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## Patriotism as critique: Youth responses to teaching about injustice

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# Patriotism as critique: Youth responses to teaching about injustice

## ABSTRACT

*The view that patriotism is characterized by unquestioning loyalty to one's country remains common in the United States despite its anti-democratic implications. From this standpoint, classroom discussions of past and present injustices are a threat to patriotism because they raise doubts about national superiority and exceptionalism. Through an ethnographic study in two critical, culturally diverse US history classrooms, I investigated students' attitudes towards their country and the notion of patriotism. As opposed to fomenting disaffection among students, candid discussions of injustices led students to view their teachers and curriculum as more trustworthy than what they had encountered in prior classrooms. Moreover, they believed that this approach to curriculum was necessary for fostering the type of critical democratic patriotism that they advocated.*

## KEYWORDS

patriotism  
critical pedagogy  
democratic education  
citizenship  
US history  
classroom ethnography

I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.

(James Baldwin)

In the current era of increasing economic inequality, decreasing social trust and intensifying political polarization in the United States, there is a new urgency to the civic mission of schools to develop the will and skills necessary for pursuing a more democratic and just society. To some, this means ensuring our youngest citizens are proud of their country through learning the high points of US history and sidestepping elements such as racial and gender oppression, xenophobia, vast income inequality, health disparities and so on. This perspective can be seen in the Republican National Committee's *Resolution Concerning Advanced Placement US History* (2014: 1), which recommended an overhaul of the revised curriculum because it 'emphasizes negative aspects of our nation's history while omitting or minimizing positive aspects'. Educators who present counternarratives to the dominant, celebratory version of American history, such as teachers in the temporarily banned Mexican American studies programme in Tucson, are thus perceived as promoting divisiveness and anti-American ideas (Cabrera et al. 2014; Stitzlein 2015).

In contrast, many argue that the civic mission of schools is to ensure students understand the ways in which equality along the lines of wealth, race, gender, ability and other dimensions has yet to be achieved (e.g. Barton and Levstik 2004; Journell 2011; Levinson 2012; Mirra and Garcia 2017). These advocates of a more critical approach to the teaching of US history believe that the next generation cannot pursue democracy without understanding the ways in which the country thus far has not lived up to democratic ideals. This raises an important question for educators: empirically speaking, do students actually become disaffected when they learn the less laudable aspects of US history? That question is what the present study explored.

Extant research suggests that an acknowledgement of injustices may actually increase civic engagement among youth, particularly those from communities that have historically been marginalized (Clay and Rubin 2020; Mirra and Garcia 2017; Moya 2012; Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Rubin (2007) found that low-income students of colour were more likely to recognize injustices than their middle-class White peers, but whether they became discouraged or empowered was associated with whether they were in classes that held frank discussions of privilege and power. There has been much political debate over history textbooks and standards (Nash 1995) and speculation as to how students respond to various narratives, but very little attention to students' own perspectives on this debate. Therefore, in this study I asked youth how they felt about the United States and about critical history pedagogy after having taken a class with critical US history teachers. In particular, I sought to better understand how youth from historically marginalized communities felt about the United States, particularly in the context of classrooms in which frank discussions of injustice and resistance were common. I chose to study eleventh-grade US history students due to the opportunities this curriculum affords for such discussions. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. In what ways do youth express or reject affinity towards their country in the context of critical history classrooms?
2. How do students in critical history classrooms conceptualize patriotism and how much value do they place on it?
3. What do students perceive to be the effect of critical history teaching on patriotism?

The following section outlines some of the contending perspectives on patriotism, including the recent development of *Black critical patriotism*. Next, I situate the present study by summarizing the empirical literature on how patriotism is treated in schools, how students think about the relationship between patriotism and critique and how critical teaching of history might influence students' attitudes. I then describe the research methods and findings of the present study and offer implications for citizenship education.

## PATRIOTISM: DEFINITIONS AND DEBATES

Patriotism is an essentially contested concept, meaning that its definition is perennially a matter of dispute, and the dispute cannot be settled through empirical evidence or logic alone (Gallie 1964). The sole book-length philosophical study of patriotism defines it as a special concern and affection for one's own country (Primoratz 2017). Although many have posited more specific forms of patriotism (described in the next section), most tend to use the term broadly to mean love or special concern for one's country.<sup>1</sup> That also serves as the definition used in this article, although the specific forms of patriotism described in the next section will be more useful than this broad definition.

The question of whether patriotism is desirable has prompted much debate. One common concern is that patriotic sentiments can lead to the justification of military aggression and the suppression of those outside one's borders (Kateb 2000; Zembylas and Boler 2002) or even within. Some view the delineation of nation-states as arbitrary, and strong emotion towards one's own as misguided and divisive (Jensen 2007). Others argue that we have a psychological and social propensity towards patriotism and that this emotion can serve important aims. In her book *Political Emotions*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2013: 210) argued that the kind of particularistic love associated with patriotism is necessary if unrelated people are to have 'a willingness to live together and face adversities for the sake of common goals' or to sacrifice their own self-interest in pursuit of the greater good. She argued, 'even in a world dedicated to the pursuit of global justice, the nation has a valuable role to play, as the largest unit we know so far that is sufficiently accountable to people and expressive of their voices' (Nussbaum 2013: 212).

Recognizing that much of the debate around the desirability of patriotism stems from inconsistent definitions, some scholars have put forth frameworks to specify the various forms patriotism can take. On one end of each framework's spectrum are forms of patriotism that are characterized by unwavering positive evaluation of one's country and condemnation for any criticism of it. These include blind patriotism (Schatz et al. 1999), loyal patriotism (Merry 2009) and authoritarian patriotism (Westheimer 2007). On the other end are forms of patriotism that promote questioning and criticism in the interest of improving one's country. These include, respectively, constructive patriotism (Schatz et al. 1999), critical patriotism (Merry 2009, also Tillet 2012) and democratic patriotism (Westheimer 2007).

