



# MUSE

The official newsletter of the Humanities Division  
Brandeis University



Greek Red Figure Vase, ca. 530 BCE, shows the nine Muses

## Message from the Head of the Division

Dear Friends of the Humanities,

We are coming to the end of a difficult year for many of us—facing illness for ourselves and loved ones (Covid-19 and other things brought about by our loneliness and isolation), anxiety about the future and fear of illness, and personal, national, and global losses. A lot to digest, but I want to congratulate everyone at Brandeis for the strength and resolve I have witnessed as Head of the Division of Humanities from staff, students, faculty, and senior administrators (our Dean Hodgson, Provost Fierke, President Liebowitz, and their staff), all working together to make us feel safe, to set up protocols against the spread of Covid-19, and to help us all to move on with our work (whether that means finishing degrees—B.A., B.S., M.A., or Ph.D.—writing books and articles, attending conferences, doing lab research, painting, or performing). I want to thank everyone in my life (and for this issue: Madeleine Cahn, Katie Dickinson, Claire Khokhar, Julie Seeger, and my current assistant editor, Jessica Wei) for helping me with my job as Head of the Division, which has not always felt so easy this year.

As an archaeologist who has not been in the field for some time now, I use my garden for digging and as a measure of changes and progress. Watching what is growing at any given moment—tulips, grape hyacinths, daffodils, forsythia, pink and red azaleas, and Japanese Andromeda are all blooming now—gives me good reason to feel like better things are happening. Soon my multi-colored lilacs will come, I am now (as of April 15) fully vaccinated, several of my large writing projects are finished or approaching the finish line, and graduation is coming soon! As the song goes at the end of *Life of Brian*, “Always look at the bright side of life!”

So, here I begin with some good news from the Division of the Humanities: special congratulations again to **Ulka Anjaria**, Professor of English and new Director of the Mandel Center for the Humanities, who received the GSAS Dean’s Mentoring Award this spring. This award recognizes faculty who are outstanding mentors for students enrolled in our Graduate School (GSAS). Winners receive a certificate; a \$2,500 prize; and their names added to a plaque in the International Lounge in the Usdan Student Center. Also, congratulations go to **Lucia Reyes de Deu**, Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies, who received the Louis Dembitz Brandeis Prize for Excellence in Teaching. The award honors an individual for her outstanding teaching and carries a \$2,500 prize.

As a final bit of news, I want to invite everyone most warmly to attend Brandeis’ first annual [Undergraduate Research and Creative Collaborations Symposium](#), at which live presentations will be held on Friday, April 30, 2021, from 1:00–3:00 pm. This online event will showcase the research and creative work of about 120 undergraduate students across all disciplines and enable all members of the community to learn from their experiences. About 18 of these presentations will be made by students in the Humanities! Please come to

support them and write comments about their work! The event opened to the Brandeis community on Wed., April 28, at 12 noon, and will stay available for 11 days.

This issue of MUSE pays special tribute to the Department of Philosophy (staff, faculty, and students). We all mourned the death of Professor Andreas Teuber (who died in February), a long-time mainstay of the department, but Jessica Wei '21 (**hereafter JW**), PHIL major, and one of the three UDRs for PHIL, happily agreed to be my assistant editor for this issue, so that we could sing some of the praises of the department, lay out the changes it has experienced over time, and talk about why studying philosophy remains both relevant and even crucial in our world today. Jessica has been a joy to work with, and she will be going to Oxford University in England next fall to study for her BPhil in Philosophy. I shall miss her, but I hope you will all enjoy how she has arranged these interviews.

With all best wishes,

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## Special Tribute to the Department of Philosophy



Julie Seeger and current UDRs; left to right: Jessica Wei, Jacob Knauer, Alex Kougasian, Julie Seeger

**JW: 1. Julie Seeger, the Academic Administrator, has been with the Department of Philosophy for a long time. I wanted to know what Julie can say about the strengths and relevancy of the Dept. of Philosophy as we move into such an uncertain future.**

### Julie Seeger:

Our Brandeis Philosophy Department has changed a lot since I arrived. We launched a Master's Program in 2009 and that did a lot to enhance the feeling of community. Once we had graduate students, our lounge became a grad student space with workstations and couches and a Nespresso machine. Suddenly there were always people hanging around – both graduate and undergraduate students and there was lots of lively discussion, and plans made – for projects to work on, conferences to attend, karaoke bars to go to and parties.

