



Book review

Misrepresentation and Silence in United States History Textbooks: The Politics of Historical Oblivion

By Mneesha Gellman (2024). Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 117 pp., EUR 49.99 (Hardcover) ISBN: 978-3-031-50352-8; EUR 39.99 (Softcover) ISBN: 978-3-031-50355-9; (eBook) ISBN: 978-3-031-50353-5, Open Access: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-50353-5>

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This is a timely book that, amid the recent U.S. federal push for ‘patriotic education,’ which promotes ‘a unifying and uplifting portrayal of the nation’s founding ideals’ (U.S. Department of Education, 2025), highlights the crucial role of educational media in producing knowledge and shaping educational practices. Through an extensive analysis of U.S. history textbooks from the 1950s onward and ethnographic fieldwork in four high schools in far Northern California, Mneesha Gellman demonstrates what is at stake for minority students whose histories are misrepresented or silenced in the textbooks.

The book’s overarching framework focuses on textbook representation, agency, and the socio-political implications of educational media for historically and contemporarily marginalized groups—in this case, Native American and Mexican-origin communities. The main argument is that history textbooks function as powerful instruments of indoctrination and nation-building, shaping youth identity in ways that extend beyond the classroom and influence their academic trajectories and life



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opportunities. The author therefore asks, ‘How can students imagine successful futures when history classes include a litany of past failures or the subjugation of their ancestors?’ (p. 9)

Native Americans and Mexican-origin communities occupy a unique position in U.S. history because they challenge the dominant national narrative. Native Americans are Indigenous to the land now called the United States, and their presence disrupts the foundational story of the U.S. as *terra nullius*—an empty land awaiting settlement. Mexican-origin communities are both Indigenous to regions that became U.S. territory through war and annexation and are subject to racialized narratives of being ‘immigrants’ even when their families lived in these territories long before they became part of the United States. Their histories challenge the assumption that U.S. borders are natural and historically uncontested.

The evident strength of Gellman’s work lies in its diachronic analysis of U.S. high school history textbooks published over the past seventy years and in how these findings are connected to contemporary classroom experiences and students’ own testimonies. By combining these diverse methodological approaches, the author brings to light a persistent ‘mismatch between textbooks (...) and their readers’ (p. 53), even when new editions claim to incorporate diversity and inclusion. Through the analysis of well-known cases, such as the origins of the Thanksgiving celebration and the story of Pocahontas, the author demonstrates that, despite the passage of time, even contemporary textbooks continue to reproduce inaccurate and sanitized versions of these histories. They do so by portraying Thanksgiving as an uncomplicated story of peacemaking and Pocahontas as a willing savior of a White settler.

An interesting observation by the author is that even one of the most progressive textbooks designed for Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH) courses currently in use does not fully avoid reproducing harmful narratives and stereotypes. While much of the analyzed volume encourages deeper critical thinking, many practice exercises rely on repetitive multiple-choice questions. Even when the correct answers are nonracist, the questions themselves or the alternative incorrect options often include racist or discriminatory content, thereby perpetuating stereotypical and inaccurate representations of Native Americans and Mexican im/migrant communities. Highlighting the tension between progressive content and the assessment-driven design of APUSH textbooks, Gellman consequently asks, ‘What are the virtues of a standardized curriculum if it does not inspire learning or, even worse, produces shame and even misinformation in students?’ (p. 77)

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon recently stated that teaching “this country’s exceptional place in world history is the best way to inspire an informed patriotism and love of country” (U.S.

Department of Education, 2025). By exposing how US history textbooks have omitted and silenced the histories of Native American and Mexican-origin communities, Gellman demonstrates that textbook production is a political act. Without the adoption of inclusive educational practices and critical reflection on what counts as history and who is allowed to be part of the nation's story, textbook representations 'risk casting many young readers outside the circle of belonging' (p. 60). As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) argues, hegemonic power structures shape not only what becomes recorded history, but also whose voices are silenced in the process. School textbooks participate in this production of historical knowledge, reproducing dominant narratives while silencing and marginalizing the voices of minority groups.

What is the relevance of Gellman's work beyond the U.S. context? Many national curricula around the world are built upon dominant historical narratives that privilege majority populations while marginalizing Indigenous peoples, minorities, and im/migrant communities. Despite official commitments to inclusion and diversity, Eurocentric, nationalistic, or White-centric textbook narratives frequently persist. Gellman's findings therefore underscore a broader need for culturally sensitive history education that recognizes multiple perspectives and interrogates the politics of representation in educational media. Moreover, because elements of U.S. history, such as the American Revolution and migration to the United States, are taught internationally, the book invites educators worldwide to reconsider how these themes are presented and what silences shape dominant interpretations. This is also relevant in Nordic countries, where national narratives tend to downplay involvement in colonial structures, marginalize Indigenous Sámi histories, and frame transatlantic migration with little consideration of Native American displacement.

I recommend Gellman's book because it provides an insightful analysis of how textbooks shape historical understanding and influence student identity, offering valuable lessons for educators and researchers alike. It is particularly positive that the book is open access, making these critical insights available to teachers, students, and scholars without barriers.

References

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