



MUSE

*The official newsletter of the Humanities Division
Brandeis University*



Message from the Head of the Division

Dear Friends of the Humanities, students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty colleagues, staff, and those outside Brandeis who care about the disciplines of the Humanities and how they impact our lives,

Welcome to the end of the first month of the fall semester! I hope you are all well and keeping safe.

The words of Frederick Douglas have been on my mind this fall: “Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.” We decided that MUSE should take a look at courses being offered this fall at Brandeis dealing in any way with systemic racism and ways to understand it and ultimately eliminate it.

With the help of two energetic Humanities Division UDRs, Eric Blum (hereafter EB, majoring in Classical Studies), and Alyssa Rider (hereafter AR, majoring in Russian Studies), we picked three courses to highlight in this volume of MUSE: 1) CLAS/ENG 153B, Race Before Race: Premodern Critical Race Studies, co-taught by English Professor Dorothy Kim (DK) and Classical Studies Professor Caitlin Gillespie (CG); 2) ENG 167B, Writing the Nation: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison, taught by Professor Brandon Callender (BC), who is brand new to Brandeis this fall; and 3) PHIL 128B, Philosophy of Race and Gender, taught by Philosophy Professor Marion Smiley (MS). Eric and Alyssa conducted the interviews of the faculty, and the responses were long to each of the three questions we asked. While we had to edit the responses down a bit for the sake of the newsletter’s capacity, I want to thank everyone, especially the faculty of the Humanities listed here, for putting so much heart and thought into this discussion. To quote Frederick Douglas again, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

Warm regards,

Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow
Head of the Division of the Humanities
The Kevy and Hortense Kaiserman Endowed Chair in the Humanities
Professor of Classical Studies

Interviews with instructors of courses dealing with systemic racism in fall 2020

CLAS/ENG 153B, *Race Before Race: Premodern Critical Race Studies* Professors Dorothy Kim (DK) and Caitlin Gillespie (DG)

1. What are the most important learning goals for students in this course?

CG: Our main learning goal is for students to come away from the course with an understanding of ancient and medieval attitudes towards race and ethnicity. We are approaching this goal through examining ancient and medieval texts, material evidence, and modern scholarship through the lens of premodern critical race studies. We hope that students will think critically about the texts and contexts presented in the course, build their awareness of the ways in which the concepts of race and ethnicity are different and change depending on place and time period, gain an understanding of the misuses and abuses of this material, and dedicate themselves to correcting such abuses.

DK: Because the course is online and we decided to make it an opportunity to see what kind of possibilities a digital format might bring, we made the class into a DOCC (<https://femtechnet.org/docc/>). This is a distributed online collaborative classroom. This is a feminist answer to a MOOC. Part of the goal of the class is to create communities, especially in this time of pandemic. So, we not only have communities in class, but also we connect with other classes around the world to create digital communities to discuss premodern critical race studies with a Classical Studies and Medieval archive. In addition, since the world is now online for education, we also wanted to make the class's work germane to the issues now both in terms of ongoing discussions of antiracism, race, racial literacy, and also to the lack of resources, lessons, units for students in Middle School or High School when we are all online. As a result, students will be doing critical antiracist digital pedagogy projects to fill a gap missing in relation to resources for our periods.

2. How do you think the course will help students face systematic racism in the U.S. and around the world?

CG: When we decided to move the course entirely online, we also decided to create a website for the course and to invite students to create pedagogical materials as their midterm and final projects. They will have the option to share these with a broader audience on the website. We hope that students will help other students and teachers educate themselves as well. With more materials available that are aimed at younger audiences, we hope to start conversations about race and ethnicity in the classical and medieval worlds that are founded in textual evidence and scholarship and thereby correct misunderstandings before they start.

