

Comments on Professor Kita Miyuki's  
"Seeking Justice: the Civil Rights Movement,  
Black Nationalism and Jews at Brandeis University"

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**Introduction**

The relationship between African Americans and Jews in the twentieth century was very complex. Since both groups experienced severe oppression, the former as slavery and segregation and the latter as anti-Semitism, they felt at times a deep sympathy toward one another. Scholars have characterized this side of relations with words such as "alliance," "Neighbors," and "experiential and ideological convergence." On the other hand, since the encounter of African Americans and Jews on the local level often took the form of tenants and landlords, employees and employers, customers and shopkeepers, exploited and exploiter, they at times felt deep animosity toward each other. Scholars have characterized this side of relations with words such as "broken alliance," "strangers," "conflict," and "competition." In the conventional narrative, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and the early 1960s represented the best collaboration between the two groups for common goals, whereas the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s, fueled to some extent by contrasting views on the Israeli-Arab conflict, represented the transitional period in which this collaboration deteriorated.

Professor Kita's presentation about the involvement of Jewish students at Brandeis University in the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent surge of black nationalism at the university basically fits into this conventional narrative. From this viewpoint, one may say that her presentation is the one which strengthens the conventional narrative, rather than changes it. However, I feel her presentation touches on one very important but not yet sufficiently explored topic in the study of the Civil Rights Movement. In the following discussion, I first mention the significance of Professor Kita's presentation by putting it in the context of historiography of the Civil Rights Movement. Then, I consider her presentation in relation to the main theme of this conference, "Americanism and Social Justice." Finally, I refer to one more point that I think worthy of consideration.

## I. Brandeis University as a Movement Center

In her recently published book, Joy Ann Williamson refers to the fact that scholars have not given the same degree of attention to colleges and universities as movement centers as they have given to black churches and various civil rights organizations.<sup>1</sup> Movement centers in this context can be defined as the major places where people are organized, politicized and mobilized for common goals. In the case of black churches, scholars have made an in-depth examination of how they were transformed into liberating agents for the black freedom struggle.<sup>2</sup> Weekly worship services were transformed into mass meetings and rallies, offerings were transformed into collections to provide bail for arrested activists, sermons were transformed into pep talks for protesters and marchers, and hymns were transformed into freedom songs. In this process, black churches were redefined as movement centers, vehicles for social change, and played a pivotal role in sustaining the black freedom struggle. Although this level of analysis does exist for black churches, according to Williamson's observation, it does not exist when it comes to student campus activism at colleges and universities.

With regard to student activism, one may easily relate it to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a dynamic and militant student-led civil rights organization. Studies on SNCC as a movement center abound. However, scholars have often been oblivious to the fact that many SNCC members were full-time students in the first place and worked part-time for the organization. To overlook this fact is to miss what was taking place on college and university campuses. It must be noted that even though students often actively participated in off-campus campaigns organized by SNCC and various other protest organizations, they could not escape campus realities such as attending classes, studying for examinations, paying tuition, participating in various activities on campus, communicating with faculty, the president, and administrators as well as other students. In these circumstances, students attempted to make their campus a primary arena of activism where they established college chapters, raised money, published newspapers and flyers. Accordingly, Williamson suggests that scholars should add colleges and universities as yet another movement centers and give in-depth analysis on how the campus-based movement developed.<sup>3</sup>

If Williamson's argument is valid, we can say that Professor Kita's presentation about student activism at Brandeis University is a welcome addition to the study of colleges and universities as movement centers. Professor Kita richly illustrates how Brandeis students politicized the campus spaces and resources by establishing chapters such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE), writing a letter to every faculty member asking for donations for the Freedom Ride, arranging "Freedom Fast" to

provide food to the South, and opening up on-campus study sessions before they went into the South to help with the voter registration drive. Among these activities, nothing illustrates a campus-based movement better than Freedom Fast. It reveals how ordinary university cafeterias could be transformed into movement centers for the black freedom struggle.

