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**Settler Kitsch** *The Legacies of Puritanism in America*

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JONATHAN BEECHER FIELD

## Settler Kitsch

### *The Legacies of Puritanism in America*

#### Interstate Fight Songs

The legacies of Puritanism in America seem to be nowhere and everywhere at the same time. On one hand, very few current US citizens ~~even~~ belong to churches that William Bradford or John Winthrop would recognize as such. On the other hand, for much of the twentieth century, signage for the Massachusetts Turnpike featured a logo that was a Pilgrim hat with an Indian arrow through it. In the judgment of highway officials, this image evidently served as an iconic representation of Massachusetts. It is also an example of a legacy of Puritanism I am calling settler kitsch. Kitsch, of course, is a term made famous by the art critic Clement Greenberg in his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” In 1939, Greenberg inveighed against the proliferation of lowbrow art mass-produced for a mass audience. Greenberg’s frame of reference is such that contemporary readers will be surprised by some of the artifacts he categorizes as kitsch, but the concept does offer a way to understand an aesthetic process that makes unspeakable moments of history palatable. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, there is a proliferation of images that work to reduce the violent, genocidal encounters between England settlers and New England Natives to cartoonish horseplay. This transformation echoes what Tuck and Yang refer to as “a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence.’”<sup>1</sup> Transformations like these are the most persistent legacies of New England Puritanism one is likely to encounter in everyday life.

Another legacy of Puritanism works in tandem with settler kitsch, which is the persistent notion that Puritans are why we can’t have nice things, which is to say sexy things. When present-day activists use the hashtag #freethenipple to chastise social media platforms like Instagram or Tumblr for restricting sexually oriented content, they frequently blame “puritans” for these repressive policies.<sup>2</sup> Many contemporary US citizens, like to think of themselves as sexually liberated and uninhibited, or at the least do not identify with the

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sexual mores they associate with Puritans. Unfortunately, disavowing this presumed legacy of sexual repression makes it easy for present-day settlers also to disavow the Puritan heritage of settler colonialism. As such, in the twenty-first century, it is very difficult to take Puritans seriously, because of their prudish reputation. In turn, it is easy to reduce the violence of settler colonialism to something like a Tom & Jerry cartoon. As such, the most salient legacies of American Puritanism today are not an intellectual genealogy that runs something like Eliot to Edwards to Emerson to Eliot to Ellison to Ellis. Instead, Americans today engage with a Puritan past through phenomena like #freethenipple and settler kitsch.

As such, the legacies I am detailing here do not represent an intellectual history of Puritan legacies as they unfold across time. Rather, this is a sketch of cultural history of specters of Puritanism in the twenty-first century. For one thing, Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Amanda Porterfield, Bryce Traister, Max Weber, and others have already done that intellectual history work in various forms, and for another, those narratives are limited in the heuristic values they bring to more relevant contemporary cultural formations like sexy Pilgrim costumes, settler-themed Thanksgiving saltshakers, and Wednesday Addams's oration in the *Addams Family Values*.<sup>3</sup>

Against the conception of legacy as a patrimony that follows biological lines of inheritance, this chapter considers the ramifications of a Puritan legacy that is simultaneously for everybody and for nobody. Rather than tracing genealogies from Winthrop's city on a hill to Reagan's city on a hill, or from Mary Rowlandson's captivity in the seventeenth century to Patty Hearst's in the twentieth, I will explore how Americans imagine the legacy of Puritanism as something like the lead blanket you wear at the dentist, weighing us down and preventing us from becoming our true uninhibited selves. Like the lead blanket, too, contemporary imaginations of Puritanism can also work to shield us from things we might prefer not to confront. This ambivalent connection to a colonial past allows many US residents to remain comfortable with the uncomfortable realities of the settler colonial violence perpetrated by Puritans in a portion of the continent that became part of the United States.