DK: Facing systematic racism while we are also all online because of COVID-19 means that students need to understand how to dismantle digital systematic racism and find ways to create tools and resources to help dismantle digital systematic racism. In this way, we are taking what Ruha Benjamin discusses in her book *Race After Technology* about abolitionist tools. In this case, it's about educational digital abolitionist tools. This is why the first third of the class addresses different discussions of methodology: the premodern critical race and racial literacy methods for a premodern archive; the critical digital discussions about race and digital systems; and finally, the critical digital pedagogy discussions about what it means to create antiracist lessons and resources. We have organized our syllabus to ask students to do three things regularly: read things, do things (usually specific discussion and/or hands-on digital activities), and reflect on things. The last thing allows us to work on metacognition and for students to reflect constantly on what we are doing and also what we are reading and how that will fold in as they build antiracist digital pedagogical resources.

3. Do you think the current atmosphere has affected how students are receiving and interacting with the course?

CG: I think that the current atmosphere likely brought more students to the course. Students are certainly engaging in a thoughtful manner during class, developing insightful questions on the reading and for our speakers, and writing engaging reflections about the material and integrating their own experiences into their interactions. In my experience, Brandeis students are skilled discussants and careful, critical thinkers, but perhaps the level of engagement has been heightened. Great question. I'll have to ask the class!

ENG 167B, *Writing the Nation: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison* Professor Brandon Callender (BC)

1. What are the most important learning goals for students in this course?

BC: My hope is that the course title "Writing the Nation" will do more than evoke familiar images of black writers addressing a presumably white nation. Instead, I want students to see black writers writing to, for, and about themselves in ways that are not always reducible to inter-racial conflict or to a perpetual writing *against*. As Toni Morrison teaches us, reading black literatures as writing *against* also assumes the idea of writing *for*. As

a result, we sometimes center white readers too much, taking their education – their critique – as the reason why black literatures matter. Instead, I want students to ask what black writings can do beyond always responding and being reduced to oppression. I want them to come away with how bustling and busy the black tradition can be. For this reason, we began our first class looking at Toni Morrison’s 1973 preface to *The Black Book*, a book whose complex litanies of black collectivity – “I am everything I have hated,” “I am all the ways I have failed,” “I am all the ways I survived,” “I am all the things I have seen,” “I am all the things I have ever loved” – concludes with walking away from the cramped confines of having to fix and define itself for its readers: “I am not complete here; there is so much more, / but there is no more time and no more space...and I have journeys to take, / ships to name, and crews.” While many of these hopes and provocations are laid out in my course description, I think the learning goal that most encapsulates this elasticity is that students be able to “map the changing aesthetic, social, and political worlds that these authors navigated, and how they contributed to the fields of both black literatures and whiteness studies.” In this phrase, students are thus encouraged to prioritize concerns with racial justice (to become “an advocate for racial justice,” as one goal states) while also learning to celebrate the creativity of black living and creating in ways that exceed black-white relations. This is especially important for non-black readers because it means that you’re not just studying “others,” but studying yourselves. And for black readers, this means that you’re not just studying what black literatures have to teach outsiders; you’re sitting with the wild plenitude of everything these authors have to say to you (not all of which might include you).

As far as goals go, I like most the blank personal goal that I’ve asked students to fill in with their own. This space – soon to be gathered into a collective document – acknowledges that we are all coming to the course with different needs, needs that might shift or, with time, even merit scrutiny as we move throughout the course. Here again we face the central question of what it is we allow black art to do. And since, as Morrison elsewhere reminds us, “the discussion of Black literature in critical terms is unflinching sociology and almost never art criticism,” the question becomes how to benefit from the socio-political insights these authors give us without forfeiting the wonder and distinctiveness of their style.

2. How do you think the course will help students face systematic racism in the U.S. and around the world?

BC: Students are encouraged to make connections between longer histories that travel up to us from enslavement and to see how white world-building depends upon the world-wrecking forces of systemic racism. As our first long text, Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* in this way sets the mood for our course, for in it he critiques how the seeming advancements of enlightenment, civilization and “humanity” all depend upon the brutish – *not at all civilized* – dehumanization of those we uphold up as our less-human others: “these men leaped upon the road of progress; and their leap was the windfall of our tragedy. Their excessive love of life wove a deadly web of slavery that snared our naked feet. Their sense of the possibility of building a more humane world brought devastation and despair.” In such moments, we scrutinize how the attempt to accrue and safeguard what we regard as culture and property systemically requires the denigration of others. This is to ask a simple question: how much does the nation’s peace, its security, its values, and its cherished myth of itself, depend upon those who are denied these rights and protections?

