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## **Examining Historical (Mis)Representations of Christopher Columbus within Children's Literature**

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*Effective teaching, while supplemented by best practice methods and assessments, is rooted in accurate, age-appropriate, and engaging content. As a foundation for history content, elementary educators rely strongly on textbooks and children's literature, both fiction and non-fiction. While many researchers have examined the historical accuracy of textbook content, few have rigorously scrutinized the historical accuracy of children's literature. Those projects that carried out such examination were more descriptive than comprehensive due to significantly smaller data pools. I investigate how children's non-fiction and fiction books depict and historicize a meaningful and frequently taught history topic: Christopher Columbus's accomplishments and misdeeds. Results from a comprehensive content analysis indicate that children's books are engaging curricular supplements with age-appropriate readability yet frequently misrepresent history in eight consequential ways. Demonstrating a substantive disconnect between experts' understandings of Columbus, these discouraging findings are due to the ways in which authors of children's books recurrently omit relevant and contentious historical content in order to construct interesting, personalized narratives.*

**Key Words:** Christopher Columbus, children's literature, presentism, exceptionalism, omission, heroification

### **Introduction**

While research findings suggest that some elementary educators teach historical content well, the bulk of the research indicates otherwise (Fallace, Biscoe, & Perry, 2007; Holloway & Chiodo, 2009). The reasons for weak teaching of historical content are varied and interconnected, including: an increased focus on tested content (such as mathematics, reading, and science) as class time allotted to history and social studies is reduced (Lintner, 2006), teachers' reliance on textbooks (Loewen, 1995; Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004), teachers' inclusion of history-themed children's literature for jettisoned history content (Wilton & Bickford, 2012), and the methodological focus—as opposed to content focus—of teacher education programs (Cohen, 2011; Hirsch, 2011). As a result, elementary history and social studies content is frequently barren. Curricula unadorned with the latest findings manifest in disengaged and uninformed students (Leming & Ellington, 2003). Politicians and experts encourage change (Duncan, 2010; Senechal, 2010). One effective (and inexpensive) step forward is for researchers to distinguish engaging, age-appropriate, and historically accurate textbooks and children's literature from those that are not.

Research has documented the frequency of inaccuracies or misrepresentations within expensive history textbooks (Chick, 2006; Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2009; Lindquist, 2009; Loewen, 1995; Matusevich, 2006). Many elementary teachers supplement textbooks with curricular materials such as children's literature (Lindquist, 1997; Welton, 2005). Researchers encourage elementary teachers to use of such material to enrich history content, as an interdisciplinary connection during prescribed reading time, and to improve reading scores

(Bigelow & Peterson, 1998; Lindquist, 2002; Sunal & Haas, 2008). Common Core prescribes intensive readings of informational texts within both English/language arts curricula and history/social studies at the elementary level (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). Since engaging stories may elicit students' interest but misrepresent history, such materials are most effective if the content presents accurate and comprehensive history (Field & Singer, 2006; Henning, Snow-Gerono, Reed, & Warner, 2006; Senechal, 2011). Many topics, from historical minutiae to critical events and controversial people, are misrepresented due to employment of inaccurate curricular materials. This is even true of topics frequently re-examined in history books, memorialized in museums, and celebrated with national commemorations (Loewen, 1995, 2000). Christopher Columbus's navigational journeys through the Atlantic, his interactions with Native Americans, and their historical significance and impact combine to form example.

There is a tension associated with terms used to denote the various and distinct peoples living in North and South America prior to European contact (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998; Mann, 2005, 2011). A single name cannot represent inclusively these diverse groups. For purposes of simplicity and clarity, the term *Native Americans* will be used when referencing the general populations. When appropriate, specific names of tribes will be employed.

As the only non-American citizen awarded a national holiday, it is meaningful for students to learn about Columbus, but teachers must use accurate content when doing so. Much like research reporting misrepresentations in history textbooks, illustrative research has investigated historical inaccuracies and content anachronisms in children's literature (Blos, 1985; Collins & Graham, 2001; Field & Singer, 2006; Henning et al., 2006; MacLeod, 1998; Williams, 2009). Due to small data pools and selective focus on certain topics, there is a dearth in research quantifying the historical accuracy and substance of children's literature about: Columbus, his exploration, his interactions with Native Americans, and their historical significance. There is not a shortage of research exploring the history of Columbus and exploration, history of the interactions between Europeans and Native Americans, the economic impact of the Columbian Exchange, or the anthropology and archaeology associated with the pre-contact Native Americans (Diamond, 2005, 2011; Mann, 2005, 2011; Nader, 2002; Nunn & Qian, 2010). Similarly, for secondary students, there is no deficiency of highly engaging and historically accurate literature that is inclusive of the latest historical, anthropological, and archaeological research of this era (see Appendix I, *Literature on Columbus and the Columbian Exchange for Secondary Students*). Significant portions of the history surrounding Columbus's exploration and interactions between various explorers and Native Americans are taught in elementary school (Wilton & Bickford, 2012). The latest findings have not trickled down to literature intended for these students. This research will demonstrate that the Columbus-themed children's literature intended for elementary students—with but a few exceptions over the last century—is limited, misrepresentative, devoid of primary source material, and replete with inaccuracies.

