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P is for Patriotism: Messaging of Patriotic Symbols and Rituals in Picturebooks

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Abstract

Patriotic education is mandated or encouraged in most US states. Picturebooks are used to promote values and beliefs with children. This qualitative study employs critical content analysis exploring how picturebooks (n = 49) intended for elementary school aged children frame patriotic symbols, rituals, and narratives. Often starkly dissonant to the lived experiences of children who interact with them, promoted meanings of patriotic symbols and rituals may be interpreted as “owned by others.” Picturebooks promote narratives of achieved social justice, white male ownership of patriotic symbols and rituals, and avoid the concepts of dissent or disengagement with patriotic rituals. Recommended to create more inclusive--and critical--patriotic experiences is employment of more diverse symbols and rituals and exploring various history and geography narratives.

Key Words: picturebooks, patriotism, historical narratives, Black Critical Patriotism, critical content analysis

Patriotic practices common in US schools include recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, school assemblies focused on veterans, school plays with historical and civically oriented themes, and music curricula emphasizing patriotic themes (Merisier, 2019). With focus on narratives purporting struggles for and achievement of “liberty and justice for all,” school-based patriotic practices such as assemblies and plays rarely acknowledge the reality that these concepts were intended only for White people (Mills, 2014). Rarely explored are narratives of marginalized peoples using their bodies, political thought, and intellectualism as patriotic tools in the fight to construct systems embracing universal personhood (Busey and Walker, 2017). Rather, many patriotic practices promote loyalty to histories, ideals, and contemporary systems that continue to be exclusionary of many *de facto* citizens (Banks, 2021).

Patriotically framed Symbols, Rituals, and Narratives (SRN) are employed throughout elementary schools. As crucibles for self and group identity development, elementary schools are important venues (Christou, 2007) for dissemination of a wide range of messages nested in patriotic SRNs. Many SRNs endorse ideals that were exclusionary in intent and practice and have not yet been achieved. When struggles for personhood are explored, they are often framed as working toward achievement of master narrative (Alridge, 2006) ends that assume infallibility of founding documents and promote an “ideals achieved” framing of recent US History.

There is a body of research that examines dissonance between idealized narratives and realized experiences in the struggle for actualized equality, found in learning standards and curricula (An, 2022; Bickford, 2015; Busey and Walker, 2017; Hyres, 2022; King, 2014; King, 2020; Schroeder and Gates, 2021). However, little of this work is done in early childhood curricula framed as “patriotic”. With the ubiquitous expectation that US schools promote patriotism, as well as the universal employment of children’s literature, patriotic picturebooks influence countless children who interact with them.

Picturebooks serve as important venues for self- and group identity development (Chaudhri and Teale, 2013; Hall, 2008; Koss, 2015). As SRNs are important informants of identity development, (Clark, 2017; Connerton, 1989; Verbytska et al., 2019), it is important for teachers, librarians, family caregivers, and teacher-educators to explore whether patriotic SRNs in picturebooks are inclusive of all children. To this end, this article explores SRNs in picturebooks characterized as “patriotic.” We argue that SRNs expressing loyalty to documents and histories of exclusionary intent and practice—without exploration of the ongoing struggle to achieve societal equity espoused by these documents—works to alienate students who are relegated to subpersonhood by these documents and histories (Busey and Walker, 2017). Conversely, SRNs focusing on historic and contemporary uses of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) bodies, political thought, and intellectualism promote inclusionary patriotism focusing on personhood, rather than on exclusionary documents and narratives (Busey and Walker, 2017).

Literature calls for continued study of the role of patriotism in schools (Altıkulaç, 2016; Busey and Walker, 2017; Martin, 2012; Nash, 2005; Schatz et al., 1999; Westheimer, 2006). In exploring picturebooks specifically, we respond to Busey and Walker’s (2017) call for research into “...nuanced iterations of racialized citizenship in social studies curricula... (p. 458)”. Broadening Mills’ (2014) assertion that the ideals of the United States were intended only for White people to include a host of other historically and contemporarily excluded identities, we explore patriotic SRNs nested within included and excluded identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and (non)religious belief.

We begin with an operationalization of “patriotism” and subsequent discussion of the importance of symbols and rituals in individual and group identity formation. We then describe the theoretical lenses through which this study is viewed. After our articulation of how the text set was created, coded, and analyzed, we discuss the themes, implications, and recommendations drawn from our study.

Patriotism as Use of Symbol, Ritual and Narrative to Demonstrate “Love and Loyalty”

Described as “love of country” (Hand, 2011) patriotism is frequently operationalized as actions that either blindly supporting a country’s narratives regarding founding, history, and heroes (authoritarian patriotism) or engagement in critique, political action, and social change while adhering to the proposition that founding documents and subsequent struggles were noble in their intents (democratic patriotism) (Altıkulaç, 2016; Busey and Walker, 2017; Hand and

Pearce, 2009; Kodelja, 2011; Martin, 2012; Schatz et al., 1999; Westheimer, 2009). What is frequently missing from this dichotomic view of patriotism are SRNs that “[...]take] the form of active rejection to the exploitation and degradation of Black bodies, land, and resources in addition to a rejection of the social ontology of freedom and equality as White designations (Mills, 1997)” (Busey and Walker, 2017, p. 461).

