My work seeks to understand how the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and its leading figures are depicted in school textbooks for youth in the United States, Africa, Germany, Russia and France and how these depictions serve American and European national and international interests. The purpose of the study is to inform the development of future textbooks and promote international understanding.

After World War II the United States emerged as a world power, conflicted on issues of racial injustice and moral leadership. The Civil Rights Movement, sometimes referred to as the Black Freedom Struggle, took center stage in the United States and around the world in the 1950s and 1960s at the height of the Cold War. As images of sit-ins, bombed churches and water hoses spraying innocent children flashed around the world, the United States became increasingly concerned with its image as a democratic world leader. Azza Salama Layton (2010) argues in her dissertation that it was international criticism of the United States rather than intrinsic interest that prompted American Presidents Truman and Eisenhower to support civil rights legislation. President Harry Truman was known to recite in his speeches and writing that “The rest of the world is watching us: We must put our own house in order” (To Secure These Rights, 1947, p. 146-148).

African Americans also increasingly looked abroad for inspiration and leverage by comparing their struggle with the anticolonial and antifascist struggles throughout the world. American civil rights leaders like William Edward Burghardt (WeB) Du Bois, Eslanda Robeson, Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and others fled to Europe, Russia and other countries seeking asylum and recourse to injustices they were enduring in America. In spite of this exodus, historian Taylor Branch found the Civil Rights Movement is “misremembered”, with too much emphasis on events in the United States and too little on the global impact of the struggle.

For me, the challenge is to look at what remains in the collective memory of these countries by examining how textbooks in the United States and other countries make meaning of the US Civil Rights Movement. As the United States and the world reflect on the 50th anniversaries of the 1963 March on Washington, the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March, and the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombings, I inquire, how does the memory trace in school textbooks preserve, enhance, diminish or change the message? How are the global dimensions of the movement depicted with respect to the agency of individuals, groups, institutions and nations?

I spent the period from June 9 to June 27 2014 and from May 26 to June 2 2015 in residence at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research to continue the research on transnational memory and the impact of the American Civil Rights Movement in history textbooks in the United States Africa, Germany, Russia and France. I specifically utilised the resources of the Georg Eckert Institute Library.

My project will culminate in a monograph or book length manuscript with credits given to the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research and the Howard University School of Education. With permission, the publication will be disseminated at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research and at the Moor-
land-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University where a discussion of the work is planned.

Initial results of my research indicate what scholars of this period have previously suggested, which is that the activism and agency of African Americans and their allies during the Civil Rights Movement not only brought about significant changes in the law in the United States, but also helped bring about significant changes in textbooks as well (Griffin, 2004). Historian Francis Fitzgerald described this as the most “dramatic rewriting of history ever to take place in American schoolbooks” (1979, p. 58). Prior to the 1960’s, Blacks were largely absent from the mainstream narrative in American history textbooks, except for a few predictable periods such as slavery and Reconstruction. While I used a wider frame, the Black Freedom Struggle from slavery to the present day, for my analysis of history and social studies school textbooks, it was still evident that textbooks, like the rest of American society had undergone a major transformation in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

However that transformation was incomplete. After analysing textbooks in the United States from the 1940’s until 2014 for their inclusion and representation of the Black Freedom Struggle, three themes emerged in an early analysis of the data. First, the narrative of the struggle is often strait-jacketed to fit a narrow nationalistic ideology of American progress and manifest destiny. This renders a complex struggle of racial identity, white privilege and the American dream difficult to tell.

Second there is a focus on heroes. This is often referred to as the canonisation of individual leaders in the Civil Rights Movement and emerged as a major theme in many history and social studies school textbooks in Africa, Germany, France, Russia and the United States. The narrative of the Black Freedom Struggle is almost always told around great men, such as Martin Luther King and a few great women, like Rosa Parks. Many included a picture of Martin Luther King and of Rosa Parks, sometimes the same ones, with a description of their activities nearby.

Lastly, to canonisation, I would add simplification and trivialisation of the many diverse stories and experiences of the Black Freedom Struggle. For example in Joy Hakim’s, 2010 US history textbook entitled, All the People: Since 1945 that was recommended by the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts as an exemplary informational text, there is a chapter entitled “Rosa Parks Was Tired”. This is in direct contradiction to Rosa Parks experience as a trained and intentional activist as described by historian Jeanne Theoharis in her well received book, The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks (2013). While additional themes are emerging in my study, those described here are fairly consistent with scholarly inquiry into collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement (Griffin, 2004: Hall, 2005).

REFERENCES

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