While substantive educational materials have been proffered and creative methodological approaches have been encouraged, more is needed to encourage teachers to discard or reuse (in different ways) popular but outdated literature (Bigelow, 1998a, 1998b, n.d.; Field & Singer, 2006; Henning et al., 2006; Olson-Raymer, 2005; Peterson, 1998). This endeavor is important for teachers and educational researchers due to the frequent use of literature as a curricular supplement and the positive learning benefits when teachers intertwine accurate history and engaging literature (Johnson & Janisch, 1998; Kent & Simpson, 2008; Stewart & Marshall,

2009; Virtue & Volger, 2009). For purposes of clarity, this paper is organized into four sections. *Columbus in History and in School* represents a concise yet inclusive examination of the history surrounding, and historical disagreements about, the significance of Columbus and his explorations. By contextualizing historical, economic, anthropological, and archaeological research, the reader is better able to understand the significance when these findings manifest or remain absent in children's literature. *Research Methodology* reports various forms of misrepresentation that potentially emerge within literature. Methods for establishing a representative data pool are described and steps to establish and verify emergent codes are identified. *Historical Misrepresentations within Children's Literature* reports findings about misrepresentations and historical inaccuracies within children's literature. It contextualizes findings within the aforementioned historical, economic, anthropological, and archaeological framework of experts' disagreements. *Discussion* details a path for research.

### **Columbus in History and in School**

The history of Christopher Columbus's exploration of the Atlantic (and the subsequent European expansion into the western hemisphere) is an ubiquitous historical topic within elementary social studies classrooms because, in part, it is commemorated with a national holiday. Since it is memorialized as a holiday, many elementary teachers, textbooks, and children's literature construct a "hero" narrative of Columbus (Loewen, 1995, p. 43). This heroification celebrates the European-Native American contact (in 1492) as an exclusive result of Columbus's idealism and bravery (Bigelow, 1998b; Bigelow & Peterson, 1998; Henning et al., 2006). Columbus is represented as an individual while the structural changes that enabled such exploration are ignored, and subsequent Atlantic exploration is contextualized as a direct result of only Columbus's journey(s) (Bigelow, 1998a; Nader, 2002; Nunn & Qian, 2010; Peterson, 1998). While erroneous and limited, this paradigm nonetheless is common in elementary schools (Field & Singer, 2006).

Students should learn about Columbus because of his impact on world history. To do so appropriately, elementary teachers should enable students to examine the timeline of events that facilitated the explorations and their collective and individual impact. It should not be a simplistic celebration of Columbus, but instead include multiple and various other perspectives, like those of his crew, the Natives, and those who financed his explorations (Bickford & Wilton, 2012). The content should contextualize the exploration, accomplishments, and transgressions through a world history framework, and not simply a Western history paradigm (Bickford & Wilson, 2012).

The complexities of the exploration, accomplishments, and transgressions have generated considerable controversy and stark sentiment. As Samuel Wineburg (2007) noted, "It is almost as if [once] the Columbus button in memory is pressed, [people see a] green light to erect a soapbox and preach the gospel of our age" (p. 11). This controversy has manifested at various times in a variety of political, historical, and education contexts and is rooted in disagreements about the significance of Columbus's exploration, his talent as a navigator, his motivations to explore, his and his crew's behaviors, and his place in world history (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997; Symcox, 2002). History education researchers encourage teachers to complicate students' historical understandings by eliciting their interests in controversial aspects of history (Drake &

Brown, 2003; Ruffin & Capell, 2009; Wineburg, 2001). The following is a summation of historians' understandings of and divergent opinions about Columbus.

Historians from various philosophic and political persuasions and separated by decades credit Columbus as the catalyst for European exploration and economic expansion into the Atlantic world and see his travels as significant (Bourne, 1906; Hanke, 1949; Nader, 2002; Sale, 2006). Disagreements, however, emerge about Viking voyagers or explorations from Phoenicia, Ireland, Africa, Carthage, China, or possibly Germany preempting Columbus (Heyerdahl, 1971; Hughes, 2004; Menzies, 2003; Richardson, 2003; Severin, 1977). Intellectual divergences manifest over the relative significance of Atlantic exploration in comparison to exploration of the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Benton, 2005; Campbell, 2003; Hall, 2004; Pouwels, 2002; Tcherkezoff, 2003; Tolmacheva, 2000). Experts disagree on which region first achieved modernity: Europe or Asia (Flynn & Giraldez, 2002; Pomeranz, 2000). Historians debate the relative significance of a single explorer's voyage in comparison to European rulers' willingness to enable merchants' risk-taking (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2005; Diamond, 2005; Mann, 2005). Most historians do not affirm Columbus with superlatives like, "Of all the members of humankind who have ever walked the earth, he alone inaugurated a new era in the history of life" (Mann, 2011, p. 4). Nor, do most commemorate initial contact with grand statements like, "The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies" (Lopez de Gomara, 1991, p. 1). The majority of researchers, however, do see Columbus's exploration as epic because of its impact on colonization and trade (Diamond, 2005; Mann, 2005). Consensus about the historical significance of Columbus's "discovery" cannot be achieved as disputes emerge about his talent, motivation, and misbehaviors.

Experts disagree about Columbus's navigational talent and that of his crew. Whereas some have claimed Columbus was a courageous, skilled, and poised navigator who utilized managerial expertise to succeed despite his crew's fearfulness (Schweikart & Allen, 2007), others suggested his luck and resiliency were as important as his competence (Granzotto, 1985; Nader, 2002). Still others characterize Columbus as an arrogant, deceitful, and relatively novice navigator who employed flawed navigational logic, maladroitly followed the stars, wrongly subscribed to a Ptolemaic geographical framework, and disregarded Eratosthenes' more accurate, comprehensive geographical framework (Crease, 2003; Mann, 2011; Thrower & William, 1999). Some assert Columbus succeeded only because of his crew's diligence (Loewen, 1995; Zinn, 1999). Similarly, when asserting the influence of luck, some historians emphasize Columbus's crew's navigational inexperience, coerced participation (due to proffered pardons for prisoners and promises of non-deportation for Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity), and threats of mutiny based on fear and squalid living conditions (Nader, 2002; Sale, 2006). Consequently, historians see Columbus's navigational talent and his crew's involvement quite differently.