Our exploration of patriotic SRNs in picturebooks is viewed through a lens of Black Critical Patriotism (Busey and Walker, 2017). Taking Westheimer’s (2009) critique-based *democratic patriotism* further through challenge of the narratives that purport “life, liberty, and justice for all,” Black Critical patriotism does not assume the founding and subsequent history of the United States was intended as a universal struggle for realization of individual and group rights (Busey and Walker, 2017; Mills, 2014). Upholding the “[b]elief that one’s country’s ideals are worthy of admiration and respect” (Westheimer, 2009, p. 318), *democratic patriotism* works to improve upon social justice issues but does not deeply explore how these ideals were not intended for all. Rather than focus on ideals nested in documents and narratives, “Black critical patriotism centralized the person first before a set of ideals and offers the ideology of democratic patriotism as historically inapplicable to Black persons” (Busey and Walker, 2017, p. 459). Operationalized in our study, *democratic patriotism* assumes the infallibility of the patriotic narrative of “life, liberty, and justice for all” while Black Critical patriotism symbolism focuses on the use of Black [and others’] bodies, political thought, and intellectualism as centers for struggle for the systemic realization of personhood (Busey and Walker, 2017). We expand upon the concept of Black Critical patriotism to include the struggles of people and groups relegated to subpersonhood by institutions and histories.

Operationalizing “love of country” (Hand, 2011), we define “patriotism” as observable demonstration of commitment to one’s nation and its people. Purposefully broad, this definition acknowledges the many lenses through which individuals view their country’s purported ideals, history, and current social structures. As a country benefits from contributions of both *de jure* and *de facto* citizens (Banks, 2021), we argue genuine demonstration of love of country must be inclusively oriented toward the realization of universal personhood, rather than exclusionary in nature. Manifested through action, we agree with Busey and Walker (2017) who state “...that Black self-liberation from enslavement, physical resistance to subpersonhood via revolts and rebellions, and the self-placement of Black bodies in White intended spaces are all acts of patriotism” (p. 462). We thus explore the extent to which manifestations of patriotism in picturebooks emphasize unquestioning loyalty, tempered and limited critique of narratives of “liberty and justice for all”, or focus on individual and group struggles for societal embrace of personhood (Busey and Walker, 2017).

Symbolic Patriotism

Use of symbols, imagery, and ritual work to create bonds between individuals and the greater societies in which they reside (Myerhoff, 2008). Interwoven, symbolic meaning and repeated public ritual influence individuals’ sense of self and sense of community (Clark, 2017;

Connerton, 1989; Verbytska et al., 2019). It is in childhood that individuals begin to view and integrate modeling of culture and identity into their self-concept and self-positioning in society (Chapin, 2018). Institutionally symbolized objects such as flags, fireworks, the Bald Eagle, the Statue of Liberty, Mt. Rushmore, the Liberty Bell, and the White House are broadly promoted as representing and interacting with abstract concepts such as freedom, equality, unity, opportunity, prosperity, peace, and security. Children are encouraged to blend patriotic symbols into their self- and civic identities through curricula, child-produced art, and instruction to revere patriotic symbols and their meanings (Bruter, 2003; Provenzo, Jr., 1984).

Informing generations of peoples' interpretations of patriotic SRNs are narratives leveraging patriotic symbols for racist, hegemonic, and xenophobic ends, reinforcing the conflict between purported liberty, unity, and justice and realized actions directly counter to those ideals. A terrorist organization described by its members as working to uphold "...real American Patriotism", (Wright, 1926, p. 37), the Ku Klux Klan, for example, describes itself as an "...essentially patriotic institution" (Wright, 1926, p. 37) that lists the US Flag after only the Bible and the cross as symbolic of its goals; "Under its fluttering folds, Klansmen will forever defend the sublime principles of a pure Americanism, and thus perpetuate the sacred memory of our venerable and heroic dead." (Wright, 1926, p. 34) Woven together, ethnocentrism, systemically racist governmental and social institutions, and SRNs; "...create *exclusionary patriotism*: a situation in which communal and national identities are supportive and positively correlated among socially dominant groups, but in conflict among those in subordinate communal groups" (Sidanius & Petrocik, 2001, p. 108, italics in original). In a landscape where socially dominant groups control governmental institutions, history narratives, economic messaging, and narratives of meaning of patriotic symbols, people who are othered by the socially dominant groups; "...are likely to see more of a conflict between their communal identity and national symbols that are associated with the communal identity of the dominant group" (Sidanius & Petrocik, 2001, p. 108). In this way, societally dominant meanings assigned to SRN may be seen as thin veneers, representative of true community values counter to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Juxtaposed with the promotion and reverence of ideological symbolism are "banal reminders" (Billig, 1995) of nationhood through their universal display which further influences individuals' integration or challenge of the symbols into their understanding of their environments and their self-identities (Schwartz, 2012). Complicating interaction between individuals and ever-present institutional symbolism purported to promote unity in history, culture, purpose, and collective identity is dissonance between their suggested symbolic meanings and the lived realities of marginalized people and groups (Kook, 1998; Schwartz, 2012). Though common narratives may encourage meaning upon and through symbols such as flags, seals, and icons, it is individuals, ultimately, who interpret meaning (Butz, 2009; Foret, 2009; Marmo, 2010; Mick, 1986). It is through individual interpretation of symbols that children create personalized meanings of patriotic symbols and icons. Whether children see their identities as well-integrated or othered (Devine et al., 2008) through texts and educational