Democratic and critical forms of patriotism allow for allegiance to democratic principles such as 'political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and social equality' over and above the nation itself (Westheimer 2014: 129). They also allow for dissent and moral outrage arising 'from the fact that citizens may sometimes feel the best ideals of American democracy are being betrayed if not effectively undermined' (Merry 2009: 379). Both democratic and critical

1. Patriotism and nationalism are sometimes used interchangeably although many have distinguished between the concepts along several dimensions. Nationalism often refers to the normative political claim that 'one's national community should enjoy political independence' in the form of a sovereign state (Hand 2011: 330). A strong form of this definition could be used to argue that the interests of one's nation should take priority over the interests of all other nations (Zembylas and Boler 2002). Patriotism, on the other hand, need not place the interests of one's own nation above those of any other (Nussbaum 2013). Another way of distinguishing between the two is that patriotism, unlike nationalism, is more of a sentiment than an ideology (Appiah 1996).

2. Mills (1997) developed the theory of racial contract as a more accurate model of modern political arrangements than the social contract of Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke. Mills argues that, because the social contract was only intended to apply to White people, it set up a political system of White supremacy that can be understood as a racial contract.

patriotism also include consideration of the wellbeing of people beyond one's own nation, which is consistent with Nussbaum's conception of patriotism as not subordinating the interests of those in other countries to those in one's own.

Democratic patriotism has been critiqued, however, for its inability to account for the Black experience in America and the racialization of citizenship. Busey and Walker (2017) proposed the theory of *Black critical patriotism* as a counterframework to Eurocentric conceptions of citizenship and patriotism, particularly those propagated in school curriculum. The authors explained, '[w]hereas allegiance is the primary principle of authoritarian patriotism and liberal democracy for democratic patriotism, our definition of Black critical patriotism concerns personhood (Mills 1998)' (Busey and Walker 2017: 459). Drawing on Mills' (1997, 1998) argument that the United States was founded on a racial contract<sup>2</sup> under which the liberal references to the rights of 'all men' were only ever intended to apply to White men, Busey and Walker (2017) offered Black critical patriotism as a counterframework that forefronts Black resistance to subpersonhood. The authors outlined three tenets of Black critical patriotism: Black physical resistance, Black political thought and Black intellectualism. These three tenets serve as frameworks for understanding resistance to White supremacy as acts of patriotism. Their critique highlights the way in which democratic patriotism, as currently formulated, may seem suspect to youth who question whether the American democratic principles of equality and justice will ever truly apply to all.

## HOW IS PATRIOTISM TREATED IN SCHOOLS, AND WHAT ARE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS IT?

How love of country is approached (or not) in classrooms around the world reflects the political contexts of the countries in which those classrooms are located. Whereas civic education in the United States and China, for example, generally aims to instil patriotic sentiments, in Northern Ireland and Hong Kong, a degree of ambivalence towards patriotism accompanies avoidance of political controversy in favour of social stability (Barton 2005; Fairbrother 2003; Li 2018). Curricula in the United States and China tend to promote national identification, while curricula in contested societies such as Northern Ireland exposes children to a wider array of perspectives and interpretations of history (Barton 2001; McCully and Barton 2019).

Although a growing body of literature has illuminated the forms of patriotism and citizenship promoted in curricula (Westheimer 2011) and students' feelings about their countries (Barton 2005; Fairbrother 2003), only a few studies have interviewed teachers or students regarding their thoughts and feelings about patriotism specifically and its role in schools. Secondary students in China defined patriotism as loving one's country, obeying laws and not disturbing the social order (Li 2018; Xiang et al. 2018). While the students that Li (2018) interviewed believed a patriotic citizen could dislike the government, they did not think actively opposing the government was acceptable.

A study in the United States examined high school students' understandings of patriotism following the 9/11 attacks (Mitchell and Parker 2008). The authors found that students' allegiances could not be categorized simply along a binary of patriotic versus cosmopolitan (i.e. a sense of affiliation with all humans, rather than limited to those sharing a national border). Rather, the students expressed a historicized affinity – one that is constructed, contingent,

and impermanent (2008: 799). In other words, youth who are growing up in a world that is already globalized are more likely to have complex affiliations that both transcend borders but are also grounded in particular actions and events such as the 9/11 attacks.

Although most studies of attitudes towards patriotism have consisted of small-scale case studies, such as the one above by Mitchell and Parkers (2008), one large-scale survey study shed light on students' expressions of patriotism across classrooms and schools. Kahne and Middaugh (2011: 94) used interviews and a survey of 2366 high school seniors from twelve California high schools to examine 'the degree to which students' patriotic commitments align with the needs of a democratic society'. A promising 69 per cent agreed with the statement, '[i]f you love America, you should notice its problems and work to correct them'; however, a full 43 per cent of students failed to disagree with the anti-democratic statement: 'it is un-American to criticize this country' (2011: 98).

Other scholars have investigated how students feel about the United States in general, without asking about patriotism specifically, as well as how views might differ between different racial groups. Cornbleth (2002) found that high school juniors and seniors associated the United States with inequity, freedom and diversity, as well as (to a lesser extent) progress and the American Dream. Epstein (2000) analysed the historical narratives of five African American and five Euro-American students in a single US history class and found that the two groups expressed divergent understandings of the existence or lack of a common national identity, the history of racial domination and subordination, and the role of the government in perpetuating White supremacy. Several students struggled to reconcile the idea of expansion of freedom and equality with the continued existence of racial oppression in the United States. In neither of these studies were the teachers structuring curricula in such a way as to help students make sense of conflicting national narratives.

### **HOW MIGHT CRITICAL TEACHING OF HISTORY INFLUENCE PATRIOTISM AND OPINIONS OF THE NATION?**

While many studies examined the interactions between curriculum and students' levels of patriotism or feelings towards their countries (e.g. Barton 2005; Fairbrother 2003; Law and Xu 2017), fewer examined how specific pedagogies influence those feelings (for an exception, see Hand and Pearce 2011). Critical pedagogy may help students understand contradictions in American democracy by explicitly addressing issues of power, oppression and resistance. It aims to uncover the ways in which the current social order is not natural or inevitable but a product of human actions and the ongoing reproduction of social hierarchies<sup>3</sup> (Freire [1970] 2008; Giroux 1983; McLaren 2009). Students with firsthand experience with social inequities may respond particularly well to critical pedagogy, as it validates their experiences and encourages action (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008; Levinson 2012; Moya 2012). This suggests that critical teachers who facilitate candid conversations about US history may foster critical patriotism among their disenfranchised students. In addition, these conversations are important for privileged students to recognize their own power to make political systems more equitable, and to resolve to do so as adults (Swalwell 2013).

