

## Introduction: Christmas Studies, American Studies, Area Studies

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How American is Christmas? That might seem a strange question given that each year from approximately the Autumn Equinox, and certainly from November 1<sup>st</sup>, Christmas occupies large swathes of the popular imagination in the US—in ways that also have significant cultural implications for much of the rest of the world. The second that spooky season is over, and frequently before that, Christmas music, movies and television specials dominate the airwaves. The steady, upwards march of Hallmark's Christmas productions – 42 original offerings in 2023 alone – and their emulation by other companies like Netflix and Great American Family would suggest that, if anything, the Christmasification of popular culture during the winter months remains a growing trend. One survey in 2018 discovered that around 60 per cent of American households engage in the tradition of watching at least one Christmas movie between Halloween and the New Year, a remarkable unifier (Robinson II et al 2022). Christmas commercialisation also shows no signs of slowing down. In the face of a cost-of-living crisis, rising inflation and high interest rates, Americans set new spending records in the winter of 2022: holiday retail sales reached \$936 billion and will soon top a trillion dollars annually. At the same time, there are also signs that the meaning of Christmas in American life continues to shift. A 2021 survey found that four in ten Americans believed that there was a War on Christmas underway in American culture—a paranoid sense of an attempt to remove Christ from the festive season that, in its current iteration, dates back at to the early twenty-first century and was merrily stoked during the Trump years (Robertson). At least according to some sources, the religious sense of the holiday *has* shifted: between 1995 and 2019, the number of Americans who celebrate Christmas dropped from 96 to 93 per cent, a small but potentially significant downturn. David A. Graham has gone as far as to argue in *The Atlantic* in December 2022, “Christmas is becoming less of a religious holiday for millions of people. If a war on Christmas exists, it’s gaining ground in a long battle of attrition” (Graham 2022).

For such a vital cultural and commercial event which continues to have profound religious, economic and political implications, American Christmases have received surprisingly little scholarly attention. More than two decades ago, a series of foundational texts helped to shape an understanding of the ways in which, from inauspicious beginnings, Christmas became such a potent force in American life. In different ways, Penne L. Restad's *Christmas in America* (1995), Stephen Nissenbaum's *The Battle for Christmas* (1997), and Karal Ann Marling's *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (2000) mapped out the shifting status of American Christmases, from Puritan rejection to Gilded Age embrace, exploring its changing social, cultural, material and religious expression across those centuries. More recently, Robert E. May's groundbreaking *Yuletide in Dixie: Slavery, Christmas and Southern Memory* has reshaped our understanding of the role played by Christmas in relation to slavery, abolition, and post-Civil War memories of the plantation. In broader cultural terms, collections like Bettye Collier-Thomas's *A Treasury of African American Christmas Stories* (2018) and my own *Christmas Past: An Anthology of Seasonal Stories from Nineteenth-Century America* (2021) and *The Last Gift: The Christmas Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (2023) have opened up similar spaces in the rich literary history of the season. Yet in surprisingly many ways what William Waits wrote in the Preface to his pioneering study of gift giving in America in 1993 still holds true: “Scholarly secondary literature on the American Christmas celebration is sparse [...] The general lack of scholarly effort in analyzing the Christmas celebration is ironic when one considers the enormous

effort Americans (scholars included) have expended in celebrating Christmas” (Waits 1993, xviii-xix).

By any rights, Christmas should be seen as a exemplary subject for comparative Area Studies disciplines: intrinsically interdisciplinary and deeply transnational, closely implicated in questions of national identity, intimately tied to issues of religious freedom and political debate, at the centre of cultural forms annually consumed by a majority of Americans—and many people beyond its borders. Its international effects are profound: much of the world, Christian or not, feels the influence of American Christmases through the media that it consumes every winter. Seasonal Starbucks red cups, for example, became popular in China in the early 2010s along with a sense of seasonal nostalgia confectioned by brands “filling in the blanks” for consumers without established Christmas memories of their own (Donald 2014). On the other hand, American Christmases retain significant areas of exceptionalism. Even in Transatlantic terms, Britain and the United States remain, in many ways, two nations divided by a common winter holiday. Santa Claus and Father Christmas might have blurred into one homogenous gift-bringer but pockets of significant divergence still remain. In his recent Christmas history-cum-memoir, Bill Bryson recalled his own seasonal wonder at his first experience of a British Christmas: “I discovered an entirely different kind of Christmas – a Christmas that was fascinating, full of surprises, drenched in centuries of tradition and wholly bewildering all at once. Nearly everything about it was new to me” (Bryson 2022). If that level of culture shock is difficult to imagine today, some aspects of Christmas are still lost in translation. Christmas crackers, for example, remain little known in the US, as evidenced by the mild controversy surrounding their inclusion in the Great American Family Christmas movie *A Kindhearted Christmas*: “Brits dumbfounded by American Christmas cracker technique as it’s ‘all so wrong,’” fumed the *Daily Mirror* (Hoffman 2022).