experiences rests in the interplay between promoted narratives of patriotic symbols and rituals and individual interpretation of them.

Ritual Patriotism

Like symbols, patriotic rituals are assigned meaning by the individual (Butz, 2009; Clark, 2017; Foret, 2009; Marmo, 2010; Mick, 1986; O'Donnell et al., 2016). As texts, civic rituals; “afford insight into the way in which political legitimacy is defined, imagined, and articulated” (Kook, 2005, p. 152). Through music selection at firework demonstrations, organization of ceremony or parade, and individuals’ clothing choices for attendance at civic events, messages of membership/exclusion are sent (Koschnik, 1994; Willems, 2013). The wearing of “Thin Blue Line” clothing at Independence Day events, for example, conveys a wide variety of gendered and racialized messaging (Wall, 2019).

Deepening the impact and potential identity conflict with an individual’s self-concept of their patriotism is pressure to engage in patriotic ritual. Participation in patriotic ritual—particularly at school with recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance—is broadly framed as compulsory and to be performed without question or critique (Apple, 2004; Bennett, 2004; Smith, 2002). Though abstention is guaranteed by the US Constitution, members of religious groups, for example, have been expelled from school and socially ostracized for their refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance (Nussbaum, 2012). Because patriotic rituals are intended to inform social identity and purported to bring unity and community, individuals who choose to not participate in them or to participate in their own ways often face deep social ostracization (Smith, 2002). Indeed, responses to the personhood-oriented patriotic actions of Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe during playing of the Star-Spangled Banner were largely negative (Schmidt, 2019).

Through a wide variety of curricular resources and experiences—including picturebooks—children are encouraged to learn about and demonstrate reverence for patriotic symbols and to participate in rituals. Interpreting these symbols and rituals—aligned with specific narratives—children are encouraged to integrate often problematic and exclusionary messages into their own self-concepts (Busey & Walker, 2017). While interpretation of meaning of symbols and rituals is ultimately up to the individual, externally created contextualization of these symbols and rituals promotes specific interpretations and discourages others.

Broadly promoted as representative of US social and cultural identities with “uniformity of perception and action among group members” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 226), patriotic symbols and rituals are the abstract meeting places of large “imagined” communities that work to inform civic and individual identity (Anderson, 2006; Firth, 2011; Schatz and Lavine, 2007). Interpretation of the messaging of these ideological meeting places, however “depend[s] on the social context and the concepts people associate with the flag and other national symbols” (Becker et al., 2011, p. 5). Interplay between individuals’ self- and community identities and promoted messaging of patriotic symbols and rituals influence individuals’ conceptualizations of each (Butz, 2009). Responding to Butz (2009), who calls for deeper exploration of the multi

referential nature of political symbol meaning and interpretation, we explore how authors and illustrators position patriotic symbols and rituals in picturebooks.

Research Design

Our exploration of patriotic symbols, rituals, and narratives portrayed in picturebooks is viewed through a lens of Black Critical patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017). Taking Westheimer's (2009) critique-based *democratic patriotism* further through challenge of the narratives that purport "life, liberty, and justice for all," Black Critical patriotism does not assume the founding and subsequent history of the United States was ever intended as a universal struggle for realization of individual and group rights (Busey & Walker, 2017; Mills, 1998). Upholding the "[b]elief that one's country's ideals are worthy of admiration and respect" (Westheimer, 2009, p. 318), *democratic patriotism* works to advance social justice issues but does not deeply explore how these ideals were not intended for all. Rather than focus on ideals nested in documents and narratives, "Black critical patriotism centralized the person first before a set of ideals and offers the ideology of democratic patriotism as historically inapplicable to Black persons" (Busey & Walker, 2017, p. 459). Operationalized in our study, *democratic patriotism* assumes the infallibility of the patriotic narrative of "life, liberty, and justice for all" while Black Critical patriotism symbolism focuses on the use of Black [and others'] bodies, political thought, and intellectualism as centers for struggle for the systemic realization of personhood (Busey & Walker, 2017). We expand upon the concept of Black Critical patriotism to include the struggles of other people and groups relegated to subpersonhood by institutions and histories.

