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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0887

Katie Orenstein

July 8, 2015

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ABSTRACT – Katie Orenstein

Interviewee: Katie Orenstein
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: July 8, 2015
Location: WeWork building, Manhattan, NY
Length: 2 hours 45 minutes

Katie Orenstein is the founder and CEO of the OpEd Project. This interview covers her childhood, as the daughter of a civil rights attorney father from an immigrant Jewish background and a mother whose family can trace its lineage back to William Bradford, author of the Mayflower Compact. She discusses her mother's professional successes and the cultural meanings of those successes in historical context, as well as her relationship with her father, her multi-racial family, and growing up in Oakland and Berkeley California. A significant part of the interview focuses on her experience after graduating from Harvard studying and writing in Haiti, and how that lead eventually to the founding of the OpEd Project. Much of the interview focuses on the work of the OpEd project, its goals, programs, and financial model. Orenstein reflects on her relationship to the feminist movement and what she sees as some of the shortcomings of the ways many feminist organizations are funded. This interview was conducted as part of Rachel F. Seidman's research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement*.

FIELD NOTES – Katie Orenstein

(compiled July 8, 2015)

Interviewee: Katie Orenstein

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: July 8, 2015

Location: WeWork building, Manhattan, NY

THE INTERVIEWEE. Katie Orenstein is the founder and CEO of the OpEd Project

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in a small conference room in the WeWork building, which is a large coworking space in Manhattan. At one point in the interview we were interrupted by people who had reserved the room we were in. There is some background noise from other people going by, etc. Orenstein is passionate about her work, and talks at great length about the goals of the program, etc. There are many stories in here that it seemed she had told before in other settings, but at times she slows down to reflect on how different pieces of her story tie together over time. She mentioned afterward how much she enjoyed the chance to reflect back on her life and career, and that she'd never had a chance to do so at such length.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT: KATIE ORENSTEIN

Interviewee: Katie Orenstein
Interviewer: Rachel Seidman
Interview Date: July 8, 2015
Location: Manhattan, New York
Length: 1 audio file, approximately 02:45:54 minutes

START OF RECORDING

RACHEL SEIDMAN: This is Rachel Seidman and I am here in Manhattan, New York with Katie Orenstein and we are undertaking an oral history for a project called *Speaking Up, Speaking Out, Talking Back: An Oral History of Feminism in the Digital Age*. Katie, I'm just going to ask you to start out helping to situate me with your family and just tell me what you know or what you remember about your grandparents and where they came from and what they did.

KATIE ORENSTEIN: My grandparents on my—[Laughter]. My family is very mixed. My mom is from a long line of blue blood WASPs and my dad is immigrant Jews. I didn't know my dad's parents very well. They died in their early seventies. I was six or seven and they lived in St. Louis. My dad's father ran a factory that he started with his father, who had come over from Russia. My grandfather was born here, but he had siblings who were born in Russia. He had, I think, seven living siblings, and two died. Two had died early. So, he started a factory, it was a hat binding factory called Star Binding. It also made sanitary belts. [Laughter] Sanitary pad belts. My aunt worked in that factory. He started that when he was thirteen with my great grandfather. When he was older, he put his youngest brother through med school and gave loans throughout the

community. Many years later, my aunt showed me things people had given him to thank him, a watch, for the loans that he'd given. My brother and I visited the factory last summer—.

RS: Is it still—

KO: —it's still around. It's in the hands of cousins of--. My aunt's, my dad's cousins I guess. It's huge. It's from another generation. It won't be around forever, but Star Binding is what brought our family out of poverty, so interesting. On my mom's side, my grandmother lived into her nineties, so I knew her well. My grandfather died when I was maybe seven, he was a metallurgist. He worked for Batelle. They are—maybe I am—the thirteenth generation grandchild of William Bradford.

RS: Oh wow.

KO: William Bradford is the author of the Mayflower Compact, the first American government. Technically I could be a Daughter of the American Revolution, if I wanted to join that. My aunt has a family tree that's framed, and it's funny how when you have a famous and important relative, the family tree always goes straight back to that relative. So, and my grandmother went to what I guess would've been business school, but for women it was more like secretarial school. She went to college. Really smart. I want to say she was the secretary to the president at the college. Anyway, my grandmother was smart and educated. She and my grandfather lived in Ohio, which is where my mom and her sisters were born.

RS: What part of Ohio?

KS: Columbus, Ohio. My family roots are Midwest I guess. My mom and my dad met in training for the Peace Corps. My dad heard John F. Kennedy give his speech at

Michigan, where my dad was a law student: “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” So he signed up. My mom was just out of college, and they met in Syracuse, New York. I think they had thirty days of training, and I think in that thirty days they decided to get married.

RS: Wow.

KS: I think the reason is I think they had to get married or they would have been sent to different places. They never said that, but I think that’s the reason. And they both went to Malawi together. My parents spent the first two years in Malawi, where they were the first Peace Corps members to go to that country.

RS: Wow.

KO: It was in the sixties.

RS: Then you were born back here?

KO: Yes. My brother was born in San Francisco and myself in Oakland. My parents had moved back there. My dad worked for the NRLB. My dad’s a labor lawyer, and he worked for the NRLB there and my mom was writing at the time.

RS: What kinds of things did she write?

KO: Well, really early on my mother wrote an article—my mom and my dad had climbed Kilimanjaro together. My mom wrote an essay about it that ran in *The Atlantic*—which is one of the only published things that I had seen by her.

RS: What was her name?

KO: Grace Manning Orenstein. My mom’s history is—I have to reflect on what I would share because it’s inflected with lots of things she didn’t do, but almost did. As opposed to what she did. So it’s hard for me to tell the difference when I think back on it.

I know my mom was writing a book that she didn't publish. That shouldn't go in anything. She'd be devastated by us talking about that [Laughter]. She had a scholarship to a writing program that she didn't go to, she stayed with my dad. There were decisions made before I was born about what my mom would or wouldn't do. I know my mom felt that she missed feminism by a hair. Betty Friedan's book came out when she was in Malawi, already married. She feels as if it was a boat that had just sailed, just moments after she got her footing.

RS: So it sounds like this idea of not only finding, but using your voice has long threads in your life.

KO: Yeah, in lots of different ways. Yeah. Some of them, by example and some of them by warning. You know, I don't feel that my mom missed feminism, actually. So what did she do? When I was really young, my mom, who is very entrepreneurial, she rarely refers to herself with the kinds of words that would glamorize what she did. Like today, my mom would be called a social entrepreneur and maybe she would win some fancy awards for it. I think. But back then—and some of this is the culture, and some of it is maybe my mom—you could also refer to the kinds of things my mom did in sort of, “Oh, isn't this a nice project, does it earn any money?”

Anyway, my mom opened a school in Oakland, a Montessori school. Montessori is not the kind of school that typically opened in Oakland back then, in the early seventies. It was in the basement of a church. She had a partner who is still one of her best friends today who is African-American. It was a very mixed and mostly low-income community. And I went there. I was one of her first, three--. There were three students. I still remember my first friend Lisa. So my mom had this amazing school and it ran for

many years. It was creative and awesome, and they thought about what kind of things they would put in the room to let people learn in outside-the-box ways. It was a lot of fun. Then later, my mom got a degree, an MFCC, it's Marriage Family Counseling, and then later went back and got her PhD and is a psychologist. And she just published a book recently.

So I don't really feel my mom missed feminism, she did all these really exciting things. She also, I'm missing a big one, she founded a non-profit which is called "The Link to Children." It put mental health workers on-site in family care and early child education centers. And the idea was you could pair people--you have to have thousands of hours as an intern to be able to become a psychologist--and could you pair those people who need to get those hours with sites that need those kinds of people and could you maybe put them on the site early enough where you could capture people in stressful situations, in low-income environments, before they drop out. It's such an intelligent pairing, really visionary. You could take two needs, pair them together and have a really smart design. It closed recently, but that was maybe fifteen years. Fourteen, fifteen years. That's kind of thing you could apply for and be called a social entrepreneur, someone with a very innovative approach to a social problem with a long-term vision. I don't know I feel like--. All of those things you couldn't have done if you didn't have a good sense of possibility, of creative possibility in your life. Would my grandmother have been able to do that? It would have been very difficult. I think my mom was pretty profoundly shaped by a new environment or a different environment. Maybe, I don't know, in some ways, not fully feeling it.

RS: How would you describe--. It sounds like she was working most of your childhood—

KO: --All of my life.

RS: Yeah, so how was your dad--. Or how would you describe gender roles in your home growing up?

KO: Well, in some ways I feel like my dad is a throwback to another generation. He never wore a grey flannel suit but I could easily see him in that role [sighs]. My dad had a lot of struggle around this. My mom is an ambitious woman. My mom is a purposeful, ambitious woman with a very active intellect. I mean she wanted to do things beyond just her immediate family. And she has. I'm really not so sure that my father understood the frustrations that my mother felt, not only in the culture, but in their family dynamic. My dad was the primary earner. I watched a lot of this as I grew up. There's power in being a primary earner. If you're in the dominant position, you might not examine how you got there and you might not think about how the culture you're in put you there. I'm not so sure how I'd feel about this being on paper, but one of the things that's happened to me as I've gotten older is I've so wanted to have a deeper understanding with my father about how things are the way they are, how he thinks, and how I think. I don't want to have soft understandings like, this what you think and this is what I think. I want to have a bit more clash. Like, I don't think that, how can you think that? Please fight back against me.

But I feel like there's a lot of assumptions and I see those assumptions rippling out into culture everywhere, and they affect marginalization in every way. They affect dominance and marginalization in every way. Men and women, I see the same kinds of

conversation sometimes playing out about race, which allows me access to the other side of that conversation. I'll say, being a white in this conversation—I don't want to check it on the forms, it feels so limiting—but in this conversation for the purposes of this, being white and watching that conversation play out from the other side gives me access to the assumptions that we have. Enormous assumptions. So, I mean this is such an old school assumption. Like I can't imagine myself being in a relationship where the person that earns the money sees themselves as the head of the household in the same way as they might've a generation ago. In particular, as if you just worked and earned that, as opposed to the culture decided you would have this job, which your wife can't really have. Oh by the way you both made a collective decision that my mom would not take her scholarship for her writing program. All of these decisions add up and not even many years down the line you're--. You have to be much more creative to make a living and have a purpose because your set of choices has been shaped by supporting the predominant--. What's the right word? The primacy of the other person's career. So I think my mom was very creative. I mean, look what she did. She went and started a school with a very creative, entrepreneurial approach, pretty great. But what might she have done if her career choices had been the first investment? They might've been different, and maybe she would make more money. Maybe, maybe not.

