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EAAS Travel Grant Report 2014

My project focuses on African American travel into, out of, and around the racially segregated South between the 1930s and 1960s. Through examination of archival materials, landmark Supreme Court decisions as well as correspondence, documentary film and oral histories, I am charting the relationship between civil rights and travel, with the aim of revealing a cultural history of segregated travel that emphasises the experience of ordinary people attempting to cross geographical and racial barriers.

Thanks to the EAAS Grant I received, this summer I was able to go to the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans for a month to examine the Free Southern Theater Papers, the Tom Dent Papers and the John O'Neal Papers, which contains materials important to my planned thesis chapter about the Free Southern Theater and the Freedom Rides of 1961.

The Free Southern Theater was a group of actors formed in 1963 in Mississippi and aligned with the civil rights movement, whose aim was to bring theatre to black communities and perform for free. The organisation was originally integrated, before later being an entirely African American enterprise. Their integration posed many practical issues to their free travel around the South, quite apart from the enormous difficulties faced by African American travelers during legal segregation and the transition to integration in the 1960s. For this research trip I aimed to locate descriptions of travel in the correspondence, meeting minutes, journals, reports and compositions of the organisation's members.

I flew from Manchester to New Orleans on the 29th May 2014, with a very brief stop in Charlotte, North Carolina, where my flight connected. Once in New Orleans I made my way to the Amistad Research Center, which would be the base for my research over the four weeks I was in the city.

On my first visit I met with the Director of Library and Reference Services, Christopher Harter, who, along with his colleagues, oriented me to the facilities including microfilm readers, printers and printed material-handling equipment over the four weeks as I came to require each one.

In my first week I looked at the Free Southern Theater Papers on microfilm, paying special attention to journal entries and articles written by the members of the theatre describing travel, as well as any references to celebrity support of the theatre, because the latter is relevant to a different chapter of my thesis. I also met one of the members of the Free Southern Theater, Kalamu ya Salaam, who

was involved with the theatre from 1968 onwards and had come to the Amistad Research Center to research Tom Dent, another member of the theatre who is now deceased. Although Salaam had never been involved with the touring arm of the theatre that I was researching, he let me know how to contact the members of the theatre who had been involved during that period, including John O'Neal, one of the founders.

In my second week I continued to work my way through the Free Southern Theater Papers and also began looking specifically at the notebooks within the Tom Dent Papers, because Dent, who joined the FST in 1965, was primarily a writer by trade and as such kept regular personal notebooks in which I hoped he may have recorded impressions of the FST tours around southern states. My pace slowed down considerably when moving from the FST Papers on microfilm to the Tom Dent original handwritten notebooks, because Dent's handwriting is particularly difficult to decipher, and at times I had to consult the staff to attempt to transcribe some of the useful materials I found. Luckily, one of the staff members had extensive experience transcribing Dent's handwriting, and she was very helpful.

During this week I also came across an online exhibition on the website for the Hogan Jazz Archive, also located at Tulane University. The exhibition was on the resident jazz bands of excursion steamboats in the first half of the twentieth century, and because this topic intersected with my research interests of segregated travel and performance, I contacted the curator at the archive, Bruce Raeburn. He immediately got back to me and invited me over to talk to him about the practicalities of life for mixed or all-black jazz bands that performed for segregated white audiences between New Orleans and New York while traveling up and down the Mississippi. I also spoke to his colleague and by the end of the afternoon I had taken notes from rare books on the topic and left with a long reading list.

In the third week I continued with Tom Dent's notebooks, from 1965 until the end of the sixties, and started to look at specific writings of both Dent and John O'Neal, which looked to contain information about their lives on the road with the theatre. I also used the specific information I found within the Dent and O'Neal papers, such as the dates and names relating to important events, to go back to the FST Papers and look for more information on these events.

In the fourth week I started to look at a collection unrelated to the FST, the Reverse Freedom Riders Papers, because it is a topic also relevant to my chapter, and was also housed at the Amistad Research Center. The same week I also attended a special screening of the Freedom Riders documentary by PBS at the Louisiana Humanities Center, which featured a Q&A session with a panel of local civil rights figures, including John O'Neal. The session was filmed by the Center and will be a valuable resource for me.

This research trip was incredibly useful in a number of ways: not only was it my first archival research visit, which gave me the opportunity develop research skills such as searching, handling and recording materials, it also was fruitful in

terms of the actual data I accrued about the Free Southern Theater and the Reverse Freedom Rides. It also allowed me to explore a new area I wouldn't otherwise have come across, namely the steamboat jazz bands, and go to a relevant scholarly event I couldn't otherwise have attended.