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Representing the Portrayal of Pilgrims in Elementary History Textbooks and the Myth of the Founding of the American Nation

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Every American knows something about the Pilgrims: they were Puritans (or Separatists) who emigrated from England to freely practice their own form of Protestantism. They went first to the Dutch Republic, but about thirty-five members of the party desired complete separation from other religions. These thirty-five Puritans, along with sixty-seven other emigrants, set out in the *Mayflower* for the New World, ostensibly for Virginia. They landed instead in Massachusetts in November of 1620 and chose a site for a settlement, which they named Plymouth. Plymouth lay outside the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company, with whom the Pilgrims were contracted, so they created the Mayflower Compact, which set up what is often seen as a democratic system of government. Unfortunately, because the settlers arrived in November, they were unable to grow food and about half of the group died in the first winter. Luckily for them, however, Squanto, a Native American—and later others—came to help. They taught the settlers how to grow crops and gather food in their new environment. Squanto and his allies also acted as ambassadors and translators to the other Native Americans in the area. At the end of the harvest that year, the Pilgrims celebrated the “First Thanksgiving” with their Native American friends.

This paper will examine how this common representation of Pilgrims in elementary history textbooks reflects and disseminates an American nationalist mythology. This representation communicates this myth specifically through the portrayal of Thanksgiving, the relationship with the Native Americans, and the Pilgrims’ “American ideals.” Many historical facts are omitted or distorted in this depiction of the Pilgrims’ story. The representation of the Pilgrims is examined in two elementary United States history textbooks, *Social Studies: United States History*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 2004, and *United States History: Beginnings*

to 1877, published by Holt McDougal in 2010. These texts' presentation of the Pilgrims' story prevents a true understanding of America's complex history and identity.

The theory of invented tradition plays a significant role in the discussion of the Pilgrims and their representation in history textbooks. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger define invented tradition as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules...these ritual or symbolic acts seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition...implying continuity with the past."¹ Importantly, an invented tradition does not have to be a specific event, such as a holiday, though it often takes the form of one. "Tradition" can also mean a longstanding set of beliefs or a doctrine that is woven into the fabric of society. The representation of Pilgrims in textbooks constitutes just such a series of invented traditions.

Textbooks are a particularly effective way to examine the representation of the Pilgrims because they play an integral role in teaching United States history. Frances FitzGerald notes in her seminal examination of history textbooks, "Children have to read textbooks; they usually have to read all of each textbook and are rarely asked to criticize it for style or point of view."² Classroom curricula are often based in textbooks, ensuring that the books' representation of the facts will be spread even if the students do not specifically engage with the text. Additionally, the public sees textbooks as a reliable source of correct information about the subject. They purport to contain an unbiased presentation of the facts that students can easily reference. The American Textbook Council, an independent research organization dedicated to reviewing history texts, addresses this important role of textbooks:

¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in *The Invention of Tradition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

² Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 27.

American history textbooks are the official portraits of our country's past that are purchased by local and state governments and that are assigned to students with the foreknowledge that these students will someday participate in public affairs. How much these students know and what they think about their nation and world will indelibly affect civic character.³

Students learn much of what they know about the United States from history textbooks; therefore, the representation of events in this nation's past in textbooks is key to students' perception of those events.

Both textbooks analyzed here are credible examples of the norm in elementary United States history textbooks. The Houghton Mifflin textbook is on the American Textbook Council's list of most widely used elementary history textbooks in the country.⁴ Both books convey essentially the same basic information about the Pilgrims (although the Holt McDougal book devotes slightly more text to them), as well as providing similar resources for teachers, such as online lesson plans provided by websites like TeacherLINK.⁵

American national mythology is spread in part by the portrayal of the Pilgrims in elementary United States history textbooks. One of the most prominent examples is the myth of Thanksgiving. Most people perceive the First Thanksgiving as a celebration by the Pilgrims of a successful harvest with their Native American friends. Textbooks represent it as a three-day-long feast with about ninety Native Americans, including Massasoit and Squanto. Most

³ Gilbert T. Sewall, *History Textbooks at the New Century: A Report of the American Textbook Council*, (New York: American Textbook Council, 2000), 2.

⁴ "Widely Adopted History Textbooks," *American Textbook Council*, accessed October 25, 2010, <http://www.historytextbooks.org/adopted.htm>.

⁵ "Lesson Plan – Thanksgiving – A Focus on Clothing," *TeacherLINK @ Utah State University*, accessed October 25, 2010, <http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/Thanksgiving.html>.