Discussion of colleges and universities as movement centers is not sufficient if it focuses solely on students. Again, to borrow Williamson's phrase, "the story of student organizing and mobilizing must be paired with presidential attitudes toward student efforts, the response of the governing boards, and pressure from state officials."<sup>4</sup> The following serves as an example. Jackson State College was a black State college in Mississippi. Its president during the Civil Rights era was Jacob L. Reddix, an African American. Although he supported the idea of equal rights, he was under immense pressure from the State Board which controlled the purse strings and could fire the president if he dared to suggest any hint of criticizing the Mississippi way of life. Now the faculty, who were all African American, was under the same kind of pressure from Reddix because he could fire them at any time if they disagreed with his policies. Needless to say, the students were also under the same kind of pressure from Reddix who warned them that a violation of campus policies would result in suspension or expulsion. Consequently, in the case of Jackson State College, the president and faculty, trapped within the confines of the southern racial system, functioned as discouraging forces against student activism.<sup>5</sup>

Brandeis University stands in sharp contrast to Jackson State College. As Professor Kita explains, president Abram Sachar's attitude toward student efforts was very positive as evident in his statement quoted in her presentation. The same could be said regarding the attitude of faculty members, who participated in sit-ins with students and raised bail money for arrested Freedom Riders. What facilitated them to be supportive to student activism? Although much still remains to be done regarding this question, we can say that one obvious factor Professor Kita provides is the founding principles of Brandeis University.

It is ironic that Brandeis University, once effectively functioned as a movement center, was put on the defensive side as black Brandeis students started demanding race-based campus reforms like the one presented in "The Ten Demands" during the Black Power era. However, what caught my attention in Professor Kita's observation is that she emphasized the fact that many white students, as well as faculty, continued to support the black student efforts, rather than focusing on the ways in which students, faculty, and the president were divided. This is somewhat different from the conventional narrative regarding especially the relationship between black and white students at predominantly white colleges and universities. It is generally understood that they rarely worked in-concert because their priorities were different. Black students, accompanied with separatist sentiments, focused on race-based campus reforms, while white students focused on opposition to the war in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Then Professor Kita's

observation raises a question as to why race-based campus reforms by separatist black students gained so much support from white students at Brandeis University. I suppose that it is beyond the scope of Professor Kita's current presentation to provide detailed analysis on this issue. I hope she will consider this question in her future studies.

## **II. Interpretations of Americanism and Social Justice among Jews and African Americans**

Since the main theme of this conference is "Americanism and Social Justice," it is worthwhile understanding Professor Kita's presentation in relation to the theme. I consider that what Professor Kita says in her concluding words is a valid assumption: "It is not an overstatement to say that they (Brandeis students, who mostly were Jews) were not so much believers in Judaism as believers in Americanism." Needless to say, we should always be cautious not to oversimplify the motivations of Jewish activism. However, as far as students are concerned, one may say, as historian Clayborne Carson in fact does, that the Jews who participated in the projects of civil rights organization such as SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were the least religious Jews.<sup>7</sup> The activism of such figures like Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who were murdered during the voting registration campaign in Mississippi, was rooted not so much in Judaism as in secular egalitarian ideals. Viewed in this light, it seems a valid conclusion that Jewish Brandeis students were not so much believers in Judaism as believers in Americanism. Americanism in this context, however, needs to be clarified since its content and meanings have been source of conflict. Take African Americans for example. Through the periods of slavery and segregation, many African Americans claimed that they had been victims of Americanism. It does not mean that they were not believers in Americanism. On the contrary, they had been ardent believers in the founding ideals of the United States. Their criticism was rooted in the recognition that the United States had failed to live up to the true meaning of its creed.<sup>8</sup> Thus, one may say that what many African Americans had rejected is an intolerant version of Americanism which had served as an ideology to maintain white superiority, justify racial discrimination, and force minorities to conform to Anglo-Saxon values. What they believed in was a tolerant version of Americanism which would respect ethnic and cultural diversity as well as afford every individual "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The observation of Professor Kita about the founding spirit of Brandeis University seems to show a basic affinity between African Americans and Jews over the interpretations of Americanism. As Professor Kita provides in detail in the first section, the Jews who supported establishing Brandeis University believed that the quota admission policy in higher education was discriminatory and totally un-American. Although they had keen recognition of the need to fight against the policy in any universities which practiced it, they insisted that