And then there is the other crucial dimension of the American Christmas story: those who don’t celebrate Christmas at all—for reasons theological, political or otherwise—or else celebrate it in complex ways. In popular culture terms, these tangled skeins of identity and culture are immediately notable in the unmissable contributions to the global experience of Christmas by Jewish creatives. Indeed, a recent headline in British newspaper *The Jewish Chronicle* declared, “Jingle kvells! The great American Christmas was invented by Jews” (Gold 2022). Certainly, Jody Rosen’s *White Christmas: The Story of an American Song* (2002) has drawn out the extraordinary genesis of one crucial piece of Christmas entertainment: after experiencing Christmas as a child in late nineteenth century Russia “as a day of dread”, because of the increase in antisemitic violence around Christian holidays, Irving Berlin went on to write the definitive Christmas song, one which which both “resonated with some of the deepest strains in American culture” while also serving as “a blank slate on which Americans have projected their varied views on race, religion, national identity, and other heady matters” (70, 8).

What also makes a further compelling argument for the sustained, multidisciplinary study of Christmas is the holiday’s ongoing involvement in social and political controversies. Here again, Transatlantic differences are immediately apparent. Aside from the Puritan attempt to smother celebrations during the interregnum, British seasonal festivities have remained relatively separate from domestic national tensions (despite limited attempts to import the War on Christmas). In America, however, Christmas has been a perennial political brickbat and continuously contentious flashpoint since the arrival of the first Anglo-European colonists in the seventeenth century, from early and long-lasting theological suspicion to sectional strife around slavery and the Civil War to today’s culture wars. Perhaps the recent

rise of New Area Studies as a scholarly paradigm characterised by its interest in “the intersection of the local and the global, the macro and the micro,” and its interdisciplinary attempts to “uncover and interrogate political, cultural and social contexts” will provide Christmas with a suitable framework for further study (Hodgett & Smith 2020, 1). Through whichever lens we look at it, Christmas can tell us enormous amounts about a wealth of pressing issues in American life, past, present and yet to come.

Certainly, the essays in this special issue make a very compelling argument for us to turn to Christmas again as a profoundly rich and neglected space, real and imagined, in which to work through important questions about America and its relationship to key issues of its own national culture as well as its engagement with the wider world. Taken together, they are a model of what a sustained Area Studies approach to Christmas studies might look, and what we might learn from such an engagement. Approaching the season through a variety of lenses and approaches, these articles explore its meaning temporally, geographically, politically, theologically, environmentally and culturally. We begin with a series of essays rooted in the nineteenth century that provide fresh illumination of the shifting patterns of Christmas as it took a recognisable form. I open the issue with an exploration of the early reception of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) in America, a pivotal moment in Transatlantic Christmas culture which, until now, has been surprisingly ignored. In the shifting embrace of Scrooge and company by American audiences between its launch in 1843 and Dickens’s death in 1870, I find the book to be “a crucial mediator: between Dickens and his American audience, between those audiences and a growing idea of Christmas in American life, and between the shifting literary cultures on both sides of the Atlantic.”