It is likely that most US residents complete their education through the high school or college level without reading a word published by a seventeenth-century Puritan colonist, except maybe Winthrop's phrase "city on a hill." It would be hard to find any contemporary American church with a theology, liturgy, or polity that closely resembles the churches of Puritan New England. It is easy, however, to find assertions that this or that aspect of contemporary US culture is a legacy of the Puritanism embraced by some of the settlers of one corner of North America in the

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seventeenth century. For example, online activists, organized under the hashtag #freethenipple, who feel that Instagram or Facebook should allow the unfettered display of female breasts, often point to the “puritanism” that informs these restrictions. Lina Esco, who initiated the free the nipple movement, opined in a *Time* editorial “I came up with ‘free the nipple’ because it’s engaging and funny – and the fuel we needed to start a serious dialogue about gender equality. The shaming of the female nipple is a direct reflection of how unevolved this puritanical country is.”<sup>4</sup> One of the more famous incidents associated with this movement was Scout Willis’s topless foray through downtown Manhattan. She posted pictures on Instagram, which suspended her account, leading *New York* magazine’s *The Cut* to recap “after puritanical Instagram banned her account ... Willis has taken her protest to Twitter.”<sup>5</sup>

In an article supporting this movement, *Maxim* magazine cited “chipping away at puritanism” as one of its benefits.<sup>6</sup> Examples of this association between twenty-first-century repression and seventeenth-century religion are easy to find. Yet the religious lives of the people at Instagram enacting these restrictions are unlikely to have anything at all to do with the theology and ecclesiology English settlers brought to New England in the seventeenth century. More broadly speaking, contemporary media ~~routinely have invoked~~ the specter of puritanism as a repressive force. When *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner died in 2017, he was eulogized as an antagonist of the puritanism that consumed mid-twentieth-century America.<sup>7</sup> Journalists routinely describe Hefner’s fellow high-profile pornographers, Bob Guccione and Larry Flynt, in similar terms.

Ironically, the modern association of the first white settlers of New England with censorship and repression comes in large part from a confrontation between a Baltimore journalist and a New Jersey postal inspector. Anthony Comstock was born in Connecticut and made his home as an adult in New Jersey. In 1873, he founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and lobbied successfully for the passage of the “Comstock law,” which criminalized using the US mail to distribute materials containing obscenity, contraception information, and contraceptives or sex toys. He finagled an appointment as a special postal inspector and bragged about the tonnage of obscene material he destroyed over the course of his career. As Rochelle Gurstein details in an essay titled “Puritanism As Epithet,” Emma Goldman was eloquent in her association of Comstock and Comstockery with puritanism.<sup>8</sup> In her 1910 essay “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism,” Goldman observes: “Puritanism no longer employs the thumb-screw and lash; but it still has a most pernicious hold on the minds and feelings of the American people. Naught else can explain the power of

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a Comstock. Like the Torquemadas of ante-bellum days, Anthony Comstock is the autocrat of American morals.”<sup>9</sup>

Comstock’s definition of obscenity was expansive – he referred to George Bernard Shaw as an “Irish smut dealer” – and included medical textbooks as well as manuals intended to provide sexual education for married women. His censorship attracted the ire of Baltimore’s H. L. Mencken, who attributed Comstock’s activity to puritanism. Mencken’s work is larded with disparaging references to puritans as the source of distinctly American neuroses about sex. Famously, he defined puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” Most notably, in a 1915 essay titled “Puritanism as a literary force,” Mencken decried the puritan pathologies he saw afoot in Comstockery, which included the “throttling influence of an ever alert and bellicose Puritanism, not only in our grand literature, but also in our petit literature, our minor poetry, even in our humour.” Mencken expounds on this theme at length, lamenting that “the typical American maker of books becomes a timorous and ineffective fellow whose work tends inevitably toward a feeble superficiality. Sucking in the Puritan spirit with the very air he breathes, and perhaps burdened inwardly with an inheritance of the actual Puritan stupidity, he is further kept on a straight path of chemical purity.”<sup>10</sup> More broadly, for Mencken,

The Puritan’s utter lack of aesthetic sense, his distrust of all romantic emotion, his unmatchable intolerance of opposition, his unbreakable belief in his own bleak and narrow views, his savage cruelty of attack, his lust for relentless and barbarous persecution – these things have put an almost unbearable burden upon the exchange of ideas in the United States, and particularly upon that form of it which involves playing with them for the mere game’s sake.<sup>11</sup>

Mencken’s furor at the Puritan critics who kept, for instance, Dreiser’s *The Titan* from getting its due evidently prevents him from tracing early modern Calvinism to twentieth-century literary culture with any clarity, which is a shame, for “From Calvin to Comstock” would make for interesting reading. Ironically, it was the New Jersey-based Comstock who inspired the formation of the Boston-based Watch and Ward Society, the organization responsible for the phrase “banned in Boston.” However, traditional accounts of this form of censorship (and marketing) often bypass Comstock’s influence and attribute censorship efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to the English men and women who settled Boston in the mid-seventeenth century. None of this is to say that John Winthrop would have welcomed the publication of, say, *Ulysses*, but the anachronism inherent in this question points to the difficulty of making this kind of connection.