establishing Brandeis University would have a far more positive effect on American society. They argued that it would become a model of the nondiscriminatory university whose admission policies were truly American. Added to this, succeeding Middlesex University's founding principles of embracing "freedom and equality, maintaining a racially, religiously and ethnically diverse student body," Brandeis University "fostered an environment open to intellectual inquiry and debate." Consequently, we see that the interpretation of Americanism among Jews in general and those at Brandeis in particular was in the line of a tolerant version of Americanism.

In much of the twentieth century, although both Jewish and African American interpretations of Americanism generally fell into the line of a tolerant version of Americanism, their interpretations of social justice seemed to be more complicated because social justice entailed a more specific level of goals and targets within a certain period of time and circumstance. In other words, although social justice is generally conceived as a society in which individuals and groups enjoy fair treatment and an impartial share of benefits in every aspect of social life, different proponents and groups have developed different interpretations regarding what constitutes fair treatment and an impartial share.

The observation of Professor Kita about the founding spirit of Brandeis University and Jewish student involvement in the Civil Rights Movement reveals that social justice for Jews and for those at Brandeis in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s was connected with equality of opportunity. The Jewish ideal of a "color-blind" society, the eradication of racial barriers, appealed to African Americans in the early Civil Rights era because they too had faced "color-conscious" laws and policies which segregated them from mainstream American society. Therefore, the dominant interpretation of social justice for African Americans in that period was also connected with equality of opportunity. This partially explains why "a grand alliance" between Jews and African-Americans could be achieved during that period. On the contrary, the African American interpretation of social justice changed after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Recognizing the need for collective economic and political power to truly solve the problem of racial inequality, they shifted their emphasis to "color-conscious" policies in all spheres of social life. Social justice for African Americans in the late 1960s became more connected with equality of outcome, which sharply conflicted with the Jewish interpretation of social justice as equal opportunity.

My discussion above is at best a broad picture of interpretations of Americanism and social justice on the part of African Americans and Jews, and I am aware of the danger of understanding both groups monolithically. It seems reasonable to suppose that there were public disagreements and overt conflicts even among Jews over the interpretations of Americanism and social justice during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras if we introduce class, gender, regional, and generational perspectives. What I have particularly in mind at this moment is Jews in the South. Some scholars have examined the conservatism of

southern Jews and their conflicts with northern Jews during the Civil Rights and the Black Power eras.<sup>9</sup> With that in mind, I would like to ask Professor Kita about her opinions regarding what Americanism and social justice meant to Jews in general and southern Jews in particular during these periods. I believe that such a discussion will also help us to place Brandeis student activism in a broader context.

### III. On the Primary Source, the Brandeis Student Newspaper, *The Justice*

One other thing which caught my attention in Professor Kita's presentation is an alteration of wording. In Section II of her presentation, the words to describe students at Brandeis University are "Brandeis students" or, simply, "students." These students are, of course, Jewish students. In Section III, however, words such as "white students," "Brandeis white" or "white" are used to describe the same Jewish students. This alteration could be understandable on one level considering the fact that the proponents of Black Power insisted on the need for racial pride to achieve meaningful social change and tended to identify Jews with whites. Black students at Brandeis were no exception as evident in the decision of the Afro-American Club cited by the presenter: "any gesture made by whites had to be hypocritical." On another level, however, it is the Black Power proponents' point of view toward Jews and does not explain how Jews and Jewish Brandeis students viewed themselves.