Chua and Sim (2017) conducted the only empirical study I was able to find that examined secondary classrooms in which the teaching of

3. Critical pedagogy has been criticized for promoting indoctrination, given that the teacher may present a particular (leftist) view as the correct understanding of the world (Sibbett 2016). On the other hand, '[t]eaching to disrupt oppression and create more humane and inclusive systems and structures, and more genuine equality of opportunity, is the stance most consistent with democracy' (Hytten 2015: 4). In this way, critical pedagogy can be a means of promoting democracy, as opposed to a leftist political agenda (see also Applebaum 2009 for a response to the charge of indoctrination).

critical patriotism was an explicit goal. In the context of an elite high school in Singapore that had little pressure to conform to the national curriculum, Chua and Shim found that the two focal teachers encouraged critical sociopolitical consciousness in students through asking them to consider which groups were disadvantaged by particular national policies. Although the researchers did not examine students' responses to these pedagogies, the study helps to illuminate what teaching for critical or democratic patriotism might look like. The present study is the first of which I am aware to ask students directly how they understand both the concept of patriotism and the interaction between critical US history curriculum and the patriotism of their peers and themselves.

## **STUDY DESIGN**

This article draws from a larger ethnographic project (Anderson 1989; Carspecken 1996; Gordon et al. 2001; J. Thomas 1993) of two classrooms in diverse schools conducted between January 2015 and September 2016 in a mid-sized city in the southeast United States. The larger study examined critical pedagogy practices in US history classrooms and how students responded to these practices (see Parkhouse [2018] and Parkhouse and Massaro [2019] for a further analysis of the critical pedagogy practices and students' responses). I observed, audio-recorded and transcribed each 90-minute class for ten weeks; conducted daily, short, informal interviews with each teacher as well as two in-depth interviews in the middle and end of the observation period; and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven students from each class. I also collected classroom artefacts such as lesson plan materials, handouts and student work. In the final interview with each teacher, I asked the teachers to read their students' interview transcripts and think aloud to provide their interpretations of the student data.

The data used for the present study comes primarily from the students' interview transcripts. (The protocol can be found in Appendix A.) However, an analysis of these data was enhanced through teachers' think-alouds and my ethnographic observations of class sessions in which students formed and re-formed their opinions of the United States and patriotism. Observing students' reactions and comments in class allowed me to better contextualize and triangulate the statements they made during interviews.

### ***Participants and context***

#### *Teachers*

I used purposive sampling (Maxwell 2013) to identify two US history teachers who taught from critical perspectives and worked in an urban public school (see Table 1 for details of both schools and classrooms). I met Ms Ray in 2013 while teaching with her at a free college-access summer programme for low-income students. I identified her as appropriate for this study after seeing the critical media analysis and civil rights courses that she developed and taught in that programme. I met Ms Bowling in 2011, when I served as the co-instructor for her social studies teaching methods course, and the university supervisor for her student teaching internship.

#### *Students*

I interviewed seven students from each class. Seeking a diversity of perspectives, I invited students with a variety of ethnoracial, gender and ideological backgrounds. Both teachers recommended students they thought would



Teacher	Age and race	Years teaching	School	Free/reduced lunch schoolwide	Racial demographics of class	Gender demographics of class
Ms Bowling <sup>a</sup>	28, White	3	Creekside High School (comprehensive public)	59%	9 Black 8 White 7 Latinx	13 F 12 M
Ms Ray	24, White	2	Health Academy High School (small public magnet)	55%	21 Black 3 Latina 3 White 1 Jamaican/ Egyptian	22 F 6 M

<sup>a</sup> All individual and school names are pseudonyms. IRB approval and signed consent from all participants were obtained.

Table 1: Teacher participants and schools.

Student	Gender	Religion	Race/ethnicity/nationality <sup>a</sup>	Date of interview
<b>Ms Ray's class, Health Academy High School (public magnet, grades 9–12)</b>				
1. Amina	F	Muslim	Black American	April 1
2. Melony	F	Christian	African American	April 2
3. Ida	F	Christian	African American	April 2
4. Josephine	F	Christian	Black/African American	April 6
5. Diane	F	Christian	Black/African American	April 8
6. Dolores	F	None	Hispanic	April 14
7. William	M	Jehovah's Witnesses	White/US citizen	April 29
<b>Ms Bowling's class, Creekside High School (public comprehensive, grades 9–12)</b>				
1. Kiya	F	Christian	African American/Black	April 9
2. Angela Davis <sup>b</sup>	F	Theist	African American	April 13
3. Isabel	F	blank	American/Dominican	April 15
4. Alex	M	blank	Mexican	April 21
5. Feisty Rebel	F	None	White/American	April 22
6. Roman	M	Christian	Black/Native American	April 23
7. Matt	M	Christian	White, American	April 28 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Students filled out a demographic sheet in which they self-identified their religion and race/ethnicity/nationality.

<sup>b</sup> Angela Davis, Amina, Melony, Isabel and Feisty Rebel were the only participants who opted to choose their own pseudonyms.

<sup>c</sup> All interviews took place in 2015.

Table 2: Student participants.



provide a variety of perspectives. Table 2 provides details about the students interviewed. I strove to build students' trust and comfort with me prior to the interviews by explaining the purpose of my study to the whole class, chatting casually with students during breaks and before class, assisting students during independent or group activities, and waiting until I had been observing several weeks before inviting students for interviews. In addition, I knew Ida and Amina from the same summer programme in which I met Ms Ray.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis occurred throughout all stages of the research process in order to iteratively shape subsequent data collection and interview questions (Emerson et al. 2011). I kept a journal of my questions and initial interpretations after every class and interview, while transcribing each interview and while coding all data. I personally transcribed all interviews and observations for a deeper immersion into the data (Maxwell 2013). I then used MAXQDA to conduct substantive coding (Holton 2010), first with open, line-by-line coding followed by focused coding (Emerson et al. 2011). I coded both inductively, to seek emergent themes (D. Thomas 2006), and deductively, to identify data that related to a priori codes derived from the various patriotism frameworks described above. (See Appendix B for an excerpt from my codebook.) I then collapsed codes into emerging thematic findings, seeking disconfirming evidence as each finding emerged in order to enhance the credibility of the results (Miles and Huberman 1994). Additional measures taken to enhance trustworthiness were peer debriefing, member checks with the teachers and an audit trail (Creswell and Miller 2000).

