

TALKING TURKEY:

VISUAL MEDIA AND THE UNRAVELING OF THANKSGIVING

A Dissertation Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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DECEMBER 2010

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TALKING TURKEY: VISUAL MEDIA AND THE UNRAVELING OF THANKSGIVING

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have heard that, under the best of circumstances, writing a dissertation is a lonely and isolating process. That has not been my experience because so many individuals have shown interest and contributed meaningfully along the way, sending material about turkeys and Thanksgiving to support my research. Certain individuals were crucial at different stages of my journey, and they should be mentioned here.

Years before I began this research, Gerry Gerasimo (Augsburg College) inspired me to think critically about culture, and Michael Owen Jones (University of California-Los Angeles) caused me to fall in love with food as a serious topic of study. At the start of my dissertation research, Elisa Glick's (University of Missouri) graduate seminar on the body led me to consider theories of embodiment in my examination of Thanksgiving's symbols. My dissertation advisor, Elaine Lawless, offered vital insight, careful editing, and unwavering support at every single phase of the project, as did other members of my committee. Karen Piper and Joanna Hearne likewise provided continual encouragement to pursue this project, and both challenged me at critical points to develop a more sophisticated engagement of theory and deeper reading of the materials collected; Nancy West guided me through various aspects of film and visual studies and encouraged a more nuanced consideration of these media forms; and Sandy Rikoon and John Miles Foley complicated my assumptions about folklore and its functions. I would also like to thank the staff at the National Museum of the American Indian (especially Melissa Bisagni and Dennis Zotigh), who pointed me toward important resources and alternative

curricular materials that deal with the problematic aspects of Thanksgiving, and Eryca Neville at the University of Missouri, who shared her experience of the “Through Native Eyes” exhibit at West Boulevard Elementary School. While the above people have added immeasurably to this dissertation, I am fully responsible for the content herein, including any errors, omissions, or flaws of argument.

I also cannot overemphasize the importance of my family’s support. They have listened patiently over the years, accepting my pursuit of the bizarre and the obscure, and have pushed me to explain theory in a way that makes sense to the lay public. Moreover, they helped me to maintain a sense of levity about my research and assured that our own Thanksgiving Day celebrations continue to be fun, meaningful, and tasty. In particular, my beloved husband, Frankie Minor, sat through hours of musings about turkeys—on the porch, in the kitchen, in the car, in the bed, in restaurants—wherever we happened to be when I had an impulse to articulate a string of seemingly random ideas. Not only did he patiently endure piles of papers and books, and assume more than his share of housework, but his tireless sleuthing rendered him an unofficial research assistant. He also helped me to limit the scope of my argument, joking at one point, “the Ottoman Empire was also in Turkey, but you can’t cover everything!” My deepest gratitude, however, goes to my son, Kahlil, who does not recall a time when I was not juggling graduate school, employment, and motherhood, and who will surely be relieved to know that I have *finally* finished my dissertation. Kahlil’s knack for navigating the sticky terrain of Thanksgiving (and life in general) is totally refreshing and has helped me to uphold a sense of humor and perspective.

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Talking Turkey: Visual Media and the Unraveling of Thanksgiving

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Abstract

Standing at the core of American culture, Thanksgiving is an invented tradition celebrated by millions of Americans. This dissertation examines contemporary representations of Thanksgiving in “the media of everyday life”—including television, film, literature, comic strips, paintings, advertisements, and the Internet. After interrogating the myth of “First Thanksgiving” through vignettes that challenge its dubious history, this project shows that media representations of the holiday expose conflict and alienation at the meal that is supposed to signify harmony and inclusivity. In this embodied holiday, the turkey becomes compulsory, so that refusing to eat it threatens family cohesiveness. As a day of “intensified patriarchy,” the gendered division of labor encompasses all aspects of the holiday—from preparation and turkey carving to clean up and post-prandial activities. In some instances, the turkey undergoes processes of anthropomorphism and sexualization, revealing the influence of colonial ideology on both race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality. Along with subjectivity comes the desire of turkeys to live free from humans and their appetites. In “poultry-themed gallows humor,” turkeys discover the conspiracy of their lives, try to escape, and seek revenge. By probing these visual representations of turkeys, the murky underbelly of the holiday comes into focus, suggesting that—despite its nostalgic trappings—discord and violence inhere in Thanksgiving discourse. Some of these subversive elements create fissures in Thanksgiving ideology, in hopes of unraveling the holiday once and for all, and others seek broader themes of harvest, gratitude, and family togetherness to celebrate.

Introduction –

Talking Turkey: Theorizing Media Representations of Thanksgiving

“The table, covered with a damask cloth, vieing in whiteness, and nearly equalling in texture, the finest imported, though spun, woven and bleached by Mrs. Romeiee's own hand, was now intended for the whole household, every child having a seat on this occasion, and the more the better, it being considered an honor for a man to sit down to his Thanksgiving supper surrounded by a large family! The provision is always sufficient for a multitude, every farmer in the country being, at this season of the year, plentifully supplied, and every one proud of displaying his abundance and prosperity. The roasted turkey took precedence on this occasion, being placed at the head of the table; and well did it become its lordly station, sending forth the rich odour of its savoury stuffing, and finely covered with the frost of the basting” (Sarah Josepha Hale 1827:108-109).¹

Some argue that Thanksgiving is inescapably at the core of American culture, a day on which Americans must either “celebrate or avoid a ritual family feast, centered around a stuffed turkey” (Siskind [1992] 2002:41). Said to be the most ubiquitous of American holidays, Thanksgiving is celebrated by over 200 million Americans, who gather with family and friends on the third Thursday in November (or thereabouts) to eat a meal perceived to be traditional. The holiday is celebrated by an estimated 90% of Americans, including both American-born and immigrant families (Pleck 2000:42). The Thanksgiving meal has inspired numerous authors, directors, and artists. For instance, Norman Rockwell’s famous painting, “Freedom from Want” (March 6, 1943), depicts an American family at the iconographic Thanksgiving.² The grandmother (actually modeled after the Rockwell family cook) is about to set the turkey platter on the table as the patriarch stands beside her, waiting to carve the bird. The expression on the faces of family members reveals jovial anticipation. One man looks directly at us from the lower

right corner of the painting. Is he inviting us to the meal? Or, is he trying to let us in on a little secret?³

Feminist and postcolonial theorists argue that scholars are obliged to describe their “strategic locations” within their work (Said 1978:20; Rich [1994] 2003). It would be remiss, therefore, if I neglected to acknowledge up front that my own strategic location vis-à-vis Thanksgiving has roots in nostalgic childhood memories. I love the emphasis on family togetherness and harvest and the notion, however erroneous, that these traditional foods somehow bind us to previous generations. I love the food itself—from the chilled relish trays to the green bean casserole smothered in Campbell’s mushroom soup mix and French’s Fried Onions, the sweet potato casserole topped with tiny Jet Puffed marshmallows, the fresh bread rolls with melted butter, the mashed potato volcanoes spilling gravy lava and, of course, a crispy outer slice of roast turkey, a nibble of which used to be worth the risk of having my hand slapped and which, during my vegetarian decade, was the source of a great dilemma. Even today, after dissecting Thanksgiving discourse exhaustively, I can quickly fall into the comfortable rhythm of the ritual of complaining about being starving, then painfully stuffed, and the politics of praising the cooks.

Surveying the existing literature on Thanksgiving, I found no dearth of scholarship, especially by historians interested in the study of the invention of tradition (Appelbaum 1987; Hobsbawm 1983; Humins 1987; Jennings 1975; Loewen [1996]; Pleck 1999; Siskind [1992] 2002). There is also a fair amount of scholarship on Thanksgiving from the field of education (Hopkins 2005; Johnson 1999; Larson 1986; Ramsey 1979; Reese 2006), marketing and consumer behavior studies (Wallendorf and

Arnould 1991; Cross 2009; Jing 2007), sports studies (Pope 1993a, 1993b, 1997), poultry and food history studies (Davis 2001; Smith 2006), theatre (Villanueva 2004) and, of course, folklore studies (Anderson 1973; Freund 1991; Santino 1994; Snow 1993).

During my research, several articles were especially influential at key moments. One was in “Giving an Altar to St. Joseph,” by folklorists Kay Turner and Suzanne Serif, which describes the altar and feast traditions of this religious holiday (1993). The other was “The Passover Seder” by folklorist Sharon Sherman (1992 [1988]). Both studies offer an in-depth analysis of how an annual meal may re-enact an event, and how the microcosm of the family meal has implications for the larger national family. These folkloristic theories shaped my initial approach to the Thanksgiving meal, which is said to reenact the so-called “First Thanksgiving,” but “The Invention of Thanksgiving,” by historian Janet Siskind, brought to my attention the fact that the story of the First Thanksgiving belongs, in fact, not within the realm of history, but within that of legend and/or of myth (2002 [1992]).

Whereas the above folklorists demonstrates that certain dishes come to symbolize specific events in the community’s history, Siskind offers a bold interpretation of the core dish of Thanksgiving, the turkey. What lies beneath this symbol of the holiday, Siskind suggests, is a celebration of colonial ideology. In an endnote, she describes a cartoon from a late 1970s issue of *Velvet* magazine that shows “a Pilgrim family grouped around a table, poised to eat an American Indian, served on a platter with an apple in his mouth and already missing several body parts. The caption says: ‘For history, let’s say it was a turkey’” (cartoon by Shawn Kepri, quoted in Siskind 2004:56). This cartoon is made intelligible because of the easy slippage between the figures of the Indian and the turkey

in media discourses surrounding Thanksgiving, where both are seen as native to the Americas, both depicted visually with feathered plumage, both considered to be either wild or domesticated, both endangered at some point in time, and both are replaceable through symbolic substitutions. These parallels are central to the chapters that follow.

As a folklorist, ethnographic research about Thanksgiving would have seemed an obvious choice—that is, doing extensive interviews and participant observation.

However, not wanting to detract from my own family's meal, and not wanting to turn my family (and others) into research subjects, I avoided this kind of ethnographic work. As such, my research on the holiday turned rather quickly to the media. What a gold mine! Yet, with all of the scholarly attention on Thanksgiving, there has been surprisingly little research about how the holiday is represented in the media. Some important exceptions include "Pilgrims and Progress: How Magazines Made Thanksgiving" (Wills 2003) and a chapter in Margaret Weinberger's doctoral dissertation, *How America Invented Thanksgiving* (2003, Bowling Green State University), which examines the content of *Godey's* and *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1830 to 1915, showing how these popular magazines helped to construct the modern Thanksgiving holiday. Likewise, historian Elizabeth Pleck devotes one chapter of *Celebrating the Family* (2000) to the development of the Thanksgiving holiday over the course of several centuries, discussing how Thanksgiving has been both invented and reinvented within American families (see also Pleck 1999). Traditions that seem ancient are found to be fairly recent. Thanksgiving has indeed undergone many changes in its practices and in its representations. From its carnivalesque origins in the public sphere, with parades of the Fantastics, to a sentimental domestic occasion, intended to celebrate Victorian notions of homecoming, family, and

paterfamilias, and back into the public realm of parades, football, presidential turkey pardons, and videos distributed on YouTube.

In *The Turkey: An American Story* (2006), food historian Andrew Smith traces the development of the wild turkey *Meleagris* from its pre-Columbia domestication in the New World, and its forced migration to the Old World, to the rise of its industrial counterpart, the Broad Breasted White. While Smith's historical research provides important knowledge about the natural science of turkeys, the contemporary examples are seemingly thrown in with scant analysis or cultural context. Karen Davis' *More Than a Meal: The Turkey in History, Myth, Ritual, and Reality* (2001) interrogates examples of the turkey in culture, literature, and natural history. Although she lays more blame on the "European assault on turkeys" for decreasing the numbers of wild turkeys, she is likewise critical of the erstwhile practices of Native peoples toward turkeys (2001:43; see also Smith 2006). Many of Davis' ideas are compelling and useful in my reading of turkeys in the media. For example, she describes the "spectacular rituals of humiliation" of turkeys leading up to and during the holiday season—for example, turkey trots (2001:60-3), turkey shoots (2001:15), and turkey drops (2001:99-101), arguing that these rituals provide Americans an opportunity to heap abuse on the holiday's mascot, which functions as a ritual scapegoat. Unfortunately, Davis fails to connect this argument to postcolonial or feminist theories involving oppressed humans. As someone who studies traditional expressions of the folk, for me this connection to the human realm is critical.

In this study, I seek to fill the lacuna of scholarship by doing a sort of ethnographic examination of manifestations of Thanksgiving (and especially the turkey) in the visual media of our everyday lives. Since 2005, I have been collecting items

related to Thanksgiving, focusing on those “Thanksgiving moments” that can be found, by and large, within some sort of visual frame in “the media of everyday life” (Balsamo 1995). This includes scenes from television and film, as well as those found in political cartoons, commercial advertisements, theatrical performances, and on the Internet.

In their collection of cinematic food scenes, film critics Steve Zimmerman and Ken Weiss devote a whole section to Thanksgiving meals. While these scenes may serve to mark the passage of time in stories not otherwise about Thanksgiving, often the cinematic family seems to function as a microcosm of the national family. The filmic Thanksgiving dinner imparts “a certain cachet of Americana” that directors use to comment on American culture (2005:106). The authors provide descriptions of a plethora of scenes in films ranging from *Holiday Inn* (Sandrich 1942),⁴ *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (Perry 1970), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (Mazursky 1986), *The Doors* (Stone 1991), *The Myth of Fingerprints* (Freundlich 1997), *The Object of My Affection* (Hytner 1998), *One True Thing* (Franklin 1998), and *Pollack* (Harris 2000) to the obvious Thanksgiving films of *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (Butler 1953), *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (Hughes 1987), *Home of the Holidays* (Foster 1995), *What’s Cooking?* (Chadha 2000), and *Pieces of April* (Hedges 2003). Yet this list barely brushes the surface. Many film titles could be added, not to mention myriad television episodes. My goal, however, is not to produce a comprehensive list of Thanksgiving scenes, but to examine trends in how the visual media uses the holiday to comment on aspects of family life, the turkey as symbol, and issues of nationalism.

Running throughout these chapters, therefore, is a consideration of the question of what one can reasonably argue about a given representation of Thanksgiving. For

example, consider what I refer to in Chapter Three as “sexing the turkey” (when turkeys are gendered and sexed) and in Chapter Four as “the turkey revolt” (when turkeys turn the tables on the humans who intend to kill and eat them). Does Eli Roth’s faux trailer “Thanksgiving,” a major focus of Chapter Three, reveal something about Roth as the director, or does it reveal something about the audience that watches (and posts blog comment about) the trailer? That is a good hermeneutic, a rhetorical question offering much food for thought and to which this dissertation provides no conclusive answer. When such a Thanksgiving moment appears once, we might chalk it up to authorial or directorial intent. But when similar examples begin to pile up, we must seriously consider what certain trends mean. For the purposes of this dissertation, I treat all of these Thanksgiving moments as folkloric expressions in their creation, performance, and in their reception.

Some of the best examples are found in Gurinder Chadha’s ode to Thanksgiving, *What’s Cooking?* The feature-length film opens with a trumpet somberly playing “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the credits roll over a blurry object that gradually comes into focus. It is the rose-colored flesh of a roast turkey and a man brandishing a carving knife and serving fork over the bird’s supine breast. As the frame widens, it reveals the iconographic image of the “all-American family”—three generations of blonde-haired, blue-eyed individuals that form a clearly-recognizable nuclear family. They smile proudly, surrounding the father who is poised to carve. Just before the last triumphant lines of the national anthem fades out, replaced by the upbeat rhythms of salsa music, the familiar Thanksgiving image suddenly begins to slide out of frame. We come to realize

that we have been staring at an advertisement for Sun Valley Turkeys on the side of a Los Angeles Metro bus that is driving away.⁵

As soon as the prototypical image slides off screen, the camera enters the bus to highlight the diversity therein. It passes by a motley crew of racial and cultural multiplicity—a driver wearing a turban, a man wearing a business suit, women dressed in Indian saris and African dresses, a couple speaking Spanish, and an interracial teenaged couple in the middle of the bus, blatant in their public display of affection. An entire chapter could be written on this densely packed opening scene alone—about the turkey as the central object, about the patriarch with the carving knife, about the whiteness and heterosexuality signified by this family, and about how all of this is problematized visually as the image slides off frame. Throughout the film, Chadha reminds us that there is no single Thanksgiving; it is as multiple as America itself. The film goes on to highlight the celebrations of four families—the African American Williams, the Vietnamese Nguyens, the Hispanic Avilas, and the Jewish Seeligs—all of whom are immigrant groups.

This value on diversity multicultural goal of the film is likewise reflected in the school play that quickly follows, where Pilgrims and Indians are cast by an array of racial groups (black, white, and yellow, but significantly, not red). Of the two speaking roles, the Pilgrim holding the huge turkey is played by a Vietnamese-American boy, while the pink-fringed Indian with white leotards is played by an African-American girl. Despite this celebration of diversity, there is a noticeable absence of American Indians, except for the children dressed as “Indians” in the school play (none of whom are cast by real American Indians). The film meditates on the meaning of Thanksgiving for several

immigrant groups, only one short reference to the situation of Native Americans is made by a marginalized vegetarian character (with gothic hair, dress, and body piercings), who insists on referring to Thanksgiving as “Thanks-taking.” That the character to voice this critique of Thanksgiving is the person who also rejects the turkey, is a point central to my later argument.

Besides the turkey, of course, the most prevalent visual images of Thanksgiving involve “Pilgrims” and “Indians.” As such, Chapter One begins with an examination of the representation of Pilgrims and Indians in discourses surrounding the myth of the First Thanksgiving. “The misrepresentation, commodification, and distortion of indigenous identities have existed from the moment of first contact,” says Gretchen Bataille (2001:01). When the Norse arrived in Newfoundland in 1004, they called the indigenous inhabitants *Skraelings*—“a term that has been described as an untranslatable expletive”—stereotypical representations of Native Americas seem to have prevailed ever since (Bataille 2001:01). In 1492, Christopher Columbus, who is still celebrated in schools today, wrote thusly of the indigenous people he encountered: “They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appear to me to have no religion” (quoted in Bataille 2001:02). Soon after, American Indians were captured and brought to Europe for study and exhibition. Fascinated by the “exotic” people of the New World, European travel narratives depicted American Indians as fierce and cannibalistic, and the accompanying woodcuts reinforced the image of Indians as “naked, violent, warlike, and, frequently, more animalistic than human” (2001:02). Maps in the late 1500s depicted America in conflicting ways—either as a Native woman

in an Edenic setting or as a hostile enemy—and art and literature similarly portrayed Indians as either benign or hostile: “This duality was difficult to reconcile, but it presaged the ongoing ambivalence of the Europeans and later the Americans about the people of the New World” (Bataille 2001:02; see also Deloria 1998).⁶

“The backdrop of centuries of misrepresentation has taken its toll,” observes literary critic Gretchen Bataille. “Woodcuts, paintings, explorers’ journals, and missionary accounts provided early images to Europeans, and movies, western novels, and cartoons have perpetuated the myths and stereotypes” (2001:04; see also Molholt 2008). Moving from printed page and portrait to the theatre, these stereotypic representations of Indians preceded the black-face minstrelsy shows so popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Although Indians did sometimes get to “play themselves,” they had to do so in narratives that celebrated European victory over Native Americans. These images formed the base of storylines in the first films with Indians (Bataille 2001:03). From Karl May’s fictional character Winnetou to “the noble savage” representations of anthropologists, ethnographers, the tourism and advertising industries, the appropriation (among white fraternal organizations) of American Indian ceremony, language, and history continues, even during a period of political correctness (Deloria 1998). The centuries of misrepresentation have taken a toll, and American culture is immersed in inaccurate stereotypes, so that it becomes necessary to point out that the “Indian images reflected the creators of those images more than the people themselves,” and that these images “have changed through time, with portrayals of vanishing Indians, primitives, half-breeds, squaws, warriors, and militants taking their turn in the foreground during various historical periods” (2001:04)

Such is the case with the “First Thanksgiving,” a story easily recalled by most Americans—the one about “the Pilgrims” and “the Indians” sharing a meal at the so-called “First Thanksgiving.”⁷ Although historical evidence debunks the story (Loewen 1996; Weinberger 2003; Smith 2006; Siskind 2002; Pleck 1999), it functions as a sort of master narrative that continues to be held as true by mainstream America.⁸ The myth of the First Thanksgiving was chosen from among other colonial narratives to represent the nation’s infancy. Although I refer to *the* story of the Pilgrims and Indians, there are actually a number of stories that consistently appear in support of the master narrative and, as I will show later, variations of the master narrative are *still* being told today, including this variant from a 1980s high school textbook, *The American Tradition*:

After some exploring, the Pilgrims chose the land around Plymouth Harbor for their settlement. Unfortunately, they had arrived in December and were not prepared for the New England winter. However, they were *aided by friendly Indians*, who gave them food and showed them how to grow corn. When warm weather came, the colonists planted, fished, hunted, and prepared themselves for the next winter. *After harvesting their first crop, they and their Indian friends celebrated the first Thanksgiving.* (Green et al 1984: quoted in Loewen 1996:77; emphasis added)

Scholar of myths, James Robertson offers another prototypical narrative of the First Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrims, persecuted in England and unhappy in Holland, took the ship *Mayflower* and sailed ultimately to a place they called Plymouth, near Cape Cod. They met with harsh times and starvation through the winter, while they struggled to build log cabins to live in and hunted to get food. In the spring, the Indians taught them how to plant corn (maize) and fertilize it with fish, and how to plant other Indian foods. *When the harvest was in, the Pilgrims had a feast of thanksgiving to which the Indians came.* At the feast they ate the corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins [that] they had learned to grow from the Indians, and they ate wild turkeys and other game the Indians had taught them to hunt. And they gave thanks to God for the new land, for their new life in it, and for all the bountiful things He had given to them. (Robertson 1980:15; emphasis added)

Some variations of the master narrative mention Squanto, the “friendly Indian” who aided the Pilgrims. Some dramatize the number of Pilgrim deaths from disease and starvation. These variations give the master narrative its strength, agility, and persistence through time and space. As such, we find the master narrative manifesting through the practices of education and literature, as well as through the visual media of comics, television, film, and theatre, advertising, through the Internet.

As I alluded to earlier, it is not clear to which narrative genre the story of the “First Thanksgiving” belongs. It was created around 1820, two hundred years after the so-called Pilgrims landed on American soil.⁹ I initially placed the story in the realm of myth—a sacred narrative that provides an etiological explanation—because it is largely

accepted and taught as true, offers an explanation (however biased) of how the nation came into being, and is re-enacted annually as part of the holiday's rituals. Yet the story also seems to hover around the genre of legend—a narrative about a happening in which the narrator was not directly involved, which may or may not be believed by the narrator and/or the audience, but is presented as if it could have occurred and told as if it really did (Fine 1992:2). Scholarship on Thanksgiving tends to use both myth and legend—a distinction that perhaps only matters to folklorists. Myth or legend, nationalism shaped the master narrative of the First Thanksgiving, with reformers in the second half of the nineteenth century seeing in it the potential to assimilate recent immigrants. Pleck explains:

Their attempts to Americanize the newcomers were both a gesture of welcome and an exercise in cultural power of the English-ancestry Protestant elite. Initially the Progressive era interest in the Pilgrims seemed to partake more of prejudice than of inclusion. Beleaguered by the onslaught of so many former peasants, many of them Catholics or Jews, Anglo-Protestants looked to American history as a form of cultural superiority. Genealogical fervor, snobbery, and the desire to differentiate themselves from the great wave of new immigrants standing on the national doorstep led to the founding of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames of America, the Society of Mayflower Descendants, and dozens of other patriotic societies (Pleck 2000:27).

In antebellum period, the first chapter in American history textbooks chronicled the Pilgrims' settlement. The Protestants sought examples of "intense faith, imagination, and

courage” to serve as “respectable ancestors, founders of the country,” stories of people who “could not be accused of religious intolerance or intellectual arrogance” (Pleck 2000:27).¹⁰ The Pilgrims drew the attention of the Protestants in the decades sandwiching the twentieth century, from 1890 to 1920, when “the tableaux of the friendly Pilgrims making peace with their Indian neighbors” became prominent in newspaper advertisements and school pageants around Thanksgiving (2000:27).

Thanksgiving is an example of Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of the invented tradition, “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and or a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition” (Hobsbawm 1983:01; see also Bendix 1997). Invented traditions claim continuity with the past and tend to construct an honorable historic past. This continuity with the past is mostly fictitious, Pleck notes, for invented traditions are intended to address the needs of the present (1999:785).

As with other examples of myths and legends, the story of the First Thanksgiving functions ideologically to reinforce colonialism—“the formal and informal methods (behaviors, ideologies, institutions, policies, and economies) that maintain the subjugation or exploitation of Indigenous Peoples, lands, and resources” (Wilson and Yellow Bird 2005:5). Whether colonies of settlement or colonies of rule, the result of colonization is devastating for the colonized. Cultural genocide and the marginalization of indigenous people—along with class, gender, and racial tensions—continue to be felt in postcolonial societies (McMichael 2000:4-5). Another outcome of colonization that directly pertains to Thanksgiving is “the elaboration of ideologies justifying colonial rule” (Molholt 2008:3). Inherent in the myth of the First Thanksgiving is the ideology of

Manifest Destiny, the nineteenth-century belief in the U.S. destiny to expand across the continent of North America. A number of ideological motifs underline the master narrative of Thanksgiving: 1) Americans are descended from European immigrants who sought religious and political freedom; 2) America is a melting pot of regional and ethnic cultures eager to assimilate; 3) Americans are hardworking people; 4) God helps those who keep their faith; 5) America is the best country in the world in which to live; 6) We should be thankful and generous to those who are less fortunate (Anderson 1973:12).

The myth of the First Thanksgiving is inherently bound to the nation's infancy and national subjectivity. In this schema, the Pilgrims represent the prototypical Americans, espousing values upon which new immigrant groups were supposed to model themselves. The process of inventing traditions occurs more frequently during times of social stress, according to economist and historian, Eric Hobsbawm, and invented traditions quickly become legitimized, reconstructing history to cement of group cohesion (1983:04,12). The story of the First Thanksgiving, a nineteenth-century public relations effort, has become a kind of sacred narrative that is compulsively reiterated in the media. Presenting this history shows how the myth of the First Thanksgiving came into being, but it does not account for why it persists today when alternative historical accounts are so plentiful. Key scenes in the media bring to bear the fact that in many schools, significant class time is sacrificed to make costumes and ritually re-enacting the myth/legend complex, despite protests against this practice (Ramsey 1979:28-9). A crucial element of invented traditions involves "emotionally and symbolically charged signs" through which the group proclaims its identity (Hobsbawm 1983:11). The practices symbolizing these traditions become compulsory, as with standing at attention

for the Pledge of Allegiance ritual in American schools (1983:11). As such, many teachers and parents see these “Pilgrim and Indian activities” as an educational imperative, and efforts to revise the curriculum are still met with anger, defensiveness, and hostility.¹¹

If “the committed debunker” is as central to the legend’s existence as “the true believer” (Ellis 2001:116), then the story of the First Thanksgiving as a legend has endured a long and complicated journey. What *really* happened at the “First Thanksgiving” and where this alleged event may have taken place are matters still open to debate.¹² In his article, “Why I’m Not Thankful for Thanksgiving,” novelist Michael Dorris poses an intriguing question: “Considering that virtually none of the standard fare surrounding Thanksgiving contains an ounce of authenticity, historical accuracy, or cross-cultural perception, why is it so apparently ingrained? Is it necessary to the American psyche to perpetually exploit and debase its victims in order to justify its history?” (1978:7). Chapter One, “Pilgrims, Indians, and Turkeys: Inventing (and Subverting) Thanksgiving,” responds to Dorris’ question, exploring why the master narrative is so pervasive and persistent in American culture and how even seemingly benign school activities unwittingly perpetuate harmful stereotypes about American Indians, objectifying them even as they are said to honor them (Bataille 2001:04).

If Thanksgiving is so overwhelmingly adored, as many contend, then how do we account for the myriad media representations in which Thanksgiving ideology and its iconography are subverted?¹³ Because Thanksgiving Day rituals are guided by no written liturgy, “the details of its celebration, like the past and future, are actually negotiated among participants, and not always harmoniously” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:16).

Consider the film *Avalon*, which depicts Thanksgiving as a contested tradition. Set in Baltimore in the 1940s, *Avalon* (Levinson 1990) uses flashbacks to follow the Krichinsky family's migration from Eastern Europe to its assimilation into American culture. We see the extended family gather each year to celebrate Thanksgiving. In the first Thanksgiving scene, the matriarch Eva Krichinsky (Joan Plowright) wonders about the origins of the holiday, saying, "I don't understand this holiday, Thanksgiving. We're giving thanks to whom? All I'm saying is we had to get the turkey, and we had to kill it to say thanks. If it wasn't for this holiday we wouldn't have turkey. I don't eat turkey the rest of the year, why do I have to eat it now?" Several years later, one of the brothers, Gabriel Krichinsky (Lou Jacobi) arrives later than usual, and the family reluctantly agrees to start without him. When he arrives to find the turkey carving already underway, he starts to rant, "You cut the turkey without me? You cut the turkey without me?" Taking his wife, the brother storms out of the house, starting a feud that will last for years. What began as an unfamiliar holiday the family adopted with some reluctance became so engrained in one generation that a deviation spurs a deep family rift. "The seemingly innocuous act of cutting the Thanksgiving turkey without waiting for Gabriel has dire consequences," explains film critic Eric Goldman of this scene, "and it will be the beginning of the demise of this extended family" (2003:115).¹⁴

Such vignettes, when taken together, seem to create fissures in Thanksgiving ideology. From theatrical performances of the myth of the First Thanksgiving to video clips of an animated turkey doing a striptease and documentary footage of turkeys attacking Americans, Chapter One addresses contemporary examples of such discourses that would fall into the period Pleck refers to as the 1960s post-sentimental approach to

Thanksgiving (Pleck 1999).¹⁵ These scenes seem to expose and challenge the colonial and patriarchal ideology that is embedded within the holiday. In addition, they comment on the effect this American holiday can have on individuals at the family's margins.

I first began noticing such dynamics while interviewing vegetarians in the 1990s. Asking people to describe how their families reacted to the individual's decision to not eat meat, I was offered stories about Thanksgiving as a time of particularly intense family conflicts (see Roth 2005; Jabs et al 1998). "Thanksgiving is highly structured and emotion laden, with its celebration of family, home and nation," observes Siskind (2002:41). Therefore, the conflicts over food that naturally occur at other family meals are made more extreme at this festal meal because of the vegetarian's so called "deviant" behavior, and we see this dynamic play out in visual forms, ranging from cartoons to television and film. For example, in the films *Home for the Holidays* (Jodie Foster 1995), *Pieces of April* (Peter Hedges 2003), *What's Cooking?*, and *The Doors* (Oliver Stone 1990), and in television shows *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening 1989-present) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon 1997-2003), conflict ensues over the vegetarian's eschewal of the turkey at Thanksgiving. This propensity for tension to arise over turkey flesh is not a new phenomenon. Writing in 1835, a physician named William Alcott opposed the Thanksgiving feast on both moral and medical grounds, calling it a carnival of luxuries. Alcott became especially concerned when New Englanders began to also celebrate Christmas, and he feared that "the two feasts had already merged into one long period of overindulgence that caused serious health problems" (Smith 2004:np). Alcott was also opposed to the Thanksgiving dinner because he had become a vegetarian in 1830 (and later helped found the American Vegetarian Society).

The authors of *A Celebration of Family Folklore* observe about storytelling at the family dinner table that the subjects for stories often contrast sharply with meal activities. “Whereas dinners, reunions, and holiday celebrations tend to be peaceful and pleasurable occasions, stories told at those times are often about the unpredictable. They signal disruption or disaster” (1982:18). Such visual forms as the aforementioned film and television episodes may be useful as ethnographic data, for while the scenes involving Thanksgiving catastrophes are technically fictional, the kind of scenarios they depict resemble those told among real-life families (e.g., Zeitlin et al. 1982; see also Ohnuki-Tierney 1990). What might be learned by comparing scenes of *reel* meals with stories of *real* meals? Although the former meals are technically fictional, they can reveal much about how the holiday is actually experienced and conceived than do standard ethnographic reports and marketing questionnaires, which tend to underreport moments of family dysfunction (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:14). For example, consider the meaning and function of the “spilt-milk story,” the narrative motif performed after the Thanksgiving meal has been eaten, when mouths are no longer busily eating and family conversation resumes. These are generally stories about “bad times,” of disasters solved through family togetherness. The unpleasant incident is often laughed off as the family proves its strength to withstand such shocks, to solve problems through the bonds of family (1991:21-22). Providing a series of emic interpretations, the Thanksgiving scenes that appear in the visual media reveal that Thanksgiving ideology is socially constructed, hence, the media offers fertile ground for a folklorist studying discourses surrounding the holiday.

As with other holidays, “the central discourse of Thanksgiving Day negotiates larger meanings that are difficult, if not impossible, for many participants to acknowledge, articulate, and negotiate verbally” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:13), so it is not surprising that these invisible meanings are worked out through such scenes. If Thanksgiving ideology is constructed through some visual scenes, it is no doubt contested in others. In these latter scenes, families bicker, crisis rules the day, and the holiday’s central symbol—the turkey—is inevitably burned, stolen, or defiled. My interpretation is influenced by both feminist and postcolonial theories, which seek to make sense of and ultimately change the oppressive power relations encoded in traditions as regards race, nation, empire, as well as class, gender, and sexuality (Lewis and Mills 2003:2). As such, I interpret key scenes of Thanksgiving as possible sites for disruption that leads to the de-centering of patriarchy and colonization. We see conflict over eating turkeys take stage in the mid-twentieth century, for example, in the musical film *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (Butler 1953), set after World War I in a small Indiana town. Marjorie Winfield’s (Doris Day) charming little brother Wesley (Bill Gray) befriends the Thanksgiving turkey, Gregory. Upset about his friend’s fate, Wesley conspires to free Gregory, avoiding the butcher altogether, and returning home with a substitute, a turkey already dead and de-feathered (which he stole from a neighbor’s storehouse).¹⁶ The ruse is up, however, when the real Gregory flies into the dining room during the Thanksgiving meal, gobbling and creating much chaos.¹⁷

Likewise, in the drama *Giant* (Stevens 1956), a similar conflict occurs. Shortly before the Thanksgiving meal, we see the blond-haired children hand-feeding a caged turkey, talking sweetly to it, and calling it “Pedro,” a gesture that foreshadows their

sympathies towards Mexican immigrants. During dinner, the children wear Indian headbands, with brightly colored feathers. The turkey is carried to the table by the family's African-American servant. The turkey platter is shown in close-up. Suddenly, things take a quick turn for the worse. As the patriarch prays, the children-dressed-as-Indians realize that the turkey on the table is Pedro and they cry for two excruciating minutes of screen time, completely disrupting the family's meal.

By attacking the central symbol of the ritual, the disruptions in these scenes — from *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* to *Giant* make explicit critiques of the holiday itself. While Pleck would place these scenes within the post-sentimental era of the 1960s, we find that they are much older, critiquing the family system as well as the nation-family several decades earlier. “The list of the harm that rituals are said to cause,” says Pleck, is long, “although the complaints have grown more shrill and more frequent in the postsentimental era” (2000:19). As Siskind reminds us, Thanksgiving involves both inclusion and exclusion, so that many people feel let down by these special occasions.

At a broader level, history-teaching family rituals convey a ‘mythic’ view of history that reduces complexity and can even foster xenophobia. The postsentimental critique borrows from feminism, gay liberation, and the swelling of racial and ethnic consciousness. Critics point out that rituals are associated with patriarchy, and with assumptions that heterosexuality is the norm and the desired state and that homosexuality is marginal and invisible. Feminists assert that women have carried the burden of having to make an occasion perfect. Newspaper columnists often note the hypocrisy of trying to create family solidarity when kin have already

grown apart. Closeted gay people feel uncomfortable returning home for Thanksgiving and Christmas and having to pretend to be heterosexual (Pleck 2000:19).

For this reason, these family rituals “may generate stress rather than relieve it, create as much conflict as they reduce, provoke bad feelings as well as good” (Pleck 2000:19). Whether we feel included or excluded by Thanksgiving’s rituals, one thing these vignettes show is how Thanksgiving is an embodied experience that exists in the material practices associated with Thanksgiving’s rituals. Following Foucault’s observation that “the body is...directly involved in a political field” (1975:155), Chapter Two, “Stuffing and the Flesh that Unites: The Embodiment of Colonial Desire” explores the connection between the embodiment of Thanksgiving and colonial desire. Knowing that cultural practices are experienced by the body (Bordo [1985] 1997:229), I look at some examples of embodied Thanksgiving ideology — specifically, re-enactments of the “First Thanksgiving” in schools and eating traditional Thanksgiving food within families. Like the imagined First Thanksgiving, where the grateful Pilgrims, after a period of deprivation, were said to have hosted a feast with the Indians, family members today initially claim to be “starving” before the dinner (despite the trays upon trays of appetizers laying around) and later complain about being “stuffed” after the meal. That is, this full-bodied experience is so crucial to the ritual of Thanksgiving that, in order to reinforce the ideal that satiety prevails, tradition calls for after-dinner conversation about how everyone is painfully full (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:18). While verbally negotiating consensus about the experience of material abundance, the bodily postures of celebrants are noticeably different after the meal from before. Not surprisingly, the

embodiment of Thanksgiving indulgence is a topic frequented by the media, especially in cartoons and television episodes.

What, exactly, is the nature of the food being embodied at Thanksgiving? In contrast to foods that suggest frivolity or elaborate luxury, the foods served at Thanksgiving are plain and bland, foods identified as “comfort food.” They tend to be baked, boiled, and mashed, their texture and flavor “safe for young and old alike...like baby food” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:19). “The Flesh that Unites” explores this idea that the Thanksgiving meal enacts infantilism (1991:20) and following this line of inquiry to its logical conclusion, suggests the ways this relates to notions that Thanksgiving Day being connected, at least mythically, to the nation’s infancy.

Whereas the theatrical plays in such films as *Step Mom*, *What’s Cooking?*, and *Addams Family Values*, use the “play within a play” format to reenact the myth of the First Thanksgiving, I argue that preparing special food and participating in the ritual of fasting and surfeit are two traditions that likewise function to constitute the nation-self. This is especially poignant in the case of the turkey, which became the focus of the Thanksgiving meal during the early nineteenth century (Applebaum 1984:267). Negotiations occurring over the turkey’s body are significant and highly charged because, as “the true original native of America” (Davis 2001:35), the bird represents more than just the wilderness that was civilized; it represents American Indians who were sacrificed in pursuit of the colonies. Siskind puts it bluntly: the Thanksgiving turkey powerfully symbolizes the Indians” (1992 [2002]:48-49).

Having established how colonial ideology is embedded within the Thanksgiving holiday, in symbols and traditions that refer back to the master narrative, in Chapter

Three, “Sexing the Turkey,” I next turn to the matter of how patriarchal ideology is embedded and re-inscribed throughout many details that make-up the celebration of Thanksgiving. From the gathering of foodstuffs and preparation of the food, which requires days of female labor, to the meal’s presentation and consumption, not to mention the post-prandial activities of clean-up and football, patriarchy is enacted at Thanksgiving. “Thanksgiving was a day of intensified patriarchy,” explains Pleck, “when the difference between male and female responsibilities was pronounced” (2000:24). However, patriarchy seems especially embedded within the rituals involving the Thanksgiving turkey.

In this theoretical schema, therefore, the turkey is positioned at the axis where patriarchy and colonialism intersect. Since the turkey features so prominently in the overall Thanksgiving holiday, not just at the actual meal, it seems reasonable to treat our feathered friend as a full-fledged character in the drama that is Thanksgiving. Therefore, in “Sexing the Turkey,” I explore some of the gender and sexual politics occurring at Thanksgiving. Specifically, I look at vignettes that depict the unequal labor involved in Thanksgiving’s preparations, as well as those that depict masculinity being negotiated over the preparation, presentation, and penetration of turkey bodies. In the end, these media scenes serve to illustrate how patriarchy is embodied within the meal alongside colonialism. In this way, the symbol of the turkey stands poised at the intersection of patriarchy and colonialism.

Seeking to grasp the significance of this avian symbol, I follow the turkey as it is anthropomorphized, particularly instances of the bird being alternately gendered as either female or male in different contexts and with different results. The chapter title plays

upon Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000). Rather than the gendered space of the *human* body, however, I consider that of the *turkey* body, asking how negotiations occurring over its body may have implications not just for turkeys, but for humans as well. Given the ready associations between turkey and human female bodies (Adams 1994), where "women and animals are similarly positioned in a patriarchal world, as objects rather than subjects" (Adams 1990:168), certain turkey carving scenes become especially fraught with power, raising questions about the deeper implications of the ritual. That is, whether positioned as male or female, patriarchy is reinforced (and subverted) through the handling of these turkey bodies in a "cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption" (1990:168).

What do these acts of sexualizing turkeys reveal about the symbolic role of the carving knife? Eli Roth's faux film trailer "Thanksgiving," seems to respond directly to my question, pointing to a possible knife / phallus connection. The latter part of "Sexing the Turkey" is devoted to these three minutes of carnivalesque gore, which offers new (albeit disturbing) meaning to Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque body (1968) and to the act of carving a turkey.

Chapter Four, "Revolted Turkeys: A Bird's-Eye View of Thanksgiving," continues the trajectory of the grotesque body, representing my attempt to grapple with another re-occurring motif. Here I examine anthropomorphized representations of the turkey in the media, those that assign subjectivity to the turkeys. Along with subjectivity, of course, comes a desire to live unfettered by human appetites, revealing individual turkeys who, actually, do *not* wish to be eaten. In light of these examples of "poultry-themed gallows humor," I interpret critical moments when turkeys discover the

conspiracy of their lives, when they try to escape, and when they seek revenge on farmers, butchers, and even suburban mail carriers. Examples range from the 1872 “The Turkey Revolt” to *The Simpsons*’ episode of “Turkey’s Revenge” (Groening 2008). In between, I consider elementary school curriculum (“Please Don’t Eat Me for Thanksgiving” 2008), videos posted on YouTube (“Beware the Turkey Revolution” 2009), and even news stories (“Turkeys Chase Man, Ready to Attack” 2008). By examining these Thanksgiving vignettes of “revolting” turkeys through the lens of postcolonial theory, important insights are revealed.

Postcolonial and feminist theorists Reina Lewis and Sara Mills caution us that the term “postcolonial” cannot be applied appropriately to every situation of the New World (2003:03). Native writer Thomas King takes issue with the term “postcolonial” in the context of Native studies. In his article, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” King says that “while post-colonial purports to be a method by which we can begin to look at those literatures which are formed out of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer, the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America” (King 1990:11). The “post” implies that the struggle between colonized and colonizer is over. Moreover, King notes, the very language of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial suggests that forms—such as Native writing—are also constructs of oppression (1990:12), dependent upon the introduction of Europeans for its creation and, therefore, depriving it of its rich pre-colonial literary and oral traditions that existed before and survived colonization. What would happen, he wonders, if we used such terms as “guardian” and “ward,” instead of colonizer and colonized?

As a set of intellectual discourses comprised of analysis of, and reaction to, the legacy of colonization, the goal of postcolonial theory is to combat the continuing effect of colonization and to decolonize the future (Young 2003). As such, I find the theory useful in my efforts to critique Thanksgiving. Taking Foucault's call to examine "relations of power" in which there is "the possibility of resistance," these revolting turkeys represent a space in which agency can be explored. As such, these vignettes of revolting turkeys offer sites of resistance. They attempt to manipulate the colonizer's gaze and open up the possibility of agency. If turkeys become a metaphor for American Indians, as we frequently see in the media, then what do these connotations of turkeys and Indians mean? Can these vignettes of turkeys, their oppositional gaze, and their acts of resistance be read as a commentary on the real-life issues facing both turkeys and American Indians today?

"To talk turkey" has been synonymous since 1837 with "to speak frankly," and "to talk cold turkey" has come to mean speaking freely and giving cold, hard facts, even when unpleasant (Smith 2006:113). The title of this dissertation, "Talking Turkey," draws on the historical turkey as a symbol of honesty (Smith 2006:112-13). Recalling the man at the margin of Rockwell's painting, "Freedom from Want," who is practically winking at the viewer, I aim in this dissertation to talk turkey about the various discourses manifesting around Thanksgiving. From striptease turkeys to turkey suicide bombers, these diverse examples of turkeys revolting offer a powerful social critique of America and its beloved holiday. All in all, whether these visual vignettes are effective critiques, or whether they end up inadvertently reinforcing dominant ideologies and stereotypes is a matter still open to debate. Rather than being the last word on the subject of

Thanksgiving and its representation in the media, this dissertation seeks to inspire future conversations, explorations, and interrogations of this fascinating, albeit problematic, American holiday.