Americans see the First Thanksgiving as a celebration of the Pilgrims' hard work and perseverance through their first year in Plymouth.

Today, Americans celebrate Thanksgiving each year on the fourth Thursday in November. It is a time to remember the Pilgrims, spend time with family, eat turkey, watch football, and (in some cases) actually give thanks. When we celebrate the Pilgrims, we celebrate the values they supposedly upheld. Waters comments, "Today's uniquely positive American values like the rule of law, freedom of religion, cultural diversity, farming, and hard work are logically celebrated by acknowledging the role Pilgrims and Indians played in developing the new society."⁶

This role, however, is largely an invented tradition. The Pilgrims did not actually have a Thanksgiving tradition, and if they had celebrated a day of thanks, it probably would have included prayer and fasting rather than feasting. In fact, Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until the Civil War, when America desperately needed a holiday to inspire feelings of patriotism and solidarity.⁷ Thanksgiving, in its current incarnation, provided the perfect solution. Many Americans think of Thanksgiving as an organic tradition; rather, it was invented to remind a war-torn nation of its roots and to reunite the country.

However, none of this information is mentioned in elementary history textbooks. All the Houghton Mifflin text says of Thanksgiving is, "People in the United States remember this feast during Thanksgiving, a national holiday celebrated every November."⁸ When people "remember

⁶ Tony Waters, "Why Students Think There Are Two Kinds of American History," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 1 (2005): 18.

⁷ Arthur Quinn, "The Miracle Harvest," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1994, 33, *Academic Search Complete* (accessed January 25, 2012).

⁸ "European Settlements," in *United States History 5: Houghton Mifflin Social Studies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 138.

this feast,” they also remember the Pilgrims, and all of the values and ideals that, according to Waters, are attached to the Pilgrims.

The Houghton Mifflin text credits Squanto, saying, “Squanto taught the Pilgrims to plant crops such as maize (corn), pumpkins, and beans...By the fall of 1621, the colony had become more successful.”⁹ The message sent here is that if the students work hard and persevere, they will be rewarded with help and a good harvest in whatever endeavors they are pursuing. These are the quintessential American values of hard work and equal opportunity.

The Holt McDougal text is more explicit in its presentation of Thanksgiving as an invented tradition. It reads, “This feast became known as the first Thanksgiving...This event marked the survival of the Pilgrims in the new colony.”¹⁰ By referring to the celebration as the “first Thanksgiving,” the textbook sets Thanksgiving up as an organic tradition started by the Pilgrims and continued by the rest of the nation, not a one-time event that was capitalized on during the Civil War.

Thanksgiving was formally instituted as a national holiday around the same time policies towards Native Americans became much harsher. In the late nineteenth century, especially in the frontier states, “Exterminate or Banish” became a popular slogan regarding Native American policy.¹¹ This exterminatory rhetoric translated to significant violence against Native Americans throughout the United States. Ironically the Pilgrims’ story and Thanksgiving, in which

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “The English Colonies,” in *United States History: Beginnings to 1877* (Austin: Holt McDougal, 2010), 79.

¹¹ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, (New York: Cambridge, 2005), 91.

friendliness to the Native Americans plays a key role, rose to national prominence in this time in which general opinion and actions were anything but friendly to Native Americans. Mann posits that genocidal policies such as the ones practiced by the American government in the nineteenth century are “the dark side of democracy,” because he has found that ethnic cleansing occurs more in democratic regimes than authoritarian regimes.¹² Since Democratic government also plays a key role in the myth of the Pilgrims, the institution of Thanksgiving as a national holiday demonstrates Lincoln’s need for a device that not only unified his people but also highlighted national mythology to ease the people’s conscience concerning Native American policy.

Most American schoolchildren are taught that the Pilgrims coexisted peacefully with the Native Americans. The myth is that the Pilgrims were generous, magnanimous settlers who were willingly helped by the friendly Native Americans. Though the settler-Native American relations were generally peaceful from the time of settlement until the Pequot War of 1637, the events that took place before Plymouth was founded were not so benign. Though the exact effect is difficult to quantify, a high percentage of Native Americans died as a result of European contact. Jennings cites an account of a settler:

In 1656, Adriaen Van der Donck wrote from his experience in New Netherland that “the Indians...affirm, that before the arrival of the Christians, and before the small pox broke out amongst them, they were ten times as numerous as they are now, and that their population had been melted down by this disease, whereof nine-tenths of them have died.”¹³

