

America Rock's EDUCATION:

Presenting National Narratives on American Televisions

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In 1995, *Schoolhouse Rock Live!* opened off-Broadway and went on to enjoy a successful run.¹ As a “jukebox” musical, its score comprised selections from all the classic *Schoolhouse Rock* genres, ricocheting between *Science Rock* (“Interplanet Janet”), *America Rock* (“Elbow Room”), *Math Rock* (“Three is a Magic Number”), and *Grammar Rock* (“Unpack your Adjectives”). Since then, the musical has become a popular choice for amateur theater companies around the United States.

A large factor in the musical’s success is the strong influence of nostalgia. In the case of *Schoolhouse Rock*, this nostalgia is not too surprising: the cartoons were a 1970s and ‘80s childhood classic, a family-friendly collection of songs that adult audience members can now pass on to their children. This nostalgia can reverberate generationally as a generation of children develop their own memories of their parents’ childhood television. *Schoolhouse Rock*’s status as a classic remains unclear, since the generation of children of parents born in the 1960s and ‘70s is only now developing its own culture of nostalgia. Yet *Schoolhouse Rock* remains strong for the present, in part because it is tied so deeply to the acculturation to U.S. history that has contributed to a generation’s national identity. As such, these stories often receive an uncritical reception from students and grownups remembering their childhoods.

¹Erika Engstrom, “‘Schoolhouse Rock’: Cartoons as Education,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23 (1995): 103.



Examining these stories in relation to the historical understanding of the time may help to break down the implicit messages in these beloved cartoons. *America Rock* presents a fairly familiar story to anyone who went through the American public educational system in the late twentieth century. The story of the United States' founding and expansion in both land mass and population depicted in these videos are central to our idea of American national identity.

Educational Entertainment: Schoolhouse's Origins

Schoolhouse Rock ran from 1973 to 1985 as a series of Saturday morning musical cartoons.² It followed in the trend of "children's hour" programming, established in the early 1970s through the efforts of activist groups and, later, FCC guidelines, which were repealed under President Reagan.³ By the 1970s, educational television had gained popularity and was considered to be a wholesome alternative to other programming, often considered to be too violent or trivial for child viewers.⁴ Most educators saw television as a viable learning tool. By 1967, teachers across the country screened educational videos in their classrooms.⁵ In the 1950s and '60s, professional historians also began to connect with modern media, especially film, as a means of historical study and as a way to project information.⁶

The videos were created for Saturday morning cartoon airing, not school use, and were intended to supplement and facilitate students' classroom education. They fulfilled the educational content quota for children's programming, which were otherwise satisfied by unpopular shows.⁷ Since cartoons were the top revenue-maker for Saturday mornings, educational cartoons like *Schoolhouse Rock* allowed profitability while still adhering to standards.⁸

Schoolhouse Rock's creators were likely focused on the educational value of their cartoons as well. The idea for the series came from an executive at the McCaffrey & McCall advertising agency, who claimed to have been inspired while setting multiplication tables to music so

² Tom Russo, "Graduates Revive A Toon Tutorial," *New York Times*, April 24, 1994.

³ Engstrom, 99.

⁴ Robert A. Levin and Laurie Moses Hines, "Educational Television, Fred Rogers, and the History of Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 43 (2003): 265.

⁵ Levin and Hines, "Educational Television," 269.

⁶ Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 250.

⁷ Engstrom, 99.

⁸ Engstrom, 99.

his school-aged son could better memorize them.⁹ *Schoolhouse Rock*'s creators knew from the advertising industry about the effectiveness of jingles in enhancing potential customers' memories.¹⁰ The cartoons and lyrics relied on educational consultants' advice about tools such as repetitive melodies and short lyric phrases.¹¹ Television had the unique capability to provide succinct storylines, could proliferate widely due to new distribution technologies, and could spawn a high retention rate. The commercial potential of the series was also a strong motivation. McCaffrey & McCall sold the idea of animated educational jingles to its client ABC in order to help it compete with the popular CBS children's series *In the News*.¹²