I had an argument with my dad years ago, and it came up recently. My mom's sister divorced. My mom has two sisters, one of whom who married a lawyer quite young and helped put him through law school. She's a dental hygienist, they divorced. She got a very unfavorable divorce settlement which she didn't want to contest because she wanted to have continued good relations with her in-laws, if not with him. My aunt, my mom's

other sister, told me that her sister's lawyer had made her sign something saying the lawyer advised her against--. The settlement was so unfavorable that the lawyer didn't advise, so she signed, "I won't sue my lawyer for misrepresenting me." I had an argument with my dad. It was so unfavorable. It was like ten years. I kind of remember what I heard, it was forty thousand dollars for ten years. And I'm like, what the hell? What's she going to do after ten years? She has arthritis, she's a dental hygienist, what is she going to do? That's nothing! And he's a lawyer—it might seem like a lot of money, maybe, at this moment in time, but ten years from now he's going to have access to a much larger future salary and what is she going to do? And my dad felt like, his response was: [imitating father's voice] 'if that's what was decided between the parties it's fair.' I mean there's this blanket assumption that authority is fair.

RS: Mhmm.

KO: I mean that's the first thing. My dad believes that the assumptions and the laws are fair, and that when they're not fair they are challenged. Like, civil rights is a big part of my family's history on my dad's side. Everybody's a civil rights activist, and it's an interracial family in multiple ways. My dad's family, civil rights has been a big part of that, so my dad does acknowledge--. But acknowledging challenges to the law have actually buttressed his belief in authority of the law and that the culture we live in is fair and just largely. My dad would say that he believes that the world is largely—or America, maybe, I don't know—is largely fair and just and meritocracy is huge. He really believes in that. I mean his family lived it. He really lived, *really* lived the American Dream. My grandfather, from poverty and scraps, supported seven siblings and their descendants went to Harvard and Brown. It is the American Dream. So I think

my dad has a lot of faith, whereas I have much less and I'm not sure my mom has the same degree of faith.

That instance with my aunt bugged the crap out of me because I felt like, can't you see how structurally this--it's impossible. This is an impossible situation for a person to come out of on top. The majority of--. Poverty is so heavily feminized. This is why. Can't you just do the math? Play this out ten, twenty years, thirty years. This is an impossible situation for her to come out on top. Is your assumption that she didn't merit that? Is she getting what she deserves, because if you play it back ten years earlier, or twenty years earlier, the decisions were already set in motion. She put him through law school. I don't know exactly where I fall on the whole divorce settlements, like when and where do you decide you were a joint family and split your assets. Maybe people marry later in life. I mean there's all kinds of things. But in this particular case they married young. They were a joint company and they made decisions together.

RS: Right

KO: If you're gonna split up, you should divide the assets as if it was a company, regardless of who made the money. You can no longer say anymore that because she didn't work, the decisions they made together was that she would raise their kid. She also didn't work because the kinds of options available to her were not money-making options at the level that were available to him. Actually, some women, yes, it was already shifting then. But back then, she could not have gone to the schools that I went to, they weren't co-ed yet. The options were so limited. I feel like, it's interesting because that just bugs the crap out of me. How can you not see the structural reasons for that?

RS: There's an element of choice she makes not to fight, and that, from an outsider's perspective, seems based on the sort of assumptions of being nice. You know, that there's a sort of pressure on her and she feels--.

KO: --It's coping. It's a coping mechanism and I've been watching it a lot. It's not a stupid coping mechanism, but particularly if your thinking is limited to your lifetime. That's the problem, most of us are using coping mechanisms that are short term, and by short term I mean our lifetime or our immediate adulthood. I see that happening on a macro-level, quite a lot of choices people make; it's been preoccupying my mind in the last couple of years because I see it in our programs.

Our programs are essentially accidental but very powerful focus groups happening over and over again. While we are doing the work that we're doing, we're simultaneously performing a scientific experiment on thousands of people because we're doing the same game over and over again. If I was doing this as a social scientist at Stanford or whatever, because I've watched a lot of their studies, we're doing a much higher numbers version of this study. You should come see our program, you really should, it would be very pertinent to this. We do a game around expertise and credibility and the goal--. We set twenty people in a room, and we've done this hundreds and hundreds of times, ten thousand people have come through, that's conservative. How many hundreds of times have we played this game, and we keep tweaking it. So over the years it's been tweaked a lot but it's essentially the same game. And the game is, everyone's going to play and the object is to establish the maximum credibility that you possibly can in the shortest amount of time using only true facts in the eyes of people in the room. So you have a challenge, and then everyone does it by filling in a sentence.

“Hello, my name is and I’m an expert in...because....” You watch what people do and in a room of twenty the same set of undermining principles will happen over and over again. Undermining principles, if they were happening outside in the world, you might say it was casual. But when you’re playing with the intention of winning this game, with this very clear definition and objective, you can start to examine, like “did you realize you were doing this and why did you do it?” You start to realize that the ways people undermine themselves are coping mechanisms that are intelligent coping mechanisms.

RS: Can you give us a specific example?

KO: Yes, so the reason I segued to this is that my aunt’s desire to be on good standing is intelligent. I would say misguided, but only because I’m a different generation. It has a logic. She’s thought this out, and she thinks she can benefit or might be hurt more by not playing nice. Playing nice is a coping mechanism. The most typical things people will do? For example, people won’t share their most impressive credential. This is a huge one. If you won a Nobel Prize, you probably wouldn’t say that, even though it would definitively enhance your credibility. I can’t imagine anyone who would have less credibility by mentioning it—why would you not mention it? By the way, it hasn’t happened just once. We’ve had Nobel Prize winners in our room and it’s happened recurrently. I could probably find five different Nobel Prize winners who didn’t mention it in our groups. Everyone, our whole team discusses this. This is not an arbitrary or ad hoc observation. This is repeated. That’s a poignant version, but for example, routinely people won’t mention that they have their PhD from Harvard. So why won’t they do it? Oh, I should say this behavior is limited to underrepresented groups, so women, underrepresented men. It plays out very differently with well-represented white men. I

don't say that with judgment, I say that simply with observation. Why? There is no moral judgment implied by our game, but there is an objective. The comments, the reasons people would say when you ask them "why did you not say that?"-- it's not therapy, it's a quick gut response--over and over again, it's "I don't want to brag, I don't want to be a blow hard." Or, "people might look at me like I'm a bragger or might not like me."

RS: When they are answering the question, are they writing it down or are they listening--.

KO: No, they're--. Some people write. But it's designed--you say it, you have to stand up and say it. Or you might say it seated. It's fascinating. I'm giving you one, there are maybe ten recurrent conversations where there's a coping--. Where there's a reason why people are doing something that undermines them, and there's a reason why. To tease out the reason is really interesting. And more and more, I become aware that the reasons are explained as virtues, which is how we internalize them, which is why we continue to do them. If we didn't understand them as virtues we wouldn't willingly continue to do them. They are intelligent coping mechanisms to the culture. The thing about bragging is, it's a coping mechanism and an accurate reading of the culture that women who present their credentials are disliked for it and sometimes penalized for it. There's a slew--I'm sure you're familiar of the research around that. We're taught that we should be modest. There's a penalty. We have an intelligent understanding and accurate reading of the culture and what we internalize is the virtue of modesty. So what we're not doing is having a conversation about the implications of that, which are you don't have as much credibility as your white male peer. And what if you have critical information that would be better, or that would steer the earth or the planet in a better way? But you

won't, you won't in comparison to that other person, and the way that the culture and the world will understand this is that "this person has better credentials, they're better." They won't say [lowers voice a few octaves] "this person has a culture which supported them sharing their credentials."

What we do in our game, we play that game out. We try and tease out some of those dynamics and then we present a high stakes scenario where the implications would be dramatic of what you did or failed to do. The point is to allow people to do a little rewind in their head, like wow, and to understand that sometimes modesty, we call it "the abusive virtues." Modesty is a virtue, but if you're more concerned with looking modest than playing a role in history where you could benefit people; if you had a piece of knowledge that would be vital to the lives of people in the room and you didn't share it because you wanted to be modest. Modesty has become a vanity, essentially. It's more about how you look than what you've done. So we try and do that.

I've been playing this out in my head. I've been working through this for several years but especially recently because I've been looking at some of the things that just drive me nuts. I think it's the ways in which culture attributes the problems of the culture to the marginalized group. So for example—this is one that has infuriated me—there's been, in the last couple of years, a lot of writing about women and confidence. Sheryl Sandberg, Claire Shipman in *The Atlantic* cover story. It bugs the crap out of me because essentially the message—even though some of these people are writing with greater nuance—the essential message that's being conveyed in the headlines and in popular conversation is that women lack confidence. How can we help them? We need to teach

our girls more confidence. And I think this is stupid, and it's not incorrect, but it's limited in its understanding of what's happening and therefore quite stupid.

What's really happening is--. And you can sort of see this--. I read a study of women in STEM, confidence of women in STEM, and the first question was about confidence and yes they lack confidence and the second question is "what do you lack confidence in?" It was not in their abilities or their competence. They lacked confidence that they would fit in and be received well, which is true. So I thought about it and thought this drives me crazy because we should not be teaching our girls to have more confidence, what we should be teaching them is to have faith in their accurate assessment of the culture which still treats them differently. To validate their accurate assessment of the culture, and we should teach them strategies to deal with that culture and we should teach them that the problem is the culture and not them.

RS: Right.

KO: The idea that we should teach our girls to have more confidence, well, if we sent them out there "have more confidence, just do this" they would--it's a bad strategic response because it's blind to the culture.

RS: Like, 'You go girl! See ya!'

KO: Yes, it's infuriating to me. This is the dialogue I had with my dad around the culture and structure that leads to people feeling—not feeling, but being excluded and being blamed for their exclusion. I feel that when I look at my mom, I feel like these are some of the things she's wrestled with without articulating it in this way. She's been really, I would say, really successful. But for her--. I wonder if she would say this, but I feel a lot of her success in her life is experienced as struggle.

RS: I want to pull you back to that, not to your parents, but maybe the messages you absorbed as a young person. Who were you in high school? Looking back, do you see yourself--? There was civil rights activism in your family and interracial relationships and your parents were Peace Corps members and your mom was working but struggling. Looking back, how do you think those things shaped you as a young--?

KO: I didn't have any sense of social justice awareness when I was a kid.

RS: You did not?