Experts do not agree about which variables motivated Columbus to embark on such a dangerous journey. These motivational catalysts include: developing a safe travel path to India for spices; exercising natural curiosity of undiscovered lands and new peoples; spreading Christianity; basking in the associated glory of accomplishment; and acting out of lust for gold (McCants, 2007). Some historians emphasize the first three variables (Schweikart & Allen, 2007); others acknowledge the first three motivations, but assert Columbus's primary interests

were in obtaining glory by locating gold (Granzotto, 1985; Mann, 2005, 2011). Still others, while not dismissing the first three variables, argue the zealous pursuit of glory and voracious mercantilist quest for gold to be of utmost concern for Columbus and his financiers: the Spanish royalty and Catholic Church who wanted both expansion of Christianity and development of wealth (Bourne, 1906; Loewen, 1995; Nader, 2002, Phillips, 1992; Zinn, 1999). There is a plethora of primary evidence indicating Columbus's fanatic delusions of grandeur. In his will, for instance, Columbus asserted, "I presented [to Spain] the Indies. I say presented, because it is evident that by the will of God, our Sovereign, I gave them, *as a thing that was mine* (emphasis added)" (Deagan, 1977, p. 52). Delusions of grandeur, like fanatic desire for glory through titles, and greed for gold, are areas where historians disagree about Columbus's motivations to explore.

Experts diverge in their characterization and contextualization of Columbus's involvement with violence. While some acknowledge his conquest and enslavement of indigenous peoples only to argue that such actions were typical of his contemporaries (Schweikart & Allen, 2007), other historians admit how such brutality may appear through a modern historical lens while asserting he should be contextualized as an explorer, not an invading conqueror (Granzotto, 1985; Phillips, 1992). Still others intensely disagree and assert Columbus's (and his crew's) unscrupulous behaviors violated anti-slavery decrees set forth by the Spanish royalty because they involved murder, thievery, rape, enslavement, and other dehumanizing acts (Deagan, 1977; Loewen, 1995; Nader, 2002; Sandburg, 2006; Zinn, 1999). As a result, historians contest the meaning of Columbus's actions after contact with indigenous peoples.

Due to their noteworthy disagreements, historians' conclusions about Columbus's place in history diverge drastically. Some argue Columbus should be viewed as a brave explorer with noble and religious-based intentions and, in their view, modern views about brutality misrepresent and vilify Columbus (Lopez de Gomara, 1991; Schweikart & Allen, 2007). Ignoring evidence of the Spanish royalty's changing perceptions about slavery and violence, some claim that "left-wing" and "socialist" historians with "agendas" revise and "corrupt" history by focusing on unimportant details that were not anomalous, but part of a larger pattern of explorers' behaviors (Schweikart & Allen, 2007). Other historians disagree, contending that financial incentives generated a fanatical desire to gain treasure and titles, intense hubris to obtain glory and notoriety, and extreme loyalty to Spanish royalty mixed to generate unspeakable crimes against humanity under the guise of religiosity (Diamond, 2005; Loewen, 1995; Zinn, 1999). In their view, to argue otherwise is to defend an orthodoxy favoring a romanticized view of the Genoese mariner. While historians converge in agreement about the significance of the 1492 exploration, there is considerable disagreement about its meaning, the events that occurred afterwards, and Columbus's place in history.

If students are expected to understand why Columbus is memorialized with a national holiday, they must evaluate accurate, age-appropriate content about him, and his motivations, deeds, and misdeeds. Teachers must incorporate curricular materials representing historical disagreements and their supporting evidence. Such disagreements are palpable in historical circles but have not emerged within children's non-fiction and historical fiction books about Columbus.

### Research Methodology

History is frequently misrepresented with superficial and less-than-comprehensive content in American schools (Leming & Ellington, 2003; Lintner, 2006; Yendol-Hoppey & Tilford, 2004). This particular pattern manifests within both history textbooks and curricular materials (Blos, 1985; Collins & Graham, 2001; MacLeod, 1998; Williams, 2009). With regards to Columbus, initial European contact with Native Americans, and the Columbian Exchange, researchers have conducted six different content analyses (Bigelow, 1998a; Bigelow, 1998b; Field & Singer, 2006; Henning et al., 2006; Peterson, 1998). The results, however, were more descriptive than rigorous and comprehensive because not a single data pool included more than ten books and few researchers gave details about the selection process. To do so rigorously, the data pool must include a representative number of books at diverse reading levels from a variety of eras.

I searched for all published literature intended for elementary teachers or students in kindergarten through sixth grade that focused on Columbus and/or the Columbian Exchange. Initially exceeding three hundred books, the data pool was reduced to those that could be obtained via the university library, interlibrary loan, or for purchase on the Internet. Access to the book was necessary for analysis, but was also a limitation. To generate a data pool inclusive of a variety of reading levels, 33 children's literature books were selected with intended age ranges from kindergarten to sixth grade. Of those selected 19 were intended for lower elementary readers and 14 were intended for upper elementary students. The ratio of lower elementary books to upper elementary books (19:14) purposefully matched the percentages in the initial data pool where almost 60% of books were intended for lower elementary grades. To generate a data pool representing both contemporary and older literature, 27 books were published within the last thirty years (after 1983). Six books were published more than 50 years ago (before 1963). Of the books older than 50 years, three were intended for lower elementary students and three were aimed at upper elementary readers). Thus, the data pool represents and balances new and old books, popular and obscure books, and books intended for lower and upper elementary students (see Appendix II, entitled *Selected and Reviewed Children's Literature*).

The employed content analysis protocol was intended to detect the concepts of presentism, exceptionalism, heroification, and omission, all forms of historical misrepresentation, within the children's literature. Various history education researchers have documented the presence of historical misrepresentation in children's literature (Field & Singer, 2006; Williams, 2009). Such historical misrepresentations have a strong, negative, and lasting impact on students' historical understandings (Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2011).

