

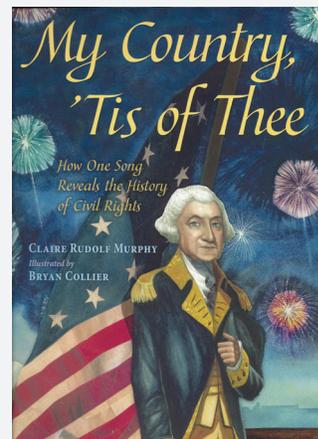
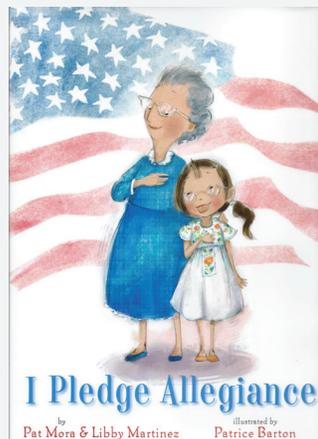
First Opinion: A Nation and Its Youth

Mora, Pat, and Libby Martinez. *I Pledge Allegiance*.

Illus. Patrice Barton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. Print.

Murphy, Claire. *My Country, 'Tis of Thee: How One Song Reveals the History of Civil Rights*. Illus. Bryan Collier. New York: Henry Holt and company, 2014. Print.

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Recent revisions to the Advanced Placement United States history curriculum have prompted intense debate regarding appropriate outcomes for history curricula. On one side, a number of politicians and school board members allege that the new AP framework—which emphasizes “historical thinking skills”—maligins the United States through “excessive” attention to “negative” aspects of American history. Some go so far as to deem the new curriculum “dangerous” because it “fails to instill patriotism and an appreciation for American exceptionalism” (Horsey). On the other side of the debate, a mass of educators, parents, and students themselves assert that a censored history curriculum designed to breed good (i.e., loyal) citizens and patriots is closed-minded and therefore is truly dangerous. The picture books *I Pledge Allegiance* and *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* align with opposite sides of these debates.

Mora and Martinez’s book, *I Pledge Allegiance*, encourages patriotic fealty through an uncritical promulgation of American exceptionalism. It tells the story of a school girl, Libby, who happens to be learning the Pledge of Allegiance during the same week that her great-aunt Lobo is practicing it at home in anticipation of her upcoming citizenship ceremony. With the Pledge of Allegiance itself repeated five times in the course of the book, one of the

obvious objectives of this text is to help child readers learn the Pledge of Allegiance as well. Another effect of this repetition is the fetishization of the Pledge of Allegiance. Notably, this combination of repetition and fetishization underwrites a more general effort on the part of Mora and Martinez to guide children become good little citizens themselves. A perfect encapsulation of how this book works to hail child readers into good citizenship occurs when Libby's teacher explains the history of the Pledge of Allegiance. In a passage that amounts to Mora and Martinez speaking to young readers, Mrs. Adams says, "Long ago, in 1892, a man named Francis Bellamy wrote the Pledge of Allegiance. He hoped that girls and boys would promise to be good citizens. Now let's all read the Pledge together" (unpaged). In this passage, both the children in the book and the readers of the book are deftly connected to the ideals of citizenship that Bellamy envisioned.

The most heavy-handed ideological work occurs through Lobo. For instance, at one point Lobo and Libby are practicing the Pledge of Allegiance when Lobo imparts to Libby (and the reader) a sugary vision of the United States: "I like the words 'liberty and justice for all.' We are promising to be fair to everyone. This country is like one big family, *una familia*, that works together to take care of people who need our help" (unpaged). Later, when Lobo recounts her migration to the United States from Mexico, she tells Libby, "My father wanted a safer place for us to grow up, and we came to the United States. The American flag—red, white, and blue—wrapped itself around me to protect me" (unpaged). In these and other moments, the book does nothing less than sanction a reader into an idealized, exalted, and ultimately smug view of the United States.

Like *I Pledge Allegiance*, Murphy's *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* centers on a familiar profession of American citizenship. However, rather than drill the song into children's minds and hearts—as Mora and Martinez do through repetition—Murphy encourages historical thinking skills by escorting readers through an overview of the ways that "Protestors for equal rights have claimed their place in this nation's history by writing and singing new verses" (7) for the patriotic standard. She begins by taking readers back to England in the 1740s, when "God Save the King" served as a rallying cry for supporters of King George II. She then shows how, from that point onward, individuals in an array of contexts have co-opted and modified the tune according to the exigencies of their specific social and political circumstances. These include British colonial soldiers involved in the French and Indian War, American colonists chafing against the rule of King George III, advocates for women's rights in the new American republic, and labor activists speaking up for fieldworkers, to name just a few.

As Murphy thereby demonstrates her point that "More than any other, one song traces America's history of patriotism and protest," she enables a more complicated, more historically comprehensive understanding of a text that children might otherwise be asked or required to memorize and recite. In the process, she invites critical curiosity about the stories behind the professions of patriotic faith that most of us take for granted. What is more, and contrary to the

ethos of Mora and Martinez's book, Murphy goes out of her way to acknowledge unflattering aspects of American history. Of course, to honestly account for some of the permutations of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," she simply must do so. Thus, to provide a meaningful context for the abolitionist revision, "My country, 'tis for thee, / Dark land of slavery, / For thee I weep," she notes that at the time "America was not a 'land of the noble free' for the four million slaves in the South" (22). Likewise, to put into proper perspective lines such as "My country! 'Tis to thee, / Sweet land of Liberty, / My pleas I bring" (by Sioux writer Zitkala-Ša), Murphy explains, "Even though American Indians had lived on this land for thousands of years, they still were not considered citizens of the United States " (34).

Although intended for slightly different age groups, *I Pledge Allegiance* and *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* throw into relief the competing philosophies and priorities that drive current debates surrounding the AP US history revisions specifically and US history curricula more generally. Ultimately, as Mora and Martinez's efforts at patriotic inculcation modulate into stark nationalism, their book ends up feeling as unnervingly indoctrinating as, say, something like Lynne Cheney's *America: A Patriotic Primer* (2002). Meanwhile, whereas Mora and Martinez effectively foreclose critical historical thinking, Murphy productively models and encourages it.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Phillip Serrato is an associate professor at San Diego State University in San Diego, California. His teaching and research interests revolve around matters of identity, sexuality, and gender in both children's and adolescent literature. Presently he is at work on two books, one an examination of masculinity in Chicano/a literature, film, and performance from the nineteenth century to the present day, and the other a critical survey of the emergence, history, and development of Chicano/a children's literature.