Introduction – Notes

¹ Often credited as the person most influential in making Thanksgiving a national holiday, rather than one celebrated only in New England, Hale’s novel *Northwood; a Tale of New England* (1827) devotes an entire chapter to a Thanksgiving dinner. The foods Hale includes are not just roast turkey (with a savory stuffing), but also beef, pork, mutton, goose, duck, gravy, chicken pie, vegetables, pumpkin pie, pickles, preserves, cakes, sweetmeats, and fruits. Drinks include currant wine, cider, and ginger beer (Hale 1827; see also Smith 2004).

² Inspired by President Roosevelt’s 1941 “Four Freedoms” speech, Rockwell painted four pieces, which were published in separate issues of *The Saturday Evening Post*. “Freedom from Want” was the second.

³ This image was recently parodied by a University of Missouri fan. Instead of a turkey, a University of Kansas Jay hawk mascot sits on the platter.

⁴ *Holiday Inn* (Sandrich 1942) is a musical structured around calendar holidays. The Thanksgiving scene shows the white protagonist (Bing Crosby) too distraught to eat his Thanksgiving dinner, which is served by his black “Mammy” (Louise Beavers).

⁵ At the end of this lengthy establishing sequence, the film follows several plot lines through cross-cutting: the school play and a group of African-American teens (including actor Eric George) jumping out of a car to throw white paint on Anglo Governor Rhoads (Frank Novak), who is justifying to the press his decision to end affirmative action. The sound track becomes jazzy and frenetic as this conflict erupts, but returns to the percussive salsa refrain again as the white-faced governor reacts angrily beside his African-American assistant. Then the camera takes us again to the world of the play. “The final and definitive piece of dialogue comes from Joey Nguyen,” notes James Keller, and paraphrases Rodney King as he steps forward and says: “And we pray for hope, future progress, harmony, and so that we can all get along. Amen” (Keller 2006:61). Together, these scenes suggest the film will make some sort of racial commentary.

⁶ In 1693, William Penn hypothesized that Indians were of the Jewish race, while Cotton Mather argued that they must be influenced by the devil himself (Bataille 2001:03).

⁷ For more detailed treatment of the holiday’s history, I encourage readers to turn to some of the many resources available (especially Anderson 1973; Appelbaum 1984; Ross, Robertson, Larson, and Fernandes 1986; Siskind [1992] 2002; Loewen 1996; Smith 2006; Pleck 1999; Weinberger 2003; Villanueva 2004).

⁸ The term “master narrative” was introduced by Jean-François Lyotard (1984 [1979]).

⁹ At this time, the story of the Pilgrims was connected to Forefather's Day, not Thanksgiving (Weinberger 2003:52).

¹⁰ Riding the wave of this trend, William DeLoss Love, a Congregationalist minister and member of Sons of the American Revolution, published *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (1895), which chronicled the early declarations of these days. "Love argued that Plymouth was the birthplace of the nation and that the New England family of the past was 'one of the grandest conceptions of family life known in history'" (quoted in Pleck 2000:28).

¹¹ For examples of these angry reactions to attempts to revise Thanksgiving curriculum, see "Insulting Stereotype or Harmless Holiday Feast?" 2008 and Silvey 2010.

¹² The story of the "First Thanksgiving" initially became meaningful in places that claim to be the location in which the alleged meal took place (e.g., Canyon, Texas; Jacksonville, Florida; Jamestown, Virginia; Plymouth, Massachusetts) (Applebaum 1984:7-15).

¹³ In *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (Perry 1970), a marriage falling apart is made visual through the Thanksgiving scene, when a power struggle breaks out between Mr. Balser (Richard Benjamin) and his ten-year-old daughter Sylvie (Lorraine Culver) because Mrs. Balser (Carrie Snodgrass) tried a new stuffing recipe (with oysters). This scene shows the conservative nature of tradition, which often dogmatically resists change. At the

word “oysters,” Sylvie spits out her food, yelling, “they make me sick... On the half shell with cocktail sauce, not in a bloody turkey, for God’s sake.” Tina ends up throwing the uneaten dinner in the garbage and then, upon hearing her husband make plans to leave for the evening, she hurls a plate of food at the kitchen door.

¹⁴ In the film, two women prepare the turkey as they grapple with the horror of the Holocaust. The camera transitions from the drawing room to the kitchen where the women are basting a turkey. Film critic Eric Goldman describes this scene: “We watch through a close-up as the women place the turkey into the oven, all the while talking about the Holocaust and Simka's family. The oven close-up proves to be an incredibly powerful visual relating to the crematoria and the death camps” (Goldman 2003:109).

¹⁵ Since before the Civil War, ministers, politicians, and social reformers used Thanksgiving to draw attention to economic disparities in America. “While many Americans were enjoying a sumptuous Thanksgiving feast, others were unable to partake in the festivities,” notes Smith, who adds that in the early twenty-first century, this trend continued with news stories featuring Thanksgiving dinners for the homeless or poor (Smith 2004:np) and free turkeys in local communities.

¹⁶ The dialogue between characters regarding the turkey is revealing. The turkey flies into the dining room during an otherwise normal breakfast between the parents. “It’s only Gregory,” explains young Wesley (Billy Gray). “Gregory?” repeats his incredulous

father (Leon Ames). “You’ve been told to stop running the flesh off of that turkey!” chastises the maid Stella (Mary Wickes). “It’s a good thing tomorrow’s Thanksgiving, there’d be nothing left but feathers.”

“For the last time, that turkey does not belong in the house,” says Mr. Winfield, pointing his finger authoritatively. “It he’s good enough to be on the table, he’s good enough to walk around it,” retorts Wesley, who stomps out holding Gregory under his arm. Mr. and Mrs. Winfield resume their breakfast conversation. “I’m afraid this is another crisis,” says Mrs. Winfield. “Wesley has become very attached to our Thanksgiving dinner. I think I’ll send him to the movies this afternoon, and while he’s gone I’ll take the turkey to the butcher to be prepared.” “No, Alice,” Mr. Winfield responds. “I don’t believe in sparing the boy with deceit. When he does find out, he’ll only resent being tricked. Wesley can take the turkey to the butcher. It’s part of his growing up.” Though Mrs. Winfield pleads with him, Mr. Winfield stands firm, explaining: “After all, it’s my duty as a father to make Wesley understand that sentiment has its proper place. Fish and fowl and most animals are mainly created for the sustenance of mankind. A turkey is a turkey and meant to be eaten. And you tell him that, Alice.”

In the next scene, the father tells Wesley himself, though less elegantly. “Tomorrow is Thanksgiving and huh...and huh...,” struggles Mr. Winfield. Wesley interrupts: “You want Gregory’s head chopped off and his insides taken out so you can eat him, don’t you?” yells Wesley, “talking turkey” to his father. “Now please, Wesley, you’re making this very difficult” responds the father, exasperated. The camera moves to

a close-up of Gregory, tied to a table, watching nervously. “Now you know perfectly well that all your little chums and their families all get turkeys and fatten them for Thanksgiving. Why, we even picked Gregory because you said he had the biggest drumsticks.” Pleading desperately, Wesley replies, “I bet he’d be good and fat for next Thanksgiving. I’ll bet we’d have the biggest, fattest turkey in the whole country!”

¹⁷ During the meal, family members tip-toe cautiously around Wesley, assuming he is upset. “It looks good. When will it be ready?” he asks, opening the oven to peek. “I don’t know. I’ve never cooked one with the door open before,” replies the sarcastic Stella. “I only hope Wesley doesn’t make a scene.” “Oh, he’s been wonderful about the turkey so far,” says Mrs. Winfield. “He hasn’t said a word since he came home from the butcher.” “I’m glad he’s taking it so well, of course the real test will come when he sees Gregory in this... condition.” Right before the meal, Stella refuses to bring the turkey into the dining room. “I’m not gonna be the pallbearer,” she retorts, crossing her arms.

Chapter One –

Pilgrims, Indians, and Turkeys: Inventing (and Subverting) Thanksgiving

“Every slice of turkey is a serving of tradition, each ladle of cranberry sauce a pouring out of American history, each slice of pie an offering of love, of family, of tradition.” (Appelbaum 1984:278)

“To tell a simple national story therefore is to repeat, extend, and also engender new forms of imperialism.” (Said 1993:273)

“Correctly taught, the issues of the era of the first Thanksgiving could help Americans grow more thoughtful and more tolerant, rather than more ethnocentric.” (Loewen 1995:97)

“It is a sham, but it’s a sham with yams. It’s a yam sham.” (Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Pangs” 1999)

Thanksgiving as a holiday is supposed to represent all that is beautiful, bountiful, harmonious, and good about America. According to Siskind, Thanksgiving “subtly expresses and reaffirms values and assumptions about cultural and social unity, about identity and history, and inclusion and exclusion (Siskind 2002:41; see also Pleck 1999; Rockwell 1942; Villaneuva 2004). In many forms of media, the Thanksgiving meal is represented in the most positive light, complete with images of rural bounty that pervade calendars, greeting cards, and marketing campaigns. From Norman Rockwell’s nostalgic *Freedom from Want* (1942) to the harmonious images of bounty that pervade calendars, greeting cards, and decorations, images of Thanksgiving in the media show

that “the emotions we attach to the holiday, the people we share it with, and the foods we eat on it are hopelessly bound together” (Appelbaum 1984:278-9). Many food rituals, especially those that are repetitive in nature, involve the recounting of a sort of master narrative that is designed to be etiological.¹ Thanksgiving contains one such origin myth. The story, in this case, tells about the Pilgrims and the Indians peacefully coexisting and manifests throughout American popular culture in written, oral, visual, and cinematic forms. However, we need to be careful, argues American studies scholar Amy Kaplan, of any theory that “imagines the nation as a fixed, monolithic, and self-enclosed geographic and cultural whole” (1998:583). Heeding Kaplan’s warning, this chapter traces the development of the myth of the First Thanksgiving as well as efforts in the media to present alternative histories.

Although the story of the First Thanksgiving is based more on fiction, legend, and public relations rhetoric than on historical fact, textbook authors, as well as teachers and children’s literature authors, are complicit in perpetuating the story. We also see the myth of the First Thanksgiving being frequently referenced in the media—from political cartoons and advertisements to YouTube clips. We see the myth reenacted as well through school plays on television and film. Consider one such scene from the film *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus 1998), in which “Pilgrims” and “Indians” parade across the stage while singing Woody Guthrie’s 1944 anthem “This Land is Your Land” and carrying over-sized platters of fake food to the table. Wearing a turkey costume, Ben Harrison (Liam Aiken) is given center stage, “flying” back and forth until he gets shot by a group of musket and bow-wielding Pilgrims and Indians. At this dramatic death, the internal audience erupts into laughter and applause. As the children sing about the

land belong to all of us, Pilgrims and Indians shake hands—as if easily resolving land disputes. Except for a brief shot of Isabel’s (Julie Roberts) shocked reaction to seeing her stepson shot, the school play is presented unproblematically.

The primal scene of the First Thanksgiving—involving Pilgrims and Indians, colonizers and colonized, and a great feast—appears in many forms, but especially in school plays and children’s films (see Rich 1992 and Eyre 2009). Chadha’s *What’s Cooking?*, for example, opens to the music of “The Star Spangled Banner,”² while the roasted flesh of a turkey gradually comes into focus, framed by a white family surrounding the turkey. Right after these opening credits, the film turns to the myth of the First Thanksgiving at a school play. The play reveals the filmmaker’s attempt to unify the various immigrant groups through the master narrative.³ When the stage curtains open to reveal the children dressed in Pilgrim and Indian costumes, the audience coos over how adorable they look. Far from seeming racist, the film presents a model for multiculturalism. The “Indian” girl is played by actress Brittany Jean Henry, who is African American. She is dressed in a sleeveless pink mini-dress, complete with fringe and feathers. The Pilgrim, Joey Nguyen, is played by actor Brennan Louie, who is Asian American. When the Indian says, “welcome to our Thanksgiving feast,” the camera cuts to the girl’s mother (Alfre Woodard), who beams proudly while mouthing her daughter’s well-rehearsed lines. The Pilgrim, wearing a black and white hat with buckle, steps forward, holding the turkey platter, and recites his lines: “We come in peace; we have brought our bounty.” The camera cuts to Joey’s mother (Joan Chen) and grandmother (Kieu Chinh), who are simply beaming. “Thank you for your kindness,” the Indian responds, “please join us for a feast.” Finally, the Pilgrim steps forward with

the closing lines of the play: “And we pray for hope, future progress, and harmony, and so that we can all get along. Amen.” At this, the audience applauds loudly. Not a single glimmer of dissent is evident.

Writing about this scene, film scholar James Keller states: “The final and definitive piece of dialogue paraphrases Rodney King” (Keller 2006:61). This reference to King’s call for calm during the 1991 Los Angeles riots, Keller suggests, reinforces the film’s preoccupation with race relations as well as the possibility of social cohesion (2006:61-2). Indeed, the actors on stage represent a number of races and ethnicities, as do the diverse families highlighted in the film. That the Indian in this play is cast by an African-American girl and the Pilgrim by a Vietnamese-American boy complicates a simple interpretation of the play’s message, as does the fact that the Indians host this meal.⁴

Keller has read the school play scene in this film as evidence of assimilation because the actors represent different immigrant groups (African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Jewish). By these casting choices, Chadha paints a multicultural tableaux of our nation’s origin myth. This casting, however, along with shots of admiring parents (of varying descent), belies the power dynamics at play in the myth of the First Thanksgiving. The ethnic group absent from this scene (and the entire film) are actual American Indians. Rather than speaking with their own unmediated voices, the “Indians” here are represented by white/black/yellow actors in red face costume—one of the many examples of the social sanctioning of children playing Indian (see Deloria 1998).

Thanks-giving or Thanks-taking?

Nobody in the internal audience of the films *Stepmom* and *What's Cooking?* seems the least bit bothered by the content of the school plays. On the contrary, we are given several close-up shots of family members nodding approvingly.⁵ In *What's Cooking?* the only explicit challenge to Thanksgiving's master narrative comes much later from a marginalized character, the angry vegetarian teenager of the white family. When it is her turn to give thanks, Monica (Mariam Parris), who dresses in Goth style with dyed black hair and facial piercings, makes the following subversive remark when it is her turn to give thanks: "I'd like to thank our fellow Native Americans, who gave us this land in exchange for measles, reservations, and casinos, so we could have all this food to celebrate with—more like 'Thanks-taking,' don't you think?" Despite the seriousness of Monica's message, it is lost amongst her dark wardrobe, facial piercings, and anti-social attitude. Add to this the dismissive reaction of the other guests, and the impact of the actual critique becomes severely limited.

In *Pieces of April*, the person to challenge the myth of the First Thanksgiving is the titular April. Though she is the film's protagonist, we learn that she is the proverbial "black sheep" of the family. Like Monica in *What's Cooking?*, April is a vegetarian with facial piercings, tattoos, and leather string wrapped around her hands and wrists—a symbol of bondage that creates a visual parallel to the turkey being tied shut.⁶ Throughout the film, we watch April awkwardly struggle to peel onions, stuff the turkey, and borrow one oven after another because hers is broken. At one point, we see her

struggle to explain the origins of Thanksgiving to her neighbors, a family recently immigrated from China. Not only do they lend April their oven, with “no strings attached,” but they sit patiently as April tries to explain the significance of the holiday by drawing upon the master narrative. With a bilingual family member conveniently present to translate, April begins: “Once, there were people here called ‘Indians’ — Native Americans, whatever. Then a boat came called the *Mayflower*. Landed on a big rock, carrying people just like me. The first year on their own was hard; it was—really, really hard. Let me start again [pause]. This was long ago—before there were the Pilgrims, there were the Indians, well, before we stole their land, killed most of them, and moved the rest to reservations, before they lost their language and culture.” April stops and starts her story several times before finally settling on a narrative she can actually feel good about delivering. “Once there was this one day, where everybody seemed to know they needed each other, this one day when they knew for certain that they couldn’t do it alone.”

On the surface, the master narrative seems harmless enough, yet such versions of the myth always begin from the perspective of the European colonizers, as April’s use of “people just like me” reveals. These examples continue to perpetuate the belief that American history begins with the arrival of the Europeans (Bataille 2001:05). Here is where the trouble begins. “I think it is crucial for us to remember that the American Revolution was not truly a war to throw off the yoke of colonization as is popularly imaged,” Native scholar Louis Owens reminds us, “but rather a family squabble among the colonizers to determine who would be in charge of the colonization of North America, who would control the land and the lives of the indigenous inhabitants”

(Owens 2001:14). In taking the colonizer's point of view, the myth of the First Thanksgiving masks the realities of relations between the so-called "Pilgrims" and "Indians," which were more often fraught with difficulties. When we read the Thanksgiving holiday as a manifestation of colonial discourse, and certain media manifestations as postcolonial critiques, it becomes evident that the master narrative serves to justify the perspective and behavior of the early colonists.

For example, textbooks often proclaim that the Pilgrims were the first "settlers" in what we now call the United States, landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620 (Loewen 1995). The historical record clearly shows, however, that this is false.⁷ The Pilgrims were not the first settlers on U.S. soil. Non-European explorers had already settled the continent around 7,000-12,000 B.C., thousands of years before European exploration; today they are broadly referred to as Native Americans. Historians suggest that the Phoenicians and the Celts were possibly in New England in 500 B.C., and travelers from Greenland and Iceland were likely in Cape Cod (and further south) between 1000-1350 (Loewen 1995:43). In the 1400s, French Protestants settled in present day St. Augustine, Florida, however, most of them were massacred in 1565 by the Spanish. In fact, the Spanish Jews, who settled in New Mexico during the late 1500s, were the first real "pilgrims" seeking religious freedom in a new land (Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]).

The first non-Native settlers were actually African slaves brought to South Carolina by Spaniards and left there in 1526 when the Spanish abandoned the settlement (Loewen 1995:77). By 1607, thirteen years before the *Mayflower* landed, there was a British settlement in Jamestown, Virginia,⁸ and by 1614 the Dutch were already living in what is now Albany, New York (Loewen 1995:77). For these reasons, many American

cities have proclaimed themselves to be the site of the “First Thanksgiving,” including Canyon, Texas (1541), Jacksonville, Florida (1564), Jamestown (1609), Plymouth (1621), Charleston (1630), and Boston (1631) (Appelbaum 1984:1-17).

After their voyage across the Atlantic, the Pilgrims did not encounter a virgin land and neither started from scratch nor civilized the wilderness. Prior to European contact, the population of the United States and Canada ranged from ten to twenty million dwellers, according to current estimates (Loewen 1995:85). Tribes along the abundant shorelines, for example, the Wampanoag, lived in settlements of up to 2,000 people. Native American groups in the New England area (e.g., the Algonquin, Nauset, Narragansett, Patuxets, and the Wampanoag) routinely burned underbrush and cultivated fields of vegetables and grains. Thus, the Pilgrims encountered already cultivated land. They chose Plymouth exactly “because of its beautiful cleared fields, recently planted in corn [by the Indians], and its useful harbor and ‘brook of fresh water’” (1995:85). According to the colonist’s journals, for four years they robbed Native houses and graves, often while thanking God for his “assistance” (Loewen 1995:91). New Plimoth, ironically, was Squanto’s village of Patuxet. The Pilgrims pitched camp right in the middle of his people’s village, appropriating their cornfields and “avoiding the backbreaking labor of clearing the land of forest and rock” (Loewen 1995:90).

While the myth of the First Thanksgiving sometimes mentions Squanto, the “friendly Indian” who helped the Pilgrims survive by teaching them how to plant crops, the story rarely goes into detail about Squanto’s life. Likewise, Loewen notes, “textbooks supply the feel-good minutiae of Squanto’s helpfulness, his name, the fish in the cornhills, sometimes even the menu and the number of Indians who attended the

prototypical first Thanksgiving” (Loewen 1995:96). Around 1605, years before the arrival of the *Mayflower*, Squanto was stolen as a child by a British captain and taken to England, along with four Penobscots, where he lived in servitude for nine years. With the help of his “employer,” Ferdinando Gorges, Squanto managed to arrange passage back to Massachusetts in 1614, but a British slave raider seized him, and two dozen other Indians trying to return to their homes, and sold them once again into slavery, this time in Spain. “What happened next makes Ulysses look like a homebody,” Loewen exclaims. Squanto escaped slavery in Spain, eventually making his way back to Cape Cod (1995:92). When he returned to his home village of Patuxet, he discovered that he was the last living member of his village. “All the others had perished in the epidemic two years before” (Loewen 1995:92).

Embedded within this sad story is one major reason why the Pilgrims could so easily take over Native American crops/fields and villages—because the plague had already greatly weakened Native groups. The Europeans colonizers were able to conquer America as easily as they did, “not because of their military genius or their religious motivation, or their ambition, or their greed. They conquered it by waging unpremeditated biological warfare” (Simpson 1980:2). The process had started before the Pilgrims landed, due to decades of British and French fishing off the Massachusetts coast, where they ended up transmitting European diseases to the indigenous people they encountered. The plague that struck American Indians during the seventeenth century dwarfed the Black Plague, where roughly thirty percent of the European population died between 1348 and 1350 (Loewen 1995:78).

“Within three years the plague wiped out between 90 percent and 96 percent of the inhabitants of coastal New England. The Indian societies lay devastated,” explains Loewen. “Unable to cope with so many corpses, the survivors abandoned their villages and fled, often to a neighboring tribe. Because they carried the infestation with them, Indians died who had never encountered a white person” (Loewen 1995:81; see also Kupperman 1980:186). Ironically, the English Separatists—the so-called Pilgrims—were in the habit of seeing themselves as part of a divine morality play, inferring that God was on their side. Rather than celebrating friendship with the Indians, the earliest Thanksgiving declarations among the Pilgrims often celebrated Indian deaths. For example, Governor John Winthrop referred to the plague “miraculous” (81) because it left villages and crop fields abandoned for the Pilgrims to settle into. Alas, the master narrative buries the truth of the plagues that left empty villages and dead bodies throughout the New World.

Even the *Addams Family Values*, which seeks to portray a more honest account of the contact between Pilgrims and Indians, fails to mention Squanto, casting another historical character instead, Pocahontas. Daughter of Wahunsunacawh (aka Chief Powhatan), chief of a network of tribal nations in the Tidewater region of modern-day Virginia, Pocahontas assisted colonial settlers in Jamestown. Born around 1595, she converted to Christianity and married an English man (John Rolfe). According to the historical record, however, Pocahontas died on March 21, 1617—four years before the mythical First Thanksgiving in 1621. No matter, for the helpful Indian role has become a stock character—from Sacajawea to Tonto. Indians from different places and times seem to be interchangeable. Such filmic moments—as when the Pilgrim Sarah Miller

declares, “Why, you *are* as civilized as we (except we wear shoes and have last names)” and “Welcome to our table, our new primitive friends”—critique the persistent belief that the Pilgrims were “a pious and moral band” of Christians who came to the U.S. to gain religious freedom (Loewen 1995:77, 89).

The historical record shows that as Separatists from the Catholic Church, the Pilgrims that left England for Holland to establish their own community, were a religious group that by today’s mainstream standards would be referred to as a cult. After twelve years in Holland, their decision to go to the New World was largely motivated by hopes of gaining profit and, thereby, luring others to follow. In these goals, the Pilgrims were successful.

Although textbooks often claim the Pilgrims as forefathers to democratic ideals, because of the Mayflower Compact, the first governing document of the Plymouth Colony, which some mistakenly view as the antecedent of the Constitution of the United States of America (Pleck 1995:89), there is historical evidence to suggest that, contrary to democratic or Christian principles, the Pilgrims may have actually hijacked the *Mayflower*. The vessel, which contained 35 Pilgrims and 67 “strangers” (non-Pilgrims) was supposed to land in Jamestown, Virginia, where economic opportunities already awaited at the English settlement. While some textbook accounts blame a storm for pushing the *Mayflower* off track, others note a mutiny as prompting the Mayflower Compact. Written by the separatists, the compact was signed in May 1620. Far from being the precursor to the U.S. Constitution, the Mayflower Compact, was a necessary result of minority-rule. The Pilgrims initiated it because the “strangers” wanted to

continue sailing to Virginia as was planned (Loewen 1995:89). The founders of the U.S. Constitution, in fact, paid little attention to the Mayflower Compact (1995:89).⁹

Most versions of the master narrative depict the Pilgrims as “generous to the Indians,” and the Indians as “friendly.” In fact, relations between the Pilgrims and Indians were fraught with problems. For the most part, American Indians were seen by the Pilgrims as “heathens” and “devils”--and the Pilgrims rejoiced in Indian demise (Loewen 1996). Furthermore, the historical record reveals that, in addition to plundering the Indians’ homes, crops, and graves, many of the early days of thanksgiving were declared by the Pilgrims because Indians were murdered or died of disease, which the Pilgrims interpreted as miracles from God (Siskind [1992] 2002). In short, the historical record of Pilgrim-Indian relations reveals that the Pilgrims were not “generous” to the Indians (Siskind 1992 [2002]).¹⁰ Alas, the master narrative omits these unsavory details about grave robbing, seizure of land, enslavement, and the plague, even though these facts were known throughout colonial New England (Loewen 1995:96). Instead, the master narrative establishes a feel-good story of colonialism.

Of course, the very notion that the Pilgrims’ First Thanksgiving introduced today’s Thanksgiving tradition is inaccurate. Many cultures celebrate autumnal harvest celebrations, including the Native groups the Pilgrims encountered. Many cultures have ceremonies and rituals of thanksgiving going back centuries before the Pilgrims. Folklorist Jack Santino traces Thanksgiving’s feasting rituals to the English Harvest Home tradition (1994:168). The Pilgrim images we see today, he explains, are generic, as are images of Indians. Hence, there are no Chief Massasoit candles in stores. Instead, there are nameless Indians and Pilgrims, engaged in fellowship with each other.

“Historically, there has been a bias toward New England as the geographical place of origin, despite the fact that it is not the oldest or first area settled, nor were Englishmen the first or only settlers” (Santino 1994:175). Yet these incorrect details become mythic in the American consciousness.

Among the Pilgrims, days of thanksgiving and days of feasting were declared (first by the ministers and then by the governors) for a variety of reasons. The Pilgrims interpreted events as evidence of God’s hand in their lives. If things went well for the Pilgrims (e.g., good weather, good crops, Indians killed by gun or disease), they read these as signs of God’s providence and declared a day of thanksgiving—a day of prayer, followed by simple food (not a feast). If things were not going well, they believed God to be displeased and declared a day of fasting and prayer. Therefore, the early thanksgivings were not only hostile to American Indians, but they did not even involve feasting. In fact, the first documented official “day of thanksgiving” by the Pilgrims was not until 1637. This was declared by the church, “to celebrate the defeat of the Pequot Indians” (Siskind 2004:44).¹¹

Folklorist David Whisnant discusses how “The Englishman’s fundamental dependence upon the knowledge and skill of Indians for his very survival—for food, especially—in no way altered his ingrained perceptions of them as lesser beings. Englishmen were never able to admit the ‘inherent integrity’ of the Indians’ way of life” (1983:255). The Indians were variably described as “heathens,” “devils,” “animals,” and “bestial creatures, given to violence and treachery [...] who ‘neither use table, stoole or table cloth for comlinessse.’ Because Indians ‘failed to replicate the civil order characteristic of European life,’ their very humanity remained ‘open to question’

(1983:255). Likewise, Siskind reports that several of the earliest Pilgrim Thanksgivings actually celebrated victories over American Indians (2004:49) and a report of possible cannibalism among the Pilgrims, where in 1674 Captain Church's company arrived near the end of the congregations' thanksgiving, "carrying the head of King Phillip" [the Wampanoag leader] (2004:49). One of the Plymouth historians, Increase Mather, reported it this way: "did God break the head of that Leviathan, and gave it to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness" (Mather [1676] 1862:197; quoted in Siskind 2004:49). "Mather's cannibalistic reference first transforms the Indian leader into the biblical monster [...] and next into a serviceable foodstuff," notes Siskind (2004:49). King Phillip's head ended up being stuck to a pole, in order to frighten potential Indian attackers (Fiskesjö 2003:50; see also Eyre 2009).

Many publications led to the current Thanksgiving ideology. The first of them to make "an association between the Pilgrims and thanksgiving [...] was a copy of a letter written by Edward Winslow, which was dated December 11, 1621, to a friend in England, describing a three-day event:

Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner re[j]oice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labours. They four in one day k[i]lled as much fowls as, with a little help besides, served the Company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms,¹² many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king, Massasoit with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer which they brought to the

plantation and bestowed on our Governor and upon the Captain and others
(quoted in Smith 2006:73).

Adding a footnote, Alexander Young, who published the letter in 1841, wrote that the above event “was the first thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England. On this occasion they no doubt feasted on the wild turkey as well as venison” (2006:73). Also, William Bradford’s 1650 manuscript, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, lost and then found and published in 1856, recounts important events from 1620 to 1647, including the early declarations of thanksgiving, but it makes no mention of the event described by Winslow in the above letter.¹³ It is crucial to consider the context of this letter. Winslow is trying to persuade an acquaintance to hop on a ship to the New World. In this context, Winslow paints a rosy image of the land and its people. This letter, therefore, should be viewed as suspect—not taken as historical fact. It is likely, say historians, that such a meal never actually occurred. Here is where the story of the First Thanksgiving becomes legend.

“Whatever happened in 1621, the Puritans did not have special memories of it. They made no subsequent mention of the event and did not observe it in later years” (Smith 2004:73). The feast described by Winslow included no prayer, and it had many secular elements, which would disqualify it as a day of thanksgiving. Young's allegation (more than 235 years later) that the event described by Winslow was the First Thanksgiving has been accepted as truth by many (Smith 2004) and repeatedly reinforced. As we have seen, the harvest feast in 1621, held by some to be the model of our contemporary Thanksgiving meal was not even a day of thanksgiving (Loewen 1996; Love 1895; Siskind 1992 [2002]:43; Santino 1994:169; Smith 2004). If it is true

that ninety Wampanoag men attended a harvest festival hosted by the Pilgrims (and there is significant reason to doubt the letter that describes the event), historians agree that the putative event was probably politically motivated to create alliances (Siskind 1992 [2002]:43; see also Humins 1987:61): “The connection between these three days of feasting in Plymouth in the fall of 1621 and our celebration of Thanksgiving is purely, but significantly, mythical” (1992 [2002]:43).

These discrepancies between the myth of the First Thanksgiving and the historical record make me wonder about the preference for schools to teach this particular story over other stories that would more accurately portray the tenuous relationship between the European invaders and Native groups they encountered. Some argue that, despite its admittedly fictional status, the story of the First Thanksgiving offers a positive message—a sort of moral “truth”—about cooperation, peace, and mutual need, and that this kind of story is harmless. Loewen counters, however, that “the Thanksgiving legend” reinforces American ethnocentrism. This same sort of “God on our side” ideology has been used “to legitimate the open expression of Anglo-Saxon superiority vis-à-vis Mexicans, Native Americans, peoples of the Pacific, Jews, and even Catholics” (1995:95). The myth belies historical realities and takes only the colonial point of view. This popular history of the Pilgrims, charges Loewen, “has not been a process of gaining perspective but of deliberate forgetting” about the tenuous relationship between colonizer and the colonized (1995:96).

Thanksgiving as Assimilation

According to historian Andrew Smith, in 1769 members of the Old Colony Club met to commemorate the landing of the *Mayflower* in Plymouth. Calling it a “Forefather’s Day,” they reported a dinner consisting of apple pie, cheese, clams, codfish, cranberry tarts, eels, frost fish, oysters, seafoal, succotash, venison, and whortleberry pudding, but no turkey (Smith 2006:71). The event was so successful that it continued to be observed until 1774, when members ended up being divided by their different loyalties in the Revolutionary War, except in Plymouth, which celebrated Forefather’s Day sporadically. In 1799, Boston’s Sons of the Pilgrims group sent an invitation to their Forefather’s Day (2006:72). In 1820, when Daniel Webster visited Plymouth Plantation (on the colony’s bicentennial), he declared it the “First Settlement of New England,” though it is important to note that he did not mention turkeys, any sort of First Thanksgivings, or even a dinner.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Thanksgiving became associated with homecoming, idealizing domesticity, all things rural, and all things white. As such, the fervor for Thanksgiving resulted from a Victorian reaction to unchecked industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Part of the attempt to “domesticate the foreign” was intended “to regulate the threat of foreignness within the boundaries of the home” (Kaplan 1998:589). In 1846, Sarah Josepha Hale launched a campaign through *Godey’s Lady’s Book* to declare Thanksgiving Day a national holiday, a campaign she avidly pursued until Lincoln made the holiday official in 1863, in hopes the domestic ritual would unite the nation fractured by civil war (Kaplan 1998:592). Along with recipes and instructions, the magazine promoted the holiday “as a ritual of national expansion and unification” (1998:592).

In 1850, Plymouth publicly asserted its claim as the place of the First Thanksgiving. Soon after, a host of fictionalized books followed, for example, *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* (1852), making stories of Pilgrim life tremendously popular (Siskind 1992 [2002]:52; Johnson 1999). This trend was fueled by the rediscovery in 1854 of William Bradford's *Plimouth Plantation* (which was reprinted repeatedly between 1856 and 1912). Although this document does not mention a Thanksgiving meal, it fed the hunger for Pilgrim lore.¹⁴ Before 1865, Hale's editorials said nothing of Pilgrims or the First Thanksgiving, nor do the previous Thanksgiving Day proclamations published in newspapers and magazines. In 1865, Hale made a passing remark that connected the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving and, soon after, the media in the north began to link the Pilgrims with the Thanksgiving dinner (Smith 2006:79). In 1870, *Harper's Weekly* joined those who provided an illustration of the First Thanksgiving, featuring Pilgrims and Indians praying beside a large table (2006:79) and textbooks began telling variants of the story. By the end of the nineteenth century, the story of the Pilgrims and their "First Thanksgiving" had coalesced around the Thanksgiving ritual (Weinberger 2003), with numerous magazines, newspapers, and books following suit. One of the more influential texts was Jane Austin's *Standish of Standish: A Story of the Pilgrims* (1896), which devotes an entire chapter to the mythical First Thanksgiving. Austin's story became one of several such fictional accounts to be repeated as if fact (Smith 2004:80).

Folklorist Jay Anderson explains the appeal of the myth: "The country needed a new folklore to bind together its heterogeneous population. The story of the Pilgrims and their feast helped fill this need and was widely diffused throughout the population"

(1973:11). The myth was especially popular in the new public school system, where elementary and secondary school teachers organized feasts based on Austin's fictional vision of Plymouth (Smith 2006:80-81). Suddenly, the Pilgrims were thrust into the role of national ancestors and role models, in lieu of other groups that could have been candidates for this position, including the Puritans of Jamestown, the Spanish Jews of Florida, or the Dutch of Holland, and thus began the "Century of the Pilgrim" (Snow 1993).¹⁵

Appelbaum explains that the fear of immigrants was an underlying theme from the colonial period on: "Victorian Americans, watching the ever-increasing flow of Irish, German, English, Scandinavian, Canadian, Chinese, East European, and Italian immigrants, worried that these strangers with their foreign ways would alter the character of the American nation" (1984:217). In addition to political attempts to prohibit immigration, the descendants of the European settlers sought to assimilate the new immigrants as quickly and thoroughly as possible (Appelbaum 1985:218). This method of nation-building was thought to be necessary, "to teach and control these immigrants, so threatening to American values, so essential to American industries" (Siskind 1992 [2002]:53). Therefore, this explosion of celebratory interest in early colonial times resulted from xenophobia, fear of the cultural changes immigrants could foment (Appelbaum 1984:218). The fictionalized story of the Pilgrims, the Indians, and their feast responded to this anxiety, a story around which all who shared a singular view of America (white and homogeneous), an etiological myth that would bind together this heterogeneous mix of people. As such, the myth of the First Thanksgiving spread throughout the nation's schools, along with other national holidays and rituals invented

in reaction to this wave of immigration, including Columbus Day, President's Day, and the Pledge of Allegiance (Anderson 1973:11; Siskind 1992 [2002]:53).

Smith explains how “the willing adoption of the Pilgrim/Thanksgiving/turkey myths had less to do with historical fact and more to do with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the United States.” Teachers needed a simple history of America to help assimilate immigrants into a common vision of what it means to be American, and the Pilgrims provided a simple story that met this need (2006:81).¹⁶ According to Pleck, the preference of these Progressive era teachers for focusing curriculum around calendrical holidays was intentional: “The selection of the national secular and religious calendar as the form of instruction was an exercise in cultural power, providing children with a dominant set of symbols (the flag, turkeys, Pilgrims, Santas, and Easter Bunnies)” (1999:779). Schoolchildren became cultural conduits, “bringing home ideas about celebration, national history, and cultural symbols learned at school” (Pleck 1999:780; see also Smith 2006:80). By the early twentieth century, immigrant children were performing in pageants celebrating the First Thanksgiving and asking their mothers for turkey (Smith 2006:81).

The Double-Edged Sword

The myth of the First Thanksgiving is like a double-edged sword. “Inclusion and exclusion are essential elements of national identities,” explains Siskind: “For the United States, the fact that the nation was built on the land of prior occupants has always been a contradictory empowerment to the sense of moral righteousness. Only God’s

mysterious plan clears the conscience of a chosen people, assuring them that those whom they conquer and have conquered were destined by their unrighteousness, their savagery, to be sacrificed” (2004:55). By tracing the nation’s roots to the Pilgrims, the myth of the First Thanksgiving is “a heroic meliorist narrative,” one “that disguised, romanticized, or simply eliminated the many-sided truth about the actual process of conquest, as well as the destruction of both native Americans and the environment” (Said 1993:314). The picture of harmony between Pilgrims and Indians celebrated today, therefore, “was not possible until the Indians had been completely vanquished [sic], their lands appropriated, their futures thought to be annihilated” (Siskind 2004:52).¹⁷ In the realm of representation of Native Americans, Siskind traces a definite shift in tone. During the Reconstruction Era, images of Indians were often violent, for example, a wounded Pilgrim or an Indian bearing a weapon. However, as the Indian Wars faded from memory, Indians could be safely incorporated as a symbol of sacrifice and “as part of the image of that lost Eden, in which Pilgrim and Indian, like lion and lamb, harmoniously joined together” (Siskind 2004:52). The bicentennial celebration of Plymouth in 1820 marks the beginning of what some scholars refer to as the “Century of the Pilgrim” (Snow 1993:13).¹⁸ A series of paintings in the 1850s included Pilgrim scenes and, by the end of the century, Pilgrim scenes were re-created on stage. These early theatrical productions—*tableaux vivants* (living pictures) became immensely popular (Snow 1993:16).

The impact of the Century of the Pilgrim continues to be felt today, with significant class time still given to making costumes and ritually re-enacting Pilgrim stories in schools. The most popular method of transmitting the myth of the First

Thanksgiving in schools is by dressing children in “Indian Headdresses” and “Pilgrim Hats” in order to reenact the mythical First Thanksgiving: “Usually the event is described as a time when the ‘Indians’ and ‘Pilgrims’ helped each other harvest the crops and celebrated by feasting together. One classroom [...] recently had a Thanksgiving program in which the boy and girl Pilgrims had a feast with the ‘Indians’ (no sex differentiation). The Pilgrims, who were given names, entered carrying food; the “Indians,” who were designated by number, were instructed to sneak ‘Indian style’ into the classroom” (Ramsey 1979:28-9).

Feminist theorist Adrienne Rich advises that we should “be less fixed on the discovery of ‘original causes.’” Instead, she adds, “It might be more useful to ask, ‘How do these values and behaviors get repeated generation after generation?’” (1978:37). In the case of Thanksgiving, thirty years after Patricia Ramsey’s scathing critique of elementary school curriculum, this theatrical practice is alive and well in our nations schools. Despite evidence to the contrary, many schools continue to teach the First Thanksgiving as historical truth, rather than as legend or myth (see Loewen 1996; Reese 2006). Here is where generic distinction *is* important. The younger grades of my son’s elementary school, for example, still host a feast that attempts to reenact the myth. In a memo, parents are asked to contribute victuals for the event, especially food “that may have been at the first Thanksgiving,” and to bring their cameras to take photographs of the students wearing Pilgrim and Indian costumes (“Unit A Feast” 2005).¹⁹

The Unraveling of Thanksgiving

Protests against the master narrative appear as early as the myth itself. In 1836 a Methodist minister of Pequot Indian descent, William Apess, urged the children of the Pilgrims to blush “at their forefather’s treatment of Native Americans” and he asked that “every man of color wrap himself in mourning [...] for it was a day of mourning and not of joy” (Smith 2006:72). Apess’ writings became public again in 1970, when Frank James, a Wampanoag, was asked to speak at the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrim landing in Plymouth. After previewing the speech James had prepared, the organizers refused to let him read it—offering instead for him to read a statement they had written. James’ original speech is now available on YouTube and is transcribed here.

Today is a time of celebrating for you [...] but it is not a time of celebration for me. It is with heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my People. [...] The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors, and stolen their corn, wheat, and beans. [...] Massasoit, the great leader of the Wampanoag, knew these facts; yet he and his People welcomed and befriended the settlers [...] little knowing that [...] before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag [...] and other Indians living near the settlers would be killed by their guns or dead from diseases that we caught from them. [...] Although our way of life is almost gone and our language is almost extinct, we the Wampanoag still walk the lands of Massachusetts. [...] What has happened cannot be changed, but today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America where people and nature once again are important (quoted in Loewen 1996:96; see also Villanueva 2004:176).

In 1979, an annual Day of Mourning procession began at Cole Hill in Plymouth, during which Native American groups observe the holiday by holding fasts and vigils: “For them, it is a symbol of the Europeans’ first foothold on the North American continent and the demise of the Native way of life” (Ramsey 1979:29). While James does not indict the public schools in his speech, he was surely aware of the prevailing curriculum involving the master narrative. As these protests suggest, our beloved social institutions—“with the best of intentions” (Tinker 1993:viii)—are complicit in the conquest of Native peoples.²⁰ If correctly taught, finds Loewen, “the issues of the era of the first Thanksgiving could help Americans grow more thoughtful and more tolerant, rather than more ethnocentric” (Loewen 1995:97). Yet challenges to Thanksgiving ideology, or the movement to eliminate American Indians as sports mascots, are seen as challenges to American identity founded on western mythology. We need to consider this historical and ideological context and seek to discover where our blindness lies (Tinker 1993:viii).

At Plymouth, for example, as a result of much conflict and negotiation, two plaques appear which suggest “a genuine desire for reconciliation” (Villanueva 2004:183). The one on Cole Hill explains the Day of Mourning procession. The other in the town square commemorates Metacomet (King Philip), son of the Wampanoag leader Massasoit, who was murdered in 1676, his head impaled on a pole and displayed for more than two decades on that spot, while his two sons were sold into slavery in the West Indies.

Because the master narrative involves “patterns of coercive orthodoxy,” which “strengthen the power of unthinking ascent and unchallengeable doctrine” (Said 1993:273), these various disruptions of traditional Thanksgiving meals can be read as

postcolonial critiques of Thanksgiving ideology, that is, as examples of Foucault's "points of confrontation" (1984:174). The social field contains a number of contending forces. Because the holiday is part of a hegemonic discourse that is reinforced and maintained via the performativity of tradition, year after year in multiple venues, disruptions may function as fissures or "points of instability" within the hegemonic system.²¹

As such, within two decades of Rockwell's "Freedom from Want," the painting was being ridiculed by artists and writers who found it easy to parody the idyllic image of the happy family gathered around the Thanksgiving table (Pleck 2000:36).²² According to Pleck, the postsentimental Thanksgiving emerged in the 1960s in reaction to changes the nation was undergoing. From the Vietnam war, the brutal assassinations of such cultural icons as the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, as well as the race riots and unrest on college campuses. The trust of the American people in their nation was shaken:

Whether protesting against the war or against university bureaucracies, American young people were questioning national morality and the values of tradition. The national origin myth, that the United States was a country descended from Pilgrims, no longer served to unify the nation or provide a compelling national identity. Whereas immigrants at the turn of the century saw a resemblance between themselves and the Pilgrims, the atmosphere of the 1960s changed the image of the Pilgrims from that of brave pioneers to that of land-hungry whites. The national story could no

longer begin with them. Thanksgiving was attacked as a symbol of national unity achieved at the expense of the Indians (Pleck 2000:37).