During the final round of coding, I used a data visualization strategy to get a sense of where each student stood in relation to both each other and to the patriotism frameworks described above. I mapped students' expressed appreciation for democratic ideals along one axis and their critiques of the United States on another axis, drawing on evidence from (a) their interviews, (b) their comments during class and (c) teacher interpretations of student attitudes as expressed during the think-aloud interview in which teachers read their students' transcripts (see Figure 1). Locating each student at a particular point on the plane helped me preserve the particularities of each student's viewpoint while also making claims about the group as a whole.

### **Potential limitations**

Students may have expressed more positive feelings towards the United States out of an assumption that I, as a White, middle-class, US-born citizen, may have had such feelings or was looking for them. Ida and Amina may have known of my critical orientation from that summer programme, but I do not know how much they told their peers. In any case, many of the students made explicit critical comments during their interviews, which reassured me they were not attempting to sugarcoat their feelings.

I also triangulated interview responses from my classroom observations, and found that most students were as critical in interviews as they were in class. It is possible they were censoring their true feelings for their White, middle-class teachers, but the likelihood of this was reduced by the frequency with which the teachers encouraged students to critique. The only student who seemed to display different degrees of criticality in interview and

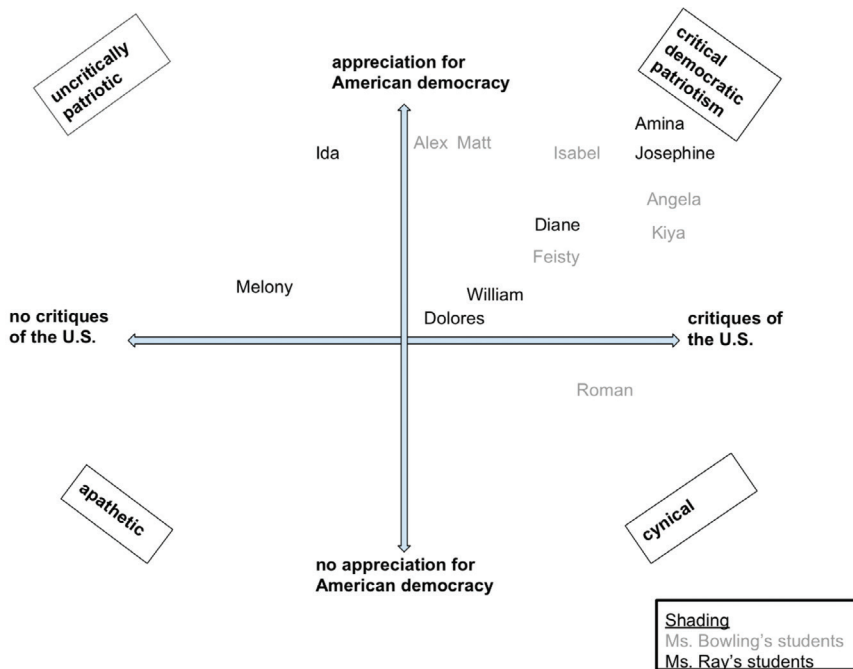


Figure 1: Degrees of critical democratic patriotism across the fourteen students interviewed.

classroom statements was Ida. In her interview, she said the United States was the greatest country in the world, but in class discussions she often demonstrated critical consciousness of its shortcomings. For instance, while discussing Freddie Grey's death, she asked Ms Ray if she thought the United States might ever have a system of slavery again. When I asked Ms Ray about the inconsistency between Ida's interview and class comments, she agreed with my interpretation that Ida generally strove to be polite and inoffensive (she was the only student who called me 'madam' throughout the interview), which may have accounted for the softening of her interview responses.

## TEACHING CONTEXTS: CRITICAL HISTORY PEDAGOGIES

Before presenting the data addressing the research questions, I here briefly provide context by describing how the two US history teachers discussed issues of injustice and modelled critical democratic patriotism. (For further details on how the teachers enacted critical pedagogy, see Parkhouse [2018]). I do not want to suggest that the students' attitudes towards the United States or patriotism were a direct result of these teachers' lessons. It is impossible to isolate the role that a history class plays in shaping students' opinions; peers, family, faith organizations, the media and other classes are just a few of the many other competing and sometimes complementary influences (Barton 2001; Cornbleth 2002; Epstein 2000, 2009; Law and Xu 2017; Wineburg et al. 2007). However, I did ask students after most responses, 'Did your US history class shape your thinking on that topic in any ways?', and students answered candidly when their opinion was formed from other influences. For example, Diana answered at one point, '[n]o it's just my own seeing type of thing'.

the most part, students did attribute many, though certainly not all, of their attitudes towards the United States and patriotism to their history classes.

Throughout their US history courses, both teachers dialogically engaged students in candid discussions of past and present inequalities. In my interviews with teachers, they expressed that they wanted students to develop critical consciousness of social injustices and awareness of ways that ordinary people can effect change. For instance, the day after protests erupted over the death of Freddie Grey, an unarmed Black youth in Baltimore, Ms Bowling projected four images and asked students to identify which they were more likely to see in the news media. On the left were photographs of looting and vandalism, and on the right were photos of a peaceful march of a church congregation and a young African American boy handing a White police officer a water bottle. Students quickly answered that those on the left were much more likely to be seen on the news, and that this resulted in reinforcing stereotypes about Black Baltimoreans, in particular, and Black Americans, in general.

Later that period, the class discussed Freddie Grey's neighbourhood in Baltimore as an example of inequitable access to decent housing. Ms Bowling told the students, '[b]ut you guys are going to be the agents of change [...] You have to come up with things that will fix the system instead of going with it. It's not going to be easy' (class observation, 29 April). This is just one of the many instances in which Ms Bowling reminded students that they had the power to act on social issues, if they could resist the tempting ease of going along with the present system.