This raises a number of interesting questions. Is this alteration consciously done by the presenter? Or did this alteration occur in the Brandeis student newspaper *The Justice* itself, and the presenter simply followed the wording as it appeared in the newspaper? If so, who were the editors and writers of this newspaper? If the editors and writers were Jewish students, why did they identify themselves as "white" rather than "Jews"? It is interesting to note that Malcolm X, whose black nationalism influenced Black Power proponents, was not anti-Semitic per se. He denounced American Jews when their dealings with African Americans were no different from other "whites" who exhibited racist and exploitive attitudes toward them. To borrow historian V. P. Franklin's conclusion, "it was their 'whiteness' rather than their 'Jewishness' that Malcolm found objectionable."<sup>10</sup> From this point of view, it seems to be worth considering why Jewish students at Brandeis preferred emphasizing their "whiteness" to their "Jewishness."

These questions naturally take us to one fundamental question. That is, what kind of source is the Brandeis student newspaper, *The Justice*? Was this the only student newspaper at Brandeis University? Why was the word "Justice" adopted for the name of the newspaper? In a picture of the newspaper in the presenter's paper appears a drawing of the Scales of Justice held by what appears to be a white man's left hand. It seems to be the symbol of the newspaper. Does the drawing tell something about the nature of this newspaper? Added to this, does it

tell something about the nature of this newspaper when it is compared with the Scales of Justice held by a female figure which is the traditional way to symbolize justice in Western countries? Since the presenter relies heavily on this student newspaper, it is my assumption that if we knew more about this source, we would be a step closer to answering the questions I have just raised. Thus, I would appreciate it if Professor Kita would explain a little about the nature and character of this primary source.

### Conclusion

Let me summarize my comments in conclusion. I will first consider the significance of Professor Kita's presentation. It is my belief that her informative research about Brandeis student involvement in the black freedom struggle is an important contribution to the study of colleges and universities as movement centers in the Civil Rights Movement. Second, in relation with the surge of black nationalism at Brandeis, I ask the presenter why Brandeis separatist black student demands of race-based campus reforms gained so much support from white students and faculty at the university. Third, after providing my observation about interpretations of Americanism and social justice among Jews and African Americans, I ask the presenter about her opinions regarding what Americanism and social justice meant to Jews in general and southern Jews in particular during the Civil Rights and the Black Power eras. Fourth, by pointing out the fact that there is an alteration of wording to describe Brandeis students between Section II and Section III, I ask why Jewish Brandeis students seemed to prefer emphasizing their "whiteness" to their "Jewishness" in the Black Power era. In relation to the question, I also ask the presenter to give some background information about the nature and character of the primary source, *The Justice*, on which she heavily relies. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Kita for giving us such an informative presentation today. I hope my comments will serve as a boost for further discussion in this session.

### Notes

1. Joy Ann Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower: Black Colleges and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 1-3.
2. See for example, Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizations of Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).
3. Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 3.
4. Joy Ann Williamson, "Black Colleges and Civil Rights: Organizing and Mobilizing in Jackson, Mississippi," *Higher Education and the Civil Rights Movement: White Supremacy, Black Southerners, and College Campuses*, ed. Peter Wallenstein (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 121.

5. Ibid., 118-121.
6. Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 133-134.
7. Clayborne Carson, "Black-Jewish Universalism in the Era of Identity Politics," *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, eds. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 181-182.
8. Useful information on African Americans interpretation regarding Americanism is given by, Mia Bay, "See Your Declaration Americans!!!: Abolitionism, Americanism, and the Revolutionary Tradition in free Black Politics," *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, eds. Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 25-52.
9. See, for example, Cheryl Greenberg, "The Southern Jewish Community and the Struggle for Civil Rights," *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict*, eds. V. P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold M. Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 123-164.
10. V. P. Franklin, "Introduction," *ibid.*, 11.