Authors, historians, and history students engage in *presentism* when viewing the past from a modern perspective (Nokes, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). Presentism manifests when the outcome is portrayed as inevitable, as if significant historical figures and their contemporaries did not confront uncertainty. If modern students or historians were to assess the American patriots involvement in the 1773 Boston Tea Party as fail-safe, their presumption would be replete with presentism and misrepresentative for two reasons. First, it relies on variables and results unknown to the historical figures. Second, it presumes inevitability about a sequence of historical events that were quite subject to change.

*Exceptionalism* emerges when a historical figure engaging in a historically accurate, extraordinary, yet anomalous action is portrayed as representative (Williams, 2009). While Harriet Tubman's exploits on the Underground Railroad and Rosa Parks's refusal to cede her bus seat are each historically accurate, Tubman is not historically representative of a typical female slave and Parks's choices and actions on that single day are not historically representative of her extensive work in the civil rights movement prior to her arrest on December 1, 1955. Tubman and Parks should each be celebrated, but as significant exceptions and anomalies. When *only* their stories are told, there is the potential for children to generate unrealistic impressions of slavery (all female slaves did not gain their freedom) and the civil rights movement (African-Americans did not suddenly gain social acceptance when one woman refused to relinquish her seat). If only the exceptional story is told, history is misrepresented.

*Heroification* manifests when a lone person is characterized as having single-handedly altered history and, as a result, receives entirely more acclaim than is deserved (Loewen, 1995). While historical figures who are heroified altered history, not one acted alone. Historical leaders guided followers, but were influenced by, and acted in concert with, numerous others. Heroification manifests when historical figures are portrayed as only good. Such portrayal is historically misrepresentative and inaccurate. A narrative heroifies Dr. Martin Luther King if it only focuses on his positive contributions to the civil rights, anti-war, and anti-poverty movements with no mention of his romantic and sexual dalliances, perceived arrogance, and dubious companions or no acknowledgement of the countless (and sometimes anonymous) supporters who contributed constructively to his causes. Heroification usually materializes when an individual is viewed in isolation and the systemic variables that contributed to the individual's success or failure are overlooked.

*Omission* is palpable when important understandings and considerations are excluded from the historical narrative (Loewen, 1995; Nokes, 2011). Due to the complicated nature of history, it is inevitable and important for teachers to leave out unnecessary content. But it is historical misrepresentative to exchange complexity and nuance for clarity and simplicity. To begin a lesson about America's involvement in World War II with the bombing of Pearl Harbor excludes the historical significance of the American military bases across the Pacific, which contributed to Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor. To omit such content is a historical misrepresentation.

Presentism, exceptionalism, heroification, and omission are forms of historical misrepresentation that manifest in children's literature. Historians use various heuristics to avoid the aforementioned historical misrepresentations (Nokes, 2011; Wineburg, 1998, 2001). This research project employed the previous section's history on the initial contact between European explorers and Native Americans as a guide in detecting the historical misrepresentations during the content analysis.

During the initial reading of each book, I detailed, in writing, specific areas that were historically accurate or inaccurate and representative or misrepresentative (see Table 1, questions 14-18 below) along with the book's genre, background, and attributes (Table 1, questions 1-7 below). Detailed notes enabled me to initially assess how each author historically contextualized the events and represented the events and historical figures within the narrative (Wineburg, 1998). After reading each book thoroughly once, I synthesized my notes from individual books into observable patterns inclusive of all books and anomalies appearing in one or a few books



(Table 1, questions 8-13 below). This organization of shared patterns and distinct anomalies established tentative and emergent codes, which were represented in the *Content Analysis Protocol* (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Content Analysis Protocol*

1. Author's name
2. Book's Title
3. Publication Date
4. Publication Company
5. For (about) what age/grade was this book is intended?
6. Is the story presented as a non-fiction history book? Or is the story presented like historical fiction? If it is historical fiction, would this be clear to a reader of the intended age?
7. Who was the main character or who were the main characters? List name, age, gender, country and/or location of origin, etc.
8. What did the author present as Columbus's main motivation for exploration? (Spices, gold/greed, glory, spreading Christianity, or something else?) Did the author present other motivations? If so, what?
9. Regarding Columbus's leadership, was he depicted as being authoritative (positive, decisive leader) or authoritarian (controlling, dictatorial)? How did the crew respond to Columbus's leadership? Was there cohesion and harmony between the crew and Columbus?
10. How did the book depict Columbus's interactions with and treatment of the Native Americans? Did the book depict violence? How often was violence mentioned? Describe the violence. Did the book depict Columbus as deceiving or cheating the native people in any way?
11. How did the book depict the Native Americans? Were they portrayed as kind and generous? Intelligent and skillful? Or something else? Be specific.
12. Was there any mention of voyages after the original 1492 exploration? If so, what? Be specific.
13. Did the book utilize any primary sources (letters, diaries, maps, etc.) within the structure of the narrative? If so, what? Be specific. Were any primary sources mentioned in the book's afterward? If so, what? Be specific.
14. Was presentism apparent in any aspect of this book? Give details.
15. Was exceptionalism apparent in any aspect of this book? Give details.
16. Was heroification apparent in any aspect of this book? Give details.
17. Was omission apparent in any aspect of this book? Give details.
18. Were there any parts of the book that seemed historically inaccurate or implausible?

