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David Levering Lewis Papers

1910-2014 48 Boxes (72 linear feet) Call no.: MS 827



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Read collection overview

The historian David Levering Lewis is the author of eight remarkably diverse titles. Raised in an academic family by his father, the president of Morris Brown College, and his mother, a high school math teacher, Lewis enrolled at Fisk University at the age of 15 and was only 26 when he was awarded a doctorate in Modern European history from the London School of Economics in 1962. Through an academic career that has included numerous positions, including Morgan State, Notre Dame, Howard, the University of the District of Columbia (1970-1980), and Rutgers (1985-2003), Lewis remained consistently productive. He is the author of the first academic biography of Martin Luther King, released just after his death in 1970, and a history of the Dreyfus Affair published in 1974, as well as an influential study of the Harlem renaissance released in 1981, and important works on colonialism in Africa (1987) and Islamic Spain (2008.) He is perhaps best known for his two monumental biographies of W.E.B. Du Bois (released in two volumes in 1993 and 2000) each of which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. One of the most lauded African American historians of his generation, Lewis

was recipient of the Bancroft Prize, the Francis Parkman Prizes, the 2009 National Humanities Medal, and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and was elected as a Fellow of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society. Lewis held the position of Julius Silver University Professor in History at New York University from 2003 until his retirement.

The papers of David Levering Lewis document a long and productive career as an academic historian and scholar of Medieval and African American history and culture. Beginning with his years in college and graduate school, the collection offers a rich perspective on the evolution of his career. Lewis's essential biographies of W.E.B. Du Bois are particularly well documented, and the collection includes abundant materials for each of his earlier projects, including correspondence, research notes, and numerous drafts.

Background on David Levering Lewis



David Levering Lewis

Like W.E.B. Du Bois, the subject of his best-known work, David Levering Lewis went from a precocious childhood to a brilliant scholarly career. Lewis was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, on May 26, 1936, into a family devoted to education. His mother, Urnestine Bell-Lewis, a taught mathematics in high school, while his father, John Henry Lewis Sr., went from being a high school principal, to dean of the theological school at Wilberforce University, and then president of Morris Brown College. With this background, Lewis grew up in a family that he described as "like characters in a Jessie Fauset novel" and in a home frequented by the elite of African American society, from Adam Clayton Powell to Walter White, Marian Anderson, Thurgood Marshall, and Du Bois.

Speeding through high school in two years, Lewis entered Fisk University at the age of fifteen -- the same age as Du Bois when he entered Fisk -- and quickly distinguished himself in his major fields of history and philosophy, earning entry into Phi Beta Kappa. Although initially planning on a career in law, he changed course after a single semester at the University of Michigan, earning an MA in history from Columbia in 1959 followed by a PhD from the London School of Economics (1962). His dissertation was a study of liberal Catholic layman, Emmanuel Mounier, and his failed attempt to construct a "third force" in French politics that would transcend Socialism and Capitalism. The choice of subject matter, was rooted deeply in the integrationist and assimilationist ethos of his family, where the mastery of "the history that white Americans claimed as their own" was viewed as a mark of distinction.

After eighteen months of military service at an Army psychiatric facility in Landstuhl, Germany, Lewis began his academic career teaching medieval and Renaissance history at the University of Ghana. He found some of the brightest students of his career there and an environment that carried both conflict and promise, but after only one year, ideological differences among the faculty in Ghana led him to return to the United States and to appointments at Howard University (1965) and Morgan State (1966-1970). Convinced that the topic of his dissertation was already too stale to make for a suitable book, he switched focus to modern French history, but the future path of his career came unexpectedly. Early in 1968, the editors of Penguin's Great Leaders of the 20th Century series approached him with the prospect of writing a biography of Martin Luther King. Initially, he had doubts about the project, unconvinced that a biography of a man who was, after all, still young and evolving would succeed, but King's assassination changed all that. Based on extensive interviews with major figures in the civil rights struggle, his King: A Critical Biography (1970) was well received by historians, though not without controversy, and is considered one of the first books to take advantage of deep archival research in the King Papers, then at Boston University.