This critical content (Wedwick & Latham, 2013) analysis approaches picturebooks as cultural artifacts infused with "ideological underpinnings in texts and images" (p. 335). Critical content analysis (Koss, 2015) "offers a way of reading power, explores the web of sociopolitical relations, and deconstructs taken for granted assumptions about language, meaning, reading, and literature" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xv). Our work approaches books as non-neutral (Beck, 2005), influencing readers through encouraged meanings of patriotic symbol and ritual. Embracing Busey and Walker's (2017) questioning of "how citizenship is mediated through race" (p. 461), we ask how patriotism is mediated through racialized nesting of patriotic symbols and rituals (Johnson, 2018). With this question at the core of our work, we seek to shift common consideration of patriotic symbols and rituals as having exclusively a priori meanings toward how author and illustrator nest symbols and rituals within larger historical and socio-cultural narratives.

Identifying texts likely to be located and selected by teachers, librarians, and family caregivers, we each independently entered the phrase "patriotic picturebooks" into a popular commercial search engine. Commonly used for identifying and locating curricular resources, internet searches and resultant parenting and reading blogs constitute several layers of conceptualization and definition of "patriotism" in picturebooks. Blog curators serve as important arbiters of texts adults ultimately use. Indeed, many of the texts in our set did not

include the words “patriotism” or “patriotic” and may not even be described as such by their creators. Despite these influences on and limitations to the text set, teachers, parents, and other caretakers are likely to employ the same process to locate “patriotic picturebooks,” therefore reinforcing their dissemination and ultimate use with children. We compiled the first ten titles from the first ten websites listed in our searches. We identified a total of 65 unique texts. Owing to restrictions caused by Covid-19, we acquired and analyzed 49 books from our initial list.

Employing critical content analysis (Botelho and Rudman, 2009; Fairclough, 2003; Mathis, 2015; McDermid, 2020; Tonkiss, 2012), to “examine how ideologies are reproduced through language and texts” (Tonkiss, 2012, p. 407), we independently coded each text with a scheme of predetermined labels (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Roper & Clifton, 2013). These labels exemplified three manifestations of patriotism: symbols, rituals, and historical/geographical narratives. Our coding scheme included terms and concepts considered “commonly understood” patriotic symbols and actions such as flag waving, the Pledge of Allegiance, voting, military service, and learning about the American Revolution. Within these *a priori* codes, however, we provided conceptual space for counternarrative equivalents to these codes. Table 1 describes the codes and examples of their counternarrative equivalents.

To ensure intercoder reliability, each author independently coded written text and illustrations (Neuendorf, 2002). After the initial coding process, we convened to discuss and adjust codes for a second round by adding in vivo codes identified in the texts. These codes included: food (ex. pie, cake, hot dogs), founding or historic documents (ex. Declaration of Independence, Emancipation Proclamation, Equal Rights Amendment), careers of service (ex. astronaut, scientist, politician), and public events (ex. naturalization ceremony, court hearings, school plays).

After the second round of coding, each author independently wrote analytic memos to contextualize instances of codes within the broader narratives of the texts. For the purpose of this analysis, we viewed the intersections of gender, race, socioeconomics, and patriotism through the lens of Black Critical Patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017)

Findings

With titles such as *Celebrate Independence Day* (Heiligman and Dennis, 2007), *F is for Flag* (Lewison and Duke, 2002), and *Stars and Stripes: The Story of the American Flag* (Thompson et al., 2003), we anticipated and observed near-universal occurrence of SRNs adhering to the narratives of infallibility of the founders and founding documents with little exploration of struggles for universal personhood throughout US history. SRNs broadly adhered to master narratives (Alridge, 2006; Woodson, 2017) rather than to authentic, person-centered struggles against subpersonhood (Busey and Walker, 2017; Mills, 2014). We identified three themes regarding the positioning of SRNs:

1. SRNs portray the concepts of liberty, justice, and equity as fully realized in contemporary society.

2. SRNs are broadly within the dominion of White males and marginalize women and people of color.
3. Concepts of meaningful contemporary dissent or critique, non-participation in ritual, and counter symbols and counter rituals are broadly absent in patriotic picturebook narratives.

Though distinct, these themes often occurred concurrently in many of the texts, with several texts including all three themes.

Symbols Implying Realized Ideals

Broadly, symbols framed as patriotic were integrated into narratives that avoid, minimize, or normalize historic and ongoing struggles for racial justice and equity. Common across the text set was the positioning of symbols into narratives of “achieved liberty and justice for all.” Frequent symbols in this narrative were buildings such as The White House and the Capitol Building, locations such as the Grand Canyon and “the West,” and objects such as “blind lady justice” and the Statue of Liberty. When symbols were associated with struggles for justice, the struggles were historically nested without reference to contemporary injustices or issues. Workers’ Rights banners, Women’s suffrage protest signs, and peace flags were common in these narratives. Table 2 provides examples of the nesting of symbols into narratives that purport “ideals achieved”, “critique but infallible origins” and “struggle for personhood”.