Beyond the business of managing the department, I've always enjoyed working with the UDRs and Grad Student Representative to create ice-breaking events. When I learned that NEJS had a coffee house night, I wanted our department to do that too. So, I talked it up amongst our students. Whenever any of the students (or faculty) revealed that they were musicians, I would prompt them to perform – In fact, that first year we managed to pull together a band. The event was so successful, that we continued to host coffee house nights for a few years in a row. The UDRs would organize everything and the graduate students would contribute. Everyone, including faculty would participate. It was a blast!

When I noticed that Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies gave out bling to their majors, I commissioned one of our students who was also an artist to design a department t-shirt – everyone who declared a major got one and so did our colloquium speakers! I think these small gestures have helped create a sense of community.

And I believe it was *that* feeling of community that contributed to the strong bonds that were made. I have been impressed with the friendships that were forged in that lounge and have lasted over the years. Recently, two former students, one in a doctoral program in California and the other in a program in Virginia, collaborated on a paper together which was accepted for publication! More evidence that our Brandeis Philosophy Department continues to make an impact on the world of philosophy at large.

**JW: 2. The Department has had some huge losses recently (Professor Andreas Teuber's death and the relocation of Professors Jennifer and Berislav Marusic to the University of Edinburgh). How has this affected you personally and the department as a whole?**

**Kate Moran:**

In a way, it's only natural to ask about Beri and Jen Marusic and Andreas Teuber under the heading of 'losses to the department' – but in another sense I see it as apples and oranges! People going to other universities is a normal part of departmental life, even if it is disappointing. A sudden death like Andreas's leaves a different mark, I think. But both go to show that academic departments are not static entities; they're always changing. And we've been so, so lucky to have some new faculty members join us recently. I'm thinking, in particular, of Umrao Sethi, Peter Epstein, and Eyal Tal, but also of our recent Kay Fellow Brendan Cline, whose time at Brandeis ended last year. I also think that, with a little luck in the form of new hires, we're in a position to make some exciting additions that will help to reshape philosophy at Brandeis in the coming years. And of course one thing does remain the same over the years, and that is our wonderful students! I feel very fortunate to work with so many curious and dedicated BA and MA students at Brandeis.



*Prof. Andreas Teuber and former grad students; standing, left to right: Lia Curtis-Fine, Shane Henckel, Quentin Williams, Daniel Friedman, William Grogan, Andreas Teuber, Nicholas Hanson-Holtry, Minghui Yang; squatting, left to right: Peter Carmack, Evan Welchance*

**Jerry Samet:**

The losses have been a blow. We were at the crest of a wave after we hired Umrao Sethi and then Peter Epstein – we were expecting Jen and Beri Marusic back after their year abroad, which is what we were convinced we needed to run our BA and MA programs well. As an older professor, I was also very pleased with the group of 5 younger faculty members who would form a new core.

**Marion Smiley:**

The recent losses in faculty (to death and departure) mean that we are now in dire need to rebuild the department. Brandeis students are very much interested in, among other things, social, political, and legal philosophy, so it will be especially important for the department to hire someone in these fields.

**JW: 3. What was the Department of Philosophy like in the earliest years of Brandeis (1948-1968), and how has it changed, if it has since then? How do you personally see yourself fitting into the historical overview of the department?**

**Jerry Samet:**

None of the present members of the Department were at Brandeis in the late 60's, so it will be up to the university archivist and the earliest philosophy majors and PhD students to paint a picture of that period. In terms of my place in the Department: I think that I was the first member to be focused on philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences, which emerged as central areas in the 70's and 80's. Both Umrao Sethi and Peter Epstein are deeply into this area as well, but they come at many of the topics from different angles, so I'm gratified that we have this continuity and contrast.