KO: No, the fact that our family--. My family on my dad's side, it's interracial in a couple ways. And they didn't seem remarkable to me. My dad's sister adopted my cousin Danny, who's just a year or two younger than me, and is black. Sharon, my cousin married Cal. She's an older cousin, so her kids, who are biracial, are my age. So those are my cousins. Then, Danny married this woman who actually went to high school with me and had their son Dylan. A good portion of that family is African American or biracial. David, my other older cousin, married a Japanese woman, so their children are Japanese-Jewish. None of this actually seemed very relevant or important to me. I mean I grew up in Berkeley, in Oakland, in a mixed-race school, in a very mixed-race school, all the way through public education. I'm not saying segregation in our school—it was all there, but it didn't seem notable to me. I didn't see patterns. I didn't care. I was like, "That's my cousin, this is my aunt, this is my whatever." It didn't seem like a big deal. It was a bigger deal, maybe, to my St. Louis cousins because they--.

My dad wasn't so overt, but his sister is very activist. She was the first white member of the NAACP in her state. She and her husband—civil rights on every level. They've worked for older people when they were older. My cousin DeeDee is a civil

rights lawyer who works primarily on racial justice. But I didn't have that. I just felt—I didn't really have much of that. I did have a couple of strong things. I know from playing in the sandbox with my next door--my oldest best friend, playing in the sandbox she wanted to be a mommy. And I'm like, "Are you crazy?" I remember this conversation really well. I really remember it. It's like, "If I'm ever that, it'll come after many other things." I feel like I'd have to have gotten a sense of that from watching my parents and my mom. I was a big tomboy. I didn't really associate with even being a girl.

RS: Do you have siblings?

KO: I have an older brother.

RS: Okay.

KO: We were into sports and swimming. Mom says I was bossy. My mom and dad said something recently, and I thought about this too, especially because Sheryl Sandberg has that whole thing 'bossy'—you have leadership skills. My dad made this thing. Somebody asked them what I was like as a--. He went to one of our events. I wasn't there, but somebody reported back that he said that "she was like a hurricane when she was a kid." And I'm like, I know you meant that as a compliment, but a hurricane is a destructive force. Nobody wants a hurricane in their backyard. Have you thought about why that? I know he meant it as a compliment, but it's not a compliment.

I've thought a lot about language. I was definitely--. Even as a kid I was probably opinionated and driven, and I had a lot of ideas. I have, oh, I have a funny thing, which I feel like says a lot about who I was. My mom told me this story, that I learned to read before my brother, who is a year and a half older than me. What she told me, in my memory, was that they suppressed it because they didn't want my brother to be

demoralized. I don't remember this, but it's so resonant with me. It feels like the story of my life, "I can read, goddammit, I can read! [sound of slapping table] Look at me I can read! Mommy look I can read!" How horrible that must have felt. I reflected back on this with my mom, later, probably some years later, and my mom was like "No, we didn't suppress you. We just didn't tell Jeff." Okay, what actually--I don't know what actually happened, but that felt so true. Dammit, it felt true [laughs]. I don't know what happened.

I do feel like that has been some part of my character, which is like somehow I feel like I have to fight for my intelligence. I can read. I'm not stupid. I don't even know why I have to say that but some part of me is defiant and maybe I'm actually absorbing some of my mom's defiance because she has a version of that too. So there's that.

What happened that made me more political is after I—. I went to Harvard. I wasn't political there at all. In fact, when I think back to what I studied there and did, it's very helpful for me, but it's not inflected with any politics that I remember. I wasn't feminist, I wasn't civil rights-y, I wasn't anything like that. I studied art and folklore and swam. But I got--.

RS: And swam—?

KO: I swam competitively. My brother and I did that our entire lives. We were driven little kids. My dad was very much about discipline and ritual. We were up in the morning swimming [snaps fingers]. I have to say a big component of my learning is whatever you believe, apply yourself consistently and preferably early in the morning—which is so funny because I'm really not an early morning person.

But, I got a grant after college or in my senior year of college, to go study folklore in Haiti. I think I did have one thing, and probably my parents' experience sort of

affected me, which is “get out of the United States and see what’s happening somewhere else.” So I went there to study folklore and while I was there, quite quickly, there was an election, the first democratic election, of Aristide, and then a coup.

RS: Right

KO: It...it was as if somebody had injected adrenaline into, not just your body, but your conscience. I had my conscience jolted.

RS: What year was that?

KO: ‘91. End of December ‘90 was the election, and August of ‘91 was the coup. I also met an Italian photojournalist who became my boyfriend for a while and he was very radical. He asked me a set of questions—he was crazy—but he asked me questions constantly that it had never occurred to me to ask. I mean, like, the CIA, to me, was like a lark in movies. The idea that our government may not have liked what another government was doing and might have some involvement in shaping the story of that country was initially preposterous to me. But also not something I set aside as “Oh that’s preposterous let me not examine it.”

The first piece I ever published, I think this is the first piece I ever published--. That year, in ‘91, lots of violent things were happening. And during this period, a hundred thousand Haitians marched across the Brooklyn Bridge and they called *The New York Times* the voice of the State Department. It was widely reported that no one bothered to check if they had a point; it was almost as if *they* were preposterous. I thought, well, this is actually something we could check. Why don’t I do that?

RS: At this point, you’re--

KO: I had come--I don't know where I was. I feel like I was in Haiti, or back in New York or--. Oh, I was back in New York. I must have been [pause]. It's really hard for me to think about, when the hell was this? I was definitely back in New York because Menotti and I must have been living in New York.

RS: That's the same Italian guy—

KO: Yeah. Anyway, I can find out because I published this piece. There was no Internet. I didn't have access to Internet then.

RS: Right.

KO: I bought the *Times* for several weeks and I counted the sources and counted the column inches and they were completely right! Not one hundred percent the voice of the State Department, but it was overwhelming. It was something like this--and I have the articles, so I can actually give you, find exact numbers, but it was something like forty percent of their sources were US diplomats, and another forty were international NGO heads and things like that. Something overwhelming. Twenty percent of the sources were Haitian, and then those were, who were they? They were wealthy French speaking, typically. When they quoted somebody who was majority class, it was like color rather than intellect, trusting that as a narration. I'm like--. It affected not just--. It affected what facts they chose. I mean sometimes the facts were actually very different, like the State Department reported dozens of deaths whereas Aristide's team reported thousands I think. But often times, it was what you chose to notice. It wasn't the difference in the facts, it was which ones you even chose to privilege and put in history and the historical record.

That year, or couple of years, was a jolt, not only to my conscience, my sense of social awareness and justice, but also a jolt to my sense of the world as it is. The world as it's presented is not necessarily—well, it's not even a proxy of the world as it is. It's just one version of the world out of an infinite set of versions. Whereas up until then I hadn't had much reason to question broadly; I mean maybe I had had some grounding in looking in the relationships in my own family about women and men, maybe I had some of that, but I didn't have any real trigger to question the world as it is. The version of the world we're getting. By the way, the version of the world we're getting that is enormously advantageous to me, I mean really advantageous to me.

RS: It's interesting that the questions that you were most interested in were about mythology, which is all about stories that were being told, and you were interested in the meta question even before you connected it to a political version.

KO: Yeah. Yes, but they were abstract, distant, sometimes fictional.

RS: Had you made connections in Haiti with particular people or majority class Haitians? Because I know so many journalists go in, and of course they're interviewing French speaking—.

KO: So I don't speak French. I mean I do, sort of, I passed it in some whatever.

RS: Right.

KO: I speak Creole. I would say I speak good Creole, although I haven't practiced lately, and I'd say I spoke very fluent Creole then. I lived with a Haitian family, that's how I first went there. And it was all random how it happened. I lived with a Haitian family that we would call here poor, but they would have called middle class because

they had a house. And I did that. All told, I lived in Haiti for about three years but in two long stints and some back and forths.

The first one, I was there as a student studying folklore supposedly, but eventually began writing about what was happening on the streets. I lived with a Haitian family. And then I had a Haitian boyfriend, also somebody that would've been called middle class but would maybe be considered poor here maybe. I spent a lot of time in the suburbs of Port-au-Prince and the slums. I don't think--. There were journalists who did that, but I don't think I would have been the typical--. I didn't see a lot of people like me, but there were some. But not a lot. Later, I went back and I lived in a different way, I lived with a group of journalists and I worked for the UN. So it was really different experience then [laughter, faint music in background]. The family I lived with were distrustful of Aristide. And it's funny because at that time I had a huge crush on him. The people that I learned from were not the family that I lived with. I don't know.

RS: Okay, so you write that article. Were you in graduate school at that time? When did you? [Background voices]

KO: No, that was before graduate school. Let's see what happened. I went to graduate school because I think at the time I had done--. So let's see. I organized a photo--. I worked for a tiny Latin American affairs journal in between coming back from Haiti—it was NACLA's Report on the Americas—which is where I published that piece. Tiny. That piece circulated, and some other pieces I did circulated. I took a delegation of journalists and people down in Haiti during the military regime era to sort of report and study. I went and spoke at different places. I went to the White House with Jonathan Demme, and I spoke at the National Press Club, stuff that today I realize was part of the

machinery of getting information out, but at the time it was like “Wow, I better learn what I’m talking about.” I felt like it was only a matter of time before people realized that my background is—[Laughter] completely-- So that’s why I went to grad school. I went there to figure out, I better read some of this history and politics I didn’t get as a folklore student.

RS: What was your degree in, the graduate degree?

KO: Columbia School of International Affairs, and I did International Media, I guess is what they would call it. During this time, around this time, I organized a photo show of photojournalists. First I did one that looked at different parts of Latin America. The Panama Deception had come out; I organized a showing of the movie. I started doing--How could we get a different set of ideas out? And then I organized an exhibit of photographs of Haiti. It was fantastic because the photojournalists who went down there were amazing. It traveled around, a lot of different places took it. [Pause] I don’t know, can’t remember the train of thought, but it was a period of time where I was thinking a lot about what do people think is happening? Who’s telling this story?

RS: And starting to develop a role for yourself in intervening in that.

KO: Yeah, intervening. I was really raw. A lot of the ideas I had, I was fast to have a new idea about the-- One of the photographs, this guy Les Stone had a photograph of a Haitian kid in the slum holding up a Bart Simpson doll and that photograph got in the exhibit. The exhibit got a little write up in *Harpers*, and *Harpers* used that photograph. And someone said, maybe a Haitian friend said, “It’s just a kid holding up a doll.” The whole irony, the reason that *Harpers* chose it for us is because “oh, it’s a kid with Bart Simpson.” Oh, the connection. And they’re like, that’s not what

happened in that Haitian kid's life. He's just a kid with a doll. It doesn't have that irony or meaning. So I really remember just thinking about--constantly, constantly feeling like "Ah! foiled again. [Slap sound, Laughter] Stupid again! Blind again!" But it was a good feeling, it was a very alive feeling, of feeling like [pause] there was not very much stale thinking going on for me. Even if there was a lot of embarrassment in my thinking processes.

RS: Right, right.