The flag of the United States, for example, was strongly associated with the US Revolution, the US Civil War, and—to a lesser extent—the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. When presented in contemporary settings, however, the US flag was only strongly associated with military service and sacrifice and not with current issues of social or economic justice. Thus, the US flag was broadly framed as a symbol of struggle for freedom and justice only in historical settings. Contemporary struggles for freedom and justice in the text set were not symbolized by the flag or other “traditional” patriotic symbols such as the Statue of Liberty or the Liberty Bell. The few texts in the set with narratives exploring contemporary social justice issues had fewer graphics of or explicit connections to “traditional” patriotic symbols or rituals.

Framed as symbolic of US power at home and abroad, imagery and embedded narratives of the White House, for example, minimized, avoided, or deproblematized both history and contemporary societal issues. For example, in *Washington D.C., Our Nation’s Capital from A-Z*, (Schroeder 2018), an entry for the letter “S” is simply “slave”:

Slave—Many hundreds of slaves helped to build Washington, D.C. The U.S. government hired them from their owners for about fifteen cents a day. The slaves fired bricks, laid foundations, erected walls, felled trees, mixed mortar, quarried stone, and with the help of horses and cattle, removed stumps to clear the way for future roads and streets. (p. 23)

Through acknowledging—but downplaying—the forced contribution of enslaved people, this symbol of the United States implies an unproblematized history without moral or ethical challenge. This unproblematized history is strongly connected to symbols of patriotism such as the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument, and the Liberty Bell.

Examples of the coupling of patriotic symbols with implied achievement of ideals or with unproblematized histories included the following: Mt. Rushmore as symbolic of Presidential achievement without balanced narrative of the Indigenous land on which it rests; the Statue of Liberty as symbolic of unfettered economic opportunity without balance with the Immigrant Labor Paradox (Banks, 2021); and Independence Day symbolism and meaning without acknowledging deep systemic sexism and racism embedded in the founding documents. Additionally, Gingrich's (2012) *Land of the Pilgrim's Pride* includes an illustration in which a bald eagle is positioned alongside a historical narrative implying quickly resolved conflict: "Between the settlers and Indians, conflict quickly arose. Captain John Smith was soon captured by his foes. But his young friend Pocahontas courageously stepped in, saving the Englishman so peace could begin" (np).

Perfect and proud, these symbols and their idealized meanings are not balanced with narratives of historical and contemporary work to realize those meanings. The symbols represented the ideals achieved by White males who, from the founding of the colonies, have enjoyed their realization and who have often worked—through legislation and *de facto* practice—to keep them exclusive. Though narratives regarding historical and contemporary work toward social justice were present within the text set, they were not deeply ingrained with symbols such as US Flags, the Statue of Liberty, or the Capitol Building. Picturebooks with deep integration of symbolism framed ideals as accomplished; picturebooks with less integration of "traditional" symbolism were more likely to present narratives of ongoing social justice work.

Symbol and Ritual are in the Dominion of White Males

Symbols and rituals throughout the text set were frequently associated with abstract concepts such as liberty, equality, justice, opportunity, morality, religious freedom, and military strength. The corresponding narratives widely implied these concepts had been achieved, often through struggle, without deep exploration of the exclusionary nature of the founding documents or ongoing systemic barriers to prevent their genuine realization. Because these concepts have historically been enjoyed by White males with the exclusion of others, the symbols represent their experiences and not the experiences of others. Counter-symbols, such as protest banners, raised fists, and the contributions of women, immigrants, or BIPOC, appeared more frequently. Texts exploring the Presidents of the United States, the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War focused on White men's contributions and implied successful achievement of "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness". When "traditional" patriotic symbols such as the US Flag, the White House, or the Statue of Liberty were evident in narratives of protest or struggle, the exclusionary intent of the founding documents was absent. Table 3 provides examples of narratives—with embedded symbols, rituals, and historic events—purporting "ideals achieved," "critique but infallible origins," and "struggle for personhood."

Reflecting their intersectionality with unproblematized, sanitized narratives, symbols and rituals were nested in and framed to insinuate an "all problems solved" view of history. Implied

as representing achieved ideals, symbols reflect ideals first and foremost achieved by White males. Occurring throughout the texts are symbols connected to the concept of freedom, despite centuries-long struggles to achieve *de jure* and *de facto* freedoms for everyone (Pavlick, 2019). Narratives about the creation of the flag during the American revolution, for example, focus on the flag as representing justice and liberty without acknowledging that, as the war concluded, these ideals were not realized by large swaths of the population. Symbols such as a blind Lady Justice (signaling equal treatment under the law), covered wagons and pioneers “taming” the prairie (signaling opportunity), and the Statue of Liberty (signaling welcome for immigrants) promote “achieved ideals” narratives without corresponding narratives describing the ongoing struggle for societal improvement.

