LEARNING AT THE MARGINS: THE CREATION AND DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS AND JEWS SINCE THE 1880S

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI) and Howard University, September 7-9, 2017. Conveners: Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (University of Augsburg), Kierra Crago-Schneider (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, USHMM), Yvonne Poser (Howard University). Participants: Aaron Bryant (National Museum of African American History and Culture, NMAAHC), Charles L. Chavis, Jr. (Morgan State University), Danielle Christmas (University of North Carolina), Marlen Eckl (University of São Paulo), Cedric Essi (University of Bremen), Robert M. Ehrenreich (USHMM), Lonneke Geerlings (Free University, Amsterdam), Lisa Gerlach (GHI), Douglas Irvin-Erickson (George Mason University), Jürgen Kocka (Professor Emeritus, Humboldt University Berlin), Kerstin von der Krone (GHI), Joyce Ladner (Professor Emerita, Howard University), Yanick Rice Lamb (Howard University), Simone Lässig (GHI), Jim Loewen (Professor Emeritus, University of Vermont), Bernard Mair (Howard University), Beverly Mitchell (Wesley Theological Seminary), Jan Neubauer (University of Munich), Thomas Pegelow Kaplan (Appalachian State University), Atiba Pertilla (GHI), Kenvi Phillips (Harvard University), Dan J. Puckett (Troy University), Richard Rubenstein (George Mason University), Keith Singleton (George Mason University), Jonathan Skolnik (University of Massachusetts), Frederick Ware (Howard University School of Divinity), David Weinfeld (Virginia Commonwealth University).

This conference focused on different aspects of two marginalized communities, African Americans and Jews, who collaborated in the area of education and knowledge exchange, learning together and from each other in the long twentieth century. The conference opening took place at Howard University and began with a public, well attended screening of the film “Rosenwald,” which was followed by a lively discussion with the film’s director, Aviva Kempner. On Friday, Bernard Mair, Simone Lässig, Robert M. Ehrenreich, and the conveners made additional opening remarks.

Frederick Ware chaired the conference’s first panel. Charles L. Chavis, Jr. presented the case of the lynching of Matthew Williams on December 4, 1931 in Salisbury, Maryland. The focus of his paper, “‘A Strange and Bitter Crop’: Black and Jewish Responses to Race Lynching on
Maryland’s Eastern Shore,” was on the roles of Dr. A.D. Brown, a black physician, and Rabbi Edward L. Israel. In the aftermath of this particularly brutal murder both Brown and Israel, who was an advocate for social justice, challenged political and religious leaders to break their silence and continued to speak about the injustice of lynching. Israel did so especially in his sermons, stressing that it was the duty of Christians and Jews to fight for social justice.

In his talk on “Mass Violence and Political Culture: Epistemic Interventions of Jewish Survivors and Activists of the African-American Freedom Struggle during the 1960s and 1970s,” Thomas Pegelow Kaplan linked the comparisons between the U.S. government in the 1960s to the NSDAP as well as the usage of the term genocide regarding the treatment of African Americans to the individual memories and experiences of Holocaust survivors. He explained that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as well as the Black Panthers appropriated certain images and language that were connected to the Holocaust with the intention to raise emotions and draw people’s attention to the similarity of the suffering of African Americans and the Jews in the Third Reich.

Next, Dan J. Puckett spoke about “Jews, Jim Crow, and the Holocaust.” He showed convincingly how Southern Jews were deeply involved in an international network of North American and European Jews and that they were aware of the threat of National Socialism and the Holocaust. Southern Jews engaged in helping persecuted Jews and spoke out against the Nazi regime. They did not make the connection between the Nuremberg Laws and the Jim Crow Laws as African Americans did, however. They emphasized the similarities they saw between the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis, for example as part of the Double V Campaign, promoting the fight for democracy abroad and within the U.S. for African Americans.