While themes of policing and discrimination pervade the class, the second module, “Imagining Whiteness,” targets them most directly. Toni Morrison’s critique of whiteness in *Playing in the Dark* is paired with short stories by Richard Wright and James Baldwin that address the violent love-hate relation to blackness that undergirds how our country simultaneously consumes and repudiates black life. We will study the equally fixated swing between fascination and aversion, desire and aggression, that undergirds so many American fantasies, and which allows dominant culture to delight in, divest from, and (directly and indirectly) destroy black life without having to treat these phenomena as racially motivated. In all this, students will be asked to probe why only certain lives *and* deaths are positioned as worthy of value and grief. What traits must you have for your life to be seen as mattering?

3. Do you think the current atmosphere has affected how students are receiving and interacting with the course?

BC: This is my first time teaching this class, and my conception of it has frantically shifted across the summer in light of the news I was taking in. Drafting beneath the thrum of news helicopters, the class became more urgent with every state sanctioned homicide. So, I would imagine students were affected too! One of the most beautiful experiences of my teaching career so far has come from our first day check-in on classroom protocol. As you may have noticed, as a black person, I haven’t yet capitalized the “b” at any point through this interview. As countless summer headlines poured in announcing our need to do so, I began clumsily faltering back and forth between my accustomed lowercase “black” (the voice of my family and long-back community) and the more recently recirculated uppercase grammar of respect. Perhaps stubbornly, as a black person, I wanted my ability to linger in the interstices of how many times we’ve had to rename ourselves – to become newer and newer negroes – in order to command the still ungiven respect of so many centuries bent on denying

it. (Would it matter whether or not they wrote “black” with a lowercase or an uppercase on all of the police homicide reports?) The anxiety came down to teaching, and to how my students would respond to a syllabus whose lowercase language might look backwards. Rather than hurry myself into an upper case “b,” I made the matter of my not capitalizing the “b” into a topic of discussion. I loved hearing the reasons why and – so, so very importantly – *when* students decided to capitalize “black” as a term. Who in their communities did and didn’t capitalize it? After I raised the topic, one black student mentioned that they did in fact bat an eye at my not capitalizing it, and we all discussed why folks did it: to humanize, to elevate, to make equitable, they offered. They were eager to demonstrate, clearly and loudly, the solidarity and respect they felt towards black life, and their minds and language had in this way kept pace and faith with the black world. I encouraged them to write in the ways that felt right to them and thanked them for their patience as I mull over – as many writers long before me have – what would or wouldn’t come with this new-old word. This exchange matters, for me, because it shows the breaks, lurches, and lags in how blackness responds to – and shows itself as vigorously responding to – a crisis and urgency that feels new and old at the same time.

Even more so, it was humbling to discuss with students whether or not we would read the word “nigger” aloud when it was printed in texts. Into the initial silence of that question, I suggested that we might perhaps begin – as a starting point – with not saying the word and adapt this policy as new perspectives come in. “What do folks think?” The three voices that gradually spoke all belonged to black students, and after each suggestion we would shift how we would approach the word in light of their newly introduced perspective. We went from first agreeing to *not* say the word to agreeing that everyone could use it (so long as it was academic and appeared in the text). The second student confronted, so very touchingly, the discomfort of hearing white students read it – it “just does something to me” – and so the class unanimously agreed that no white people should use it. As a final addendum, one last student added that perhaps all non-black folks shouldn’t read it: if you were black and felt okay saying it, then it’s your right to say it. Thumbs up were given all around and we had a way forward. I was so humbled to see the way that the students showed up for one another as advocates and allies newly flung together online. At a time when safe spaces feel rare, we got to see black students shaping the kind of space that made them comfortable and non-black students eager to make that space possible.

