

Blacks and Jews in America

Summer School 2021

Professor: Terrence L. Johnson, Ph.D.

Email: tj44@georgetown.edu

Course Description: This course offers a constructive, interdisciplinary approach to examining the competing and overlapping ways Blacks and Jews in America imagine, cultivate and perform their religious and cultural identities. Although the groups emerge in the American context with unique histories and traditions, there is an overwhelming popular belief that Blacks and Jews share, at least historically, a special relationship. Drawing on primary, secondary, visual and material resources, students will investigate the nature of this relationship and examine how Blacks and Jews retrieve religion, tradition and ethics to interrogate, explore and, in some cases, expand definitions of democracy, political liberalism, freedom, citizenship and community.

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the complex history of Jewish American and African American relations in the United States. Our inquiry will begin by exploring the historical roots of each group's discreet experiences in this country. Then we will focus on how they have coalesced sometimes in friendship, sometimes in antagonism, in the past century. Some of the questions we seek to explore are: Do there exist similarities between Blacks and Jews that account for the gravitational pull they exert upon one another? Are there differences between them that explain the unique texture of their interaction? How are both related to mainstream White Anglo-Saxon culture in the United States? How do issues of gender and sexual orientation refract the nature of their interaction? How have artists sought to depict their encounters? What political projects have led these groups to form common bonds? And what political projects have placed them in opposition? What role does religion and theology play in Black-Jewish relations? What do we learn about the very nature(s) of Jewish, Black, and even American identity by scrutinizing their encounter?

Course Requirements and Guidelines: (1) Students are required to facilitate at least one classroom discussion, which will involve an oral presentation that offers a discussion (not a summary) of the assigned readings. This discussion will shed light on the major arguments at hand as well as offer critical insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the readings. (2) Classroom attendance and participation are mandatory. Three absences will result in a zero for the classroom participation grade. (3) Students are required to visit the United States Holocaust Museum <http://www.ushmm.org/> and the National Museum of African Art <http://africa.si.edu/> (4) Students will submit a 10-15-page critical reflection paper at the end of the course. (5) Students are expected in each class to articulate their concerns with the assigned texts as well as share their critical opinions of the ongoing classroom debates. Indeed, this course is designed to stimulate rigorous reflection and debate, and at times classroom discussions may become contentious. Classroom discussions will aim to protect students from gratuitous insult and verbal injury and strive to respect and protect those at the center of the conversation. However, students may be offended by so-called liberal, conservative, religious and/or secular commitments, values and ideas that emerge in the discussions. It is the goal of the instructor that students will bracket familiar epistemic terrain, if only momentarily, in order to weigh what is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. (7) Plagiarism will not be tolerated. If students borrow ideas and lift sentences without proper citation, they will receive an automatic F in the course. (8) The instructor may modify the standards and requirements set forth in this syllabus at any given time in the semester.

Grading Distribution:

Classroom Participation: 20 percent

Draft of Final Paper: 20 percent

Final Paper: 60 percent

Books for Purchase:

Michael Staub
Torn at the Roots

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Clayborne Carson

Introduction

I. Slavery

II. Public reason, Affected Ignorance and Cultural Inheritance

James Baldwin, Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White

<https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antisem.html>

Norman Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem – And Ours

<http://www.bernardavishai.info/Podhoretz>

Alice Walker's *Democracy Now Interview*,

http://www.democracynow.org/2012/9/28/palestine_conditions_more_brutal_than_in

Daniel Mannix, "The Middle Passage"

III. Holocaust

Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, ed., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 722-732, 787.

Cynthia Ozick, "The Shawl", Wendy Zierler, "My Holocaust is not Your Holocaust"

*****Visit the United States Holocaust Museum and watch Schindler's List

IV. Minstrelsy and Representation

Eric Lott, "Love and Theft" and Ethnic Notions (in class)

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Exhibiting Jews," in *Destination Culture*, 79-128; Jenna Weissman-Joselit, "Best in Show," in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, 141-155

V. Race

Karen Brodtkin, "How Jews Became White Folks," 25-52

Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Whiteness of a Different Color," 1-14, 171-199

Jane Anna Gordon, "What Should Blacks Think When Jews Choose Whiteness: An Ode to Baldwin" http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/journals/critical_philosophy_of_race/v003/3.2.gordon.pdf

Charles Mills, "Dark Ontologies: Blacks, Jews, and White Supremacy" in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*

***** "Conversations: African and African American Artworks in Dialogue" at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

***** **One or Two-paragraph Thesis Statement and Bibliography Are Due**

VI. Biblical Narratives and Black Jews

Al Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel"

Jon Levenson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of Hebrew Scripture*

Nathaniel Deutsch and Yvonne Chireau, *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism*, 15-54
Blackjews.org

VII. Diaspora, Sacred Space, Zionism

Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America*, 25-52
Charles Long, *Significations*, 173-184

Jews, Blacks, and Religion

Chaim Waxman, "American Jewry," in *Modern Judaism: An Oxford Guide*, in Nicholas de Lange and Miri Freud-Kandel, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 129-143.

Evelyn Books Higginbotham "Black Church: A Gender Perspective" in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 1-18.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Religion and Race" and "White Man on Trial," *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966), pp. 85-111.

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1963; *The Negro is Your Brother*, Vol. 212, No. 2, pp. 78-88.

Susanna Heschel, "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel

and Martin Luther King, Jr." *Conservative Judaism* 50 (2-3), 1998, pp. 126-143.

VIII. Lynching

James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*

Amy Wood, "The Spectator has a Picture in his Mind" and "The Lynching of Leo Frank"
[Leo Frank on CNN](#)

IX. Civil Rights

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, Introduction and Chapters 2 and 3

Staub, Chapters 4, 5, 7

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*

***** Research Paper Outline is Due

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*

Nathan Glazer, "What Happened to the Grand Alliance," and Clayborne Carson, "Blacks and Jews in the Civil Rights Movement," in *Jews in Black Perspectives*
PBS Movie (The Jewish Americans) (in class)

Research Day

Student Presentations

Research Paper Draft is Due (10 pages)

X. Ethics and the Problems of Whiteness

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*