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Editorial Introduction: Women Have Achieved This, I Follow: WHAT IF?

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Editorial Introduction: Women Have Achieved This, I Follow: WHAT IF?

Abstract

In turning to questions of gender, economics and entrepreneurship, the 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues asked participants to explore how various forms of labor and compensation affect individual lives, societal movements, and institutions. One of the sub-themes for the conference was "Arts and Activism," which led to our choice of keynote speaker Brenda Ann Kenneally and inspired Eastman professor of music education, Philip Silvey, to propose a performance of the University of Rochester's women's chorus at the Dialogues. With the full support of the Department of Music at University of Rochester, chaired by Professor Honey Meconi, and the full enthusiasm of the organizing committee, this proposal became a reality and the performance was a highlight of the Dialogues, dramatizing the importance of place and the contributions of women throughout time and cultures.

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

WOMEN HAVE ACHIEVED THIS, I FOLLOW: WHAT IF?

In turning to questions of gender, economics and entrepreneurship, the 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues asked participants to explore how various forms of labor and compensation affect individual lives, societal movements, and institutions. One of the sub-themes for the conference was “Arts and Activism,” which led to our choice of keynote speaker Brenda Ann Kenneally and inspired Eastman professor of music education, Philip Silvey, to propose a performance of the University of Rochester’s women’s chorus at the Dialogues. With the full support of the Department of Music at University of Rochester, chaired by Professor Honey Meconi, and the full enthusiasm of the organizing committee, this proposal became a reality and the performance was a highlight of the Dialogues, dramatizing the importance of place and the contributions of women throughout time and cultures. Held in the Wesleyan Chapel, the site of the first Women’s Rights Convention, the performance, titled “Legacy of Freedom,” featured a chorus of about 65 women including singers from the Eastman School of Music, the University of Rochester, and the greater Rochester community. They performed *a capella*, with occasional additions of African drums and a Nepalese singing bowl. The program featured a wide variety of music, including a South African freedom song, a setting of Lebanese-American poet Kahlil Gibran’s “On Children,” a stunning, wordless tone poem created by the members of the choir, and a stirring rendition of “Suffrage Song,” arranged for this performance by Silvey. Members of the audience and even members of the choir were moved to tears by the beauty of the performance and its resonances, both literal and figurative, in this simple, yet sacred space.

In the spirit of continued dialogues, four members of the organizing committee and the editorial board of this journal, Maria Brandt, Barb LeSavoy, Jill Swiencicki and Deborah Uman, sat down with Silvey and Meconi to discuss the performance and all the work that went into its creation. As interviewers, we were struck by the mindfulness of each decision that led to such a profound performance, and thought a summary

of some of the main ideas from this conversation would serve as an apt introduction to this second rendition of the *Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal*.

An early part of the conversation focused on the challenges women have long faced in the artistic arena, a challenge one can see most visibly when visiting a traditional art museum filled with painting after painting by European men. At the Eastman School of Music, all freshmen female voice majors audition for placement into choirs. Those who are not chosen to join the Eastman Chorale—a mixed gender group—are assigned to sing in the women’s chorus. Some singers may interpret this to mean the ensemble is less selective and therefore of lesser stature. Aware of these feelings, Silvey strove to create a unique identity for the chorus, urging the group to realize its potential for excellence. He also understood the complicated gender dynamics resulting from his position as a male conductor of an all-women’s ensemble. As an example, he spoke of introducing the chorus to a series of songs about the Virgin Mary, one of which they performed at the Seneca Falls concert. He recalled discussing the view of Mary as the redeemer of Eve’s sin and then hearing from one of his graduate students who pointed out the problems associated with pinning all of humanity’s sins on Eve. Rather than shrinking from this conversation, Silvey returned to his singers and changed how he talked about Mary, writing in the program notes, “rather than see these figures as literal in the traditional Biblical sense, the singers wish to think of them both as iconic women whose story conveys the vulnerability in all of humankind and the potential for restoration and redemption.”