Ms Ray described her approach to teaching and her own feelings about patriotism thusly:

I think that equality is a really important founding principle of the United States, and that pushing towards social and political equality is a really really really important part of being patriotic, for me [...]. And I think patriotism does not mean blind support or blind loyalty to the current holders of power: economic, social, political, otherwise. So, in teaching I try to convey that [...]. And I don't feel any need, as a history teacher, to make [a historical event] more rosy than I think it was. You know in order to make students feel any type of way about the US.

She embodied this philosophy by teaching US history from the lens of ongoing struggles for equality amidst perpetual oppression of numerous groups. She did not teach slavery and Jim Crow solely as examples of victimization, but as contexts in which Black Americans exercised their agency to dismantle these oppressive systems. Rather than teaching the African American civil rights movement as beginning in the 1950s, she used Hall's (2005) conception of the *long civil rights movement* as she connected every unit – from the thirteen colonies to the War on Drugs – to historical and contemporary struggles for racial justice. Students used primary sources to 'bust myths' about the movement, such as '[t]he Civil Rights Movement was an unplanned, spontaneous uprising of exceptional individuals who acted without organization or premeditated strategy'. Through having students study the ways in which ordinary individuals, and youth in particular, contributed to the movement, she countered the tendency for curricula to portray movement leaders as messianic figures that students have no chance of emulating (Woodson 2016).

Ms Ray's students learned about the Black Panthers' Ten Point Program and created their own Ten Point Program for today, applying their own observations about the many ways in which racial justice is far from being realized. Ms Ray also connected units to the long women's rights movement and gay rights movement (starting earlier than Stonewall – the event that kicks off the LGBTQ movement in many curricula, if the movement is discussed at all), labour movements, the Chicano Movement, American Indian Movement and others. Her hope was that, through 'always couching the oppression in resistance' and 'not telling about anything without showing how someone was pushing back against it', students would not feel disillusioned and hopeless, but feel inspired to join in the ongoing struggles for equality.

## STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES

As shown in Figure 1, most students in both classes expressed critiques of the United States as well as an appreciation for American democratic ideals. Notice that there are an equal number of students from both classes in that quadrant, and that there is no clustering of students by teacher. This suggests that, although the schools and teachers differed in the ways described above, students' expressions of patriotism did not appear to vary in conjunction with these differences. In this section I provide examples to justify students' positions on the plane, with particular attention to those three students who did not fall under the *critical democratic patriotism* quadrant. In the subsequent two findings sections, I address students' opinions about patriotism and their beliefs about the impacts of critical history teaching on youth's attitudes towards their country. Those viewpoints also informed my placement of students along the two axes of Figure 1.

My first interview question to students was, 'In general, could you tell me a little about your opinions of the United States?' Most students expressed positive attitudes, citing rationales such as 'it gives you a lot of freedoms' (Amina), or '[w]e know we are the best' (Ida). Eight students (Diane, Dolores, Kiya, Angela, Josephine, Matt, Feisty and Isabel) gave qualified answers, which included 'I think it's a good country. We have our problems definitely, but I'd rather be here than anywhere else' (Matt); '[i]t's better than some other countries but [...] I have a very strong opinion about the United States getting in everyone's business' (Feisty); and

I figure it's a good place to come, but we still have our – we still have a downside to the US. Like we say that we're welcoming, but we still are prejudiced towards different groups [...] and racial profiling is very disturbing to me as being a Black female [...] I just feel like the US isn't all that it's [made out] to be.

(Kiya)

Note how Kiya justified her critique through judging the nation by its own ideals (i.e. being welcoming to different groups), as opposed to her personal expectations for the nation. Kiya went on to cite lessons from Ms Bowling's class in which they discussed restriction of personal freedoms during wartime and the forced assimilation of Native Americans and enslaved Africans. During the class discussion of the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, Kiya pointed out that being at war may call for justifiable

restrictions of freedoms, but in this case, 'it was a biased act' (class observation, 8 April).

Josephine's answer was:

Here we can actually like voice our opinions and get to stand up for what we believe in, versus in other places, [where] you can't. It's just what one person thinks that goes [in other countries]. So I think it's a privilege to just be somewhere where you're able to speak for yourself.

Angela also justified her qualified opinion of the nation via a comparison to countries with less freedom (and implicitly also a comparison to the United States in the past):

I mean it's a lot better – present day it's a lot better than any other places, I mean we still have our issues that we need to work out. But overall I'm fine living in the US. Because I would really hate to live in some developing or Third World country where women cannot speak. I like speaking, I like having rights. And I don't want to get abused.

While many thought the United States was superior to countries with fewer freedoms, four added that the United States was not the greatest country in the world (Amina, Alex, Angela, Josephine) or that it would be too hard to evaluate which country is the greatest (William), or that they did not have enough information (Angela). Although Alex said the United States was 'great' and he considered himself patriotic, he also thought the country was not living up to its ideals of equality and justice:

[Immigrants] are treated very poorly, and [...] it's the whole like American thing, that we take in people, who need help, and try to get them help. But at the same time, we're not paying attention to them, and pushing them out.

Like Alex, many students took the question of 'greatest country in the world' seriously – carefully considering how it measures up against other nations rather than using their patriotism as a heuristic, which may result in a more reflexively reverent and blindly patriotic response.

### ***Synthesis of appreciation and critique***

For most students, the answer to the first research question, 'In what ways do youth express or reject affinity towards their country in the context of critical history classrooms?', was an integration of critical opinions, on the one hand, with appreciation for the freedoms and opportunities afforded in this country, on the other. Diane began her interview describing the United States as 'greedy' and not 'united' enough, especially 'with racial tendencies'. She described Americans as 'like separate clouds that are floating away from each other'. But later in the interview, Diane also said, 'I'm definitely proud to live here. Even though sometimes we can't really help ourselves, I feel like we put ourselves out there to help others' (referring to foreign assistance, for example). Diane and Isabel, as well as six other students (Alex, Amina, Angela, Dolores, Ida, Josephine) traced at least portions of their opinions to their US

history class. Diane, for instance, drew on examples from their recent lessons on the Vietnam War and the Freedom Riders to support her points.