Despite the overwhelmingly nostalgic portrayals of Thanksgiving, therefore, we also begin to find depictions of Thanksgiving in a variety of media forms that involve disruption and conflict. For someone looking at these scenes through the lens of postcolonial theory, there is often “beauty in the breakdown,” as depicted in attempts to de-center the master narrative.²³

Eventually the sentimental Thanksgiving “became a victim of the cultural changes of the 1960s,” during which it served as “a symbol of family hypocrisy, cultural dominance of a Protestant elite, and theft of Indian land” (Pleck 2000:22). Three decades later, some of these counter-narratives likely drew energy from apprehension “over the then-impending celebration of the Columbus quincentennial and the extent to which it seemed destined to strengthen and validate the unhealthy mythical illusion that white U.S. citizens have about themselves and their role in the world” (Tinker 1993:viii). Indeed, in cinematic, televised, and literary examples of Thanksgiving meals in the 1990s, discomfort appears to be the norm. Cinematic Thanksgiving scenes that suggest happiness, comfort, and fulfillment have become the exception (Boswell 1993:9). “In American movies, food and dining are most often associated with crisis, frustration, conflict, or emptiness,” observes film critic Parley Ann Boswell. “No matter what the food, or what the meal being presented to us, Hollywood shows us not how Americans celebrate an abundance of food, but how this very abundance of food exposes other yearnings and other needs of American culture” (1993:9). Boswell’s argument is especially compelling when the focus is narrowed to one particular meal.

As such, numerous Thanksgiving scenes in the media seem to expose, challenge, and subvert Thanksgiving ideology, “using consumer and popular culture both as symbols to rail against and as tools to enhance their celebrations” (Pleck 1999:20). In such films as *The Doors* (Oliver Stone 1991), *Home for the Holidays* (Jodie Foster 1995), *What’s Cooking?* (Gurinder Chadha 2000), and *Pieces of April* (Peter Hedges 2003)—and in innumerable television episodes—families bicker, crisis rules the day, and the symbol-laden turkey is inevitably burned, stolen, or defiled in some dramatic and often hilarious way.

The Collateral Consequences of Capitalism

“Thanksgiving dinner couldn’t get worse,” suggest Zimmerman and Weiss, “than the one pictorialized in Oliver Stone’s *The Doors*” (2005:110). In the biopic about the 1960s rock star, Jim Morrison (Val Kilmer) and his wife Pamela Courson (Meg Ryan) host a Thanksgiving meal for their friends. On the way home from the grocery store, the couple takes LSD and by the time the guests arrive, things are well out of control. During the party, Jim flippantly acknowledges adultery with one of the female guests, and Pamela responds in a rage, flinging spoonfuls of mashed sweet potatoes at her husband, saying, “I have just one thing to say to you, Jim. You have ruined another Thanksgiving.” Transferring the pain of betrayal onto the duck (a turkey substitute), which has fallen to the floor, Pamela cries “You killed my duck. You ruined my duck.” When Jim tries to calm her down, Pamela attacks him with a carving knife. As Jim begins smashing the duck aggressively with his boot, the guests finally get

disgusted and leave with empty stomachs. Their Thanksgiving has been destroyed, along with the central symbol of Thanksgiving, the turkey substitute.

Whereas *The Doors'* Thanksgiving scene reveals the devastation of Thanksgiving's core symbol in order to critique this aspect of the rags to riches dream, in *American Gangster* (Ridley Scott 1997), the myth of the American dream is also critiqued by means of the Thanksgiving holiday and the turkey. Released in November, the film tracks Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington) as he follows in the footsteps of his mentor, Ellsworth "Bumpy" Johnson (Clarence Williams III) to become the primary importer of heroin to Harlem by smuggling the drug directly from its source in South East Asia inside military convoys during the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, honest cop Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe) heads the narcotics team that seeks to catch Lucas and bring down his drug empire. In the film's opening scenes, a man is bound, drenched in gasoline, and set aflame at the orders of "Bumpy" Johnson, the gangster who runs much of Harlem. The camera cuts from the fire to another scene depicting Bumpy in Harlem, tossing frozen turkeys from the back of a refrigerated truck into the arms of the clamoring crowd. This scene is repeated later once Lucas takes over as crime lord, with Lucas tossing the turkeys to the crowd. The transfer of patriarchal power is shown visibly, therefore, over the turkey body.

Besides these turkey-tossing scenes, *American Gangster's* Thanksgiving montage offers one of the strongest commentaries on American capitalism, warranting the film's tagline, "there are two sides to the American dream." With scant dialogue, director Ridley Scott provides a number of disturbing impressions, leading one reviewer to remark, "After Thanksgiving dinner and then *American Gangster* later that night at

the cinema, I came home feeling the need to scrub America off me with a wire brush” (Kuersten 2007:n.p.). The scene begins with the instrumental version of the Protestant hymn, “We Gather Together,” a shot of a lavishly prepared table, then pans to Lucas carrying the turkey platter to the table (his wife following with a side dish), amidst cheering from the extended family. After focusing briefly on the turkey being carved (with an electric knife), the camera cuts to a parallel scene taking place at Detective Roberts’s house. Roberts does not spend the holiday with family or his estranged wife. Instead, he prepares a spartan meal consisting of a tuna salad sandwich with crushed potato chips and pickles. The camera cuts next to Detective Trupo’s (Josh Brolin) home. The crooked cop is not shown with food at all. Instead, we see him smoking a cigar while watching the Macy’s parade on television when his doorbell rings. Answering the door, he encounters a caged turkey that gobbles nervously in warning before a car bomb explodes, destroying the detective’s prized car. As the montage progresses, the brutality and severity of images worsens.

With the hymn still playing somberly in the background, the camera returns to the Lucas household, as Lucas the patriarch taps with his fork on a crystal wine glass to announce the prayer. Family members automatically clasp each other’s hands as Lucas begins: “Lord, we thank you for this food we are about to receive, the nourishments of our bodies. Feed our souls with heavenly grace, in Jesus’ name, and for His sake, Amen.” On the heels of this prayer, the camera cuts to other forms of consumption occurring on the holiday, specifically, shots of heroin being sold on the street, a close-up of a woman injecting heroin into her arm, another injecting it into her foot and then collapsing in the bathroom floor, another of a bloody body in a different bathroom and,

finally, a shot of a mother dead on the bed, her toddler crying at her side. By showing a series of women overdosing on the very drug that has brought the Lucas family wealth and fame, the Thanksgiving montage exposes the collateral consequences of capitalism.

While the film explores the idea of Lucas as a new-era African-American entrepreneur, whose ambition was to circumvent the Mob by cutting out the middleman, this montage employs point/counterpoint to suggest the cost of Lucas' success, a kind of war waged on the bodies of black Americans. The film will not let us forget that "as charming and likeable as he is, Frank Lucas is a brutal mobster" (Warren 2007) and shows that while his drug empire affords him the Rockwellian dream of freedom from want, "it comes at the cost of hungry kids crying as their parents overdose" (White 2009:n.p.). If capitalism and the American Dream are critiqued in *American Gangster* and *The Doors*, the myth of the "First Thanksgiving" is parodied, reinforced, and criticized in other examples.

Of the many discourses manifesting in the visual media, which challenge the master narrative and Thanksgiving ideology, many of them occur over the Thanksgiving prayer. This is blatant in *Home for the Holidays* during the patriarch's disastrous prayer, and it is hinted at in the Thanksgiving prayer from *The Ice Storm* (Lee 1997). Set in 1973, with the Watergate scandal unfolding in the background, two families of New Canaan, Connecticut, find their lives out of control. As we have come to expect, their existential crisis is expressed through the Thanksgiving meal. Asked by her father (Kevin Kline) to give the grace, the daughter Wendy (Christina Ricci) gives the following prayer: "Dear Lord, thank you for this Thanksgiving holiday. And for all the material possessions we have and enjoy. And for letting us white people kill all the Indians and steal their tribal lands. And stuff ourselves like pigs, even though children in

Asia are being napalmed.” Wendy does not get to finish her acerbic Thanksgiving prayer, however, before her father interrupts. “Jesus! Enough, alright? Paul... roll?”

In the “Pangs” episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1999), Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) decides to cook a Thanksgiving meal for all of her friends when her mother leaves over the holiday. Buffy arranges to host the meal at the house of her British mentor Rupert Giles (Anthony Head), explaining that it will help him to fully assimilate into American culture. Later that day, a problem arises during a groundbreaking ceremony for the new anthropology building, which sits directly on top of the old Sunnydale Mission. Working on a construction job, Xander Harris (Nicholas Brendon) accidentally releases Hus, “a Native American vengeance spirit.” Coming in a green haze, the Chumash spirit goes about killing Anglo authority figures in the community, including the museum curator and the priest, and then it comes after Buffy and her friends.

For one thing, a number of diseases manifest on Xander’s body. He is diagnosed with malaria, smallpox, and syphilis—the European diseases that took their terrible toll on Native populations without resistance (Simpson 1980). As Dr. Gerhardt, of the museum, gives a speech about Thanksgiving “as a melting-pot that celebrates making our culture stronger,” Willow (Alyson Hannigan) exclaims in response: “What a load of horse hooley!” Explaining her comment, Willow adds that “the Pilgrims wiped out the Indians,” a reason to *not* celebrate Thanksgiving or Columbus Day. Overhearing their conversation, Anya (Emma Caulfield)—the demon with a soul—explains that the Thanksgiving turkey is a ritual sacrifice. When Buffy protests this interpretation, Anya

elaborates confidently: "To commemorate a past event, you kill and eat an animal. It's a ritual sacrifice—with pie."

"It is a sham," admits Buffy, "but it's a sham with yams. It's a yam sham."²⁴ It is appropriate that this supernatural disaster occurs on Thanksgiving day. There are numerous scenes when characters discuss the meaning of Thanksgiving and its traditional foods. Hus attacks the protagonists as they prepare the Thanksgiving fixings. The point of Thanksgiving, Buffy concludes sentimentally, is that "everybody has a place to go." The concept of "everybody," however, does not extend to Hus, the Chumash Indian spirit (Tod Thawley). When Buffy attacks him and engages him in a fight, he throws her to the ground saying, "I am vengeance. I am my people's cry. They call for Hus, for the avenging spirit to carve out justice."

Employing logic, Giles suggests they could "give him some land," adding sarcastically, "that will clear things right up." Unable to take this proposition seriously, Buffy tries to negotiate with Hus, at one point yelling, "You can have casinos!" Piercing the centerpiece of Buffy's table (a Pilgrim) with an arrow, the spirit turns into a large black bear, which Buffy fights and then stabs, causing the spirit to disappear altogether, along with the postcolonial critique—a point to which I will return shortly.

The myth of the First Thanksgiving is also critiqued in Barry Sonnenfeld's dark comedy *Addams Family Values* (1993), sequel to the *The Addams Family* (1991). When Wednesday and Pugsley Addams experience extreme sibling rivalry over their new baby brother, with several attempts to kill the infant, they are sent to summer camp against their will. Titled Camp Chippewa, "the foremost facility for privileged young adults,"

the camp appropriates “Indian” names and rituals in many of its activities.²⁵ The camp is filled with mostly white kids, who are depicted as mean and shallow; the protagonists clearly do not fit in. At the end of the camp, the campers put on a play about the “First Thanksgiving,” “to celebrate a seminal event in American history.”

During the rehearsal, we see the kids dancing around on the stage flapping their arms and singing:

“Happy happy turkey day.

Hunger pains will go away.

When you hear the Pilgrims say,

‘It’s happy turkey day.’

Happy happy turkey day.

Let’s all eat the Indian way. . .

As they sing these words, they gesture “the Indian war cry” to connote the “primitive” Indians eating with their hands.²⁶ For the most part, the directors have cast the fair (but mean) kids in the role of Pilgrims and the sympathetic outcasts as either Indians or turkeys. Camp co-director Gary Granger (Peter MacNicol) slaps one of the actors (a brown-skinned boy) on the head several times with the script, highlighting his unfair treatment of non-white children.

Wearing a feather in her hair, the camp's other co-director, Becky Martin-Granger (Christine Baranski) cheerfully announces the play: "This year, we depict perhaps the most important day in our shared pasts—the First Thanksgiving!" Gary (wearing a Pilgrim hat) continues: "A day for maize, the Native American word for corn, a terrific turkey dinner, and brotherhood. So, white meat and dark meat, take it away!"

At this, the camera cuts to the play's title, "A Turkey Named Brotherhood," and children dressed as turkeys and vegetables scamper across the stage as the theme song begins. At the musical prompt, Pugsley enters, wearing a wild turkey costume. The food actors begin to sing joyfully:

Eat us, / hey it's Thanksgiving day. / Eat us, / we make a nice buffet. / We lost /
the race with Farmer Ed. / Eat us because we're good and dead.

White man or red man, / from East, North, or South. / Chop off our legs / and put
'em in your mouth.

Eat me, / sautéed or barbequed. / We once were pets, / but now we're food. / We
won't stay fresh for very long. / So eat us before we finish this song."

Following this song, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Sarah Miller (Mercedes McNab), the lead pilgrim, stands in front of a long table and is surrounded by white children in Pilgrim costumes. Sarah addresses the Pilgrims in attendance: “I am so glad we invited the Chippewas to join us for this holiday meal. Remember, these savages are our guests. We must not be surprised at any of their strange customs. After all, they have not had our advantages, such as fine schools, libraries full of books, shampoo.” At this, the audience chuckles, and in enters the Indians, played by the non-white kids, the dark-haired kids, the obese kids, the kid in a wheelchair, kids wearing eye glasses, and those otherwise marked as non-normative Other.

Wednesday plays the part of Pocahontas. “How,” she says artificially, “I am Pocahontas, a Chippewa maiden...We have brought a special gift for this holiday feast.” In wobbles Pugsley, the head turkey, who says flatly, “I am a turkey. Kill me.”

“What a thoughtful gift!” replies Sarah Miller. “Why, you *are* as civilized as we (except we wear shoes and have last names). Welcome to our table, our new primitive friends.”

“Thank you, Sarah Miller,” responds Pocahontas. “You are the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.” As Wednesday recites these banal pleasantries, Amanda preens her hair shamefully, unaware of Wednesday’s sarcasm. “Your hair is the color of the sun, your skin is like fresh milk, and everyone loves you.” At this point, however, Wednesday breaks free from the script and delivers an impassioned speech about colonization, the devastating effects of exploitation of indigenous people. As she speaks, Wednesday turns towards the camera, breaking down the fourth wall, so that she

addresses the viewer: “We cannot break bread with you. You have taken the land, which is rightfully ours. Years from now, my people will be forced to live in mobile homes on reservations. Your people will wear cardigans and drink highballs. We will sell our bracelets by the roadsides. You will play golf and enjoy hot hors d’oeuvres. My people will have pain and degradation. Your people will have stick shifts. The gods of my tribe have spoken. They have said, ‘Do not trust the pilgrims, especially Sarah Miller.’”

Taken aback, and unable to remain in character, Amanda pleads, “Gary, she’s changing the words.” Despite Gary’s protest about her destroying his text, Wednesday continues: “And for all these reasons, I have decided to scalp you and burn your village to the ground.” At this, she leads the Indians in revolt. They begin making “war cries,” the soundtrack becomes ominous, and together the Indians and turkeys begin to attack the village, setting fire to the buildings. Tying Sarah Miller to a pole on stage, Pugsley-the-turkey stuffs an apple in her mouth to muffle her screaming, and other Indians catapult cherry pies into the faces of Amanda’s parents, who are slow to realize that this is not part of the script. Like Amanda, the camp directors are also tied to a pole and turned over a spit (with apples in their mouths).

Repetition with a Difference?

Looking at this nation-building meal through both folkloristic and postcolonial lenses raises questions as to the effectiveness of attempts at alternate discourses. For instance, the vegetarian teenager who rejects the turkey in *What’s Cooking?* and

attempts to subvert the master narrative by talking about the genocide of American Indians are marginalized and more or less ignored. And the hybridized turkey that burns in the Nguyen family kitchen is replaced triumphantly by a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, yet another symbol of capitalist culture. Even in these cinematic disruptions that challenge the icon of the American family, many end with a resolution that functions to restore the status quo. The hegemonic order is almost invariably restored, and the master narrative is left apparently unscathed. Hence, the ending of *What's Cooking?* picks up the last lines of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and then closes with the Beach Boys' 1966 song, "Wouldn't It Be Nice?," reinforcing the film's optimistic resolution, and in the Thanksgiving episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the Chumash spirit is defeated in the end, allowing the participants to return to their meal.

In *Home for the Holidays*, the ideology of capitalist consumption and excess is explicitly critiqued at Thanksgiving, appropriately so, for the holiday marks the start of the Christmas shopping season in contemporary American culture. Despite the serious conflicts that occur at the meal, the film closes with resolution, the family (relatively) intact.²⁷ *Pieces of April* follows a similar trajectory, where the conflict/disruption gets subsumed in the happy-ending that films so often demand: The turkey that was held hostage and amputated by the creepy Caucasian neighbor Wayne (Sean Hayes) gets "fixed" by the innovative Chinese neighbors (Stephen Chen, Sally Leung Baker, Jack Chen, Jacqueline Dai, Rosa Luo), who replace the missing leg with one shaped from dough. Beyond the symbolic turkey, the strained family cohesion of April's family is restored, and April finds a way to finish the story of Thanksgiving in a way that avoids its colonialist implications altogether. She explains to the immigrant family, "Let's just

say it's a day when everybody knows they need each other" and, in doing so, she connects the myth of the First Thanksgiving to her own situation. Not only does April's family finally show up at April's apartment, but they are joined by a makeshift multicultural cast, including Bobby, her African-American boyfriend (Derek Luke) and her African-American and Chinese neighbors. Director Peter Hedges has created a feel-good multicultural meal, where everyone contributes something to help each other, and that appears to reenact the myth of the "First Thanksgiving" itself.

Subversions of the master narrative remain inscribed within the dominant discourse of Thanksgiving. The fact that the marginalized characters are most often chosen to make the most scathing criticism of the master narrative in such films suggest an attempt to soften the critique of Thanksgiving ideology. Yet, as cultural studies theorists Stuart Hall reminds us, "'cultural change' is a polite euphemism for the process by which some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the centre of popular life, actively marginalized," he argues. "Rather than simply 'falling into disuse' [...] things are actively pushed aside, so that something else can take their place" (Hall 1981:228).

While disrupted Thanksgiving meals—both in *real* life and *reel* life—may at times destabilize the master narrative by calling into question the nationalistic and colonial assumptions of empire-building that enable it to thrive, these assumptions are always already inscribed within the dominant discourse. As a negotiation between the fixed, complete, "pedagogical" myth of Thanksgiving and alternative discourses, these disruptive meals must be in dialogue within and against the normal form of peaceful, unquestioning Thanksgiving meals in order to comment upon and manipulate them. If they abandon the traditional form completely—for example, host a meal without turkey

and potatoes or have a Thanksgiving play without Pilgrims and Indians—the subversive message may be lost altogether. Yet their adherence to those traditional forms raises questions about their ability to successfully and simultaneously subvert the ideology that hides quietly beneath the tastes of Thanksgiving.

This softening of the critique raises questions as to the effectiveness of disrupted Thanksgivings, pointing even to the possibility that they may inadvertently reinforce Thanksgiving ideology through yet another reiteration of the traditional Thanksgiving meal. While these scenes express discomfort with the ideological associations of Thanksgiving, they do not solve the problem. In some ways, they even reproduce it. Could these heartfelt attempts to de-center the Thanksgiving ideology end up reinforcing the very master narrative they claim to subvert? Or is it possible, as Judith Butler argues, that there can be "repetition with a difference" (1990), to perform the Thanksgiving meal in such a way that allows the possibility of real anti-colonial resistance? We shall see.

Chapter One – Notes

¹ For scholarship on other feasts that have etiological narratives at their core, see Anderson 1973; Sherman 1988; Turner and Seriff 1993; Shuman 2002; Pleck 1999; and Siskind 2004.

² The lyrics for “The Star-Spangled Banner” were written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key, set to the tune of “To Anacreon in Heaven,” a popular British drinking song. It became an

official song for the U.S. Navy in 1889 and for the White House in 1916. Congress voted to make it the national anthem in 1931.

³ These scenes, according to James Keller, serve to signify various levels of assimilation. For example, when the Nguyen women prepare the turkey, the first-generation Vietnamese-American matriarch critiques American foodways, and her children's ready adoption of fast food, while preparing a roast turkey for their Thanksgiving meal. "So much work just to make it have taste," remarks the grandmother who coats half of the turkey with red chili sauce. In response, her second-generation teenaged daughter Jenny (Kristy Wu) retorts, "Why do you have to make everything taste like Vietnamese food?" to which her mother responds, "Why do you think everything should taste like McDonalds?"

⁴ Following four families—the Latino Avila family, the Vietnamese Nguyen family, the African American Williams family, and the Jewish Seelig family—the film *What's Cooking?* offers a montage of Thanksgiving's celebrations and dramas. Of the four families highlighted, Keller observes: "Each celebration begins with goodwill, proceeds to upheaval, and ends in forgiveness. Each household cooks the obligatory Thanksgiving turkey and stuffing, but each family embellishes on the meal in a fashion consistent with its own racial or ethnic heritage" (Keller 2006:61).

⁵ Likewise, in *Addams Family Values* (1993), we see repeated shots of family members reacting more-or-less positively towards the reenactment of the myth of the First Thanksgiving, despite its over-the-top racist content. At one point, two parents in the audience whisper and giggle, correcting the actor's use of the term "Native American" with the word "Indian." The parents show no disapproval except when the marginalized characters interrupt the play to describe a more historically accurate relationship between Pilgrims and Indians in the seventeenth century.

⁶ In the screenplay, April and her boyfriend are recovering drug addicts.

⁷ For additional information about the differences between the putative First Thanksgiving (and early Pilgrim foodways) and our contemporary Thanksgiving rituals, consult any number of historical accounts (Loewen 1996; Hopkins 2005; Johnson 1999; Larson 1986; Simpson 1980; Robertson 1980; Weinberger 2003; Freund 1991; Appelbaum 1984; Pleck 1999; Siskind 1994, Love 1895; Anzaldua 1999).

⁸ The most likely reason the Pilgrims were hailed as the Founding Fathers, for example, instead of Jamestown, is because the Jamestown residents were too uncomely as role models. For instance, these settlers immediately enslaved Indians, forcing the Indians to teach the British newcomers how to farm. And the British even engaged in chemical warfare in 1623 during a reputed treaty negotiation, offering the tribes near the Potomac River (headed by Chiskiack) a toast "'symbolizing eternal friendship,' whereupon the chief, his family, advisors, and two hundred followers dropped dead of poison" (Loewen

1996:90). The Virginians were described as bickering, slothful, and even cannibalistic. “They spent their early days digging random holes in the ground, haplessly looking for gold instead of planting crops. Soon they were starving and digging up putrid Indian corpses to eat or renting themselves out to Indian families as servants—hardy the heroic founders that a great nation requires” (1995:90).

⁹ In fact, the United States was not the first democracy in the New World. Democratic traditions were present in the Republic of Iceland and among the Iroquois Confederation (1995:89).

¹⁰ The Pilgrims gained profit from American Indians in many ways. Besides robbing graves and settling in Indian villages, Hobomok (sent by Massasoit) helped the Pilgrims establish fur-trading posts in Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut (Loewen 1995:93).

¹¹ If the early Pilgrim days of Thanksgiving were declared by the ministers for such reasons as to celebrate Native deaths, later proclamations by governors and the latter presidential Thanksgiving proclamations continued in this tradition. The first documented Thanksgiving proclamation was in 1676, for instance, by Edward Rawson at a council in Charlestown, Virginia, on June 20th. It begins: “The holy God having by a long a Continued Series of his Afflictive dispensations in and by the present Warr with the Heathen Natives of this land, written and brought to pass bitter things against his own Covenant people in this wilderness...” (Sickel 1940:113), and illustrates a desire for

Native American tragedy within the opening sentence. Throughout the years, Days of Thanksgiving were declared for a variety of reasons. Our current celebration of Thanksgiving dates back to 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving in an effort to unify the nation fractured after the Civil War (Siskind 2004:44).

¹² This reference to “exercising arms” refers to the firing of shotguns—for practice and also, no doubt, as a way for the Pilgrims to impress the Indians with their weaponry.

¹³ Bradford does report an abundance of “wild turkeys, venison, cod, bass, waterfowl, and corn” (2006:73).

¹⁴ “The Pilgrims had nothing to do with it,” says Loewen, until the 1890s. “For that matter, no one used the term *Pilgrims* until the 1870s” (Loewen 1995:95).

¹⁵ It is no accident that Chadha’s film opens with the music of “The Star Spangled Banner” and showcases the master narrative while emphasizing the diversity of America’s immigrants.

¹⁶ Food scholars have noted a similar process in attempts to change the foodways of various ethnic groups during the period (Levenstein 2002 [1985]; Kalcik 1984).

¹⁷ Since the late eighteenth century, says Michelle Raheja, “there has been a myth of the disappearing Native American. Anthropologists, social reformers and politicians continue to lament the imminent demise of Native American communities and cultures. [...] Yet Native Americans continue to survive and thrive well into the twenty-first century” (“Faculty Profile: Michelle Raheja” 2009).

¹⁸ In August of 1921, to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the *Mayflower* departure, a play called “The Pilgrim Spirit” was performed in a 10,000-seat amphitheatre built at Plymouth Rock. The performance involved 1300 people dressed as Pilgrims and a chorus of 300, along with a full symphony (Snow 1993:13).

²⁰ According to cultural theorist Louise Althusser, the educational system is one of a number of institutions that comprise what he calls the ideological apparatuses of the state—or the ISAs (1969). Althusser focuses most of his attention on the education system, arguing that the schools have become the dominant Ideological State Apparatus. In light of how Thanksgiving is handled in the schools, Althusser’s take on the power of these apparatus within the school system may not be alarmist, but appropriately concerned: “It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most “vulnerable” [...] eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven,” explains Althusser. Moreover, he argues that the mechanisms behind this regime “are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School [...] an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology” (1969).

²¹ Althusser paints a dire picture of the situation for educators who want to use counter-narratives against the ruling ideology: “I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they ‘teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare and how many (the majority) do not even begin to suspect the ‘work’ the system (which is bigger than they are and crushes them) forces them to do” (1969).

²² Pleck offers a specific example: “In the 1980s Frank Moore, intending to dramatize the plight of AIDS victims, made significant alterations to the Rockwell illustration. Grandpa and the grandchildren became black. An aunt appears to be Hispanic. Grandma, although still Caucasian, was shown serving a platter of medications and syringes” (Pleck 2000:36). A more recent parody of Rockwell’s “Freedom from Want” positions a University of Kansas mascot (a Jay hawk) as the Other and MU’s mascot, Truman the Tiger, as the patriarch. The other major difference is that the knife has been removed. Perhaps the implications were too gruesome even for football fans (2009).

²³ The lyrics, “There’s beauty in the breakdown,” are from the song “Let Go” by Frou Frou.

²⁴ Episode list at http://tv.yahoo.com/buffy-the-vampire-slayer/show/episode/3051/recap&vers=long&start=1;_ylt=AgVxZmnSmy.55GXtuETGnpqxo9EF, accessed 12/05/09.

²⁵ See Bataille 2001; Davis 1993; Dorris 1978; Hopkins 2005; Landline TV 2009; Larson 1986; Mehta 2008; Niman 2003; Ross et al. 1986; and Villanueva 2004 for criticism of Anglo institutions that promote “playing Indian”—from the Boy Scouts of America to the Wakonse Conference for College Teachers and the Rainbow Family.

²⁶ In fact, neither Pilgrims nor Indians ate with utensils during the 17th century.

²⁷ Joanne (the “nutri-turkey” sister) accuses Claudia (Holly Hunter) of being on a new diet, the overweight father is accused of eating all the time, and those representing the capitalist system (and homophobia) are symbolically punished. While the homophobic sister Joanne gets turkey dumped on her, her banker husband is humiliated and symbolically castrated by his openly gay brother-in-law, as he is easily tackled during a football game in the front yard (see Dundes 1997). Soon after, Joanne (now covered in turkey grease) is abjected from the family in a fit of shouting. The main character, Claudia, tries to calm her upset mother (Anne Bancroft): “Nobody means what they say on Thanksgiving, Mom, you know that. It’s what the day is supposed to be all about...torture....It’ll all be okay if we just stuff ourselves until we can’t even think anymore.”

Chapter Two —

The Flesh that Unites: Embodying Colonial Desire

“The choice of green vegetables, breads, and additional foods is optional, but without the core turkey the meal is unrecognizable as Thanksgiving” (Korsmeyer 1999:137).

“A whole beast cut up in public [...] expresses the unity of the group that consumes it” (Visser 1991:231).

“To commemorate a past event, you kill and eat an animal. It's a ritual sacrifice — with pie” (Anya in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Pangs” 1999).

“The stuffed turkey represents the Native Americans, sacrificed and consumed in order to bring civilization to the New World” (Siskind 2004:42).

“Every year in a show of ceremonial magnanimity, the president spares that particular bird (and eats another one). The rest of the fifty million turkeys raised for Thanksgiving are slaughtered and eaten on Thanksgiving Day” (Roy 2004:87).

In Jodie Foster’s film *Home for the Holidays*, instead of sharing the same food, family members bring their own, and dinner conversation includes such remarks as “I only want my sweet potatoes” and “please pass my stuffing.” This conflict over whose food will be embodied becomes especially poignant when the mother (Anne Bancroft) and daughter insist on their own turkeys, competing rather openly to have the most popular turkey — the “nutri-turkey” (which is leaner and healthier) or the “traditional” turkey (filled with

antibiotics, hormones, and fat, but presumed to be tastier). Though everyone will eat turkey in this cinematic family, it fails to be a symbol around which they can unite.

I first began noticing the turkey as an expressive object ripe for interrogation while interviewing vegetarians in the 1990s (Roth 2005). Because Thanksgiving is “highly structured and emotion laden, with its celebration of family, home and nation” (Siskind 2002:41), I find that the conflicts over food that occur at other ferial family meals are made more extreme at the festal meal, due to the ideological significance of the turkey. When compared with vegetables, explains Margaret Visser, which “cost plenty of effort and care, but far less guilt, drama, and intensity than that which attends the catching and slaughtering of animals”—we see how “a whole beast cut up in public [...] expresses the unity of the group that consumes it” (Visser 1991:231).¹

While a heightened sense of community and togetherness—*communitas*—(Turner 1969) may be created by eating the turkey, negating this traditional food may likewise produce deleterious consequences.² Thanksgiving is consistently mentioned as a time of particularly intense family conflicts over the family member’s decision to eschew meat, in this case, turkey.³ If Thanksgiving “subtly expresses and reaffirms values and assumptions about cultural and social unity, about identity and history, and inclusion and exclusion” (Siskind 2002:41), then rejecting turkey can signify a rejection of what it means to be in the family, in a way that passing on the sweet potatoes or green bean casserole does not. “What things we admit into our mouths and what we emit from them,” Skubal reminds us, “are essential to our individual and cultural identities” (2002:50). Refusing to eat turkey is a refusal to embody the core symbol of Thanksgiving, and hence it is perceived by many as unpatriotic and unfamily-like.

For example, in *What's Cooking?* a rebellious teenage girl loudly declares that she is vegetarian and will not eat turkey. In *Pieces of April* (2003), the main character April Burns (Katie Holmes), who is a vegetarian and recovering drug addict, strives to surmount her role as the black sheep of the family by offering to host a traditional Thanksgiving meal for her family, turkey and all the fixings in an attempt to make reparations with her critical mother, whose name is ironically “Joy” (Patricia Clarkson) and who is dying of breast cancer. If most food films show the beauty and skill of food preparation, *Pieces of April* becomes a sort of anti-food film. April awkwardly begins her meal preparations, which the jerky camera captures in visceral splendor. April must stifle her disgust of the turkey carcass as she empties its innards, washes it, stuffs its empty body cavity—with a whole onion, celery stalks, and boxed stuffing—and then sews the bird’s flesh back together. Meanwhile, we see her family get in the car and begin the long trek to New York City, as April’s younger sister Beth (Allison Pill) complains loudly about April getting to host the Thanksgiving meal: “Who told her she could cook? I was the one who got an A in Home Ec. I bet she won’t even have turkey.” Along the way, members of April’s family deliberately stuff themselves with junk food, so that their stomachs will not have room for April’s meal, which they assume will taste bad and might not even include the sacred fowl.

This sort of conflict over vegetarianism manifests in a number of cinematic and literary accounts of Thanksgiving meals. In fact, it has become a common motif. Mary McCarthy describes one such a dispute in her novel *Birds of America* (1971), illustrating how a woman’s eschewal of turkey at Thanksgiving is taken by the male host (a NATO general) as a subversive act requiring an aggressive response. Chuck Lammers, the

NATO General, establishes his position at the start of the meal by ordering the carving-knife be sent back to the kitchen for sharpening (1971:194). When he learns of the vegetarian in the midst, he sets down the knife, appalled, and asks. “*No turkey?*”

“Oh, come on,” says the general, playing impatiently with the carving implements. “This is Thanksgiving!” Roberta Scott holds her ground. “No, thank you, I won’t. Really.” The General asserts his patriarchal authority. “I’m in command here,” he announces, laying a slice of breast meat on the girl’s plate, despite her protest. The General then piles stuffing upon the vegetarian’s already full plate. He seizes the gravy boat “like a weapon in hand-to-hand combat,” and pours giblet gravy on top of Scott’s mashed potatoes (1971:196). The general’s actions, comments Carol Adams on this scene, demonstrate that hegemony “requires a continual recollection of itself on everyone’s plate” (Adams [1990] 1993:48).⁴

In response, the vegetarian stages her own silent protest. “Roberta Scott had not succumbed to the appetizing slice of breast in its casing of crisp brown skin. Instead, she was eating carefully around it: the onions, the rutabagas, the sweet potatoes, the Ocean Spray cranberry jelly. She avoided the mashed potatoes polluted with gravy and the stuffing contaminated by animal fat and juice during its stay in the oven” (McCarthy 1971:198). Moreover, Scott manages to maneuver her fork in order to construct “fortifications against the giblet gravy, which ran between the banks of vegetables, lapped at the base of the tottering tower of jelly, divided into rivulets, and finally congealed” (1971:198). McCarthy’s literary lens then scans the room: “Meanwhile the carnivores lifted forks that appeared to have grown heavy with their cargo of turkey and trimmings. They wiped grease from their mouths, quaffed wine, sought elusive food

particles between their teeth with their tongues or a furtive fingernail” (McCarthy 1971:198).

Above all else, Thanksgiving is an embodied experience that involves the act of stuffing oneself with copious amounts of food. Both of these scenes—from *Birds of America* and *Pieces of April*—demonstrate that, whether literary or visual, this dynamic plays out in scene after scene, demonstrating how turkey becomes compulsory at Thanksgiving, suggesting that *communitas* cannot be attained without sharing in the flesh that unites. Even in the bi-national families examined by management scholar Samantha Cross, 84% of them ate turkey at Thanksgiving, a figure that jumps to 94% if we include both turkey and turkey substitutes (2009:44). What is it about Thanksgiving food—especially the turkey—that gives it this nearly sacred meaning?

The Philosophy of Taste

Thanksgiving ideology exists in the bodily practices associated with its rituals. After all, it is a day when Americans deliberately stuff themselves with copious amounts of food. The body is also involved in the political realm, as Foucault observes, so that cultural practices are already and always inscribed on our bodies (1975:155). Likewise, biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling suggests that as we grow up, we literally “construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh” (2000:20). While the former is specifically referring to the regulation of sexuality by social institutions, and the latter to the social construction of gender, sex, and sexuality, Foucault and Fausto-Sterling invite us to note other ways in which bodies are

constructed. For that reason, I turn to issues of embodiment in this examination of Thanksgiving and consider how its practices have are experienced by the “lived body” (Bordo [1985] 1997:229). Literary critic Susanne Skubal suggests that “[To] take up the issues of cultural identity and alterity it is most necessary to study the place where the domains of nature and culture, biology and mythology, art and science, all quietly or smackingly occlude—the mouth” (2002:41). In fact, “It might be said that all culture passes through the mouth [and that] food—its production and preparation, its distribution, its consumption—still comprises the central economy of life” (Skubal 2002:43). Therefore, Thanksgiving ideology is embodied by cultural practices—including the eating, tasting, digesting, and contentment that results from filling one’s stomach with comforting, safe, traditional food. By reflecting on the food-related aspects of embodiment—as well as theatrical reenactments of the mythical feast, I suggest that the embodiment of Thanksgiving is inherently bound up in the master narrative.

Because of the importance of food on this holiday, philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that it is important to examine the philosophy of taste involved with the holiday’s dishes—which she describes as warm, savory, and heavy—“the kind of slowly digested sustenance that ushers in cold months” and contributes to feelings of comfort, well-being, and plenty. Consumer studies describe the traditional foods of Thanksgiving as “simple, plain, and close to the earth” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). In other words, they are comfort foods. While comfort foods tend to evoke nostalgia for “from scratch” cooking, today many these traditional dishes are constructed from highly processed foods packaged in bags and cans and arranged in convenient locations at grocery stores. Although, most Americans are generations removed from the farm

(Pollan 2006; Belasco 2008; Kenner 2009), the holiday meal continues to have agricultural associations and is judged to be traditional. Certain elements of the meal have become ubiquitous throughout the country (and among expatriates abroad), thanks to aggressive marketing and widespread distribution efforts, and in spite of regional and ethnic variations many Americans at least have the sense that everyone else is eating the same foods—a belief that seems to offer a degree of comfort and togetherness, of *communitas*-building on the level of both the individual family and the nation family (Anderson 1973; Sherman 1988; Shuman 2001).⁵

Furthermore, the symbolic function of Thanksgiving food is “inseparable from the felt qualities of sensation” (Korsmeyer 1999:129). Elements of the meal have become so compulsory, in fact, that “it just doesn’t feel like Thanksgiving” if one has not experienced them in some form or another. People will resort to buying frozen turkey TV dinners, and vegetarians have a selection of turkey substitutes, in order to fulfill the ritual of eating these traditional foods. “It is an obvious point,” literary theorist Carolyn Korsmeyer remarks, “but the fact that tastes are always embedded in meanings is so often overlooked” (1999:131). The “the phenomenology of taste” (1999:94-5) is integral to the ritual. Like the full-bodied experience imagined at the mythical First Thanksgiving, where the Pilgrims are said to have hosted a feast with the Indians after a period of deprivation, contemporary family members are expected to fast prior to the Thanksgiving meal. Or, at least, they must claim to be “starving” in spite of the plethora of appetizers that stave off real hunger. This has a practical result, that is, food tastes different, depending upon how hungry we are: “If one is ravenous, almost anything tastes good and gobbling is intensely enjoyable” (Korsmeyer 1999:95). This also has symbolic

value. Participants' stomachs become empty vessels into which the symbolic food may be stuffed, so that they may "prove decisively the ability of the group to provide a profusion of life-sustaining basics" (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:19).

Concepts of "stuffing" and "loading" are redundant in the meal itself—from the stuffed turkey and the mashed potatoes loaded with butter and/or gravy to the piecrusts and cornucopia centerpieces overflowing with the fruits of the harvest (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:17). Thanksgiving Day abundance, moreover, is represented on the plates of each individual participant, which are "so loaded with food that they are difficult to balance," and "with so many different foods that they run together" (1991:17). "The best part about Thanksgiving," says Carla in *What's Cooking?* as the meal begins, "is knowing I get to eat this all over again tomorrow." Symbolically, these traditions assure that individuals will embody material surplus: "Their personal storehouses, like the granaries of the agriculturally based consumer culture they each metonymically echo, are charged with the basics. Food at this moment reflects more than personal preferences; it unconsciously mirrors social relations and processes. Fullness will endure" (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:18).

"The meal has a languid, comforting quality," notes Korsmeyer, that is "exaggerated by the habit of putting too much on the table and *inducing* torpor" (1999:137). In fact, a plethora of comics emerges in November representing this full-bodied experience of feeling stuffed. For example, a FoxTrot comic shows Peter's shirt and pants being stretched all the way across the frame by his younger brother. At Paige's questioning expression, Peter responds, "You don't pre-stretch your Thanksgiving wardrobe?" (Amend 2006). A Sally Forth comic shows the nuclear family (two parents,

one child, and a cat) reclining on the couch after eating their Thanksgiving meal, their hands holding onto their full bellies. “If I open my mouth,” says the father too tired to open his eyes, “could someone insert a slice of turkey?” “I . . . can’t . . . move,” responds the mother almost comatose. In no better shape, the daughter finishes the dialogue with, “Don’t wake me until it’s time to open Christmas Presents” (Alaniz and Marciuliano 2006). Another comic shows an otherwise stick-thin man with a grotesquely distended belly, reclining on the couch in front of the television. Empty plates, beer cans, and turkey bones lie all around him as he mutters, “Help! I’ve eaten and I can’t get up!!” (McCoy 2008). Similarly, in a Blondie comic, Dagwood (famous for his towering sandwiches) says, “Every Thanksgiving I eat so much turkey that I’m too sleepy to watch football.” In the next frame, he is still eating and still talking about the dilemma: “Geeze Louise, it’s an impossible choice to have to make every year.” In the last frame, of course, we find Dagwood passed out in his reclining chair in front of the television. “Some impossible choice,” remarks Blondie sarcastically (Young and Marshall 2008).

The fully-embodied experience of the Thanksgiving ritual is reflected as well in the bodily postures that are noticeably different after the meal—“bellies more outstretched, with hips forward on the chair and arms sometimes resting overhead on the back of the chair to accommodate the full belly, contrasting with the more upright before-dinner posture” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:18). Conversation often involves the turkey’s alleged soporific effect from tryptophan, an amino acid that can have a sedative effect. Experts argue that the claim that turkey makes you drowsy, like the story of the First Thanksgiving, is revealed to be a contemporary legend.⁶

A variation on the lore of being stuffed appears in MADtv's "Not Another Bite." In this scene, an African-American man and woman are guests at a white couple's home. When the matriarch performs the obligatory offering of thirds before dessert, the guest Bill accepts. To our surprise, he asks for not just thirds, but fourths and fifths. The frame dissolves to thirty minutes later. Bill reclines in his chair; his tie is crooked and his pants are unbuttoned as he groans in pain. Still later, his shirt is ripped and he cries, "I'm so full, I can't breathe." At one point, Bill pulls out a gun, threatening violence if the matriarch does not hurry up and make another batch of mashed potatoes. Still later, we see Bill holding a pistol in his left hand, while holding a turkey leg in the other. Pulling his shirt completely open, he rolls his head back and moans like a zombie, demanding "a steady stream of turkeys." Finally, we see Bill with the remains of the turkey carcass, holding the pistol to his head and sobbing in agony at being so full yet unable to stop eating ("Not Another Bite" 1998).

Although this scene is an extreme form of being stuffed, these scenes in the visual media show that, in order to demonstrate the feast's abundance, "an almost universal topic of after-dinner conversation is that everyone has overeaten and is painfully full" (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:18). This ritual of verbally negotiating consensus heightens *communitas* by highlighting the material abundance. Therefore, while evoking physical pain, people are generally proud to have eaten so much. Yet, ironically, the feasting at Thanksgiving is not seen as gluttonous. "The kind of surfeit proved at Thanksgiving Day is not an abundance of fun and frivolity or elaborate luxury," Wallendorf and Arnould point out. Instead, most elements of the meal recall agricultural themes. Thanksgiving foods are often plain and bland, simple unities served baked,

boiled, or mashed, so that their texture and flavor are rendered “safe for young and old alike...like baby food” (1991:19). Whereas the myth of the First Thanksgiving is connected to the infancy of the nation, the intense oral gratification that occurs at Thanksgiving meals “allows each participant to return to the contentment and security of an infant [...] who falls asleep after being fed well” (1991:20). For this reason, the authors suggest that in the calendar of rituals, Thanksgiving is the cultural equivalent of Freud’s oral stage of development (1991:20).⁷

This suggestion that the Thanksgiving meal represents an enactment of infantilism (1991:20) is compelling vis-à-vis the postcolonial critique of Thanksgiving. “Uneaten food is ‘other,’ part of the world outside,” says literary theorist Sarah Sceats. When it enters the mouth and is chewed, swallowed, and digested, however, its status changes. “At what point does it become part of us?,” she asks (2000:1). In Korsmeyer’s view, “The objects of taste are taken into one’s own body; they become one” (1999:189). Drawing upon epistemological and ontological concerns, Sceats argues that the act of eating is linked to subjectivity formation within the individual (Sceats 2000; Skubal 2002; Kristeva 1982).⁸ The orality of eating is seen, in this view, as the first libidinal zone and focus of desire, and the oral site is directly implicated in ego-identity (2002:8).⁹

From psychoanalytic theories to popular child-rearing literature, many support the notion that eating experiences impact personality development.¹⁰ If food and eating “are essential to self-identity,” they are instrumental, as well, in defining family, ethnicity, and class (Sceats 2000:1). These associations are not vague, Sceats argues, but are highly specific, for “encoded in appetite, taste, ritual and ingestive etiquettes are unwritten rules and meanings, through which people communicate and are categorized

within particular cultural contexts” (2000:1). Beyond fulfilling its role in the individual’s subjectivity development, the Thanksgiving meal contributes as well to the development of the nation-self by reenacting the myth of the nation’s infancy through this ritual of bodily surfeit. The major significance of eating, argues Sceats, is not biological but symbolic (2000). Hence, the conservative Thanksgiving menu “indicates the degree to which it is the entire meal itself that acts as a symbol” (Korsmeyer 1999:137), signifying historical events, however dubious their status as truth, for example, the belief that the Pilgrims and Indians ate turkey at the mythical First Thanksgiving (1999:132).