Despite the success of the King book and his growing awareness of the untapped potential in African American studies, Lewis returned to French history after taking a new position at Federal City College (later the University of the District of Columbia) in 1970. By the time his Prisoners of Honor: The Dreyfus Affair appeared in 1974, followed shortly by District of Columbia: A Bicentennial History (1976), Lewis surrendered to the lure and promise of African American studies. The result became a landmark. A conversation with his literary agent led to a fascinating exploration of the origins of the Harlem Renaissance and the self-conscious vanguard of African American intellectuals who sought to create an arts movement in service to the cause of civil rights. When Harlem Was in Vogue (1981) became an instant classic that.

This deep dive into African American history came at a challenging time in Lewis' career. After being fired from his position at the University of the District of Columbia, and pursuing a wrongful termination suit, he crossed the country twice for academic positions, joining the faculty at the University of California San Diego (1981-1985) and then at Rutgers, where he served as the Martin Luther King Jr. Professor of History until 2003. Unsurprisingly, given his record of accomplishment, these migrations had little impact on his scholarly productivity: in many ways, he entered the most important part of his career. Learning that the papers of W.E.B. Du Bois had recently been opened for research at the University of Massachusetts, Lewis became one of the first scholars to mine the collection deeply, intent on writing the first comprehensive biography of one the great minds of the twentieth century. Even while this new project was consuming his energies, Lewis somehow found time to spin out another noteworthy monograph: a study of European colonialism and African Resistance, The Race to Fashoda (1988).

But it was Lewis's writing on Du Bois that cemented his reputation, and particularly the monumental two-part biography, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1919): Biography of a Race (1994) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1919-1963): The Fight for Equality and the American Century (2001). The first volume received both the Bancroft Prize and Francis Parkman Prize, while the second was awarded the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. Even more notably, each volume was recognized with the Pulitzer Prize, making Lewis the first author to receive the prize for consecutive volumes on the same topic.

Lewis left Rutgers to become the Julius Silver University Professor and Professor of History at New York University in 2003. Since that time he has written two books: God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215, which explored the relation between Islam and the West, and The Implausible Wendell Willkie: Leadership Ahead of Its Time (2011). Highly regarded in the profession, he has earned fellowships from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the National Humanities Center, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Academy in Berlin, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, and the MacArthur Foundation. He was awarded the National Humanities Medal by Barack Obama in 2009 and the 2015 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Award for distinguished writing in American history of enduring public significance.

Lewis married twice. In 1966, he married Sharon Siskind, with whom he had three children: Allison, Jason, and Eric. After divorcing in 1988, Lewis met Ruth Ann Stewart, who at the time worked for the New York Public Library. The couple wed in 1994, and adopted a daughter, Allegra Stewart.

Scope of collection

A massive archive of correspondence and writing, the David Levering Lewis Papers mark the celebrated career as an eminent author and academic. At nearly fifty boxes, the collection ranges from personal and professional correspondence and records of his academic appointments to a rich record of his prolific publications. Lewis's path breaking biographies of Martin Luther King Jr. and W. E. B. Du Bois and his important studies of the Harlem Renaissance and African history make the collection a valuable resource for understanding the evolution of African American academic history in the 1960s through the early part of the twenty-first century. In many ways, the most important portion of the collection is that covering his two Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of W.E.B. Du Bois, an invaluable collection of his research process, along with original manuscript drafts, publishing records, and transcripts of interviews with personal and professional acquaintances of Du Bois.

Lewis's academic career is also well documented in the collection, including materials from each of the many universities where he was employed and many of the organizations with which he was affiliated. These records offer a view into not only his professional life, but the world at large, from his firing and subsequent wrongful termination suit against the University of the District of Columbia to his setting up a writers exchange program between Rutgers State University and a Soviet Writers Program.