The Native Americans often cooperated with the settlers because their numbers had been so diminished by disease that they felt they had no other option. Loewen remarks, “Indeed, the

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 24.

plague helped prompt the legendary warm reception Plymouth enjoyed from the Wampanoags.”¹⁴ In fact, Plymouth was built over an abandoned Native American village called Patuxet that had been decimated by sickness. Another aspect of the myth of the Pilgrims is that “America was a virgin land, or wilderness, inhabited by people called savages...that civilization was required by divine sanction...to conquer the wilderness and make it a garden.”¹⁵ America was already inhabited when the Pilgrims arrived; instead of forging new territory in a wilderness, they had to displace the current occupants and resettle the land. Pilgrims also were known to steal from the houses and graves of Native Americans.¹⁶ Without the Native Americans, the settlement at Plymouth would almost certainly have failed, because in spite of poor treatment by Europeans, the Native Americans helped the settlers grow crops and gather food as well as establish trading posts for the furs they trapped. However, this side of the European-Native American relationship is not often discussed, because Westerners try to avoid the image of mass murderers who essentially wiped out entire populations. The myth of the Europeans’ good relations with the Native Americans is an invented tradition perpetuated to show the European-Americans in general and the Pilgrims in particular as inherently good people who cohabitated harmoniously with the native peoples.

This myth is perpetuated in elementary history textbooks. The Houghton Mifflin text mentions Native American relations (besides the story of Squanto) in one sentence: “William

¹⁴ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, (New York: Touchstone, 2007), 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 75.

Bradford, the governor of Plymouth, and Massasoit agreed to live in peace.”¹⁷ The text offers no discussion of the reasons for this agreement, other than that Squanto introduced Bradford and Massasoit. The effect European diseases had on the Native American population also goes unmentioned. However, the authors highlight the role of Squanto as an example of the harmonious relationship between the Native Americans and the Pilgrims. The text says, “Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant crops such as maize (corn), pumpkins, and beans.”¹⁸ This book portrays Squanto as helpful, obliging, and, to some extent, subservient. The disturbing aspects of the relationship between the settlers and the Native Americans are ignored completely.

In the Holt McDougal text, Squanto again plays a major role in the portrayal of Native American-Pilgrim relations. The Pilgrims learned farming techniques from him, and he “helped the Pilgrims establish relations with the local Wampanoag Indians.” After that, “conditions in the Plymouth colony began to improve.”¹⁹ This text shows Squanto as a key factor in the survival of the Plymouth colony, which he was. However, like the Houghton Mifflin textbook, the Holt McDougal book contains no allusion to any negative relations with the Native Americans, such as disease or grave robbing. In fact, in a graphic of the Plymouth colony, an abandoned Native American village is shown, but the text does not mention that the village is abandoned because all of its former inhabitants perished from European disease.²⁰

¹⁷ “European Settlements,” 138.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “The English Colonies,” 79.

²⁰ Ibid., 81.

These texts willfully ignore the negative aspects of the relationship between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans because the traditional American historical narrative regards the Pilgrims as the embodiment of American ideals. Abrams points out that, “Bay Staters boasted about their Pilgrim forefathers’ high moral standards, individual piety, congregational autonomy, educational superiority, and governmental stability.”²¹ The vast majority of historical texts at all levels portray Pilgrims as virtuous citizens who laid the groundwork for the American values we now treasure. The glorification of American values and culture (which purport to originate with the Pilgrims and other founders) in textbooks dates back to “the texts of the nineteenth century and those of the nineteen-thirties and after” which “go on at length about the special virtues of Americans and the specialness of American culture and political institutions.”²²

One of the main values cherished by Americans is religious freedom. Americans believe that all people should be able to worship or not worship as they choose, and the myth of the Pilgrims perpetuates that value. The story of the Pilgrims as it relates to religion is that the Pilgrims wanted to be able to practice their religion freely, so they moved to Holland and eventually to the Americas. Miller notes, “The Pilgrims...had never wanted to leave England, but had been obliged to depart because the authorities made life impossible for Separatists.”²³ The Pilgrims’ desire to worship freely is an invented tradition that forms the basis of the institution of freedom of religion in American history. However, the Pilgrims’ version of religious freedom was exclusive: only their specific form of Protestantism was allowed in their

²¹ Ann Uhry Abrams, *The Pilgrims and Pocahontas: Rival Myths of American Origin*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), 14.

²² FitzGerald, *America Revised*, 77.

²³ Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956), 3.

settlements; they wanted the freedom to worship as they chose, but not to allow members of other faiths that same privilege.