The idea was successful: *Schoolhouse Rock* sustained high ratings throughout its run.¹³ The first series, *Math Rock* and *Grammar Rock*, were soon followed by *America Rock*, featuring lessons on U.S. history and civics. More episodes were inaugurated in 1975 and 1976 for the occasion of the U.S. bicentennial. Immensely popular, *Schoolhouse Rock*'s creators won Emmys, revived broadcasts as tape and video releases, and aired new episodes designed in the style of the original cartoons, largely at the request of grown-up former viewers.¹⁴

Considering the multitude of reports about American students' continuing disinterest in learning history, the popular yet educational *Schoolhouse Rock* videos could easily be deemed a success.¹⁵ Yet, as with much of American history education, the content of the material reveals more about the time period in which it was written than about the history it describes.

There is little remaining written material about *Schoolhouse Rock*. Many of its creators have since died, and perhaps more profoundly, the *Schoolhouse Rock* archives no longer exist.¹⁶ Analyzing a combination of history education and mainstream historical "myths," however, can help contextualize the cartoons in historiographical trends of the mid-1970s.

History textbooks are an especially apt comparison. Both textbooks

⁹ Wolfgang Saxon, "Thomas Yohe, 63, a Creator of TV's 'Schoolhouse Rock,'" *New York Times*, December 26, 2000.

¹⁰ Engstrom, 99.

¹¹ Engstrom, 101.

¹² Wolfgang Saxon, "Thomas Yohe."

¹³ Engstrom, 100.

¹⁴ Engstrom, 100.

¹⁵ Bruce VanSledright, "Narratives of Nation-State, Historical Knowledge, and School History Education," *Review of Research in Education* 32 (2008): 125.

¹⁶ Engstrom, 101.

and *Schoolhouse Rock* cartoons were produced for profit, and since they were intended for children, they shared an omnipresent, didactic narrator's voice.¹⁷ School textbooks and *America Rock* videos also had a similar amount of professional oversight in their creation; both were allegedly reviewed by professional historians, though for both, most of the creative and distributive work (cartoonists and grade-school teachers) was done by Americans who were not professionally trained in history. They also shared a similar purpose in publicly promoting a national historical narrative. History textbooks, moreover, have received considerable academic attention.

Content analyses of U.S. history textbooks from the 1970s reveal two specific trends in history education. First, there was a perceived need for patriotism resulting from threats to U.S. hegemony. Though U.S. history education has long taken a highly patriotic timbre, Cold War competition further increased the country's need to depict its history positively. The need to compete with Communist states that promised universal social equality led many Americans to paint their own national history as "virtually free of class or racial conflict."¹⁸ Second, there was a desire to represent racial and gender diversity, a shift from earlier historical narratives that resulted from civil rights-oriented social movements.

In line with these changes, the *America Rock* videos present mostly traditional narratives with limited "progressive" elements, as seen in its populist reinterpretations and celebration of some forms of diversity. This paper will analyze three of the most well-known *America Rock* history videos: "No More Kings," documenting the U.S. Revolution, "Elbow Room," about westward expansion, and "The Great American Melting Pot," depicting nineteenth-century European immigration.

A Popular Revolution: "No More Kings"

According to Melvyn Stokes in *The State of U.S. History*, the narrative of key actions and events in the history of the U.S. revolution has not changed much in two-and-a-half centuries.¹⁹ After two centuries, in 1975, the "No More Kings" video largely adhered to prominent founding legends of the U.S. Revolution, though with a more populist focus than is common in traditional narratives.

"No More Kings" depicted the U.S. colonizers as natural owners of

¹⁷ Wayne Journell, "Setting out the (Un)Welcome Mat: A Portrayal of Immigration in State Standards for American History," *The Social Studies* 100 (2009): 160.

¹⁸ Melvyn Stokes, ed., *The State of U.S. History* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2002), 28.

¹⁹ Stokes, 24.