KO: Like I hadn't created--. George Lakoff and a lot of people write about how we store information, and I think about this a lot because we're trying to change people's minds about things. We tend to remember the information that agrees with our existing superstructures and we tend to forget the information that doesn't, that conflicts with our preexisting beliefs or structural, structures of knowledge. At that time, whatever existing structure I had was not so aggressive and it was really--. I just feel like my whole internal thought landscape was subject to reconfiguration at that time.

RS: So how do we get from there to The OpEd Project?

KO: Could I fast forward?

RS: Yeah.

KO: I could just say a lot of things happened between. Some of them really important to me, but briefly: After working for the UN, I worked for a group of lawyers. And our job was to track down--. My job, really my minion job, was to interview victims and witnesses in horrible cases of rape, arson, massacre, torture.

RS: Just in Haiti, or around?

KO: In Haiti, and then after that I came and located some of them who had--. Some of the perpetrators had fled to the United States so I went and did interviews with them. These things also were an important part of shaping my thought process around this, and then I had kind of a meltdown [laughs].

RS: Because of the trauma of the--?

KO: I don't know. In retrospect it is kind of easy to say, it was not just the trauma of what other people were going through, it was like, "I'm so useless here, have I done anything?" I mean just deep depression. It affected in my personal—. I had a personal--. I had a relationship that crumbled during this time, so I was heartbroken and useless and depressed and I wrote a book about a fairytale. You think you're doing things that don't fit together, but sometimes afterwards you're like "Ha! My life didn't want to tell me that it had a—." You're oblivious about how the choices in your life were maybe not so random.

RS: Right. So for the Little Red Riding Hood book, you look back and see connections--.

KO: I do and it's the same stuff. The things that I'm doing now are very similar to the first article that I wrote. People think "Oh, you're working in politics and bloody torture, death, hell and Haiti, what does that have to do with fairytales or women and media?" And I'm like, "Well, actually, my book is a look at how the same story was told differently and not for random reasons of entertainment, but for political, philosophical, and moral reasons that reflect the era and the kinds of messages we want to spread through the culture across five hundred years. The OpEd Project is based on the same belief that my very first article was about, which is the sources: Who tells the story will

shape the story. It's not simply whether the fact is true or false. It's which facts do you choose to represent?

I say this a lot in talks, lately, I've said it more and more, which is somehow we don't have a history, we have an infinite ocean of histories, of facts and events and people and interpretations and somehow, through that ocean, a very small number of us pick up an infinitesimally thin thread through that ocean that we call history on behalf of all of us. But we live in an infinite ocean and it's not--. True and false is only a small part of the equation. It's how do you choose which things out of that ocean to privilege. And whoever is telling the story is choosing. I think that first piece, looking at Haiti and that whole awareness there is really very much the same thing that we're talking about now, which is when we're looking at—initially women, but we obviously consider this project about all underrepresented voices. If you're not telling the story, who's telling it for you? Which facts are they picking? They won't pick yours, they won't pick the ones you're going to pick. Which events, which interpretations? If you're somebody who believes in traditional objectivity, I'd say that's the word you give to privilege the status quo, the status quo choices.

RS: Right, the stories that fit. Looking back, do you—there's the interviewing, and then there's the writing of the book, and you have really established yourself as a very young woman as an expert on Haiti by that time. Did you have the same problems that you've identified among the people who come to your program? Were you able to claim that expertise?

KO: Yes and no. So I had a significant advantage, a significant unfair advantage of being a white American. So if I had been a Haitian woman, I might've had a much harder time. I would have had a *much* harder time, period.

RS: You mean establishing yourself, or—.

KO: I mean in the ecosystem of news about Haiti, I had a much more privileged soapbox. I was looking at—something that's inflected what we do in The OpEd Project is trying to give people as close up view at what's at stake, as close as possible. The more distant what's at stake seems, the less your own weird dynamics with yourself can be investigated. So I had a front row seat to life or death issues happening right in front of me, and I could see that I also had a soapbox that many of those people didn't. For me, it was very clear. There is something enormous at stake and I have the ability to say and do things about it that they don't. There's moral clarity here. If I'd like to say, "oh, not me," that's not, that's not an option. The consequences of behaving in that way, of performing that role were extremely undesirable.

I think that's one of the things we actually bring, both strategic and philosophical, into that game on expertise and credibility. At the end of the game we present a high stakes scenario where whatever you would do would have immediate life or death consequences to the people around you. The point of that is not to slap an answer on anything, it's not to urge women or anyone to speak up at any cost, or even to speak up necessarily at all; the purpose of presenting such a scenario is to get people to grapple with what they would do with themselves and their necessarily imperfect knowledge if something really big were at stake. Really, the point of doing that is "could we take ourselves seriously for a moment."

It's funny. Life comes in phases and I have this period where nothing worked. I worked on a series of trials, all of which failed, and had much more poignant consequences for the people in Haiti than for me. But one consequence for me was a complete demoralization. They all failed, except for one, which succeeded many years later in ways that are worth writing about some day.

During that period at some point--. I've taught literacy at various stages of my life and it's also related to the same set of ideas. I had a literacy group that I started teaching and I had a particularly awesome group. So everyone was nineteen to sixty-five [years old]; basically you take a literacy class if you didn't pass high school. And yet everyone in that room has decided it's worth not just learning to read but getting your GED. I had this woman from Ghana, supporting her kids going to college, but couldn't read. She was a hair dresser. I had this nineteen-year-old kid. They all have these crap ass books to read. God, it was awful. They were reading like health insurance forms and I was like god, this is boring and terrible, no wonder nobody wants to read this shit. And I thought, they need a book—they read at a sixth grade level—they need a sixth grade level book that talks about something more meaningful. What book can it be? I'll bring in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, something that my literary friends just cringed at because it's so sentimental and in the age of irony, sentimental is whatever. And I'm like "Whatever, they'll understand the dilemma." So we brought in *Tuesdays With Morrie* and then we read it we went around the room reading it.

I decided I'm going to write a letter to Mitch Albom's agent and get them this book. I should preface this with--this is an aborted story of empowerment because I never actually got the books. I wrote a letter so fast and so strong that I kind of stunned myself.

I'm like, why was that so easy? That is a really compelling letter. I realized because I had sort of forgotten about myself, what I realized was these are awesome people. They deserve a book, they deserve a good book, and no one's giving them a book. A simple frickin' book. I could maybe get them a book and I shouldn't hold back on that. I got out of the way, and I thought that was a really good letter, and if they say yes or no, whatever they'll do they'll do, but I should make sure I make the most compelling case possible. I think about this a lot because the whole trying to understand what's at stake, I think a big part of it is understanding what's at stake for others.

When you're only thinking about what's at stake for you, it's quite paralyzing. But when you think about your literacy group behind you, you really don't have any neuroses entering into your story; you just tell the best story possible. I don't mean fiction, I just mean tell what's happening and you get all the things that you need to get out of the way, you clear the road. So I have that event. That event, I'm only mentioning it now because that letter didn't actually lead to the books. It did become the basis for a thing in our curriculum. We do a high stakes scenario, it's actually a cancer scenario, so we do a really dramatic scenario, but it's designed to do the same thing, which is to try to imagine something that would affect other people around you quite a lot so that you can stop worrying about how you look and start worrying about what you'd accomplish.

RS: That's great. So when did the idea for The OpEd Project emerge from this--?

KO: There was a series of debates starting in 2006 and 2007. Larry Summers had given a speech, famous, infamous. It was a speech about why there are so few women in higher math and science. Could it be, he wondered, something to do with biological aptitude, which pissed a lot of people off. It sparked a lot of parallel debates. One of the

parallel debates it sparked is why there are so few women in the opinion pages. Susan Estrich, who is a nationally syndicated columnist, accused the *LA Times* of sexism and started a very public fight with the then editor. They were running--. Ninety percent of their columns were by men. And then everyone starting weighing in at different outlets. Maureen Dowd said "No, it's not sexism, it's socialization." I remember Anne Applebaum was then the only female columnist at the *Washington Post* and said "Why should I have to write about this? Why is my female status worthy of a column?" There were a lot of people weighing in. And I watched that with a lot of interest.

RS: What were you doing at the time?

KO: I was writing a little bit, freelance. I worked for a non-profit, a think-tank-y kind of non-profit, that did some diversity work. And I also belonged to another non-profit think tank-y thing, the Woods Hole Institute, with whom I did some trainings around op-eds. The reason is I thought, you know, these are big ideas: sexism, biology, socialization, should we care? They're all big ideas. There's also a more simple part of the problem that's more mechanical that no one's talking about that could potentially offer a much easier solution, which is submission ratios. Submission ratios were overwhelmingly male and I knew this from my own editors because I'd written for some of those outlets that were part of the big debate. The submission ratios were enormously weighted to men. By the way, you could find similar data to look at other underrepresented groups. And also I think you could find a lot of intelligent reasons for this. It's not because we're lily-livered. There's a data point, nine out of ten submissions to *The Washington Post* were coming from men. They did a five-month study, and during that period, eighty-eight percent of their bylines were by men. So I just looked at that and

I'm like nine out of ten, eighty-eight percent, we're being fairly represented at least in relationship to our submission ratio. Isn't the obvious solution to get more smart women submitting?

I talk about this a lot because I have to tell the origin story, so this is my canned speech but I always say, "it might be socialization, it might be sexism, it might be biology, it might be the weather, how do we know? You can't win a game if you're not playing, and in this case the game is called history." *The Washington Post* called itself a rough draft of history and submissions were predicting publication more surely than fourth grade predicts fifth grade. That's an excellent leverage place to start. If you could increase submissions, even a little bit in these forums, you could perhaps have a dramatic shift in representation.

And the reason I thought that was worth paying attention to is because I'd been participating in these forums because of what had happened in Haiti. A small number of pieces had catapulted me to somebody who is speaking at universities and on television or at the White House. I knew these were not just doodling forums, this was not the wading pool. These forums were the front door into the market place of ideas in that they are a very good proxy for which individuals and ideas will shape history. Very good proxy. They drive resources, they drive talent, they are highly predictive of which people will rise in influence, will get money, will go on TV, as they were for me. Eventually predicting leadership across all industries, not in the media necessarily, but across academia, politics, business.

If this is where it starts—George Orwell says the end is contained in the beginning— if we just take a tiny version that, if we're looking at inequalities and

everyone was talking about big inequalities, could we just start to--where is the pool where it starts?