The Houghton Mifflin textbook ensures that its readers understand the importance of religious freedom to the Pilgrims. Under each main heading, there is a “Main Idea” that is reinforced by a question at the end of the section. The “Main Idea” for the largest block of text on the Pilgrims states, “The Pilgrims came to America for religious freedom.”²⁴ The authors could not possibly be more explicit in their representation. Presenting the idea of religious freedom as the “Main Idea” shows its importance in the myth of the Pilgrims that is being perpetuated. The text goes on to read, “One small group of Separatists went to the Netherlands in the early 1600s to find religious freedom. These Separatists called themselves Pilgrims.”²⁵ The word choice sets up the Pilgrims as defiant, freedom-loving people, just like Americans are supposed to be. Calling them “Pilgrims” reinforces the religious motivation for the journey to the New World and adds a sense of legitimacy to their expedition, because pilgrims have long been respected for their faith. The Holt McDougal text has a similar message. It says, “The Pilgrims were one Separatist group that left England in the early 1600s to escape persecution.”²⁶ “Escape persecution” is the key phrase here. Moderate Protestants were indeed persecuting the Pilgrims on the basis of their religion, but instead of leaving to form a society in which a modern conception of religious freedom was practiced, they wanted to ensure that their strict form of Protestantism was the only type of worship allowed. Though these texts both focus on religious freedom, their characterization of religious freedom is different than that of the Pilgrims. Both

²⁴ “European Settlements,” 136.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “The English Colonies,” 78.

textbooks assume the modern definition of religious freedom as codified in the First Amendment, whereas the Pilgrims' version of religious freedom was very restricted. Textbooks perpetuate an American nationalist myth by not revealing the true meaning of religious freedom according to the Pilgrims.

Another of the core principles of American society is the principle of democratic self-government. This principle is firmly rooted in the myth of the Pilgrims as well, specifically in the myth of the Mayflower Compact. These texts portray the Mayflower Compact as a document that set up a democratic form of government that the entire group of Pilgrims agreed to obey. Lord discusses the importance of the Mayflower Compact in American history:

Monuments are erected, historical and hereditary patriotic societies meet on the 21st day of successive Novembers to commemorate the signing of the Compact on that day in 1620, because the Compact expresses and typifies to them that ideal of civil liberty and pure democratic government which Theodore Parker first expressed in the line which Lincoln made famous: --"Government of the people, for the people, and by the people."²⁷

The portrayal of the Mayflower Compact as a democratic document is an invented tradition because it serves to perpetuate the American democratic ideal from a time before such an ideal even existed. Textbooks depict the Mayflower Compact as a natural precursor to the Constitution and the democratic form of government we all enjoy today; the use of Lincoln's quote links the history of the United States to the Pilgrims, making the struggle for democracy seem like a natural, pre-ordained progression. However, the Mayflower Compact's influence on the development of American democracy was minimal. Loewen points out, "Since the framers of our Constitution in fact paid the compact little heed, however, it hardly deserves the attention textbook authors lavish on it. But textbook authors clearly want to package the Pilgrims as a

²⁷ Arthur Lord, "The Mayflower Compact," *American Antiquarian Society* 30, no. 2 (1920): 278.

pious and moral band who laid the antecedents of our democratic traditions.”²⁸ Both textbooks examined here give the Mayflower Compact a significant amount of discussion in a relatively small section of the book. The Mayflower Compact is covered more thoroughly than the true beginnings of democracy in America: the House of Burgesses in Virginia, which has been democratic since 1619. Generally, “textbooks indeed cover the Virginia colony...but they devote 50 percent more space to Massachusetts,” so the Pilgrims are wrongly remembered as the originators of democracy in the United States.²⁹ The Mayflower Compact is presented as the only logical way to form a government, though the Mayflower Compact denied equal rights to self-government to women, slaves, and men who did not own property; only property-holding men were allowed to participate in governance, much like in the original United States Constitution.

In discussing the Mayflower Compact, the Houghton Mifflin text says, “The passengers created their own plan for government...In this compact, the passengers agreed to make laws for the ‘general good’ of the colony, and to obey them.”³⁰ The passengers essentially created their own government. Both texts depict them as self-sufficient and independent, in keeping with basic American values. The passengers also “agreed to make laws,” implying a democratic society in which the people make their own laws. This general description neglects to discuss the restrictions in participation of this lawmaking.

