THE DREAM AND ITS UNTOLD STORIES: 
THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON AND ITS LEGACY

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington, September 19-21, 2013. Sponsored by the GHI, the University of Nottingham, and Georgetown University. Conveners: Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI), Sharon Monteith (University of Nottingham) and Marcia Chatelain (Georgetown University). Participants: Eric Arnesen (George Washington University), Erin Chapman (George Washington University), David Chappell (University of Oklahoma), Cerue Diggs (Howard University), Angela Dillard (University of Michigan), Paul Farber (Haverford College), Allison Graham (University of Memphis), Heinrich Grosse (Institute of Social Sciences of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Hannover), Duchess Harris (Macalester College), Michael Haspel (University of Jena), Maurice Jackson (Georgetown University), Peniel Joseph (Tufts University), Mark Malisa (College of Saint Rose, NY), Suleiman Osman (George Washington University), Christopher Phelps (University of Nottingham), Stephen Tuck (Oxford University), Brian Ward (Northumbria University), Stephen Whitfield (Brandeis University).

Co-convened by three professors of American History and American Studies from Germany, Britain, and the United States, this symposium reflected the global impact of the March on Washington by forging a transatlantic conversation in the city of the March. Hosted by the German Historical Institute in Washington DC, it brought together civil rights organizers and scholars with the general public at its keynote event, “Martin’s Dream: The Global Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.” Keynote speaker Professor Clayborne Carson, Professor of History at Stanford University and Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, posited that King’s “most important contribution was that he not only understood his place in a larger African American freedom struggle, but also the place of this effort in a global freedom struggle.” Carson’s response to the fiftieth anniversary of the March developed into an examination of “King’s valiant life and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s courageous challenge to white supremacy in the deep South.” Congressman John Lewis (Democrat, Georgia), whose speech from the platform in 1963 was, for many participants, as important as King’s, was unable to attend but he sent a personal video message for the opening of the conference. A centerpiece of the event was the...
exhibition of Leonard Freed’s photographs of ordinary people from the crowd of some 300,000 present on the Mall on August 28, 1963. The curator of this exhibit, Paul Farber, told some of the stories behind Freed’s images and their publication in *This is the Day: The March on Washington* (2013).

This commemoration of this important civil rights anniversary included activist-participants who marched on that hot August day fifty years ago and activists who had questioned the efficacy of the March, in order for us to debate as well as analyze the impact of the event, then and now. Speakers at the commemoration roundtable included Courtland Cox of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who was a member of the Steering Committee for the event in Washington in 1963; A. Peter Bailey, journalist and founding member of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in 1964; and Freedom Rider and SNCC activist Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, the extraordinary “ordinary” woman who is the subject of the documentary *An Ordinary Hero: The True Story of Joan Trumpauer Mulholland* (2013). Each of these speakers addressed one of the conference’s key concerns: that the stories of activists receive sustained attention. Speaker Ella M. Kelly’s experience spoke directly to the conference theme. She had volunteered for the Red Cross and was driving an ambulance the day of the March, attending to marchers suffering from heatstroke to heart attacks. Having witnessed the event from behind the scenes, she told a story of the March previously hidden from view. A number of important African American women were invited to share the platform at the March on Washington but none were invited to make a speech, and our conference paid attention to those whose voices went unheard and whose stories risk being lost behind celebration of a great event and a groundbreaking speech.

Martin Luther King Jr. was, of course, one of the key symbols of the twentieth-century social justice struggle, and the “I Have a Dream” speech has been highlighted in media coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of the March. The three-minute extemporization in which Dr. King recounted his dream has received particular attention, rather than the scripted talk that preceded it, in which he called upon the federal government, in the midst of the nation’s Civil War Centennial, to make good on the Emancipation Proclamation. “But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free,” King declared. “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned.”
In the United States, African American conservatives and radicals had opposed the March for a wide variety of reasons and, as Angela Dillard pointed out in her paper, the Reverend J.H. Jackson of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago and head of the National Baptist Convention characterized the idea of the March as a dangerous and unwarranted rejection of law and order.

The conference’s focus on some of the neglected or untold stories behind King’s speech and the March often took us across the Atlantic. The discussion turned to political sympathizers in the United Kingdom, for example, and, as Stephen Tuck demonstrated in his paper, to the inequalities which immigrants from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan faced, including racial violence exemplified by the murder of Kelso Cochrane in London in 1959. Scholars from South Africa, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom explored transnational and cultural crossovers, some of which were lived out by participants. Heinrich Grosse published the first scholarly account in German of King’s life in 1971 and explained what had drawn him to the Mississippi Delta in the 1960s in support of the civil rights movement. Grosse, a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and another German theologian, Michael Haspel, examined how the so-called “Peaceful Revolution” that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was influenced both by civil rights protest methods in the American 1960s and the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1980s. Theirs was only one of many stories told. In total, some thirty civil rights and social movement scholars came together in interdisciplinary ways to discuss and debate, to agree and to disagree, and to tease out more and varied stories behind the Dream.

Segregationist organizations opposed the March, as did much of the southern media. The Roanoke World News printed a cartoon depicting marchers with placards heading toward a big barrel labeled “Washington, D.C.,” and “Powder Keg.” Despite opposition from many sides, the March was filmed by more news cameras than had covered President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration and was relayed by satellite around the world in newscasts. Conference participants discussed Hollywood’s connection to the March and its supporters, including activist and fundraiser Harry Belafonte and actor Sidney Poitier. Presenters explored Motown’s recording of the “I Have a Dream” speech as delivered in Detroit in June 1963 and how the release of the album The Great March to Freedom in the wake of the March on Washington caused considerable controversy. Exploitation and
commercialization were significant issues for March organizers, with King mounting and then dropping an injunction against Motown founder Berry Gordy. Conference participants also thought about how the media’s focus on the March impacted publicity for voter registration taking place in Mississippi, and, closer to Washington, civil rights demonstrations taking place at the same time in Cambridge, MD, led by Gloria Richardson. Brian Ward and Maurice Jackson debated the extent to which musicians threw their fame behind the civil rights movement, and Ward explored the choice of musical performers who entertained the crowds. The line-up featured several white and black folk singers such as Bob Dylan; Peter, Paul and Mary; and Odetta; alongside gospel star Mahalia Jackson and classical soprano Marian Anderson, the only two artists listed as part of the official program. The role and significance of individual speakers at the March was also explored, particularly in Steve Whitfield’s examination of the orator who preceded King to the podium, Joachim Prinz, president of the American Jewish Congress. By tracing Prinz’s story back three decades to when he had been a proponent of embattled liberal Judaism in Berlin, Whitfield showed that Prinz’s story exemplified the urgency of confronting “Never” with “Never Again.” The man behind the idea of the March was A. Philip Randolph, and we discussed his economic agenda as it had developed over previous decades, as well as the political fallout that followed the March as traced over the following decades. Stories which participants told, and which they located in relation to the March, included the role of African American women on President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women, which also took place in 1963, to the position taken by Malcolm X. In each and every story we found the seeds of other stories, and we followed some of those stories, tracing them through to the King Holiday in 1983 and to U.S. sanctions against South Africa in 1986.

The legacy of the 1963 March on Washington is long, and the individuals whose lives have been touched by this historic event are many. But there remain stories about the March, its preparations, contestations, and legacy that are yet to be told, and which deserve further and more sustained study. Our project promoted a transnational, multidisciplinary approach to civil rights scholarship and encouraged a lively exchange of ideas which will hopefully encourage more research in this area.

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