Broadly absent from the texts were counter-symbols (i.e., the “Peace Flag”) representing protest, with the exception of the Gadsden Flag in the US Revolution. More current counter-symbols, such as those from the Black Lives Matter movement, were absent. Symbols representing indigenous nations were framed in historical contexts without contemporary balance or reference. Though the narratives in our text set implied unity and achievement, context was broadly absent regarding the struggles—historic and contemporary—to achieve them. Throughout US history, the ideals reflected in common patriotic symbols in the text set have only been realized by a select few. Despite this, symbols in the text set, with their historical positioning and lack of contemporary analogue, implied these ideals have been achieved by all.

Patriotic Ritual: No Room for Question, Dissent, or Alteration

Across texts, patriotism as participation in ritual and civic ceremony centered around Independence Day celebrations. Parades—often spontaneous, child-generated parades—firework displays, and picnics were central events. Texts placing emphasis on patriotism as civic ceremony presented traditional gender roles in preparing for picnics, parades, and Independence Day celebrations, with women preparing food and caring for children and men socializing with one another, often exclusive of women. Socioeconomic diversity was not emphasized in ceremony-based texts—except in naturalization ceremony narratives—with broad framing of patriotic ceremony as solidly “small town, middle class.” Table 4 provides examples of the nesting of rituals into narratives that purport “ideals achieved,” “critique but infallible origins,” and “struggle for personhood.”

White males were often centered in civic ceremony while females and people of color were marginalized. For example, the cover of *My Fourth of July* (Spinelli & Day, 2019) features a White boy—in his pajamas—leading a parade down the street. Later, a landscape portrait in the town park positions the boy upon a hill, arms outstretched, with a multitude of people in the background. Contrasting these scenes is Wong and Chodos-Irvine’s (2006) story of an Asian-American girl who negotiates her family culture with the perceived “American” culture of Independence Day celebrations: “Even though my father has lived here since he was twelve, even though my mother loves apple pie, I cannot expect them to know Americans do not eat Chinese food on the Fourth of July” (p. 14). One illustration positions the character standing

alone in front of her family's business, watching a distant Independence Day parade. The story concludes with the girl's family sitting on the roof of their building, watching fireworks from afar. Though texts emphasizing civic ceremony included representation of diverse races and ethnicities, the default culture rests in rural, White, framing of patriotic ceremony.

Further empowering messaging of gender, racial, and socioeconomic norms of patriotic events was the theme identified in the text set related to implied universal, unquestioning participation in patriotic ceremony. Throughout the text set, no examples of protest or voluntary disengagement from patriotic ritual was identified. Children who—for religious reasons or otherwise—do not engage in patriotic ceremony will certainly not see themselves reflected in the texts analyzed.

Naturalization ceremonies as patriotic rituals were present in several texts. Framing the culminating event in which people studied and worked hard to reach citizenship, systemic barriers to this event (see Banks, 2021) and varied personal struggles were not explored.

Protest and dissent activities framed as patriotic were exclusively historical in nature. Narratives exploring the US Revolution and the Civil Rights movement as patriotic dissent were not balanced with contemporary examples of struggles for social justice. Several texts describing contemporary protest and action to change were framed in storylines regarding student-council election processes. Recess, homework, and school lunch concerns were addressed by students through protest and the elections process. Broadly, contemporary applications of “patriotic protest and dissent” were infantilized through the storylines that avoided issues of systemic inequity.

Discussion

Congruent with literature exploring textbooks (Aldridge, 2006) our analysis revealed SRNs associated with hegemonic narratives (Busey and Walker, 2017; King and Swartz, 2014). SRNs are aligned with narratives presenting a country with a flawed past but with a near-perfect present where ideals fought for have been realized. Reflecting this realization are SRNs embracing these ideals without room for disengagement, critique, or alteration. While much societal improvement has been made since kidnapped people were brought to the shores of an already-populated continent in 1619, SRNs implied a lack of social issues remaining to be addressed. Framed as patriotic, these narratives, manifested through SRNs, portray a present that is dissonant to the lived experiences of many students, their families, and communities. The nesting of SRNs within narratives that do not resonate with many children send messages that many of SRNs represent concepts not actually experienced by many. Applying the concepts from Frederick Douglass' 1852 speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* children may not see their lived experiences reflected in symbols commonly framed as patriotic (Douglass, 2018). Given picturebooks are used to impart identity and environments in which symbols and narratives are not well-realized, children may see themselves as othered by common patriotic messaging. If it is to be healthy, patriotism requires voluntary participants learn deep history, celebrate successes, dialogue about and address challenges, and be dedicated to continued