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This connection between Puritanism in colonial New England and censorship in the twentieth-century United States is somewhere between tenuous and spurious, but Mencken's agitating helped establish it as conventional wisdom. In her 1915 essay "Comstockery in America," Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger writes: "It is the Comstock laws which produce the [illegal] abortionist and make him a thriving necessity while the lawmakers close their Puritan eyes."<sup>12</sup> Writing in 1998, Rochelle Gurstein characterizes Morris Ernst's 1937 account of the court decision allowing the publication of *Ulysses* in the United States as celebrating a "crushing defeat for the forces of puritanism."<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice protested this verdict.

This association popularized by Mencken is persistent, and the mean men from Boston in big hats have been invoked in nearly every high-profile censorship case over the last century or so. A 1973 *New York Times* article compiled reactions to the recent obscenity ruling against Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Breakfast of Champions*. The novelists Ross Macdonald, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Updike all blamed the decision on "puritanism" in one form or another, with Oates commenting: "When America is not fighting a war, the puritanical desire to punish people has to be let out at home."<sup>14</sup> In her 1988 reappraisal of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Erica Jong opined: "It was not only that 'Lolita' dealt with forbidden obsessions; 'Lolita' was, above all, literary. American puritanism is more comfortable with sex when it stays in the gutter than when it rises to the level of art."<sup>15</sup> Jong, herself, was the author of the 1973 novel *Fear of Flying*, which one of her defenders described as "a huge international best seller and a widely debated emblem of the sexual coming of age of women in Puritan America?"<sup>16</sup> (It is worth noting that Jong's novel is set in the 1970s, and its heroine is a Jewish woman who lives on the Upper West Side of New York City.)

Beyond the question of regulating (female) nudity and censoring sexually explicit content, puritanism figures more generally as a label for a distinctly American asceticism and joylessness. In a review of a concert by the legendary Boomer troubadour Jimmy Buffett, a *Los Angeles Times*' critic observed: "In many of his songs, he celebrated adventure and travel, recoiling from the strait-laced life and the Puritan ethic."<sup>17</sup> A 2017 *Vice* article offered a timeline of "All the Times in American History That Authorities Tried to Stop People From Dancing," beginning with Puritan minister Increase Mather's *Arrow Against Vain and Promiscuous Dancing* and continuing through the 1984 Kevin Bacon film *Footloose*.<sup>18</sup> This timeline is notable for its gaps, especially the ones separating the 1684 publication of Mather's text, the 1845 founding of (Baptist) Baylor College, and the 1984 release of *Footloose*. When the first Baptists arrived in Puritan Massachusetts, the

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Puritan leaders responded by whipping them.<sup>19</sup> Three hundred years, 1,750 miles, and a sectarian divide separate Mather's *Arrow* from the town in Oklahoma that inspired *Footloose*. If there is a connection between Increase Mather's repression and Kevin Bacon's resistance, the legacy of Puritanism must be a durable and robust one.

Yet it is difficult to point to any current religious establishment in the United States and make a case that it has a strong connection to the Bible Commonwealth established by English settlers four centuries ago. In some cases, institutions and/or physical structures founded as Puritan churches in the seventeenth century now operate under Congregational or Unitarian management.<sup>20</sup> The "About Us" section on the webpages of these churches can make for interesting reading, as the current church leadership seeks to claim the historic cachet of Puritan founding, while disavowing every aspect of perceived Puritan doctrine. For instance, the heirs of the church that Thomas Hooker founded in Cambridge in 1633 put it like this:

[For more than 375 years,] First Church has welcomed searchers and seekers, pilgrims and pioneers to share on the journey of faith that guided is by God's grace, every step of the way. Though we celebrate a rich and robust history and tradition, we are called to live out our faith in the present, to make what is ancient fresh, and to make our ideals for the future relevant in the here and now. Here is just a snapshot of our earlier years . . .<sup>21</sup>