New England land. The only Native Americans shown in the video appear for approximately two seconds, hiding behind Plymouth Rock when the colonizers arrive.²⁰ The video shows the colonizers crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a boat, whereas the British soldiers bob across the water when they come over to supposedly subjugate the American colonizers.²¹ The Americans thus appear to be the natural heirs to the land, while the British regulars are unnatural and thus seem to be invading. The Pilgrims are never seen leaving England, only journeying across the Atlantic from “over the horizon.”²² This depiction characterized the U.S. as having no real historical roots, “virtually transcending the particularities of time and place,” as is typical with U.S. historiographical exceptionalism.²³

The video depicted American colonizers as more rustic than their English counterparts, a myth that is irretrievably gendered. In the video, King George III appears effeminate, with a high-pitched laugh, rouged cheeks and pink lips, and perched on an opulent throne with crossed legs.²⁴ Moreover, the British soldiers are not redcoats but pinkcoats.²⁵ Europeans’ depictions of their aristocracies as effeminate were common even before the colonial period. Meanwhile, the American colonizers wear plain, undecorated, brown clothing to signal their masculinity and rusticity.²⁶ At first, the video depicted the American colonizers as submissive to George, bowing prostrate on the ground in a way that connotes feminine submissiveness as well as eastern or otherwise non-Christian religious traditions.²⁷ Femininity and non-Christianity were thus taken to connote un-Americanness as well as non-manliness. Therefore, the colonizers’ revolution against George III and British effeminacy appeared to be a triumph of their masculinity. The gendered depiction of the colonizers as rough-edged frontiersmen also linked to populist notes throughout the film by associating English extravagance with femininity, a duo that supposedly cannot match the Americans’ rusticity. This depiction aligned with traditional beliefs in American rusticity as compared to their European predecessors’ over-civilization.

In addition to the linkage of femininity with weakness and un-

²⁰ Lynn Ahrens and David Boroughs, “No More Kings,” September 20, 1975, 2:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvOZs3g3qIo>.

²¹ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

²² Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

²³ Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 45.

²⁴ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

²⁵ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

²⁶ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

²⁷ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

Americanness, “No More Kings” only showed men as agents in the U.S. Revolution. The *Schoolhouse Rock* videos, in line with concurrent trends regarding gender equality, presented modern girls and boys learning equally; the historical stories, however, are very male-centered. However, “No More Kings” did not depict any colonial children learning, and there were no women depicted as historical actors. This resulted in a male-dominated historical narrative. In terms of gender, the narrative was a traditional one, with men shown as powerful and women shown as weak, or not shown at all. The American Revolution was considered to be a mostly political and military event, and these areas typically excluded women during this time. “No More Kings” did not challenge this part of the typical historical narrative.

At the same time, the video’s characterization of the U.S. revolution as an act of communal agency had populist implications that aligned more with the specific historiographical trends of the 1970s. These trends deviated somewhat from the “great men” theories of history that dominated earlier historiography about the U.S. revolution.²⁸ More historians by the 1970s had shifted to primarily studying society through a social history lens, and American colonies became “testing grounds” for scholars who used this focus.²⁹ In “No More Kings,” the American Revolution was portrayed as an act of populist unity that was specific to small Massachusetts communities. Throughout the cartoon, the Massachusetts colonists assert their right to self-sufficiency and attempt to claim the political benefits that go along with it.

In “No More Kings,” the only colonizers depicted are the New England Puritans, and the revolution itself is shown as an exclusively Massachusetts-centered movement. The video briefly depicted other North American colonies on a map, but presented them as all deriving from the Massachusetts colony.³⁰ Massachusetts itself was shown to be a state composed of small communities, symbolized by groups of wooden houses springing up to form the shape of the contemporary Massachusetts state (the video depicted it with its contemporary borders, historically inaccurate but easier for young viewers to identify as Massachusetts).³¹ The implication remained, though: Massachusetts’ Puritan origins supposedly gave rise to the entire United States. This small-town and specifically New England-centered narrative aligned with the trend of 1970s historians focusing on small New England

²⁸ Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 2.

²⁹ Appleby, 47.