### **Counterexamples**

I considered two students to fall in the uncritical patriotism quadrant. Ida expressed a few critiques in class (see 'Limitations' section above), but in her interview, she expressed a great deal of national pride and said the only issue she would work to change is the fact that people were too free to travel during the Ebola crisis. Melony also said the United States was a good country, but did not express as much appreciation for American democratic ideals as Ida did. The only issues Melony identified as major problems were homelessness, obesity and HIV; and unlike Ida, she did not express additional critiques in class comments. Melony mentioned in her interview that racism was on the decline, citing integrated schools as an example (although their class had recently discussed how schools are actually becoming more segregated), and she added that, while racially motivated crime is still a problem, there is essentially nothing that can be done about it.

Only one student (Roman) fell in the *cynical* quadrant, giving purely critical responses with little faith in democratic freedoms of dissent or protest as a means for effecting change. Roman said he planned to move to England or Australia, because he appreciated the fact that England is 'more upfront' about their stratified class system. When I asked if his negative feelings about the United States had been influenced by Ms Bowling's class, he answered:

**Roman:** I was kind of gullible before I came in her class. Because her and the previous history teacher I had, they both like try to show us what's really going on beyond what's been said and think past [that], instead of just taking information, like gullible people would [...] But [...] it's just, nothing I can do about it personally so.

**Interviewer:** Nothing you can do about your opinion?

**Roman:** No, about the US. Like I can have my feelings, but I'm not going to be like all radical and stuff.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by radical?

**Roman:** Like to get some people to try to find change. But you can't change the system unless you have like a lot of backing, like momentum of change. Like nothing could happen if I – I'd just be labeled off as one of those crazy bloggers or something.

Roman was the only student from either class who expressed little of the critical hope that their teachers were aiming for.

### **STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS OF PATRIOTISM AND IDENTIFICATION WITH THE CONCEPT**

During interviews I asked students how they would define patriotism and whether they would consider themselves patriotic. Many appeared to be considering these questions for the first time, and phrased their response in the form of a question back to me (e.g. 'Is that like nationalism?' [Melony] and

'Is that like loving your country?' [Feisty]). Others appeared to have already given the issue at least enough thought to have decided that the question requires more than a simple answer. For instance, Josephine replied, '[p]atriotism. That word'. She hesitated but eventually went on to define patriotism as 'willingness to do anything for your country'. She then identified her own level of patriotism thusly:

Ok. Don't get me wrong. I love the US. However, I feel like, like [...] it's one thing to love your country or to like it highly, and [another] to be willing to sacrifice your life for it [...] I think that – to a certain extent – the country itself doesn't really protect its people enough for me to want to go out and put myself in a predicament. And that's the only reason I say that. Like I said, if police brutality and other things like – you're not ensuring my safety here, so what would make you think I would feel safe outside of here?

Josephine viewed patriotism in terms of reciprocity: if the country is not protecting her as a Black woman in a time of disproportionate police violence against Black people (Fryer 2016), then she does not feel the country has earned her willingness to die for it. Josephine believed that if patriotism is willingness to risk one's life for her nation, then it can only be earned if one feels confident that the nation is doing its part to minimize that risk. Although Josephine did not characterize herself as patriotic, she nevertheless exemplified critical democratic patriotism in that she 'loved the US', appreciated its protections of free speech (see her other quotations above), and yet also held it accountable to its promise of equal protection for all.

### ***Self-identifications and expectations of others***

Overall, when asked to identify whether they would consider themselves patriotic, four said yes (Amina, Matt, Alex, Isabel), four said no (Kiya, Roman, Angela and Feisty) and three said 'slightly' or 'somewhat' (Melony, Diane, Josephine). Although most students defined patriotism as loving your country or having pride in your country, two (Melony and Alex) added the qualifier that you do not have to think it is the greatest country in the world. Matt, who answered yes, went on to say, 'I used to think when I was a kid that it's the best country. And now I'm thinking, it could be the best, but it's got a long way to go'. Amina saw appreciating the United States as a debt she owed to ancestors who moved her family here: '[i]f my ancestors didn't come here for a better opportunity, there would be a lot of things I would be missing out on'. She added that being patriotic does not mean you have to exhibit certain behaviours, such as reciting the pledge of allegiance. She explained, 'I personally don't do the pledge of allegiance and stuff like that because I don't think that's a measure of my patriotic-ness', going on to explain that, as a Muslim, she is not supposed to 'pledge to anything before God'.

When I asked students if they thought people should be patriotic, Kiya answered, '[w]e should, but right now we don't have a reason to'. Angela's response to the question was '[n]o. But on the flipside, I don't want them to be like, "You know what I *hate* America! I wish I would blow this up!"' Matt responded:



I think (exhales) if you don't like the country, you know, you can leave. But you don't have to leave. But if you don't like the country, you know at least try to do something to fix it. Just don't sit around and complain.

Although he opened by parroting the oft-heard rejoinder, '[i]f you don't like the country, you can leave', he quickly revised his statement to say instead that you should stick around and improve the country rather than abandon it. This echoes statements Ms Bowling made throughout the year, such as '[y]ou have to come up with things that will fix the system' (class observation, 29 April).

Diane, however, defined patriotism more broadly as pride not just in the place but the people and perhaps even ideals: '[p]atriotism to me is basically pride in your country. And what your country is made of. And the people that make your country'. Dolores similarly defined it as the ability 'to do something for not just a certain group of people, but like for the whole community'. In sum, students expressed broad and complex understandings of patriotism, recognizing that it can involve allegiance to people, not just the place or its symbols, and that many who do not feel patriotic are justified in feeling this way.

### **STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF CRITICAL TEACHING ON PATRIOTISM**

During interviews, I asked the students if they thought their teachers were patriotic and whether they thought critical teaching might diminish students' patriotism. All but one student (Roman) believed their teachers were patriotic, but most of them added that their teachers recognized problems. As Amina said, '[j]ust because you love your country doesn't mean – like if you love something, you can say you know, "That was wrong" or "this was wrong"'. When I asked whether they thought there were any risks to teaching students about these problems, a few students acknowledged specific risks, but all indicated that the benefits outweighed the risks, or that high schoolers have already formed their opinions anyway (e.g. Matt).

#### ***Students' views of uncritical history teaching***

Matt explained why he believed the benefits of candid teaching about the nation's flaws outweigh the risks of student disaffection:

**Matt:** I think it's worth the risk because people need to know. And I think the pros outweigh the cons in that situation.

