



MUSE

The official newsletter of the Humanities Division
Brandeis University



Message from the Head of the Division

Dear Friends of the Humanities,

A belated welcome to the spring semester. I can't wait to see the crocuses this year, and I know we all are hoping for vaccines, more positive times to come, and a better year than 2020 was. I hope you are all safe and doing well.

I want to begin with three happy pieces of news from the Division of the Humanities; 1) Irina Dubinina has won an award for "Best Contribution to Language Pedagogy" from the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages for her textbook (written with Olesya Kisselev), *Rodnaya Rech': An Introductory Course for Heritage Learners of Russian* (Georgetown University Press, 2019); Matthew Fraleigh has been chosen for the Hakuhodo Research fellowship for 2021-22 at Waseda University in Tokyo for his study of Sinitic verse composition in post-1945 Japan; and AOK-O has been named the Charles Eliot Norton lecturer by the Archaeological Institute of America for 2022-23, which is the first time this high honor has been afforded to a scholar at Brandeis.

We have the great privilege in this issue of MUSE to publish an interview conducted by our Humanities Division Graduate Student Assistant, Claire Khokhar, who is working on her MA in Ancient Greek and Roman Studies. Claire interviewed two Brandeis faculty members, Professors Alexander Kaye of NEJS and Amber Spry of AAAS and POL, both to advertise their forthcoming Critical Conversation on Tuesday, March 9, from 5:30-6:30 pm, "Black and Jewish Identities: Visions of Freedom," and to dig deeper into the topic for MUSE. This event will be accessible [via Zoom](#). For more information: [Critical Conversations 2020-21 Panels and Participants page](#).

Given the Black Lives Matter protests of last summer and Brandeis's long commitment to Social Justice, the outcome of the Presidential election (with the first Black/South Asian VP in Kamala Harris and the first Jewish Second Gentleman in Doug Emhoff), and outcome in Georgia senatorial election (Democrats Jon Ossoff, a Jewish man, and Raphael Warnock, an African American man), we are regularly confronted with Black-Jewish connections. The interview below explores this relationship more deeply and grapples with its complexities and possibilities. Please come to hear our distinguished professors on March 9 to learn even more.

Sincerely,

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Interview with Alexander Kaye and Amber Spry about "Black and Jewish Identities: Visions of Freedom"

CK: Can you please address the long-standing connection, if there is one, between African Americans and Jews, what it means at this moment in our history, and what it means to each of you?

AS: Identity tends to be a term that often gets used, but whose meaning is too often taken for granted. When I talk about a black "identity," I'm talking about the sense of belonging and shared history that accompanies racial experience. But it's important to understand identity in a way that appreciates the vast differences that can exist within a shared experience. There are multitudes contained within Blackness, and my own research examines how nuances in individual expressions of identity can lead to very different outcomes in terms of policy preferences, political attitudes, and ideological beliefs (the focus of our Critical Conversation).

AK: Almost exactly the same could be said about Jewish identity. Among Jews, there is a diversity of beliefs, practices, and opinions about more or less everything, not to mention a vast geographical dispersion. There is a great deal of debate even about what it means to "be Jewish". Is Jewishness a religious belief or practice (and if so, defined by which of the several Jewish denominations?); Is it a national identity, an ethnicity, a genetic heritage, cultural affinity, artistic orientation?... The answers to these questions are bound up with the topic of our conversation, which is how to come out of a particular history, and a particular sense of belonging, with strategies for liberation and justice.

CK: How, if applicable, does the experience for African Americans and Jews differ? What about for people who are both African American and Jewish?

AK: It would be a mistake to think of "African American" and "Jewish" as entirely distinct communities. There are many people in the United States who are both Jewish and African American, just as there are many other kinds of Jews of Color, and Black Jews in many countries around the world.

AS: For the purpose of our Critical Conversation, we are engaging with the ways that Black Americans and Jewish people have experienced oppression, and the strategies that have emerged to advance social and political progress, both individually and collectively. But even as we imagine the ways that history and struggles over power may link the experiences of Black people and Jewish people in some ways, it is important to recognize that anti-Blackness and anti-Semitism are different forms of hatred. And that's something we'll explore in this conversation as well. We are careful not to draw inappropriate analogies here.

As we think about how solidarity can be forged between Black and Jewish people, we want to emphasize that solidarity doesn't require us to reduce experiences to "sameness." Solidarity comes from recognizing that power manifests differently across groups, and that requires us to think in meaningful ways about how to redistribute power for the benefit of all.

CK: What inspired the two of you to come together for the Critical Conversation you have planned for March 9, and what do you hope will be the takeaway messages/ lessons for the audience?