societal improvement. Rather than eschew patriotic symbols and rituals, we encourage integration of more diverse cultural and historic symbols, discussion of ongoing work to achieve ideals SRNs represent, practical ability to challenge and withdraw from ritual, and engagement in dialogue exploring a complex history of both challenges and successes. SRNs have a long history of appropriation and use by racist, xenophobic, and hegemonic organizations and are embedded in broader sociocultural narratives (Wright, 1926). As—by their own admission—hate groups embrace patriotic symbols as representing their ideologies and actions—exploration of the various meanings assigned to SRNs is needed to better understand their positioning(s) in contemporary society. That a last sight of countless Black or Indigenous people—before their murders by terrorist groups or the US military in its quest to expand westward—was a US flag, requires honest acknowledgement and consideration. If love of country is to be manifested through symbols, deeper contextualization and complication of those symbols is necessary for a more informed citizenry. It is not our desire to encourage the framing of love of community and country as problematic. Rather, we encourage engagement in dialogue regarding the complex and often problematic symbols, rituals, and histories that inform individual understandings of national identity.

Discussing how the Statue of Liberty, Mt. Rushmore, or the Star-Spangled Banner, for example, represent ideals not yet realized by all balances those ideals with the lived realities of many. Beyond picturebooks, voluntary engagement in patriotic rituals that explore multiple narratives provides venues for consideration of the balance of ideals to which many strive with an imperfect history we share. Voluntary recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, in addition to Indigenous land acknowledgements, for example, deepens students' exposure to both ideals and historical reality. Exploration of both the Star-Spangled Banner and Lift Every Voice and Sing balance traditional patriotic work with narratives that expand understanding of the diverse experiences of people throughout US history. Reflecting Bello and Okpiliya's (2017) call to create children's literature that "... must not shy away from the realities that confront us as a people" (p. 18), we call on authors and illustrators to present ideals balanced with historical and contemporary realities.

Conclusion

Patriotic experiences are foundational to the US elementary school experience. Likewise, employment of illustrated children's books is universal in elementary classrooms. This analysis explored how patriotism is conceptualized through picturebooks. Results of this analysis inform adults and will advance discourse regarding the role of patriotic education in schools and society. We encourage future deep critique of picturebooks to grow understandings of relationships between self-identities, civic identities, and the books to which children are exposed.

Children witness in their lived experiences their nation's wonders, successes, and greatness, struggles, flaws, and conflicts. Balancing exploration of these strengths and challenges through wider and more diverse patriotic symbols, rituals, and their associated narratives reflects the opportunities and challenges realized by such a large and complex nation. It is through well-

informed choice, meaningful action, and deep understanding of history and present that commitment, love, and loyalty to community—local and national—can be meaningfully achieved.

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Table 1: *A priori* Codes Used in Analysis of “Patriotic Picturebooks”

Manifestation of patriotism	“Commonly understood” patriotic codes	Examples of counternarrative codes
Symbols	Flags; liberty; fireworks; parades; picnics; Fourth of July/Independence Day; Bald Eagle; Pledge of Allegiance; and Star-Spangled Banner/National Anthem	Protest flags; Juneteenth; Lift Every Voice and Sing; “peace symbol”; raised fist symbol, totem poles
Rituals	Pledge of Allegiance; saluting the flag; military service; veterans; sacrifice; heroes; voting; protest; dissent; campaigning/elections; and volunteering	Conscientious objection; critique-based kneeling; lunch counter protests; the placement of Black and other disenfranchised bodies in spaces intended for White people
Historical people/places/events	Historic people (ex., George Washington); historic event references (ex. American Revolution, Civil War); historic processes (ex. westward migration); national monuments (ex. Grand Canyon, Statue of Liberty) and geographic locations (ex. Washington, D.C., Nebraska)	Historic people (ex. Sonia Sotomayor, John Brown, Claudette Colvin); historic event references (ex. Slave rebellions, marches/protests for civil rights); historic processes (ex. Limitations to legal immigration, slavery); national monuments (ex. Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site) and geographic locations (ex. Montgomery Jail).

Table 2: Patriotic Symbols and Ideals

	Example Text or Illustration	Citation
Symbol nested as ideal achieved	The cover of this text portrays children hoisting a flag in a style reenacting <i>Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima</i> , (Rosenthal, 1945) without mention of the context or price paid in the original event.	Cheney, L., and Glasser, R. P. (2002). <i>America: A patriotic primer (1st ed.)</i> . Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books.
	“When people come to our great country Aboard ships that cross the sea They are welcomed to our harbors By the flags of liberty”	Ryan, P. M., and Masiello, R. (2006). <i>The flag we love (Anniversary ed.)</i> . Charlesbridge.
	“The Statue of Liberty is a truly unforgettable sight—a symbol of all that is America.”	Maestro, G. (1989). <i>The Story of the Statue of Liberty</i> . New York, NY: HarperCollins.
Symbol nested as critique but supporting infallibility of intent of founders	Illustration of a civil rights protest of the 1960’s with the US Flag in prominent display. Text over the protest states “Woven together”. Text on the flag also states: “Woven together.”	Naberhaus, S., and Nelson, K. (2017). <i>Blue sky white stars</i> . Adfo Books.
Symbol nested as struggle for personhood	The illustration portrays Cesar Chavez in a corn field standing on a ladder with an upraised fist. A US flag is near the margin of the illustration. The text associated with this scene is: “Cesar picketed, prayed, and talked. The people listened to their hearts and marched for their rights. “ <i>¡Sí, se puede!</i> ” Cesar said. “Yes, you can!”	Obama, B., & Long, L. (2010). <i>Of The I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters</i> . Alfred A. Knopf.