³⁰ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

³¹ Ahrens and Boroughs, “No More Kings.”

communities in the North American colonies.³²

The video's depiction of small communities' unity also indicates its populist perspective. In "No More Kings," the members of the community are visually unified, appearing as exact visual copies of each other.³³ This depiction was not simply a stylistic choice, because other *Schoolhouse Rock* videos animated by Tom Yohe in the same time period do not share this trait. There are no Americans mentioned by name in the video. The American Revolution itself was characterized as a communal movement for sentimental independence from a controlling metropole. England's primary offense in the video is "controlling" the colonies in a way that they appear to find patronizing. Its only specific mention of economic motivations for U.S. independence is the taxation of tea products; even then, the lyric was "he even has the nerve to tax our cup of tea," and the cartoon "patriots" do not consider the expense of taxing tea, only the indignation of having to use teabags (an anachronism, but that is irrelevant here) that are marked with the Union Jack.³⁴ This symbolism allowed the viewer to perceive the Revolution as a people's revolt, rather than as a political act of elite, educated men.

Finally, the video depicted the Americans' communal self-sufficiency as empowering. In the video, the act of community-building alleviates the colonizers' initial homesickness for "Mother England" and makes them decide to revolt.³⁵ Their willingness to see King George III as over-controlling is their main act of revolution; the video allocated more time to depicting the colonizers' movement from deference to rebellion than to the actual Revolutionary War.³⁶ The video also presented the colonies as winning independence with their own military might, without the help of any other polities.³⁷ The Americans' community-building is precisely what makes them ready for independence, thus valorizing the political power of the colonies' rustic self-sufficiency.

Expanding Westward and Upward: "Elbow Room"

Similar to "No More Kings," "Elbow Room" presented white colonizers as the natural occupants of American land. The justification for U.S. settler colonialism—manifest destiny—appears with varying levels of subtlety in "Elbow Room." This depiction is evidence that the

³² Appleby, 50.

³³ Ahrens and Boroughs, "No More Kings."

³⁴ Ahrens and Boroughs, "No More Kings."

³⁵ Ahrens and Boroughs, "No More Kings."

³⁶ Ahrens and Boroughs, "No More Kings."

³⁷ Ahrens and Boroughs, "No More Kings."

influence of the Civil Rights movement on popular 1970s historical narratives did not extend to settler colonialism. Although “slavery is now taken seriously in our histories,” as a result of Civil Rights activism, James Loewen wrote in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, “conquest still is not.”³⁸ Similar to “No More Kings,” the “Elbow Room” video incorporated populist tones. However, the celebration of the rustic nineteenth-century “frontier” was a traditional narrative before the 1970s, unlike the changing view of the U.S. Revolution.³⁹

“Elbow Room” justified expanded settler colonialism with its portrayal of the legitimacy and need for U.S. ownership of the North American continent. The title alone is justification for expanded settler colonialism; east coast Americans were too cramped, the video narrates, and needed more space.⁴⁰ This justification is similar to the German concept of *Lebensraum*, however the filmmakers carefully avoid any terms similar to this, possibly due to post-WWII sentiments. In the three-minute song, there is an entire verse dedicated to detailing the Louisiana Purchase with great specificity.⁴¹ The emphasis on the purchase from Napoleon emphasizes the territory as the legitimate result of a transaction between consenting parties. If that was not convincing enough for its young viewers, the lyrics specifically mention that Napoleon sold the land “without a fuss.”⁴² The video also used the concept of manifest destiny as justification for U.S. expansion. Contrary to the 1970s trend of highlighting ideology as a factor in historical actions, “Elbow Room” claims that settler colonialism “*was* a manifest destiny” (emphasis added).⁴³ It thus depicted manifest destiny not as an ideology that influenced historical actions but as a historical truth itself.⁴⁴

The video also incorporated traditional myths about the positive influence of white colonizers on American land. The lyrics characterized land west of the Mississippi River as empty preceding colonization, a typical justification that, according to Richard White, “avoids the guilt of conquest” for white colonizers.⁴⁵ Sacagawea is the

³⁸ James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 117.