Notes derived from questions 14-18 on individual books were synthesized to form tentative emergent patterns and distinct anomalies, which appeared as questions 8-13. These patterns and anomalies, served as tentative codes needing reevaluation for purposes of

verification (Kline, 2008; Maxwell, 2010; Wineburg, 1998). Then I reread each book using the established *Content Analysis Protocol* to confirm findings or establish dependability of findings (Maxwell, 2010; Pillow, 2003; Wineburg, 1998). Findings were organized in large wall charts to extrapolate meanings. The employed data collection methods and analytic techniques used were rigorous, coherent, and consistent with best practice qualitative research (Kline, 2008; Pillow, 2003; Wineburg, 1998).

### **Historical Misrepresentations within Children's Literature**

The historical analyses tools were used to extrapolate eight key findings from various children's literature books about Columbus. The eight key findings form the basis for the subsequent subsections and were derived from the content analysis of the children's literature. The findings reported in the subsequent subsections are then contextualized within the framework of historians' understandings detailed in the previous section.

#### **Genre and Reading Level**

All of the reviewed children's literature shared the same content, but there appeared to be genre-based patterns based on the intended age of the reader. While I recognize nuances within the non-fiction literature genre (i.e., expository, narrative non-fiction, biography), they remain grouped as non-fiction because their intent is to convey factual information. While non-fiction literature (n: 28) outnumbered historical fiction (n: 5), the genre-based stylistic patterns generated an intriguing, unexpected finding when extrapolated by the intended age of the reader. Non-fiction books intended for lower elementary readers greatly outnumbered historical fiction (18:1), but non-fiction intended for upper elementary readers outnumbered historical fiction by a less-noteworthy majority (10:4). This disparity was not predicted considering that lower elementary students usually read more fiction than non-fiction (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Duffy-Hester, 1999; Jacobs, Morrison, & Swinyard, 2000).

It seems likely that the books intended for lower elementary readers were written as engaging supplementary material for the teacher to include within the classroom. Stated differently, these lower elementary books are likely used as teacher tools to guide students towards historical understandings; such direct guidance might not be as routine for upper elementary readers, who are more independent readers. If this data-derived inference is correct, lower elementary teachers rely on the accuracy of the books' content because supplemental primary sources are certainly too complex and historically nuanced for their students. This, however, is conjecture. Teachers, nevertheless, do not intend to convey inaccurate material within their classrooms, so the misrepresentation and distortion of historical content in these books are of concern.

#### **Eurocentric Perspective**

The vast majority of the books (n=30, 91%) constructed a narrative from the perspective of European explorers. Whereas the data pool included 33 different books, only three (9%) substantively included strong voices from non-Europeans (Bond, 2008; Dorris, 1992; Yolen, 1992). Of these, only Jane Yolen's (1992) *Encounter* was intended for lower elementary readers. This leaves readers—especially young students—with an incomplete understanding of the divergence of opinion through which history can, and must be, viewed. Readers of the vast majority of these books (n=30) could only see this event through the eyes of the victors, the European explorers. History education researchers strongly encourage teachers' employment of

multiple perspectives, including those who were disenfranchised or underrepresented; to do otherwise is to err via the historical misrepresentations of exceptionalism and omission (Nokes, 2011; Wineburg, 1991).

### **Leadership Perspective**

The prevalence of a singular perspective of country or location of origin was also seen in the lack of multiple perspectives in the main characters' roles. Nearly every book (n=27; 81%) across intended reading age and genre focused on the perspective of explorers or political leaders, like Columbus and the Spanish royalty. While the three books mentioned in the previous subsection all focused on the roles of Native Americans (Bond, 2008; Dorris, 1992; Yolen, 1992), only three others included substantive voices from Europeans who were not political leaders or explorers (Dodge, 1991; Foreman, 1991; Smith, 1992). Barry Smith's (1992) *The First Voyage of Christopher Columbus*, a historical fiction novel intended for upper elementary students, focused on an anonymous sailor who lived in Palos, Spain near Columbus's residence. Michael Foreman's (1991) upper elementary historical fiction book *The Boy Who Sailed with Columbus* centered on Leif, a young European boy who traveled on board with Columbus. Stephen Dodge's (1991) *Christopher Columbus and the First Voyages to the New World*, a non-fiction upper elementary book, includes Bartolome de Las Casas as a main character. de Las Casas was a willing participant on the voyage who later, as a clergyman, opposed the brutality. While a small data pool can easily be skewed, it appeared meaningful that five of the six books were intended for students in the upper grades of elementary school and all six were published in the last two decades. This indicates a slight shift in diversity of role or a more inclusive approach to whose perspective deserves attention. This also leaves young readers with a sense of exceptionalism in the leaders' roles and impact on history.

That the majority of narratives focused on characters with explicit leadership roles guides young students to construct the misperception that only traditional leaders strongly shaped historical events. In doing so, the contributions of ordinary people appear less important. History education researchers strongly encourage teachers' inclusion of diversity in political and social history (Loewen, 1995; Wineburg, 2001). While any of the 27 other books' exclusion of the crew could be used for descriptive purposes, Christina Mia Gardeski's (2001) *Columbus Day* was representative of this pattern: the crew was mentioned only on the day Columbus and his crew set sail. While the information is readily available for historians and students of history, Gardeski (2001) mentioned not a single crewmember by name. Whether intended or not, the uniformity in role implies the relative insignificance of those who worked tirelessly to enable success. Such authorial decisions indicated omission of role and also exceptionalism and heroification of Columbus for his accomplishments (Williams, 2009; Wineburg, 2001).

### **Motivations to Explore**

Authorial decisions to disregard multiple perspectives appeared similar to their disregard of multiple motivations to explore. Historians' divergent opinions about Columbus's motivations to explore contrast sharply, as noted above. The authors of the children's books avoided such complexity when constructing narratives. The vast majority of books constructed narratives based on Columbus's desire to locate India in order to find spices; Columbus's adventurous spirit to explore; and Columbus's religious motivation to spread Christianity. These motivations dominated the narratives more than Columbus's desire to obtain riches (through gold, silk, spices, and other commodities) and the resultant glory. The implication of these

authorial choices is that Columbus's curiosity, courage, and piety were the catalysts for exploration, and not potential financial gains and fame. It has been argued that a partial narrative devoid of mercantilist intent guides the reader (especially young children) to attach an undeserved virtue to Columbus, leaving the reader with unrealistic historical understandings (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998; Loewen, 1995).