The website of the First Parish of Concord, a Unitarian church in Concord, states:

In 2004, the First Parish in Concord gave a large collection of its historic records to the Concord Free Public Library. The recent processing of this rich material provides a natural opportunity to take stock of the long history of Concord's Unitarian-Universalist church, which was first gathered in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Its first ministers, Peter Bulkeley and John Jones, were formally installed in 1637, in Cambridge.<sup>22</sup>

The phrasing of this passage suggests that Peter Bulkeley and John Jones were Unitarians. They were not. Elsewhere, I have detailed the uneasy perch of John Winthrop outside of the First Church of Boston as material evidence of this ambivalent disavowal, but there are many other places to find this posture, which is more of an awkward side hug of Puritan history than a full embrace.<sup>23</sup> The alleged prudishness of New England Puritans distances them from the present moment culturally as much as temporally. They are repressed; we are not. They hate sex; we ~~like to think of ourselves as having~~ a healthy relationship with our bodies and sexualities. As Rochelle Gurstein observed in 1994, "For almost a hundred years now, the charge of

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Puritanism has guaranteed the accuser the prestige of being on the side of progress, free speech and sexual emancipation.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time, these filiations can be complex, in that, for some, alignment with a Puritan legacy is a point of pride, as in the Society of Mayflower Descendants.

The legacy of Puritanism, then, is difficult to pin down. This complexity should not be surprising, for, under any circumstances, legacies are complicated things. In its most common sense, a legacy connotes a welcome inheritance that passes from generation to generation and is a gift of wealth or property or, more abstractly, culture. For instance, the University of Chicago is the legacy of a generous gift from John D. Rockefeller. There are several ways that Puritan legacies depart from this model. A legacy can be a burden rather than a boon. In 2018, the *Chicago Maroon* published an article titled “UChicago’s Legacy of White Supremacy.”<sup>25</sup> A legacy, for good or for ill, can disappear and reappear generations later. Inspired in part by Jordan Stein’s argument about queer temporalities, this chapter considers legacies as entities that can move laterally, disappear, and reappear in a different time and place, with new context and new meaning.<sup>26</sup>

One advantage to this approach is that it moves the work of understanding legacies of Puritanism in the present day out of a chain of direct biological inheritance. Genealogy and early American history have a deeply intertwined – some might say incestuous – history. The New England Historical and Genealogical Society remains an important resource for scholars as well as genealogists. The General Society of Mayflower Descendants, on its webpage, stipulates: “If you are interested in joining us, *you will need to provide evidence of your lineage from one of the Mayflower Pilgrims. Anyone who can prove this ancestry may join.*”<sup>27</sup>

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Historically, many conversations about the first white settlers of New England have hinged on these questions of biological heredity that we see in the membership requirements for the Mayflower society. Here, rather than debating evidence that might or might not establish a set of links from Increase Mather to Cotton Mather to Instagram’s posting regulations, I am interested that Americans continue to make connections like these, whether they are true or not. The persistent legend that Americans inherited their prudishness from the Puritans has an impact on how many Americans think about the most significant material legacy of the Puritans, which is the land they took from Indigenous people and bequeathed to further generations of settlers. Unlike the first settlers, today’s settlers are groovy and liberated, and



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therefore oppose what the Puritans supposedly stood for, even as they reap the benefits.<sup>28</sup>

If we were to look for a rupture between conventional filio piety and the more ambivalent embraces we see today, Nathaniel Hawthorne offers a promising site of investigation. The novelist claims, but does not own, this legacy. Hawthorne famously had a genealogical connection to one of the judges who hanged alleged witches in Salem, and his unease with this legacy is one of the first things students reading *The Scarlet Letter* learn about Hawthorne. More pointedly in his shorter fiction, we can see Hawthorne satirizing Puritan mores, even as he relies on this inheritance for the theme of his most famous work. In stories like *Young Goodman Brown* and *Endicott and the Red Cross*, Hawthorne does the work of separating the values of these settlers from the kinder and gentler mores of nineteenth-century New England. These two stories in particular expose hypocrisy with the kind of ham-fisted irony you might find in a high school creative writing class, but they help to begin to produce the idea that the settlers of New England were cartoons. He does not use the word, but D. H. Lawrence's 1923 characterization of *The Scarlet Letter* as a "colossal satire" suggests he might concur with the notion of Hawthorne's work as proto-kitsch.<sup>29</sup> While Hawthorne dismisses the values of his settler forebears, he does little to disavow their salient material legacy to him, which is possession of the continent of North America.