Table 3: Patriotic Narratives and Ideals

	Example Text or Illustration	Citation
Narrative nested as ideal achieved	<p>“Tom [Jefferson] leveled a mountain to build his estate of Monticello in Virginia. Architecture was one of his ‘favorite amusements’.... [The illustration associated with this text has Jefferson sitting on a horse, smiling as he looks at a blueprint. Enslaved people are in the background pushing wheelbarrows and constructing Monticello.]</p>	<p>Kerley, B. and Fotheringham, E. (2012). <i>Those rebels, John & Tom</i>. Scholastic Press.</p>
	<p>After four years of fighting, at last the North won. The country was united again.</p>	<p>Thomson, S. L., Dacey, B., and Bandelin, D. (2003). <i>Stars and stripes: The story of the American flag (1st ed.)</i>. Collins.</p>
Narrative nested as critique but supporting infallibility of intent of founders	<p>T is for Harriet Tubman, who fought against slavery. We’ll always remember her most for her bravery.</p>	<p>Stone, T. L., and Kelley, G. (2011). <i>A Is for America: A patriotic alphabet book (Original ed.)</i>. Price Stern Sloan.</p>
	<p>“Soon after [the Gettysburg Address] I [Abraham Lincoln] helped pass a law that ended slavery in America and freed all those people. Then we ended the Civil War. As a result, we didn’t just bring together these United States of America—we proved that this government of the people, by the people and for the people would be dedicated to freedom and justice.</p> <p>Most [presidents] were wealthy, white, Protestant men who might have been surprised if they’d been around to see a Catholic or an African American man elected president...or a woman nominated by a major party for the highest office in the land.</p>	<p>Meltzer, B., and Eliopoulos, C. (2014). <i>I am Abraham Lincoln (Ordinary people change the world) (First Edition/First Printing ed.)</i>. Dial Books.</p> <p>Messner, K., and Rex, A. (2020). <i>The next president: The unexpected beginnings and unwritten future of America’s presidents</i>. Adfo Books.</p>

Narrative nested as struggle for personhood	<p>“The delegates now turned to Tom’s declaration. He squirmed and suffered as they fine-tuned phrases and trimmed passages, including his condemnation of slavery—an issue the country would not resolve for almost one hundred years. They cut and cut until soon Tom’s work was only one page long: an expression, in terms plain and firm, of American independence.”</p>	<p>Kerley, B. and Fotheringham, E. (2012). <i>Those rebels, John & Tom</i>. Scholastic Press.</p>
	<p>Ruby [Bridges] wouldn’t be treated like a second class student, and she persisted, walking for weeks past angry, hateful protesters to integrate an all-white elementary school in New Orleans</p>	<p>Clinton, C., and Boiger, A. (2017). <i>She persisted</i>. Adfo Books.</p>
	<p>“...in Montgomery, Alabama, Claudette Colvin was expected to give up her seat to a white woman just because she was African American. In her refusal to get up, she persisted in taking a stand for what’s right...”</p>	<p>Clinton, C., and Boiger, A. (2017). <i>She persisted</i>. Adfo Books.</p>

Table 4: Patriotic Rituals and Ideals

	Example Text or Illustration	Citation
Ritual nested as ideal achieved	“Everyone marches on the Fourth of July.”	Ziefert, H., and Miller, G. (2000). <i>Hats off for the fourth of July!</i> Viking.
	“Then we sing “The Star-Spangled Banner and when we get to “the home of the brave,” the first fireworks go off. They light the sky—a red-and-blue umbrella. Bud barks. Jess cries.”	Osborne, M. P., and Catalanotto, P. (2003). <i>Happy birthday, America (1st ed.)</i> . Roaring Brook Press.
Ritual nested as critique but supporting infallibility of intent of founders	Citizens march for freedom with action, faith, and word. A righteous banner guarantees their voices will be heard.	Ryan, P. M., and Masiello, R. (2006). <i>The flag we love (Anniversary ed.)</i> . Charlesbridge.
	Illustration of protest with text “insure domestic tranquility”	Spier, P. (1987). <i>We the People: The Constitution of the United States</i> . Doubleday Books for Young Readers.
Ritual nested as struggle for personhood	Not all American Indians Celebrate this holiday [Independence Day]. For some of us it is a day to protest the loss of our native lands.	Heiligman, D., and Dennis, M. (2007). <i>Celebrate Independence Day</i> . National Geographic.