In the second panel, “Subaltern Histories on the Silver Screen,” chaired by Aaron Bryant, Danielle Christmas shared her recent research on the presentation of racism and anti-Semitism in a talk entitled “Camping up Atrocity: Jew Hunters, Circus Plantations, & American Horror Stories.” Discussing the popular TV series American Horror Story (2011–) and analyzing the Tarantino films Inglorious Basterds (2009) and Django Unchained (2012), Christmas convincingly argued that by presenting slave-plantations in an absurd, “candy-land” fashion where the evil slaveholders are obviously insane and by depicting anti-Semitism as a form of madness of a few German Nazis,
these types of movies ultimately trivialize slavery and the Holocaust. Talking about movies from the 1930s and 1960s, Jonathan Skolnik’s contribution, “‘Two Must have Got Hanged Together’: German Exiles, Hollywood, and Race in America,” focused on an examination of Fritz Lang’s *Fury* (1936) and Sidney Lumet’s *The Pawnbroker* (1964). The presentation dealt with the question of parallels and differences between the African American and the European Jewish experience. By choosing these two examples, Skolnik was also able to illustrate two very different ways to handle these topics. While *The Pawnbroker* hinted at parallels in the discrimination against African Americans and Jews through a particular setting and mood in the movie, namely the slums of New York, which allowed comparisons with Jewish ghettos, *The Fury* thematized lynching even though it had a white protagonist (in contrast to the novel on which the movie is based) and made the connection between the black and the Jewish experience, as expressed in one significant line in the movie: “Two must have got hanged together.”

Atiba Pertilla chaired the last panel of the day, whose topic was “Race and Gender in the Struggle for Freedom and Emancipation.” The first paper, “Race Was the Crucial Issue in America,” by Marlen Eckl focused on Gerda Lerner and the promotion of African American women’s history. Giving insight into the fascinating biography and work of Gerda Lerner, Eckl not only emphasized her importance for the field of women’s history, but for African American women’s history in particular. She pointed out that Lerner’s experience of being a persecuted Jew during National Socialism prevented her from assimilating to “the evil of racism” in the United States. Eckl not only showed how Lerner promoted African American female scholars later on in her career, but also that she insisted that research be pursued regardless of race, religion and gender. Lerner firmly believed that new knowledge emerges only in debates among scholars with different backgrounds and points of view.

“Cross-Racial Mothering as a ‘Conversion’ Experience in the Interracial Family Memoir” was the title of Cedric Essi’s paper. Focusing on the experience of white Jewish mothers of black children, Essi thematized the topic of claiming kinship across color lines. Showing both sides of the spectrum through the examples of Jane Lazarre, who described her transformation to a black mother as empowering and as a rebirth, and Rachel Deborah Schilsky, who experienced being excluded from her white social circles as a form of death. The talk
also touched on topics such as the mothers not only experiencing metaphorical blackness, but noticing bodily transformations, and the different stages of the “conversion” of the mothers. Most importantly, the paper emphasized specific violence against the black community in terms of knowledge production and memory, since many sources in American history tend to exclude the black experience.

Jan Neubauer presented the last paper of the day, titled “Bayard Rustin, Human Rights, and the Holocaust.” He showed how Rustin’s experience of being a pacifist during the Second World War and his knowledge about the Holocaust influenced many of his subsequent activities. It was one of his core beliefs that practicing non-violence was the only way to prevent another holocaust. He also saw similarities between the antidemocratic character of the Jim Crow laws and the National Socialist regime, though he clearly acknowledged that they are not the same. In 1975, Rustin became director of BASIC (Black Americans to Support Israel). In his overall work, he stood for an integrated society in which neither race nor religion, neither class nor sexuality should be cause for discrimination.

The conference’s last day began with the fourth panel, which focused on “Reflections on the Policies of Racial Oppression and Genocide in African American and Jewish Discourses,” chaired by Beverly Mitchell. Douglas Irvin-Erickson gave a talk titled “We Charge Genocide: R. Lemkin, W. L. Patterson, P. Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois and the Politics of Race and Genocide in the United States (1949–1959).” Dividing into the history of the famous paper by the Civil Rights Congress and the philosophical theories accompanying it, Erickson pointed out that one must not only take into consideration the physical violence of genocide but also the destruction it wrought on the processes of group formations. Referring to historian Simon Dubnow, the 1951 CRC paper stated that a nation is tied together by consciousness and that the true horror of genocide is the destruction of this shared awareness, knowledge and tradition.