PHIL 128B, Philosophy of Race and Gender

Professor Marion Smiley (MS)

1. What are the most important learning goals for students in this course?

MS: Learning Goals for the course:

- to grasp the way in which the concept of “race” is itself constructed in particular social and political contexts on the basis of particular goals, purposes, and projects;
- to understand how these goals, purposes, and projects get embedded in what we now know as “race” and lead us – often without knowing it – to reinforce troublesome (e.g., racist) social norms and structures of power.
- to make sense of what it means to be of “mixed race”;
- to understand how racial identities of all kinds are infused with cultural stereotypes;
- to discern what, if anything, xenophobia has to do with race and to grasp how the concept of national identity can be – and often is – racialized;
- to think about how race, gender, religion, class, and other general identities come together and square with the personal identities of individuals; and
- to map out the different meanings, as well as manifestations, of racism in U.S. society and to ask what it means for racism to be “systematic”.

Note: All of these goals are served by what is known in philosophy departments as conceptual analysis, i.e., the taking apart of particular concepts by asking how they are formulated, on what basis, by whom, with what kinds of norms, values, and beliefs in mind, as well as by asking what consequences follow from such formulations in the world and how, if at all, we might reformulate these concepts so as to render them more useful and less problematic in cases where they are problematic now.

The course also asks students to think about the various ways in which racism operates in society. To this end, we focus on:

- whether racism is ideological, i.e., grounded in an ideology of white supremacy;
- the nature of white ignorance and its place in racism; and
- how, if at all, we might understand both of these things in light of more obviously structural matters such as those associated with economic inequality and exploitation.

Note: The last three sets of concerns are generally associated with social and political philosophy. But we also broach straightforward ethical questions such as:

- What, exactly, is wrong with racism? – a question that I prefer to pose as “What is the wrong of racism?”; and
- What do “racial equality” and “racial justice” entail?

Finally: The course brings all of the above to bear on the acceptability of three sets of public policies: affirmative action, reparations, and racial profiling in the realm of policing. Here students are asked to think, not only about the ethics and practicality of these policies, but how our discussions of them are now framed, i.e., whether they are being framed in ways that are themselves biased, and whether there are better ways of framing them.

Since the course is also on gender, we come back to questions of systematic racism as the latter is experienced by Black women, Asian women, and others. But that is for another conversation...

2. How do you think the course will help students face systematic racism in the U.S. and around the world?

MS: Three things come to mind regarding how the course will help students face systematic racism:

a. Since moving beyond systematic racism in the world requires grasping both its source and the various beliefs, concepts, and institutions that sustain it in practice, the course, by speaking to these matters, becomes part of the process of achieving this goal. Obviously, it is only one part.

b. Two things about conceptual analysis in particular might be helpful here. First of all, by highlighting the ways in which concepts shape reality, conceptual analysis awakens all of us (including students) to the possibility that some of the concepts that we are now using are sustaining racism.

c. As it turns out, some of the most troublesome (e.g., racist) aspects of our concepts have their source in grounding assumptions (assumptions that ground our concepts) about which we are not aware. (In other words, they are hidden from us by virtue of being deeply embedded in our concepts.) Moreover, these assumptions do not lie dormant in our concepts. Instead, they get reproduced in practice whenever we use these concepts as now formulated. Hopefully, by learning how to tease these troublesome assumptions to the surface, we all (including students) might be in a better position to get rid of them from our conceptual repertoire.

3. Do you think the current atmosphere has affected how students are receiving and interacting with the course?

MS: I wouldn't want to insinuate that I know what is motivating particular students or what is going on in their minds. (I don't.) But I did make some changes. First of all, I introduced racial profiling in policing as a topic. Second, I expanded our discussion of reparations to include the increasingly creative, innovative, and competing ways of affording reparations. I can say that I have noticed the following changes over the last five/six/seven years with respect to how students approach the subject matter:

a. There is seemingly much more interest in the topic of racism in general among Brandeis students. I assume that such an increased interest has a lot to do with what is going on in the U.S. and elsewhere.