There are so many worthy efforts. So many, many worthy efforts to have a more democratic and representative world, in particular for women in leadership. And I think you can play all along that spectrum is important, but I also think it's important to pay attention to where the key inflection points are, both in our lives and in our systems. And also to pay attention to which ones are most leveraged, so this is an extraordinarily leveraged inflection point. These forums. So much has changed in ten years, eight years, seven years since we've been around, 2008? But the debates were happening earlier. Many things have changed and in this regard the only change I would say, when I say these forums are leveraged, I would say, we want to change the name of the package that I'm talking about. We might not call it an op-ed anymore. We kind of need to rebrand our organization. But the observation I made at the time, which I would still make today, is "where are the front door idea forums? Where are the most leveraged forums where an idea enters the ecosystem?" That's where we should be paying keen attention to who has a voice.

RS: And you think that's changing away from op-ed?

KO: The word op-ed; the delivery mechanism for the idea has been shifting for twenty years, yes. I would have never had called this The OpEd Project if I had imagined it was going to become such a—seven years later—I just wouldn't have. I didn't imagine I was going to start an organization, I thought this was a project someone else should do, like an immediate, short little intervention. I really didn't imagine the trigger that we would hit. So The OpEd Project it was. Now, I would say maybe we need to change the

name, not just of our organization, but of the package that we're talking about to make sure people understand.

We're not actually talking about a platform, or any one platform. I am talking about media, but in the larger sense of what media is. Media is--. Media is the connective tissue between all of us. A real definition of medium. Media, medium. It's the delivery mechanism for information, so in our brains we would call it synapses. So if we're talking about ideas, we want to look at where the key leverage inflection points, where you could have a catalytic effect on representation. And we're talking about the delivery mechanism. Like through ideas, and the delivery mechanisms for those ideas. These are the things that are very interesting to me and to anyone that wants to change the flow of ideas to be more representative. And the delivery mechanisms have certainly changed, but not that sound principle; these are the things we should look at.

RS: What are some of the new delivery mechanisms that you are thinking about?

KO: Well, I mean, for one, in twenty years there's been a massive shift to digital. So massive that it's breathtaking to think about what we did. I actually started my career twenty years ago so I have physical clips of things. When did that stop happening? Gradually, and then suddenly [claps], kind of like the way pay phones went away. One day you woke up and you realized, "where did they go?" but you didn't notice them going. I mean that's been such a shift.

A big development from this has been the explosion of outlets and possibilities to have a voice. I was talking to a journalist yesterday. I was communicating with a journalist who writes about this, and we were talking about what's been so bad about the complete erosion of traditional journalism. Many, many difficult things, but what's been

bad for traditional journalism has also presented a big opportunity for us as an organization because I'm not sure we would have had the same relevance if we had been founded ten years earlier. Because today, far more people understand that they can have a voice than ever before. In the past, in order to have a voice you needed to follow a certain path, look like a certain kind of person, and then be anointed. Today, almost anyone can have a public voice. The *Huffington Post* has created—I mean it's not the only but--it was one the first to create comments for voice. Doesn't mean your voice will be any good or that anyone will listen, but you have the ability. You have the ability and that offers shattering possibilities. It doesn't guarantee any of them, but it offers possibilities to shatter the old hierarchies, and we have seen significant shifts.

Many of the things of traditional media are being replicated in new media and new structures, not just what we call media but new structures of information sharing. But also, there have been significant shifts. More women representing online. You saw our data, but if you look at traditional media, college media and opinion—we're looking for inflection points, which is why we're also looking at college. You can see where do-- just in terms of gender, where do women have more voice? Certainly we have more voice in new media or what a lot of people call new media, online media, than we did in traditional and even more in college outlets.

RS: College outlets meaning—?

KO: We tracked college opinion forum online. Young women. So that's an inflection point. Something happens after graduation, maybe.

We're much better represented. I always talk about these things. In the seven years since we've been in existence, first of all, the representation of women in these

critical forums has improved dramatically. We were fifteen percent of voice, shared voice, and we looked at best available data at time of this big debate, so *the New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Washington Post*, and a couple of others. Roughly women had about fifteen percent share of voice. That's a very good proxy for voice not in the media, but on the planet. Those are powerful outlets, they're globally dominant outlets, arguably. People might push back on this, but I'm not talking about what's fair, I'm talking about what's influential.

By 2012, we did a byline report and we were twenty one percent by that time, so that's a six percentage point shift that represents a forty percent improvement for women. And then we're in the midst of a new and much larger data collection project and working with MIT Media Lab. That data is not public yet, so I shouldn't share exact numbers but I can say prototype data indicate another really significant shift upwards. So if we were to say that we've moved about ten percentage points, roughly, more or less, that's an enormous shift in a short amount of time. I always point this out to people because some problems are thousand year problems, or just intractable and we'll never know. Maybe you're working on a problem that will take decades, but some of us are working on problems that are not only solvable but are imminently solvable. And we should take note--. Because sometimes we think all problems need to take forever, or a long time, but no: There are five-minute problems, five-year problems, five-hundred-year problems. We're working at somewhere in the middle. It's a huge shift and you can really see, you can actually see "if this, then that" will result in this shift. You do need to pay close attention because we're contravening the culture. I don't think the shift will happen without an intentional and studied intervention, which is what we're doing. But with that

intervention, you can see. Each year the shifts improve and then eventually you have a solution that is sticky, which we've seen. We've seen sticky demographic shifts and improvements. I always say that because I think it's important and refreshing for the people in our community, many of whom do work on intractable or thousand year problems, to see, hey, you're also part of a community working on a solution that is solvable, you're part of the solution too.

The other thing I point out to people is the shift in technology has enhanced the solution for us. It's easier to track gender than other things that we work on, like race. Color, creed, class, gender, sexuality are all things we're interested in finding a more inclusive conversation around. But it's easiest to track gender. It has been so far, so that's what mostly what we're tracking. I'm just saying that because I see that as a metaphor for the other things. So shift to digital has helped us because it's opened up many more outlets and given many, many more people the sense that they could have a voice. So it's enfranchised a lot of people and the sense of the voice. It's planted an idea, and sometimes the idea seems so small "Oh, I just read a little blog, I could write a blog." Then, all of a sudden you realize you have a good idea and you gain traction.

RS: Can you give a specific example, because it's easy to see-- I at least have examples in my head of someone who gets an op-ed in the *New York Times*—well, you're an example—and then becomes an expert at the White House. Can you give an example of someone who, through your program, has entered a different sort of level?

KO: I could give you so many examples though it's like a flood! Who would I pick? I'll just pick somebody who is in the news a lot today, this woman Chandra Bozelko wrote to me five years ago from prison. She wanted to know-- I wouldn't say

we became pen pals, but we corresponded a bit. I said we would come to the prison but their prison didn't let us. So when she got out, she contacted us again and we gave her a scholarship to attend the program here right upstairs. Maybe that was probably, I want to say, eight months ago. And then she was matched with more than one of our mentors, but one of the mentors we matched her with was a prison writer himself, he'd learned to write in prison. Chandra has been all over. One weekend she was in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times Magazine*, the same weekend.

RS: Can you spell her name?

KO: B-o-z-e-l-k-o, Chandra. She's writing about women in prison right now. She could write about anything, there is a door. That's a door.

We're not actually interested in op-eds, we're interested in the systems, the delivery mechanisms, the psychological, cultural, environmental factors that lead us to take advantage of them. We're interested in what makes a good idea. What are the doors for ideas into better ideas, what are the doors into the ecosystem? We're interested in all of that. So Chandra writing about women in prison is a doorway into writing about marginalized voices anywhere. Or any number of other metaphors--. The metaphor she finds in that will be different from the metaphor I find in that. What she knows is a door, and also what's she's participated in is a door. Writing for the *New York Times* is a door into lots of other things as well. I'm really interested in the doors. That makes me want to sing a Doors song [laughter, singing] "C'mon baby light my fire."

RS: I'm really interested in--. So yesterday I was talking to Emily May from Hollaback.

KO: Yeah.

RS: And there have been interesting parallels in the way you both think and operate and talk that are really interesting to me. One of the things that Emily said--. We were talking about conflict in the feminist movement. There are two things from that I wanna talk to you about. One is--. She and Hollaback have been a target of a lot of negativity.

KO: Yeah.

RS: So I guess I have--. She thought that a lot of that comes from the way, particularly academic women, feminists, women's studies people are trained, which is all about critique. And she was sort of saying "I want more young women to learn how to make stuff." Like, let's stop just critiquing and start building. And both of you are able to critique systems and see structural issues and, you know, sort of use that analytical stuff that one learns in school. But then when you said--. There's the you who was counting, in the newspaper counting sources and measuring inches, and then, I don't know, ten or fifteen years later is looking at the data and sort of saying, okay, we can do something about this and actually building an organization to do it. And Emily's sort of similarly building something.

KO: Yeah, I think she's right with what she's saying about being trained to critique and not only critique but critique each other, is a big part of that. And I wonder what's at the root of that. I think it's much deeper than what you're trained in academia. Would it be too much to say the culture trains certain kinds of people to be in less harmful roles, less potentially interrupting roles? So to do what Emily is doing, or to do what we're doing, is an interruption. To critique it is important but it's less devastating to the system, at least until it prompts action or change. Is it fair to say that? I'm trying to

put this in a thought that I might not agree with, but years ago I was asked to do a talk for the NOW Conference, “Love Your Body” was the talk. And I’m like “okay, I’ll do this talk, but I’ll only do it if you let me say what I want to say, which is “who cares if you love your body. Love your body, hate your body. Go get a job.” Either way, love or hate your body is naval gazing. It’s about how you look, and the culture has trained us to be in a certain role, very self-critical, very much about how we look. And that’s how we take all the energy away from what we do. How does that mechanism work? It’s like in this sort of, I don’t know, in the ecosystem, the political economy of ideas and people somehow we’ve developed this system where--. It’s like how we internalize oppression, by keeping ourselves in these roles.

RS: Do you find—is it a part of your training—okay two questions. Do you find that the women who write, who come out of your training and write op-eds and stuff, do you find you have to warn them about—

KO: Yes.

RS: —backlash?

KO: Yes.

RS: And all of that stuff?

KO: Yeah. We haven’t talked about this yet, but what is it we actually do in our programs? It’s not teaching people to write op-eds at all. That was true seven and a half years ago, that was the intervention. Very quickly we began to move into these curious experiments around credibility, that I mentioned. That began, by the way, not intentionally as an experiment but “how could we get people to quickly state their credentials in a way that an editor would respond to?” We could immediately do a SWOT

analysis. But we had no idea what would happen, and I had no idea what would happen. I say “we” because there was a couple of us in the beginning, but now there’s a lot of us. It’s a vexing, vexing experience for every room we’re in. We began to think about what’s happening. Eventually what we do, while still under the guise of The OpEd Project, we are examining all of the—I want to say by hook or by crook--what are the psychological, environmental, cultural factors that make us feel, that lead us to behave as though we have not just a right, but a responsibility to shape history.

RS: Mhmm.