Series descriptions

Series 1: Personal materials 1910-2013

While relatively small, Series 1 offers valuable insight into Lewis's personal life. The two boxes of material include student papers from his undergraduate years to travel photos and itineraries from later in life with his second wife, Ruth Ann Stewart. The series includes an impressive collection of theater bills; records relating to his three children, his finances, and philanthropy; and materials relating to the care and medical treatment for one of his sons.

Sensitive content relating to Lewis's son, Jason, have been removed and housed separately. These materials are restricted until 2035.

Series 2: Professional materials 1946-2013

Series 2 contains the bulk of Lewis' professional life and career in academia. There are subseries devoted to each of his major academic appointments, beginning with his first post in Ghana to his current position at New York University. Subseries F contains the bulk of his speeches and written works as well as event pamphlets, personal publicity, and the many awards he has received throughout his life. Subseries G contains materials relating to his myriad affiliations with academic societies, fellowships, learned councils, and foundations.

1911-2014

By far the largest portion of the collection, Series 3 is comprised of materials relating to Lewis' published manuscripts. Materials from each of Lewis's major books are housed in subseries, from God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe to When Harlem Was in Vogue, with the largest being those documenting Lewis's two Pulitzer prize-winning biographies on W.E.B. Du Bois. The subseries typically include research materials, handwritten notes, drafts and rough manuscripts, and materials relating to the publishing process and beyond.

Beyond the monographs, Series 3 includes selected material on smaller publications (Subseries F), including his celebrated biography King: A Critical Biography and his Bicentennial publication of the history of the District of Columbia.

Series 4: Correspondence 1956-2014

Lewis's extensive correspondence is organized into three primary groupings, relating to his correspondence with his graduate students, his professional correspondence, and personal correspondence.

Letters of recommendation and correspondence with graduate students and colleagues relating to professional advancement are housed separated and have been restricted until 2035.

Series 5: Ruth Ann Stewart Papers 1969-1995

Lewis' second wife, Ruth Ann Stewart, was a curator at the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library. This series includes materials about Stewart, along some content on her family, and information relating to the adoption and raising of her daughter, Allegra Stewart.

Series 6: Media and realia 1982-2013

Series Six contains all electronic media within the collection, including CDs, VHS, DVDs, Computer Diskettes, and microfiche. The materials are largely related to Series Two and Three, with a large portion of the CDs comprising interviews relating to Lewis' book, When Harlem was in Vogue.

Materials in this series are sorted by format: Box 47 contains CDs and DVDs, while Box 48 contains VHS, microcassettes, microfiche, audiocassettes, floppy discs, and other media formats.

Inventory

Series 1: Personal Materials 1910-2013 3 boxes (4.5 linear feet) Address Book, Passports ca.1980s Box 1: 26 Brooklyn Botanic Garden 2015-2017 Box 51: 1 Day Calendars 1981-1989 Box 1: 22 Day Calendars 1990-1999 Box 1: 23 Day Calendars 2000-2009 Box 1: 24 Day Calendars 2010-2013 Box 1: 25 Day Calendars 2014-2015 Box 51: 2 Education: Fisk University Undergrad-Diploma and Alumni Activities 1956 May-2010 Nov Box 1: 1 Education: Fisk University ca.1976 Box 43: 1 Education: Fisk University ca.1976 Box 43: 2 Education: University of Michigan Law School: Mock Trial Brief 1956 Oct 31 Box 1: 2 Education: London School of Economics: Ephemera, Alumni Outreach 1962 June-2012 Winter Box 1: 3 Education: London School of Economics undated Box 43: 3 **Events and Memorials** 2012-2016 Box 51: 3 Family: Bell-Lewis, Alice Urnestine (mother) 1953-1963 Box 2: 10 Family: Bell-Lewis, Alice Urnestine (mother) 1911-1960 Box 2: 11 Family: Lewis, Allison (daughter) 1986 Oct-1991 Dec Box 2: 1 Family: Lewis, Allison (daughter) 1981 Feb-1989 Jan Box 43: 7 Family: Lewis, John H. (father) 1917 Nov-2013 March Box 2: 9