b. Students come into the class assuming that racism is a very serious problem. There isn't the kind of questioning of this assumption like there was sometimes earlier on. Instead, the questioning comes with what to do about the problem.

c. Moreover, this assumption is now being made across the political spectrum (at Brandeis), including among those who call themselves conservatives and/or libertarians. (I suspect that this is a generational matter.)

d. Students are now much more likely than before to speak of systematic racism, as distinct from discrete racist acts, and to treat its existence as non-controversial.

e. White ignorance and white nationalism are now more of a concern.

f. Students in my class are also much more likely to zero in on violence against Black men (especially in the hands of the police) and racial profiling more generally.

g. There is much more interest in and support for reparations, as well as a lot more discussion about what kinds of reparations.

h. There are also a lot of shifts in perspective that have to do with the simple fact that younger generations are, by virtue of the kind of education they are getting, more sophisticated about, say, intersectionality, more open to talking about the different kinds of racism that particular groups (including Asians) experience, much more aware of the complexities of "mixed race", and other things.

Other courses in the Division of Humanities, Creative Arts, and Social Science that touch on systemic racism, race, or injustices in our society offered this fall:

Division of the Humanities courses:

ENG 62B Contemporary African Literature, Global Perspectives, Joshua Williams

ENG 127B Migrating Bodies, Migrating Texts, Faith Lois Smith

ENG 131B Decolonial Pedagogy, Joshua Williams (one-time offering)

FREN 110A Cultural Representations, Clémentine Fauré-Bellaïche
 HISP 158A Latina Feminisms, María Durán
 IMES 104A Islam: Civilization and Institutions, Carl S. El-Tobgui
 NEJS 162B It Couldn't Happen Here: American Antisemitism in Historical Perspective,
 Jonathan Sarna
 NEJS 171B Tikkun Olam/Repairing the World: Service and Social Justice in Theory and
 Practice, Jon A. Levisohn
 NEJS 177A The Holocaust in Israeli and Jewish Literature, Ilana Szobel
 SAS 100A India and Pakistan: Understanding South Asia, Avinash Singh

Division of Creative Arts courses:

THA 144B Black Theater and Performance, Isaiah Matthew Wooden
 THA 150A Global Theater: Voices from Asia, Africa, and the Americas, Isaiah Matthew Wooden

Division of Social Science: courses in the humanistic social sciences:

AAAS 124A After the Dance: Performing Sovereignty in the Caribbean, Faith Lois Smith
 AAAS 155B Hip Hop History and Culture, Chad Williams
 AAAS 159A Identity Politics in the United States, Amber Spry
 AAAS/HIST 154B Race, Science, and Society, Wangui M. Muigai
 AAAS/WGS 125A Intellectual History of Black Women, Shoniqua Roach
 AAPI/HIST 171A The United States in the Pacific World, Yuri Doolan
 ANTH 1A Introduction to the Comparative Study of Human Societies, Jonathan Anjaria
 ANTH 123B Lost Voices: The Historical Archaeology of Oppression and
 Exploitation, Charlotte Goudge
 ED 170A Critical Perspectives in Urban Education, Derron Wallace
 HIST 153B Slavery and the American Civil War: #1619 Project, Abigail Cooper
 HIST 175B Resistance and Revolution in Latin America and the Caribbean, Gregory Childs
 HIST 184A Silk, Silver, and Slaves: China and the Industrial Revolution, Xing Hang
 HS 110A Wealth and Poverty, Thomas M. Shapiro
 HSSP 114B Racial/Ethnic and Gender Inequalities in Health and Health Care, Maria Madison
 LGLS 129A Global Justice and Societies in Transition, Melissa Stimell
 LGLS 140B Investigating Justice, Rosalind E.W. Kabrhel
 POL 105A Elections in America, Zachary Albert
 SOC 116B Social Inequalities in the Media, Sarah Mayorga
 SOC 153A The Sociology of Empowerment, Gordon Fellman
 WGS 171A Transgender Studies, Varun Chaudhry
 WGS 182B Feminist Bioethics: Social Justice and Equity in Health Care, Beth Clark