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Editorial Introduction: We all Write: Reclaiming a Sacred Space

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Abstract

The project of the Seneca Falls Dialogues is founded on hope in the face of continued discrimination and inequities, and the essays in this journal continue to move that agenda forward.

Keywords

race and intersecting feminist futures

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

WE ALL WRITE: RECLAIMING A SACRED SPACE

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It is not the intelligent woman v. the ignorant woman; nor the white woman v. the black, the brown, and the red,—it is not even the cause of woman v. man. Nay, 'tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking the world needs to hear her voice. (121)

Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

Several events for the Seneca Falls Dialogues are held in the Wesleyan Chapel, the site of the Women's Rights Convention of 1848. In 2016 we started to feel the tension between our gratitude for the accomplishments of well-known foremothers such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and our eventual acknowledgement of those left out of the Seneca Falls story. In the Chapel, during a celebratory collective recitation of *The Declaration of Sentiments* some of us stumbled over the line “he has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners” (Stanton), which exposes the prejudices evident in Stanton's later speeches in which she advocated to prioritize ascertaining the vote for white women over black men and depicted immigration as “this incoming tide of ignorance, poverty and vice.” The passage of the 19th amendment did not enfranchise all women, as many women of color fell under Southern state discrimination practices that denied them access to civic voice.¹ Conference organizers recognized the need to

¹ For more on this topic, see Jill Swiencicki, Maria Brandt, Barbara LeSavoy, and Deborah Uman, “Strategic Mythmaking: Extending Feminist History through the Seneca Falls Dialogues,” forthcoming in *Feminist Connections: Rhetorical Strategies from the Suffragists to the Cyberfeminists*. Edited by Katherine Fredlund, Kerri Hauman, and

address these tensions directly, to acknowledge the sins of the past, to address the challenges of the present, and to work towards an inclusive vision of the future. The theme of the 2018 Dialogues, “Race and Intersecting Feminist Futures,” turned our attention to both the heightened racist rhetoric of our current political and cultural moment and the racist practices of many white suffragettes who met on this historic site.

To open the 2018 Dialogues and to set the tone for an inclusive and intersectional weekend, the performance group We All Write staged a reading in the Wesleyan Chapel. Self-described as a “consortium of dope black women thinkers, creators, healers and shapeshifters” (Graham), We All Write was founded by Tokeya C. Graham, Associate Professor of English at Monroe Community College. The group also includes: Reenah Oshun Golden, Founder/Creative Director of the Avenue Blackbox Theatre; marketing professional, Selena Fleming; founder of Roc Bottom poetry group, Lu Highsmith; and Kristen Gentry, Associate Professor of English at SUNY Geneseo. While Kristen was unable to attend the Seneca Falls performance, the other four members rocked the chapel with a multimedia performance featuring a stirring interplay of original prose and poetry and the images and words of African American suffragettes and freedom fighters, including Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Harriet Forten Purvis, Mararetta Forten, Mary Church Terrell, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Daisy Elizabeth Adams, Anna Julia Cooper, Naomi Anderson, Elizabeth Piper Ensley, Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth. Also quoted in the performance were activists, poets and truth tellers, including Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, and Melissa Harris Perry.

Titled “When and Where We Enter: Black Women Writers + Intersectional Arts Activism,” the performance piece offered a conversation between the women on stage and the elders whose names and words they called forth. From the moment the performers stepped on stage, the feeling in the Chapel was electric. As members of the audience, we felt a seismic shift as four powerful women gave voice to those who had been previously excluded from

Jessica Outellette, University of Alabama Press and Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

this space. In an interview following this performance, we asked the members of We All Write to recount their preparation for and experience of this pivotal event at Seneca Falls.

Tokeya described the process of working with individual pieces and weaving them into a new piece that would resonate with the words and work of the foremothers. Each performer researched the lives of the women whose names they called because, as Tokeya explained, “as we’re saying their names with the call and response with the audience, we’re saying their names, but we also know who these people are; they’re not just random names. It’s important,” Tokeya continued, “that we inform ourselves about the lives of these people, so even when we are taking older pieces that we’ve written, and having a fresh look at them, and writing them together with us.” For her quotations, Lu explained, she chose Nikki Giovanni’s “If you don’t understand yourself you don’t understand anybody else” and Audre Lorde’s “When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed / but when we are silent / we are still afraid / So it is better to speak.”(Lorde 31) These words highlight concepts of self-knowledge and voice that resonated with Lu’s work, “I Be,” which she quickly decided to start with for the performance.

Kristen spoke of the pressure of “rising to the occasion and the level your sisters have set for you” and the pressure she puts on herself, but acknowledged that “it’s a good pressure to have.” This sense of community, with each other and with other black women writers is critical to the creative force of We All Write. As Kristen pointed out, she is surrounded by creative writers on her campus, but no other black women. “It means a lot,” she said, “to be able to come into a space with people who not only know what it means to be a writer, but to walk in the world as I do. And that plays a huge factor in what I write, in what we all write and the lives that we live outside of the page.”

