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Introduction

Learning and Teaching the Complexities of Patriotism Here and Now

Mark T. Kissling

Last June, the day before the Philadelphia Eagles franchise was scheduled to celebrate its Super Bowl victory at the White House, U.S. President Donald Trump revoked the invitation.

The majority of the players had made clear that they would skip the event. Instead of attending the presidential spectacle, they planned to celebrate elsewhere in Washington, D.C., including by touring the nearby National Museum of African American History and Culture (Nakamura & Lowery, 2018). In place of the event, the President led a ten-minute “Celebration of America” on the White House lawn that featured the playing and singing of the national anthem and “God Bless America” (Shear, 2018).

The politics of patriotism were at the center of what transpired.

Ever since the fall of 2016, when quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling on the sideline during the national anthem in protest of racial injustice and police brutality, the President has called Kaepernick and other professional athletes who have joined the cause unpatriotic (Bryant, 2018). But protesting injustice—with precedent in the Declaration of Independence and protection in the U.S. Constitution—is patriotic. Indeed, patriotism is much more than simple loyalty to a country or obedience to its leaders.

This issue of the Bank Street Occasional Papers Series seeks to grapple with the complexity of patriotism, particularly in relation to its workings in the lives of teachers and students in schools. Like it or not, schools teach (about) patriotism implicitly if not explicitly. Therefore, much consideration needs to go into what schools should teach about and how they should enact patriotism.

Patriotism is neither simplistic nor arcane, two common tropes. Rather, it is dynamically messy and as relevant as ever, in the present moment of rising populist and nationalist sentiments in the United States and across the world. As the pieces in this issue show, patriotism—and the learning and teaching of it—is complicated and contested, loved and hated, seemingly straightforward but entirely complex.

Patriotism and Schools

As a natural-born citizen of the United States, am I patriotic? Is my teaching patriotic? Do I want my students to be patriotic? My answer for each of these questions: well, maybe. It depends upon how we’re defining patriotic.
At this moment in time in the United States, some are trumpeting a longstanding nationalistic patriotism reflected in slogans such as “America First” and “Make America Great Again,” akin to Westheimer’s (2007) description of “authoritarian patriotism” (pp. 171-188). But equally if not more patriotic are the critical commitments reflected in the exhortations “Black Lives Matter” and “Time’s Up,” which align with Westheimer’s “democratic patriotism.” While knee-jerk allegiance to the country’s symbols or leaders is often simplistically recognized (or dismissed) as the whole of patriotism, it is a “critical patriotism”—with a loving orientation that embraces diversity, equity, and solidarity—that is the foundation for bettering one’s communities.

Critical notions of patriotism focus on the scale of the country or nation-state (i.e., “the national”) but they also include associations at more local and global scales. Informed particularly by the work of Wendell Berry (e.g., 2003), I have sought to unfix the national as the sole scale of patriotism:

While patriotism does involve the national, it must be understood in deep relation to other scales of association. Following this notion, I contend that patriotism must be understood, or at least contended with, as place-based. Thus, I define patriotism as loving one’s shared lands and communities—that is, one’s place—by working for the betterment of all living beings within those lands and communities. The starting point for this patriotism is our places: our local lands and the communities of beings that inhabit them. (Kissling, 2016, p. 49)

Importantly, place-based patriotism is not isolationist. Rather, it is rooted in place(s), always with connections to beings and places elsewhere.

Patriotism is and can be many things. Growing a garden and donating blood are patriotic acts, alongside displaying a national flag during holidays and voting in elections. Working to combat climate change and seeking denuclearization while rooting for one’s country in the World Cup or Olympics are also patriotic acts.

This variety is also true in schools. In the United States, the Pledge of Allegiance is recited at the start of each day. Elementary students often learn and publicly perform “America the Beautiful,” “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” and “This Land Is Your Land.” These are patriotic acts, and so are lessons when teachers explicitly teach about the tensions and injustices of U.S. and world history. When teachers eschew a curriculum focused on the nation-state in favor of local and global inquiries, that can be patriotic as well.

