Controversy Through Absence and Distortion: The Misrepresentation of the Rosa Parks Story in Children's Picture Books, Biographies, and Elementary Textbooks

John H. Saunders
University of Alabama in Huntsville

Follow this and additional works at: https://louis.uah.edu/rceu-proposals

Recommended Citation
https://louis.uah.edu/rceu-proposals/152

This Proposal is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in RCEU Project Proposals by an authorized administrator of LOUIS.

Dr. John H. Saunders, Lecturer, Department of Communication Arts,

205B CTC, Huntsville, AL 25899; 256-824-3855, jhs0011@uah.edu.

RCEU19-CM-JHS-01

Project Summary: Many historians consider Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott to be integral elements of the American Civil Rights Movement. However, the reports and representations of Rosa Parks and her involvement can often be misleading, especially to young audiences. Because Parks’ story, and that of the Montgomery bus boycott, contains elements of overt racism and violence, many authors of picture books, children’s biographies, and elementary school textbooks have altered Parks’ story due to the nature and age of their audience. By altering the story, these authors are presenting children with much skewed, and often incorrect, ideas about what really happened during the Civil Rights Movement.

I presented a conference paper on this subject many years ago but have not had the time to research as many different children’s picture books, biographies, and elementary school text books as this project would need. The focus of this proposed study is to examine a large number of children’s books and elementary school textbooks that present the Rosa Parks story to young children (ages 5-12). To begin, this study will need to establish a consistent narrative of Parks’ story from historical accounts targets towards adults. By looking at these texts first, which will not have the same need to shield its audience from certain elements; we can establish a complete narrative of her story. From there, the student will examine many different children’s books for all omissions, alterations, or additions. Finally, we will make an argument concerning the values and dangers of presenting such altered narratives to children. This project will provide the student with experience conducting detailed historical research, experience conducting close textual analysis of a variety of books for children, opportunity to present original research at an academic conference. After being presented at either a state or regional academic Communication Arts conference to receive feedback, the resulting study will be submitted to the Howard Journal of Communications, a journal that focuses on ethnicity, culture, and communication. I will include the student’s name on both submissions.

Student Duties: The RCEU student will have three major tasks. First, they will conduct historical research of Rosa Parks’ story, and will summarize the narrative. Second, they will research and
create a bibliography of picture books, children’s biographies, and elementary school textbooks that present the Rosa Parks story. The student will cite, summarize, and code each book for omissions, alterations, and additions to her story. Third, the student will write a paper making an argument based on findings of the research. I will then combine the student’s ideas with my own to create a paper to be submitted to an academic conference. After receiving feedback at the conference, we will revise the paper and submit it to the Howard Journal of Communications. Both my name and the student’s name will be on both papers.

**Student Prerequisites:** Students must be of junior or senior status in a major within the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences or College of Education. Experience writing papers including historical research is preferred. There are no prerequisite classes.

**Mentor Supervision and Interaction:** The RCEU student and I will meet at least once a week, and more often when necessary. We will use a shared Dropbox folder for both of us to update the elements we are working on. I will provide some theoretical understanding of rhetoric and public memory at the beginning of the collaboration. I will have a specific group of books to target for each week of the project. Our meetings will entail discussing the strategy for acquiring the books for the next week (these books may be accessed in the UAH library, inter-library loan, public libraries, online books, and by talking with teachers/administrators in local elementary schools), the results of the previous week’s research, and an ongoing discussion of what the student is finding or not finding so that we can carefully craft our arguments.

**Prior Awardees:** RCEU18, Nathan Bedford Forrest’s Crisis of Identity: Controversy over Conflicted Personas as Represented in a Memphis Statue. Meg Bojarski researched two major Memphis newspapers from 1995 to 2017 for all mentions of Nathan Bedford Forrest, his statue, and the controversy. She then coded the language used to depict Forrest to create an argument concerning how Forrest’s public memory is being used and misused for very different purposes. She wrote a paper arguing what the history of the controversy and the recent removal of the Forrest statue has done to Confederate ideologies and the “great what-if” question that pro-confederates pose. She has presented our research at two poster sessions, we both have presented one guest lecture in a Public History class, we have submitted a combined paper to the Southern States Communication Association conference, and, upon feedback, we will submit this paper for publication in the Southern Communication Journal.