Deconstructing the Turkey

Beyond its status as the centerpiece of the meal, the Thanksgiving turkey has also become the holiday mascot, a fact exploited through such visual media as comics and videos. In a *Lucky Cow* comic, by artist Mark Pett, a wild turkey holds a white flag of surrender in the background while two cows stand in the foreground—one is the anthropomorphized Lucky Cow, mascot of a fictional fast food franchise, who stands on two legs and points at the other (a more life-like cow), saying “For Thanksgiving this year, spare the precious life of a turkey...Eat a cow instead!” The Lucky Cow’s wink at the audience suggests that this is just a ploy. Despite this half-hearted plea, turkeys will be eaten at Thanksgiving, for they are the flesh that unites, necessary for the ritual of Thanksgiving to be successfully complete.

We see an example of the turkey flesh uniting in the film *What’s Cooking?*. After highlighting the preparations of four ethnically-diverse families in Los Angeles, the

film seeks to resolve a paradox: that Americans separated by ethnic and ideology “are nevertheless united by common rituals and concerns” (Keller 2006:61). This unity is most powerfully shown, among other things, by the turkey. As the core of each symbol of the holiday, the birds in this film are lavished with attention, albeit in different ways that express the ethnic background of each family. Much screen time is devoted to discussion of them and to their handling, conversations that occur in grocery stores, kitchens, and dining rooms. There are moments when the female characters pat the birds, kiss them, or caress them, and there is a montage of the turkey presentation in which the patriarch (or his proxy) carries the turkey platter to the dining room amidst much acclaim from the dining room chorus (Keller 2006:62).

While the turkey is treated with reverence in this montage, it is subverted in others, befitting this film that advertises “Families. Fights. Feasts.” This preoccupation with the turkey is evident in some of the film’s publicity posters, which depict a turkey roasting in an oven. Along with a meat thermometer, a lit stick of dynamite juts out of the bird’s rear end. This might seem extreme for a film that ultimately promotes feel-good diversity, tolerance, and unity. Yet, in *What’s Cooking?* numerous conflicts play out over the turkey. At the African-American Williams family, the struggle for matriarchal control is deployed when the mother and daughter-in-law Grace (Ann Weldon and Alfre Woodard) argue over whether the turkey has been cooked long enough, the former suggesting they might get food poisoning, the latter insulted by the insinuation that she does not know how to properly cook a turkey. No sooner has the table been set than it collapses, and all of the carefully laid gourmet dishes (including the turkey) fall to the floor. We see Audrey groveling on her hands and knees, hysterical

over the broken meal (and the distressed family it symbolizes). Likewise, in the Vietnamese-American Nguyen family, intergenerational arguments and family problems distract the cooks, and their turkey ends up burning to a crisp in the oven. Such examples of the turkey being disrupted in television and film are so numerous that it would be futile to try to mention all of them. Suffice it to say, the disrupted turkey has become a very common motif in Thanksgiving scenes, as I suggest in the previous chapter.¹¹

In order to deconstruct the turkey's symbolic significance, let us consider how the turkey has become a fetish, a point made evident in "the elaboration of attention to live turkeys destined for the table" and representations of full-feathered toms that began to appear in mid-nineteenth century in magazines and decorations (Siskind [1992] 2002:48; Tuleja 1987).¹² This turkey fetishization process seems to have developed just as most Americans were becoming increasingly distanced from their source of food. "In just the past few decades we have largely stopped plucking our own chickens, gathering their eggs, or chopping off their heads," notes Skubal. "I venture that most of us would be put off by those early recipes that require us to 'take the hen or cock and wring its neck'" (Skubal 2002:5). Therefore, most Americans are not aware that the birds they eat bear little resemblance to the every popular tom turkey image.

On the day prior to Thanksgiving in *What's Cooking?*, several characters are shown at the neighborhood grocery store. Though there are other food items in their grocery carts, we only see the characters shopping for turkeys. Two male characters from separate families express concern about whether the chosen turkey will be big enough. As Tony Avila (Douglas Spain) grabs the largest turkey body from a massive pile of frozen others, Audrey Williams pulls her young daughter past the same turkey display and says,

“We’ll get an organic one.” Whether concerned about size or purity from pesticides and antibiotics, the fact of the turkey as the centerpiece of the meal goes unquestioned, for the most part in this film.

As these scenes illustrate, most Americans purchase turkeys from the refrigerator or freezer section of the grocery store (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). The turkeys are hermetically sealed in plastic—so that no blood shall fall upon the consumer’s hands. In fact, the plastic is opaque, in order to hide the turkey’s flesh, the reality of which might be unpleasant for consumers to see. Indeed, the next trend in Thanksgiving food processing seems to be turkeys that do not have to be washed, stuffed, or otherwise handled with bare hands. This Jennie-O product advertises “Oven Ready” turkeys—home style. “Thawing and cleaning a turkey sounds ridiculous to us, too” begins the advertisement: “Why would you go to the trouble of thawing and cleaning a turkey if you didn’t have to? JENNIE-O TURKEY STORE Oven Ready is the frozen turkey that comes already cleaned, seasoned and sealed in our FOOL-PROOF cooking bag. Just take it from the freezer and put it in the oven—no thawing, no cleaning, no hassles. It’s yet another way we’re making it easier than ever to enjoy the great taste of turkey” (Jennie-O 2005). The purpose of this product, of course, is to distance the cook even further from the turkey as animal. Moreover, the bird in the shrink-tight plastic will most certainly not be a wild turkey—the iconographic image of the turkey in full plumage that appears repeatedly in decorations and advertisements. Today, the turkey embodied by most Americans at Thanksgiving is the homogenized industrial turkey.¹³ An examination of the industrial turkey reveals that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway 1991:149). This snowy-white creature, with its

enormous breast, is barely recognizable to the average American as a turkey. The industrial turkey is a hybrid of machine and organism. It is a substitution of the symbol for which it stands, the wild turkey.

Smith's *The Turkey* provides an excellent history of *Meleagris gallopavo*. Originating in the Mexican highlands, the wild turkey underwent domestication by the Aztecs centuries before the Spanish colonizers encountered the birds. The Spanish brought some of the turkeys back with them to Europe and immediately began their own breeding process (Smith 2006; Davis 2001). Curiously, writers like Janet Raloff, author of a *Science News* article about turkeys, ignore Aztec agency altogether. Consider key sections of Raloff's article.

[T]he bird that took center stage on most Thanksgiving dinner tables this week was anything but wild. It was a heavily domesticated version of the species that once inhabited Mexico's highlands. *Ironically, much of the domestication took place in Europe a long time ago.*

[...] When the birds first arrived in Europe remains fuzzy. However, most historians agree that by 1520, Spaniards carried turkeys home to *Europe, where poultry breeders began improving the stock.* According to Stahmer, 'On account of their splendid appearance and their tender tasting meat, [these birds] may be said to have *advertised themselves* and within a few decades were to be found in practically every civilized land.' [...] ¹⁴

Though rudimentary domestication of the bird was under way in America when the Spaniards arrived, *European biologists soon took over and transformed the nervous, squawking flyer to a far bigger animal that reproduces more quickly.* Today the domestic turkey reaches sexual maturity at one year—roughly half the age of maturity for it's [sic] wild brethren.

When the British settled in North America, they brought along their domesticated turkeys [...] which the colonists sometimes crossbred with their wild American cousins. In time, U.S. poultry scientists took their turn at domestication, creating the huge-breasted, strutting gobblers that land on American dinner tables today. (2003:1-2; emphasis added)

Note the primacy of European domestication, ignoring the centuries of domestication that took place by the Aztecs.¹⁵ The Europeans are said to have improved the turkeys, but it is not clear on what basis this claim is being made. Were the generations of Aztecs, and the Indians who followed, not also “improving” the stock? As with the widely-believed myth of the First Thanksgiving, this account emphasizes the superiority of European culture and makes derogatory inferences about non-European accomplishments. In this case Raloff assumes Mexican lands were not “civilized,” and that a primitive or inferior kind of domestication occurred in the centuries prior to Spanish colonization. She does not mention that when they took turkeys from Mexico, the Spanish also enslaved Indians (see Davis 2001).

Postcolonial theory is useful here to establish a connection between the domestication of the turkey and the colonization of Native peoples throughout the Americas. This is important to recognize in any consideration of what it means to embody symbols through food. According to Raloff, western scientists bred the turkey from a dark, colorful “truly native American”—the “wild turkey” image that dominates Thanksgiving propaganda—to a white, large-breasted meat-making machine that is totally dependent for its survival upon its scientist master. Raloff’s unchecked celebration of western technological progress is exposed as problematic on several levels when looked at through the lens of postcolonial theory. Said warns that “to tell a simple national story therefore is to repeat, extend, and also engender new forms of imperialism” (1993:273). Raloff’s story is fairly typical, actually, in that it is full of ethnocentric assumptions. She writes that the European biologists, “transformed the nervous, squawking flyer to a far bigger animal that reproduces more quickly.” Whereas the European scientists were able to subdue the loud, annoying, difficult to control bird into a machine for reproduction, the American scientists are presented in Raloff’s story as brilliant, even though they bred a bird that cannot reproduce naturally, is more susceptible to disease and painful medical problems, and whose flesh will contain hormones and antibiotics, chemicals passed to the humans who eat them. If the ability of a species to survive without human intervention is considered important, then the Europeans and Americans are clearly low on the scale. Just as the myth of the First Thanksgiving works to instantiate colonial ideology, Raloff’s story celebrates the West’s ability to control and manipulate nature (see also Shohat and Stam 1994).

One important reason why Americans turned to the domesticated variety of turkeys is because they had hunted the wild turkeys so heavily that, by the 1930s, wild turkey populations fell to just 30,000: “Owing to the success of the recent stock-rebuilding program of the National Wild Turkey Federation, however, the latest U.S. turkey census puts the number of feral birds at some 6 million” (Raloff 2003:1). Because of the success of attempts to increase wild turkey populations, Raloff proudly declares: “Some 2 million people now shoot wild turkeys. This past spring alone, those hunters spent some \$2 billion on their sport [...] more than the domestic box office take of *Titanic*, *Star Wars*, and *ET* combined” (2003:1). It is ironic that our concern over the decimation of the wild turkey population, which was caused by hunting, is celebrated by killing the turkeys again as soon as possible. Is it so reassuring for Americans to once again be able to shoot our “truly native Americans,” as Davis suggests (2001)? Perhaps the connection between turkeys and humans is closer than even the aforementioned cyborg turkey reveals. Examples from the visual media shed light on this connection. Blurring the boundary between human and bird, the two figures coalesce around the Thanksgiving meal, the myth of the First Thanksgiving, and American Indians.

“It's a ritual sacrifice—with pie.”

According to Richard Slotkin, the attitudes and traditions that shape American culture evolved from the social and psychological anxieties of European settlers “struggling in a savage new world to claim the land and displace the Native Americans” (1973:5). The American colonists sought regeneration, Slotkin argues. “The myths of

regeneration through violence were developed during the initial stages of colonial expansion” (1992:14) and “became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (1973:5). Like the stock character of the Indian in westerns, the turkey as the sacrificial victim becomes the structuring metaphor of Thanksgiving—a point duly noted by Anya (the demon with a soul) in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who retorts: “To commemorate a past event, you kill and eat an animal. It's a ritual sacrifice—with pie” (Whedon 1999).

The dynamic blurring of the boundaries between human and bird, and the nature of the turkey as symbol, is also revealed in the presidential turkey pardoning ceremony. Taking place in the Rose Garden of the White House, U.S. presidents since George H. W. Bush have extended mercy to a turkey, “namely, one big fluffy turkey that would otherwise have ended up on the Thanksgiving dinner table” (Fiskesjö 2003:1). As he pardons the turkey, the president makes official remarks—to the turkey, to the press, and to the delighted audience in attendance. Usually these speeches are short and lighthearted. President Clinton, for example, made this statement in 1999: “Before I feast on one of the 45 million turkeys who will make the ultimate sacrifice, let me give this one a permanent reprieve” (Clinton 1999).

There are now two turkeys pardoned (Fiskesjö 2003:6). The second turkey serves as a back-up, kept “in an undisclosed location” in case the number one bird is unable to perform its duties (2003:6). According to Roy, ConAgra Foods reports proudly that “it trains the lucky birds to be sociable, to interact with dignitaries, school children, and the press. (Soon they’ll even speak English!)” (Roy 2004:88). In 1989, when George H. W. Bush turned the turkey presentation into an official pardon, the ritual quickly became “traditional,” and a sense of a much longer tradition was established to legitimize it, one

that claimed roots going back to President Harry Truman in 1947.¹⁶ Fiskesjö notes that the turkey pardoning tradition points to the etymological coincidence of the words “executive” and “execution” (2003:3).¹⁷ While the ceremony is enacted in a jocular manner, Fiskesjö argues that the now annual event “is pregnant with deep and terrible significance” (2003:3). Hidden within this ritual is the secret of sovereign power, which “is constituted, recreated and perpetuated even in our so-called modern states” (2003:1).¹⁸ The presidential turkey pardoning tradition offers a prime example of a seemingly innocuous act that helps shape our nation’s consciousness: “Masquerading as a joke, it is really a symbolic pardoning act which, through public performance, establishes and manifests the sovereign’s position at the helm of the state by highlighting, as an attribute of this position, his power to control matters of life and death” (Fiskesjö 2003:2). Fiskesjö describes the journey undertaken by these celebrity turkeys on their way to and from the White House, where they will learn that life for them “is not a Rose Garden.” Prior to the ceremony, the birds stay in the Hotel Washington. After the ceremony, they are brought to Frying Pan Park in Herndon, Virginia, where they undergo another a more informal induction, sometimes referred to, ironically, as “a turkey ‘roast’” (2003:8). At this point, the turkeys are said to “live happily ever after” at the farm.¹⁹

In reality, Fiskesjö reveals, “they are usually killed within a year and stand-in turkeys are supplied” (2003:8). Seen as “unfit for any other purpose than their own slaughter and consumption,” the birds are killed out of “an act of mercy” within a few months, are buried in the presidential turkey cemetery, and a younger living turkey is chosen as its substitute, so that the public may have a turkey to visit there, so that the veil that covers the industrial turkey will not be lifted (2003:8-9).²⁰ Fiskesjö interprets this

bizarre American tradition as evidence of a first-fruit sacrifice. That is, the role of these turkeys “is to symbolically make way for the millions that will die (or which have already been killed and sold deep-frozen)” (2003:9). As such, “the bird is an appetite teaser,” adds Davis, “with a load of symbolism surpassing the number of pounds it weighs” (2001:14). The presidential turkey pardoning ceremony, therefore, is in accordance with the holiday of Thanksgiving, which is itself based on animal sacrifice.

In the dozens of articles about the presidential pardon, along with photos of the president standing beside the turkey, what is most striking is that all the turkeys, not to mention the human officials, are white and male (until 2009). What happens when these photographs—of the snowy-white turkeys being pardoned by their white masters—are juxtaposed with comics that depict the dark-feathered “non-pardoned” turkey imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay or a bound and gagged Saddam Hussein on a platter with an apple in his mouth? Such images illustrate a complex web of displacements and substitutions, in which the turkey becomes a stand-in for ethnic or racial Others.²¹

As a ritual of atonement for the mass slaughter to come (Fiskesjö 2003:17), Arundhati Roy argues that the turkey pardoning tradition functions as an allegory for New Racism and, as such, participants do not see these activities as racist (2004:87). This was perhaps most striking in 2009, when President Obama was walked through his first presidential turkey pardoning ceremony: “You know, there are certain days that remind me of why I ran for this office,” he said outside the White House on November 24, 2009. “And then there are moments like this—when I pardon a turkey and send it to Disneyland.” With daughters Sasha and Malia at his side, the President mixed jokes with a serious message about giving thanks, about the troops unable to join their families,

and about the families hurting by the bad economy. He noted, several times, how delicious the turkey looked and asked about its weight (forty-five pounds). The Broad-Breasted White named “Courage” stood quietly, except once, when he let out a gobble that sent the President and everyone else into a fit of laughter.²² Obama confessed that he had wanted to eat the turkey, but that Sasha and Malia begged him to pardon it, sparing “its terrible and delicious fate.”

At the same time, the President assured the public (and undoubtedly the poultry industry) that not only does his family have a turkey to eat on Thanksgiving, but that the family donated “two of their less fortunate brethren” to Martha’s Table, a charity organization. Obama adds that they were already “dressed,” so that we do not conjure the image of slaughter too vividly. “All told,” the President jokes, “I believe it’s fair to say that we have saved or created four turkeys.”

The full video shows that as he moves closer to the turkey, Obama awkwardly finishes the ritual, raising his arms in “an official gesture.” He looks directly at the bird and says, “Courage, you are hereby pardoned. You will live in Disneyland.” The camera zooms in on eight-year-old Sasha who cannot take her eyes off the turkey, and seems disturbed by the ordeal. The girls nervously pet the all-white bird, perhaps the first time they (like most Americans) have been this close to a live turkey outside of a petting zoo. Malia observes, “He’s like a big chicken,” undoubtedly referring to turkey’s whiteness and lack of tail display, in stark contrast to the traditional wild turkey symbol of Thanksgiving.²³ Of course, saying that Courage gets to live out his remaining days in Disneyland does not explain what would have happened to Courage had he not been big enough, white enough, and sedate enough to make it to the White House. Nor does it

note how long Courage's body will last beyond the pardoning ceremony, considering he was already twenty months old at the time of the pardoning ("Obama Turkey Pardon" 2009).

One observer of the turkey pardoning tradition argues that, "by designating a common sacrificial victim, we ritually constitute ourselves as a nation" (Brian Luke, quoted in Davis 2001:120). I tend to agree. Far from disrupting Thanksgiving ideology, the presidential turkey pardoning ritual signifies the continuation of the status quo. Hence, the "soothing mercifulness that is enshrined in the Thanksgiving turkey pardon gives the go-ahead for the dinner gatherings of millions of families. It is reassuring and calming" (Davis 2001:120). The pardoning ritual parallels the post-conquest period, says Fiskesjö, during which "European immigrants said thanks to their god for aiding them by exterminating the native Indians and thus clearing the land for themselves" (2003:20; see also Siskind [1992] 2002). Fitting in nicely with the ideology of Thanksgiving, the symbolic processes of substitution at play, with both the master narrative and the turkey pardoning ritual, involve a "displacement of gratitude" (Fiskesjö 2003).²⁴

In a recent campaign PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) seized upon the logic of this tradition. Protesting the rampant "capital punishment of turkeys," they appealed to Americans to eliminate turkey from the dinner table. They ask: "If the president of the U.S. can pardon a turkey every year [...] then why can't we do the same?" PETA then promotes a number of turkey substitutes (e.g., tofu turkey, tofurky, soy-turkey),²⁵ vegetable-based protein products made to taste, more or less, like turkey (Murphy 2003:np).²⁶ The most blatant example of symbolic or representational food "is food that is crafted to look [or taste] like something other than itself" (Korsmeyer

1999:188). PETA's campaign rhetoric attempts to bring to consciousness the fact that eating turkey involves killing an animal—one that we simultaneously hold as our “mascot” at Thanksgiving—urging us “not to kill the mascot.” Instead, PETA proposes a symbolic substitute in tofu (a vegetable-based food). The campaign recognizes the powerful symbolism of the turkey and turns instead to the closest safe representation—rather than a dish too different (like lasagna). In doing so, the campaign exposes the necessity of a sacrificial entity in this regenerative ritual. As the central symbol of this first fruits sacrifice, the turkey becomes the flesh that unites and, therefore, a compulsory part of the ritual. People go to great lengths to join family and friends to embody the turkey together, to create *communitas*, a heightened sense of social cohesion, traveling long distances and spending days preparing for the meal that will likely be gulped down in thirty minutes or less. In a pinch, many will go to restaurants for a Thanksgiving meal, will arrange impromptu Thanksgiving meals with others and, as a last resort, will buy frozen TV dinners of turkey and mashed potatoes.

It is for this reason that vegetarian turkey substitutes arose, with mock turkey recipes emerging in the late nineteenth century (Smith 2006:126). “Even if turkey itself does not appear on vegetarians’ tables, simulated turkeys frequently do,” reports Smith, in the form of tofu turkey and “Tofurkey,” a soy-based product molded in the shape of a turkey. “Others prefer not to eat something shaped like a turkey or intended to taste like one” (Smith 2006:126).²⁷ A magazine advertisement for Citigroup plays upon this desire for substitution. It shows a white family gathered around the table. The matriarch has just set the turkey platter on the table, while looking at the young woman on her left, who smiles gratefully at her. The platter appears to contain a normal turkey, except that it is

somewhat pale, and the caption explains why: “It was my first tofurkey and I wanted it to be just right.” The text on the right side of the page offers further explanation. “Well, my son Jack went a married a vegetarian. So I grabbed my Citi card and went to the store. I picked up the old favorites like cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, green beans and turnips. As well as 15 pounds of “turkey” tofu. The dinner was a hit. Alice knows she’s already more like a daughter than an in-law. My husband Steve especially loved that I made a small turkey for him to eat later (“Let’s Get It Done” 2007). On the far right of the advertisement, almost out of the frame is the father—the patriarch—whose carving duties are not needed in the context of the tofurkey but who smiles graciously nonetheless, for he knows he will not be completely deprived of turkey flesh. It is highly significant that real turkey flesh does not disappear altogether from this meal. On the one hand, like the earlier examples of simulated turkeys, Citigroup offers a symbolic substitute. On the other, certain family members apparently even sneak off and consume “the real thing” so that the ritual may be properly completed (see also Deck 2001).

Editorialist Erin Murphy reflects on these kinds of substitutions from the perspective of the “dominant meat eating culture” (Twigg 1983), that is, the 200 million Americans who will happily consume an estimated 46 million turkey bodies for Thanksgiving (Raloff 2003:n.p.): “Unfortunately,” Erin Murphy continues on the subject of turkey substitutes, “I, like the majority of non-turkey-farming Americans, do not have it in my power to grant such a stay of execution this year. But as long as turkeys must suffer their inevitable fate, I will do my part to ensure it did not die in vain by making it the guest of honor at my Thanksgiving celebration. And though my complicity in the

crime of its death will inevitably weight heavy on my heart, at least I can be thankful that at my table, we still politely pass on the Tofurky” (Murphy 2003).

With turkeys being the mascot for Thanksgiving, the controversy about Indians as sports mascots becomes enmeshed in this discussion of Thanksgiving. Numerous media texts demonstrate a connection between turkeys and mascots, and between turkeys and Indians.²⁸ Siskind suggests that, in this national communion, the turkey symbolizes American Indians, “sacrificed and consumed in order to bring civilization to the New World.” The turkey’s ingestion, consequently, connects proper Americans to their spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims” (2004:42). There are enough parallels between the turkeys of North America and the American Indians of North America (2004:50), especially in the visual media, to make this claim feasible.

In her book, *More Than a Meal: The Turkey in History, Myth, Ritual, and Reality*, Davis includes a chapter titled, “A True Original Native of America,” phrasing taken from Benjamin Franklin’s letter to his daughter Sarah Bach. Davis discusses not human Native Americans, but wild turkeys (2001:33). Siskind explains that his blurring between human and animal recurs throughout American culture and that turkeys assume the role of “perfect metaphor for Native Americans.”

Like the turkey, Indians were either wild or domesticated. Although feared, wild Indians were more admirable in a sense, more flavorful, more ‘game,’ an enemy to be respected, if also to be killed. A Native American converted to Christianity and ‘civilization’ was a domesticated Indian [...]
As a true ‘native of America’ the turkey, wild and domesticated, could

easily become a symbol for those other natives, constructed not as Americans but as Indians—others (Siskind 2004:50).

“As the dominant culture succeeded in expropriating more of their lands and controlling more of their lives,” the image of “Indian” in mainstream discourse went from the attitude of “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” to a more nostalgic one (Siskind 2004:49). By the time turkeys came to be the focal point of Thanksgiving feasts, around 1863 (Tuleja 1987:31), the Indian Wars were fading and the image of Indians changed significantly (Siskind 2004:50). The emergence of nostalgic representations of Native Americans was coterminous with the emergence of the wild turkey as the central symbol of Thanksgiving. When wild turkey bodies were disappearing at alarming rates, they were substituted by domesticated turkey bodies—their bodies “civilized” and controlled by western scientists. Through these imbricated processes of substitution, the turkey as symbol of sacrifice—symbolic for Native Americans—comes to the center of our tables and our national consciousness.²⁹ In the media, both turkeys and Indians are seen as native to the Americas, both are depicted visually with feathered plumage, both are considered to be either wild or domesticated, both have at times been considered endangered, and both are replaceable through processes of substitutions.

In this way, the turkey bodies of Thanksgiving are laden with meaning. The significance of this symbol may come into focus when looked at through the lens of the Catholic ritual of Communion, in which wafer and wine denote the body and blood of Christ. For those who subscribe to the doctrine of transubstantiation, Korsmeyer explains, “the body and blood are literally re-presented: present again to the congregation. The Communion bread and wine metaphorically exemplify or express the

events foreshadowed by the Last Supper—the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, the crucifixion, and the resurrection” (1999:139). As such, Communion becomes a ritual of regeneration, an embodiment of this symbolic process, which is connected to a story of violence. According to Korsmeyer: “These instances of bread and wine are both food and not food. They are tasted and swallowed, but not for nourishment. [...] The fact that the sacrament is actually taken into the body indicates the most direct participation in the mystical reenactment of God’s sacrifice, one that the exercise of any sense other than taste might not render so intimate” (1999:139).

Beyond representing “natural abundance” and the “domestication of the wilderness,” they have become the victims of oppression and colonialism and, as such, the consumption of the Thanksgiving turkey—like the Eucharist—draws upon metaphors of cannibalism. On the levels of metaphor and symbol, “cannibalistic appetite invokes incorporation inasmuch as it expresses a desire to swallow or subsume something that cannot otherwise be dealt with in some way” (Sceats 2000:38).³⁰ As such, the oral stage, “conceived as the first stage of libidinal development when nutrition is inseparable from the love relationship with the mother,” says Sceats,³¹ is replete with connotations of eating and being eaten.³²

While on the one hand, Slotkin’s theory of “regeneration through violence” is useful in discussing the symbolic role of Thanksgiving turkeys, on the other, Freud’s “repetition compulsion” can be usefully applied to understand a nation’s behavior. Repetition compulsion, coined by Freud in 1920, refers to a psychological condition during which an individual keeps repeating a traumatic event over and over again. In this

trajectory, Thanksgiving in its current state operates as a sort of repetition compulsion, one in which a mythical event gets reenacted to constitute national subjectivity.

The dramas of these different stages, according to Freud, are continually replayed throughout one's lifetime. There is simultaneously "an adult urge for incorporation [that] reflects both nostalgia for a (mythical) state of union and a degree of ambivalence" (Sceats 2000:40; see also Freud (1950 [1920])).³³ This developmental process is not limited to individual psyches, but to social consciousness as well. Hence, we may see how the effect of national movements to assimilate cultural difference involves a form of colonialism: "If the object is taken in, then everything about it may be appropriated by a form of digestion" (2000:40). Such incorporation represents "a fundamental exploitation," in which one cultural group is seen by the other in "absolutely primitive terms" (2000:48). Eating the outsider engenders fear in the enemy, offering "the ultimate triumph of eating one's victim" (Skubal 2002:105). Furthermore, Sceats argues, "framed slightly differently, self-perpetuating appetite (consumer desire for goods and services perhaps) and a potentially monstrous self-serving group (or corporation or market) can easily become a metaphor for political cannibalism" (2000:41). In this view, figurative, cultural, and colonial forms of cannibalism are invoked through Thanksgiving ideology (2000:46), where the Indian is incorporated and embodied symbolically vis-à-vis the turkey.

In conclusion, there is an intimate connection between food's role in subjectivity development and its role in colonial discourse. The psychosocial development of the infant coming into being as an individual subject—through orality and through food—is compulsively reenacted throughout an individual's lifetime. The ritual of the

Thanksgiving meal enables this reenactment to occur on both an individual level as well as on a national level. Just as the individual subject requires consumption to constitute itself, so does the nation require this ritual consumption of turkey bodies and their substitutes.

Because Thanksgiving ideology exists in the bodily practices associated with Thanksgiving rituals, we literally embody Thanksgiving. The rituals of bodily surfeit that occur on Thanksgiving allow us to “return to the contentment and security of an infant [...] who falls asleep after being fed well” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:20). I argue, however, that despite the meal’s soporific effect, we should be wary of being lulled into a nostalgic view of Thanksgiving and its practices. It is incumbent upon us to be alert to the implications of even such beloved traditions as Thanksgiving and how colonial and patriarchal ideologies are inscribed on and through our very bodies.

Chapter Two – Note

¹ For this reason, many families substitute another kind of “whole beast”—e.g., ham, chicken, or a beef roast.

² See also Goodman and Goodman’s *Communitas* (1947) as well as criticism toward the concept in Eade and Sallinow’s *Contesting the Sacred* (1991).

³ Jabs et al describe an interview with a 72-year old vegetarian, during which the woman described interactions with her ‘meat eating’ daughter over Thanksgiving: “We don’t

interact too much with them [daughter and her husband] as far as food is concerned [...]. She said to me, ‘Are you going to make a turkey?’ ‘No,’ I said. [...] ‘Oh well, then we’re not coming.’ That was very hurtful” (quoted in Jabs et al 1998:186; see also Roth 2005).

⁴ Korsmeyer discusses at length the epistemological concerns involved in consuming symbols in the form of food. Citing the example of the croissant, invented by bakers in Vienna in 1683 to celebrate the city’s successful defense against the Ottoman Turks, Korsmeyer reports that the croissant’s crescent-moon shape represents the same image on the Turks’ flag. “In this case, not only is the crescent shape recognized as denoting the foreign enemy, but the fact that one devours the crescent reenacts the defeat of the invaders, and perhaps also represents Christianity conquering Islam” (1999:119). In its representational value, however, it is important to realize that “exemplification enfolds the sensuous elements of taste experience—the quality of flavor, the blends or conflicts of sensation, as well as the pleasures” (1999:129). Hence, the symbolic function of Thanksgiving food is “inseparable from the felt qualities of sensation” (1999:129).

⁵ In *What’s Cooking?*, for example, variations include tortillas and tamales, rice noodles and stir fried vegetables, oyster and shiitake mushroom dressing, fruit compote, steamed asparagus, polenta, and macaroni and cheese (see also Lockwood 2007; Long 2007; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Others are mentioned in *The Folklore of American Holidays* (Cohen and Coffin 1991), including a section titled “Thanksgiving Turkey with

Ethnic Dressing,” which is quoted below. The interviews reveal that, while roast turkey remains the core of the meal, the peripheral dishes derive from the family’s ethnic and regional background. Margaret Louise Arnott comments on this issue: “The Puerto Rican will serve turkey, rice and beans, with *Arroz con Dulce*, a pudding made of rice, sugar, coconut milk, and milk spiced with cinnamon and ginger in place of pumpkin pie. Among the Armenians, the old country people serve the traditional Armenian foods but do use turkey because it is similar to chicken and will feed a large number of people. Those born in the United States vary in custom but most have turkey with pilaf and the Armenian bread, *Cheorig*, while all the food is seasoned with oriental spices. Pumpkin pie is not generally served by the old country people but the new generation does use it, though there is no hard and fast rule. On the other hand, the Greek community tends to serve the traditional American menu, even in those families which adhere regularly to the Greek cuisine. However, the salad and condiments, namely feta cheese, are Greek, and sweet sauces or candied yams are avoided. Families from India usually depend upon being invited by an American family, but when they are not, since most of them are vegetarians, they tend to keep to their own cuisine. The Italians mix the menu, serving soup, roast turkey, ravioli, macaroni, pumpkin pie, wine and coffee. They cannot tolerate the sweet potato. The Poles use turkey with various vegetables, but serve apple pie and lots of beer and whiskey” (from a paper by Margaret Louise Arnott titled “Thanksgiving Dinner: A Study in Cultural Heritage” from 1975 quoted in Cohen and Coffin 1991:415; see also Cross 2009).

⁶ According to Snopes.com, an Internet set committed to debunking urban legends, the amino acid is also present in milk, beef, chicken, and even beans, and only effects the body when taken on an empty stomach with no protein present. “That lazy, lethargic feeling so many are overcome by at the conclusion of a festive season meal is most likely due to the combination of drinking alcohol and overeating a carbohydrate-rich repast,” as well as by the increased blood flow sent into the gastrointestinal tract to digest the heavy meal (“The Big Sleep” 2010; see also Troop 2010).

⁷ Unlike the popular American holiday of Christmas, Thanksgiving does not reify childhood delights. “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 the culture to the everyday world of adult instrumentality” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:20).

⁸ Kristeva theorizes that the primary psychological repression is first enacted by the infant spitting out the mother’s milk, thereby abjecting the material *chora*—the moment at which the infant experiences itself as a subject. It is the bodily experience of spitting out—that painful and clumsy moment—that makes this subjectivity development possible (1982). Kristeva likewise posits abjection involving simultaneous desire and disgust, a push-and-pull process. As such, Skubal concludes: “To consider the orality of

existence—its necessity, its complexity, its fundamentality—is to consider the aggression therein. To suck, to chew, to incise and tear off a hunk of something, to bite down hard on anything [...] comes to us so naturally. Yet it seems we've had to produce our most elaborate set of social regulations, rituals, and garnishments to manage this mouthwork of ours. The when, the what, the how, the how much, the who of eating are all markers of class, of creed, of cultural human identity. But the oral urge seems finally, as it must have originally, to be dangerous as much as delightful, sadist as much as sustaining, devouring as much as defining" (Skubal 2002:135).

⁹ Sceats, like Kristeva before her, notes the contradictory, but equally strong "human desire for a unifying vision.[...] Its most literal manifestation, perhaps, is in deep, often unacknowledged longing to be reunited with the maternal figure, a fantasized return to the status of wholly fulfilled infant at the breast, or even *in utero*" (Sceats 2000:5; Kristeva 1982). In fact, "before agency and subjectivity, before words are formed to fill the mouth of the child," she says, "we must remember that there is already the language of the body—the look, the touch, the warmth, the milk. First the mouth fills with milk—the maternal word—leaving a taste, beyond and before memory, that lasts a lifetime" (Skubal 2002:49).

¹⁰ The idea of the oral with subjectivity development is in line with Freud's claims that "this oldest instinctual domain—the oral—comprehends a fundamental judgment about ourselves and the world: this will be a part of me; this other won't" (Skubal 2002:3). Therefore, from infancy to the last supper, the boundary between self and other, inside

and outside, is enacted, challenged, and maintained via food. Julia Kristeva premises her theory of subjectivity development on orality, arguing that the moment when the infant spits out the mother's breast milk—abjection—is the true moment when the infant recognizes her or himself as a subject separate from the mother (1982).

¹¹ For comparison, see also the disrupted turkey scenes in *The Doors* and *Tortilla Curtain*.

¹² The less-colorful hens were insufficiently decorated for such a strong fetish.

¹³ Folklorist Simon Bronner shows how masculinity is constituted among deer American hunters. The closing words of “This is Why We Hunt” are about the lack of masculinity inherent in the industrial turkey: “Ritually sitting at the Thanksgiving dinner table with family staring at a symbol of wild game, the men may realize that the traditions, and the continuities between the generations, need reconfiguration” (2004:40).

¹⁴ According to Raloff's article, the etymology of the word turkey abounds in confusion. Quoting from what I assume to be an interview with Stahmer, “Some say it arose from the proud ‘Turkish’ strut of the cock [...] or that the bird's coloring resembled the red fez, dark gown, and red upturned shoes worn by Turks” (2003:2). But Stahmer also posits the possibility of *turkey* deriving from—*tukki*—the Hebrew word for peacock used by Spanish Jews.

¹⁵ Davis draws attention to a number of domestication and hunting practices of Native groups as regards the wild turkey. Clearly, from her point of view, even the American Indians mistreated turkeys (2001).

¹⁶ While the National Turkey Federation has supplied a turkey to the White House since 1947, none of these birds were spared during Truman's presidency. The earliest use of the word "pardon" said in reference to the presidential turkey gift was in 1963, when John F. Kennedy was in office. While Kennedy do not pardon the turkey, he did announce that he did not intend to eat it. The next day, the press reported the bird as having been pardoned. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan used the word "pardon" in a good-hearted effort to deflect an unwanted question from the press about whether he would pardon figures in the Iran-Contra scandal. The official turkey pardoning tradition we know today, however, seems to have a much shorter history, going back only to President George H. W. Bush in 1989 ("The Ungobbled Gobbler" 2008).

¹⁷ Many accounts place the origins of this ritual on Harry Truman in 1947, but even the Truman Presidential Library denies this provenance, as do many historians (see Fiskesjö 2003; Smith 2006; Davis 2001; "The Ungobbled Gobbler" 2008). Evidently, Truman ate all of the turkeys donated by the National Turkey Federation; he did not pardon a single one.

¹⁹ According to Davis, the pardoned turkeys began to be sent to Northern Virginia "pet farms" in 1982, then to the Pet Farm Park (in Vienna, Virginia) in 1984. From 1985-

1988, they were sent to Evans Farm, and since 1989, they have been taken to Frying Pan Park (Herndon, Virginia) (2001:123-4). In 2009, President Obama says that the turkeys will get to live in Disneyland.

²⁰ In fact, says Davis, the turkeys given to the president (usually breeder turkeys) have already been spared from the Thanksgiving table; they are too old to be considered viable at Thanksgiving. While the enormous size of these engineered turkeys (40 to 50 pounds) makes for good photo opportunities, the turkeys most commonly eaten at Thanksgiving are actually slaughtered much sooner, so that few live to see their eighteenth month. The presidential turkey, therefore, has already outlived its intended life. It will live only about four months longer after its pardoning than it normally would have.

Fiskesjö bemoans the treatment of these “fast-forward turkeys,” which she writes, “have been engineered and packed with hormones to the point that they are unfit for any other purpose than their own slaughter and consumption” (2003:8). Succumbing to joint disease, they cannot bear the load of their artificially engineered bodies. “The sturdiest survivors may live a little more than a year,” Fiskesjö adds. “But the birds are always finally put out of their growing misery” (2003:8-9).

²¹ Folklorist Psyche Williams-Forsson found in chicken advertisements going back to 1910 this conflation of chickens with the dark-skinned Other, in this case, with African Americans (2008). I believe a similar dynamic inheres with the turkey in its association with the Other.

²² The alternate turkey, Carolina, waited offstage, in the unlikely event that Courage could not perform his duties.

²³ I cannot help but note the irony in a bird named Courage, the forty-five pound turkey who sits calmly on the pedestal, rather than walking away. I wondered whether it was drugged or bred to behave so sedately. Or was it so big and old (by industrial turkey standards) that it hurt to move? Even after the pardoning ends, and the people walk away, the bird just sits there until its owner comes to pick it up and carry it away. Obama wonders about the bird's size, asking the turkey's owners what they have been feeding it. "Just the right stuff," a woman responds. "No, uh, performance-enhancing drugs or anything?" Obama asks, to which everyone laughs, however, it is telling that nobody really answers the question.

²⁴ "The displacement of gratitude is also, in a strange fashion, still mirrored in the route traveled by the turkey itself," notes Fiskesjö, which moved from Mexico to Europe, and then from Europe to the U.S. (2003:27). She continues: "[In] the orthodox understanding of the Thanksgiving meal and of the lore that surrounds it, the issue of the origin of the food and to whom grace should be directed remains largely concealed and semi-subconscious in the minds of those acting out the ritual. Orthodoxy rules, and the thanks said for the copyright on the ingredients of the meal, despite their actual native origin, still goes to the acknowledged supreme deity and not to the former natives, their gods, or the American land" (Fiskesjö 2003:27).

²⁵ Often vegetarian protein products are soy-based substitutes for their meat equivalent in terms of nutritional value, taste, and also appearance. That is, veggie “burgers,” veggie “hotdogs,” veggie “sausages,” veggie “bacon,” veggie “meatballs,” veggie “ground beef,” veggie “chicken,” and so forth, are frequently rendered to resemble the very animal-referents that the people are trying to avoid eating.

²⁶ Carol Adams places the root of this contestation within a dualistic framework and is worth quoting at length: “When we talk of eating animals, we are referring to eating nonhuman, rather than human, animals. But then, we rarely talk of eating (dead) animals at all. We talk of eating ‘meat.’ And once we begin talking about eating ‘meat,’ we are in the realm of cultural production that poses as individual decision. Herein lies the problem. For what ‘meat’ eaters see as a ‘nagging moralistic tone’ in vegetarians (as one philosopher puts it) might actually reflect the response that ‘meat’ eaters bring to any attempt to expose the cultural construction of the eating of animals’ corpses. As another philosopher retorts: ‘There can be no doubt that almost all people in Western countries have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo because they are strongly identified with the taste for meat . . . [T]he identification promotes a stream of self-supporting arguments.’ Is the vegetarian voice a judgmental one or is the ‘meat’ eating listener defensive? Will any discussion that names the raw material—the living animal—and exposes the manner of ‘meat’ production and the accompanying production of ‘meat’s’ meaning face a problem of tone and voice? We will see” (1998:60; see also Davis 2001).

²⁷ Along the theme of symbolic substitutions, consider the business venture by Mark Nuckols to sell a tofu-based product said to taste like human flesh (*Hufu*). He says he got the idea for Hufu over lunch one day—while reading about cannibalism in an anthropology textbook and eating a tofurkey sandwich. “I thought, ‘If you can make tofu that tastes like turkey, why not human flesh?’” (quoted in Shepherd 2005). Whether Hufu is supposed to be a substitution for animal-flesh or human-flesh remains unclear; its creator mentions that his target audience includes people who already cook with tofu, “as well as any actual cannibals who might settle for artificiality” (Shepherd 2005). With the disclaimer that he has never actually tasted human flesh, Nichols says he based his recipe on “cannibals’ reported descriptions of the flavor.” Following his study of cannibalism, Nuckols has determined that human flesh “essentially tastes like beef, but is a little softer and a littler bit leaner. [...] People do not taste like pork or chicken” (Shepherd 2005).

²⁸ Consider Murphy’s editorial comments on PETA’s campaign: “As with many aspects of American society, Thanksgiving dinner just wouldn’t be complete without a healthy helping of guilt. For most, the purported hypocrisy of celebrating our friendship with a people whose land and lives we allegedly stole will suffice. But in the spirit of Thanksgiving excess and abundance, PETA has cooked up another accusation to stir our consciousness: capital punishment of turkeys” (Murphy 2003:np). It is not merely coincidence that Murphy references guilt about the master narrative and guilt about turkeys in the same paragraph. She notes that PETA’s campaign does not call for the

complete elimination of the turkey as a mascot from Thanksgiving. Its Web site features the Thanksgiving E-cards “*Don’t Eat the Mascot!*” and “Happy Tofurky Day,” along with a list of children’s books that teach compassion toward turkeys (Murphy 2003). Instead, PETA offers recipes for vegetarian dishes to replace the turkey, including Tofurky, UnTurkey, and Tofu Turkey, formed to resemble the silhouette of a turkey.

²⁹ The turkey did not become the focal point of the Thanksgiving celebration until the mid-19th century [just as the threat of the Indian Wars was fading (Tuleja 1986:31; Siskind 2004)].

