

THE BRANDEIS HOOT

News

Deis hosts sessions on legacy of slavery

By Kathleen Fischman

Leading intellectuals, artists and activists came together at Brandeis this week to discuss the history and consequences of slavery at the public conference Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacy. Sponsored by the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project, the conference took place on October 15 and 16 in the Sherman Function Hall.

Kraft-Hiatt Professor of Christian Studies and Women's and Gender Studies Bernadette Brooten spearheaded the event, which took over four years to plan.

"It takes a lot of time to bring together people from different areas who are not usually at the same table. We spent a lot of time trying to gather together the best people with knowledge of the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, public policy, law, and literature," said Brooten. "I hope people who attended the conference can now see how things they may have thought were not connected—sexuality, women, religion and slavery—are intertwined."

The conference sessions covered a wide range of topics including sexual assault and exploitation under slavery and Jim Crow, how slavery has shaped our understanding of marriage and friendship, and how to create the conditions for meaningful consent to sexual intimacy. The speakers examined how slave-holding values are embedded in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious texts and the way they continue to influence society today, as well as ways to move beyond stereotypes concerning sexuality and eradicate the lingering effects of slavery.

One of the most poignant speakers was Mende Nazer, an antislavery activist who was formerly enslaved in Sudan. Nazer was captured as a young girl and sold into slavery, where she remained for six years. She escaped in 2000 and was granted asylum in the U.K. Nazer shared her personal experience as an enslaved woman and responded to the history of slavery and religious teachings on it.

"Slavery is in the Talmud, the Koran and the Bible and sometimes people think it is a more benign kind of slavery," said Brooten. "Mende Nazer powerfully challenged this notion. She doesn't think that there is any good kind of slavery."

The event also featured performances by the Roots Uprising Dance Troupe, vocalist and featured soloist of the Boston Pops Gospel Choir Katani, and novelist and poet Florence Ladd.

Debra Fricano '10 was moved by Ladd's performance of her original poem, which discussed slavery from the perspectives of both a slave and a mistress.

"Her poem had a really powerful message," said Fricano. "I would like to sympathize with the enslaved woman, and in the poem the white woman tries to apologize for slavery, but I realized that you can't apologize for it."

Although many people in the U.S. think slavery is a thing of the past, "it still has devastating effects," said Brooten, naming a number of examples. "People who came out of slavery had nothing because they did not get reparations at the time they needed it most. They had no leg up and African American communities have struggled all these years. We also have to recognize the slave-holding values of domination and subordination within marriage and with children. Today, if an African American woman is raped, she is less likely to report the rape and if she does, the jury is less likely to convict the rapist. Harmful racial and sexual stereotypes still exist. These examples just show how the issue of slavery intersects many different things."

She added, "Slavery still exists in our world today. I don't just mean people who work for a low wage, but people who are forced to work for no wages and are not allowed to leave. They are treated violently and are not only beaten but also raped." Although the conference revealed the horrifying effects of slavery, Brooten explained, "We want people to be aware of slavery and support efforts to stop it. We tried to offer a positive vision of what can be done."

Brooten pointed to two of the conference's speakers, Gloria White-Hammond and Melinda Weekes, who are part of My Sister's Keeper, a humanitarian action group which creates schools for girls where they can receive an education and overcome the effects of slavery.

Brooten also feels that holding discussions like the Beyond Slavery conference is a great step in overcoming the repercussions of slavery, and was very satisfied with the outcome of the event.

"I was so excited about the speakers and performers, as well as all the people who attended the conference," she said. "People came from all over to attend the event, from California, New Mexico, and even Jerusalem and Jamaica. Students were able to interact with people from all over and from different walks of life and discuss the issue of slavery."

Many Brandeis students who attended the event were impressed with the conference and were moved by what they heard, "I thought the conference was powerful and addressed the implications of slavery that are often overlooked," said Sarah Woodbury '10.

Brooten is planning to publish a volume containing the longer versions of the excerpts speakers read at the conference in order to make their work accessible to more people.

“We want to make it useful for the whole community so everyone can work to overcome the legacy,” she said. Given the tragic history of slavery, “it is time to start a new narrative.”

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