*The Scarlet Letter's* framing narrative of the discovery of an actual, material A works to authenticate Hester's story. As such, the frame works to suggest that the Puritan patriarchs were really as stern and judgmental as we like to imagine them. There is a lot more going on in the novel than this, but the title of the novel and its plot revolve around the punishment for Hester's sexual sin. Detached from the context of the novel, a scarlet letter has become a familiar way to refer to almost any kind of sin or shame, usually undeserved. The issue here is not if this use of the phrase misreads Hawthorne's novel but the material Puritan roots of the scarlet letter suggest that it is men like John Winthrop and Thomas Hooker who are responsible for the scarlet letters that surround us today, in places as disparate as the 2010 film *Easy A*, not to mention the ongoing conversations about a mid-1990s affair between President Clinton and an intern.

It is easy to understand the logic and ideology of the process of dispossession enacted by the first waves of Puritan and Pilgrim settlers by reading primary sources. For instance, John Cotton, in his farewell speech to the first wave of Puritan settlers in 1630, imagines an exchange where the settlers trade their "spirituals" (knowledge of Jesus Christ) for the Natives' "temporalls" (the continent of North America).<sup>30</sup> As any contemporary

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evangelical Christian can tell you, it is not customary to invoice your converts for the cost of their salvation. However, very few contemporary US residents derive their understanding of the settlement of New England by reading sermons from the 1630s. Instead, the images that circulate of Pilgrims and Puritans doing this work of dispossession work at the level of cartoons, because the echoes of their prudish repression make it impossible for us to take them seriously. As such, the popular imaginary of New England's settlement looks more like a Warner Brothers cartoon than a violent and genocidal conflict.<sup>31</sup>

One easy place to see this dynamic is in Thanksgiving cards. Images of young white children adopting Pilgrim hats or Indian headdresses more or less interchangeably amplify the sense of the holiday as a cultural encounter that ended in reconciliation and friendship. Various presidents declared various days of thanksgiving, but Thanksgiving's contemporary form as a national holiday celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November owes its genesis to an 1863 proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, who saw the day as a way to ~~promoted~~ reconciliation in the midst of the Civil War. Lincoln's proclamation does not invoke the Pilgrims explicitly, but the material forms of this celebration typically evoke the 1621 gathering William Bradford chronicles in *Of Plimoth Plantation*. The idea of this encounter as a good moment for historical cosplay is buttressed by the ease of making these costumes. Even today, many schoolchildren in the United States make Pilgrim hats and/or Indian headdresses as an activity in the days leading up to Thanksgiving. The proliferation of these benign images makes it difficult to recover the actual violence that attended this process of settlement. If you consider how difficult it is to imagine a diorama of the Trail of Tears populated with Hummel figurines, you can see how settler kitsch works.

After generations of scholars of American Puritanism who frequently treated New England's Indigenous inhabitants as an afterthought, there has been scholarship seeking to do more to articulate the facts of the encounter between Native and settler in New England. Francis Jennings's *The Invasion of America* and Jill Lepore's *The Name of War* were early gestures in this direction, while, more recently, Kathleen Donegan's *Seasons of Misery*, Jean O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting*, Christine DeLucia's *Memory Lands*, and Lisa Brooks's *Our Beloved Kin* work in a variety of ways to enrich and complicate our understanding of New England settler colonialism and, more importantly, to give names, faces, and voices to New England's Indigenous inhabitants. Even as this heroic scholarly work continues, settler kitsch remains a staple of US mass culture. There are boudoir photographers happy to arrange a Thanksgiving-themed pinup photo session, while the vitamin company Muscle Milk uses videos of a "sexy pilgrim" to promote

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their dietary supplements.<sup>32</sup> The sexy pilgrim trope is a peculiar space where perceptions of Puritan prudishness and the ideology of settler colonialism intersect. One of the peculiarities of contemporary sexual discourse is that what is not sexy is sexy because it is not sexy. The icon of the sexy librarian is perhaps the most familiar version of this notion, but it also operates with the sexy pilgrim, exemplified in Figure 8.1 by Marilyn Monroe sporting a blunderbuss.