Family: Lewis, John H. (father) 1910 April-1977 March Box 43: 6 Family: Lewis family (Jenkins) Genealogical Research undated Box 2: 12 Family: Siskind-Lewis, Sharon undated Box 2: 8 Finance 1961 Dec-1973 Oct Box 43: 9 Finance 2012-2017 Box 51: 4 Finance and philanthropy: Donation receipts, gratitudes 1997 Jan-2013 Oct Box 1: 12 Georgia 1900-2011 Box 51: 5 Granddaughters 2014-2018 Box 51: 6 King-Bell Family Data 1900-2015 Box 51: 7 Legal materials: Will, jury duty, victim/witness advocate 1995 June-2012 Aug Box 1: 11 Memorabilia: Funerals 2009 March-2012 Sept. Box 1: 8 Miscellaneous paperwork Assorted dates Box 43: 4 NYPL Lawsuit 2011-2015 Box 51: 8 NYPL Lawsuit 2011-2016 Box 51: 9 Op-Eds 2015-2016 Box 51: 10 Park West Village: Balcony Issue 2015-2016 Box 51: 11 Photographs undated Box 43: 5 Photographs 2002-2014 Box 51: 12 Photographs: Jason (1994) and Allison (1988) graduation 1994, 1998 Box 1: 13 Photographs: Oversized (includes CD) undated Box 1: 20 Photographs: Peru trip undated Box 1: 17 Photographs: Professional life undated Box 1: 14 Photographs: Thanksgiving at Milan (N.Y.) ca.2006 Box 1: 15 Photographs: unidentified undated Box 1: 16 Photographs: unidentified undated Box 1: 18 Photographs: unidentified negatives undated Box 1: 21 Photographs: W.E.B. Du Bois, Volume II event undated Box 1: 19 Playbills 2016-2019 Box 51: 13 Playbills and Museum Guides 2014-2016 Box 51: 14 Political ephemera 2002 Oct-2013 Sept. Box 1: 10 Retirement 2011 Box 51: 15 Theater and music: Flyers 1995 March-1998 Aug

Box 2: 13 Theater and music: Programs and flyers 1979 June-2013 Aug Box 2: 14 Theater playbills Assorted Dates Box 2: 15-19 Theater playbills Assorted Dates Box 3: 1 Travel: Interstate: Brochures, maps, hotels 1988 Sept.-2002 April Box 1: 4 Travel: International: Brochures, maps, postcards 2003 April-2013 May Box 1: 5 Travel: International: Peru travel problems 1999 Oct-2002 Aug Box 1: 7 Travel: International: Travel, financial, and hotel information 1981-1988 Nov Box 1: 6 U.S. Army service 1962 June-1967 Sept. Box 1: 9 Series 2: Professional materials 1946-2013 10 boxes (15 linear feet) Subseries A: New York University 2002-2012 New York University 2006 May Box 43: 10 New York University: Freshman honors seminar 2003-2010 Box 3: 5 New York University: Abu Dhabi undated Box 51: 4 New York University: Abu Dhabi campus opening 2009 April-2011 Feb Box 3: 4 New York University: Speeches and events 2002 Sept.-2012 Aug. Box 3: 3 New York University: Undergraduate and graduate courses ca.2002-2009 Box 3: 2 **Rutgers University** 1964-1999 Academics: "1969 Upheaval: Gift of Dissidence and Diversity, Promise of Access and Excellence 1988 Jan-1990 March Box 3: 14 Academics: "1969 Upheaval" Presentation and Final Report ca.1988-1989 Box 3: 15 Academics: "Academic Merit 1986-1988" ca.1986-1988 Box 3: 17 Academics: Afro-Am Center Proposal and Research 1990 March-1991 Dec Box 3: 12 Academics: Afro-Am Professor Search Committee 1999 Sept.-2000 Feb Box 3: 13 Academics: Moscow Writers Exchange 1988 July-1990 July Box 3: 16 Academics: Robeson Centennial Exhibition Committee 1996 March-1997 July Box 3: 18 Academics: Rutgers Magazines, Newsletters 1991 Sept.-2002 May Box 3: 19 Courses: Assorted Syllabi 1986-1996 Box 3: 9 Courses: French Third Republic and Afro-Am History Lecture Notes undated Box 3: 10 Courses: Imperialism Colloquium Handbook undated Box 3: 6 Courses: Imperialism Colloquium Syllabi, Lecture Outlines 1988 May-1990 Oct Box 3: 7 Courses: Imperialism Lecture Notes undated Box 3: 8 Courses: Student Essays 1991 Dec Box 3: 11 Finances: Research Budget Papers ca.1985-1989 Box 4: 3