In his talk on “The Black Experience: A Historical Analysis of Genocide & Ethnic Control in the U.S.,” Keith Singleton argued that the unresolved issue of African American human rights not being acknowledged by all members of society although civil rights were implemented is rooted in the history of the treatment of African American communities. He stated that every period of African American history had its own kind of disruption of the community. Starting with slavery, where people were being dehumanized and seen
as economic commodities, he showed that those disruptions were not only a process of mass violence, but a way to disconnect people from their own history and culture in order to keep them down and capitalize on them.

The next panel on “Moving beyond Academia: Teachers as Activists for Social Change” was chaired by Kerstin von der Krone. David Weinfeld gave a talk on “Black-Jewish Relations in Academia: Alain Locke, Horace Kallen and the Howard University “Minority Groups” Conference of 1935,” in which he characterized the relations between Locke and Kallen as a very specific kind of friendship. Going into biographical detail about this relationship, Weinfeld not only made the point that universities provide an ideal setting to form these kinds of sometimes productive, sometimes quarreling friendships between thinkers. He also introduced friendship as a fitting metaphor for the term cultural pluralism, since it did not imply sameness — as opposed to brotherhood — or suggest an identical starting point, but a common bond.

The second paper, titled “Time and Money: African Americans, Jews and the Colored YMCA Campaign,” was given by Kenvi Phillips. Referring back to the film screening that opened the conference, Phillips gave insight into Julius Rosenwald’s dedicated work to combat race hatred. This even included funding a Christian institution, as long as it was also accessible to black people. Phillips characterized Jesse Moorland as another hard worker for the colored-YMCA-campaign, showing that it took the efforts of many influential people to establish this institution. Her most important point was the fact that the colored-YMCA — after existing in the form of a conscious group that would meet at different places — reached its full potential by getting a physical space, a house, built out of and standing for the ideals of the colored-YMCA and providing space for a community that matters.

Lonneke Geerlings gave the last talk of the panel, discussing Rosey E. Pool’s lecture tour to HBCUs in the Deep South, 1959–1960. Her paper, titled “That Piece of Yellow Cotton Became My Black Skin,” discussed the Dutch Jewish translator, educator, and anthologist of African American poetry Rosey Pool, who visited Black Colleges in the South on one of her many postwar trips to the USA. Pool understood these colleges as spaces in which blacks and whites could talk equally, and she reported on her own experience of the National Socialists’ racial persecution of Jews. Geerlings also showed how Pool
used her humor and satirical notions when confronting white people in the south with their racism.

The last part of the conference consisted of a Contemporary Witness Panel (Panel Six), which dealt with the experience of German Jewish refugee scholars in the Southern United States following the Second World War. The panel’s chair, Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, first showed a brief film clip of interviews that she had prepared with two Jewish refugee scholars, Wilma and Georg Iggers. In the film, the two shared insights on their decision to teach at Black Colleges in the South and become actively involved in the civil rights movement despite harassment from white segregationists. Finally, historians Jim Loewen and Jürgen Kocka and sociologist, civil rights activist, and former SNCC member Joyce Ladner talked about their specific experiences regarding Black and Jewish relations in the postwar South. All of them were connected by being friends with and/or mentees of the Jewish refugee scholar Ernst Borinski, who taught at Tougaloo College in Mississippi from the 1940s to the 1980s, defied segregationist norms and became a major agent of bringing white and black scholars together.

Altogether, the different parts of the conference helped to illuminate the history of unique frameworks and collaborations that emerged within the educational spheres of African Americans and Jews throughout the twentieth century. The conference was thus able to show new concepts of knowledge exchange within academic and nonacademic communities as well as draw attention to lesser-known aspects of the history of African-American/Jewish relations in the long twentieth century.

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