If the Marilyn Monroe pinup works to celebrate her sex appeal to demonstrate that her sexiness transcends unsexy things like a turkey, a blunderbuss, and a Pilgrim costume, Demi Moore's appearance as Hester Prynne in the 1995 film adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* does Marilyn one better by having Demi's sex appeal transcend an entire unsexy society. As the tagline on the poster proclaims, WHEN INTIMACY IS FORBIDDEN, AND PASSION IS A SIN, LOVE IS THE MOST DEFIANT CRIME OF ALL.

For several decades, college and professional sports mascots that appropriate Native names and iconography have been a topic of contention. Some



Figure 8.1 Marilyn Monroe in abbreviated Pilgrim costume, with a blunderbuss and turkey for accessories, 1950. In the mid-twentieth century, Pilgrim-themed pinups were surprisingly popular.

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universities, notably Stanford and Dartmouth, dropped their Native mascots in 1972 and 1974 respectively, while other programs, both collegiate and professional, continue to use Native mascots in spite of ongoing criticism. For a variety of reasons, the history of a Puritan as an unofficial mascot of Harvard University has attracted less attention, but the intersection of these icons as illustrations for football programs offers a classic example of the work of settler kitsch in the twentieth century. Harvard (unofficially represented by a Puritan) and Dartmouth (the “Indians” until 1974) play one another every year in football (Figure 8.2). The illustrators of the programs for these football games often chose to illustrate the covers with images of a cartoon Indian and a cartoon Puritan involved in some sort of violent shenanigan. A recurring trope in these images is a Native arrow passing harmlessly through the big hat of the Puritan settler. The big hat is intrinsically comical, but the way arrows never seem to harm settlers is a droll way to represent the fundamental futility of Native resistance to settler aggression.

A more elaborate instance of settler kitsch is on display in the Thanksgiving pageant scene in the 1993 film *Addams Family Values*. This movie is a sequel to a movie based on a television show that is in turn based on popular cartoons by Charles Addams that appeared in the *New Yorker* from 1937 to 1988. In the sequel, Wednesday Addams (Christina Ricci) is at summer camp, and the campers are putting on a play about Thanksgiving as the culmination of their time at camp. The event goes according to plan until Wednesday Addams arrives, identifies herself as “Pocahontas” of the Chippewas, and delivers a speech to her fellow campers dressed as Pilgrims, which culminates in a declaration that she will scalp them and burn their village. Wednesday does tell the audience that the Pilgrims have stolen Native land and that the Natives will not fare well in the future, but this critique is impossible to take at face value – Ricci is playing a cartoon character who is herself playing Indian in the stylized, two-dimensional context of a summer camp theatrical. The violence, such as it is, is unsettling, but, again, it is cartoon violence like that we see in football programs of earlier decades or in cartoons. It is violence that hurts nobody and truth presented in a way that will not make anyone uncomfortable.

A final complication of settler kitsch comes in something I am calling the dialectics of Native erasure. In 1989, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority agreed to remove the arrow from the iconic Mass Pike signs described at the opening of this chapter. The hat on the logo is a Pilgrim hat – a big black hat with a buckle on the front, of a sort one would never wear unless it was part of a Pilgrim costume. There is no head inside the hat – so it exists as a kind of free-floating signifier of an aspect of Massachusetts heritage. The arrow, I would argue, is supposed to be hard to take seriously. Of the ways

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Figure 8.2 Dartmouth vs. Harvard football programs, 1946, 1953. Many American college football programs of this era featured illustrations presenting conflicts between the opponents' mascots. With Dartmouth's Indian mascot and Harvard's unofficial Puritan mascot, many of their programs featured images of cartoonish violence between settlers and Natives.

~~Massachusetts motorists might be concerned about a violent death over the last several decades, arrows are low on the list.~~ When Steve Martin wears the comedy prop that has two halves of an arrow attached to a headband allowing him to simulate being shot with an arrow, the point is not to

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simulate that he has been shot but that he is trying too hard to be funny. As such, arrows are funny, because this symbol of Native resistance to English settlement is deemed laughably puny. After all, Jared Diamond told all the dads back in the 1990s that Guns, Germs, and Steel were responsible for settlement.