Moved by this astonishing and overdue voicing of women who have long been overlooked in the narrative of Seneca Falls, we asked about the experience of performing in the Wesleyan Chapel. Tokeya spoke of the welcoming feeling of the place and her recognition of being “in the presence of something bigger than ourselves.” She spoke of the need to fit the space and recalled the piece she performed about her grandmother who worked as a domestic: “it talks about the sentence of the broom speaking back; and I felt like we were in that space, honoring the names of these women that we had just learned, some of us more

recently, in our education, because the school systems don't really present it for us." Lu described a similar sense of significance that hit when she set foot in the Chapel. "I felt simultaneously humbled and empowered," Lu said. "Thinking of Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells and so many other black suffragettes who worked tirelessly, many with no recognition or acknowledgement, caused me to feel proud to continue with speaking our truth. Then I was humbled to make sure that I am extending and stretching myself to ensure that their labor was not in vain." Lu found the performance a "re-claiming of sorts," in which We All Write changed the narrative by "claiming that space as ours too by speaking through our powerful voices and emanating our presence." Recognizing the responsibility, the honor and the privilege of speaking the words of black suffragettes, Tokeya found that the audience disappeared for her. "I really was onstage with my sisters," she recalled, "and we work so well with each other. It felt like we had done our eldresses some honor."

For Reenah, her experience brought back memories of earlier trips to Seneca Falls, often taking all-girl groups on what she calls "the Day Trip through Women's History." The trip would include a visit to Harriet Tubman's House among other sites, but Reenah spoke of sometimes skipping the chapel because "there is often so much omission of my people." She recalled the challenge of "hearing myself and my people omitted" and how difficult that is, especially when bringing young people who look like you who might walk away from the trip and ask "well, what did I do?" To counter this answer, she would create a scavenger hunt at the Women's Hall of Fame to look for the black and Latina women "in addition to some of the ones that we know will be there" and she encourages these young girls "to take the time to go and look at their faces, their pictures, read about them, and leave knowing that we contributed, because we know what we did, but it's not always archived."

In contrast, Selena had not visited Seneca Falls before the performance. She did some research but wanted to feel the experience in a more organic way. She described the process of walking into the chapel: "I knew it was important for me to be there. And I knew that we were going to release something that had not been previously released before. And if it impacted no one else, it was going to have a profound impact on all of us. And in the end, as we watched people cry, as young women from all different backgrounds, especially those who looked at us, said 'oh my God, thank you,' I knew that we had done our work. And then

many days later, when you could feel whatever the thing was that we were wrapped in, just kind of open up a little bit to give us the space to breathe, I could describe it as the skies opened, the sun shone, and there was a chorus of ancestors saying ‘thank you for the work. Thank you for calling our names. Thank you for giving us space. Thank you for saying the truth.’”

The title of We All Write’s performance alludes to Anna Julia Cooper’s quotation, “only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (Cooper 31). Tokeya explained that they chose Cooper’s words “to lead us and talk about entering, and when and where, and defining it, and really wanting people to understand that one of the dominant narratives about black women’s experiences in the United States is their right to pain, their right to trauma and tragedy, and we standing in opposition to that too; there’s a lot of power and joy.”

The tears shed among the audience bore witness to a transformation of place and story. We could feel the power and energy of the words, images and speakers and knew that We All Write had changed the Wesleyan Chapel and Seneca Falls forever. The dialogues that followed Friday’s performance worked to extend this transformative moment through presentations and conversations that examined the exclusions and intersections of feminism within a wide range of topics. The essays in this volume contribute to that conversation.

The project of the Seneca Falls Dialogues is founded on hope in the face of continued discrimination and inequities, and the essays in this journal continue to move that agenda forward. We open the volume with activist and author KaeLyn Rich’s keynote talk, “We Marched. Now What?!: Positionality, Persistence, and Power as Catalysts for Change,” which she delivered to a packed room on Saturday evening. Rich’s words as spoken then and reproduced in text here inspire us to examine ways the dynamics of institutional power situate us individually and in feminist movements in order to garner the power needed to challenge inequities. “Doing the *: Performing the Radical in Antisexist and Antiracist Work” follows as a bridge to reify the activism that Rich describes in her talk. This student-and-faculty-authored essay weaves together a series of creative feminist manifestos that enact critiques to gender and racial inequalities.

Three essays center the volume, each teasing out themes of gender and racial justice as analyzed across a diverse range of disciplinary frameworks. “#BlackLivesMatter: Intersectionality, Violence, and Socially Transformative Art” interrogates the discourse around the language of oppression using an interdisciplinary examination of art as deployed in the protest movement #BlackLivesMatter. “Media and Social Media Best Practices for Feminist Activist Groups and Organizations” identifies best practices for feminist activist groups and organizations to help begin or improve their media relations efforts. “Entangled Visualizations to Craft Feminist Activism” discusses examples of how to craft feminist activism from dialogue to committed action as means to stop injustice and work toward intersectional justice.

We close the volume with, “Let's Change the Subject: Grounding Social Change in Indigenous History and Philosophy.” This essay circles back to the ways we deploy activism to address inequalities rooted in identity and place. The author urges altering the discourse around social change as a means to create more peaceful activism and forge better allies to indigenous nations and peoples.

A call to action, linking past to present to future, best captures the breadth and scope of the essays in this volume. Taken together, the essays bring us back to Kaelyn Rich’s keynote and the We All Write performance. In describing the hard and sometimes uncomfortable work of feminist activism, Rich reminds us that we must use our positionality to speak for and amplify voices of those who are pushed to the margins. We All Write affirms the significance of positionality in our work, reminding us that as they performed the words of their foremothers, they had to let other women’s stories “sit on top of them;” they “had to wear their skin.” As a call to action, we must look closely at ourselves and each other as we come face-to-face with past racial and gender exclusions that continue to persist today. The essays in this volume affirm that we can do better. We must do better. We will. Inspired by the 2018 Seneca Falls Dialogue theme, “Race and Intersecting Feminist Futures,” join us in this important fight for equality. Quoting Rich, “You are the catalyst. It’s been you the whole time.”

Editors

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