When more fully contextualized, the narratives in the books appear especially skewed. The following are descriptive examples. In Marion Bauer's (2009) *Christopher Columbus*, Columbus grows up dreaming of sailing. While Bauer included an illustration of Columbus dreaming of gold, not a single sentence conveyed this motivation. *Young Christopher Columbus*, by Eric Carpenter's (1992), had a narrative where the gold and gifts were for the Spanish royalty, as if Columbus had no financial stake in successful voyages. Rennay Craats's (2001) *Columbus Day* does not reference spices, gold, glory, or God as catalysts that motivated Columbus to explore. As if Columbus had not pleaded for years to embark on the voyage, Craats (2001) placed the onus on the Spanish royalty when writing, "Columbus was asked by the King and Queen of Spain to find a shorter route west across the Atlantic Ocean" (Craats, 2001, p. 6). Other authors focus on Columbus's desire to be a mapmaker, yearning to prove the earth was round, curiosity to see if Ptolemy's calculations were correct about the size of the Atlantic, or longing to live his life helping others in a Christian way, as his name implied (Gardeski, 2001; Judson, 1960; Kurtz, 2007; Weir, 1950).

While it cannot be known with certainty the influence of each possible motivation, historians include and discuss all of those identified above (Fischer, 1970; Holt, 1990; Wineburg, 2001). The authors of these children's books did not discuss diverse motivations. By evading the financial implications (and accompanying fame) of success, the authors omit motivation while focusing on Columbus's exceptionalism and heroifying him.

### **Leadership and Response**

The virtue that authors credited to Columbus's motivations to explore surfaced in descriptions of his leadership and the crew's response. The majority of the books described Columbus's leadership style as decisive and noted the crew's concerns about successfully finding land and safely returning. Little or no mention was made of how Columbus obtained a crew or of the crew's living conditions. Historians have written extensively about Columbus's manipulation to obtain a crew, his purposeful deceit when writing in the ship's log, the crew's squalid living conditions, and the crew's resistance through near-mutiny and threats of desertion (Granzotto, 1985; Nader, 2002; Sale, 2006). As these historians report less-than-idyllic decisions, living conditions, and interpersonal confrontations, only a few books acknowledge any of this and not one mentioned everything.

Whereas one book intended for lower elementary (MacDonald, 2004) and three intended for upper elementary (Brenner, 1998; Brooks, 1892; Sundel, 2002) referenced Columbus's intentional manipulation of the navigational log, the other 29 (88%) did not include this deceit. Every book ignored the crew's filthy living conditions, save one upper elementary book (Aller, 2002). Only three (9%) books mentioned one of the two ways Columbus secured a crew: by offering Jews an opportunity to avoid exile by converting to Christianity and proffering pardons to imprisoned convicts (Brenner, 1998; Dodge, 1991; Sundel, 2002). Not a single book mentioned both approaches and 30 (91%) mentioned neither. Although a majority of books (n: 25, 76%) mentioned the crew's uncertainty about Columbus's navigational skills, 12 (36%)

referenced their potential for mutiny, and one book noted the crew's plan to desert Columbus yet ended with a focus on Columbus's success (Bond, 2008). The successful end to the initial journey, though historically accurate, leaves young readers with an assuredness of success that the crew did not share. While this indicates presentism, omission, heroification, and exceptionalism, it was historically accurate.

All examined books constructed narratives with incomplete information about Columbus's leadership and the crew's response. While I could proffer examples from any of the books, the following are representative selections. Jane Kurtz's (2007) *What Columbus Found* depicted the crew as happy and excited to discover if the world was flat or round. In *Three Ships for Columbus*, Eve Spencer (1993) characterized Columbus as an encouraging, calming influence; he was willing to compromise with a skeptical, inexperienced crew who responded in positive ways to Columbus's leadership. Ruth Weir's (1950) *Christopher Columbus* characterized Columbus as a genuinely caring leader whose crew reciprocated with trust in words and actions. These narratives are replete with various historical misrepresentations that leave readers (especially impressionable young students) with incomplete understandings.

Based on the data collected and analyzed, the voyage was successful due to Columbus's skillful, persistent, positive leadership and talent at navigation. While it was not explicitly stated, the books' collective focus on Columbus's navigational skills and leadership style implied that no one else contributed meaningfully to the voyage's success. The focus on Columbus's resolve, navigational talent, and decisive leadership indicated exceptionalism and heroification and were likely underpinned by the authors' presentist understanding that Columbus ultimately was successful. This intense focus on Columbus, his skills, and his resultant success overshadowed or historically omitted the crew's grave concerns, agentive resistance, and contributions.

### **Content on Native Americans**

The inadequate description of the crew's response to Columbus's leadership paralleled inadequate coverage of Native Americans. While all the books referenced the Native Americans, the Native Americans were largely overshadowed. This was due to superficial textual content that generally focused on their scant attire and deep tans. The books were devoid of substantive descriptions about their culture. Following a trend, the authors essentially ignored the abundant and convincing research generated by anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians. Michael Dorris's (1992) upper elementary historical fiction *Morning Girl* combines rich cultural details with an engaging story to demonstrate the Native Americans' distinct cultural context. By including storylines that parallel modern children's behaviors and attitudes, Dorris (1992) constructed a narrative that demonstrated Native American's humanity. Whereas historians might argue that such a plot represents presentism, educators might value its relevance as engaging children in rich literature. Dorris's (1992) narrative was anomalous in its focus on Native Americans.