While program notes typically feature historical and biographical information, often drawn from the writings of scholars and academics, Silvey chose to feature the ideas of his performers. As Meconi pointed out, it is the rare conductor who sees who sees concerts as learning experiences for the performers beyond the purely musical event. Silvey is one of those rare conductors and he spoke repeatedly about asking himself what the students will get from their choral experience and how it will enrich their lives. In programming for the Seneca Falls performance, Silvey had ideas of lineage and heritage at the forefront of his mind as he thought about the upcoming 100 year anniversary of the New York state women’s right

to vote. Thinking too about the Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, Silvey wanted to make the experience of singing there personal for each member of the chorus. He asked them to think about an aspirational figure, a woman who excelled in the students’ discipline or field and to research the individual, bring in pictures and quotes, and share what they learned. He called this exercise: Women Have Achieved This, I Follow—WHAT IF. When one student asked “what if I want to do something that a woman hasn’t done yet,” he answered, “Women Haven’t Achieved This, I’m First.” Later, he had the chorus members contact their oldest female relative and ask her a series of questions including: what was something you wanted to do that you felt you couldn’t because of a rule or convention; what do you remember most about your mother; and what do you want to be remembered for. With both of these projects, Silvey gave the singers opportunities to consider the limitations women face and the ways in which they transcend those limitations, with the hope that each member would be encouraged and inspired. He had the chorus wear pictures of their chosen women pinned to their concert dresses, and he used the energy and the theme from this exercise to inspire one of the most moving pieces on the program.

The composition “Reverberations” began with four notes linked to the single pitch and the partials created by a Nepalese singing bowl. Silvey introduced the bowl and the tones to the chorus on their first day of rehearsal, giving them the chance to play on the bowl and absorb its resonances. In subsequent rehearsals, Silvey and the chorus members experimented with sound and movement, until he realized they needed something around which to structure the piece. For Silvey, it was the words “legacy” and “remember,” words associated with the interview project, and he encouraged each of the singers to come up with their own words from their interviews and set it to the four pitches. The middle of the piece built on these words in an improvisatory section in which singers chose to sing their word or not, repeat it, keep humming, or stay silent. Silvey talked about the challenges of creating and performing a piece like this. Everyone shared in the collaboration but also in the uncertainty. Meconi pointed out how this collaboration gave the students a chance to see the process of creation, to understand how things go right and wrong,

and to see how a piece evolves. Great works of art, Meconi said, aren't "just there; someone creates them." In this instance, the singers themselves helped create the work. In performance, Silvey stopped conducting, allowing the singers to control the movement of the piece and giving them another rare opportunity—to experience music making that they initiated and created independently.

Because of the design of the Wesleyan Chapel, the singers performed "Reverberations" standing around the perimeter of the church, surrounding the audience. Although not designed for acoustic grandeur, the Chapel provided the context and the soul of the performance. For Silvey, the whole concert was structured around the idea of singing where the women's rights convention occurred. The concert also provided what Meconi called the perfect audience, one steeped in conversations about gender and equality and cognizant of the symbolic resonances of the Chapel. Silvey described his own response to the location, explaining that he was moved during the performance, "because it was the space, and the historical connection, and the idea of the long reach back into history, and what music represents in terms of a spirit." In particular, singing the historical "Suffrage Song" provided harmonies of the era. Singing it in Wesleyan Chapel helped performers and audience members alike feel like we were in that time period, even as the experience allowed us to "transcend the insistency of presence."

While the performance took place in October 2016, at the height of the excitement over the possibility of electing America's first female president, our conversation occurred in January 5, 2017, only days before the presidential inauguration. In those few months, our collective mood shifted dramatically. But as we began to wrap up this conversation our thoughts turned to hope. Swiencicki recalled her emotional response to the performance as feeling like was she "in a place of hope, because we had the election and the potentiality of that in front of us. But we're also in a space of incredible tension around social categories of identity and race, and I think I felt all of that coalesce, so I felt overcome. I want to use the word overcome with emotion about the tragedy of where we were combined with the potential of that promise of working that forward. So I think all of that came together in ways I wasn't fully prepared for in the

performance and the ending piece just pulled at my emotions in ways that reminded me of the traumas around us and all of the sadness that comes with that and all the potential hope that we could be united, that we could come together in unity and voice and I felt like that potentiality really rested on that closing piece.” Similarly, Brandt described the performance as a gift, “that you and all of those women worked to create a piece that was so fluid and so well done, that required so much cooperation and collaboration across lines of difference, between all of you, just because of your ages where you are, maybe backgrounds, all of that in-sync-ness that you had, that the work that went into that, the love, on some level, not for me but for whatever, and to be in that room, so it’s like a vortex, so as much as I felt deeply connected to the past and maybe hopeful for the future, and that moment I was right there, locked into it. And even if it’s an illusion of unity in that moment, that illusion is real.”