³⁰ For Margaret Visser, the cultivation of manners and rituals developed to contain the “dangers of eating, the insistent cycle of hunger, and the ever-present destruction required by the continuation of life” (Korsmeyer 1999:194). “Somewhere at the back of our minds,” Visser continues, “carefully walled off from ordinary consideration and discourse, lies the idea of cannibalism—that human beings might become food, and eaters of each other. Violence, after all, is necessary if any organism is to ingest another. Animals are murdered to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled, and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire; and chewing is designed remorselessly to finish what killing and cooking began. People naturally prefer that none of this should happen to them. Behind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish. It is one of the chief roles of etiquette to keep the lid on the violence which the meal being eaten presupposes” (Visser 1991:3-4).

³¹ In Sceats' view, during the oral stage of ego-development, the infant is initially unaware of things outside of itself. "[I]ndeed it takes everything it experiences to *be* itself. Owing to this 'impetus towards incorporation,' once the infant discovers difference, he or she may be said to have entered the 'oral-sadistic' or 'cannibalistic' stage, which is characterized by ambivalence; the infant experiences a conflict of love and aggression toward the love object or person (or part object, in the case of the breast) which is now perceived as external and unfamiliar, and a potential source of fear" (2000:38-9).

³² "Images of cannibalistic consumption are everywhere: children eat jelly babies and bake gingerbread men; ethnic groups are swallowed up (assimilated) by host societies; sharp business practice is described as "dog eat dog" in a competitive world of "eat or be eaten"; lovers are invited to oral congress, "Eat me." As a metaphor, cannibalism is rife. [...] Most potent, though, are the images of ingestion that cannibalism evokes, figuring an extreme desire to devour a person, to incorporate someone into oneself, a lust for total possession or a rage for obliteration and supremacy. The suggestion of rapacious dealings and profound yearning for union together indicate the conflicting motivations of power and love. Indeed, my argument in part maintains that these conflicting feelings are not mutually exclusive, and that cannibalism, whether actual, fantasized or metaphorical, is a self-contradictory, complex phenomenon" (Sceats 2000:33-4).

³³ “But one thing civilization is unequivocal about is its foundational oral repression,” reminds Skubal. “No sane or sound human being eats other human beings these days” (2002:115).

Chapter Three –

Sexing the Turkey: Gender Politics and the Construction of Turkey Sexuality

"I love Thanksgiving turkey... It's the only time in Los Angeles that you see natural breasts." — Arnold Schwarzenegger

At the Miss Drumsticks competition held annually in Yellville, Arkansas, young women strut across the stage, dressed in one-piece swimsuits and high heels. They hold a cardboard cut out of a wild turkey over their torsos, in order to expose only their “drumsticks” to the judges. As the audience whistles and cheers in appreciation, the cultural conflation of women and turkeys here is obvious (“Miss Turkey Trot / Miss Drumsticks Pageant” 2010).¹ The title of this chapter, “Sexing the Turkey: Gender Politics and the Construction of Turkey Sexuality,” plays upon the title of Anne Fausto-Sterling’s book *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000). From film and literature to cartoons and advertisements, I examine various manifestations of the turkey “in the media of everyday life” (Balsamo 1995), particularly moments when the bird undergoes processes of anthropomorphism and gendering. By looking at key vignettes involving the Thanksgiving turkey through the lens of critical theory, we can begin to see that which lies under the skin of the holiday.

Indeed, in the media coinciding with the holiday we almost always find scenes in which gender politics are staged around the meal, beginning with the shopping and preparation of the food, and ending with the meal’s clean-up and post-prandial activities (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), as well as supplemental events like the Miss Drumstickz pageant described above. By examining the gender politics that manifest around this

tradition, we see the impact of colonial ideology—not just from the point of view of race and ethnicity (as I argue in the previous chapter)—but from the standpoint of gender and sexuality as well.

Intensified Patriarchy

In many American households, Thanksgiving is “a day of intensified patriarchy” (Pleck 1999:24), in which the division of labor between males and females becomes even more pronounced than on ordinary days. Women do the backstage work to procure the ingredients and prepare the meal, often stepping aside at the moment of high ritual drama when the patriarch appears to carve the turkey. In their consumer behavior study of over one hundred family Thanksgiving traditions, Wallendorf and Arnould found that:

“Although regarded as a day of rest by men, in most households Thanksgiving Day is a day of [...] physical labor for women” (1991:25).² Of course, this arrangement is not entirely disadvantageous for women, argues Elizabeth Pleck:

There had always been gender segregation at the Thanksgiving meal, with men talking to other men, and women conversing with women before and after the meal. As women in the kitchen washed the dishes, and men listened to the game, one could recognize that women (willingly) gave up their leisure, and that men and children benefitted from female sacrifice.

Men and women also occupied separate spaces in the home on

Thanksgiving, although it was easier for a woman to enter the living room where men were listening to the game than for a man to don an apron and

help in the kitchen (Pleck 1999:782; see also Turner and Seriff 1993; Williams 1984).

Furthermore, Pleck figures, because women cook together to prepare for Thanksgiving:

[W]omen enjoyed female companionship in the kitchen and could display their mastery of womanly skills to each other. One basted the turkey while another made the gravy. One held the bird while the other stuffed it. While working in the kitchen women talked about the hard luck of relatives, a neighbor's choice of a bride, and the (sexual) reputation of friends and neighbors. In gathering information as well as disseminating it, women exercised their power to shape reputations and draw lines between the violators of community norms and the insiders.

At the meal's end women were rewarded for their skill in baking, appreciated more than they might be after an ordinary meal. Grateful aunts asked for a hostess's recipes; stuffed diners called out their compliments. In the recipes they chose, women remembered and honored a dead mother or other female relative. The act of using a mother's or grandmother's recipes was a way for women to make a powerful, loving connection with the dead (Pleck 1999:25).

While there is certainly truth to Pleck's characterization, many women report feeling exhausted at day's end,³ whereas men are relegated to being served or, "in some households, to 'help' but not assume primary responsibility for planning, preparing, and presenting the feast" (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:25).

In many of the households studied by Wallendorf and Arnould, men's help came "in the form of symbolic labor," for example, taking the cooked turkey out of the oven, carrying it to the table, and carving it:⁴ "In typical Thanksgiving feasts the man presents the 'hunted' bird (actually purchased in a supermarket after being raised in a feed pen), while the woman presents the gathered berries (from a can) and cultivated vegetables (also purchased in the supermarket)."

The ethnographers found that men's symbolic labor at Thanksgiving tended to be more public, watched by an audience and often recorded photographically. "Unlike the days of hidden labor that women put into ironing tablecloths, polishing silver, and molding gelatin salads, men's symbolic labor is public, focal, and worthy of historical documentation in photographs" (Hochschild 1989; qtd in Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:25-26; see also T. Adler 1981; Freund 1991). In this study, men were seldom shown preparing side dishes, those that are the focal point of the meal (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:25)

As the "cult of domesticity" developed around Thanksgiving in the nineteenth century, the turkey carving ritual seems to have emerged, as if to offer reassurance, because, as gender theorists have argued, masculinity must always reconstitute itself. Writing in her classic *Book of Household Management* (1861), Isabella Beeton gushes about the significance of the turkey for the holidays: "A noble dish is the turkey, roast or boiled [...] and we can hardly imagine an object of greater envy than is presented by a respected portly paterfamilias carving, at the season devoted to good cheer and genial charity, his own fat turkey, and carving it well" (Beeton 1861; quoted in Hughes 2006:148). Though she is referring to the turkey as indispensable at Christmas, within a

decade, the bird would become compulsory at Thanksgiving.

In the majority of families surveyed by ethnographic studies (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Freund 1991), the patriarch of the family—Beeton’s *paterfamilias*—holds the role of turkey carver. How that position is arrived at and negotiated within the family unit, and what patriarchal implications inhere, has yet to be adequately explored. By examining vignettes when this ritual is contested, we learn much about the turkey carving ritual. Toward that goal, I examine scenes ranging from Ang Lee’s western drama *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) to Jodie Foster’s comedy *Home for the Holidays* (1995), Eli Roth’s faux horror film trailer “Thanksgiving” (2007), and numerous other Thanksgiving moments that manifest in the visual media.⁵ Interrogating these vignettes through the lens of postcolonial and feminist theory, I argue that the handling of these turkey bodies exposes the pervasiveness of colonialism and patriarchy, just as it subverts these ideologies through the “carnavalesque body” and “grotesque realism” (Bakhtin 1968; Brooks 1993:4).

The Sexual Turkey

In her popular nonfiction book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), Barbara Kingsolver describes her family’s efforts to live sustainably and eat locally. Among their many food-production activities, the family tried turkey breeding. Kingsolver complains about her inability to find information on the topic of turkey mating behavior in her poultry husbandry manuals:

The whole birds-and-bees business has been bred out of turkeys completely, so this complex piece of former animal behavior is now of no

concern to anyone. Large-scale turkey hatcheries artificially inseminate their breeding stock. They extract the eggs in a similarly sterile manner and roll them into incubators, where electric warmth and automatic egg-turning devices stand in for motherhood. For the farmers who acquire and raise these hatchlings, the story is even simpler: fatten them as quickly as possible to slaughter size, then off with their heads. That's it. Poultry handbooks don't go into mating behavior because turkey mating has gone the way of rubberized foundation garments and the drive-in movie (2007:320).

In her chapter on "The Birds and the Bees," Kingsolver contemplates the nature of turkey sexuality. Early on in her efforts to breed poultry turkeys, she observed that information about turkey sexual behavior, unfettered by the meat industry, was not readily available. Kingsolver was perplexed. "The first hen who'd come into season was getting no action from either of the two males whom we had lately been calling Big Tom and Bud Tom. These guys had been fanning their tails in urgent mating display since last summer, but they directed the brunt of their show off efforts toward me, each other, or any sexy thing I might leave sitting around, such as a watering can. They really tried hard with the watering can. Lolita kept plopping herself down where they'd have to trip over her, but they only had eyes for some shiny little item. She sulked and I didn't blame her. Who hasn't been there?" (2007:325-26).

Thus begins Kingsolver's apparent obsession with turkey sexuality. She sympathizes with Lolita, the hen who struggles to attract the attention of the toms, because the males seem to be more interested in the watering can. Finally, Kingsolver

arranges the birds to have “their own honeymoon suite,” inside the main barn. She removes the watering can from view. Kingsolver’s description of the process is worth quoting at length:

She practically had to connect the dots for him—no bras to unhook, heaven be praised—but finally he started to get the picture. She crouched, he approached, and finally stopped quivering his tailfeathers to impress her. After all these many months, it took him a couple of beats to shift gears from “Get the babe! Get the babe!” to “Oh-oh *yess!*” Inch by inch he walked up onto her back. Then he turned around in circles several times, s-l-o-w-l-y, like the minute hand of a clock, before appearing to decide on the correct orientation. I was ready to hear the case for artificial insemination. But it looked now like he was giving it a go.

The final important event after all this awkward foreplay is what bird scientists call the “cloacal kiss.” A male bird doesn’t have anything you would call “a member,” or whatever you call it at your house. He just has an orifice, or cloaca, more or less the same equipment as the female except that semen is ejected from his, and eggs come out of hers later on. Those eggs will be fertile only if the two orifices have previously made the prescribed kind of well-timed contact.

I watched, I don’t mind saying. Come on, wouldn’t you? Possibly you would not have stooped quite as low as I did for the better view, but geez, we don’t get cable out here. And this truly was an extraordinary event, something that’s nearly gone from our living world. For 99.9

percent of domestic turkeys, life begins in the syringe and remains sexless to the end. Few people alive have witnessed what I was about to see.

Cloacal kiss is exactly the right name for it. The male really has to extend that orifice, like puckering up for a big smooch. Try to picture this, though: he's standing on her back, tromping steadily and clutching his lady so as not to fall off. The full complement of her long tail-feather fan lies between his equipment and hers. The pucker has to be heroic to get around all that. Robert Browning said it perfectly: *Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?*

Paradise arrives when a fellow has kneaded his lady's erogenous wing zones for a long, long time with his feet, until she finally decides her suitor has worked himself up to the necessary fervor. Without warning, quick as an eyeblink, she flips up her tail feathers and reaches upward to meet him. Oh, my gosh! I gasped to see it.

It was an *air kiss*.

They really did miss. *Mwah!* –like a pair of divas onstage who don't want to muss their lipstick. (Not Britney and Madonna.) But rare is the perfect first attempt, I know as well as the next person who has ever been young.

She wandered off, slightly dazed, to a corner of the dark little room. He started after her, his feathers all slack for once in his life, divining that this was not the time to put on a tail-shaking show. He knit his caruncled brow and surely would have quoted Shakespeare if he'd had

it in him: *Trip no further, pretty sweeting; journeys end in lovers meeting*
[. . .].

She pecked listlessly at some grain on the dirt floor. Probably she'd been hoping for better room service.

What's to come is still unsure; in delay there lies no plenty. Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty, Youth's a stuff will not endure.

I left them there, to love again on the morrow. Or maybe in fifteen minutes. After all, they were kids (2007:326-27; emphasis in original).

After committing this much attention to turkey copulation, Kingsolver later focuses on the Thanksgiving meal: "I'm partial to the traditional menu. I love carving up Tom on the table, and then revisiting him throughout the following weeks in sandwiches, soups, and casseroles" (2007:281). Because of Kingsolver's interest in turkey sexuality, I suggest that her reference to "revisiting him throughout the following weeks" alludes to more than leftovers.

A comparable fondness for the turkey body appears visually in the film *What's Cooking?*, in which numerous scenes depict characters who gaze at, wonder about, caress, kiss, pat, and otherwise lavish attention on the (dead) turkey carcass that will become the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving meal. Indeed, one version of the film's box cover shows a gaggle of gazing women. In another version of the DVD cover, the women are framed by the oven walls, as if the photo were taken from the oven's interior. Presumably, the women are checking to see whether the turkey has finished cooking. They smile knowingly, for this is no ordinary turkey—a handful of dynamite has been

inserted into its ass! By substituting explosives for stuffing, of course, this image foreshadows the family dramas to erupt in the film. If we are looking closely, we might also note the sexual allusion to having the dynamite shoved into the hole that was the turkey's anus/pelvis area, a point to which I return shortly.

In almost every scene, attention is lavished on the turkey. From purchasing, thawing, and stuffing to presentation, the turkey becomes a full-fledged character in *What's Cooking?*. The women of the Williams family gawk at the bird as the oven door opens and then begin to argue over whether or not it has cooked long enough. From shopping to preparation, the Avila women repeatedly express concern over whether the turkey will be big enough to feed their hungry throngs.⁶ There is also the turkey presentation montage in *What's Cooking?*, in which a series of shots highlighting the turkey being brought to the dining room table as the soundtrack builds triumphantly. This act of carrying the turkey to the table (usually by the patriarch) is accompanied by requisite "oohing" and "awing." The pageantry displayed during some of these cinematic moments causes me to wonder whether the adoration is being directed at the turkey or at the patriarch holding the bird. In either case, the turkey has become a full-fledged fetish.

Homi Bhabha explains that the fetish reveals anxieties about sexual difference, anxieties stemming from the shocking moment of discovering that the mother has no penis (Freud's "castration complex"). Seeking to alleviate these anxieties, the (male) subject turns to an object that relates as much to pleasure and desire as it does to fear and anxiety (Bhabha 1994:161). The concept of the fetish, arising out of psychoanalytic theory, has been useful to postcolonial theorists, for "sexuality and race are intimately connected in the apparatus of colonial power" (1994:161). Whereas the sexual fetish

thrives on its secretiveness, “the colonial fetish is overt, articulated, recognized as common, public knowledge” (1994:161).⁷ The fetishized turkey functions similarly on the national stage, embodying larger socio-political contexts of colonial relations.

If representations of turkeys in the visual media reveal the colonial imaginary at play, we find some moments that engage in the discourse about Thanksgiving ideology in very curious ways. Consider the familiar Thanksgiving turkey—a tom displaying his tail feathers. The image is ubiquitous. The male display of his feathers is easily recognized as the primary symbol of the holiday. It can be seen on posters, flags, banners, advertisements, decorations, greeting cards, and tableware throughout America around Thanksgiving. Ironically, displaying their tail feathers is behavior toms primarily do during mating season (in the spring). Yet the “gobbler’s display” has become the core symbol of this fall holiday (Smith 2006: 127). Like peacocks during mating season, “the male will erect his tail and spread it like a fan. His wattles are more brightly colored and will swell. He will puff out his feathers and droop or even drag his wings.” This strutting around while gobbling is said to be very alluring to the female (Wolf Howl Animal Preserve 2009; see also Davis 2001:29-30).⁸ Hunting supply companies have capitalized on this knowledge with the sale of life-sized, three-dimensional turkey decoys locked in intercourse. Sold separately, the “breeding tom” is designed to fit atop the “Delta Hot Hen Decoy” (“Supreme Breeding Tom and Collapsible Turkey Decoy” 1998).

The website for TurkeyHuntingSecrets.com advertises a number of compelling points about the product, including the fact that the decoy “can also be used alone to simulate a half-strutting or masturbating tom.” The ad closes with, “you haven't seen anything until you try this guy. The breeding pose drives gobblers wild to investigate and

fight with the intruder tom. Used alone or in conjunction with a couple of Hot Hens, Feeding Hot Hens, and a Jake. The combination will lure in even the most stubborn toms” (“Supreme Breeding Tom and Collapsible Turkey Decoy” 1998).⁹ Similarly, in an article, “Weird Experiment #4: The Sexual Turkey,” the author writes:

Turkeys are dirty. Two scientists discovered something really interesting while researching their sexual behavior. When placed in a room with a lifelike model of a female turkey, the male bird mated with it just as eagerly.

They decided to explore this phenomenon, embarking on a series of experiments to determine the minimum stimulus it would take to excite the male. This involved removing parts from the turkey model one by one until the male bird eventually lost interest. They removed almost everything - tail, feet and wings - but still the clueless bird waddled up to the model, gobbled, and tried to do his thing. Even with only a head on a stick left – the male turkey could not be deterred.

Why, you ask? Apparently during turkey mating, the male is so much larger than the female that only her head sticks out during the process, therefore becoming the object of fixation” (“Weird Experiment #4: The Sexual Turkey” 2008).

The rhetoric of the breeding turkey decoy and the pseudo-scientific study has nothing to do with Thanksgiving, but suggests that, by depicting a tom at the height of its sexual arousal and territoriality, the symbol of the Thanksgiving turkey is well positioned to express aspects of both turkey and human sexuality.

This preoccupation with turkey sexuality seems to play into colonial fantasies about sexuality and the Other (Boone 2003 [1995]). Because of its staging of masculinity, the turkey carving ritual taps into this colonial fantasy. If successful, the ritual operates to reconstitute masculinity, but what happens when the ritual fails in this regard?¹⁰ In the film *Avalon*, for example, a family feud is set into play because the family decides to carve the turkey before one of the patriarchs arrives.

In *Home for the Holidays* (1995), the Larsons compete pettily about whose turkey will be more popular—Joanne’s (Cynthia Stevenson) lean “nutri-turkey” or her mother’s (Anne Bancroft) “traditional turkey.” When the father (Charles Durning) cannot carve the “traditional” fat turkey, because he is holding the knife up-side-down, his son Tommy (Robert Downey Jr.) takes over. Amidst chaotic conversation, the camera focuses on the knife and turkey to highlight Tommy’s inability to carve the bird, which he blames on his mother, joking that she must have welded it together. When the knife slips, the “traditional” turkey is flung onto the lap of Joanne, bearer of the nutri-turkey, covering her body with very turkey juices she abhors.¹¹ With references to American consumerism and “human cholesterol,” real and metaphorical, the obese father’s bungled attempt to carve the turkey marks him as a coach-potato, weak and lacking virility, an embodiment of America’s unchecked consumerism. Likewise, Tommy’s inability to carve marks him as openly gay. Together, these films reveal that within the matrix of American culture, carving the turkey is the patriarchal prerogative of (heterosexual) males.¹²

Regeneration through Violence

As we see in *Home for the Holidays* and *Avalon*, the turkey carving ritual operates to negotiate masculinity. A similar dynamic occurs in Ang Lee's melodramatic western *Brokeback Mountain*.¹³ While the film is far from the first western to depict sexuality between men, it is more direct—"out of the closet"—in its treatment of this subject than others. The film tells the tragic tale of two modern-day cowboys, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger), who meet during the summer of 1963, hired to protect a flock of sheep on the mountain. Lonely and isolated, both of the men proclaim themselves "not queer," yet they fall in love with each other and have a sexual encounter that puts into crisis "an assumption about male sexual desire, masculinity, and heterosexuality that are specific to western culture" (Boone 1995:461). Tragically, the men leave the mountain and each other; in the next sequence, we see that they have both ended up in marriages with women.¹⁴

Fourteen years later, two juxtaposed scenes powerfully illustrate how the "threat of homosexuality" hovers over the men, just as it hovers over the Thanksgiving meal. One meal takes place in Childress, Texas, at the home of Jack and his wife Lureen (Anne Hathaway); the other meal involves Ennis at his ex-wife's new home in Riverton, Wyoming. Both scenes open with a close-up of the turkey, which becomes an object over which masculinity is negotiated. The first scene begins with a close-up shot of the turkey, which Jack carries to the table, under the watchful eyes of his wife, who prepared the food. Jack's father-in-law L.D. Newsome (Graham Beckel) stands as the turkey arrives. He grabs the carving utensils out of Jack's hands, puffing out his substantial belly and saying brusquely, "Stud duck do the carving 'round here." Jack responds in submission, "You bet, L.D. I was just saving you the trouble."¹⁵

The camera cuts quickly to Lureen's reaction. Glancing down to avoid conflict, she redirects her attention their son Bobby (Jake Church) who is watching football. She threatens that if he does not start eating dinner, she will "have to turn off that television." The boy offers a belligerent retort about having to eat leftovers for weeks. At this show of disrespect, Jack stands up and heads authoritatively toward the television: "You heard your mama. You finish your meal, and *then* you can watch the game." Turning off the television, Jack returns to the table.

In response, his father-in-law sets down the carving knife and goes to turn the television back on. Lureen pleads, "Daddy? Daddy?!" to which he responds, "Hell... we don't eat with our eyes. Want your boy to grow up to be a man, don't you darling? Boys should watch football." Turning the television back on, L.D. returns to carving the turkey, having now challenged Jack's masculinity through both the turkey and through football.

Looking angry, Jack stands up and makes for the television again, saying, "Not until he finishes a meal that his mama took three hours fixing!" After turning off the set, and slapping it to punctuate his point, the camera follows Jack back to the table, cutting away to Lureen's surprised (and pleased) reaction. Not to be outdone, just as Jack reaches the table, L.D. sets down the carving knife and moves towards the television once more. Now Jack explodes, pointing aggressively at L.D., "You sit down, you old son-of-a-bitch!" Pausing, and with a more controlled tone, he continues: "This is my house, this my child, and you are my guest. Now you sit down before I knock your ignorant ass into next week."

This outburst of threatened violence apparently gets the point across. L.D. stops in his tracks and sits back down. The camera cuts to Lureen who turns to her son and gestures towards his food. Silently, Bobby reaches for his spoon to begin eating. Exasperated, Jack sighs, wiping his forehead (with his wedding-ringed hand), and then begins to carve the turkey. The scene closes with a long shot of Jack carving, framed by his in-laws on one side and his wife and son on the other, sitting on fuschia-colored chairs.

This scene begins with the gendered division of labor. Masculinity is signified in several ways: according to who gets to present and carve the turkey and whether the family will watch football while eating the meal. While a football game appearing in a western may at first seem peculiar, actually it is quite appropriate—especially at Thanksgiving—for the cultural forms of football, Thanksgiving, and the western all involve narratives of territorial expansion, belief in American exceptionalism, and rituals of violence.¹⁶ The marriage between football and Thanksgiving, in fact, dates back to at least 1869 (Pope 1997:54).¹⁷

Tracing the development of Thanksgiving as a domestic occasion, Pleck argues that “the festival of the home” became the dominant form of the holiday’s celebration as a reaction to the social dislocations caused by the industrial revolution (1999:775).

Approaching Thanksgiving in this way seemed to ease social anxieties somewhat: “The ritual of returning home at Thanksgiving, ‘when the fledged birds once more flew back to the mother nest,’ made it possible to reconcile individualism and obligation to family. A man could be self-made and an obedient son, so long as he reunited with his family for Thanksgiving... The ideal of Thanksgiving as a holiday of family reunion emerged at the

height of the ideology of domesticity that made the home into a secular shrine” (Pleck 1999:775-76). The turkey carving ritual predominates, like football, as a way of counteracting the feminizing influence of the domestic realm and to reassure symbolically that men are still in charge.

At the same time that rituals of homecoming and turkey-carving were being ushered into the Thanksgiving holiday, football emerged in colleges (circa 1870). When the radio made it possible for football to move into the home in the 1920s, the game “threatened to overwhelm the domestic occasion” (1999:782). Football, and turkey carving, actually have a lot in common than one might have thought.

Those who wrote about football have presented a variety of interpretations of the game. From journalists and educators to ministers and coaches, people have seen the game operating, like Thanksgiving, as a metaphor for American social ideals.

To be sure, occasional opponents of the game thought the game too aggressive violent, and dangerous. To the game's proponents football could be a training ground for war (a common World War I theme) or an antidote to it (a postwar theme). It could be a symbol of imperialism and social Darwinism (proof of the "dominance of the white race" and the success of the fittest). It might combine Christianity with male athleticism, or serve as an excellent preparation for bureaucracy, teamwork, and management [...]. Many late nineteenth century writers argued that football demonstrated the success of Victorian virtues, such as regularity self-restraint, and fair play (Pleck 1999:781).¹⁸

It is hard to escape the irony of Thanksgiving as “a family event, punctuated by (mostly) men listening to a game noted for its aggressive body contact, warlike language, male bonding, and the ability of contestants to withstand pain” (Pleck 1999:782). Such popular notions as the American mission and destiny that were “expressed through football commentary were, thus, entirely consistent with the Thanksgiving myth” (Pope 1993:62). Writing at the end of the 19th century, for example, Ramond Gettell advocated for football, arguing that it reproduced an “organized social effort by which man first attained supremacy over the world of nature, and by which the more highly organized and more closely cooperating peoples have conquered and surpassed their less advanced rivals” (quoted in Pope 1993:62). In this view, the overtly masculine game of football expresses “territorial, sexual, or economic conquest,” and through its association with the Thanksgiving master narrative it is linked to “national imperialism and war, gendered dominance, or corporate capitalism” (Lindquist 2006:448).¹⁹ Emerging as “the religion of the masses” by the end of the nineteenth century, football was seen as “a moral training ground and a mirror of American industrial capitalism” (Pope 1993:73).

Football was also the perfect reaction to the domestic occasion, offering violence as a source of rejuvenation, used to negotiate power between players, to re-establish the social order, and as a rite of passage into masculinity. Postcolonial theories about the western narrative, in fact, may be meaningfully mapped onto the landscape of football and, as we shall soon see, they may also be mapped onto the landscapes of Thanksgiving’s turkey carving ritual. As such, Richard Slotkin’s theory of “regeneration through violence” (1973) might be repurposed to explain both football and certain aspects of the Thanksgiving meal. Slotkin is referring to a narrative pattern common to

westerns, in which the hero moves out west—to the frontier land—and uses violence as a way of enacting societal regeneration. Although it may seem odd to apply Slotkin's work in the context of football and Thanksgiving, both of which occur in the domestic realm, Slotkin's theory provides a useful model to examine elements of the holiday's rituals. Like the western's reaction to industrialization and urbanization, Thanksgiving as a domestic occasion requires that masculinity be reconstituted within the domestic sphere of the home:

Encamping in the living room, men seemed to find solace in an all-male group, after having participated in an event so female in ambience. One function of football, even enjoyed vicariously, was to reaffirm men's bonds with other men and their masculinity, to inject some manliness into the sentimentality. Sons, listening to the game with their fathers, were learning the rules of male sociability—and being weaned away from their mothers. Listening to football was an additional masculine element that followed the ritual of carving the turkey, man the gladiator side by side with man the hunter. As such, the football game on Thanksgiving Day provided an added symbolic statement about the difference between the gender (Pleck 1999:782-83).

Recall the scene from *Brokeback Mountain*, when the father-in-law seizes the carving knife from Jack's hands. Jack initially submits to this patriarchal prerogative hoping to avoid conflict, however, he regains the turkey carver role after he becomes menacing (slapping the television, pointing aggressively and threatening violence). If Jack's outburst is convincing enough to make L.D. relinquish the very carving duties he

had just insisted on having, it also triggers a smile from Lureen, who seems pleased, perhaps even aroused, by his behavior. Jack's violent outburst, therefore, establishes him as a contender for "stud duck," despite his non-heteronormative sexuality. Much of this power struggle is enacted visually through one important cinematic detail. Alternating shots of the two men are framed so that a glass of white wine (actually yellow in color) is positioned in the foreground. As each man returns from the television, the glass of yellow liquid is positioned directly below his crotch. This framing suggests that the power struggle (over both carving turkeys and watching football) amounts to a pissing contest, a negotiation of the alpha male position.

This Thanksgiving scene, which begins with a close-up of the roast turkey, ends with a long shot of Jack carving the bird. The camera cuts away to the second Thanksgiving scene with a high-angle close-up of another turkey being carved, this time with the noise of an electric knife. As the frame widens, we enter another Thanksgiving meal, this one attended by Ennis at the home of his ex-wife Alma (Michelle Williams) and her new husband Monroe (Scott Michael Campbell), who is carving the turkey. Monroe is seated at the "head" of the table, while Alma is at the "foot of the table. Ennis sits between the children, Alma Jr. (Sarah Hyslop) and Jenny (Cayla Wolever). Though polite, the conversation is awkward and strained. Wearing red and looking quite pregnant, Alma looks down a lot and sighs heavily, still upset over the failure of her first marriage. Alma Jr. tries to break the silence. "Daddy, tell about when you rode broncs in the rodeo." The camera cuts to a close-up of Monroe chewing; he shows no reaction. "Well, that's a short story, honey," responds Ennis to Alma Jr. "It was only about 3 seconds I was on that bronc. The next thing I knew, I was flying through the air. Only I

was no angel like you and Jenny here. I didn't have no wings." He pulls on Jenny's ear and strokes her cheek lovingly as he says this. The girls chuckle, delighting in the attention, as he concludes, "and that's the story of my saddle bronc career."

As the dialogue draws attention to Ennis' participation in the hyper-masculine sport of bronco riding, the turkey carcass is framed in the foreground of each shot. As soon as Ennis concludes the story, the camera cuts to Monroe, who has no lines of dialogue, but resumes his carving of the turkey as the putative patriarch of this household. The camera moves to a close-up of the knife cutting through the bird's flesh. While there is no explicit contest over the patriarchal prerogative to carve the turkey, masculinity is called into question in other ways. For example, it occurs visually with Ennis doing the dishes in the kitchen, and it occurs through dialogue, when Alma confronts Ennis for having a sexual fling with his old fishing buddy, Jack Twist. The challenge to masculinity is also directed at Alma's new husband (the town grocer). The camera twice lingers on Monroe's use of an electric knife and when we see him watching figure skating, instead of football, after the meal has ended. Despite his possession of the knife, his performance of masculinity is weak. With the camera drawing so much attention to the electric knife, the suggestion is made that, despite his exclusion from the realm of strict heterosexuality, Ennis is the more masculine of the two men.

The regeneration through violence that is called forth in many westerns is not be possible without the use of guns. Many scholars have noted that the gun becomes an extension of the hero himself and takes on both masculine and sexual meanings. While there is no gun per se in the Thanksgiving scenes of *Brokeback Mountain*, I suggest that

we might read the knives instead as a substitute, and a phallic one at that, a point to which I shall return shortly.

It is also necessary to note the importance of photography as a means of communicating imperial power. In this schema, the gun is also an extension of the camera because, ‘to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world, that feels like knowledge—and, therefore like power’. It has been suggested that photography ‘turns people into objects that are symbolically possessed’. The camera, like the phallus/gun, involves ‘loading’, ‘aiming’ and ‘shooting,’ just as bringing back images from Africa “provided evidence of conquest and a medium for the voyeuristic gaze” (Bale 1996:289; see also Sontag 1978).

In the colonial context, the common trope of the ‘camera gun’ resonated with the aggressive use of the camera by the agents of the colonial powers” (Shohat and Stam 1994:122).²⁰ If the parallels between the gun, the camera, and the carving-knife represent phallic power, then what does this mean for Thanksgiving? As we have seen, nearly every aspect of the holiday is gendered, even the turkey. In many media examples, the bird is gendered as male, the turkey becoming a stand in for human males. Human husbands are sometimes referred to as turkeys, the term denoting lazy, stupid, or insipid behavior—especially those human husbands who sit in front of the television during Thanksgiving Day while their wives do all the work (Tuleja 1987). Of course, worthless politicians are also referred to as turkeys, a reference repeatedly made in presidential turkey pardoning speeches, as well as in political comics (see Davis 2001:17-24; Smith 2006:110-29). However, this gendering of turkeys in the visual media usually leans toward the feminine, a process evident in John Currin’s painting titled “Thanksgiving,”

which depicts three blond Anglo women (presumably sisters) preparing the turkey (2003). In the painting, each woman is presented as being very bird-like. Whereas the woman on the right works on arranging a bouquet of flowers, an act that resembles nest-making, the woman on the left feeds her sister, who cranes her neck and opens her mouth like a baby bird. The woman who seems delighted to be doing the feeding wears a smock that matches the color of the translucent flesh of the raw turkey. Her full breasts, thin neck, and bird-like arms parallel that of the plump and “naked” turkey. Moreover, the woman is positioned above the turkey, so that visually her fecund body becomes one with the turkey’s body.

From Preparation to Penetration

Beyond being anthropomorphized and gendered, the turkey is sexualized as well.²¹ While the sexing of the turkey generally occurs from a male point of view, we do see an example from a female perspective in *What’s Cooking?* when Mrs. Seelig (Lainie Kazan) instructs her daughter Rachel’s lover Carla (Julianna Margulies) on the proper method of stuffing the turkey. “Make sure it goes all the way in the back,” says the Mrs. Seelig, to which Carla offers politely, “Hmm, that’s my favorite part,” with a wink and a smile at Rachel (Kyra Sedgwick).²² In this scene, we see how easily the turkey is assigned gender and sexuality, marked, in fact, as lesbian. In case the viewer has not yet decoded the reference to Carla’s “favorite part,” it is echoed once more when she makes a comic gesture with a turkey baster in front of the oven, foreshadowing their later announcement that Rachel is pregnant. Referencing the so-called “turkey baster method,”²³ the comedic feminization of the turkey body in this case, symbolizes an earlier erotic act shared between two women trying to get pregnant and start a family. In

most cases, this feminization of the turkey is less tender, in fact, it often becomes crude and even violent.

Consider a posting on the satirical blog, “Why Women Hate Men,” a website created by “Weasel” (who identifies as male) that is devoted to making fun of internet personal ads posted “by men who have absolutely no idea how to attract a woman.” Critiquing one man’s personal ad, Weasel writes: “In AJ's personal ad, we can deduce that spontaneity isn't his specialty. He's about as spontaneous as the ritual preparation of a Thanksgiving Day turkey. Which, ironically, might make it easier for him to fuck you, because if he fucked you in a 4-inch pan lined with carrots and rotated you every thirty minutes, at least he'd know he was following the proper directions. But either way, I guarantee you his stuffing would somehow end up leaving *you* dry” (“Mr. Spontaneity” 2008). The blogger imagines the human female as a turkey to be stuffed, basted, and otherwise penetrated. His rant parallels other examples of female turkeys or actual human men becoming a turkey and then being feminized/dominated. For example, consider blog about a sexual fetish called “the turkey man”:

“The Turkey Man” is an extreme form of such fetishes wherein a man feels sexual pleasure when he is treated like the Thanksgiving turkey. We didn’t make this up. A Turkey Man usually has a dominatrix dressed as a classic mothering housewife come to his home, where he has constructed a large oven out of usually cardboard or plywood. The Turkey Man then strips, leaving only his socks (like the little paper booties on the turkey’s feet), and crawls into the oven. The woman then describes to the man how

she will baste, cook and eat him. Lord only knows where the meat thermometer ends up! Gobble gobble! (Ebb 2007).²⁴

This aspect of “the turkey man fetish”—the desire to dominate or to be dominated—may shed light on other examples of the turkey being sexualized, whether the turkey (or the human stuffing and basting it) is envisioned as male or female. For example, in one episode of television’s *Friends*, Monica puts her head inside a turkey’s pelvic cavity, places a hat and large glasses on her turkey/head, and mimics a striptease dance in an effort to cheer up her lover Chandler (1998, Season 5, Episode 8). The off-screen audience roars with laughter as Chandler’s anger softens and he awkwardly blurts out to Monica (for the first time ever) that he loves her. In a later episode, Joey employs the same gag (in an attempt to scare Chandler), but the ploy is foiled when Joey’s head gets stuck inside the bird. Trying to help, Monica and Phoebe strategize to help Joey remove it before Chandler enters the apartment. “Okay, you pull, and I’ll open the legs as wide as possible,” Monica says to Phoebe. Joey giggles at the double entendre of these words, and Monica rolls her eyes in disgust at this crude sexual reference. In both scenes, it is clear that the turkey has been feminized. In one it becomes an extension of Monica’s body, in the other it becomes the generalized female body.

Another striking example of the feminized turkey, a YouTube clip titled “Pour Some Gravy on Me.” The animated video parodies Def Leppard’s sexually suggestive “Pour Some Sugar on Me” as well as the erotic shower scene from the film *Flashdance* (Lyne 1983), a headless turkey (with nipple piercings, heart-

shaped thong underwear, and stiletto heels) does a strip dance. The lyrics are, of course, sexually suggestive: “Pour some gravy on me / And stuff me with stuff / Pour some gravy on me / C’mon grease me up / Pour some gravy on me / I can’t get enough (“Flowgo” 2007).

The turkey stripper swings her ample buttocks to and fro, while tassels dangle from her pierced nipples. In the background, we hear the hooting and hollering of drunk men at a strip club. Parodying Jennifer Beals’ infamous dance scene from *Flashdance*, the stripper leans back in a chair and pulls a chord, releasing a pot of “hot gravy” onto her breast as the lyrics conclude: “I’m hot, good to eat / I’m the Thanksgiving feast / yeah!” Taken together, the images and lyrics coalesce around the act of eating (and preparing food) as indistinguishable from various sexual acts. The stuffing and gravy in this trajectory are allusions to sex and its resulting secretions. That the turkey begs to be “eaten” follows the colonial fantasy that the colonized *want* to be colonized.

Another YouTube video plays upon this fantasy. “I want to stuff you” parodies the Exiles’ hit song, “I Wanna Kiss You All Over.” Here, though, a man sings the love song to his headless/featherless Butterbird Frozen Turkey: “When I get home, babe / turn the oven on. / All day I’ve been thinking about you / and it won’t be long. / Massage your skin so gently / don’t make me beg. / Gotta whip out my stuffing / and spread your legs. / MMMMMMMMM. / I’m hungry. / I’m hungry, babe. / I want to stuff you all over / and over again. I want to stuff you all over / ‘til the night closes in / ‘til the night closes in” (“Flowgo” 2007). If this isn’t creepy enough, as the last lines of the refrain, “‘til the night closes in,” are sung, the camera zooms out to reveal the man with his head inside

the turkey's pelvic cavity. What's more, the turkey's head suddenly appears on the body carcass to join in singing the last few words. The turkey head is inexplicably alive.

Even though our protagonist claims to massage the turkey's skin "so gently," we must not forget that he is singing to a turkey carcass after all, a turkey that has already been killed and decapitated, just as it is the singer's hunger that takes center stage, hinting at sexual violence. The fact that these scenes can so quickly position the turkey body as a female, her legs spread to make room for the first man to whip out his "stuffing," speaks to the close association between women and meat in western culture, where we have come to interpret certain images "from a stance of male identification and human-centeredness." From breasts to thighs, Carol Adams argues, "the association between attractive human female bodies and delectable, attractive 'meat'" has been culturally constructed (Adams 1998:67),²⁵ as an advertisement for a kitchen tool named "the turkey hooker" makes clear:

Designed to [...] move a cooked turkey corpse from the cooking pan to the serving plate, it hooks into the gaping hole that was once the neck. Accompanying an image that shows the "turkey hooker" in use, is a fantasy image of a turkey in high-heeled shoes, one wing placed seductively, invitingly, behind her head, hints of breasts showing. In large print, we are told: "AN EASY PICK UP FROM PAN TO PLATTER" (quoted in Adams 1998:67).²⁶

The "turkey hooker" here appears to be a colleague of the turkey stripper, yet the turkey hooker is even more explicit, sexual, and violent in design. As a caricature of a human prostitute, the "turkey hooker" dresses and poses seductively in order to be

“eaten.” The success of this ad’s image relies, as Adams argues, on how readily turkey bodies can be associated with the bodies of women.²⁷ In light of this tendency, patriarchy may be both reinforced and subverted through the handling of these turkey bodies.

When viewed through a feminist lens that attends to the relationship between turkeys and women, certain scenes—of turkeys being carved by patriarchs at Thanksgiving—become fraught with issues of power. While the turkey hooker sticks into the hole that was the neck, we might ask about other tools used in relationship to turkeys, in particular, the carving knife.

When the Knife Cuts Both Ways

Though numerous scholars have observed a process of “phallic appropriation” occurring in films ranging from the genres of westerns, film noir and crime films, and horror films (e.g., Clover 1992),²⁸ this symbolism has not been explored in regard to Thanksgiving, that is, until the 2007 exploitation double feature *Grindhouse* (Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino) was released, with a series of faux trailers sandwiched between the two main features. Of particular interest here is the trailer “Thanksgiving,” directed by Eli Roth (no known relation to the author). Modeled in the style of holiday-themed slasher films,²⁹ the trailer draws meaning from and reinforces the connection between the knife and the phallus.

In an interview, Roth recounts his inspiration for the trailer: “My friend Jeff, who plays the killer pilgrim—we grew up in Massachusetts and were huge slasher movie fans—and every November we were waiting for the Thanksgiving slasher movie. We had the whole movie worked out: A kid who’s in love with a turkey, and then his father

killed it, and then he killed his family and went away to a mental institution and came back and took revenge on the town. I called Jeff and said, 'Dude, guess what, we don't have to make the movie, we can just shoot the best parts' (quoted in Edwards 2007; emphasis added).³⁰

As with other films in the horror genre, the dense three-minute trailer reveals much about American social anxieties and the deeper implications of Thanksgiving's seemingly benign turkey carving ritual. As such, it is worth describing the trailer's gory details. The trailer begins quietly with Grandma (Liliya Malkina) whistling to herself as she prepares the Thanksgiving turkey, rubbing butter on its raw flesh to prepare it for the oven. The trailer pays homage to Carpenter's horror classic *Halloween* (1978), which implicates the audience in the crime by showing events through to the killer's point of view. In this case, the subjective camera follows the killer's movement and sight line as he reaches down to pick up a large kitchen knife and moves toward Grandma, who turns and screams in horror.

We do not see what happens to Grandma because the camera cuts away to the title shot, in which the stentorian voiceover (Eli Roth) aligns the viewer with the turkey—with such lines as, “this holiday season prepare to have the stuffing scared out of you”—and then the screen dissolves to red and cuts to a close-up image of a knife stabbing a roast turkey, blood oozes out of the turkey's body (as if still living), and the red letters in the word “Thanksgiving” drip blood.³¹ This shocking sequence draws our attention to the violence inherent in Thanksgiving, a theme that pervades the trailer. Next we are shown a Thanksgiving parade in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where “the fourth Thursday in November is the most celebrated day of the year.” It is a sunny day, one man dressed as

a Pilgrim helps zip up the costume of a man dressed as a turkey (Kevin Wasner), while another dressed as an Indian chief (uncredited) places the finishing touch of a turkey mask on top. “The table is set / the festivities have begun,” continues the narrator, “when an uninvited guest has arrived.”

At this, we get a dark shot of someone putting on another Pilgrim’s costume—an imposter (Jeff Rendell) —with a close-up of his black leather combat boots being zipped. “This year, there will be no leftovers,” adds the voiceover. The alternate Pilgrim moves in front of the camera and swings his machete, chopping off the Pilgrim/Turkey’s head with one swipe. After a prolonged shot of the head rolling around on the street, accompanied by the crowd’s frightened chaos and screaming, the camera cuts to the headless body of the Pilgrim/Turkey, which stumbles and falls to the street, as the bloody title “Thanksgiving” appears once again on screen. What comes next serves to remind us that the violence associated with Thanksgiving can take a sexual angle.