KO: So what makes us feel like we matter? That’s the fundamental question in our curriculum. It took a long time before we named it but then we realized we better name it because otherwise people will think we’re doing some journalism or writing instruction. There’s a total of six minutes of writing in our seven-hour day. It’s really not about writing; it’s certainly not about writing op-eds. It is about mattering. That’s why we present high stakes scenarios and thought experiments. What if you really mattered? And the implication is, how would we deal with the things we call “considerations.”

Considerations are all of the things that might get in the way. “I don’t have enough time; I might experience backlash; I might get death threats. I might get laughed at. I don’t want to look like I’m bragging.” There’s a thousand-item list, some of them are poignant and scary. One of our teammates has been covering what’s been going on in the South, murders and burnings. She said on the phone the other day, we don’t tell people to go into this lightly. This is not a ‘find yourself,’ though a lot of people say they find themselves. But that’s not our endeavor. This is not a light, dilettante activity. This is like “how will you behave if you realize how much you matter” and also “what could get in

the way?” For us, it’s about trying to prioritize what matters, which is different for every individual, but there is a shared presumption that we matter. Demographically we matter. Our voices actually--. We don’t want to have a history that doesn’t have our voices in it. So that’s our shared presumption, and then everything else is individual. Can we prioritize that and separate it from the noise of the considerations? Which may shape how we act, but the easiest way to know if it’s a consideration or what matters is, would you want it on your tombstone? “Didn’t do what I believed in because I was afraid. Didn’t do what I believed in because I didn’t have enough time.” You know what you don’t want on the tombstone.

A lot of work is to create clarifying opportunities and then to pair the considerations, what we call considerations, with strategies. As I said with the confidence thing, what should we be teaching young women is-- we should validate their accurate, intelligent assessment of the culture, give them strategies, and teach them that the problem is the culture not them. That’s a strategic response to acknowledging a consideration, which is the culture will not treat you fairly. Backlash is a huge one.

Time, almost all of them—one of the important elements is to first validate the considerations because the culture ascribes them to us as weaknesses. You lack confidence, that’s how it’s described to us. “Oh, why don’t our girls have confidence?” Or you’re bad at time management. One of the first things we would do-- “we don’t want to coddle you.” Yes you’re going to get backlash, but let’s not coddle you, let’s not let that stop you.

Our approach is to start with: you will have backlash, it is valid. Your concern is valid. The internet is not the same to women as it is to men. If you put an opinion out

there, as Emily May will tell you, you'll get called a "cunt" and "I want to fuck your head." That sounds like something a strong willed person might ignore, but not the death threat with your address on it. That's not something that men experience anywhere near the volume of. You need to first validate. So how would we strategize around the kind of backlash you're going to get? And we're very practical. Everything from preemptive things that you can write to structural things that you might do, like who you might enlist in your support, who at your institution might have--. I mean everything, a very pragmatic, strategic response. How do you prevent irreparable harm? Or at least how can we try to envision, and try to make sure the consequences of what might happen are the consequences we are willing to bear? And some of these are horrible and violent.

Time is another I like to talk about because it's not laden with such violence. Often times women talk about not having the time, and there's a critique, "if you really care you'd make the time." And nobody sits here and says, I haven't see anyone say this, "First, let me validate what are your experiences because in fact women have less time than men. On many levels." First, in self-described egalitarian households, women do more childcare and housework than men. Being married saves a man housework; being married adds seven hours a week to a woman's work. Second, you have the beauty shift, which Naomi Wolf writes about. If you ignore it, there are consequences. Political and economic for you, so ignore that at your peril. Third, you have the representation shift. If you are successful as a woman or person of color, you're going to be asked to speak on panels or represent your race or color, even if you write about something completely different. Even if you're a scientist, you'll be asked to talk about women in science. And you can ignore that at your peril or to the detriment of those you represent. If you ignore

it, there are consequences, possibly for your career as well. Finally, you have the amount of time you have to spend just validating your own right to have an opinion. Rebecca Solnit writes about that and I thought she was really persuasive. How much time do you actually have to, Like, 'like I can read, dammit, yes I can read!' You have multiple shifts. You do, as a woman, have less time. First validate that. Time is a legitimate consideration.

The real question is what are we going to do about it. Because that's fine if it's the beginning of the conversation, but not so great for us if it's the end of the conversation, which is where many of us leave it because we don't have a chance to talk about the whole conversation, which is what do you want on your tombstone? Didn't do what you cared about because you didn't have enough time? Everyone will answer that question differently. I think the point of the conversation process is not to suggest judgment on any use of time, but to merely have the conversation at all. We have less time—and also to suggest that if our voices aren't part of the narrative, the circumstances that make us much more time pressured may never change.

We try and validate backlash. Yes, you experience more backlash. What strategies might we apply? Yes, you might have less time, what strategies might we apply? What awareness-es? Yes, you're going to be saddled by the culture with the so-called weaknesses that are actually the weaknesses of the culture. "Oh you lack confidence." So could we take a moment to go through, yes you're going to be ridiculed, probably, because the cost of saying anything out of the ordinary for somebody who's not well-represented is potential ridicule. So could we be real about those things, and what strategies can we help each other with? I think that's our conversation.

One thing happened this last week. This conversation comes up quite a lot because backlash is the atmosphere everywhere. One of our fellows wrote a piece and it was in the conversation and it was about the penalty for competence in academia. In academic evaluations, the more competent you are the more likely you are to be disliked. There's a penalty for women. The exact research is in her piece, but it's something like that. If you show the face of a woman, the name of a woman, there's a penalty, whereas men don't have that penalty. So if you really wanted to do accurate evaluations of faculty, she wrote, you should exactly adjust for the penalty. The penalty is x percent, what if you exactly adjust it for the penalty? Fox and Friends picked that up and did a ridicule of it. Three guys and a blond woman—does it matter that she's blond? Is it bad that I noted that?

RS: [Laughter]

KO: And a young guy, and they skewered it. As she's talking about, "If they show your face, the penalty is being disliked" and they show her face and—I think they showed her face or maybe I just looked it up, but I think they showed it. And then he brings up some research. "It's not true at all! If you're a woman instead you're twice as likely to get a job." I'm like, really? Are you going to argue on television that there's no sexism for women in science? Is that the point you want to stand on?

What did the woman weigh in with at the end? The woman weighed in with one point "if you show up with your hair messy and you're a guy you're 'the mad scientist.' but if you show up with your hair messy and you're a woman, you're the crazy woman." Not a bad point, but such a miniscule point in the scheme of what they all said. I had sympathy for the woman, because I'm like she's facing the exact thing that this other

woman is describing in academia which is, you don't want to say anything--. If you argue the point, you will be argumentative. The problem will be ascribed to you. You will be the harpy, you will be the shrew, or the--right? Rather than the person who spoke truth to silliness.

Anyway, we all discussed that on our team call, all of our team from all over dials in every Tuesday and we all discussed it, it was happening at one institution. And we thought about what we could do. What strategies we might employ, everything from the really simple, who can call her? But who's working on discrimination, gender discrimination in academia among our fellowship co-hort. We have two hundred and something odd fellows. There were four across different institutions so we just connected them all. First, hi, now you're connected with some people who can validate what you just experienced and maybe write something about it. I really hope they do, which sometimes happens. Sometimes they'll collectively write something. That's an imperfect, small glimpse at what kind of strategic response we could create within the little systems that we've developed. What kinds of things could we do about it?

RS: Okay, so the trainings have changed over time.

KO: Yeah.

RS: What is your work like? Is there a typical day? Can you tell me about--. Emily was telling me about how young women look at her and say 'I want to do that.' Start a new thing and end up winning awards and starting a movement, kind of thing. She said that they don't understand that ninety-nine point nine percent of is, I think her term was muckety muck, mucking through the muck.

KO: Yeah, very few people want to do what we do.

RS: Yeah. But—

KO: I don't know what she does on a day-to-day basis, but I do know that very few people want to do this. I didn't want to do it.

RS: So how did that happen? I know there were the debates that [Larry] Summers sparked and you got interested in.

KO: I spent seven or eight months going around trying to convince somebody else to do it, which is how I met some of my great friends and allies. I met Lisa Witter, who is a powerful ally in this world. I met Marie Wilson, who's a mentor of mine. I met Shifer Broms. I met Joanne Smith later, much later. But I didn't imagine I would start it. I really imagined someone else--. I talked to Naomi Wolf. Could they do it? There is a persistent lack of awareness of how much influence-- , which surprises me. I just felt like people didn't understand there's media, and then there's this thing, which actually isn't about media or journalism or PR or communications.

I don't really know how to fully express this because sometimes people will say, "well what you do is communications." I'm like, Really? Is that what you think? We are looking at the concentrated pools and systems and delivery mechanisms of power and ideas. We're going to try and turn some knobs to shift where you could do an interruption or intervention to dramatically enhance our democracy. We are not brushing up the writing skills, let alone writing. Even that's shocking to people because everyone thinks—and it's our fault too, because we titled our program, "Write to change the world." But there's nothing writing oriented. This is like--how do we better understand--? Make people understand they matter? Explore what makes a good idea happen and what

prevents it from happening to some demographics more than others. See if you could create, if you look at the environment--.

I'm not answering your question about how this happened, but it does speak to what we do today. Today I would say, based on our last seven years, we're interested--. We live in a universe where good ideas seem to happen to some people more than others. We live in a universe that sends constant negative feedback to the vast majority of citizens of the world. Some of it, we're very conscious of and much of it we're not and quite a lot of it we've internalized as our own fault. What could we do if we could we could create a parallel environment, a bubble environment, where the rest of us, who are underrepresented, are as likely or perhaps more likely to have good ideas that infiltrate and affect society as those who are in power? What could we do? By hook or by crook. That's my motto: by hook or by crook. My goal is to ensure that those of us who are underrepresented will have an opportunity to have as many good ideas that impact the world as the idea dominant class. That's our endeavor. Like a core principal of citizenship and democracy. So that's what I think we're doing. That's what our large programs are all about. Quite a lot of them are based on experimentation and how we think about ourselves and how we behave.

At the time that I went around, I think this was in my mind, but I felt stunned that most of the people I was talking to didn't really think it was such a critical idea. They really didn't. I'm like, "this is really important." I did because I had this personal, profound experience of how I did a few pieces that allowed me to shape policy. And I worked for two Haitian presidents as well, I didn't mention that. I was able to do and say and affect far more people, including myself, and the effect on me was to give me a sense

of purpose, that I could do something purposeful. So I'm really like, this does matter. What does it take to wake people up to that possibility? I don't know I went around for seven or eight months, people gave me great ideas, really no one was that interested in doing it. What happened was, I did an event, in partnership with Woods Hole, the think-tank non-profit, and the *New York Times* wrote a story about it and Katie Couric did a thing on her CBS blog, not blog, her personal video. All of sudden there was a ton of attention, and I began to think. I'd been thinking, "this is a good idea, why doesn't anyone want to do this, someone should do it." I began to shift in thinking to "maybe I should do it, and if I'm going to, I should do it right now because—when would be a better time?"

