

Reflection by Brontë Velez '16 on:

Now As Then: We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest
Events focusing creative attention on the struggle for voting rights
September 28 – October 8, 2015
Brandeis University

PRESENTED BY STUDENTS IN THE CAST MINOR, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE
PROGRAM IN PEACEBUILDING AND THE ARTS, AND THE POLITICS DEPARTMENT

The new interdisciplinary minor, CAST (Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation) just finished up with a three-part series entitled, “Now as Then: We Who Believe In Freedom Cannot Rest”, that focused creative attention on the continued struggle for voting rights in the United States. The events celebrated the incredibly arduous ways African-Americans demanded civil rights in the U.S. And yet, how we too, now find ourselves mourning these same rights as the 2013 Supreme Court Shelby County vs. Holder case annulled the very heart of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which permits direct methods to prevent African-Americans from voting through covert disenfranchisement and the absence of federal accountability.

CAST first began the series with a songwriting workshop led by cultural worker, musician, and organizer Jane Wilburn Sapp, where the student participants wrote a song called “Time to Act” that explored the necessity to persevere in making a stand against systematically racist legislation. Beautiful and poignant, their voices rang a clarion call for immediate action.

Dennis Hermida-Gonzalez '17, Student Union Vice President, who participated in the series said, “I want to say that these events were so important. I felt empowered in ways I had never felt empowered. The song writing workshop with Jane Sapp, was and is so special to me because I was able to use my voice to show my frustration, but I wasn't harming others. Before this I had never been exposed to this form of nonviolent protest.”

Inspired by the moral courage and the strategic clarity of the African-American leaders and communities in the South in the early 60's, our second event oriented participants around the stories and songs of those who risked, and in some cases, lost their lives fighting for freedom. Professor Dan Kryder of the Politics department provided context to the complex and calculated methods used to oppress African-American's civil rights. Kryder showed the participants copies of the actual forms that were used to thwart people's attempt to register, and helped those present to understand the web of interlocking relationships that reinforced and upheld white supremacy in the 60's. Jane Sapp, also present, allowed those in the room to experience the power of music – then as well as now – to express people's determination to be free, to be enfranchised to vote, and to be motivated to act.

Dan Kryder, Chair of the Politics department said, “I felt transported through the past inspired for today by Jane Sapp's singing, Brontë Velez's poetry, and by the folks who attended “Songs and Stories of the Struggle for Voting Rights,” especially the now grown up grandson of a slave who told vibrant stories of his historic family.”

And Alex Montgomery, Heller Master's candidate in Public Policy '17, wrote, “At the Songs and Stories of the Struggle for Voting Rights workshop with Jane Sapp, I thoroughly enjoyed an

enriching, inter-generational conversation between faculty, staff, students and community guests about the history, song and the arts have played in the struggle for Black equality and equity. The event - and the series overall - arrives at a poignant time when the voting rights of millions are violently threatened and rapidly disappearing ahead of a monumental U.S. election season in 2016. The CAST Voting Rights series is an acute reminder of the complex history that must continue to be unpacked and passed down to young folk such as ourselves; it is us who are emerging as change agents and occupying spaces where we can keep ablaze the torch of change our elders have carried for decades. My sincerest hope is that series and programs like these will continue to nourish the Brandeis community. Great work done by the CAST team."

Finally, the CAST minor hosted the play *Selma '65*, written by playwright Catherine Filloux. *Selma '65* explores the complex narrative of activist Viola Liuzzo, who was the one white woman killed at the Selma marches and the FBI informant who was with the Klan the night she was killed by them. A one-woman performance, actress Marietta Hedges, played both Viola Liuzzo and the FBI informant, Tommy Rowe. Immediately following the performance, a panel of CAST students responded to the play and asked questions of the playwright and actress, and this conversation then continued into a dinner and generative discussion that utilized questions the play prompted within the viewers as well as its ties to civil rights today.

The entire series asked the Brandeis community at large to consider many questions, including: How do we complicate the possibilities and risks of choosing to take action for justice in a community that is not one's own? Whose stories find precedence and weight over others? How have the same rights that were fought and died for in the 60's resurfaced in the 2013 Supreme Court case? And finally, what can we here at Brandeis do to strengthen voting rights – for African-American people in particular – now, in 2015 and 2016?

We hope to continue to focus intentional, creative facilitation to raise awareness around the oppression of civil liberties, hoping this series sparked a ripple of social transformation so that all may have access to the same freedom.