

Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South
National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute

Report

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To Whom It May Concern:

The summer institute in Charleston provided me with an almost overwhelming amount of materials in the form of readings, discussions, primary sources, and especially resources, to incorporate into my teaching and programming for the Jewish Studies program. I feel sure that I will be drawing on these resources well into the future. For the moment, the most concrete effect of the institute on my work is through a revision of my first-year course “Creating Community: Religions in the US”. I have incorporated Judaism as a case study in religion, race, and ethnicity, and I have incorporated lessons of materiality and ethnography informed by the work we did in Charleston.

The course is what we call at UVM a “TAP” course – part of the Teacher Advisor Program. These are courses that are taught within a professor’s discipline, but specifically for first-year, first-semester students. This particular course also fulfills the general education requirement called D1 (Diversity 1), addressing theories of ethnicity and race in America. My work in Charleston allowed me to incorporate Southern Jews into the course as a topic that sheds light on the way racial relationships are constructed regionally, as well as with relation to religion. I will be using some of the sources I was introduced to in the Institute, such as chapters from *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil* and the electronic source: *To Stand Aside or Stand Alone: Southern Reform Rabbis and the Civil Rights Movement*. (In addition, I have adopted *Hair, Headwear, and Orthodox Jewish Women: Kallah’s Choice*, by fellow Institute participant Amy Milligan, as a text for the course because it addresses gender as well as region and religion.)

In addition to readings about Southern Jews and race, the students will also carry out a short assignment of transcribing oral histories of Jewish Vermonters (collected by students in my “Judaism in America” course last spring). This work, and my confidence in assigning it, are inspired by Dr. Rabin’s examples of work done by students in her class based on archival photographs. My hope is that my students, too, will be able to gain a stronger sense of the link between place, religion, ethnicity, and identity by using archival materials, in this case audio. This project will be supplemented by students’ viewing of a documentary about the history of Jews in Burlington, VT that uses archival photographs as well as interviews and maps. (In the future, I hope to work with more advanced students on mapping the changes in Burlington’s Jewish landscape, similar to the digital mapping projects we worked with in Charleston.)

Finally, the students will visit a local Jewish artwork, a mural that reflects traditional painted synagogue interiors from Lithuania and was recently moved from the now repurposed and renovated “lost shul” to a nearby synagogue. This unique work of devotional art provides a rich source for the students for examining questions of “materiality” and religion – is it a work of “folk” art? Devotional art? “High” art? What difference does it make? How has the local Jewish community transformed it from a ritual object to a memorial object? Is there a difference, or is memorialization another form of ritual? How does this art represent the international nature of the Jewish American experience? The immigrant experience? The time I spent at the Institute with my colleagues and the leaders of the program greatly enhanced my ability to incorporate the topic of material culture and ethnicity into my teaching in this course.

Although I am unfortunately not in a position to offer a course specifically on Southern Jews and Judaism at this time, I feel confident that in the future I will be well prepared to create such a course to offer to students of Jewish Studies at UVM.

In terms of my role as the Director of Jewish Studies, I also valued my time in Charleston for the opportunity to make professional connections with other scholars of Judaism, and directors of programs very different from my own, so that I can learn to be a better administrator. I am confident that my time there will enhance the programming that I create here on campus and allow me to build projects here that are inspired by and complement the incredible work of programs in Charleston and elsewhere. I hope to invite many of the scholars I met and worked with to our campus to participate in lectures or conferences, in order to strengthen the field of Jewish Studies here at UVM and allow us to reach out to audiences both on and off campus to benefit from the work we are all doing. I feel that, in this time of political polarization and increased public attention to the identity and role of Jews in America, this work is especially important, and I am grateful for the time I was able to spend with so many thoughtful and accomplished scholars from so many different backgrounds, academically and otherwise.

Sincerely,

Erica Andrus

REL095 (TAP): Creating Community
Fall, 2019
Professor Erica Andrus
University of Vermont

Material Culture and Oral History:
Jews in Vermont

This mid-term mini-project will combine these two approaches to the study of religion, focusing on Jews in Burlington and other Vermont towns.

First, we will visit the Ohavi Zedek Synagogue to view the “Lost Shul Mural” and see the sanctuary and other parts of the building. While you are there, you will be asked to take notes on objects of your choice using a worksheet handed out in class.

Second, each student will be assigned a recording (audio or audio/video) to listen to and then choose a particularly interesting segment to transcribe. The segment should relate somehow to the larger question of the course: How do Americans incorporate their religious identity into their sense of being part of America (or in this case Vermont, or even just their town)? When you listen to the recording, you should also make note of anytime that specific objects are mentioned, and what is their importance and/or context. This can include buildings, books, or other material items.

Third, students will watch the documentary film *Little Jerusalem* about the history of the Jewish community in Burlington. You will receive a worksheet to fill out for this film as well, focusing on objects, stories, and buildings.

After these events, you will be asked to write an essay bringing the three sources together – asking questions like: how do the objects in all three places reinforce or challenge the stories that people tell about them? How do people speak about the objects in terms of religion, identity, ethnicity, history, etc.? Do different people illustrate different ways of relating their Jewishness to other parts of their identity? How do objects become symbolic of or carriers for particular ways of understanding history and identity? You will not be expected to answer all these questions in your short essay, but you should use them to formulate your own analysis of the particular stories and objects you have been working with.

Dates:

Visit to Ohavi Zedek on October 3rd

Audio transcriptions due on October 8th

Essay Due on October 15th

Ohavi Zedek Synagogue Visit
Worksheet
Oct. 3rd, 2019

(for REL095: Creating Community)

As we are guided through the sanctuary and the lounge of the synagogue, choose one object or aspect of the architecture to focus your attention on. Take notes using the following prompts:

What is it?

Where is it located in relation to the building, other objects?

What attracted your attention to it?

What questions do you have about it?

How would you describe it visually? materially?

Are there elements you would identify as “symbolic” about it? If so what, and what do you think they might mean? How do you think it might be or have been used?