Nearly every other author were more complimentary than substantive, describing the Native Americans as gentle, welcoming, naïve, generous, and intelligent, skillful with their resources yet without the benefit of contemporaneous tools and inventions. It was significant that each book noted Columbus's confusion about location, which contributed to his insistence that they had located India. These books' descriptions and characterizations cohere strongly with the primary source material provided by Europeans. None of the books, however, included information generated from anthropological and archeological research. Further, not every book

represented Native Americans respectfully. Fiona MacDonald's (2004) *You Wouldn't Want to Sail with Christopher Columbus* depicted the Native Americans using imagery that appears more sardonic than accurate. MacDonald (2004) and Al Sundel (2002), in *Christopher Columbus and the Age of Exploration in World History*, both used prose and word choice implying uncivilized and/or barbaric dispositions. While previous research has examined the historical frequency of misrepresentations through stereotypical imagery (Bigelow, 1998a, 1998b; Bigelow & Peterson, 1998; Field & Singer, 2006; Henning et al., 2006; Peterson, 1998), it was nonetheless disheartening that such books have publication dates within the last decade.

It was similarly disheartening that 23 books did not use the name, Arawak, who were the indigenous tribes of the West Indies, or the name Taino, the branch of the Arawak who first encountered Columbus (Mann, 2005). Except for three historical fiction books that invented historical Native Americans within their historical fiction accounts (Bond, 2008; Dorris, 1992; Yolen, 1992), none of the books mentioned a single Native American by name. Not only are the Native Americans overshadowed by authors' disregard of content deemed unworthy of inclusion, they are effectively silenced through omission of tribal names and names of actual Native Americans. Historians know of Hatuey's uncompromising resistance (Backer, 2008; de Las Casas, 1992; Rouse, 1992; Saney, 2009), readers of these 33 children's books do not. These historical omissions appear to be authorial choices to heroify Columbus with exceptionalist tales of successful voyages.

### **Violence**

The authors' overshadowing of Native Americans, silencing of their voices, and evasion of mention of their resistance was akin to the authors' reticent approach to violent action. Historians have thoroughly explored the violence that emerged during Columbus's (and his crew's) interactions with Native Americans. The vast majority of authors (n=26, 79%) omitted or misrepresented these events that complicate the exceptionalist notions that underpin the heroification of Columbus. *A Picture Book of Christopher Columbus* (Adler, 1991), written for young readers, mentioned the crew's violence towards Native Americans in an age-appropriate way. The author, however, described Columbus as *noticing* the violence upon landing during his second voyage; in this situation, Columbus did not order, participate in, or affirm the violence. The author of the upper elementary book, *Christopher Columbus*, took a similar approach (Aller, 2002). She placed the burden of blame indirectly on the Native Americans when she noted that Columbus's crew was killed. In doing so, both Adler (1991) and Aller (2002) acknowledged the violence but implicitly relocated blame away from Columbus. While arguably spurious, it can be asserted that the authors addressed the violence in a way that would not disturb elementary students, which is a valid consideration for all educators.

Other authors were far more detailed when accounting the violence (Bond, 2008; Foreman, 1991; Fradin, 1990; Landau, 2001; McNeese, 2008; Syme, 1952; Yolen, 1992). While it can be argued that the material is too graphic even for children of these ages, this subsection focuses on what is and what is not included. While seven did so (21%), Gloria Bond's (2008) *Sons of Yocahu* and Tim McNeese's (2008) *The Fascinating History of American Indians* are representative examples. *Sons of Yocahu* detailed both physical violence in the forms of torture and killing directed at adults and children alike and sexual violence directed at women (Bond, 2008). *Sons of Yocahu* particularizes the violence to include indiscriminate sword attacks, burning huts, hangings, and death by burning to intimidate and compel the Native Americans to

produce gold, cotton, pearls and other valuables (Bond, 2008). *Sons of Yocahu* noted how members of one village selected suicide by poison to avoid torture and slavery (Bond, 2008). The author also mentioned Native Americans' purposeful infanticide so that their children did not have to grow up under tyranny or because their infant children were products of rape and had Spanish blood. These unspeakable choices were included to contextualize the turnabout from friendship to repression. While excluding graphic elements, McNeese (2008) extensively details the Europeans' use of superior weaponry to mistreat the Native Americans and compel them into forced labor for exploitative purposes. It can be argued that Bond's (2008) and McNeese's (2008) accounts are too graphic but it cannot be argued that they distort history.

Seven (21%) books actively distorted history in egregious ways. Distortions occurred when Native Americans were portrayed as willing and motivated to work; when the forced labor was contextualized as a cooperative and harmonious effort to obtain gold; when Columbus was described as being unable to control his men's impulsive anger; when the Native Americans were characterized as initiating violence not reacting to European violence; when the burden of guilt is placed on the crew and not Columbus; and when Columbus's actions were justified because of the need to locate gold (Brooks, 1892; Dalglish, 1955; Dodge, 1991; Liestman, 1991; MacDonald, 2004; Sundel, 2002; Weir, 1950). The most egregious misrepresentations were within *You Wouldn't Want to Sail with Christopher Columbus!*, a recently published lower elementary book (MacDonald, 2004). In *You Wouldn't Want to Sail with Christopher Columbus!*, Columbus makes a variety of "mistakes" that the author uses to give "handy hints" to young readers about being kind to local people. These are noted when scenes of violence are portrayed in comic form; when explorers are drawn looking scared and innocent as the Native Americans are depicted as cruel and bedecked in gold necklaces and jewelry; and when a crew member reflects, "I wonder if I should have been a carpenter" (p. 26-27) as Native Americans approach with spears (MacDonald, 2004).