The camera cuts to a long shot of the inside of a school gymnasium, where two teenagers have stolen away for some hanky-panky. Giggling, the blonde pig-tailed cheerleader (Vendula Bednarova) does a striptease atop the trampoline for her brunette boyfriend (Petr Vancura), who wears a letterman’s jacket and watches excitedly from the side. As the voiceover warns, “white meat, dark meat, all will be carved,” the cheerleader removes her shirt and bloomers, and we see several shots of her white butt. Suddenly the killer descends from behind, covering the boyfriend’s mouth and yanking him out of the frame, presumably killing him. With her back turned, the cheerleader continues to strip, oblivious to the massacre, but when she bounces up and spreads her legs as wide apart as possible, the viewer is privy to the knowledge that she will land—

crotch first—upon the (erect) knife the killer has just stabbed through the bottom of the trampoline. The camera dissolves from a close-up of the knife to a low-angle shot of the cheerleader just prior to the moment of her landing, so that the knife appears to stab her, and then cuts away again to the earlier image of the knife stabbing a roast turkey. This juxtaposition of shots makes the connection between knife and phallus, between the penetration of the knife into the turkey and the penetration of the phallic knife into the cheerleader.³²

After a scene on Lover's Lane, during which two teenage males are decapitated while engaged in sexual acts with a teenaged female, we return to Grandma's house, where the voiceover commands us to "arrive hungry, leave stuffed." We see guests arriving, Grandma opening the door to invite them in, and then the family gagged and bound around a fully set Thanksgiving table. We soon learn that the phrase "leave stuffed" contains double entendre, when the killer (whose face is obscured by shadows) unveils the huge platter on the table. Expecting a roast turkey, the "money shot" here is that it is actually a man's supine body (Daniel Frisch)—his knees spread and feet bound (like a roast turkey), his flesh baked golden brown, and with unknown objects (a giant thermometer?) sticking out of his anus. We do not see his head at first, but we can assume it has been removed—not only because we have already witnessed heads being removed in the previous scenes but because Americans have come to expect Thanksgiving turkeys to be served without their heads. Indeed, a moment later the camera tilts down to reveal a young man's head stuffed into an actual turkey's neck hole, the man's mouth stuffed with an apple. A reaction shot of a cousin (Chris Briggs) projectile vomiting at the sight, is followed by the narrator's closing words: "You'll

come home for the holidays...in a body bag.” As these words are spoken, the camera offers one last shocking scene in which the killer, wearing an apron and standing at the head of the table, masturbates with the turkey’s body with the man’s head attached.

As a parody of slasher films, what darkness lies beneath the laughter this trailer was intended to produce? Like the scenes described earlier, these “spectacles of death” illuminate aspects of the Thanksgiving turkey and the rituals employed to prepare and to carve its body. Since this has been a central focus of this dissertation, the trailer is worthy of continued attention.³³ We actually see a number of decapitations in this trailer—the Pilgrim/Turkey, the men on lover’s lane, and the human/turkey on the Thanksgiving table.³⁴ From the repeated title segment of a knife stabbing the turkey, which bleeds the words “Thanksgiving,” to the cheerleader scene, the handful of heads, in this trajectory, may be read as phallic substitutes.³⁵ As such, the trailer highlights and mocks this cultural preoccupation with the phallus as a source of power and violence, the repeated shots of decapitations revealing a profound castration anxiety at play. Although Roth has responded to questions about the cheerleader scene by pledging allegiance to the genre of exploitation films,³⁶ it seems that not only women are being exploited in Roth’s “Thanksgiving,” but anxiety over masculine sexuality as well, as all of the actual victims are male.

Male human heads, and their phallic equivalents, are not the only things being lopped off in “Thanksgiving,” in this trailer. The Pilgrim/Turkey’s head, as well as an actual turkey’s head is also cut off, although, curiously, that latter image is withheld. The blurring between turkeys and humans is created in several other ways—specifically, the Pilgrim/Turkey in the parade, the roast man on the dining room table, and by showing

(albeit briefly) the killer masturbating with a cooked turkey. Roth addresses this latter shot during his interview, explaining how the Ratings Board made him: “take out the full frontal nudity just with scratching and clever editing. The grateful Roth remarks, “And, you know, they even let me keep the turkey sex, even though it’s not really sex with a turkey. It’s a cooked turkey, although it’s not really a full turkey. I mean, someone having sex with a live turkey—that would be really gratuitous. I mean, it’s someone having sex with a cooked turkey with a decapitated head on top of it, so it’s more of a turkey/human hybrid, really.”

This “turkey/human hybrid” notion is key to my argument about the sexing of turkey bodies. There are visual parallels between the decapitation of these men and the repeated cuts to the title segment of the knife stabbing the turkey (which has already been beheaded), just as there are parallels between the roast turkey and the roast man. These visual parallels underscore an apparent urge—at least on the part of Eli Roth—to turn men into turkeys and then decapitate, dominate, stuff, and screw them. By interrogating the carving knife, further insight is revealed about this urge.

Between the Gobbler and the Gobbled

By identifying the symbolic parallels between the knife and the phallus, other scenes involving Thanksgiving turkeys, particularly close-up shots of knives cutting into turkey flesh, begin to take on new meaning. Of course, the visual media reinforces this aspect of the turkey carving ritual. Frequently, there is a close-up shot of the turkey, which is glorified and fetishized. It is talked about, admired; it is fondled and kissed; and

it is even engaged in sexually explicit activities. “In the safer confines of the paterfamilias’ house,” writes literary theorist Kathryn Hughes, “it is the breast—plump, sweet, maternal—that gets devoured” (2006:150).

Given these cultural associations between turkey and human bodies, scenes involving the turkey carving ritual are fraught with issues of sexuality and power. The shocking decapitation of the Pilgrim/Turkey in Roth’s “Thanksgiving” trailer, along with the repeated title shot of a knife stabbing a turkey, which bleeds as if alive, reminds us of the violence associated with Thanksgiving, that “the knife cuts both ways” (Davis 2001:68). Anthropologist Margaret Visser looks at this aspect of meals in *The Rituals of Dinner*, offering a lengthy discussion about the socio-historical significance of carving: “For thousands of years it was placed before the family as a result of male enterprise and triumph; and men, with their knives, have insisted on carving it up...before the expectant and admiring crowd” (1991:231). In a similar vein, Hughes offers an interlude on the topic of turkey carving in *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861), showing that Mrs. Beeton’s “vision of the fitness of things” is revealed through her reflection on the roast turkey. Hughes writes: “The stress on the paterfamilias *carving* the bird nods towards the continuing sense [...] that you could always tell a gentleman by the grace and style with which he apportioned a roast” (Hughes 2006:149).

Attempting to unify class and empire, Mrs. Beeton sought to provide the aspiring middleclass with the requisite skills to maintain a household in Victorian Britain, as well as details about how to build bridges, raise children, subdue the natives, and balance the books, “and she does it all with a turkey.” The art of carving turkey, Mrs. Beeton writes, is “in getting from the breast as many fine slices as possible; and all must have remarked

the very great difference in the large number of people whom a good carver will find slices for, and the comparatively few that a bad carver will succeed in serving [. . .] the carver should commence cutting slices close to the wing, from 2 to 3, and then proceed upwards towards the ridge of the breast-bone” (Beeton, quoted in Hughes 2006:149). Carving the roast turkey, therefore, “becomes an object lesson in managing and deploying your resources” (Hughes 2006:149), in portioning out the kill to the extended family. This drama—between the carver, the carved, and the audience—“is a ritual of dinner that could be said to reveal, as well as to conceal,” argues Davis (2001:68) the “determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish” (Visser 1992:4), to be the gobbler, not the gobbled.

Folklorist Tad Tuleja reconciles the devolution of the turkey as symbol by examining changes in the turkey industry. According to the Department of Agriculture, per capita consumption of domestic turkeys rose by more than 250% between 1950 and 1980 alone (Tuleja 1987:32). Noting the conjunction between marketing aims and imagery in popular culture, Tuleja states: “What is strange is that, in the very period in which the turkey is becoming renationalized, it is also coming to be seen as an emblem of ignominy and failure. At just the time when a turkey on every table is becoming a social ideal, ‘turkey’ is becoming a synonym for ‘loser’ or ‘fool’” (Tuleja 1987:32).

Tuleja cites the 1943 painting by Grandma Moses (1860-1961), “Catching the Thanksgiving Turkey,” that offers a clue as to why turkeys underwent this transition from fame to infamy. Nostalgia for a fading America, the painting depicts a panorama with rolling mountains in the background and a farmyard in the foreground. The titular subject of the painting—a tom—is trying to escape capture, while a man in the center of

the frame holds a rifle. The artist's own comments on the painting point to the contrast between the barnyard scene and the wilderness beyond, providing "an apt summation of the turkey's fate in modern times" (Tuleja 1987:35). Moses said: "Why do we think we must have turkey for Thanksgiving? [...] Poor turkey. He has but one life to give to his country" (quoted in Tuleja 1987:35).

The point made here is that the turkey "has become expendable—a means to an end" (1987:35). The wilderness in the background of "Catching the Thanksgiving Turkey" serves to remind us that the animal was once a part of this wilderness. Reduced to its utilitarian role, the turkey became an object of pity: "The elusive phantoms and feathered emperors were kings of a wild frontier. Old Tom is merely a joke—a hybridized, unnaturally fattened buffoon whose destiny is to be stuffed with chestnuts and devoured" (1987:35).

The devolution of the turkey symbol—from a symbol of New World freedom and plenty to bearing brunt of jokes—resulted from industrialization, explains Tuleja, "when the consumption of turkey meat became part of a vast, rationalized economic process, the bird lost—or rather was deprived of—the aura of expansiveness and abundance that had made it useful as an image in the first place" (1987:35). As Americans nearly exterminated the wild turkey, and the industrial turkey emerged, the turkey in popular culture adopted an aura of domesticity and doom: "Perhaps what the history of the turkey as symbol really suggests is a growing resentment, on the part of a nation of consumers, at its own success" (1987:36). Hence, we see many examples in the visual media of turkeys being violated, penetrated, dismembered, and destroyed.

In a similar vein, Davis argues that America has gone from scapegoating foreigners and “bungling turkey carvers” to the turkey itself. To support this idea, she examines the impetus for “turkey taunting” traditions: “In order to affect people properly, a sacrificial animal must not only be eaten by them; the animal’s death must be ‘witnessed by them’” (2001:70), but because Americans have grown increasingly disconnected from the source of their food, especially the slaughtering of turkeys, “attention must somehow be ‘deliberately drawn, by means of ritual and ceremony,’ to the reality of the animal’s life and the ‘performance of killing’” (Visser 1991:32), so that people cannot completely forget the animal that had to be killed to bring the turkey to the oven. “Consequently, all kinds of articles, cartoons, jokes, and bizarre rituals crop up right before Thanksgiving, emphasizing the subjectivity of the bird. That way we can’t miss the fact that someone—a turkey, not a turnip—had to be sacrificed for the feast” (Davis 2001:120).³⁷

Vegetables, on the one hand, “were most often the result of a steady, unexalted, cooperative, and often mainly female work required for collecting them, or for tending them in the fields” (Visser 1991:231). They required “less guilt, drama, and intensity than that which attends the catching and slaughtering of animals” (1991:231). On the other hand, “a whole beast cut up in public...expresses the unity of the group that consumes it” (1991:231). The turkey is compulsory in this national ritual, therefore, because of its function as a sacrificial animal: “This is why, in order to be ritually meaningful, the bird continues to be culturally constructed as a sacred player in our drama about ourselves as a nation” (Davis 2001:70), a fact made explicit in theatrical dramas around the myth of the First Thanksgiving. While on the surface, the turkey is

commonly understood to symbolize the bounteous richness of the U.S. (Robertson 1980:15), on a deeper level, there is a way in which eating itself bears the mark of transgression, violence being necessary if any organism is to ingest another (Visser 1991:4).

As such, this handling of turkeys connects to the repressed cannibalistic colonial fantasy discussed in Chapter Two, whereas “cannibalism, transposed to the consumption of a nonhuman animal, is a critical, if largely unconscious, component of America’s Thanksgiving ritual” (2001:70). What the Thanksgiving moments examined here reveal is that these processes of scapegoating, sacrificing, colonizing, and consuming has a gendered side. Therefore, the Other is often portrayed as female, a phenomenon discussed by postcolonial and feminist scholars.³⁸

Arguing that domestication paralleled westward expansion, Amy Kaplan explains that “the imperial scope of domesticity” was central to the mission of Sarah Josepha Hale, who opposed the women’s rights movement as “the attempt to take woman away from her empire of home” (quoted in Kaplan 1998:585). For example, Kaplan suggests that “while Anglo-Saxon men marched outward to conquer new lands, women had a complementary outward reach from within the domestic sphere” (1998:588). In order to emphasize the safety and comfort of middle-class domesticity, Hale’s logic rendered “prior inhabitants alien and undomesticated” and newcomers subject to assimilation. “The empire of the mother thus shares the logic of the American empire; both follow a double compulsion to conquer and domesticate the foreign, thus incorporating and controlling a threatening foreignness within the borders of the home and the nation” (Kaplan 1998:591).

Kaplan found just “how deeply the language of domesticity suffused the debates about national expansion” (585), similarly, Hale argued that “as women they could be more effective imperialists, penetrating those interior feminine colonial spaces” (1998:588). In this way, the language of territorial expansion draws upon the language of rape and sexual conquest.³⁹ In so far as football functions as an allegory for territorial invasion, there is a sexual aspect to this invasion, for football ritually enacts sexual conquest, “in which one male demonstrates his virility...*at the expense of a male opponent*,” that is, by feminizing one’s opponent, so that “victory entails some kind of *penetration*” (1997:27; italics in original; see also Dundes 1980). Just as football enacts processes of dominance and aggression, these processes are brought to bear upon turkey carving as well and helps explain the feminization that occurs in many of these Thanksgiving vignettes.

On a basic level, patriarchy is a social system that reinforces the domination of men over women. In these visual media examples, sexing the turkey is about feminization and/or domination, whether that domination involves chopping off its head, throwing it out of planes, stuffing it, cutting it, or eating it. Although “cultural institutions are visible,” says Bhabha, “the ideology behind them (deeply rooted in fantasy, fetish, stereotype) is concealed” (1994:172). Representations of Thanksgiving in the visual media reveal the colonial and patriarchal ideology underline Thanksgiving, just as the turkey carving ritual offers insight into the material effects of Thanksgiving ideology.

Like the blurry red object in the opening of the film *What’s Cooking?* which ends ups being the flesh of a turkey on the verge of being carved by a patriarch,

Thanksgiving's domestic rituals may likewise reveal themselves to be implicated in a complicated colonizing enterprise—one that displaces women's labor and undeservedly elevates patriarchy while justifying atrocities against American Indians. Examining Thanksgiving in the visual media, the murky underbelly of this beloved national ritual is exposed, in which the turkey flesh (as symbol for the Other) feeds more than individuals. It fulfills the promise of regeneration through violence and embodies colonial ideology. In so far as eating becomes the ultimate act of aggression and sexual domination, understanding these dynamics may be crucial to reach the on-going goal of dismantling the colonial project. These cultural manifestations, in which the turkey is feminized and dominated, suggest a profound anxiety about masculinity and subjectivity.

Chapter Three -- Notes

¹ The Turkey Trot Festival has been held annually since 1946, after World War II. One of the main attractions is the “turkey drop,” where turkeys are thrown out of airplanes. “Turkeys don't actually fly,” remarks one observer, “but they soar, so when they drop, they just sort of soar to safety” (“Miss Turkey Trot” 2010). The “safety,” however, is questionable. As soon as they hit the ground, people rush at them and grab them (see “He's Mine” 2009). I could not determine when the Miss Drumsticks competition was added to the festival's activities, but it is the subject of a November 23, 1967, episode of *To Tell the Truth*, in which the winner of the competition (and two imposters) stand behind a wall displaying images of cornucopia, wild turkeys, and Pilgrims, so that only the women's legs are in view (Stewart 1967).

² Wallendorf and Arnould observe that food shopping and meal preparation actually begin days prior to the feast, “culminating on Thanksgiving Day with women attending to last-minute details” (1991:25).

³ “Almost half (42.5 percent) of women surveyed said their major Thanksgiving Day activity is cooking for others, while less than one-quarter (23.9 percent) of men so indicated [...] Further, a third (30.5 percent) of women considered it to be a hurried day, while only one-sixth (17.85 percent) of men considered it to be so. [...] When the meal is finally served, the fact that the mom will not sit down but instead continues working to insure that all are served is testimony to the day not being a work free holiday for everyone. Consider a remark made by Paula Lefkowitz (wf, midtwenties): ‘My [Polish] grandma would always try to serve the food while everyone else was eating. We would always tell her to sit down, but she never seemed to listen’” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991:125).

⁴ Pleck explains that, during the postsentimental era, when more women held paying jobs, women devoted less time to the Thanksgiving feast. “The gender division of labor at Thanksgiving began to reflect the reality that American men since the 1970s were doing more housework and cooking” (1999:39). Although men did more to help at Thanksgiving, women retained control over the organization of the event: “Men still carved the turkey, but increasingly in the kitchen rather than at the table. Since so few fathers taught their sons to carve, men had to learn from reading instructions in a

cookbook. Magazines of the 1980s from *Sunset* to *Esquire* described men making turkey dressing and gravy, simmering giblets, peeling and mashing potatoes, and taking instruction from svelte grandmothers as to how to trim the edges of pie pastry” (1999:39). Pleck cites fieldwork reports by University of Arizona students, who note in 1988 that, within their own family Thanksgivings, “men were not doing much of the cooking, but they were helping with the clean-up” (1999:39).

⁵ There are, of course, always exceptions to the rule. In both *What’s Cooking?* and *Pieces of April*, the turkey carving ritual does not lead to conflict. In fact, the films pay little attention to carving. In two families, the turkey is carved and/or presented by the men. In the Avila family, the matriarch carves the turkey, which signifies her independence from her estranged husband.

⁶ Eventually, the matriarch Lizzy Avila (Mercedes Ruehl) decides that since her ex-husband won’t be there this year, they will probably have plenty of meat. The Vietnamese-American Nguyen women also fuss over the turkey, though they do not seem to infuse the bird with a sense of masculinity as the Avila and Williams women seem to do. Wondering aloud why they bother trying to give the bland meat flavor, they coat half of its breast with chili paste and leave the other half plain, an act that nicely symbolizes their status as half Vietnamese, half American.

⁷ For example, the image of the submissive and sweet Oriental woman that we find in *Madame Butterfly* or the Indian maiden used to sell everything from cornstarch to margarine (Molholt 2008).

⁸ According to the Wolf Howl Animal Preserve, turkey males are polygamous and may mate with at least five females during the breeding season (Wolf Howl Animal Preserve 2009).

⁹ The website also offers an important safety tip: “Be very careful when using this product. It is so realistic that it will attract other hunters as well as gobblers. Other hunters in the area will mistake this for the real thing, so when you know others are in the area, be super careful or don't use it until you think they have left the area” (“Supreme Breeding Tom and Collapsible Turkey Decoy” 1998).

¹⁰ In the autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, patriarchy is reinforced vis-à-vis the Thanksgiving meal. Country music singer, Loretta Lynn, recounted a Thanksgiving, when her father flew into a rage because one of his children started eating before he (as patriarch) was served. The father ends up dumping the whole meal out of the window (Lynn 1976).

¹¹ To make matters worse, the giggling siblings then dump the turkey platter and stuffing over the raging, screaming sister.

¹² Tommy, who is openly gay, is accused by Joanne of being “a wife” to his lover and life partner. While Joanne’s rant stems from Tommy’s inability to carve a turkey, they quickly turn to an attack on homosexuality: “You cock sucker! You bastard! You pervert! [...] You kissed him on the lips in front of everyone. [...] You make me want to throw up.” It would be easy to read Tommy’s inability to carve the turkey as a homophobic moment, except that most of the film is actually anti-homophobic. The sister, for example, who makes the homophobic remarks, is marginalized within the narrative, and Tommy’s marriage is celebrated by other characters.

¹³ While often referred to as the first gay cowboy movie, the film is neither the first western to depict homoerotic relationships in the western genre. Nor is the moniker “gay cowboy western” empowering, for it marginalizes the film outside of the dominant; that is, we do not refer to John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) as a heterosexual cowboy western.

¹⁴ We see something of the intensely homophobic environments of which Jack and Ennis exist through a narrative flashback to a time when the latter was a young boy. As Ennis recounts the story, we see a close-up of his father’s large hands clamped roughly around the boy’s small neck, as he and his brother are led to see a dead man laying in a ditch laying face up so that all can see he had been castrated, “for taking up residence with another man.” With this painful memory at hand, and the extremely homophobic

environment in which they live, the decision to keep their relationship closeted appears to be justified.

¹⁵ Oilfield jargon. The lingo employed by drillers and other oilfield employees. The “stud duck” is the person with the most authority. “Stud Duck” was also the name of a B-17E bomber flown in the South Pacific during World War II.

¹⁶ The relationship becomes especially apt when the Dallas Cowboys play against the Washington Redskins, for it mirrors a classic motif in the western genre as well as the myth of the “First Thanksgiving” (if I may blur the stock figures of cowboys and pilgrims for the sake of this argument).

¹⁷ Sports historian Steve Pope argues that “the Thanksgiving football ritual was a late nineteenth-century ‘invented tradition’” (1993:56). Noting the symbiotic relationship between nineteenth-century Protestantism and sport, Pope continues: “The religious-oriented antebellum tradition was, however, most profoundly transformed by the idea for an annual Thanksgiving game between the previous year’s two leading teams, hatched by a student-run Intercollegiate Football Association in 1876, and quickly became the showpiece of American collegiate sport” (1993:58). Moreover, Pope reports that during the mid nineteenth-century, a group known as “muscular Christians” orchestrated the “marriage of sport and morality” through the Y.M.C.A. and similar religious organizations, the foundation beneath what appears to be a secular sport (1993:59).

¹⁸ Ironically, two-thirds of National Football League players today are African American.

¹⁹ Pope suggests about football: “There is patriotism, militarism, prayer, music, conspicuous consumption, politics, sex, white supremacy, and sport” (1993:73). Like the western and the Thanksgiving myth, the game of football also has racial undertones. Again, Pope cites an article by Nathaniel S. Shaler, a Harvard geology professor, who wrote about football in 1889, advocating “the success of the race” through football (1993:63).

²⁰ For example, Shohat and Stam report that “topographies were documented for purposes of military and economic control, often on the literal backs of the ‘natives’ who carried the cinematographers and their equipment” (1994:122). Of the camera itself, they observe that it “penetrated a foreign and familiar zone like a predator, seizing its ‘loot’ of images as raw material to be reworked in the ‘motherland’ and sold to sensation-hungry spectators and consumers, a process later fictionalized in *King Kong* (1933)” (Shohat and Stam 1994:122-23).

²¹ Some early examples of poultry being sexualized has been described by Psyche Williams-Forsen (2008), who offers examples of chickens being sexualized *vis-à-vis* African Americans going back to 1910. In a burlesque television advertisement “Gallina Blanca” (from 1960), a chicken does a strip-tease dance to promote chicken meat. Simon Bronner reports a comparable sexualization process occurring in the case of men

and deer hunting (2004). Whether the animal is a deer, a chicken, or a turkey, each has become a complex symbolic object.

²² We see Rachel Seelig instructed by her mother on the proper way to make pie crust. Mrs. Seelig takes hold of Rachel's fingers, in order to demonstrate how to pinch the dough gently between her first two fingers. Rachel seems taken aback initially at this gesture, a coded reference to lesbian "finger sex."

²³ For more information about the so-called "turkey baster method" of insemination: "At Home Insemination Methods" (<http://www.fertilityplus.org/faq/homeinsem.html>, accessed June 7, 2009), "Woman Attacks Her Wife With 'Turkey Baster' Full of Sperm" (<http://lezgetreal.com/?p=5444> accessed June 7, 2009), and "Jennifer Aniston Turns to the Turkey Baster" (<http://justjared.buzznet.com/2009/04/01/jennifer-aniston-the-baster-2/>, accessed June 7, 2009).

²⁴ The full transcript of the Coilhouse magazine blog is as follows:

1. D Says: "...more concerned about where the stuffing goes..." (11/22/07 at 5:50 pm);
2. Jerem Morrow Says: "Und ze giblets..!" (11/22/07 at 9:46 pm); 3. zoetica zoetica Says: "Sweet sweet giblets! Wait..what's a giblet again?" (11/22/07 at 10:29 pm); 4. Jerem Morrow Says: "Giblets are the edible offal of a fowl, typically including the heart, gizzard, liver, and other visceral organs. Yum yum." (11/23/07 at 7:19 am); 5. ovencleaneruk Says: "It is not so unusual. I have been to a dominatrix who put a slave cage up against her oven, forced me into it, covered the cage and turned on her oven. It

was amazingly erotic to feel the heat warming up the body. I was in there 30 minutes and came out very red and sweaty!!!” (March 9th, 2008 at 4:35 am); 6. Anton Gray Says: “I have had that fantasy [sic] ever since i was a young boy. I would pretend my Aunt had locked me in a cage [sic] and was fattening me up for her sunday dinner. It all started when she would come up to me pinching my cheek and saying she could just eat me up, and it went from there. I still fantasize [sic] about it to this day” (12/27/08 at 10:31 am) (<http://coilhouse.net/2007/11/fear-the-turkey-man/>, accessed 10/10/09). Although it is beyond the scope of my project, it is important to note that this motif appears in oral tradition, for example, in the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel.

²⁵ In the 1969 classic film *Alice’s Restaurant*, Alice remarks flirtatiously with Arlo Guthrie, who has arrived bearing the gift of a mule. The man notices an attractive Asian woman, and he watches her walk past, saying “mmmm” to Alice as if the woman is food. This being the era of sexual freedom, Alice notices but doesn’t mind, saying, “I made the turkey. She made the platter.” “I wonder who made her,” he asks. “No one I know about. You wouldn’t have had to try,” Alice responds.

²⁶ The “turkey hooker” here appears to be the wayward sister of Kingsolver’s “Mr. Thanksgiving,” the turkey who practically bastes himself, yet the “turkey hooker” is more explicit, sexual, and violent in design.

²⁷ A number of other videos give subjectivity to turkeys while making them appear eager to be eaten: [“Mr. Turkey” (sung to the tune of “Mr. Sandman”); “Turkey in Yo Belly,” a

rap to Devo's "Stuff it good"; "We Will Eat You," sung to Queen's "We Will Rock You"; as well as "The Turkey Song," and "Turkey Jive Thanksgiving," a rap about how to baste turkeys.

²⁸ In these film genres, violence is not only used to negotiate power between people, but also functions as a sort of rite of passage and a source of rejuvenation. As such, the knife (or gun) is both masculinized and sexualized.

²⁹ See, for example, *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark 1974), *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978), *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka 1981), and *April Fool's Day* (Fred Walton 1986).

³⁰ "Shooting the trailer was so much fun," Roth is often quoted as saying, "because every shot is a money shot. Every shot is decapitation or nudity. It's so ridiculous, it's absurd. It's just so wrong and sick that it's right" ("Grindhouse" 2009). Because of this collection of scenes, the fake trailer nearly earned *Grindhouse* an NC-17 rating.

³¹ The design for the titles in the "Thanksgiving" trailer was based on a *Mad* magazine slasher parody titled *Arbor Day* (1981). The score consists of excerpts from *Creepshow* (George Romero 1982).

³² In the following scene, two teenagers in a convertible are parking on lover's lane. "Come on, Judy, how about it?" pleads the boy Tucker (Eli Roth). Judy (Jordan Ladd)

needs little convincing; she spits out her gum and responds, “Happy Thanksgiving, baby,” as they hurry to remove his pants so she can perform fellatio on him. In its voyeuristic depiction of the couple’s sexual encounter, the camera follows Judy’s hand as it reaches up from the boy’s crotch toward his chest and then his head, only to find that his head has been lopped off. Judy runs screaming from the car, right into the arms of another man (Jay Hernandez), who also wears a letterman’s jacket. “Cool it, Judy,” he says, “you’re safe. Bobby’s here.” Strangely, the couple begins kissing, but we soon hear slashing sounds. Suspecting something is amiss, the girl looks at Bobby’s face, which she has been holding between her hands, she realizes that his head was cut off while she was kissing him. Poor Judy screams mightily at her bad luck. Having two lovers decapitated while in sexual acts, after all, is more than most of us would endure calmly. Finally, the camera cuts once again to the turkey being stabbed and the now familiar bloody word “Thanksgiving.” These murders on lover’s lane recall two legend motifs—“the hook,” in which sexually active teens are punished by a hook-wielding psych-path, and the vagina dentata legend, in which young men are decapitated while having sex with a woman (in this case, the toothed mouth represents the toothed vagina).

³³ It would appear initially that the killer is targeting women: the grandma preparing the Thanksgiving meal in the opening scene, the family matriarch, is the first to be attacked. Furthermore, it does appear that the cheerleader is killed in a distinctly sexually violent manner. It also appears—upon first viewing—that the human turkey on the table is female (because of the way in which its legs are spread). The trailer includes numerous other nods to slasher classics, including scenes of screaming women and of sexually

assertive women being punished. The scenes appear to follow the classic four-movement structure outlined by Daniel Barnes, who applied Vladimir Propp's morphological structure to contemporary urban legends, arguing that legends move through the following formula: Interdiction, Violation, Consequence, and Attempted Escape (I-V-C-AE) (Barnes 1996:4-9). However, actually these are cinematic tricks done through clever editing, as well as the power of audience generic expectations. For instance, while the editing dupes us into thinking that three women are murdered, we actually witness no actual evidence, only the implication created by the juxtaposition of shots. In the one case, a high-angle shot of the grandma turning around (with a startled expression) cuts to the turkey being stabbed. In the other, a low-angle shot of the cheerleader's crotch dissolves to a shot of the knife sticking erect through the skin of the trampoline and then to the turkey being stabbed. We see neither the grandma nor the cheerleader actually being killed. Grandma appears in a later scene, in fact, proof that she wasn't actually killed earlier. Might we suspect that the cheerleader has similarly been spared, as was the young woman parking on lover's lane? What about the turkey? Could it likewise have been spared? When examined very closely, this trailer actually challenges the very patriarchal conventions of the slasher film to which it claims to pay homage.

³⁴ At first, I assumed the human/turkey was female, but it is actually credited as male (Daniel Frisch), and the human head inserted into the turkey body is likewise apparently male. All of the violence that is actually shown, in fact, is perpetrated on the bodies of men, not women. Whereas we see four gruesome close-ups of decapitated male heads,

the violence against women is only hinted at through clever editing. In this way, the trailer “Thanksgiving,” upon closer inspection, seems to mock the tendency of slasher films to torture women.

³⁵ A rap posted on YouTube plays upon this parallel, with the closing lines, “Go kill some hos / carve that turkey / carve that cooch” (“Ode to the Thanksgiving Pilgrim” 2010).

³⁶ Roth credits generic expectations as influencing his decisions, when he remarks: “If I don't exploit this girl I have failed as a *Grindhouse* director.” Yet for some, this loyalty to generic conventions is still inexcusable, for example, one blogger writes: “Is this press junket really entertaining? Correct me if I'm completely wrong, but in a matter of almost twenty-five minutes, Eli Roth has managed to objectify women repeatedly and has suggested that the torturing of, violence against, and the killing of women by men is not only entertaining, but acceptable in some situations. It is just a film, and a horror film nonetheless, but I have two questions for everyone to answer: Who is the target audience, and why are we putting out these messages?” (Reader Feedback 2007).

Consider the audience present during the 20-minute interview, especially how it responds to Roth's discussion of key scenes. Not only is there audience laughter throughout entire segments, but there are times when it resembles a comedy skit, particularly when Roth comments on the cheerleader and the turkey sex scenes. Whereas “AB” asks what these images mean, and for whom, she views them through the lens of the horror genre, therefore, failing to consider how the images might fit more

comfortably within the realm of horror/comedy. Make no doubt about it, when a certain segment of the population watches these scenes, laughter is a common response (not fear or outrage). Judging from the response of the press in the audience, others find these particular cinematic moments to be funny as well. Hence, Roth's audience roars in laughter, egging him on. Just because the intended audience of "Thanksgiving" finds the film to be humorous, however, doesn't answer "AB's" question about audience and meaning. Clearly, "AB" is not part of the intended audience, nor am I. Like "AB" above, at first I interpreted the trailer as simply misogynistic, conforming to generic conventions of slasher films. Yet, upon closer examination, however, I am reevaluating this earlier assessment.

³⁷ Davis explains: "All over the land, as usual on Thanksgiving, turkeys will be exposed to humiliation, contempt, and insult. Thanksgiving has other functions, but one thing it does is to formalize a desire to kill someone we hate and to make a meal out of that someone. In this role, the turkey dinner is not that far distant from a cannibal feast" (2001:69).

³⁸ Schauffler writes: "Bounteous Nature, with the pride of a milliner at a fall opening, spread all her treasures before them. Their little plats had been blessed by the sunshine and the showers, and round about them were many evidences of the friendliness of the untilled soil. The woodland, what a revelation it must have been to them, arrayed in its autumnal garments, and swarming with game which had been concealed from them

during the summer! The Pilgrim from over sea fell in love then and there with New England, and the bride, clad in her cloth of gold, had been waiting many years for such a suitor. So it happened that there was a wedding feast” ([1907] 1960:xix). See also Said [1978] 1994; Boone 2003 [1995]; and Mills and Lewis 2003 [1995].

³⁹ In debates over the impending annexation of Texas and Mexico, both sides of the imperial expansion drew upon the language of marital union, representing the new territories “as women to be married to the U.S.,” one writing of Texas “presenting itself to the United States as a bride adorned for her espousals” (Kaplan 1998:585).

Chapter Four –

Revolting Turkeys: A Birds'-Eye View of Thanksgiving

“I have likened reason to an escalator in that, once we start reasoning, we may be compelled to follow a chain of argument to a conclusion that we did not anticipate when we began” (Peter Singer 1999:62).

“A Turkey’s Lament”

‘Twas the night before Thanksgiving / and all through the farm
Not a turkey was gobbling / They all were in mourn’
The ax was cleaned / The chopping block was steady
The recipe book gleamed / The oven stood ready.
When suddenly outside / There arose such a clatter
The whole farm woke up / The children screamed ‘What’s the matter?’
The barn was aglow / In a warm tingly light
The turkeys were in awe / They’d never seen such a sight
Above their heads / Perched high in the rafters
Was Super Turkey Ed! / They wondered, ‘What’s he after?’
He held his banner high / Proclaiming with zeal
‘Ham you should buy / For the Thanksgiving meal!’¹

Non-fiction author Barbara Kingsolver begins a loving account of her heritage turkey, Mr. Thanksgiving, with a note about how “historic breeds tend to have proportionally more dark meat”:

True to type, this guy made up for his narrower chest with a lot of leg, thigh, and overall heft. His *color and texture were so different* from the standard turkey, it’s hard to compare them. He was *a pleasure to cook*, remaining exceptionally moist and tender. Thanks to a thin layer of egg-yolk-colored fat under the skin of the breast, *the meat seemed to baste itself* and gained a delicate aroma and flavor reminiscent, I swear, of

lobster...This Bourbon Red, we and our friends agreed *when we bit into him*, was the richest, most complex-flavored turkey we had eaten (2007:283, emphasis added).²

Kingsolver's fondness for her Bourbon Red reinforces the colonial fantasy that the colonized subject wants to be colonized. Kingsolver's dark-complexioned turkey becomes the holiday's counterpart to earlier anthropomorphized animals that clamor and seduce to get eaten, for example, the Chicken of the Sea's mermaid, StarKist Tuna mascot Charlie the Tuna, and the soulful California Raisins.³ In the preceding chapters, I focus on how meaning—both political and sexual—is enacted and negotiated over the turkey body and how this has implications not just for turkeys, but for humans as well. In particular, I stress in Chapter Three, "Sexing the Turkey," that media images of Thanksgiving turkeys reinforce the connection between the act of eating (and preparing) food and the act of having sex. Mr. Thanksgiving's ability to baste himself, therefore, is the male counterpart to the featherless, headless turkey stripper, who advertizes her body as "good to eat," begging to be stuffed, greased, and splattered with "hot gravy."⁴

In contrast, most of the turkeys I have come across in popular culture (and in real life) reveal a subject that, actually, does not wish to be killed and eaten. Along with subjectivity, of course, comes a desire to live unfettered by human appetites. It is not surprising, in this context, to find an excess of this kind of "poultry-themed gallows humor" and other examples of the oppositional gaze at work. In this chapter, I examine key scenes—from the realms of both fiction and nonfiction—when turkeys discover the conspiracy of their lives, try to escape, and enact revenge on the farmers and butchers who would otherwise oppress them. Looking at these examples through the lens of

postcolonial theory is useful, I conclude, because of how the figure of the turkey and the Other are conflated in popular culture. Their parallel representations, therefore, may be interrogated in order to reveal something important about both.

A scene from *The Simpsons*' Halloween special, "Turkey's Revenge" (Groening 2008) provides a good introduction to this "postcolonial awakening." When Lisa Simpson (a vegetarian) realizes that Milhouse's tears gain him the ability to bring to life that which he believes in, starting with the Grand Pumpkin (who seeks revenge on those who carve up his kindred pumpkins), she tells him about "Tom Turkey." When Milhouse begins to believe, a giant turkey comes to life, killing the Grand Pumpkin (and freeing those eaten by the pumpkin). The latter scene opens with the children standing on stage. Lisa is dressed as a witch, Bart Simpson as Charlie Brown, and Millhouse as Linus. The trouble begins when Millhouse says to the giant turkey, "How about a nice Thanksgiving feast? You can carve the turkey." The giant turkey, who has a British accent, responds in horror, "You *eat* turkeys?"

Always the bigmouth, Bart retorts, "Yeah, it's delicious, especially when we take stuffing and shove it up the turkey's a - -" He is interrupted by Lisa covering his mouth with her hand, but Tom Turkey has already heard enough. Enraged, the formerly domesticated bird vows revenge and begins chasing the kids. Silhouetted from Marge Simpson's point of view, we see one of the kids being devoured by the giant turkey, before Marge greets the viewers with a happy holiday message that ends the episode. We see a similar dynamic in several other Thanksgiving vignettes. For example, in "Turkey Revolution," an animated turkey, after learning of its fate, swallows TNT pellets, so that when it is placed in the oven on Thanksgiving day, it explodes—a holiday version of the

suicide bomber disguised by its status as an animated cartoon ("Turkey Revolution" 2007).

In "The Turkey's Revolt," a short video available on YouTube, the accompanying text asks, "What would it be like if a turkey sought revenge for all turkey-kind?" The credits roll slowly over a raw turkey, as an out-of-tune rendition of "You are my Sunshine" plays. The children go to bed, but only after expressing their anticipation for Thanksgiving the next day. That night, however, each has a nightmare. In the youngest brother's dream, the turkey (both dead and raw) chases him. The chase scene, of the boy frantically fleeing, is shot from the turkey's point of view. Although it has neither eyes to see nor mouth to speak, the turkey whispers ominously, "Get ready for Thanksgiving dinner" (voice of Kirk Moore). The frame dissolves to the oldest sister's dream, in which the turkey attacks her in bed. Finally, we see the middle boy nearly eaten by the turkey in his dream. Comparing dreams the next morning, the kids discover the strange coincidence of their nightmares and are terrified to realize that some sort of device has been implanted in their necks, which suggests a blurring between dream-life and real-life ("The Turkey's Revolt" 2006).⁵

In the course of my research, I have amassed dozens of similar examples. Trying to make sense of this phenomenon, at first I assumed that the theme of revolting turkeys began, like many postcolonial texts, in the 1960s, the period Pleck describes as the post-sentimental period (Pleck 1999). However, I soon discovered that this motif of turkey liberation and turkey revenge actually goes back at least to the nineteenth century. "As the turkey was the centerpiece for the Thanksgiving dinner," explains historian Andrew F. Smith, "it also became an object of humor" and, ever since, some sort of this gallows

humor has appeared regularly around Thanksgiving (2006). In 1862, for instance, *Harper's Weekly* published an illustration of two birds in conversation. The male turkey, Mr. Gobbler, says to the female, "Ain't you going to et any thing?" to which Mrs. Gobbler responds, "No, I ain't going to fatten myself up for other people's benefit!"⁶ In 1872, a satirical engraving in *Harper's Weekly* was entitled, "The Turkeys Revolt against Thanksgiving" (Smith 2006:78). Despite the efforts of these early protestations, the name "Turkey Day," by the 1880s, came to be synonymous with Thanksgiving. Folklorist Tad Tuleja describes a Bell Telephone advertisement from the 1960s, which shows the revolting turkey occurring during that decade as well. "A fattened Tom, seeing a farmer sharpening an axe, avails himself of the Yellow Pages to locate a reducing salon. In the final panel of the comic, as trim as a wild bird, he walks smugly past a window where the carcass of another turkey is cooling" (Tuleja 1987:35)

One contemporary comic, created by Signe Wilkinson, depicts a somber turkey holding a sign that reads, "Go Vegetarians!" (Wilkinson 2003). Another comic, created by Mike Twohy, reveals a turkey seeking consultation with a human fortuneteller. The fortuneteller has a beleaguered expression because what she sees in the crystal ball is a dead turkey on a platter—the turkey's destiny (Twohy 2004). In another comic, one turkey says to another, "I dreamt I found my inner-bird, and it turned out to be walnuts and bread crumbs" (Twohy 2003). In yet another comic, turkeys cluster around a campfire listening with fright to the telling of a horror story: "Then, after they say grace," recounts the storyteller, "the father comes in with a loooong carving knife" (Peters 2004). This is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.⁷ There are seemingly countless examples with similar dynamics. Today, examples of revolting turkeys are as

bountiful as the iconographic cornucopia itself. Revolting turkeys (double entendre fully intended) actually outnumber compliant turkeys. Running through these vignettes is a turkey with subjectivity and a desire for survival and freedom.

Let me consider, for example, some personal anecdotes. As I described in Chapter One, despite elementary school curriculum that otherwise reinforces the dominant Thanksgiving ideology, some schools are providing an alternate perspective—not necessarily from a Native point of view, but from the turkey’s. For instance, in second grade music class, my son was taught a song called “Super Turkey.” The catchy refrain celebrates one such revolting turkey: “Su-per Turkey / Always gets a-way hey hey hey. / Su-per Turkey / Always gets a-way.”⁸ As with the epigraph about Super Turkey Ed, this hero-ization of the revolting turkey is intriguing and ironic because most of the students singing it will be eating turkey within days.

The following year, in the third grade, my son’s class was asked to compose stories about Thanksgiving. The writing prompt begins, “If I were a turkey, I would hide....”⁹ On the one hand, these exercises celebrate “the one that got away.” On the other, the traditional turkey-centered Thanksgiving meal assures that most of the turkeys, actually, do not get away.

In fourth grade, my son was asked to color a turkey wearing a pilgrim hat. Multi-colored construction-paper feathers were attached with a clip, so that they could be fanned out, one at a time, to reveal a riddle written on each.¹⁰ On my son’s feathers, the following riddles appeared:

“I am the month of Thanksgiving...I am?” [answer: November]

“I live in a teepee and I hunt animals. I am a?” [answer: Indian]

“I am made of pumpkin. I am?” [answer: pumpkin pie]

“I am killed and eaten at Thanksgiving. I am?” [answer: turkey]

“I am used to hunt. I kill turkeys. I am a?” [answer: gun]

While the turkey cut-out is identified with Pilgrims by virtue of the hat—the standard black hat with buckle that has come to signify Pilgrim—there are no riddles that assume the point of view of Pilgrims. Instead, two of the riddles ask us to assume the point of view of Thanksgiving’s iconic foods (pumpkin pie and turkey) and one asks us to assume the point of view of an “Indian.” Of course, the turkey is also identified with the stereotypical image of Indians due to the correspondence between turkey feathers and the ceremonial feathers used by American Indians. By now this blurring of roles between these construction-paper representations and their real-life counterpart, and between turkeys and American Indians, is all too familiar.¹¹ In the case of my son’s riddle about the turkey, of course, the question of standpoint is paramount, as the use of the first person pronoun reveals—“*I* am killed and eaten at Thanksgiving” (not “*It* is killed and eaten at Thanksgiving”).

As I discussed in Chapter One, the modern holiday of Thanksgiving grew out of national curriculum developed in the 1880s, intended to assimilate the influx of immigrants with a common set of symbols (specifically, turkeys, Pilgrims, Indians, flags) as an exercise in cultural power (Pleck 2000; Siskind [1992] 2002). Ironically, amidst curriculum that teaches the master narrative of the Pilgrims and Indians, some activities encourage a subversive point of view. These alternative activities seem to demonstrate

an attempt to explore the perspective of the subaltern, those who are socially and politically outside of the hegemonic power structure.