³⁹ Deborah Epstein Popper, Robert E. Lang, and Frank J. Popper, “From Maps to Myth: The Census, Turner, and the Idea of the Frontier,” *The Journal of American Culture* 23 (2000): 96-97.

⁴⁰ Lynn Ahrens and Sue Manchester, “Elbow Room,” May 22, 1976, 3:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs2w4lwQRtc>.

⁴¹ Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁴² Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁴³ Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁴⁴ Appleby, 11.

⁴⁵ Popper, Lang, and Popper, 93.

only Native American mentioned in the lyrics or video, and she only appears briefly as a guide for Lewis and Clark, who are depicted as the first explorers in the wilderness.⁴⁶ In the video, the canoe carrying Lewis and Clark across the map leaves a trail of bright colors on a terrain previously depicted in grayscale.⁴⁷ This characterization of a positive European influence, as represented by white people bringing “color” to American land, links to the doctrine of “highest and best use,” the claim that white settlers deserved American land because of how effectively they could use and transform it.⁴⁸

“Elbow Room” also embodied myths of “geographical predestination,” which Richard T. Hughes defined as an element of manifest destiny.⁴⁹ According to this doctrine, white Americans’ right to settle the West was divinely sanctioned, so only limits set by God through nature could curb their expansion.⁵⁰ Similarly, the “Elbow Room” video showed white settlers pushing westward until they reached the Pacific Ocean, a natural boundary.⁵¹ Only then were they satisfied. The song modernizes this belief in geographical predestination, though, by suggesting that limits can change as technology does. The song suggests that if the U.S. should find itself needing “elbow room” again, they will find some more: “up on the moon!”⁵²

The ending was a modern twist, and certainly influenced by excitement about the U.S.’s space exploration program, particularly the 1969 moon landing. While this modern ending appeared to have sacrificed the religious “predestination” element of the manifest destiny ideology, it was actually quite compatible with it. Manifest destiny was believed to be divinely ordained, but also “manifest” in that Americans could dictate its direction.⁵³ The vision of American expansion being limited only by technological constraints has appeared in justifications for formal colonialism overseas and economic imperialism, in addition to the space exploration depicted in the video.

While “No More Kings” hinted at populist reasons for the American Revolution, “Elbow Room” loudly proclaimed its own populist element, through a specifically “American” mise-en-scene. In the

⁴⁶ Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁴⁷ Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁴⁸ Popper, Lang, and Popper, 93.

⁴⁹ Hughes, 113.

⁵⁰ Hughes, 113.

⁵¹ Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁵² Ahrens and Manchester, “Elbow Room.”

⁵³ Hughes, 109.

nineteenth-century frontier context, this populism was associated with rural frontier culture. The song's instrumentation included string instruments typically found in folk and bluegrass music, and singer Sue Manchester used an Appalachian accent.⁵⁴ Even the cartoon's "elbow room" dance resembled American folk dances.⁵⁵ The rough-edged frontier imagery certainly fit with the style of the song, which was, among other purposes, meant to entertain. The real populist message, however, came in the fact that the video considered all white Americans to be part of this frontier culture. The cartoon showed well-dressed men in eastern towns doing the "elbow room" dance just as enthusiastically as frontier settlers.⁵⁶ The video thus considered the frontier to be the true essence of the entire U.S., playing into older notions about a rustic "American" race.

It is true that 1970s historical narratives deviated from past historiographies by focusing on common people. While the U.S. Revolution is traditionally seen as an act of educated statesmen, narratives associated with the American West have long carried populist elements. "Elbow Room" showed a rustic frontier accessible to the common man, that was a conventional depiction of the premise of Manifest Destiny. Political trends through the nineteenth century, such as Jacksonian democracy and Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, specifically defined the rural west as a rough-edged democracy, and it is this version of history that "Elbow Room" sought to depict.⁵⁷ It is important to note, however, that, although "Elbow Room" depicted an expanded vision of participation in American democracy, this was by no means a pluralist vision. "Elbow Room" did not seek to give voice to all underrepresented groups. U.S. historiography has not always moved "forward" in the direction of inclusivity.⁵⁸

Mythmaking and National Origins: "The Great American Melting Pot"

Of the three videos, evidence of a diversifying historiography came across most strongly in "The Great American Melting Pot," through celebration of racial diversity and positive representation of immigration. Even so, this pluralism was surface-deep; the narrative remained Eurocentric and presented assimilation as the ultimate goal for immigrants.