Described as the most egregious misrepresentation of history, *You Wouldn't Want to Sail with Christopher Columbus!* at least mentioned violence (MacDonald, 2004). Seventeen (52%) other books did not (Asselin, 2011; Bauer, 2009; Brenner, 1998; Carpenter, 1992; Craats, 2001; Dorris, 1992; Gardeski, 2001; Greene, 1989; Judson, 1960; Krensky, 1991; Kurtz, 2007; Lillegard, 1987; Marzollo, 1991; Norman, 1960; Sis, 1991; Smith, 1992; Spencer, 1993). Readers are left with partial or distorted understandings by authors who purposefully silenced victims by ignoring a pattern of historically documented events. The omission enables exceptionalist notions of Columbus to surface and manifest in heroification.

### **Slavery**

The children's authors' omission of European violence paralleled their taciturn depictions of Columbus's enslavement of Native Americans. The authors disregarded content that historians have thoroughly documented. Readers are left with partial understandings that skew their perceptions of Columbus, which likely results in heroification. This was especially true of literature intended for lower elementary readers, where not a single book broached this subject accurately. Four books (12%) intended for upper elementary students accurately approached this subject in age-appropriate ways (Aller, 2002; Bond, 2008; Dodge, 1991; Fradin, 1990). As a descriptive example, Susan Aller's (2002) *Christopher Columbus* noted Columbus's early admission that the Native Americans could be easily made into productive slaves; detailed how Columbus forcibly compelled them to locate and surrender gold; and noted that Columbus

brought them to Spain as slaves when the scant gold obtained would not suit the financiers. *Christopher Columbus and the First Voyages to the New World* (Dodge, 1991) presents a historically accurate description of how the Spanish royalty requested that Native Americans be converted to Christianity in lieu of enslavement. While not comprehensive in details, the four books balanced age-appropriate content with historical accuracy in a direct manner. Over half the books (n=18, 55%) avoided reference to slavery (Bauer, 2009; Carpenter, 1992; Craats, 2001; Dorris, 1992; Gardeski, 2001; Greene, 1989; Judson, 1960; Kurtz, 2007; Marzollo, 1991; McNeese, 2008; Norman, 1960; Sis, 1991; Smith, 1992; Spencer, 1993; Sundel, 2002; Syme, 1952; Weir, 1950; Yolen, 1992). While I do not encourage evading the topic, it is arguably better to ignore it than to misrepresent it.

Ten books (30%) partially included Columbus's enslavement practices and, in doing so, distorted history. A synthesized listing of examples of distortion included describing Columbus as bringing "a few Indians and trinkets" back to Spain to "amaze the crowds" and reveal the treasures he had located, characterizing the Native Americans as willing to go to Spain and not resisting the forced excursion, revealing the long hours that Columbus required them to "work" for him, or excluding reference to the word "slavery" within the narrative and giving it only passing reference in the afterword (Adler, 1991; Asselin, 2011; Brenner, 1998; Brooks, 1892; Dalgleish, 1955; Krensky, 1991; Landau, 2001; Liestman, 1991; Lillegard, 1987; MacDonald, 2004). In *You Wouldn't Want to Sail with Christopher Columbus!*, Fiona MacDonald (2004) again offered young readers suggestions on how they should treat people better than Columbus did, an implicit reference to slavery.

Discussions can emerge about whether misinformation or omission is worse, but neither is productive. Misinformation and omission encourage readers to engage in heroification of Columbus. Misinformation and omission are authorial decisions likely based on perceptions about Columbus's exceptionalism, possibly rooted in good intentions about how violence and slavery distract from Columbus's accomplishments, how other explorers engaged in similar or worse exploitative behaviors, or how Columbus was simply following requirements to make profit. Misinformation and omission are counterproductive and leave readers with partial or skewed understandings about Columbus.

### Discussion

The findings indicate various misrepresentations of Columbus's history, exploration, and his involvement in the New World within children's books. Educators and researchers must locate areas in children's tradebooks, textbooks, and other educational content that deviate from historians' understandings. Education researchers, in doing so, should attend to the various disciplines within the social studies. It would be meaningful if students investigated how and why certain European countries (Spain, Portugal, and England, for instance) explored and developed colonies at different rates than their European counterparts or those in Africa and the Americas. The juxtaposition of the emergence of Pacific exploration with Atlantic exploration is a worthy topic for inclusion. Teachers should consider incorporating the cultural traditions and histories of distinct Native American tribes as well as the history of interactions between various indigenous peoples. The reciprocal influence of geography, flora, fauna, and domesticated animals on societies and technology are similarly consequential. While the previous list is limited in scope, each is a logical connection to more comprehensive understanding of



Columbus's explorations, the first of which is ubiquitous in elementary schools as the latter three are disregarded (Wilton & Bickford, 2012). While such extensions could all be included within elementary social studies curricula, their depth could be complemented with inclusion of experts' understandings in age-appropriate ways.

While I explore, here, various misrepresentations within children's history-based tradebooks, elementary teachers should not avoid such literature. Since Columbus has a national holiday and was the catalyst for the Colombian Exchange (Mann, 2005, 2011), this topic should be incorporated in the curriculum. Teachers must, however, locate and employ historically representative literature. Teachers should balance and supplement the selected literature with rich, yet age-appropriate, primary historical documents. They should also utilize engaging, discipline-specific methodological scaffolding for such primary source analysis. Since historical thinking is not a natural heuristic that children discover at puberty, such historical content, history-specific methodology, and historical thinking patterns should be initiated in age-appropriate ways at the primary grade level and developed in the intermediate grades.

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### Appendix I

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### Appendix II

#### Selected and Reviewed Children's Literature

##### Intended for Lower Elementary Readers

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