The Holt McDougal text is more explicit in its representation of the Mayflower Compact as a document of self-governance. In addition to an entire section of text about the Mayflower

²⁸ Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁰ “European Settlements,” 137.

Compact, this textbook includes a “Primary Source” activity using the Mayflower Compact that further reinforces the significance of the document. Part of the section of text reads, “So, they decided to establish their own basic laws and social rules to govern the colony they would found...The Compact represents one of the first attempts at self-government in the English colonies.”³¹ The phrase “establish their own basic laws” is significant because it expresses the very definition of democracy for most Americans. With this phrase and the explanation of the Mayflower Compact as an “attempt at self-government,” the Holt McDougal text clearly depicts the Mayflower Compact as a democratic document that shows that the Pilgrims respected what would become the American ideal of democratic self-governance, implying great foresight on their part.

As agents of an American nationalist mythology, textbooks perpetuate the myth of the First Thanksgiving, the myth of the Pilgrims’ cordial relations with the Native Americans, and the portrayal of the Pilgrims as representatives of American ideals of religious freedom and democratic government. Each of the myths is an example of invented tradition, whether it is an actual holiday such as Thanksgiving or a doctrine or set of beliefs that has become part of our national narrative. The mythology surrounding the Pilgrims has been used as a unifying device since the Civil War; like any founding myth, it attempts to bring the nation together by emphasizing a common history with shared values and ideals. It is especially prevalent in elementary school textbooks because the public education system, particularly the lower levels, plays a key role in indoctrinating citizens in the American nationalist mythology. Yet, in these stories, much is left out regarding the complexity of American history.

³¹ “The English Colonies,” 79.

Some elements of this history may not be appropriate for young children, such as the mass murder and grave robbing of Native Americans or the harsh religious oppression faced by the Pilgrims in England. Some elements may be left out to make the story more easily understood by young students. However, the myths discussed here are often perpetuated in high school textbooks, as well. Historians such as Jennings have been attacking these myths for years, but little change has come to upper-level history texts. FitzGerald states, “new scholarship trickles down extremely slowly to school texts...the elapsed time between the moment an idea or an approach gains currency in the academic community and the moment it reaches the school texts may be fifteen years or more.”³² By Fitzgerald’s estimate, sufficient time has passed for textbooks to reflect the new academic opinion on the Pilgrims, but school materials still perpetuate the old myths. This may be because it is easier to build on myths introduced in elementary school than shatter them with the true depth of history. Though legends such as this one are important to national identity, knowing the true history of the United States is equally important. To produce well-educated citizens, schools must select accurate textbooks that reflect current scholarship rather than simply parrot nationalist traditions.

An examination of the myths perpetuated by elementary textbooks is particularly relevant in today’s multicultural society. Many schools around the country have a significant minority population, including students who have recently come to the United States from other countries. For example, the school system of Harrisonburg, Virginia, the author’s hometown and a fairly mainstream locality, contains students from forty-seven different countries who speak fifty-one

³² FitzGerald, *America Revised*, 43.

different languages.³³ The presence of so many different heritages in the classroom raises questions about why textbooks place so much emphasis on the myth of the Pilgrims. After all, the Pilgrims were just one group that founded a small colony in Massachusetts. They were not the first group to settle in the United States, or even in New England. However, they play a huge role in what students learn about the settlement of our country. This representation raises questions about schools' focus on the Western European portion of our national heritage and whether this focus is truly fair in today's classrooms. In the examination of the two textbooks for this paper, the Western European portion of American history was revealed to be more prominent than the depiction of other cultures' experiences in the United States. This Eurocentrism has significant negative effects on the learning of history by students of non-European heritage; Loewen writes, "Caste minority children—Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics—do worse in all subjects, compared to white or Asian American children, but the gap is largest in social studies. That is because the way American history is taught particularly alienates students of color and children from impoverished families."³⁴ Not only are our textbooks and history education inaccurate, they make it more difficult for many students to learn and understand American history.

Elementary history textbooks such as the two examined here put forth a simple picture of the Pilgrims. These texts portray them as pillars of true American ideals who lived in peace with the Native Americans, celebrating the First Thanksgiving with their Native American friends after persevering through a long, hard winter. This story, while appealing to America's Western

³³ "Enrollment Statistics," *Harrisonburg City Schools*, accessed November 23, 2010, <http://www.harrisonburg.k12.va.us/Instruction/English-as-a-Second-Language/Enrollment-Statistics>.

³⁴ Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 295.

European heritage, nonetheless leaves out the more diverse heritages and cultures present in today's classrooms.

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