The video's focus was undoubtedly on immigrants who by the late

⁵⁴ Ahrens and Manchester, "Elbow Room."

⁵⁵ Ahrens and Manchester, "Elbow Room."

⁵⁶ Ahrens and Manchester, "Elbow Room."

⁵⁷ Popper, Lang, and Popper, 96.

⁵⁸ Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts Over American History Textbooks From the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 16.

twentieth century were perceived as white. The song claimed to describe “nineteenth-century immigrants,” though the immigration influxes it described continued until the U.S. instituted immigration restrictions in the early 1920s.⁵⁹ The nineteenth-century immigrants to whom the video refers were exclusively those from Europe, since Europe was the only “old world” depicted.⁶⁰ Furthermore, by presenting Ellis Island, signified by the Statue of Liberty, as the only point of entry to the United States, the video presented a narrative that was oriented primarily on the east-coast and therefore mostly isolated to immigrants from European countries.⁶¹

Unlike conventional immigration narratives that distinguish between “old” (Northern European) and “new” (Southern and Eastern European) immigrants, “Melting Pot” did not draw these distinctions.⁶² This fusion points to the assimilated status of “new” European immigrants by the late twentieth century and the subsequent shifting definition of whiteness to include all these groups. By this time, safely assimilated descendants of European immigrants could increasingly celebrate their national origins without it being a threat to their whiteness and the societal privilege it entailed. Similarly, historians in the 1960s and 1970s increasingly studied “new” European immigration, while neglecting contemporaneous Latinx and Asian immigration trends.⁶³

The video did depict people of color as American immigrants, but was so nonspecific that the depiction was tokenizing. While white immigrants’ countries of origin are clearly defined, those of immigrants of color are not. The Statue of Liberty’s “book of recipes” specifies European nationalities, for example, “English,” “Poles,” “Swedes,” but refers to “Africans” as a bloc demographic, degrading the group by failing to note its complexity.⁶⁴ Moreover, immigrants of color have a secondary status in the video, in that all the immigrant stories the video mentioned by name are European.⁶⁵ Its depiction of the European narrative as generic and different treatment of white and nonwhite immigrants reduces non-European immigrants’ narratives to a secondary status.

⁵⁹Lynn Ahrens and Lori Lieberman, “The Great American Melting Pot,” May 1, 1976, 3:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZQl6XB064M>.

⁶⁰Ahrens and Lieberman, “The Great American Melting Pot.”

⁶¹Ahrens and Lieberman, “The Great American Melting Pot.”

⁶²Journell, 160.

⁶³David Reimers, “Historiography of American Immigration,” *OAH Magazine of History* 4 (1990): 10-12.

⁶⁴Ahrens and Lieberman, “The Great American Melting Pot.”

⁶⁵Ahrens and Lieberman, “The Great American Melting Pot.”

The celebration of immigrants' diverse identities was further tempered by the fact that the theme was still pro-assimilation. Immigrants showed pride in their varied nations of origin, but only to the extent that these identities were compatible with their new Americanness. The name of the video itself, "melting pot," connotes the dissolution of differences into a homogenous collective. (Social scientists have since replaced the term with "salad bowl," which allows for individual differences among immigrants as distinct items in the "salad"). The song also presented assimilation as inevitable and necessary for becoming American, since all the newly arriving immigrants must jump into the "melting pot," which in the animation is shaped like the continental U.S.⁶⁶

The "we're all immigrants" theme of this story appears to be one of unity. Despite shifts in scholarly historiography starting in the 1960s that looked more critically at immigrants' struggles, by the 1970s textbooks began an increased trend of emphasizing ethno-racial unity above conflict.⁶⁷ *Schoolhouse Rock* very much follows in this vein. Its depiction of a unified immigrant experience also allowed for a positive representation of the U.S. by shifting focus away from discrimination against immigrant groups and the racialized challenges some immigrant groups faced. According to James Loewen, focusing on immigrants' successes confirmed the U.S.'s role as a "land of unparalleled opportunity."⁶⁸

