Black and Jewish literature course to teach similarities

By Michelle A. Artis
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The first African-American and Jewish literature course in the state will be offered at Ohio State Autumn Quarter.

Two OSU professors, one black and one Jewish, will teach the course. English 575, African-American and Jewish Literature, will be taught by Maurice Shipley, associate professor of black studies, and Steven Fink, associate professor of English.

"About 8 to 10 years ago I had the idea of creating a course paralleling African-American and Jewish-American literature as a way to understand the similarities between the two," Shipley said.

Shipley asked Fink to join him in this effort two years ago, when Fink was the vice chairman of the English Department.

To Shipley, the combination was natural because blacks and Jews share a similar history.

"Black and Jewish people both have undergone the worst kinds of suppression and oppression in the world," Shipley said. "In American slavery over 40 million blacks were murdered and in the Holocaust six million Jews were murdered. Both groups have suffered tremendously and their literature grew out of that suffering."

Rising racial tensions between blacks and Jews, which may have started with the 1989 Crown Heights incident in Brooklyn, N.Y., makes the course timely, Fink said. The Crown Heights incident was sparked when a Jewish cab driver was accused of hitting a black boy with his car. This added tension between blacks and Jews in the Brooklyn neighborhood led to riots.

Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan’s recent controversial remarks about Jews add to the timeliness of the class, Fink said. However, Shipley and Fink stressed that despite the hot topic of racial tension between blacks and Jews, the course focuses on literature — not politics.

"We’re not looking for sensationalism," Shipley said. "This course signals a forthright effort of black and Jewish academics to explore the parallels that exist that make these individual cultures strong and unique."

Although the class is not an attempt to solve the tensions between some blacks and Jews, it is an attempt to create an open dialogue between the two through their similarities in literature, Fink said.

The teaching would be integrated as well, Fink said.

"This course isn’t going to be about a black professor teaching black literature and a Jewish professor teaching Jewish literature," Fink said. "We’ll be teaching both."

Jason Wilson, a black student majoring in exercise science, said he would take the course.

"I think the course will bridge the gap that may exist between blacks and Jews," Wilson said. "I think it will give us the ability to sympathize and empathize with one another."