RS: Right.

KO: So that's what happened.

RS: Where did that first money come from? Or how did it--.

KO: After the *New York Times* story and a few other things around it, people began calling Woods Hole. The first year I did most of the initial things with them. I still wished that they would've done this, but now I see they wouldn't have been an appropriate vehicle at all because the idea and the thinking and the energy and the resourcefulness; I was willing to do things in pursuit of an idea that were much rasher than they would have ever been.

RS: Like what?

KO: I felt like this was a good idea. It could change my life, it could change other people's lives, it could change many peoples' lives, and if we could get to that point then--.

RS: But what was a rash thing that you would do that they wouldn't do?

KO: I didn't think it should be inserted as a side idea. I didn't think it should be about women's leadership, although I find a partner in everyone who believes in that. My portfolio is public intelligence, not women's leadership. My portfolio is public intelligence. I'm looking for the undercapitalized assets—public intelligence and democracy, let me call it that. I'm looking for the undercapitalized assets, of which women, women's brain power is the prize. A fantastic asset. But I'm not interested in helping women. I mean there's nothing wrong with helping women or any human being. But I'm interested in investing in underrepresented brainpower, women's brainpower, for the payoff. This is an intelligent investment. It is not a charity prize or charity for someone who needs help. It's the opposite. That's a big difference. It's the opposite. I don't see women needing help, I see women possibly able to do a huge help for our system and society and democracy. That's a critical thing that's in some ways different from a lot of other groups, including Woods Hole. I don't know if that's rash, but it did allow me to say things differently. Not allow me. I'd say things differently. Very clear.

RS: It mostly strikes me, you mentioned awhile back, that you were in the age of irony. The way you talk is the least ironic; there's no irony whatsoever. It's incredibly idealist, passionate, and a belief that things can change. You know? I wonder if there's something—there's something interesting there. I don't know exactly what it is. Is that why you were the one who had to do it? Or that other people weren't as willing to believe in it as clearly as you do?

KO: I take that as a compliment. I'm not devoid of irony--.

RS: It's meant as a compliment.

KO: Not devoid of it, but it's not my rising sign.

RS: Right.

KO: Maybe, there's also a much more practical thing which is, it's a pain in the ass to start something. You have a different idea, and it could be a bad idea, and it's so easy to shoot down an idea as bad idea. I've many, many bad ideas. You have an idea and people tell you "that'll never work." Quite a lot of people told me "that'll never work." Or, "that's not worth doing." Are you really sure? There's a huge preference for the existing, the existing models. A preference in our heads because we collect information that supports things that exist and believe in and a preference in our pocketbooks because--. Instead of inventing a new organization, let's see if we can find a job in an existing organization. On many levels it's a pain in the ass and much easier to shoot down a new idea, which is why it's so fantastically interesting to me that there are so many entrepreneurs. And so many of them fail. We're in a society that's--. God, there's never been a better moment.

I feel like it happened right as--. I wasn't aware of it until we entered it. It's perfect timing because there's a lot of love of entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship now, so that's good. But it's by and large really hard to start something and impractical and a pain in the ass and you have to be incredibly nimble. In my case—maybe if you have a benefactor you don't—but in my case, you have to figure out how to make money and you have to be really lean and make every dollar go really far. You have to convince other people to do it with you. And then you have to dodge and parry a bunch of mistakes you make, some of them really embarrassing. Some of them financial, some of them political. Some of them just dumb. It's a pain in the ass on every level. That's why what

Emily said, I agree with that. A huge amount of it is plowing through the muck. But trying to be really creative while you do, right?

RS: Do you think that, looking back, you were saying that these conversations were starting in 2006 and then you guys got started--.

KO: 2008.

RS: In 2008, it's the crash is happening. How did that shape your ability to raise money, or--.

KO: [Laughter] [Cough]

RS: Or your decision, why go work for a company when everything's falling apart?

KO: I have totally forgot about this but it's making me remember a couple of things. Have you read Clay Christensen's *An Innovator's Dilemma*?

RS: Parts of it.

KO: I read it only a year or two ago but it made me think about what applied in the beginning because a lean, nimble idea has an advantage in a challenged economy. You think that you have a disadvantage—oh, it's the crash—but actually you have--. Things are crumbling and people need to find alternative solutions and you're offering something that can be quite competitive.

So two things happened as a result, not because of the crash but because of the shift in journalism. One is, we offered—it was less proven then—but we offered a results-oriented solution to people who might have been paying a huge amount for some sort of communication opportunity. By comparison--I know because we rented office space in a larger communication firm in the first couple of years, and what would they

would charge, versus what we would change, is ten or maybe even a hundred times depending on--. So if you needed to do something with less, you would be a very good bet. Particularly if you were aware, as people were becoming aware only a little bit in the beginning, how effective--. It's very effective, what we do. It's not glossing, or polishing or messaging; we don't do any of those things at all. None. Zero. What we do do is, "how can you understand what you believe in better and be more effective, understand the barriers."

And if you were a company, you might have a thought in this new digital era, you can no longer hire a person to be your spokesperson. You actually have to have a method of figuring who your community is, who your users are, who your members are, who your staff are. Maybe you could enhance your message through the voices of your constituents. Less controllable, but you don't have a choice.

In some ways, these are accidental and as long as we were concerned with demographics, not necessarily with all the other things that we were coming in to our doors, but that many people were sending people through our doors, because there was a price advantage, a huge price advantage. Maybe. The other thing is, there are a lot of amazing journalists out of work. That's not just the crash, that's the shifting nature of journalism. There's a competitive price advantage, there's a lot of journalists out of work, and then there's a huge proliferation of outlets that make people think they have the possibility of a voice. So all of these things, it's a moment in time that makes it, makes a lot of opportunities for us.

RS: The journalists who were out of work, they were coming in--.

KO: As mentors, and then later as leaders. So we have a pool. We do three main things: We run programs, trainings, mentoring, and then we run data collection where we count the impact on the landscape. So we have about one hundred and ten mentors right now. That's a volunteer pool of professional journalists who read the drafts of people like Chandra who come through the program. That's an amazing program. It's at capacity right now. We need to do something because we have more matches than we can--. I think this month it was something like three a day. But it doubles the odds of success, really beautiful.

That's one; we also run programs. Most of the programs we run--. We run anything from a day to a multi-year. The programs that are a day-long program, which you should come and see, those are scattered all around, throughout the country. They're designed to get results and plant an idea.

But the biggest thing we do now, in the last couple years, it's become overwhelming. Maybe eighty percent of my efforts are on a collaborative initiative called Public Voices. And it is a program that we do in collaboration with fifteen institutions, universities, and foundations. Each one chooses twenty leaders, so that's where our fellows are. I think we have twelve in operation so that means we have two hundred and forty fellows, and each institution has two or three of our team members who are dedicated to that program. So those are journalists, professional journalists who have a history of commentary. Almost all of them are doing something else while they do this with us, they're writing a book or have a column or maybe teach. Those are our paid staff.

It remains to see what will happen, but some of them even in an earlier era might've had full time work or been paid so much more for their feature stories or commentary, maybe they wouldn't be with us. On the other hand, there's a lot of reasons- I think it's a pretty good pairing. It's great when you can pair two things that need each other. I think a lot of the world of journalism and writing, from the kinds of people who work with us, they want to pair it with making a difference, having a community, and also doing something that's a little less psychotic than writing.

Writing can make you mad. You know what I mean? There's a craziness to it. You're up late at night on some crazy deadline or trying to finish your crazy book. You need to get out of your head. There's that too, but definitely there are some journalists who, I mean god, it's like a crazy thing that's happened. The implosion. I was talking to a journalist and we were going back and forth. I'm so focused on what we're doing and the possibilities that I don't spend a lot of time analyzing what's happening in journalism. Or maybe we should have another word for it. Mainly what I think is of real concern is how will the deterioration of these models, how will this affect the information that we get? Because information, good information is critical to democracy. I don't know. I spend less time thinking about that because I've been so consumed with the opportunities it's afforded us.

RS: This question doesn't directly flow out of this, but I've been asking different people whether you care about, identify with, reject the term third—and we started taking about this a little before the interview—this notion of the third wave. Do you identify yourself as a feminist, do you?

[Man's voice, interruption]

KO: Are we at the end?

RS: Oh maybe. It's one.

KO: Do you want to do another room, or... [to third person] Can you give us one minute?

Man: We're late for a call.

RS: Hang on.

[voices, discussion over room logistics, tape resumes midsentence at 2:05:46]

KO:--sophisticated level of thought. But this is just my, things that keep me up at night. You know in Haiti, there was a long time where there was oppression in physical, explicit ways. Whips and chains in the most extreme ways. But later, there's different kinds of oppression, still sometimes enforced violently, but more like it's infused the culture so people behave their roles that support the oppression. I feel like a lot of that happens in our culture with gender. We behave the role that supports our oppression. We've internalized oppression as virtue, like modesty. Modesty to the point of vanity and irresponsibility. These are the virtues that come out, like selflessness. "I don't want it to be about me." Humility. These are the virtues of the underrepresented cultures across every culture that we deal with, including women. So we internalize the oppression.

The focus on our bodies and the way we look is another way we internalize, that we willingly embrace. If we're worried about how we look physically, too, if we're heterosexual women, for example, trying to look attractive to men, to the presumed male standard, how much energy does that take, A), and B), who is in charge of our value? We have subjected ourselves to their value. Sexuality, there's something about that too, the preciousness of our sexuality, oh the precious gift. It's not. It's not a little golden purse.

RS: Right.

KO: Or a dowry or something, and does that preciousness serve us? And then we spend all this time--, our world is so severely constrained, naval gazing to the body, to our concerns about our sexuality. It's so inward facing and self-blaming. We've internalized the oppression. I don't necessarily sound like an untrained academic but--.

RS: I was talking to Dana Edell, do you know her?

KO: No.

RS: She runs the SPARK Movement. And she was telling me about--. She does a lot of theater work with young women. In the beginning, a lot of it was giving girls a place to stand up and tell their story. But that she started to feel very uncomfortable with this dynamic, with the role that she and her organization were playing because she was, A), girls were telling traumatized stories on stage and they were not providing any kind of counseling, or anything. Their dad was in the audience and it was a way for them to tell their dad something that they had never said in person, that kind of stuff. One of the other things she became very aware of and uncomfortable with was these theater pieces grew out of conversations and interviews she would do with the girls. One that you were reminding me of was this girl who basically, when they were all sitting around together said "I lost my virginity last night. I don't get what the big deal is. I feel exactly the same as I did before. Why is this such a--? I heard you're supposed to cry and look in the mirror and feel totally different and I just don't get it, it's not that big a deal!" Then, when she enacted her story on stage she said, "I looked in the mirror and I cried" and it was this whole big deal.