AS: Initially, the idea for this critical conversation came from a question at the center of my Black Political Thought course here at Brandeis. What are the best strategies for pursuing (Black) freedom and opportunity in the United States? The notions of freedom and opportunity are universal -- and are especially pertinent themes in the political and intellectual traditions of groups that experience systemic oppression. Professor Kaye and I are inspired by the idea that in both Jewish and Black political thought, there are so many strategies for pursuing the same goal. That's why we've titled this talk "Visions of Freedom" -- we wanted a space to engage with the many different strategies for pursuing freedom.

In this conversation we will address themes of diaspora, exile, assimilation, and belonging through the lenses of political ideologies in order to engage with that central question of advancing freedom and equality. We will also encourage those attending to engage the important themes of freedom and equality in their own lives and consider the ways in which contemporary politics and our own lived experiences have been structured by social, historical, and ideological factors.

AK and AS: We were interested in putting the Black and Jewish experiences in conversation not only because of their overlapping histories, but also because of the similar ways that they each responded to the challenges and opportunities of the past century. As professors, we both research and write about political thought, and we are interested in looking at the ways that American Jews and African Americans have produced a wide variety of conflicting political ideologies to deal with their situation in the world. Some among each community have placed hope in the stated goals of liberalism, and the idea that all people are ultimately the same and will learn to live together in peace and respect. Others have believed that liberalism is a pipe dream (or, worse perhaps,) a way of duping the oppressed into accepting their situation. Those who rejected versions of liberalism looked to other forms of politics, such as the attempt to set up a Jewish/Black state elsewhere, to insist on Jewish/Black cultural exceptionalism, to glorify Jewish/Black power, or to look to Jewish/Black religion as a way of seeking redemption and staying apart from a world that has oppressed and rejected them. Along the way, Jews and African Americans in these different camps have looked to each other for inspiration, even as these ideologies sometimes brought them into conflict.

Jews and people of color share a great deal, both in terms of their place in the unfolding of the modern world, and in their experiences of that history. From a theoretical perspective, both Jews and people of color were identified by European Christians, albeit in different ways, as the archetypal “other”. Europeans, particularly as they began exploring and colonizing Africa and the New World, considered Black people to be more “primitive,” with lesser moral and intellectual capacities than white men. This ideology was developed to justify the colonization of much of the world, and the enslavement of Africans. It meant that, with some exceptions, Black people were excluded from the political community of Europe and its colonies, including, of course, the Americas. The tremendous profit that emerged from aspects of the European enlightenment such as the growth of global capitalism and the scientific revolution that supported it, was built on the back of centuries of suffering of the African diaspora.

Jews were also an “other” to European Christians and the civilization that they promoted. Since its beginnings, Christianity was based on the claim that it had superseded Judaism. Jews in Christian lands were treated as stubborn outcasts, whose presence was sometimes tolerated, but only under the threat of physical attack, forced conversions, expulsions and murderous pogroms. In 15th century Spain, a racial “science”, called “purity of blood laws”, was developed, which stopped people with Jewish ancestry from fully integrating into Christian society, even if their family had been Christian for generations. (There are obvious parallels to the “one-drop rule” here.) During the years of European enlightenment, the states of Europe had protracted debates about whether Jews should be allowed to become citizens or whether they were (in the eyes of their opponents) irredeemably uncivilized. It took about 150 years before Jews were accepted as citizens in all of Europe, but the backlash against this process was accompanied by increasing virulent anti-Semitism. The Holocaust was unprecedented in many ways, but it should be seen in the context of this long history.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of African Americans and Jews were working class people, who often lived side by side. This was especially true after the “Great Migration” brought millions of Southern African Americans to the same working-class neighborhoods occupied by recent Jewish immigrants. Although there were sometimes conflicts between them - and the presence of anti-Black racism among some Jews, and anti-Semitism among some African Americans - Jews and Blacks often made common cause against the systems of oppression. They were involved in each other’s political activism, religious lives, and cultural production, such as jazz and blues.

Having said that, there are many differences between the two communities. Even in the broad similarities, there are important distinctions. Because of the racialized structure of American society, Jewish social mobility since the 1950s was heavily predicated on passing as white, (for those Jews who were able to do so,) and often involved a conscious self-differentiation, among some Jews, from those of other “races”. This dynamic has produced tensions, and even violence, between Jews and African Americans, and sometimes a feeling of exclusion and marginalization among African American Jews within their own Jewish communities. At the same time, many Jews chafe at the idea of being considered “white” in a straightforward way. Although white-appearing Jews benefit from white privilege in a race-conscious America, they continue to bear the weight of anti-Semitic attacks, and are aware that bigoted white supremacists consider them to be the non-white “other” alongside African Americans and other groups. It might be helpful to think in an intersectional way about contemporary Jewish identity. People can have the experience of being white or African American, (or any of numerous other identities,) at the same time as being Jews. The diverse ways that these identities work with each other lead to many different ways of being in the world.