Finances: Research Budget Papers ca.1989-1991 Box 4: 4 Finances: University Bookstore, Typists, Additional 1986 Sept.-1996 Oct Box 4: 1 Finances: University Press, Additional 1985 June-1990 April Box 4: 2 **Rutgers University** 1964 May-1999 April Box 43: 11 Subseries C: University of California San Diego 1982-1983 "MLK Talk as Actually Given at UCSD; 1/5/1982-Exactly 30 Minutes" 1982 Box 4: 7 "We Shall Overcome-A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement 1982 Jan-April Box 4: 6 Syllabi and Course Paperwork 1982 Sept.-1983 June Box 4: 5 University of California San Diego undated Box 43: 12 Subseries D: University of District of Columbia (Federal City College) 1970-1980 Correspondence and departmental memoranda prior to termination 1970 June-1979 Sept. Box 4: 9 Court papers 1979 Box 49: 1 Personnel documents, teaching contracts, evaluations 1970 Aug-1980 Sept. Box 4: 8 Wrongful termination lawsuit 1979 Box 4: 10 Wrongful termination lawsuit 1979 Box 4: 11 Wrongful termination lawsuit 1979 Box 4: 12 Wrongful termination lawsuit 1979 Box 4: 13 Subseries E: Other Universities 1963-2001 Brown University 1994 March-July Box 4: 19 Columbia University Commencement 2015 2015 Box 51: 17 Ghana University 1963 March-1964 Oct Box 4: 14 Harvard University 2000 March-2001 May Box 4: 15 Howard University 1964 July-1985 July Box 4: 16 Morgan State College undated Box 4: 17 University of California at Los Angeles 1980 Dec-1981 April Box 4: 18 Other universities: course materials and miscellaneous undated Curriculum Vitae (Long and Short) undated Box 43: 14 Lecture Notes: Ancient and Modern History ca.1964 Nov Box 4: 22 Lecture Notes: Balkan Wars undated Box 4: 23 Lecture notes: French Third Republic undated Box 4: 26 Lecture Notes: Medieval History ca.1963 Feb-Nov Box 4: 21 Lecture notes: Medieval History and Philosophy ca.1964 Box 4: 27 Lecture notes: Thirty Years War undated Box 4: 25