Considering that the teaching of patriotism is foundational to the history of schooling in the United States (e.g., Koch, 1996; Webster, 1790/1965) and patriotism is always embedded in national political debates, patriotism has received remarkably little attention in the scholarly educational literature over the past decades. In social studies education, which is the corner of schooling most often explicitly linked to patriotism, the focus on citizenship far exceeds attention to patriotism (Kissling, 2016), although there is a growing interest in patriotism within the field.¹

“Wondering If”

A staple of the U.S. elementary school curricular canon is Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land.” Early in the frigid winter of 1940, Guthrie made his way from Pampa, Texas, to New York City, hitchhiking the last stretch after selling his car for cash (Klein, 1980). As Guthrie traveled, the most popular song on U.S. radio was Kate Smith singing Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” Berlin had written the song during World War I for a musical but left it out when he felt it didn’t strike the right tone. Two decades later, he shared the song with Smith as she searched for a song to sing on her radio show on Armistice Day of 1938 (Shaw, 2013).

Upon arriving in New York City, Guthrie took temporary residence at a hotel in Times Square. In the next few weeks, he proceeded to write dozens of songs, one of which was “God Blessed America,” a retort to “God Bless America.” The first of six stanzas read:

This land is your land, this land is my land
From the California to the Staten island,
From the Redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream waters,
God blessed America for me. (Santelli, 2012, p. 18)

Over the next several years, Guthrie made some edits, including changing each stanza’s tagline to “This land was made for you and me.” In 1959, music textbooks began printing the song as “This Land Is Your Land.” Today it is known across the country and world, thanks in large part to U.S. schools over the past six decades (Kissling, 2012, 2017).

In schools and out, many people see “This Land Is Your Land” as a classic statement of American patriotism. Yet in two lesser-known original verses, Guthrie wrote:

Was a big high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property
But on the back side it didn’t say nothing
God Blessed America for me.

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the relief office I saw my people
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
God blessed America for me. (Santelli, 2012, p. 18)

The music textbook companies omitted these two verses that include, as Bruce Springsteen (interview, this issue) suggests, Guthrie’s “radical politics.” The song learned, interpreted, and sung by many millions of people represents only a part of Guthrie’s lyrics.
In the first lesser-known verse, Guthrie speaks to the constraints of a capitalistic system built on the accumulation of “private property” by some, to the exclusion of others. In the second lesser-known verse, with an image of starving people “in the shadow of the steeple,” Guthrie calls the American Dream into question with the seismic “wondering if.”

For Guthrie, it seems, questioning our most cherished convictions and values is patriotic.

In This Issue

Contributors to this issue were encouraged to take Guthrie’s transition from declaration to question as an invitation to reflect upon the complexities and contradictions of patriotism—here and now; that is, in this moment in time and in their specific places. Importantly, with respect to place, the relevance of Guthrie’s inquiry extends far beyond the borders of the United States to all lands and to scales of communities other than the national.

The bulk of the words in this issue are found in five peer-reviewed papers by Margaret Nell Becker, Mark Helmsing, Nina Hood and Marek Tesar, Hillary Parkhouse, and Sam Tanner. Combined, these papers explore the teaching and learning of patriotism in different countries, in different regions of the United States, in the present moment and historically, in schools and out of them, across the K-16 grade spectrum, in planned curricula and lived curricula, and in social studies as well as other subject areas.

Woven among these papers are four short, invited essays about patriotism by William Ayers, Patricia Gándara, Ming Fang He, and Madhu Suri Prakash. The purpose of these essays, as a whole, is to offer multiple perspectives about patriotism from prominent educational scholars.

The remaining two components of this issue are a graphic story by Jenna Christian that investigates the link between patriotism and the military in U.S. schools through the Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) and an audio/transcription excerpt of an interview that I conducted in 2008 with Bruce Springsteen about his learning and singing of “This Land Is Your Land.”

While each of these pieces importantly and powerfully stands on its own, it is my hope that readers will engage with the pieces as a whole. There is no simple, straightforward path through the stories and ideas captured here. Rather, we have a complicated array—just like patriotism in theory, practice, teaching, and learning.

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References


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