Certainly, I have found many examples of school curriculum reinforcing the master narrative, yet I also found oppositional discourses in school curriculum, where tales of the colonized appear right alongside those of the colonizer. Consider one elementary school class's writing blog, "Please don't eat me for Thanksgiving!" Using the acronym P.I.E. (Persuade, Inform, Entertain) as a formula, the students were asked "to pretend they were a turkey and try to persuade people not to eat them for Thanksgiving." I include a few letters below to illustrate some of these oppositional discourses.

Dear Armes and Johns family,

Please do not eat me! Eat chicken! It's way better than me. I'm just rotten old turkey. Eat something else like pumpkin pie or cranberry sause. OR MAYBE SALAD JUST DON'T EAT ME! I'm not as good as anything of the things I just said. Go to Chick-fill-a. They have chicken. Just don't eat me.

Sincerely,

Your friend, Terriffic Teresa the Turkey.

Dear peoples,

Don't eat turkey for thanksgiving.

I don't like the taste of your mouth!!

"ewwwww!!!"

I don't like the feel of the gun.

I love being alive and free.

From,

Bob the turkey

Dear Richter family,

Please do not eat me for Thanksgiving. I am a kind Turkey. I want to live. Here are two reasons. I have ten wives. Ten of them are dead.

Sincerely,

Ryan Turkey

Dear somebody,

Please don't eat me I taste gross. I have one wife and 200 kids. If you eat me my 200 kids will attack you. Oh and did you know that I taste horrible. I tasted my self today and I am yuck. Please don't eat me! Please don't eat me! I repeat please don't eat me! It really hurts when you shoot turkeys!

Sincerely,

Theadore the Turkey

P.S. Please don't eat me!

Dear dudes and dudettes,

I am mad because you are going to eat me for Thanksgiving!

Because I have a wife and 8 kids. Chickens are much fatter they don't have any kids. Also because I have space issues and will make your tummy explode. I am wealthy so I will give you 1,000 dollars. So please I'm begging you please don't eat me.

Love,

Chicken turkey

Dear somebody,

PLEASE DON'T EAT ME! Because I tasted my self and I tasted like poop! So I tell you

Don't eat me! And even if you don't listen to me you won't even kill me! And I will also slice off your head!

From,

Speed the turkey

Dear everybody,

Don't eat me! Because I have 100 children and 500 wives. I roll in slime so if you eat me you will be full of slime. Start listening to the chick-fill-a cows they say eat more chicken not turkey! It is against the gobble- gobble laws to eat me! So I will smack you and you will fall down and break your head. Or I might shoot eggs at you and you will break your legs and arms. If you try to eat a cookie I will peck them up.

From,

Gobble Slime Turkey

P.S. I'm Discusting! (Ankor's Authors 2008)

Like the examples from my son's school, this assignment encourages children to assume the point of view of the subaltern in order to talk back to the oppressors, in some cases arguing that they taste bad ("I'm discusting" [sic] and "I taste like poop"), appealing to family sentiment ("I have 100 children and 500 wives" [sic]), seeking sympathy for pain ("It really hurts" and "I don't like the feel of the gun") or emotional empathy ("I love being alive and free" and "I am a kind turkey"), and in some cases, even threatening physical retribution ("200 kids will attack you," "I...will make your tummy explode," "I will...slice off your head!").

Beyond the imagination of elementary school students, some of the most subversive examples of this turkey revolt motif are documentary videos found on YouTube. For example, one poster writes: "This was literally an hour ago today while I

was riding my bike to work. I came across a flock of Wild Turkeys, and stopped to take a picture since I had my new camera with me." The unedited footage reveals a gang of turkeys mulling about a suburban yard. "Look at these things, they're *huge*," remarks the man behind the camera—possessor of the gaze. As he says this, three toms move closer toward him making soft, but clear, warning noises. "Oh shit, they're coming towards me. Uh oh. Uh oh. I'm out!" At this, the camera drops sharply. We see the ground and then a close-up of a tom's face gobbling threateningly at the camera while the man flees. Beginning as the object of the camera's gaze, the turkeys "turn the tables" and (almost) return the camera's gaze ("Attacked by Wild Turkeys in Davis" 2009).

In another video, "Turkeys Chase Man, Ready to Attack," the poster writes: "My friend got a little too close to some wild turkeys in Northern California." The unedited footage is shot from the car. It shows the friend being chased in a ditch by two toms. After several unsuccessful attempts to outrun the turkeys, the man manages to seek refuge in the car. The man who has been laughing while filming asks his friend, "What did you do to them? Did you try to *rape* one?" Winded from this ordeal, the man responds, ignoring this loaded question: "I got too close to them." Once he recovers, and from the safety of the car, he begins to make threatening jokes to the turkeys (e.g., "I'll see you again on Thanksgiving") ("Turkeys Chase Man" 2008). The cameraman's attempt to feminize the turkey ("Did you try to rape one?") parallels the friend's vague threat ("I'll see you again...").

Although turkeys continue to get proverbial "the raw end of the deal" at Thanksgiving, they do make a valiant effort to assert their rights to land and space, both in the realm of fiction and non-fiction. In yet another unedited non-fictional video called

“Turkey Attack,” a man enters a cage to tease a tom, while his friends off camera laugh hysterically. “Bak, bak, bak,” taunts the man, flapping his arms and wiggling his butt. Finally the bird gets angry and attacks, causing the man to run from the cage, muttering, “Calm down, now, you win.” Having expelled the intruder, the tom parades around triumphantly. After a few seconds, the man says, “You earned my respect. You *are* kind of intimidating” (“Turkey Attack” 2009).

If wild turkey toms are known for being territorial, it should be no surprise that attacks occur against mail couriers and police officers. In the unedited video, “Turkey Attacks UPS,” the text reads: “George the Turkey doesn't like package deliveries and attacks the couriers.” Shot from the human’s point of view, we hear the UPS driver calling for backup and excitedly explaining that he is trapped in the building by a wild turkey. Meanwhile, the turkey paces back and forth in front of the door, trying to get in (“Turkey Attacks UPS” 2007).¹² In another video, “Hilarious Turkey Attack,” captured by the trooper’s dashboard camera, we see a police officer threatened by a wild turkey as the officer tries to give a ticket to someone. The turkey chases the officer back into his car and then continues to stride portentously around the vehicle, looking into the windows. Laughing nervously, we hear the officer say, “I’m sorry, man, but that bird came out of nowhere. It’s chasing me. I can’t get out of the car without it following me” (“Hilarious Turkey Attack” 2008).

A CBSNewsOnline story tells a similar tale:

Mail carriers have long had to worry about rain, snow and biting dogs. In Grand Haven, they’re facing a new challenge: attacking turkeys.

In the past month, eight or nine turkeys have been disrupting mail delivery in one part of the Michigan city located about 165 miles west-northwest of Detroit. The threatening turkeys include three males.

It might be more than coincidence that, according to the U.S. Department of the Interior's Web site, a group of turkeys is known as a rafter – or a gang.

Carrier Jeremy Bogerd has been pecked in the leg. He says the tom turkeys are “super aggressive.” He said the 15- to 18-pound turkeys chase mail carriers around the neighborhood and gather at the doors of mail trucks that enter the area. “As soon as they see us, they’re after us,” he told the *Grand Haven Tribune*. “They’re not afraid of humans.”

[...] No one seems to know why the turkeys are attacking the carriers, but Bogerd said the leading theory is the male birds are defending their territory or trying to impress females during mating season (“Latest Threat to Mail Carriers: Turkey Attacks” 2009).

The video news story offers a montage of footage, showing the neighborhood, couriers delivering mail, and sound bytes from neighbors (who mostly seem amused by the whole ordeal, considering the turkeys are not attacking *them*). Although no actual footage of turkey attacks is shown, we do see one mail courier carrying a piece of wood with him “to shoo them away” should he ever find himself in trouble with the turkeys. He recalls: “One kinda ran towards me, then the other two joined in, and all three of them went on a dead run. There’s nothing in the handbook about this,” he chuckles, “usually about dogs,

nothing about turkeys.” After this, there is a close-up shot of a poster in the break room: “Wanted: For the Harassment, Intimidation, and ‘Chasing Down’ of Postal Workers. If you see the perpetrator identified below, please call: 1-800-TURKEY ATTACK immediately” (“Turkeys Attack Mailman” 2009).

Most of these videos of real-life turkey attacks were posted during the spring—the birds’ mating season—when the toms become aggressive and territorial. Had the attacks occurred closer to Thanksgiving, might we attribute retaliation as a possible motive for the turkeys’ behavior? While I am *not* suggesting that the turkeys in Michigan (or elsewhere) are organizing a resistance movement against humans, starting strategically with mail couriers and police officers, I interpret these turkey vignettes as screens onto which Americans project colonial fantasies and, in this case, express anxiety about unequal relationships between turkeys and humans.

Tuleja decries the fact that the greatest game bird was nearly exterminated and then replaced “with one representing domesticity and doom.” He describes the process by which the wild turkey, “cornered by consumer specialists, becomes the symbol of the one true American holiday, but only in a form that will allow it to reach the widest and most predictable market. To continue to serve as an emblem for American culture, the turkey must become subject to mass production, processing, and quality control” (1987:36). Tuleja suggests that such examples of turkeys revolting (as in the Bell Telephone turkey ad described earlier) reveal “a growing resentment, on the part of a nation of consumers, at its own success” (1987:36).

If this resentment is hinted at through these unedited documentary videos, it becomes blatant in the realm of fictional videos on YouTube. For example, in the short live-action film, “Thanksgiving Revenge of the Gobbler,” the text accompanying the video begins: “In a world where ordinary people lead ordinary lives, one holiday ends in horrific madness. Friendship, revenge, terror, turkey and an angry ex-girlfriend...all in this chest-bursting short film....” While chopping carrots and onions, the protagonist confides to his friend about breaking up with his girlfriend. They are interrupted by a fellow guest, who dips his fingers into a number of dishes mumbling, “What’s this taste like? What’s this taste like?” As soon as the interloper leaves, the conversation resumes, and the friend asks: “So, does this whole ‘Emily thing’ mean we’re not going to get any turkey over here today?”

Just then, there is a knock at the front door. The soundtrack’s ominous music signals trouble, though the door opens to innocent-looking Emily, who dutifully delivers the turkey platter, which the protagonist accepts before closing the door on her face. “We can not eat that,” insists the friend, who is suspicious that the jilted girlfriend may have poisoned it. The men debate whether or not the turkey is safe, as the foreboding music continues, and the interloper passes through again as before, dipping his fingers into food and compulsively repeating, “What’s this taste like?” The friends conspire to give the unwitting taste-tester some of Emily’s turkey, which he eagerly consumes as the others look on. After several mouthfuls, he goes into convulsions. Lying prone on the table, he rips open his shirt, and a bloody turkey head erupts out of his chest. This is an obvious allusion to the horrifying chest-bursting scene of *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979) and a variant of the Bosom Serpent legend, in which the creature uses the human’s body to lay

its eggs (Bennett 2005; Roth 2009). In both *Alien* and “Thanksgiving Revenge of the Gobbler,” the creature undergoes a bloody and violent birth/hatching. The quivering victim and the guests watch in shock, as did the internal audience of *Alien*, as the phallic-shaped head turns from side to side to survey the room and shoots (ejaculates?) blood everywhere, killing the victim and contaminating the witnesses with the abject blood (Cardarelli et al. 2008). Although the video’s title suggests the *turkey* is getting revenge, the plot detail about Emily suggests that it is also the *girlfriend’s* revenge. In this case, the girlfriend and the turkey are conflated as the Other, in attacking the consumer/colonizer.

This interpretation becomes especially apt in cases where the turkey is coded as an ethnic Other. As such, I try to merge theories of the trickster figure with Bakhtin’s theory about the carnivalesque, a literary mode that subverts the assumptions of the dominant style through humor and chaos. By viewing the turkey as trickster, an anthropomorphized animal that disobeys normal rules for behavior, we see how these media turkeys manage to raise awareness and act as a social equalizer.¹³

In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin likens the carnivalesque in literature to the carnivals of popular culture, where the world is turned upside-down, social hierarchies are profaned and overturned by those who are normally suppressed, opposites mingle, and boundaries blur between fools and wise men, kings and beggars, and fact and fantasy. Through carnival and the carnivalesque, ideas and truths are tested and contested, demanding dialogic equal, however ephemeral. If Bakhtin found sites of resistance to authority in the novel, we find comparable sites of resistance in other forms of media as well, in places cultural and political change might occur. To take this idea

further, Bakhtin describes a concept called the “grotesque body,” a concept and literary trope that involves some sort of degradation, a refocusing from the abstract/spiritual/noble to the material level, where political conflicts parallel human physiology and the grotesque body becomes the figure of “unruly biological and social exchange.” This concept provides useful insight into examples of unruly and grotesque turkey bodies.

Consider a recent Thanksgiving e-card that depicts a turkey sporting an Afro hair-do, diamond rings, and painted nails. The turkey is gendered as female, despite its snood and erect tail feathers. Dancing beneath a twirling disco ball, with several toms as backup singers, the sexy turkey clutches the microphone between her wings and sings a version of Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 hit, “I Will Survive.” While intended to be humorous, the lyrics are quite subversive:

"At first I was an egg, I was petrified.

Kept thinking I'd be lost or I'd get cracked and fried.

But you took me to your nest before it was too late

And kept me warm, and you helped me incubate...

And now you're back / think you're the boss

Wanna put me on a plate / next to your wife's cranberry sauce /

I should have known this day would come /

I should have known not to relax /

If I thought just for one second

you'd come in here with that ax.

Go on now go / Walk out the door

Just turn around now / Ain't choppin' my head to the floor.

Weren't you the one who prized this dark meat on my thighs?

Did ya think I'd gobble?

Did ya think I'd lay down and die?

Oh no, not I. I will survive.

Oh as long as I know how to peck / I know I'll stay alive.

Got my wings so I won't fall / Ain't sellin' me to Butterball.

I will survive / I will survive ("I Will Survive" 2006).¹⁴

In another intriguing example of the unruly and grotesque turkey body, a white man writes offensive messages on a raw turkey body, including such things as "black people," "KKK," a swastika, as well as misogynistic and homophobic words (e.g., "bang her here" and "fag"). As he writes, his friend (who is black) films the demonstration. Just before the camera turns off, the turkey graffitist says, "Let's fuck this turkey up – a racist-ass mother-fucker" ("Turkey Revenge Against Raciest" [sic] 2008). Through this act of degrading the turkey, political and social conflicts are critiqued. Looking at these examples through Bakhtin's theory about the grotesque body reveals the possibility that

there is postcolonial resistance at play in such moments when turkeys try to solve the conspiracy of their oppression, when turkeys try to escape, and when they confront their oppressors.

From a turkey's point of view, there would be a lot against which to revolt, not the least of which is the fact that the wild turkey, mascot of Thanksgiving, was hunted almost to extinction (Smith 2006:50-53). For domestic turkeys the situation is far worse. Having become industrial "meat animals" (Adams 1994), the birds are kept in crowded, windowless warehouses. They are bred to be killed and consumed by humans. Smith describes the rise and fall of the turkey—from the Mexican turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) that was captured and brought to Europe, to the turkeys imported with European colonizers back to North America in the seventeenth century, and the industrial turkey of the nineteenth century. "American farmers were little concerned with turkey breeding before the mid-nineteenth century," he explains. "Most permitted their birds to roam freely about the farm, where they ate insects and plants and mated at will. Domesticated European birds bred with each other and with the wild eastern turkeys (*Meleagris silvestris*), creating a true 'melting-pot' bird" (Smith 2006:83), a situation paralleled in the human realm.

In 1905, a Texas turkey grower, E. A. Tully, began selling turkeys by weight, with other farmers following suit. "The shift from price per turkey to price per pound was one important reason why turkey breeders began to breed bigger birds," Smith explains, so that "as fat and heavy turkeys became the market standard, farmers increased the birds' weight by stuffing them with food in the period just before slaughter" (2006:95). At first the industry involved growers on small farms, with local

slaughterhouses, processors, and distributors, but it has undergone revolutionary changes. For example, the practice of caging turkeys “led to a doubling of production and a further increase in farm efficiency,” with large numbers of turkeys being raised in cages by the 1940s (2006:96). Raised under these “conditions of intense confinement,” overcrowding leads to aggression and even cannibalism, so the chicks are de-beaked, de-snooded, and de-toed within days of their hatching (2006:97). To counteract diseases common to confinement, the birds are routinely injected with antibiotics (97).

Of the 400 million turkeys Americans consume each year, more than 99 percent of them are from a single breed: the *Broad-Breasted White*, a *quick-fattening monster* bred specifically for the industrial-scale setting and said to be the putative highpoint of turkey breeding history (2006:83-101).¹⁵ Infamous for its whiteness and for its Dolly Parton-sized breasts (the “white meat”), this breeding practice has led to all sorts of complications. “These are the big lugs so famously dumb, they can drown by looking up at the rain,” explains Kingsolver. “If a Broad-Breasted White should escape slaughter,” she speculates “it likely wouldn’t live to be a year old” (2007:90). Their legs collapse from the weight, so that in mature form these birds are incapable of flying or foraging.¹⁶

Alas, as the turkey industry’s “selective breeding” practices produced birds with increasingly “broader, meatier breasts,” their bodies became disproportionate, their short legs making it difficult to stand, let alone fly, and impossible for them to mate. Artificial insemination became commonplace by the 1950s (Smith 2006:91, 97).¹⁷ Surely this shift in the industry altered the relationship between human and bird. Is it coincidental that the word “turkey” began to be used at this time to denote a person acting stupid, foolish, or inept person. The earliest known example of the word “turkey” used as a term of

derision for “an ineffective, incompetent, objectionable, or disliked person” appears in 1951 (Tuleja 1987:34).¹⁸ In addition, by the mid-1950s, “the turkey and Thanksgiving had become fused in popular iconography,” so that between 1950 and 1980, the per capita consumption of domestic turkeys rose over 250 percent in the U.S. (1987:32).¹⁹ “At just the time when a turkey on every table is becoming a social ideal,” Tuleja suggests, “‘turkey’ is becoming a synonym for ‘loser’ or ‘fool’” (1987:32).

Beyond the term “turkey” as a term of derision, Kingsolver elaborates on the fate of these poor industrial turkeys that have been robbed of the ability to mate at will.

Turkey reproduction has become an affair completely mediated by humans:

The sperm must be artificially extracted from live male turkeys *by a person*, a professional turkey sperm-wrangler if you will, and artificially introduced to the hens, and that is all I’m going to say about that. If you think they send the toms off to a men’s room with little paper cups and *Playhen Magazine*, that’s not how it goes. I will add only this: if you are the sort of parent who threatens your teenagers with a future of unsavory jobs when they ditch school, here’s one more career you might want to add to the list” (Kingsolver 2007:90, original italics).²⁰

While Kingsolver wonders at the humiliation of being employed to extract sperm from male turkeys, she does so from a human’s point of view and barely mentions the male turkey’s experience, saying only what it is *not* (it does not involve pornography and paper cups).²¹ However, Smith’s study fills in the details of that procedure that Kingsolver leaves out:

Although most turkey-processing operations have been industrialized, the process of insemination must be done by hand. First, semen is collected by picking up a tom by its legs and one wing and locking it to a bench with rubber clamps, rear facing upward. The copulatory organs are stimulated by stroking the tail feathers and back; the vent is squeezed; and the semen is collected with an aspirator, a glass tube that vacuums it in. the semen is then combined with “extenders” that include antibiotics and a saline solution to give more control over the inseminating dose. A syringe is filled, taken to the henhouse, and inserted into the artificial insemination machine” (Smith 2006:97).

The experience of female turkeys during the insemination process on these industrial-scale turkey farms is equally disturbing: “A worker grabs a hen’s legs, crosses them, and holds the hen with one hand. With the other hand the worker wipes the hen’s backside and pushes up her tail. Pressure is applied to her abdomen, which causes the cloaca to evert and the oviduct to protrude. A tube is inserted into the vent, and the semen is injected (Smith 2006:97). From acquiring semen to injecting it into the hens—these industrial reproductive processes reveal parallels to rape (see “In the Turkey Breeding Factory” n.d.).

Since the core symbol of Thanksgiving is the sexually aroused wild male turkey, with erect, fully-fanned tail feathers, it is important to consider for a moment what turkey sex might be if unmediated by humans. While real turkey sexuality is not the point of my argument, I feel I should mention a bit of what is known about wild turkey mating rituals to counterbalance the unsavory details of the industrial system. Having never actually

seen wild turkeys mate, I am relying on the videos graciously provided on YouTube, as well as articles available online. The complexity of wild turkey mating behavior is striking in its contrast to industrial turkey breeding.

Alan H. Krakauer, has been carefully observing hundreds of the birds and their offspring for more than four years and has learned a lot about the turkey mating game.

While male birds and animals often engage in bitter battles to establish which of many rivals will dominate and mate with a favored female, the wild turkeys that Krakauer studied join together as a band of brothers to help their leading sibling succeed in his romantic quest.

It also offers a clear confirmation of the concept of "altruism" that the famed Harvard entomologist E. O. Wilson saw as an inborn and widely useful trait in the procreation of many creatures as varied as insects and humans.

At UC Berkeley's Hastings Reserve Biological Field Station in the remote reaches of Carmel Valley's Santa Lucia Mountains, Krakauer has watched how groups of wild turkeys band together to back up one of their brothers – the dominant one within the brotherhood – as he displays his attributes to attract a mate.

The male, approaching a female in a courtship ritual with two or more of his brothers, will blush brilliantly red and blue about his face and throat, fan his broad brown and white tail, lower his outspread wings and

emit loud thrumming noises through his air sacks as he prances in a shuffling strut.

And while he engages in his display, his brothers do so, too – but silently and without the strut, in a kind of cooperative semi-courtship – and they also turn to ward off any hostile interlopers seeking to court the same female (Perlman 2005).

One blogger named G@D posts videos of these mating rituals and writes: “It is amazing how quiet the entire process is. No gobbling or clucking, just the most graceful movements of feather displays and positioning” (“Mating Rituals of the Wild Turkey” n.d). After mating, the female creates a nest under concealed by tall grass or bushes and lays her eggs, incubating as many as eighteen at a time. After a month, the chicks hatch and instinctively follow their mother for food and protection. The poults flock with their mother all year. During the first few weeks, when the poults cannot yet fly, the mother roots on the ground with them until they learn to fly into trees at night (“Wild Turkey Mating Season” 2010).

Not only is the mating experience completely different between wild turkeys and industrial turkeys, but so is the life cycle of the birds. Once hatched, the industrial turkey poults are kept in a warm room that is safe from predators. Four weeks later, the chicks are “herded into a windowless barn that is illuminated twenty-four hours a day to encourage the chicks to eat more food” (Smith 2006:98).²² Packed tightly together, with up to ten thousand birds in each warehouse, the birds receive high-nutrient food, distributed via feeder chains along small troughs (2006:98). When they reach the desired

weight (fifteen-to-nineteen pounds), which takes only twelve to nineteen weeks, the birds are crated and transported to the slaughterhouses, where their unfortunate journey will continue (2006:98). Until the early twentieth century, turkeys were killed by either wringing their necks or chopping off their heads. Because Americans prefer poultry flesh “as bloodless as possible,” for a long time the most popular way of slaughtering turkeys was to bleed them (Smith 2006:98). Hung upside down by its feet, the turkey’s jugular was slit, the bird often “brained,” paralyzing it to keep it from struggling, which could break its bones or bruise its muscles, while it bleeds to death (Davis 2001:64).²³

Until the mid-twentieth century, turkeys were sold by butchers—the turkey’s head, feet, and entrails still intact. During the 1930s, commercial processors began eviscerating turkeys, making the “ready-to-cook” turkeys available as either frozen or fresh. In the 1950s, turkey processing became even more automated, with turkeys “transported to central slaughterhouses and shackled upside down on an assembly line; then the turkeys are stunned by submerging their heads and necks in a bath of electrified water. In smaller slaughterhouses birds may be stunned by a hand-gun. Their throats are cut by a mechanical blade or, in smaller slaughterhouses, by hand. The bleeding turkeys are next immersed in a scalding tank to loosen their feathers, which machines remove. Finally, the carcass is dressed for market” (Smith 2006:99). Turkey production practices have increasingly focused on producing cheap meat. From artificial insemination to the actual slaughter methods, critics charge the system with cruelty to animals, poor health, and pollution (Davis 2001; Smith 2006; Kingsolver 2007; PETA 2009).²⁴ For a holiday that celebrates the consumption of turkeys, however, many people do not like to be reminded of the reality of how their food is produced. PETA seeks to exploit this willful

ignorance through one of its recent advertisements. Scheduled to be televised on NBC during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in 2009, the advertisement titled "Grace," was banned at the eleventh hour by NBC and several other stations because it was deemed inappropriate for the television audience. Of course, its banishment led to hundreds of thousands of people watching it on YouTube anyway. It begins with the familiar image of a white family seated around a long dining room table. A little girl begins a Thanksgiving prayer:

Dear God, Thank you for the turkey we're about to eat. And for the turkey farms where they pack them into dark, tiny little sheds for their whole lives. Thank you for when they burn their feathers off when they're still alive and for when turkeys get kicked around like a football and killed by people who think it's fun to stomp on their little turkey heads. And special thanks for all the chemicals and dirt and poop that's in the turkey we're about to eat. Oh, and thank you for rainbows (PETA 2009).

As the girl delivers this paradoxical prayer, sweet in tone, and acerbic in content, a series of reaction shots reveal disgusted and shameful facial expressions of the family members. The closing message, "This Thanksgiving, be thankful you're not a turkey," appears on screen before cutting to the PETA's motto, "Go Veg" (PETA 2009).

Turkey bodies are put through other horrific spectacles. Beyond their experiences as industrial turkeys, they have been thrown from the back of trucks to hungry crowds, tied down and shot at,²⁵ and dropped from airplanes (Smith 2006:63, 125).²⁶ For example, the turkey drop, along with a turkey-calling contest, occurs annually at the

“Turkey Trot” festival, held since 1945 on the second weekend of October in Yellville, Arkansas. Of the festival’s activities, the turkey drop is the one that has gained it the most notoriety, for better or worse.²⁷ When Yellville’s festival was featured in *The National Enquirer* in 1989, with photographs of the events and charges of animal cruelty, the turkey drop ceased for several years, but it has since resumed. It was parodied in an infamous Thanksgiving episode of television’s *WKRP in Cincinnati* in 1978, in which the radio station manager Arthur Carlson gets the publicity stunt idea to drop twenty live turkeys from a helicopter in order to get live coverage of the anarchy as the crowd rushes to get one. “The gruesome sight of the turkeys splattering on the ground,” writes Smith of this scene, “is described by the station’s newsman Les Nessman in a script patterned after Herb Morrison’s famous radio broadcast of the crash of the *Von Hindenburg* zeppelin” in 1937, including the classic line, “Oh, the humanity!” (Smith 2006:125). Afterwards, a traumatized Nessman reports that the turkeys seemed to seek revenge: “It was almost as if the turkeys mounted a counter-attack. It was almost as if they were organized.” In response, the defeated Carlson (covered in turkey feathers) utters his famous line, “As God as my witness, I thought turkeys could fly” (Wilson 1978).²⁸

To most Americans, Tuleja argues, the turkey “evokes pictures of Thanksgiving tables, with the bird a mute centerpiece that only a day before had been gracing the grocer’s deep freeze” (1987:30). Since few Americans today have seen a turkey in the wild, “the symbolic value of the bird as an image of feral independence has long since given way to a practical value within the American food economy. This shift is of course most evident in late November, when the former image of natural abundance, now domesticated, cooked, and stuffed, serves to remind us of the efficiency of our food

delivery system” (1987:30). As such, Tuleja suggests that “Old Tom is merely a joke—a hybridized, unnaturally fattened buffoon whose destiny is to be stuffed with chestnuts and devoured” (1987:35). Davis examines the impetus for these so-called “turkey taunting” traditions: “[M]odern industrial society has become so alienated from the food production process that people can easily forget that an animal had to be killed in order for the turkey to get to the oven. Consequently, all kinds of articles, comics, jokes, and bizarre rituals crop up right before Thanksgiving, emphasizing the subjectivity of the bird. That way we can’t miss the fact that someone—a turkey, not a turnip—had to be sacrificed for the feast” (Davis 2001:120).

From the presidential turkey pardon to turkey drops, “all over the land, as usual on Thanksgiving, turkeys will be exposed to humiliation, contempt, and insult” (Davis 2001:69). At the end of her chapter, “Why Do We Hate This Celebrated Bird?,” Karen Davis grapples with the meaning of this compulsion toward turkey taunting, which she refers to as “spectacular rituals of humiliation,” taking Michael Dorris’ famous question, “Is it necessary to the American psyche to perpetually exploit and debase its victims in order to justify its history?” (Dorris 1978), and turning it sideways. Davis argues that this question “concerning America’s persistent cruelty to Native Americans applies to our treatment of that other group of native Americans involved in our history” (2001:96). By referencing the plight of Native Americans, Davis seeks to draw attention to the plight of turkeys.

What Tuleja sees as an attempt on the part of Americans to direct ridicule at the turkey as a symbol of success, others view the turkey as an example of scapegoating and sacrifice. In this vein, Davis suggests that American society has gone from scapegoating

“certain ethnic populations, foreigners, and bungling turkey carvers” to scapegoating the turkey itself. The conflation of turkeys and Native Americans appears to extend back to the colonial period itself. Davis’ chapter, “A True Original Native of America,” takes its title from a phrase in Benjamin Franklin’s letter to his daughter Sarah Bach in January of 1784.²⁹ Franklin is referring not to American Indians, but to the turkeys native to America (2001:33). “Although feared, wild Indians were more admirable in a sense, more flavorful, more ‘game,’ an enemy to be respected, if also to be killed,” explains Siskind of this historical period. “A Native American converted to Christianity and ‘civilization’ was a domesticated Indian [...] As a true ‘native of America,’ the turkey, wild and domesticated, could easily become a symbol for those other natives, constructed not as Americans but as Indians—others” (Siskind 2004:50).

Consider the language used by Smith: “The fall in numbers of wild turkeys parallels the demise of other North American wildlife. It all seemed to limitless when Europeans first arrived” (2006:52-3). Presumably, some of the “wildlife” to which Smith refers includes American Indians, who were (like turkeys) hunted, captured, enslaved, confined, and “consumed,” in so far as colonization consumed their land and disease consumed their bodies.

I found examples of this slippage between images of turkeys and “Indians” in the visual media going back to a 1945 television cartoon by MGM (around the time the word “turkey” was being used to refer to theatrical failures).³⁰ The cartoon starts with the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock and leads to a segment in which a dull Pilgrim (voice of Bill Thompson) announces he is going “to shoot ye turkey for ye Thanksgiving.” Setting out with his musket rifle, he quickly encounters a trickster turkey (voice of Daws

Butler), a skinny “black market turkey,” who lives in “Ye House of Seven Gobblers.” As we might expect, the turkey gets the better of the Pilgrim, pouring gunpowder into the poor man’s pants and tampering with his gun, so that he ends up shooting himself. For a few seconds, immediately after the first explosion, the turkey wears a headband with feathers, foreshadowing a moment to come. At one point, the Pilgrim becomes angry and, thinking he has finally outsmarted the turkey, reaches behind a log to grab the handful of feathers that he assumes is the turkey’s tail. Instead of the turkey, however, he pulls up an Indian chief, who is both large and angry (Avery 1945).

The parallel between turkeys and Indians is made clear in the elaborate scene from *Addams Family Values*, described in Chapter Two. During the play about the myth of the First Thanksgiving, several songs explicitly celebrate the slaughter of turkeys. The “eat me” lines, sung by children in turkey costumes, reinforcing colonial fantasy. Furthermore, Sarah Miller’s derogatory remarks about Native Americans also establishes the colonizer’s perspective, that is, the colonizer/consumer gaze. However, Pocahontas (played by Wednesday) subverts the script. By looking directly at the camera and by employing the second person pronoun “you,” she returns the colonizer’s gaze and delivers a powerful and eloquent critique of colonization, as I described in Chapter One.

What is significant here is that during the revolt against the Pilgrims, the Indian and turkey characters (both cast by the dark-skinned actors) join together in a well-coordinated attack on the Pilgrim village, during which they effectively rewrite the ending of the story. After binding Sarah Miller to a pole surrounded by a pyre, Pugsley (dressed as a turkey) stuffs an apple into her mouth before setting the wood on fire. The apple functions to muffle her incessant screaming, but it also symbolically reverses the

dominant order of consumer and consumed, so that the Pilgrim becomes the centerpiece, stuffed and (nearly) roasted.³¹

What does this easy slippage between turkeys and Indians mean? As long as Thanksgiving celebrates both Native American and turkey demise, there are good reasons for both to protest. As these scenes show, the cultural significance of the turkey body might have crucial implications for racial and ethnic Others the turkey has come to symbolize. Supporting this notion, both turkeys and Indians in popular representations are seen as native Americans/Native Americans, both are depicted visually with feathered plumage, both are classified as either wild or domesticated, both have at times been considered endangered, and both are replaceable through processes of substitutions (Siskind 2004:56). Consciously or not, there is a blurring between human and turkey in language, and culture. Wild or domesticated, in the realm of American culture, turkeys stand as metaphor for Native Americans. From dark turkeys to white turkeys, white meat to dark meat, there are ways in which race gets encoded onto the turkey as a part of this process of othering.

While the Other was previously the colonized Indian, it has been updated to more current ethnic others. Contemporary political comics frequently extend this metaphor to the turkey as racial Other. For example, in a 2003 comic, a bearded man coded as middle-eastern (by virtue of his turban) sits on the ground beside a turkey. They are both prisoners, and both have glum expressions. The man says nothing, but the turkey says, “Bush was supposed to pardon me, but then Ashcroft sent me here to Guantanamo” (Peters 2003). In another comic from 2004, President George W. Bush stands at a podium in front of the White House, in order to deliver a speech. A turkey stands on a

box beside him, a black hood covering its body except for its feet and tail. “Today I am pardoning this turkey,” says Bush, “now that he has been thoroughly interrogated” (Peters 2004). The hooded turkey holds its wings outstretched, evoking an infamous photograph taken of a tortured prisoner in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq. In that photograph, a hooded prisoner is made to stand on a box with wires attached to his hands and was told that if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted (“Abu Ghraib Prisoner Photos” 2004).

In yet another comic, the President proudly displays a turkey platter. Instead of a turkey, however, the platter contains a likeness of Saddam Hussein as a prisoner of war, his hands bound behind his back (Wilkinson 2003). While there is no caption, Bush serves up the Hussein-turkey in a pose similar to the press photo of the president's visit to Baghdad in November of 2003, where he held a platter of turkey and fixings for a photo opportunity (Arraf et al. 2003). A similar comic emerged with the President holding a turkey platter with the words, “DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ” written on the bird’s breast, with the caption “Actually, it’s not real...it’s just for show” in Bush’s dialogue bubble (Peters 2003).

The humor and political critique behind these comics lie in the context of the Iraq War, the American Patriot Act, and accusations that the Bush administration condoned and encouraged the torture of suspected terrorists, among other civil rights violations.³² The humor also lies in knowing the fate of the turkey and how easily it can be conflated with the racial Other, whose civil liberties are likewise violated. The subversive potential of this parallel is nicely illustrated in a YouTube video, in which a man gives a pep talk (in Spanish with English translations), to thousands of warehoused turkeys,

packed body to body, who gobble after his every phrase, in a sort of call and response. "Brothers [gobbling] / Do not fear! [gobbling] / It is I, Sidney. [gobbling] / I have returned as a human man. [gobbling] / Rejoice, brothers! [gobbling] / Rejoice all! [gobbling] / The wheels are in motion. [gobbling] / The trap has been set. [gobbling] / The revolt has begun. [gobbling] Turkeys of the world.../ [gobbling] will rule the world" ("Beware the Turkey Revolution" 2009).

While these videos of turkeys defending rights, territory, and enacting revenge are certainly saying something about the industrial turkey system, as Tuleja argues, they may also reveal something about the situation for indigenous people today, in their on-going struggle for nationhood and sovereignty and against the social and physical disease brought on by colonization. In this schema, the confinement of the industrial turkey parallels aspects of reservation life for American Indians, which is itself a form of containment, so that the confinement of industrial turkeys, as we see in "Beware the Turkey Revolution," could be read as a commentary on the oppression of indigenous peoples. And the diseases that result from the confinement of industrial turkeys may provide commentary on the diseases that afflict American Indians.

[Most] Native Americans live lives fashioned by generations of displacement with resulting impoverishment, suffering, and silence. While life for urban Native Americans can be difficult, the poorest and most desperate places in America are Native American reservations, populated by indigenous people who commonly live with as much as 85 percent unemployment, deplorable health care and even worse education, horrifying rates of alcohol and drug addiction, an epidemic of fetal alcohol

syndrome, and the highest suicide rates and lowest life expectancy of any ethnic group in the nation—all the effects of profoundly institutionalized racism. It is apparently delightful to caricature Native Americans as sports mascots and in movies, but as long as the real people are hidden from sight on rural lands reserved for their containment, it is unnecessary for the dominant culture to even contemplate the Natives' quality of life (Owens 2001:21).³³

By playing with the idea of the masses rising up, “Beware of the Turkey Revolution” opens the possibility of reading these turkey revolts as an allegory for human revolutionary and resistance movements. One student, reflecting on the White House’s use of poor children and minorities in the audience during the presidential turkey pardoning ceremony, points out that “the exploitation of animals can be linked to the exploitation of human beings, especially minorities” (Otto 1998 quoted in Davis 2001:119). Such conspicuous displays of turkey taunting “need not be consciously seen as displays of power, or felt consciously as intimidating threats, but in no way does this preclude their being experienced as such unconsciously” (Tanzer quoted in Davis 2001:121).

Since the founding of the Vegetarian Society in 1847, animal rights organizations have protested the dominant practices of Thanksgiving and fight for a revision of Thanksgiving traditions. Thanksgiving—aka Turkey Day—is not a time to eat turkeys, they say, but a time to give up eating turkeys (“Give Turkeys Something to be Thankful For!” 2009). Starting their own version of the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line, PETA offers the message that “there is no proper

way to kill and cook turkeys” (Smith 2006:126). If colonial ideology is reinforced through certain of Thanksgiving’s rituals, it is resisted through others. As such, in addition to turkey revolts, there are many acts of human resistance against Thanksgiving. There are, for example, a number of groups that host annual events to protest the master narrative of Thanksgiving, including the “Day of Mourning,” “Native American Day,” and “Genocide Awareness Day,” which critique the colonial roots of the holiday. To address the master narrative that is regrettably still taught in elementary schools, the Fourth World Documentation Project and other organizations provide teachers with alternative curriculum that manages to honestly acknowledge the “problem” of Thanksgiving yet find a larger theme of Thanksgiving to celebrate (Villanueva 2004; Snow 1993; Ross et al 1986; Ramsey 1979).

Whether these media protestations come from turkeys or humans, according to Hall, such efforts at transformation are at the heart of popular culture, which is continually re-working traditions (1981:228). Yet in popular culture, there seems to be a perpetual oscillation between containment and resistance. Like the discourses that seek to debunk the myth of the First Thanksgiving that I discussed in Chapter One, these discourses of revolting turkeys seem to grapple with the meaning of an American holiday that celebrates the colonization of Native American land and bodies, along with the fetishization and consumption of turkey bodies (and their substitutes). While a closer look at the industrial turkey reveals the murky underbelly of Thanksgiving’s central dish, a closer look at turkeys in the media reveals that, beyond representing successful harvest, natural abundance, and the “domesticization” of the wilderness (Robertson 1980:15), the

turkey on a platter represents the Other. In this trajectory, examples of turkeys revolting may be read as the Other seeking liberation from oppression.

These vignettes of revolting and grotesque turkey bodies reveal “lines of cleavage” in Thanksgiving ideology (Hall 1981:228). In 1986, the Farm Sanctuary launched its Adopt-a-Turkey Project, which places industrial turkeys (otherwise slated for slaughter) into vegetarian households. In their foster homes, the turkeys are allowed to stuff themselves on common Thanksgiving side dishes (squash, cranberries, and pumpkin pie), reversing their relative status vis-à-vis the consumer and the consumed. If we can imagine a utopia for turkeys, where they roam unconfined and “have the pleasure of stuffing themselves” on traditional foods (Smith 2006:127), there should also be space to imagine parallel acts of reconciliation toward American Indians and their assertions of sovereignty. By examining discourses that conflate the turkey with the Other, we may read these Thanksgiving moments as powerful attempts to grapple with the continuing impact of colonization on the bodies of both American Indians and turkeys. It is important to note, however, that these alternative discourses and carnivalesque moments are not actual revolts. Hall reminds us that, “almost all cultural forms will be contradictory in this sense, comprised of antagonistic and unstable elements” (1981:235). As such, these vignettes of turkeys revolting express anxiety about the oppositional gaze and the potential of other forms of counter-insurgency. Projected at either actual turkeys, or the colonized others they have come to symbolize, this anxiety becomes part of the on-going dialectic between containment and resistance at Thanksgiving.

Chapter Four – Notes

¹ The rest of the song lyrics: “The turkeys amassed / And charge across the floor / But the pigs had guessed / And barricaded the door. / Chaos filled the air / As they crashed into each other / The farmer burst in / He’d never seen such clutter. / The moral of the story / By now should be clear / Don’t mess with the pigs / When Thanksgiving is near” (“The Turkey’s Lament” 2002).

² The Broad-Breasted White was not bred for flavor, but rather, for such traits as “docility, early maturity, maximum growth, and color of the carcass” (Smith 2006:91). “That the modern turkey has less flavor than its forebears seem to be of little interest to most Americans, for consumers usually add flavoring and condiments to make the turkey meat more palatable, for example, gravy, cranberry sauce, stuffing, and salt and pepper” (Smith 2006:92). Listed today as a “heritage turkey,” the Bourbon Red is a domestic breed of turkey that was created by crossing three other domestic breeds [...]. The toms weigh about thirty-three pounds; the hen about sixteen pounds (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourbon_Red, accessed 7/17/10).

³ This kind of subjectivity is also found in advertising for Aunt Jemima flour and Uncle Ben’s rice—food products that are said to be imbued with the authentic Other (see Deck 2001; Schell 2001; Adams 1994).

⁴ The scene from *What's Cooking?*, in which the female lovers flirt over the act of stuffing and basting the turkey, shows that the turkey's sexual allusions may point to either heterosexual or homosexual sex—in this case, the phallus (and its secretions, aka “stuffing”)—or to “finger sex” and the “turkey-baster” method of artificial insemination.

⁵ The similar nighttime visitations, along with the strange device implanted in their necks, this video seems to be referencing motifs from alien abduction narratives (see Ellis 2003 and Brown 2002).

⁶ “About Thanksgiving.” In *Harper's Weekly*, Nov. 29, 1962:755.

⁷ Other examples of this trope of the revolting turkey include: “Ankors Authors” 2008; Benson 2010; Cardarelli et al. 2008; “Crazy Turkey” 2009; “Hilarious Turkey Attack” 2008; Keizer 2005; “Latest Threat to Mail Carriers” 2009; Mayr 2007; “A Turkey's Lament” 2002; “Revenge of the Turkeys: When Turkeys Attack” 2009; “Turkey's Revenge” 2009; “Beware the Turkey Revolution” 2009.

⁸ There are numerous variations of this song on YouTube.

⁹ For turkey-related elementary school activities, see “Turkey Gobblers” 2010.

¹⁰ Construction paper is used to make the feathers for turkeys, as well as to assemble feathers for the “Indian” costumes used in Thanksgiving plays. The brown-paper grocery

bag that constituted my son's "Indian" vest creates a disturbing parallel to the grocery bags that carry frozen turkeys.

¹¹ Eli Roth's faux trailer, "Thanksgiving," features a man dressed as a turkey dressed as a Pilgrim (see Chapter 4, "Sexing the Turkey").

¹² After a pause, the man's tone seems to change from fear to frustration (and possibly embarrassment) at being trapped by a turkey, and he adds: "I'm inside the doors and he won't let me out. I can't do anything to it cause I'll end up arrested or on the 6 o'clock news" ("Turkey Attacks UPS" 2007).

¹³ See Hynes and Doty 1993:34-42 and Vizenor 1989 on the trickster motif in Native American literature.

¹⁴ Available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kR0OrgKtgsM>, accessed 10/05/09. This video has been very popular, viewed nearly 500,000 times the last time I checked. It has also been remade several times.