The impetus for this move came from a surprising source, for a surprising reason. According to a UPI article, a second-grade class in Amherst, Massachusetts, mounted a letter-writing campaign urging officials to get rid of the arrow. While institutions like Stanford and Dartmouth disavowed Native iconography out of respect for Indigenous objections, the change to the Mass Pike logo happened because the teacher of this class, Barbara Skolnick Rothenberg, “thought it conveyed a message of violence and aggression, with the violence directed towards the Pilgrims.”<sup>33</sup> The ensuing logo retains the Pilgrim hat but omits the arrow (Figure 8.3).

A cartoonish representation of the violent struggle for lands that Native Americans called home is a problematic choice for a road sign, but this solution is not a solution and is worse in some ways. The hat stands alone, and rather than representing conflict, the unscathed Pilgrim hat suggests that the Natives were never there. This is an example of the dialectics of Native erasure – when Indigenous history, culture, or people appear in an encounter with settler culture, these representations make people uncomfortable, because they are a reminder that one group of people stole a continent from another group of people, and killed many of them in the process. As this theft moves from something actively celebrated by settler culture – as in the giant statue of Hannah Dustan clutching the scalps of the Native women and children she took for the bounty they carried – to something settler culture is vaguely uneasy with, the easiest solution is to remove the evidence of the Native presence in the first place.



Figure 8.3 Until 1989, the signs for the Massachusetts Turnpike featured a Pilgrim hat with an arrow through it. The current Mass Turnpike Authority logo retains the hat but omits the arrow.

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Even as we recognize the kitschy elements of Marilyn's Monroe's turkey hunter or Demi Moore's Hester Prynne, or wince at the artwork on old football programs, this ambivalent contemporary posture toward Puritan legacies establishes a difference between Us (USA!) and Them (mean men in black hats). This halfhearted disavowal produces an ongoing appetite for caricatures of Puritans and Puritanism, which serve not only for the fathers of the Daughters of the Mayflower but also, more generally, for the nation at large. This ambivalent othering produces a return of repressed origins in cartoonish form, most notably in the context of celebrations of Thanksgivings but also in innumerable fictions, memorials, celebrations, mascots, histories, and more. This transformation of Puritanism into a kind of cartoonish distortion I am calling "settler kitsch" as a way of naming the evasions, disavowals, and moves to innocence that accompany the work of Native dispossession enacted by the Puritan settlers of New England in the seventeenth century and beyond. An American inability to take the Puritans seriously because they were stuffy and prudish offers a way for settlers to distance themselves from the violent realities of settler colonialism that attended the propagation of the Puritan faith in New England. This is the most salient legacy of American Puritanism in the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. E. Tuck and K. W. Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1.
2. It is worth noting that the capricious and opaque enforcement of content policies on social media platforms has had a calamitous impact on the safety and prosperity of many entrepreneurs who use these media, including models, photographers, and sex workers.
3. Although they have a different name, the Pilgrims are part of the legacy of Puritans. Especially in the United States, the terms overlap. "Puritan" refers broadly to English Calvinists who became disenchanted with the Church of England's stipulated religious practice. The name "Puritan" began as a derisive term for English Calvinists who objected to the more ornate aspects of Anglicanism. Some of these Puritans chose not to conform with these Anglican liturgical guidelines, instead practicing a more austere and sermon-focused worship. These Christians were called "nonconformists." Some of these nonconformists, including the settlers who traveled to Plymouth on the *Mayflower*, chose to separate from the Anglican church, on the grounds that it was irredeemably corrupt. These were called "separating nonconformists." Other English Christians, including the main body of the settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, chose not to conform but held out hope that their example would inspire the Church of England to follow a more righteous path. The Puritans who settled in and around Boston can be deemed small-p

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- pilgrims, in that they were on a religious journey. The English settlers of Plymouth who arrived on the *Mayflower* are known as Pilgrims, with a capital P. There are important differences between these two types of nonconformism and major differences between the settlement and history of Plymouth Colony and the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but both settlements contribute to the conceptions of Puritanism in circulation today, and this chapter considers both.
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