The attention to "nineteenth-century" immigration, moreover, both through the video's specification of the nineteenth-century time period and characterization of immigration as a past event reserved for one's grandparents' generation, excluded contemporary immigrant groups and their continuing challenges by omitting them outright.⁶⁹ The video prompted all the child viewers to identify their own families' experiences, revealing that white children were the exclusive target audience. Indeed, the video could lead a young viewer to believe that immigration and its challenges no longer existed, at least legitimately, in U.S. society.

Nevertheless, the video did present a celebration of diversity as depicted visually by skin color and clothing. Immigrants in the video took pride in their national identities. The image of children swimming together in the "melting pot" used the progressive image of a racially integrated swimming pool to point toward a modern, multicultural United States. This image was visually pluralistic,

⁶⁶ Ahrens and Lieberman, "The Great American Melting Pot."

⁶⁷ VanSledright, 112-114.

⁶⁸ Loewen, 209.

⁶⁹ Journell, 164.

though not narratively so. It only deviated slightly from the “assimilation-oriented consensus historiography” that dominated the immediate post-World War II era.⁷⁰ Rather than a genuine move toward diverse representation, the tokenized portrayal of people of color may have actually allowed the video to deny its own Eurocentrism, which had become less permissible in 1970s narratives.⁷¹

The video did, however, provide a positive image of immigrants’ role in society. In the cartoon, the filmmakers claim that immigrants “helped build the USA,” contributing to economic growth and enriching American culture with their presence.⁷² Unlike the historiography that predominated before the late twentieth century, the video did not present immigrants as singularly burdensome to U.S. society.⁷³ Still, the narrow representation of immigrants—white Europeans who had immigrated several generations before—casts doubt on whether this view is supportive of all immigrants, or just nineteenth-century or “historical immigration.” Furthermore, its depiction of immigrant contributions of labor as offerings to the U.S. ignores immigrants’ individual struggles to succeed, and glorifies the U.S. with an exceptionalist characterization as the land of opportunity.⁷⁴

Who Tells the Story?

In general accordance with 1970s history education standards, the *America Rock* videos presented mostly standard narratives with some nontraditional elements: populism in “No More Kings” and “Elbow Room” and tokenized racial diversity in “The Great American Melting Pot.” Still, there were some discrepancies between the videos and 1970s historiographical trends. Shifting narratives in American history are documented in eras and centuries, not decades; indeed, many of the paradigms established in the late 1960s and early 1970s were more consistent than not with trends a hundred years prior. The late 1960s and 1970s did, however, bring more radical changes within academia than is accounted for in the videos.

To understand this discrepancy, one must view academic changes as separate from popular historical narratives. Though the *America Rock* videos were supposedly approved by a history professor, they were

⁷⁰ Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Thomas and Znaniecki and the Historiography of American Immigration,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (1996): 16-20.

⁷¹ Nathan Glazer and Reed Ueda, *Ethnic Groups in History Textbooks* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1983), 15.

⁷² Ahrens and Lieberman, “The Great American Melting Pot.”

⁷³ Journell, 162.

⁷⁴ VanSledright, 115.

created for and by people with conventional understandings of U.S. history. Neither were professional historians a monolithic group. The one history professor who supposedly approved the *America Rock* videos was not necessarily influenced by every academic trend at the time, especially considering how many changes came from younger historians.⁷⁵ The increasing presence of marginalized groups, as well, in higher education in the late twentieth century likely created further division between generations of academics.⁷⁶

The acknowledgment of this discrepancy is not merely a criticism of *America Rock*'s creators. Historians have contributed to the elitism and inaccessibility of new movements in historiography. In *Historians in Public*, Ian Tyrrell notes that the 1960s and 1970s saw historians further detaching themselves from institutions of mass culture, becoming more of "expert commentators" than producers of social narratives.⁷⁷ The *America Rock* videos showed the outlines of changes in academia, but their loose alignment with new historiographical trends is not evidence of causation. That these changes resulted from similar societal forces may sufficiently explain their similarity to each other.