¹⁶ "Genes that make turkeys behave like animals are useless to a creature packed wing-to-wing with thousands of others," says Kingsolver, adding sarcastically that that "might cause it to get uppity or suicidal, so those genes have been bred out of the pool. Docile lethargy works better, and helps them pack on the pounds" (2007:90). Their rapid growth

and extremely breast-heavy body “has also left them with a combination of deformity and idiocy that renders them unable to have turkey sex. Poor turkeys” (2007:90).

¹⁷ The first successful procedure of artificial insemination was developed by the USDA in 1934 and became standard practice by the 1950s (Smith 2006:91). Today, almost all domesticated turkeys in America are strains of the Broad-Breasted Whites.

¹⁸ The word was used as early as 1944 to describe theatrical failures (Tuleja 1987:34).

¹⁹ In the 1940s, turkey growers were fine-tuning breeding practices and adopting an aggressive marketing strategy, lowering the price of turkeys and helping to establish them in the minds of the public as obligatory at Thanksgiving. For example, my father recalls having duck or goose at Thanksgiving during his childhood. He doesn’t recall turkey being associated with Thanksgiving within his family until he was married in the mid-1960s. “As the poultry industry expanded,” explains Tuleja, “so too did the use of the bird as a symbol of American abundance” (1987:31). It was also in the 1950s that wild turkey restoration programs were finally becoming successful (1987:31). Ironically, just as the wild turkey takes prominence as a national symbol of Thanksgiving, its symbolic status simultaneously leans toward ignominy and failure.

²⁰ A blogger, who calls himself “Frank Observer” took a one-day job as a sperm wrangler. “I have never done such hard, fast, dirty, disgusting work in my life. Ten hours of pushing birds, grabbing birds, wrestling birds, jerking them upside down, pushing open their vents, dodging their panic-blown excrement, breathing the dust stirred up by

terrified birds, ignoring verbal abuse from Joe and the others on the crew—all of this without a break or a bite to eat (not that I could have eaten anything amongst all this). Working under these conditions week after week (Bill had been there for 4 years), these men had grown callous, rough, and brutal. Every bird went through their merciless hands at least once a week, week after week, until they were loaded up to be killed” (Observer n.d.).

²¹ Similarly, the two unidentified scientists researching turkey-mating behavior focus solely on male-to-female attraction. The female turkey, in this case, has been literally reduced to its essential parts—a stick with a head on top, waiting to be mounted (“Weird Experiment #4: The Sexual Turkey” 2009).

²² From the moment they hatch, the paths taken by male and female industrial chicks are very different. “The chicks are then sexed because toms and hens are raised for different purposes. Hens are smaller, and their flesh tends to be juicier, so they are usually processed as whole birds that are popular during the fall from Thanksgiving through New Year’s. Toms are larger, but their flesh is drier and is more likely to go into ground turkey, turkey bacon, other processed products or become food for dogs and cats” (Smith 2006:97-98).

²³ Davis explains that “braining” involves prying open the bird’s beak and stabbing a knife through the roof of the mouth, paralyzing the turkey by cutting its carotid artery at

the base of the brain. This procedure neither anesthetizes or kills the bird. It merely keeps the bird still and helps the muscles release the feathers (2001:64).

²⁴ For those with a strong stomach, a number of YouTube videos illustrate this process. To find these videos, go to YouTube and search for “turkey hatchery.” One of the disturbing videos shows close-ups of baby chicks being “processed,” as if tiny potatoes, sorted and culled without regard for their suffering, let alone their subjectivity and their instinct to follow a mother figure. Perhaps this sheds light on former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin speaking debacle at a turkey factory in Wassilla, Alaska, her hometown. Outside the building, where she had just pardoned a turkey, she gives a speech, oblivious that in the background a man is slaughtering turkeys, shoving them upside down into a funnel in order to slit their throats and bleed them to death (“Countdown: Sarah Palin’s Turkey Pardoning Fiasco” 2008). Additional video shot by hatchery employee shows scenes of chicks “gasping for air as they slowly suffocate in plastic bags. While employed at a North Carolina turkey hatchery that now supplies Butterball, a COK investigator documented the conditions forced upon newly-hatched chicks. As the investigation video shows, from the moment they're hatched, these turkeys are submerged into a world of misery. Dumped out of metal trays and jostled onto conveyor belts after being mechanically separated from cracked egg shells, the newly-hatched turkeys are tossed around like inanimate objects – they are sorted, sexed, de-beaked, de-toed, and in some cases de-snooded before they are packed up and shipped off to a "grow out" confinement facility. The video further reveals that not all chicks survive this harsh process. Countless chicks become mangled from the machinery, suffocated in plastic

bags, or deemed "surplus" and dumped (along with injured chicks) into the same disposal system as the discarded egg shells they were separated from hours earlier" ("COK Investigation at a North Carolina Turkey Hatchery" 2006).

²⁵ Andrew Smith describes the history of these so-called turkey shoots in America, during which turkeys were tied down so that the shooter could aim at the bird's head. Descriptions of these events appear in novels (e.g., James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* [1823]) and in paintings (e.g., Charles Dea's *Turkey Shoot* [circa 1837] and similar paintings by William Walcutt [1856], Tompkins H. Matteson [1857], and John Whetten Ehninger [1879]. The turkey shoot was an important Christmas tradition until after the Civil War, when it began to be challenged as "cruel and unworthy of Christian men" (Smith 2006:63).

²⁶ According to Smith, most towns have canceled their turkey drops, following a highly publicized photograph in the *National Enquirer* in 1989 that brought attention to the event as cruelty to animals (2006:125).

²⁷ In the Miss Drumsticks Pageant, each female contestant holds a cardboard cutout of a wild turkey to cover her head and torso, so that only her "drumsticks" show. This reinforces the parallel between women and turkeys and the cultural dynamic discussed in Chapter Three in which the turkey is sexualized.

²⁸ The publicity stunt is reported live at a shopping center by news director Les Nessman in a parody of Herbert Morrison's famous coverage of the Hindenburg disaster:

“It's a helicopter, and it's coming this way. It's flying something behind it, I can't quite make it out, it's a large banner and it says, uh - Happy... Thaaaaanksss...giving! ... From ... W ... K ... R ... P!! What a sight, ladies and gentlemen, what a sight. The ‘copter seems to be circling the parking area now, I guess it's looking for a place to land. No! Something just came out of the back of the helicopter! It's, uh, a dark object. Perhaps a skydiver. Plummeting to the earth from only two thousand feet in the air. A second, a third! No parachutes yet. Can't be skydivers... I can't tell just yet what they are, but - Oh my God, they're turkeys!! Johnny, can you get this? Oh, they're plunging to the earth right in front of our eyes! One just went through the windshield of a parked car! Oh, this is just terrible! The crowd is running around pushing each other! Oh, my goodness! Oh, the humanity! People are running about! The turkeys are hitting the ground like sacks of wet cement! Honestly, folks I don't know how much longer... the crowd is running for their lives.” (Wilson 1978)

²⁹ Until the Revolutionary War, explains Smith, the turkey was “just a bird to raise, hunt, and consume.” Needing to differentiate itself from England after the war, “‘American’ foods began to take on nationalistic values” (Smith 2006:110). Beyond the letter to his daughter, Benjamin Franklin published an oyster sauce recipe for boiled turkey and experimented with turkeys, for example, proposing that they be killed by electrical shock and roasted by electrical jack (2006:110).

³⁰ No doubt there are even earlier examples.

³¹ Other children dressed as “Indians” catapult cherry pies into the faces of the confused (mostly white) parents in the audience, yet another method of returning the colonizer’s gaze.

³² Other political cartoons reinforce this point. For instance, a single-panel cartoon shows a wild turkey and a bald eagle, two core American symbols, sitting on two freshly cut tree stumps. The bald eagle has the words “Civil Liberties” on its breast. “I’d start getting nervous, if I were you...,” says the turkey to the eagle (Telnaes 2001).

³³ Quoting Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Our worthiest souls contain racial prejudice,” Owens adds: “How else could our worthiest souls live with Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Chief Wahoo, the Tomahawk Chop, and so on, all of which are merely the slightest indices of the far more profound currents that impoverish Native Americans in incalculable ways? Would we live so comfortably today with the New Jersey Jews, Newark Negroes, Cleveland Chicanos, Houston Honkies, Atlanta Asians, and so on? Entering the twenty-first century, would the city of Washington cheer a football team whose mascot scampered around at half-time in blackface or wearing a yarmulke and carrying a menorah?” (Owens 2001:21)

Conclusion –

Reconciling Thanksgiving

“The subject of the domestic occasion often provokes moral assessment, wholly positive or negative. Are American domestic occasions harmful or wholesome?” (Pleck 2000:19).

“The only difference between Osama Bin Laden and the Pilgrims is the costume and the culture and religion they claim to represent” (protestor at Day of Mourning procession, quoted in Villanueva 2004:163).

In the film *Pieces of April*, the title character awkwardly maneuvers through the preparations for Thanksgiving. The vegetarian stifles her disgust of the turkey carcass in order to empty its innards and wash and stuff it. The wet bird slips out of her hands as she carries it from sink to counter. The camera offers a slow-motion close-up of the fleshy carcass falling to and bouncing off of the kitchen floor. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, from stuffed bellies to stuffed turkeys, such scenes fit within the framework of Thanksgiving’s carnivalesque roots and function to draw attention to the death underlying the holiday. As with similar Thanksgiving moments, the turkey becomes a complex symbolic object in the ideological battle over the meaning of Thanksgiving and demonstrates “how power can be present in even the most mundane objects of our material lives” (Williams-Forson 2008:49). By looking at these subversive representations of the Thanksgiving turkey through the lens of critical theory, the murky underbelly of the beloved American holiday begins to come into focus, revealing that—far from peace, love, and happiness—Thanksgiving discourse actually embodies

considerable contestation, violence, and unease. In examining how this beloved holiday is represented in the visual media, I found myriad vignettes that challenge the basic tenets of Thanksgiving ideology, discourses that both highlight and blur boundaries—between male and female, self and other, human and bird—and many that expose the violence underlying the holiday. Is it possible, in this context, to identify significant cultural change in the way Thanksgiving is imagined? In other words, is it possible to reconcile Thanksgiving of its sordid past?

“Time and again,” writes theorist Stuart Hall about popular culture, “what we are really looking at is the active destruction of particular ways of life, and their transformation into something new” (1981:227). The concept of “cultural change,” in Hall’s schema, “is a polite euphemism for the process by which some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the centre of popular life, actively marginalized. Rather than simply ‘falling into disuse’ through the Long March to modernization, things are actively pushed aside, so that something else can take their place” (1981:227-8). Because Thanksgiving’s rituals are guided by no written liturgy, the sundry details of its celebration must be negotiated among its participants. Of the many changes Thanksgiving has undergone, Elizabeth Pleck finds that “the contest of meaning became a defining feature of the way the holiday came to be understood” (2000:22). Responding to Pleck’s suggestion that protests against Thanksgiving have become just another post-sentimental element of the holiday, this conclusion explores the question of whether there can be Thanksgiving with a difference and still be Thanksgiving.

While the revolting turkeys described in the previous chapter provide an example of cultural forms being actively “driven out of the centre of popular life,” research shows that the subversive element had already been associated with Thanksgiving long before the 1960s. Moreover, contemporary subversive Thanksgiving movements, both in *real* life and in *reel* life, function to create small, but significant, fissures in the problematic ideology of Thanksgiving.

Discussing the subversive roots of Thanksgiving, folklorist Jack Santino explains that the holiday was influenced by a combination of the English Harvest Home tradition (1994:168) and Guy Fawkes Day celebrations, both of which were brought by the colonists to North America. The Fantastics remind us that Thanksgiving used to be seen as a kind of carnival, where “men escaped from the family, broke rules, and engaged in spontaneous mirth” (Pleck 2000:30). As a harvest feast, Thanksgiving’s origins could be found in “in the raucous English celebrations in the fields,” but the holiday took on carnival elements around the time of the American Revolution. Beginning in the 1780s, the original Fantastics (or Fantasticals) were veterans from the Revolutionary War, who masqueraded in the raggedy garb of the Continental soldiers on Thanksgiving day in the colonies (2000:30). Borrowing from English mumming, particularly the tradition of going door-to-door in disguise to beg for treats, the Fantastics pushed boundaries, ridiculing authority and cross-dressing.¹

Due to changing public attitudes during the Progressive Era, the adult revelers disappeared from these parades by 1900. “As late as 1885, the *New York Times* had considered the Fantastics ‘hilarious’ and ‘quaint.’ Ten years later they found them

‘intolerable’ and a public nuisance,’ although conceding that children might think them funny. A devastating economic depression and fear of strikers, anarchists, and unruly mobs seem to have contributed to the change of opinion” (Pleck 2000:31). Hence, the masquerade and carnival elements of Thanksgiving were “siphoned off in two directions”—one took the form of a ball celebrated by gay men in Greenwich Village, the other took the form of a masquerade with children, “who went begging dressed in old trousers, women’s dresses, or clown costumes” (2000:31).²

This tradition of begging continued until Progressive Era reformers acted in opposition to the children dressing in rags and begging on a holiday that “was meant to celebrate national moral purpose and the sanctity of the family” (2000:32). Teachers, school superintendents, and the clergy lectured against begging, and police enforced a ban. Boys’ clubs and child welfare agencies organized parades and costume contests. Because of such reform efforts, child begging disappeared from Thanksgiving by the 1940s (Pleck 2000).³

Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival is described as “a world free from cast and cant,” which suspends hierarchy, privilege, social norms and prohibitions (1968:07), and Pleck uses this concept to frame the Fantastics at Thanksgiving: “The Fantastics mocked gender conventions, played with race by wearing blackface, and made fun of the elite. Cross-dressing blurred the line between male and female, and blackface erased that between black and white,” a sign of cultural anxiety among people otherwise concerned about the blurring of racial and gender boundaries (Pleck 2000:33).⁴ While aspects of the carnivalesque live on in today’s Thanksgiving rituals, for the most part, “the cult of

domesticity” won the day.⁵ Thanksgiving was re-ordered “as the distinctive sphere of women,” with men engaged symbolically through the turkey carving ritual:

“Thanksgiving as a sentimental occasion initially coexisted with and eventually triumphed over the Fantastics,” Pleck explains. “The begging child did not fit into the picture of domestic felicity and national religious gratitude the holiday had come to represent” (2000:41-42). Hence, “the element of misrule was gradually subtracted from the celebration of Thanksgiving” (2000:42). I elaborate on this history because it represents a paradigm shift that occurred over the course of just a few decades. With subversion being a part of Thanksgiving for more than 220 years, perhaps the holiday is ready for another paradigm shift. Yet the shift was so profound that most people do not even know about the carnivalesque history of Thanksgiving. What if we buried the problematic aspects of Thanksgiving in a similar way? Since the myth of the First Thanksgiving, and its various reenactments, reinforces colonial and patriarchal ideology, we need to respond ethically and responsibly, in order to move closer toward a reconciliation of Thanksgiving. Today, Thanksgiving is still connected to the master narrative, but it is important to remember that it has not always been this way.

Aware of my hope for a paradigm shift, friends and colleagues have remarked, “Thanksgiving must be interesting at your house.” Well, yes, it is. There is always a good deal of frolic and fun. Moreover, my husband loves to use my research for its shock value: “Tell them about the turkey and symbolic cannibalism, dear.” By the time Thanksgiving has been wrung through the postcolonial and feminist grinder, readers may think that I despise the holiday and wish to see it abolished. Except for the annual

roasting of the folklorist by loved ones, my family's usual celebration seems to be fairly typical. As a matter of fact, Thanksgiving happens to be one of my favorite American holidays, which is why the holiday drew my gaze as a scholarly subject.

Among its many redeeming qualities are Thanksgiving's celebration of agriculture, gratitude, and family togetherness, not to mention pumpkin pie. However, this is only a fraction of the overall significance of Thanksgiving and, as the earlier chapters make clear, some Thanksgiving representations can do real damage in reinforcing stereotypes about Native Americans (and other racial groups), justifying colonialism, and promoting ethnocentrism and patriarchy. Responding to the question of whether there is an "easy way out" for people concerned about the ethics of Thanksgiving, I consider three real-life case studies in which individuals attempt to challenge representations of the master narrative and the prevailing Thanksgiving ideology.

Poison is Poison:

The first case is highly personal. While volunteering in my son's kindergarten classroom shortly before Thanksgiving in 2005, I noticed children playing with paper cutouts of "Indian things," like teepees, while making war cries. Later that day, my six-year-old son brought the following memo home from school:

Unit A Feast. Please remember that Unit A will celebrate Thanksgiving with a feast Monday morning, November 21. Your child may bring a treat to share with the class. *Try to think of something to share that may have*

been at the first Thanksgiving. Fruits, vegetables, bread, or nuts would be good choices. Please send in food ready to share. [...] Please come help us set up, serve, and/or clean up if you are able. Bring your cameras. The students will be wearing costumes we have made at school [emphasis added].

I was dumbfounded that this myth is still being taught as historical truth. In response, I provided my son's school with historical accounts, along with age-appropriate alternative lesson plans (see Seale, Slapin, and Silverman [1995] 1998). I naïvely thought that if I provided such compelling proof, along with an array of easy alternatives respectful of different perspectives, the teachers would *want* to change their approach to the holiday. In my enthusiasm to spread this information, I learned the power of tradition which, in some cases, operates like a brick wall.

I met with my son's teacher and the school's principal, explaining my concern and offering examples of the alternative curriculum I had collected. The principal smiled politely and nodded until I was finished. Despite my impassioned plea, she said something reassuring about the teachers valuing their traditions and choosing curricular activities best for their students. I actually started crying out of frustration. The principal continued to smile as she escorted me out of the office. A few days later, I received a letter from my son's teacher. It was taped onto the folder of curriculum they were returning (unused) to me. The letter explained that all four Unit A teachers had reviewed the situation and were sensitive to my concern. Instead of changing the

curriculum, however, they offered to remove my son from any activities that made me feel uncomfortable—including learning about the *Mayflower*'s journey, about Native Americans tribes in Missouri, about hunting and harvesting, and about a Native American game. Pulling my son out of the classroom, of course, was not my goal. I was seeking a paradigm shift—real honest change.

A day later, my son stepped off the bus wearing an “Indian vest” (a brown paper bag torn for fringe and decorated with markers). When I asked about it, he stuck a feather into his hair and said (in a voice meant to connote intellectual inferiority), “I-am-a-nay-tive-a-mer-i-can.” Of course, this was an elaboration of the role he had played earlier when his class created costumes to reenact the First Thanksgiving.

Even in this age of cultural sensitivity, schools are still having children dress up as Pilgrims and Indians and celebrate via reenactment the beginning of the demise of American Indian life as they knew it. Hidden beneath the cute veneer, the myth perpetuates falsehoods and a self-serving version of American history. Although historical evidence denies the feel-good message of friendliness and sharing, not enough progress has been made over the years to impact a full paradigm shift as regards Thanksgiving to challenge popular misconceptions and expand social awareness.⁶ “Protecting children from racism is every bit as important as insuring that they avoid playing with electrical sockets,” says writer Michael Dorris. “Poison is poison, and ingrained oppressive cultural attitudes are at least as hard to antidote, once implanted, as are imbibed cleaning fluids” (1991:78). Above all, he adds that no information is preferable to the reiteration of stereotypes (1991:78). “Since the media, religious groups,

and commercial establishments usually emphasize the benefits of Thanksgiving from the European settler's point of view," concludes psychologist Patricia Ramsey, "it is particularly important that the schools stress the other perspectives" (1979:54). Rather than reproducing stereotypical images of "Pilgrims" and "Indians" (which leads to war cries and tomahawk chops), we need curricular antidotes. "[T]he antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history," reminds James Loewen, "but honest and inclusive history" (1991:82).

Understandably, many teachers are reticent to teach the whole truth to very young children. The colonization of the Americas was not a noble affair and, admittedly, confronting the myth of the First Thanksgiving takes the shine off of the holiday. Fortunately, one easy way to rid Thanksgiving of its colonial residue is to shift curriculum away from discourse about "Pilgrims and Indians" altogether. To impart a feel-good message about friendship and sharing, schools should avoid connecting Pilgrims and Indians to the holiday. Instead, curricula could be developed around such universal themes as feasting, agriculture and harvest, family and togetherness and, of course, gratitude.⁷ Older students could use their own family's meal to examine gender dynamics, the division of labor, and meal rituals.

To gauge the range of Thanksgiving curriculum, Janet Siskind visited two schools in New Jersey. One was a parochial school, in which the teacher had researched the foods allegedly eaten at the so called "First Thanksgiving" and taught such spelling words as: turkey, sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkin pie. She taught about the Indians helping the Pilgrims, and acknowledged "the later battles as being due to the resistance of

Indians to their lands being seized.” The school itself was decorated with turkeys, “each feather bearing a prayer.” The other school was not decorated with turkeys. Instead, “the teacher played Native American music and knew a great deal about Eastern groups. In an impromptu assembly, she showed slides of living Native Americans and asked the children to remember their ‘Indian forefathers’” (Siskind 1992 [2002]:57; see also Reese 2006). In this way, school curricula can either intensify Thanksgiving ideology, or it can broaden children’s awareness of the complexities of history and the diversity of human experience. As such, schools could provide an antidote to colonialism and patriarchy. But I soon learned that paradigm shifts, especially those involving beloved traditions, do not occur without significant push-back.

After my altercation with my son’s school, I got discouraged, saying little the following year, other than to friends and colleagues (who have patiently endured my diatribes) and to work with increased determination on this dissertation. I was interested to note, however, that several small but significant revisions were made to the memo to parents sent in November of the following year.

Feast 2006. We will celebrate Thanksgiving with a feast on the afternoon of Tuesday, November 21st. We ask that students bring a healthy snack to share. We especially welcome snacks such as: cut fruits or vegetables, popcorn, raisins, corn bread or cheese. We will need volunteers to help us set up, serve, and clean up. We will begin setting up at 1:00 and plan to begin the feast at 1:15. If you are able to volunteer, please send a note to your child’s homeroom teacher.

I noted that the words “First Thanksgiving” were removed from the memo, along with any reference to costumes, and I wondered if my awkward intervention may have motivated this revision. I want to believe that perhaps this signals a shift, however miniscule, in the discourse surrounding Thanksgiving. I also noticed that the celebration went from being open to all parents to requiring a note to volunteer. Could this have been intended to keep a meddling folklorist at bay? Naturally, I volunteered in order to see whether the change was reflected beyond the memo, and I was sad to find that the rest of the celebration maintained the status quo. The kids still made and wore Pilgrim and Indian costumes and enacted the Thanksgiving myth while teachers and parents gushed over how cute the children looked. The only obvious change was in the memo. As painful as it was to see my son dressed as a grocery bag Indian, I have to admit that, as a parent watching the event, it was simultaneously cute. It was hard not to smile, and indeed many parents were taking photographs. This is an example of how colonialism and racism can wear an innocent face that belies the truth. Far from honoring American Indians, these activities add insult to injury.

The second case involves a community drama in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Seeking to understand both sides of the contested terrain of Thanksgiving, dramaturge Ricardo Villanueva interviewed participants from the 2001 Plymouth Pilgrim Progress Procession (PPPP) as well as those taking part in the Day of Mourning parade (DOM), who consider the third Thursday in November “a National Day of Mourning, memorializing the genocide of American aboriginals by European colonizers” (Villanueva 2004:155). The ethnographic study of the contending Thanksgiving

processions is revealing. On the one hand, we have the PPPP, a group of descendents of the Plymouth Pilgrims who have gathered annually since 1921 to honor the early colonists (Villanueva 2004:176). On the other hand, we have the DOM procession, a diverse group from the United American Indians of New England (UAINE), and their supporters (Villanueva 2004:156). Whereas the PPPP gathers in celebration of colonial history—and the myth of the First Thanksgiving—the DOM gathers in protest of this version of history, “determined to change the consciousness of all Americans with respect to how America was founded and what this meant for indigenous people” (Villanueva 2004:156). The latter parade began in 1970, when Frank James, a Wampanoag, was denied the right to deliver his speech at the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrim landing in Plymouth.

DOM participants surround the twenty-foot statue of Massasoit cradling a peace pipe, gathering for prayer and blessings (2004:162). Many of the protesters hold signs, one shouting, “The only difference between Osama Bin Laden and the Pilgrims is the costume and the culture and religion they claim to represent,” a slogan followed by cheers (163). “As protest procession, the Day of Mourning has no equal in America in terms of both diversity and empowerment” (164), in its attempts to deconstruct the myth of the First Thanksgiving by replacing it with stories of “atrocious bloodshed committed by Pilgrims and other English colonists against Native Americans and the virtual annihilation of the latter’s cultures after the initial relatively peaceful years at Plymouth” (166).

Various “acts of subversion” occurred in the town of Plymouth around this time, for example, somebody splashed red paint on Plymouth Rock, dressed the statue of Governor Bradford in a Klu Klux Klan robe, and buried Plymouth Rock with sand. Clearly, there was a great deal of tension in the community. According to oral reports, in 1996 a clerical error in scheduling caused the two processions to overlap. Fearing riots, the police tried to separate the two groups and turned the Pilgrim Progress parade back. The following year, some say that riots ensued and there were a number of arrests, though reports varied wildly. The terms of the out-of-court settlement involving the UAINE against the City of Plymouth was \$135,000 “into a fund to promote education about Wampanoag and Native American culture,” an acknowledgement of the “UAINE’s right to conduct a Day of Mourning Procession in perpetuity,” and the installation of two plaques. The first, located on Cole’s Hill, recorded a Wampanoag view of Thanksgiving and the other located in the town square marked “the location of Metacomet’s severed head” with the following proviso:

Since 1970, Native Americans have gathered at noon on Cole’s Hill in Plymouth to commemorate a National Day of Mourning on the US Thanksgiving holiday. Many Native Americans do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims and other European settlers. To them, Thanksgiving Day is a reminder of the genocide of millions of their people, the theft of their lands, and the relentless assault on their culture. Participants in a National Day of Mourning honor Native ancestors and the struggles of Native peoples to survive today. It is a day of

remembrance and spiritual connection as well as a protest of the racism and oppression which Native Americans continue to experience (quoted in Villanueva 2004:181-82).

In the town square, the plaque reads:

After the Pilgrims' arrival, Native Americans in New England grew increasingly frustrated with the English settlers' abuse and treachery. Metacomet (King Philip), a son of the Wampanoag sachem (leader) known as the Massasoit (Ousamequin), called upon all Native people to unite to defend their homelands against encroachment. The resulting King Philip's War lasted from 1675-1676. Metacomet was murdered in Rhode Island in August 1676, and his body was mutilated. His head was impaled on a pike and was displayed near this site for more than 20 years. One hand was sent to Boston, the other to England. Metacomet's wife and son, along with the families of many of the Native American combatants, were sold into slavery in the West Indies by the English victors (quoted in Villanueva 2004:181-82).

For this small group, which Villanueva describes as “initially powerless,” the DOM procession resulted in real changes, providing an example of how significant empowerment can be realized through performance” (Villanueva 2004:157). As the legal settlement and plaques reveal, these kinds of protests do indeed make some impact. The privileged status of Thanksgiving among Plymouth’s institutions has changed since 1970, “especially compared with contemporary American high school and elementary school texts” (2004:175). Even Plimoth Plantation, the “living history” museum located two miles south of town, has changed somewhat. Established in 1947 to celebrate early colonial life, the museum finally initiated a Native American Studies Program. “[D]irected, researched, and staffed by Native Americans,” the program tries to present the colonial period “through Native eyes.” Over time, the museum has more realistically presented the early colonial period, including the less unsavory details of colonist-Indian relations, as in its 2001 exhibit entitled “Irreconcilable Differences,” which depicts relations between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag from the time of initial European settlement through King Philip’s War. The exhibit includes such details as Governor Josiah Winslow selling 110 Native Americans as slaves to be exported in 1676 and debates among Pilgrim leaders about whether to execute King Philip’s nine-year-old son or sell him into slavery (2004:175).

The third case returns to the public schools. Throughout the nation, there are pockets of schools that celebrate “Friendship Day,” instead of Thanksgiving, and many families have come to simply call it “Turkey Day.” At the same time, there are many acts of resistance against this master narrative occurring. There are, in fact, a number of

groups hosting annual “Native American Days,” “Genocide Awareness Days,” and other postcolonial Thanksgiving-related events that critique the colonial roots of the holiday. Alternative curriculum is readily available for public school teachers manage to both acknowledge the “problem” of Thanksgiving while finding a larger theme of Thanksgiving to celebrate.

After reading Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States: 1492 – Present* (1980), Eryca Neville (who was at the time a graduate student at the University of Missouri) and her sister Jonette Ford (a fifth-grade teacher at West Boulevard Elementary school) decided to do something different. Neville had been looking at general education requirements, and reflects: “I respectfully submit that they aren’t taught history. They are taught propaganda. And it is reinforced at the higher education level.” Hoping to change this biased view of history, the sisters joined forces. Neville’s junior-level social studies methods class started working with Ford’s fifth-grade social studies class to curate the exhibit “American History Through Indian Eyes” in 2006. Using three-dimensional sculptures, along with poster-board text and drawings, the historical events were presented from the perspective of American Indians, including the myth of the First Thanksgiving.⁸

Neville recounted in an interview that she had recently visited the Civil Rights Museum, in Memphis, Tennessee, a pictorial history of Africans in America since 1492. Going up the ramp past artifacts, posters, pictures, newspapers, and other three-dimensional items, Neville recalls her profound emotional reaction when she entered a re-creation of the room where Martin Luther King was assassinated. “The level of goose

bumps—it was just ridiculous. You get to the top and here’s the emotional impact, and you just can’t believe it. You’re just silenced” (Neville, personal communication, 10/27/2010).

Unable to take their students to this museum, the sisters decided to create their own civil rights museum in 2005. The fifth graders studied civil rights history, along with the college students, who spent half of their time at the elementary school, assisting the fifth graders with their research projects. The collaboration was so successful, that they repeated this model for the next three years. The following year’s exhibit was titled “American History Through Indian Eyes.” The students were horrified at this history to which they had never been exposed. The West Boulevard Elementary exhibit sought to provoke cognitive dissonance, for example, by including a wanted poster of Christopher Columbus that called him a thief and rapist.⁹ The end of the exhibit was called, “We are still here,” in reaction to the myth of the disappearing Indian. While similar exhibits have occurred at West Boulevard Elementary school, since 2005 (and several have even been on display at the Winston Churchill Museum in Fulton, Missouri), this approach to curriculum does not appear to have spread to other schools within the system.

Unlike West Boulevard Elementary School’s progressive social studies curriculum, many schools do not acknowledge the ethics of Thanksgiving, preferring to cling to their myth of the First Thanksgiving. And the reaction to attempts to challenge curricular traditions can be intense. One parent, Michelle Raheja, learned this the hard way. Her situation is worth describing in detail to demonstrate what is at stake in the negotiation over representation and the consequence of challenging a beloved tradition.

Raheja, whose mother is a Seneca, wrote a private e-mail to her daughter's kindergarten teacher at Condit Elementary School, expressing concern over a forty-year-old tradition with the neighboring Mountain View School (both in Claremont, California), in which the children take turns dressing up as Pilgrims and Indians, meeting half-way for a Thanksgiving feast. "It's demeaning," Raheja wrote in a private email to her daughter's kindergarten teacher. "I'm sure you can appreciate the inappropriateness of asking children to dress up like slaves (and kind slave masters), or Jews (and friendly Nazis), or members of any other racial minority group who has struggled in our nation's history" (quoted in Mehta 2008). The issue made it to the Claremont School Board, which decided to continue the feast, but to disallow the costumes out of respect for Native American heritage. Few expected the backlash from other parents.

Many parents ignored the school board, sending their kids to school in the offensive costumes as a form of protest. "I think it's ridiculous," complained one pro-costume parent, Kimberly Rogers. "It's a longstanding tradition and the kids really enjoy it, so we're going overboard." School officials did not remove the costumed kids. At the end of a mile-long procession was another protest—from a Native American group. "What's offensive is there are harmful stereotypes that represent a harmful legacy of history that has been denied to indigenous people in this country. The true history of Thanksgiving is one of a massacre," said Klee Benally, who opposes the costumes (quoted in McMillan 2008). Parents on both sides of the issue protested outside Condit Elementary, with pro-costume parents accusing the school of capitulating to political correctness and the anti-costume parents, accusing the school of perpetuating stereotypes.

"I'm not saying that I necessarily agree with everything that happened was right. There are many things that happened," said a pro-costume parent.

"But when those traditions are harmful to the community, why continue them?" Benally replied.

"I don't understand why getting together to share a meal is harmful at all. This is why America is great, that we all can get together, different cultures, different ethnicities, we get together, and we share a meal together," said Kathy Brands, a pro-costume parent (quoted in McMillan 2008).

Nervous about the rising tension, school officials called the police to monitor the situation. However, the school event was relatively tame, compared with the backlash that occurred online. According to news reports, Raheja, whose email led to the School Board's actions, received hundreds of e-mails and phone calls, filled with hateful and misogynistic epithets and racist jeers: "They go from being anxious about political correctness to calling me (an epithet). They don't know my daughter's name, but they've said hateful and disgusting things about my daughter" (quoted in Schmidt 2008). One caller hoped that Raheja's daughter, a kindergartner, would get beat up at school, "another celebrated genocide of Native Americans" (Mehta 2008). At the Tuesday feast, one parent dressed as an Indian and "did a war dance" around Raheja's daughter, telling the girl to "go to hell" (see Raheja 2011).

On the blogosphere, the discourse took a sharper, more vindictive tone, some of which are repeated below:

“Great...Now the loons are perverting a holiday tradition that celebrates a day that people put aside their differences [sic], sat down, gave thanks, and shared a meal together. Whether this really occurred [sic] or is folklore is irrelevant [sic], the message is valid and good, and the tradition is cherished. Now, because some nut-job wants to play the perpetual victim, it's ruined for a group of innocent children - and the message (of brotherhood, tolerance and thankfulness) is lost. Ms. Raheja - you really need to get a life. Fill the pathetic hole in your soul with something other than disdain - this is a celebration, and a time for reflection and nothing else. Please, go somewhere else to search for your 15 minutes of fame and let our little ones have fun, pretend to be Pilgrims and Native Americans and enjoy their day.”¹⁰

“It was the UCR professor/parent/fascist that took it upon herself to wipe out decades of harmless tradition for her selfish reasons.”¹¹

“Women can no longer dress as wives and men can no longer dress as husbands, it is demeaning to women b/c historically husbands oppressed their wives blah blah blah God, these pygmies infuriate me with their shallow complaints over trivial issues. Frankly, I like the Casino and discount Cigs.”¹²

“I think this elitist ought to take her kid out of school and home school her. That would leave the rest of the community to enjoy some sanity in the schools.”¹³

“Let’s just bury the hatchet. We smoke-um peace pipe.”¹⁴

Besides the anti-Indian rhetoric embedded within some of these comments, Raheja was most startled by the fact that the e-mail she wrote to her daughter's teacher was circulated without her permission to other parents and to the media, along with her name: “What it does is it effectively silences any parent in the future who has legitimate concerns with the school because who would want to be the target of this much hate over something that was actually so small?” she says, adding that the matter “could have easily been taken care of within the confines of the school” (quoted in Mehta 2008). Raheja’s experience is a reminder of the power of tradition and its ability to suppress challenges to it (see Silvey 2010).

Instead of banning Thanksgiving curriculum, I would like to see schools take advantage of an opportunity to honestly address the holiday’s origins. Most importantly, schools should avoid any activities that perpetuate the master narrative and stereotypes about American Indians. Instead, schools can focus on such themes as agriculture, harvest, family, foodways and, of course, gratitude. Who can’t get behind that? If the history of the early Thanksgivings must be taught in schools, then it should be taught

from more than one perspective, and the painful truths that historians have brought to the fore about relations between Wampanoag and Pilgrims being marred by distrust and betrayal should be candidly addressed. There is excellent curriculum already available that offers these counter narratives.¹⁵

In light of the problematic aspects of Thanksgiving ideology, and the discourses that subvert it, I would like to suggest that perhaps the pendulum that is American society is swinging once again toward the practices of the Fantastics. From revolting turkeys to sexualized turkeys, the carnivalesque aspect of Thanksgiving and its practices harkens back to the earlier traditions of challenging authority, inverting the status quo, and creating chaos. With that, I offer a hope-inspiring story about an effort to redeem Thanksgiving.

In response to a writing prompt in the third grade, my son Kahlil (who has been, shall we say, privy to my tirades about Thanksgiving) was asked to finish a story. The writing prompt explains that the grandparents forgot to plan for Thanksgiving and asks students to finish the story. Kahlil's story quickly moves to a resolution of the problem, as was suggested by the writing prompt, but he then adds this addendum: "They start the feast and then they start a food fight. Food was flying everywhere. Food was going out the window. People got hit in the face. They cleaned up and had a romantic dinner. It was so boring. I told my dad it was boring. He said, 'you're excused,' then I played video games. The end."

There is a way in which some of these real life events go beyond unraveling Thanksgiving, seeking to build something new to take its place. While the above examples of attempts to subvert the hegemonic representation of Thanksgiving come from real life, we have seen in earlier chapters that there are frequent subversions in reel life and other forms of visual media. “[T]herein lies the resistance and the agency,” writes Williams-Forson. “Power is not always exercised in grand ways. The everyday acts of surviving help people dispel the denunciation that takes place around them” (2008:69). Consider my son’s use of media and popular culture in his Thanksgiving story. Like the antics of the Fantastics, and the plethora of examples in the visual media, Kahlil’s story disrupts the sanctity of the Thanksgiving meal, in this case, rather than masquerading and begging for treats, he does it by creating a food fight (as do many television and film episodes) and then moving to generic resolution (a romantic dinner). This resolution is quickly judged “boring” by the eight-year-old, and the story ends happily with Kahlil getting to do what he enjoyed best at the time—playing video games (without having to beg). In his own way, Kahlil managed to navigate the rhetoric of Thanksgiving and still get what *he* needed from the holiday—socially sanctioned recreation and fun. As my imaginative son may have figured out, there are many ways to create fissures in the ideology of Thanksgiving. Sometimes the most subversive acts are those that are the most seemingly benign. Sometimes these little fissures lead to bigger cracks and, possibly, some day we will find that the colonial ideology that grips Thanksgiving has been unraveled once and for all, and there will be beauty in that breakdown.

Conclusion – Notes

¹ Pleck explains that “in the 1830s, many Fantastics were militia regulars who dressed as women and poked fun at their superiors. Costumed boys ran after them, begging for coins. The Fantastics paraded not only on Thanksgiving, but also on New Year’s Eve and Day, Battalion Day, Washington’s birthday, and the Fourth of July. In rural areas of eastern and central Pennsylvania Fantastics rode on horseback from house to house, demanding food and drink, their faces blackened or masked” (Pleck 2000:31). “In New York City and Philadelphia the Fantastics held elaborate parades, enlisting other groups and marching bands. In the late nineteenth century in lower Manhattan the event began at the call of a horn. Costumed men staggered out of saloons, where they had been given free drinks. [...] At the end of the parade they feasted on turkey and drink at an afternoon picnic, where fistfights often broke out. The evening ball that followed went on until the early morning. Most New York City Fantastics were Irish and working class; many were fish sellers at Fulton Fish market; some were politicians and prison guards” (Pleck 2000:31).

² On Thanksgiving eve and morning children frequented the subway and the elevated tracks, knocked on doors, and rang the doorbells of Park and Fifth Avenue townhouses, asking ‘Anything for Thanksgiving, Mister?’” (Pleck 2000:31) or “anything for the poor?” (Santino 1994:165) and receiving, usually, some fruit or nuts (1994:165). Though

reminiscent of Halloween, this custom actually predates trick-or-treating (Santino 1994:167).

³ Though child begging was abolished from Thanksgiving, it emerged instead at Halloween in the late 1930s: “Before then trick-or-treating was virtually unknown.[...] Police and the heads of social agencies saw trick-or-treating as a way to tame the anarchy of destructive youth. Originally, neighbors treated the costumed children as guests, inviting them into their homes. By the 1950s most children simply stopped at the door and demanded their candy; some also soaped windows and defaced property” (Pleck 2000:32). There is no good explanation, Pleck notes, for why child begging was permitted as Halloween, if not at Thanksgiving. “Perhaps trick-or-treating was seen as preferable to hooliganism on Halloween, whereas child begging on Thanksgiving was seen as a violation of the sacred and sentimental character of the holiday” (2000:32).

⁴ Bakhtin points to the “special quality of laughter at carnival” that was an affront to the seriousness and solemnity of public events.

⁵ The first Macy’s parade was in 1924, which supports William R. Leach’s argument that the Macy’s Thanksgiving parade was borrowed from the Fantastics (Pleck 2000:259).

⁶ For example, there were once an estimated ten million American Indians populating the lands north of Mexico, until the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century led to the disruption and debilitation of the Indian way of life. If the Pilgrims losing a third of their members during the first winter is noteworthy, what might be said of American Indians

losing an estimated nine million people from the plague? As such, students could be asked to consider the point of view of American Indians, for whom Thanksgiving (like Columbus Day) has mournful associations, and such alternative curriculum already exists.

⁷ Consider the following activities. Paper Plate Meal: Students describe the menu of their family's typical Thanksgiving meal (or another traditional family meal), draw or color the meal on a paper plate, and then write about it. From Field to Fork: Students trace the route each food item took to their plate—from plow to platter—in order to learn about food systems. Older students could watch such documentaries as *Harvest of Shame* (1960) and *Food, Inc.* (2009) and write about or discuss the implications of the food system in different contexts. Thanksgiving Rituals: Students conduct an ethnographic study of their own family's Thanksgiving meal. They should take detailed notes about the acquisition of food, food preparation, pre-meal activities, family stories, as well as the actual meal, dessert, and post-meal activities. In doing so, students begin to appreciate the role that ritual plays in their own lives and, by sharing their reports with others, are exposed to a diversity of traditions comprising this national holiday.

⁸ It was a powerful critique and grew into a tradition that continued in an expanded form in subsequent years, now referred to as “Unmasked: America's Legacy of Intolerance and Struggle.”

⁹ The section that received some of the strongest push-back was the exhibit that critiqued Indian stereotypes, which included the popular children's books *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder 1932-1943) and *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks 1980), which are part of fourth grade curriculum in the Columbia Public Schools. “Somebody stole the

materials from the exhibit because they did not want it to be taught!” Neville says, bewildered.

¹⁰ Posted by: Tim_CA, 11/25/2008 at 03:51pm,
<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2008/11/nearly-two-doze/comments/page/2/#comments>, accessed 10/25/10

¹¹ Posted by: Chauncy, 11/25/2008 at 03:31pm,
<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2008/11/nearly-two-doze/comments/page/2/#comments>, accessed 10/25/10.

¹² Posted by *Da'Shiznit*, 11/25/2008 at 08:03 pm,
<http://patterico.com/2008/11/25/outlawing-thanksgiving-at-claremont-schools/>, accessed 10/25/10.

¹³ Posted by *PCD*, 11/26/2008 at 6:10 am, <http://patterico.com/2008/11/25/outlawing-thanksgiving-at-claremont-schools/>, accessed 10/25/10.

¹⁴ Posted by *Jack Klompus*, 11/26/2008 at 6:14 am,
<http://patterico.com/2008/11/25/outlawing-thanksgiving-at-claremont-schools/>,
accessed 10/25/10.

¹⁵ Dorris’s “Why I’m Not Thankful for Thanksgiving” (1978); Bruchac and O’Neill. “1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving” (2001); Dow and Slapin’s “Deconstructing the

Myths of ‘The First Thanksgiving’” (2006); Eyre and Burns’ *We Shall Remain: After the Mayflower* (2009); Harvey, Harjo, and Welborn’s “Teaching about Holidays” (1995); Hunter’s *Four Seasons of Corn: A Winnebago Tradition* (1997); Larson’s “There Are Many Thanksgiving Stories to Tell” (1979); Loewen’s “Plagues and Pilgrims: The Truth about the First Thanksgiving” (1991); Peters’ “Clambake: A Wampanoag Tradition” (1992); Ramsey’s “Beyond ‘Ten Little Indians’ and ‘Turkeys’: Alternative Approaches to Thanksgiving” (1979); Reese’s “Those Thanksgiving Lesson Plans” (2006); Regginti’s *The Sacred Harvest: Ojibway Wild Rice Gathering* (1992); Seale, Slapin, and Silverman’s *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective* (1998); Swamp’s “Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message” (1995); “Wampanoag Life After 1620,” and Wittstock’s Ininatig’s *Gift of Sugar: Traditional Native Sugarmaking* (1993).

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