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. Two essays open the volume, each highlighting the power of person and place pivotal to upstate New York as an origin site for feminist activism. The first, “Kate Gleason: Introducing a Twentieth-Century Businesswoman to Twenty-First Century Students,” reminds us of Kate Gleason’s innovative accomplishments as a Rochester NY engineer and business entrepreneur. “Disrupting the Lean: Performing a 2016 Declaration of Sentiments,” follows and features students writing with faculty to theorize the making of a 2016 Declaration Sentiments, as framed by the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, and as collaboratively invented and performed in their 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogue roundtable.

Five essays center the volume, each pulling at questions of gender and labor analyzed across diverse and changing contexts. “Add Women and Stir: Female Presidents in Pop Culture, 2012-2016” examines representational shifts in popular portrayals of female presidents following Hillary Clinton’s 2008 primary run. The scrutiny faced by female professionals is quantified in “Appearance Discrimination: Lookism and the Cost to the American Woman,” which offers a review of the research on views of ideal beauty and how those views affect women

in the workforce. Also interested in fashion, “Underrepresented: The Lack of Black Designers Featured in Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue” uses critical race theory as a lens to analyze the absence of Black designers in contemporary fashion magazines. Visual culture is also central in “Constructing Sexuality and Fetishizing Women in American History: Debunking Myths in Popular Culture from Pocahontas to the Cold War,” which integrates examples of student analysis to illustrate the value of visual imagery in teaching history and gender-focused courses. Closing out this section are, “Empowerment through Dialogue: Women’s Experience with Division of Labor as a Leisure Constraint in Family Life,” which explores points of tensions on divisions of labor in family travel; and “The New Normal: WGS Programs and Professionally-Driven Students,” which discusses instructional and institutional implications when including professionally-driven students in WGS Programs at community college. Two essays conclude the volume, both analyzing politics of gender and labor central to our 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues theme, and both linking us to origins of person, place, and feminist activism that is unique to upstate New York. “Intersectionality and Feminist Pedagogy: Lessons from Teaching about Racism and Economic Inequity” utilizes Rochester, NY as a case study to argue that approaching race intersectionally and across disciplines creates a stronger model of feminist pedagogy. “Gender (As Constant) Labor:” A Consciousness Raising Dialogue on Transfeminist Scholarship and Organizing,” coauthored by faculty and students, highlights material effects of representational politics and articulates the need to center a transfeminist critique of normative regimes of power including representation of “women’s” history in the United States.

Memory. Disruption. Presidential. Underrepresented. History. Empowerment. Sustaining. Intersectionality. Transfeminism. These words capture the breadth and scope of essays in volume 2 and bring us back to the 2016 Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues conference. Photojournalist, activist, and 2016 Seneca Falls Dialogues keynote Brenda Ann Kenneally uses her artistic work to explore the how and why of class inequity in America. Her project, *Upstate Girls*, set in Troy, NY, followed seven women for five years as their escape routes out of generational poverty led to further entrapment. Pictured on the journal cover, one of

seven upstate girls, is Kayla and mom before their morning ride to work in Troy NY in 2007. This image and the essays that follow ask us to recognize the large spaces of inequality in which we live and work and to reconcile the gendered and racial dimensions to these inequalities. Written into the goals of The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal is the importance of creatively engaging diverse tools for feminist activism, particularly those that support dialogues across difference. Inspired by Brenda Ann Kenneally's *Upstate Girls*, and drawing on the Lean Out, Gender, Economics and Enterprise theme, *The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal* honors the work of those who came before us as we build an accessible and inclusive publication in our continued pursuit of enlightenment and equality.

Editors

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Barb LeSavoy, PhD