**Interviewer:** And what are the pros to people knowing?

**Matt:** Just you know, knowledge is power. And I think the more that we know, the better we can [do] [...]. People need to know the truth, compared to what they want to hear.

Earlier in his interview, Matt, who had shared that most of his teachers had been 'putting more of a White side' to the teaching of racial oppression during the civil rights movement, added, '[s]o I'd been learning that it's not as bad as people say it is. But now I know how it really is'. When I asked why he thought his other teachers may have done so, he answered:

- Matt:** I think it's because they were White – the teachers I had were White, and they just don't – they don't want to teach what really happened.
- Interviewer:** What do you think some of their concerns might be if they teach what really happened?
- Matt:** That Black people or African Americans will disrespect and not look up – or look at White people the same.

Like Matt, Roman thought teachers should be candid about inequities. He said, '[t]he teacher shouldn't be compelled to make the US seem like, oh it's awesome and whatnot. She is just supposed to show realistic and real-life facts so people won't be so susceptible to the lying or deceptiveness'. Like Matt, he viewed honesty about shortcomings to be an obligation of the teacher. Isabel agreed. The following exchange took place after I asked if she thought that, as a US history teacher, Ms Bowling should be proud to be American:

- Isabel:** No! Because if she's teaching about history, it's history. And actually if you have somebody that's not as proud to be American, they'll teach you more than what a teacher that's proud to be an American would [...] Because if I was in [my old school in] New York I don't think that teacher would've taught that. She would've been like, 'Oh America is a really good place!' And just give you the positive. But [Ms Bowling] gives you the positive and the negative, so you'll be like, 'Oh. Now I see'.
- Interviewer:** So you think it's good for the teacher to tell you the negative?
- Isabel:** Yeah it's really good.
- Interviewer:** Why is that good?
- Isabel:** Because you won't be thinking – if they only tell you the positive, it's like all fairy tale stuff.

Isabel's final statement suggests that patriotic commitments should be grounded in a thorough knowledge of the nation, not blind to negative aspects. She also pointed out how a blindly patriotic teacher might reinforce authoritarian patriotism by preventing students from accessing more complete knowledge.

### ***Students' views of the impacts of critical history teaching***

The above examples illustrate how students believed open critique was crucial both for deeper learning and critical thinking, as was a rejection of blind patriotism. Critical history teaching also appeared to promote democratic patriotism in terms of the appreciation for democratic ideals and intention to protect them. Angela explained that Ms Bowling's class not only failed to make her cynical, it actually reversed her prior tendency towards cynicism:

At first, I was like, okay some of the things the government do is just like totally corrupt, very wrong. But now learning about the passage of history, I'm more like ambiguous. I'm like, okay, there's more of a grey

reason. It's more of an understanding of why that they did some of the things they did.

For Angela, who entered the class with some strong critiques of the United States, the critical lessons actually helped her achieve a more nuanced and complex understanding.

Alex believed that frankly discussing shortcomings of the United States is necessary for students to see how they can play a role in addressing them:

**Alex:** I think [Ms Bowling] definitely does see problems in the US and how it is run. So, the way she just makes us open our eyes to see these problems. Like the little things that we don't think can be fixed. She opens our eyes to that and how we can easily fix that. And I think it's pretty neat.

**Interviewer:** So you think you can both talk about problems in the country but also be patriotic?

**Alex:** Yeah.

At another point in his interview, Alex stated, '[t]he youth can change like a lot. Whether we decide to vote, how we grow up and see these problems, and how we decide to tackle them'. This comment echoes Ms Bowling's frequent reminders to students that they can effect change through voting and other political engagement.

Amina's response captures the essence of many of the students' opinions:

Actually [Ms Ray's] class makes me love America more [...]. Because if there was nobody in America saying segregation is wrong, we would still be segregated. I would be sitting in the back of the bus. Because if she teaches her students to you know stand up, or if she teaches her students to look at sexist ads and say, 'Oh that's definitely sexist', when they might've just scrolled through the TV before her class, then I think she's making America a better place. And eventually if someone isn't patriotic, they will begin to love America because there are people saying, 'This is wrong' and then, 'We're changing it to fix it and make it better'.

This quote is emblematic of Amina's position in Figure 1 as expressing the highest degree of critical democratic patriotism. Taken together, these examples suggest that students viewed their teachers' approaches as enhancing rather than threatening their appreciation for democratic principles such as the freedom to fight for a more equal and just society. As students learned how they could play a role in this fight, they began to feel more connected to their country and more motivated to improve it.

## DISCUSSION

The youth I interviewed expressed a situated attitude towards patriotism that acknowledged the importance of context in defining what patriotism means in a given time or place (Mitchell and Parker 2008). For Josephine, the question of whether she was patriotic required an extended explanation that included her relation, as a young Black woman, with a society committing indefensible

levels of police violence against Black people. The specific critiques expressed by these students centred around racism and nativism, at times reflecting elements of Black critical patriotism (Busey and Walker 2017). I argue that the form of patriotism expressed by these students can best be described as *critical democratic patriotism*. Their patriotism reflects not only allegiance to the democratic principles of justice and liberty, but an explicit focus on the concerns and resistance of subordinated groups, whose interests – and even personhood – are suppressed within liberal democracies despite stated ideals of equality and justice.

The critical democratic patriotism displayed by these youth positions the dismantling of oppression as inherent in the very definition of democracy. Without emancipation, the wide political participation necessary for a strong democracy is impossible (Parker 1996). Although free speech and political participation have never been equally guaranteed to Black Americans, or many other groups, the students displayed hope that they one day would – in part because free speech and political participation allow for social movements that can work to expand rights. In contrast to those who argue that patriotism reduces tolerance for diversity (e.g. Young and Sharifzadeh 2003), students in this study suggest that their particular form of patriotism is a force capable of promoting greater equality among diverse groups.

