

The Interface Between British Contemporary Black and Jewish Cultures

On 4th November 2016 a symposium on ‘The Interface Between British Contemporary Black and Jewish Cultures’ was held at the University of Reading. The event was sponsored by the AHRC, The British Academy-funded ‘British Jewish: Contemporary Cultures’ network, and the ‘Identities’ research group at Reading. It also marked the launch of a large interdisciplinary research project based at Reading entitled ‘Towards a British ‘Black-Jewish Imaginary’: The Interface Between British Black and Jewish Literature, Art and Culture 1945-2015’. The symposium was divided into four sessions: a panel on ‘Contemporary Fiction’ in the morning; a panel on ‘Shifting Identities’ after lunch; a panel on Zadie Smith after a break from coffee; and finally a talk by the playwright, theatre director and academic, Julia Pascal.

The symposium kicked off with three papers from members of the Department of English at Reading - Nicola Abram, David Brauner and Nicole King - and one from Izabella Penier, the Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow at the Institute for Black Atlantic Research at the University of Central Lancashire. Abram’s paper offered a reading of Helen Oyeyemi’s novel *The Opposite House*, emphasising the ways in which the Jewishness of the Black Cuban protagonist’s partner is represented as unspeakable and in which blackness and Jewishness are aligned – and rearticulated – in the figure of their unborn child. Brauner’s paper argued that the relationships between Black and Jewish characters in Zoe Heller’s third novel, *The Believers*, can be read allegorically in the context of post-war Black/Jewish relations and as a reflection on the transatlantic issues of identity politics. King’s paper discussed the ways in which Karen Schwabach represents Black/Jewish alliances in her YA novel *A Pickpocket’s Tale* and interrogated the elision of these alliances in the reception and marketing of the novel. Penier’s paper revisited the critical discourse on Caryl Phillips, in particular the reception of Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood*, in the context of distinctions between metaphorical and metonymic interpretative paradigms.

Drawing from cultural theory, literary readings, historical contextualisation, political discourse and creative-critical reflection, the interdisciplinary dimension of the symposium was apparent in the ‘Shifting Identities’ panel. The session opened with Bryan Cheyette’s (University of Reading) paper on ‘The Black-Jewish Ghetto and Beyond’. Cheyette’s question, ‘Is the memory and experience of the ghetto a worthwhile concept for understanding the history of racialized minorities and the inequalities of the contemporary world or is it a form of stigmatization?’, set out some key points about the ways in which different ghetto histories and cultures are in dialogue with each other. Arguments about imbricated and dialogic identifications were developed in Ruth Gilbert’s (University of Winchester) discussion of some of the myths and metaphors about intersecting migratory identities that recur in reflections on the East End of London, often itself figured as a kind of ghetto. Drawing from a conception of the ‘East End imaginary’, Gilbert’s paper considered the ways in which some imaginings of the area, circulating within a metaphorical register of migratory flow and flux, perhaps elide more jagged interfaces.

Madge Dresser’s (University of West of England), paper outlined some charged debates and raised important questions about how the Jewish role in slavery is perceived by Black Britons, by British Jews and its implications for contemporary cultural and political relations. Dresser’s perspective, as an academic historian (who has published on both slavery and its legacy in Britain and on ethnic identity) and as a public historian who has worked

closely with both museums and Black and Jewish community and history groups in Britain, signalled the necessity for bringing nuance into these debates.

Dresser's paper was followed by the film-maker and cultural theorist Ruth Novaczek's reflections on Hannah Black's *Dark Pool Party*. Black's text is a provocative and opaque meditation on shifting identifications and Novaczek's creative-critical perspective provided a welcome introduction to this suggestive piece. This presentation was followed by a screening of Rachel Garfield's (University of Reading) thought-provoking film, *So You Think You Can Tell* which explores ideas of identity-formation, in particular the interface between Black and Jewish ethno-racial identities, through interviews with two women whose experiences complicate conventional categorisation.

The final two academic papers of the day focused on Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*, a text that is rich in its enquiry into the dynamics of various interfaces and intersections. Britta Koelle (University of Oldenburg), presented on the 'Hybridity and Precarious Religious Identity in Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*'. Her paper, which focused on multi-ethnicity and hybridity, and the encounter of Jewishness with non-whiteness, explored the ways in which the interface between Black and Jewish cultures, in Smith's fiction, is underlined by questions regarding both hybridity and authenticity. Following on from this, Karen Skinazi's (University of Birmingham) paper, "What Happened to that Fat Weird Freak Black Jew Kid?": Black-Jewish Identity in American and British Fiction', looked at what the embodied crossroads of Black-Jewish identity means in and for Smith's novel, and read this in relation to the hybridization of Jewish and racialized identities found in contemporary American fiction.

Finally, proceedings were brought to a close by Julia Pascal, who talked about the concerns of her play, *St. Joan*, whose Black/Jewish protagonist travels back in time to try to prevent the atrocities of slavery and the Shoah, with accompanying clips from a powerful production of the play.

The responses to presentations throughout the day were full and energetic. Debates underscored the importance of attending to the subtleties of different perspectives and experiences of Jewish and Black interfaces in today's Britain. As well as connecting scholars working within a range of disciplines and institutions, the symposium generated questions, conversations and connections that undoubtedly signal considerable potential for further exploration.

David Brauner (The University of Reading) and Ruth Gilbert (University of Winchester)