Next, a pair of essays by Rebecca Fraser and E. James West significantly deepen and enrich our understanding of the distinctive contours of Black American Christmas traditions and the wider meaning of race in the festive season. First, using the John Kooner parades of North Carolina, famously described by Harriet Jacobs, as a jumping-off point, Fraser explores “the varying experiences of Christmas for the enslaved within the region,” revealing the fragile and contingent seasonal spaces where the enslaved were able to celebrate “the joy of family and friends, the temporary respite from labor and momentary freedoms from the constraints of the contained spaces associated with enslavers’ authority and power.” E. James West, in connected ways, gives us an equally revelatory account of “the contested history and complex politics of the Black Santa in the United States.” From minstrelsy to the twenty-first century, West traces the shifting image and meaning of this neglected and profoundly multivalent figure in popular culture: “an emblem of white supremacy, a vehicle for racial uplift, an arbiter of racial goodwill, a symbol of civil rights protest, a Black Power icon, a spokesman for commercial interests, a champion of multicultural inclusion, and an exemplar for cultural decline.” Then, Malcolm McLaughlin takes us into different territory with an innovative exploration of the ways that the “magazines of sport and recreation” that flourished in the Gilded Age “took America’s Christmas out of doors and into new wonderlands”—and in so doing, spoke closely to “the emerging sense of national coherence that came with reconciliation in the decades after the Civil War.”

Jack Hodgson and Vaughn Joy take us into the early twentieth century, a period when the social and cultural tensions around Christmas took on new forms which reflected the economic and political turbulence of the period. Hodgson reveals the surprising and forgotten story of Christmas in the Depression-era, where the financial crisis served to foster a new attack on the holiday by “radicals who viewed Santa as effectively a patron saint of capitalism for children”—an attack which took physical form in a series of extraordinary

“anti-Christmas” parties. In turn, as Hodgson highlights, “Philanthropists and liberal New Dealers mobilized to protect celebrations and experiences they viewed as a rite of passage for American youngsters.” The mobilisation of the figure of Santa Claus is also a central theme of Vaughn Joy’s rich account of perennial family favourite *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). Framing the film in the light of Macy’s Department Store’s “deeply entrenched connection to the holiday and its increasing commercialisation of Christmas,” Joy finds the seasonal family favourite to be a “a masterpiece of evasion and manipulation” which successfully rebranded “the civic holiday in favour of the religion of commercialism, recasting the central figure himself not as a secular god of morality and justice, but as the god of the best bargains and right purchases.”

Emma Long, Melodie Roschman and Nathan Scoll, in contrasting but complementary ways, bring us to the contemporary with three different visions of conflict at Christmastime. Long provides us with a definitive account of the much-discussed yet little-examined “War on Christmas”, and reveals the way that its various seasonal skirmishes actually reflect key questions about the future of life in America: “how to balance the historic dominance of Christianity with a modern understanding of the country’s religious diversity, how to understand the demands of the First Amendment in that context, and what it means to live in a culturally pluralistic society.” Roschman, on the other hand, takes us to ostensibly different Christmas battlefields—namely Nakatomi Plaza and 671 Lincoln Boulevard—but finds in the holiday experiences of John McClane and Kevin McCallister surprisingly resonant themes. As Roschman argues, *Die Hard* (1988) and *Home Alone* (1990) prove to be startlingly similar “narratives of redemptive violence” which demonstrate “anxieties about a rapidly changing society”: “Both films portray families ruptured by maternal neglect that are restored by their independent, masculine protagonists’ defense of Christmas and the family.” Scoll, on the other hand, attempts to give us a conclusive answer to the question that regularly generates conflict on social media at Christmas time: is *Die Hard* a Christmas movie? In a multi-layered account of the film’s generic, semantic and syntactic qualities, which raises bigger questions about the meaning of seasonal viewing, Scoll finds in the affirmative – but readers should feel free to continue that debate, whether at the Christmas dinner table or perhaps at their anti-Christmas party.

December 2023 is an auspicious moment to be launching this special issue, since (on December 23rd, to be precise) it is also the 200th anniversary of Clement Clarke Moore’s “Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas”, better known by its first line: “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” If we take the publication of that poem as an approximate benchmark for the inauguration of a recognisably modern Christmas culture, give or take a couple of decades, that means we have two neglected centuries of seasonal celebration to explore. As Irving Berlin himself put it, “Christmas has woven a pattern in my life” – and, as these articles make clear, it has also woven a powerful but hitherto disregarded pattern that runs right through American culture and beyond (Rosen 2002, 27). Taken together, I hope this issue points the way forward for a new realisation of the potential of Christmas studies.

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