While students of colour may easily recognize the disjuncture between typical civics curriculum and the realities they face as a part of oppressed groups (Rubin 2007; Clay and Rubin 2020), the present study suggests that some White students, too, may be disillusioned by such curriculum. All three of the White students interviewed applauded their teachers' candour in lessons about inequality. Matt, for instance, said he trusted Ms Bowling more than his prior teachers who had presented a whitestream (Urrieta 2004) narrative of the civil rights movement. Matt conjectured these teachers were afraid that admitting the severity of racism throughout history would damage social trust, a fear perhaps also underlying conservative attempts to keep 'negative aspects' out of the US history curriculum (Republican National Committee 2014).

I found no basis for such fear in this study, however. Students brought into class a knowledge of 'negative aspects' they gained from personal experiences, watching the news, social media and conversations with family and friends. But none of these, nor their US history lessons, seemed to result in lowered social trust or a condemnation of the United States as a whole. The fear that teaching injustices will instil shame or animosity towards the United States reflects an underestimation of either the intelligence of high school students or the capacities of teachers, or both. Teachers in this study demonstrated how their own critiques of racism and other social injustices drove pedagogies that empower, rather than frustrate.

Another contribution of this study is the finding that students' critiques did not exist in parallel or in contradiction to their patriotic commitments. Rather the two were integrated. They did not think they were contradicting themselves by saying that they loved the United States while also detailing many of its flaws, or criticizing unequal protection while also praising free speech. Several students mentioned that they loved the United States or were glad to live here primarily *because* they could speak out when they notice something wrong. In other words, they appreciated democratic freedoms precisely because they understood that the disapproval they wished to express was impossible without these freedoms. Critique did not threaten their patriotism – critique inspired their patriotism. And love, as for James Baldwin, inspired their critiques.

The findings demonstrated, as depicted in Figure 1, that critical history teaching did not produce similar effects in all students. Some, like Melony and Ida, expressed few critiques of the United States; and others, like Roman, were critical without feeling any patriotic commitments to the country. This helps illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of critical history teaching for critical democratic patriotism. As with any pedagogy, what students bring with them into the classroom will play as much a role as what happens within that classroom (Mosborg 2002; Porat 2004; Wineburg et al. 2007). Nevertheless, many of the youth described their US history classes as opening their eyes, and they all believed that history should be taught from a critical and candid perspective because otherwise, as Isabel said, 'it's all fairy tale stuff'.

As Isabel, Matt and other students indicated, the critical pedagogy they experienced in these two US history classrooms is not typical. Citizenship education as enacted in most social studies classrooms tends to 'retell the same patriotic, Eurocentric narrative that has been taught since the nation's founding' despite the fact that this narrative 'does not speak for a large percentage of those currently living in the United States, nor does it adequately prepare students to live in a society characterized by increased diversity, immigration, and pluralism' (Journell 2011: 11; see also Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Abu El-Haj 2009; Urrieta 2004). The following statement made over twenty years ago by citizenship education scholar Parker (1996: 107) still rings true today:

In some ways, democratic citizenship education is a program waiting to happen. A diverse student body has been gathered in the common school, has been in fact waiting there for some time now, but the potential afforded by this gathering for serious democratic education has not been approached on a wide scale.

Teachers like the two in this study are demonstrating what is possible, but taking democratic education seriously means ensuring it is not merely left up to individual teachers (Vickery 2017) and addressing not just civic opportunity gaps (Levinson 2012), but what Lo (2019: 114) called *civic debt*, or the 'systemic political inequities [that have] accumulated and manifested in civic performance gaps'. Our school system as a whole must do a better job of helping students grapple with the complexities of living in a multicultural nation and the paradox of ongoing, systemic oppression within a nominally democratic country (Epstein 2000).

Clay and Rubin (2020) proposed *critically relevant civics* as a means of acknowledging the injustices experienced by people living in poor, racially segregated communities and studying the historical and structural roots of inequality. This study contributes evidence that critically relevant civics does not displace a unifying commitment to the future of their society, as some opponents of critical history teaching might expect (see, e.g., Finn 2003; Republican National Committee 2014; Schlesinger 1992). In fact, this study demonstrates how admitting these inequities can resonate with students' lived experiences and show them that schools can be a site where the struggle for justice is acknowledged and affirmed, rather than (as it often is) swept under the rug (Clay and Rubin 2020; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008). Witnessing their teachers participating in this struggle, through their candid teaching and encouragement of political action, motivated students to feel more critically patriotic and inspired to fight for the democratic ideals of freedom and equality.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### ***Student interview protocol (semi-structured)***

1. Will you tell me a little about your opinions of the United States?
2. Do you think the United States equally protects all citizens?
  - a. Has your opinion been influenced by what you have learned in Ms \_\_\_\_\_'s class in any way?
3. Do you think the US government usually makes good decisions?
  - a. Has your opinion been influenced by what you have learned in Ms \_\_\_\_\_'s class in any way?
4. Do you think the government does too much, too little or the right amount in terms of assisting the poor?
  - a. Has your opinion been influenced by what you have learned in Ms \_\_\_\_\_ class?
5. If you held political office, what would you change about the United States?
6. Have you learned anything in Ms \_\_\_\_\_'s class that was different from what you had heard or read about the United States in the past?
7. How would you describe a 'good citizen'? Would you say you are a good citizen?
8. Do you consider yourself patriotic?
9. Do you think people should be patriotic or it is important to be patriotic?
10. Do you think Ms \_\_\_\_\_ is patriotic?
11. Do you think the way Ms \_\_\_\_\_ teaches might make students feel less patriotic?
12. Has taking this class changed how you think about your role as a citizen in any way?
13. Has this class changed how you think about the power of ordinary people to create change in any way?
14. Do you plan to be politically active in the future? If yes, how? If no, why not?

**APPENDIX B*****Codebook excerpt showing selected codes of interest and corresponding counts***

<b>Code</b>	<b>Count</b>
Outside-of-school influences on opinions	21
Current injustices/inequities	7
Injustices students care about	9
Xenophobia	7
Homophobia	3
Police brutality/criminal justice	21
Patriotism	11
'I like the US'/proud to live there	14
The US is better than some other countries	17
Appreciation for privileges in the US	6
Prevents some teachers from teaching truth	5
The US is dishonest to its people	7
Do not self-identify as patriotic	5
Teachers should be honest	8
Does not mean blind support	3
Can be critical	8
Citizenship	6
Means helping/not breaking laws	8
Justice-oriented	5
Classical liberalism	4
Doing citizenship	5



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