**Marion Smiley:**

I haven't been at Brandeis as long as the others. Nor did I go through the whole tenure-track process here. (I was hired in 2002 as a full professor.) Two things are obvious: one is that the department used to have more faculty; the other is that until recently it was all male. I was the first tenure/tenure-track woman hired in the department's history. The department has been appointing female faculty members ever since, and needs to do more with regard to diversity matters overall.

**JW: 4. The Humanities are under attack all the time these days, but students (undergraduate and M.A. students) still flock to the Dept. of Philosophy. Why do you think you have such excellent course enrollments, and why do you think the major (and the M.A.) are still so strong?**

**Eyal Tal:**

Many of the people in college these days have grown up witnessing some alarming events. They've



Current grad students in proseminar taught by Prof. Peter Epstein; left to right: Nicolas Heliotis, Peter Epstein, Aran Szostak, Ross Pergande, Kelly Frazier, Megan Dreher

witnessed moral failures in the face of a climate crisis. They've witnessed political failures in the face of social injustice. They've witnessed misinformation campaigns divide and manipulate.

Philosophy teaches us to consider the implication of any idea/plan that you entertain; does it make sense, is it well-supported, who would it affect, how would it affect them, what are the ethical consequences, is there a better alternative, how might things go wrong, what can be improved, and so on. It teaches us to think carefully before we speak, before we write, and before we act. There is not a single challenge that we face today that could not be handled well using such skills. There is also not a single profession that could not use employees who possess such skills.

Students see this. They see the failures of previous generations, they understand the need for careful and sensitive thinking, and they want the skills to do better. Philosophy helps give folks some of those skills. Plus, it's fun!

### **JW: 5. Why do you believe that philosophy is still important, and perhaps especially more so, during the economic difficulties the humanities are suffering through in recent times?**

#### **Kate Moran:**

I often think that studying philosophy and thinking philosophically is to appreciate what an amazing thing it is to be a self-conscious, rational being. I think the same is true of other fields in the humanities as well – that's probably why I started out studying English and philosophy! And of course, philosophy has clear instrumental benefits to students as well: it develops thinking and writing skills, in particular, which are both as important as they ever were!

#### **Eyal Tal:**

Attempts to undermine the humanities often coincide with various social ailments (e.g., Brazil's recent attempt to completely defund philosophy and sociology departments, and they are often promoted under the guise of helping social recovery). But when you think about it, it is absurd to say that in order to combat social crises and avoid repeating the same mistakes what we need is less well-rounded/well-informed/critical citizens. Those social ailments are not a matter of mere misfortune. We cause them, through incompetent leadership and shortsighted policy.

### **JW: Question #4. and #5. together:**

#### **Peter Epstein:**

The answers to these two questions are closely related. Philosophy is, I think, a bit of an unusual discipline within the humanities. It doesn't have any particular subject matter; it is defined, instead, by a mode of investigation and a tendency to explore extremely general questions. There's a strong emphasis – at least within the "analytic" tradition that most of us in the department work in – on assessing arguments: charting out their logical structure, evaluating whether the premises genuinely support the conclusion, or considering objections. While each course in philosophy focuses on some specific set of issues, it's the method of thinking through questions in general that is the real pay-off.

#### **Umrao Sethi:**

I think students are drawn to the freedom and universality that philosophy offers. I've wondered about this a lot recently. In March of last year, when we were facing a global pandemic, with students moving out of their dorms, and all of us anxious about the health of our loved ones, I struggled to imagine how I could continue to teach my philosophy classes – one on the hard problem of consciousness, the other on an 18th-century Irish philosopher. But, I felt humbled by the students' continued and surprisingly renewed interest in the material, despite the chaos and uncertainty that surrounded us. I think there is a way in which philosophy allows us to escape our lived realities. "Escape" is not the best word because it implies avoidance or fear. Rather, I think that reading about the nature of consciousness or puzzling over how we can avoid skepticism allows us to feel human in the richest sense of the word – it allows us to feel unencumbered by our corporeal fragility, unhindered by the loneliness that comes with the absence of human contact and intimacy, and unlimited in the reach of our quest for understanding. Rational contemplation may be the aspect of the human condition that is hardest to lose to extenuating circumstances.