There are also limits to the historical events and periods that saw a reorientation in focus. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen points out that the Civil Rights Movement fundamentally changed textbooks' depiction of slavery away from the "magnolia myth" of American slavery as beneficial or at least necessary to Southern society.⁷⁸ Indeed, no *America Rock* video even mentions slavery. Although this silence is far from racially progressive, it embodies the late twentieth-century paradigm shift about slavery and marks a change from previous decades. Dominant racist narratives involving Native Americans, meanwhile, have not even seen this much change.

Shifting narratives have been influenced both by changing demographics and the persistent role of white supremacy. Starting in the 1950s, Southern and Eastern European immigrants from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had lived in the U.S. long enough to have accumulated some political power to wield with their desire to see their stories represented in their children's history narratives.⁷⁹ These immigrants were largely able to gain political power through their adoption of white American identity by the late twentieth century. Their newfound whiteness augmented "new" European immigrant groups' political power beyond what was seen by

⁷⁵ Tyrrell, 248.

⁷⁶ Appleby, 47.

⁷⁷ Tyrrell, 238-240.

⁷⁸ Loewen, 140.

⁷⁹ Kyle Ward, *History in the Making* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 230.

other nonwhite groups, many of whom had lived in the U.S. for longer but could not similarly influence historical narratives.⁸⁰

Other commentators argue that history lessons in school textbooks and mass-disseminated programs like *Schoolhouse Rock* do not ever venture to tell real history. Bruce VanSledright claims that what public schools teach students is “heritage,” which, unlike history, “primarily uses the past for celebratory purposes, cherry-picking it along the way.”⁸¹ Though this collective memory “serves often as an inaccurate synonym for history,” it is a substitute that has no actual resemblance.⁸² Kyle Ward echoes this claim in *History in the Making*: since the 1830s, he writes, history education in public schools has served to teach young Americans, especially immigrants, “what it means to be an American.”⁸³ By extension, then, the *America Rock* videos never even attempted to tell objective history. Furthermore, as with textbook writers, the videos’ creators aimed to boost ratings to create a profit. Challenging historical narratives that are deeply embedded in U.S. culture is surely not the safest choice when profits are the goal.

It is also important to identify *America Rock*’s limitations as compared to other *Schoolhouse Rock* videos. Other series, like *Math Rock*, feature comparatively more representation of girls and children of color than *America Rock* does. Even the civics videos in *America Rock*, as compared to the history ones, better depict demographic diversity. Even when the history videos do show demographically diverse characters, they would have to alter their narrative perspectives and content dramatically in order to actually represent diverse historical perspectives.

Conclusion

The *America Rock* videos presented flawed historical narratives that withheld historical agency to women and minority groups, despite emerging at a time when scholarly historiography was expanding to include both. Thus, the *America Rock* videos provide an excellent example of popular historical narratives from the 1970s, but neither did they reflect contemporary historical thinking, nor do they conform to our understanding of American history today. Treating the narratives of original *America Rock* airings and spin-offs as fact is dangerous for objective, inclusive history. Without a critical lens for these dated historical narratives, children viewing “nostalgic” history are likely to

⁸⁰ Moreau, 214.

⁸¹ VanSledright, 121.

⁸² VanSledright, 120.

⁸³ Ward, xxi.

internalize the historiographical errors perpetuated by their forebears.

Yet, the cartoons can still be a valuable educational tool if used in the right way. Treating the *America Rock* videos as primary sources could actually help history students learn necessary historical analysis skills, and analyzing them as such could teach students about the forces affecting popular U.S. history narratives in the 1970s. Students can learn important lessons about how historical narratives are contingent on the time period in which they are told. Perhaps most importantly, students would learn the necessity of questioning the objectivity of all sources, including—and *especially*—those presented as fact.

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