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1978 March-2001 Sept. Box 9: 12 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation-Annual Report Books 1985-1993 Box 9: 10 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation-Recommendations , 1997 Box 9: 11 Joint-Center for Political Studies: "The Long Road Up the Hill" (Draft) ca.1983 Box 9: 13 Joint-Center for Political Studies: "The Long Road Up the Hill" (Manuscript) ca.1983 Box 9: 14 Joint-Center for Political Studies: Correspondence 1983 May-1990 May Box 9: 18 Joint-Center for Political Studies: Newspaper Publications 1985-1987 Aug Box 9: 17 Joint-Center for Political Studies-Written and Published Materials ca.1984 Box 9: 15 Joint-Center for Political Studies: Written and published materials 1983 Dec-1988 July Box 9: 16 Journal of American History 1983 May-2001 June Box 9: 19 Journal of American History 1998-2001 Box 11: 16 Leon Levy Center for Biography 2006-2013 Box 51: 24 London School of Economics 2016-2017 Box 51: 25 Lotus Club 2001 Nov-2011 March Box 9: 20 MacArthur Foundation 1999 June-Dec Box 10: 3 MacArthur Foundation-Publications 1999-2000 Box 10: 1 MacArthur Foundation-Publications 2000 Jan-2004 Sept. Box 10: 4 MacArthur Foundation-Publications 2002-2005 Box 10: 2 Mary Belfrage 1997 Dec Box 10: 5 National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities 1968 June-July Box 10: 6 National Humanities Center-Publications and Reports 1978-1990 Box 10:8 National Humanities Center 1981 Nov-1989 April Box 10: 9 National Humanities Center 1991 Oct-2009 April Box 10: 10 National Humanities Center: Publications and reports 1985-2011 Box 10: 7 National Portrait Gallery 1989-1992 Box 11: 17 National Portrait Gallery 2000 Nov-2012 April Box 10: 15 National Portrait Gallery: 1989 Acquisitions Committee 1989 Feb-Nov Box 10: 13 National Portrait Gallery: 1990 Acquisitions Committee 1990 May Box 10: 14 National Portrait Gallery: Executive materials undated Box 10: 16 National Portrait Gallery: Newspaper clippings ca.1989 Box 10: 11 National Portrait Gallery: Newspaper Clippings 1990 Jan-Dec Box 10: 12 New Jersey Council for History Education 1997 Spring Box 10: 16.5

New York Humanities Council 2000 Nov-2004 April Box 10: 17 New York Humanities Council 2002 Jan-Dec Box 10: 17.5 Phi Beta Kappa: The American Scholar 1964 Sept.-1998 March Box 11: 5 Phi Beta Kappa: Delegates manuals 1997 Sept.-2000 Oct Box 10: 18 Phi Beta Kappa: Executive correspondence and memoranda 1958-1995 Box 10: 19 Phi Beta Kappa: Executive correspondence and memoranda 1996 Box 10: 20 Phi Beta Kappa: -Executive correspondence and memoranda 1997-1999 Box 10: 21 Phi Beta Kappa: Executive correspondence and memoranda 2000-2005 Box 10: 22 Phi Beta Kappa: Executive correspondence and memoranda 2014-2015 Box 51: 26 Phi Beta Kappa: Financial documents 1964, 1991-1995 Box 10: 24 Phi Beta Kappa: Financial documents 1996-1997 Box 11: 1 Phi Beta Kappa: Financial documents 1998-2000 Box 11: 2 Phi Beta Kappa: Initiation, constitution, founding charter, etc. undated Box 11: 3 Phi Beta Kappa: Meeting minutes 1991 Dec-1999 March Box 10: 23 Phi Beta Kappa: Publicity 1988 Sept.-2000 Winter Box 11: 4 Scholars at Risk Network 2017-2018 Box 51: 27 Social Science Research Council 1967 March-1970 Oct Box 11: 6 Society for French Historical Studies 1968 Jan-1974 May Box 11: 9 Society of American Historians 1997 Dec-2002 Dec Box 11: 7 Society of American Historians 2003 Jan-2012 May Box 11: 8 Society of American Historians 2015 Box 51: 28 Studio Museum in Harlem 1985 Jan-1989 Oct Box 11: 10 Wilson Center 1976 Sept.-1978 April Box 11: 12 Wilson Center 1989-1991 Box 11: 13 Wilson Center: Annual Report 1982, 1986 Box 11: 11 Wilson Center: KCET Interview 1997 Nov-Dec Box 11: 14 Yale Committee 1988 Sept.-1991 April Box 11: 15 Series 3: Published Materials 1911-2014 20 boxes (30 linear feet) Subseries A: God's Crucible 2001-2012 Book Proposals 2001 May-2005 April Box 12: 1 Correspondence 2005 July-2012 May Box 12: 2 Research 2001 Oct-2009 Jan Box 12: 3

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Administrative information

Access

Access restrictions apply to materials pertaining to Jason Lewis (Series 1), legal and medical materials pertaining to David Levering Lewis (Series 1), and recommendations and performance reviews of colleagues and graduate students (Series 4). All materials have been removed and are restricted until 2035.

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