KO: She changed her story.

RS: She changed her story. She performed a narrative that fit what she thought was expected of her.

KO: What she had previously pointed out was a really silly, almost preposterous narrative, but it's the narrative you get rewarded for in our culture.

RS: The other thing---what you were talking about actually fits very nicely with the thing I was asking about before, which is how you see yourself. I know that certainly in academia there's a notion of waves, which is very contested—it's not useful, or it is useful, or whatever. I am interested where people place themselves in relationship to the feminist movement.

KO: Can we answer that question, but can I first go back to something you said that I think is so intriguing. That woman changed her narrative, or rather performed the dominant narrative even though she has her own sub-narrative. And I think one of the big shifts in this work for us over time is we set out to change the historical narrative. Like change the demographics of voice. That's what we track and measure. At least as much as if not more important that this has become about for us is to change our own narratives, to interrupt our own narratives, in particular one really obvious one is to change the narrative that we don't matter to one of agency and mattering, but also to change destructive narratives that serve only the purpose of exclusion or oppression or limitation, which maybe that one is like.

Maybe how we would deal with a case of a trauma in the room, for example, is not to not acknowledge it, but to give the drama of it no oxygen. It's very common that someone would bring up an incident of trauma or rape or incest or abuse. In our rooms, it's really clear how to address it. Someone would say, I'm an expert at sexual assault

because when I was ten, I was assaulted by la la la. The whole room is “ah” and our job as a facilitator is to allow that person to speak until they pause but then no further. When they pause, you say “thank you for sharing that, I’m so sorry to hear that. Nobody should ever have to experience that, and that’s why it’s so good that you’re here, to use your experience to talk about it in a way that would help others.” Something along that line. We’re not therapists, and also the whole room breathes a sigh of relief because frankly the other nineteen people in the room didn’t come there for therapy into that person’s background. They hate themselves for saying in their mind “I hope this isn’t going to be that.” They’re all like “oh my gosh,” and there’s such appreciation.

I realize there is a real desire to change our own self-narrative, but each of us also has them, so I think what you just said is so important. While we’re trying to change a historical narrative, that comes I think hand-in-hand with trying to change our own self-narrative about ourselves.

RS: With that young woman who told that story about virginity, you want her to be able to hold onto the real one, what she actually experienced.

KO: But we wouldn’t give it the oxygen either way, really. We would focus on what are you going to do with your knowledge and experience, how are we going to use it to advance others, to serve the--. That woman, that girl, would have to come to terms on her own which narrative, but we wouldn’t reward her for the dominant narrative or the sub. We would neither reward nor penalize, we would simply move forward into “what are you going to do with that.” By depriving it of that reward or punishment, whichever way you want to say it, but really by depriving the--. It works. People began to think “what am I going to do with my one wild precious life?” That’s Mary Oliver, I always

quote her. When you start to think that, you come to your own conclusions about which narrative. By the way, there is really no true narrative. Just like what I said about history, we all have to decide that for ourselves, which facts are we going to decide to privilege or remember. One of my whole narrative, “I can read, I can read,” and actually my mom’s like “that’s not what happened.” Really? Really?

RS: Let’s go back. If we say, okay, something happened in the 1990s and we’re gonna come up with a third wave, if only for--.

KO: I don’t really identify with any of those. I never have. I didn’t study feminism, I didn’t study women studies. I was a tomboy. I studied folklore. I did sports. I did art. I saw myself as--. Obviously I was a beneficiary of all these things, but I didn’t really see myself in them or have much knowledge of them. I didn’t have much formal training, none of that. If you asked me, yes or no, I would absolutely say yes, I’m a feminist like I’d say, yes, I’m also a humanist. Because I think how could you say no? I believe in a world where we all deserve the full range of our humanity.

I didn’t grow up in—and by the way, growing up, in my thirties—I didn’t have that. I wasn’t part of that. I wasn’t in that club. And in fact, it sort of surprises me that a lot of this is the women’s leadership stuff because my book had uncovered that, for sure. That book is a look at stories about women across five centuries and continents. It surprised me that it was read as a feminist book. Of course it is, but only because I’m a female and it’s a book about a female character and I believe--. Not because I planned it that way, but just because those are the things I believe. I don’t know. I believe in the most empowering versions of ourselves are the ones we should--. I’m not sure if that’s how I’d summarize my philosophy, but it opened that door. And then this organization,

like I said, I feel like it's part of this context but I wasn't following the step one, step two, of how to be feminist. Or ever felt like I was part of the organized feminism that you're referring to.

RS: It's interesting, the language of the club that you use.

KO: When I was writing my book, I had a friend, a historian, read a chapter and I referred to feminism and she goes, "which feminism do you mean? Do you mean first wave or second wave?" I was like "oh, good question," and I went home immediately to look up what second wave was [laughter]. I'd never heard of it. Literally never heard of it.

RS: So third wave, which I'm sure now you know.

KO: I was wondering if you were going to interview Amy Richards because she's in the neighborhood.

RS: I should. She's not actually on my--.

KO: I'm going on a run with her tomorrow, if you wanted to conveniently interview her you could.

RS: I have a gap on Friday, I think, if Samhita doesn't get back to me I might have Friday morning and actually Friday afternoon if you think she would be interested.

KO: I think she would be.

RS: I guess my question, you brought up the critique of naval gazing and this is often the critique that people make of third wave feminism, that it became about sexuality and the body and all of these things. One of the things that I'm interested in--. I do see women--. When were you born?

KO: September 29, 1968.

RS: So you're two years younger than me. A lot of the women I'm interviewing are sort of between thirty-five and forty-five. I see a lot of, "you, them, us." I'm interested in, was it the crash, was it the political, was it 9/11, was it--? There seems to me more movement building, or saying "here's a five minute, ten minute, twenty minute, fifty year problem that we can really try to fix." This kind of entrepreneurial spirit. It feels somewhat different to me.

KO: Than?

RS: Than if I looked back at the conversations happening in the 1990s. I'm not sure, I'm not ready to say yes this is a new time, but I'm interested what are the issues that women are identifying with now as the things that need to change? Are we seeing, like Emily was saying, our second wave forbearers did a lot of policy and law changing that was absolutely necessary. Now we need to do more culture change, hearts and minds change. That's different. But you were also of saying we need to change the hearts and minds of--.

KO: Yeah, but I believe that we do that in a framework of concrete outcomes. I am sentimental, I'm not that ironic. I'm sentimental, but not that touchy feely about it. Let's get down to business. The whole approach, everything, even what I just said about how we deal with trauma. Everything. How we deal with trauma, how we deal with opposition, how we deal with difference is always eyes on the prize, the outcome. If somebody's going to entertain a conversation about any of these emotional things, we are going to acknowledge the conversation but in the framework of "these are the outcomes that we all agree are important and if you don't agree they're important then you won't

want to spend your time in this room.” That guides many of the conversations that we have and even the ways we facilitate.

When I say we need to change the demographics of voice and we need to change the narrative our self, when I think about changing the narrative of our self, it’s very much in order to have a bigger voice and bigger influence. And volume matters. It’s funny thinking-- Marie Wilson, who I consider a mentor and friend but was a just distant role model to me when I started this, she says she now focuses on political and legislation. She thinks that’s where-- I want to have more conversation with her about it. But I feel it’s more along the lines of individual power becomes collective power.

You need to have more women in more position of leadership with more money and more voice and then the conversation begins to change and we saw that civil rights. It’s not done, but-- I see this in so many different ways. I used to write about media and television. There’s this conversation that came up in my mind because an editor asked me what I thought about Candace Bushnell, who was the *Sex in the City* author. Are they just trying to have women fuck like men? I’m like this is a preposterous statement. A woman can never fuck like a man because the whole presumption for a man fucking is that it doesn’t matter how he fucks. It just doesn’t matter. He is who he is and he can fuck however the fuck he wants. That’s the distinction. That’s why you can’t actually make that. The point is if you’re actually recognized in the full power of your humanness, the choices you make no longer become so critical.

If you are in power, if you have money, it doesn’t matter if you buy shoes or don’t buy shoes. You are in a position of power to make those choices and that’s something about this. There is power in numbers. Individual. It’s not enough just to have laws. I

would really like to have this debate with Marie and see what she has to tell me about this. But for me, I just feel like the more women, or insert the demographic of your choice, have political and economic value, power, by which I mean are valued by our culture, the more freedom we'll have to do anything and the less our individual choices will be seen as choices for the whole demographic. I don't know if I said that quite the way--. I don't know if that's something that is generational, but people my age were raised in a different bubble. Our universities were co-ed the year I was born, so we had the training, and the investment, many of us—not everyone, but quite a lot of us—had the training and investment to do things and expect things to be done. We have a kind of agency that didn't exist for other eras of women, so why not start? Why not start to build up? Why not start a venture? Run a company and start to build up money and power? Why not? We have the ability to do that, we have the references. We have the references.

RS: Do you--? I don't know I guess I could find this out somewhere. But you said--. I wondering, because I've talked to several of the other people about this, I'm wondering where the money comes from for this. Partly I'm just interested in that, but also it provides an interesting insight into the investment and who's investing in this. Is it people who are interested in women's leadership, like you were saying, is it journalism?

KO: We have an amazing model. Our model is funded by the people we serve. The money comes from us, from all of us. There are strategic investments, it is a business. It is a social justice business model. It is a sustainable social justice model. The initial money, we started to talk about this, after the *New York Times* article, a lot of people called Woods Hole and signed for classes, which they charged three hundred dollars for. There was 38,000 dollars in the door like that—[snaps]—it was very fast. It

went to Woods Hole, not to me. I think I had a teaching fee, at the time I was still thinking that Wood Hole could do it, not me, but I saw there was revenue from this. As we grew, we did it different cities and it became The OpEd Project later that year, or actually a few months later. There was revenue from classes.

I love our model. I love it so much that I want to tell everyone about it as a separate thing from the whole voice to demographics, women. Do you want to build a sustainable social justice model? Not everything can have a model like this, but certainly a lot of things can. So the baseline of our model is we run public programs all across the nation. We charge for them. We charge on a sliding scale, and you can opt to pay for them in words instead of dollars. You do have to pay in words. You either have to write a few paragraphs about why your idea would change the world, or a whole draft op-ed if you want a full scholarship. It means you have to interact with a human being. You can't just check a box and go free. But it means everyone in the room has the option to pay whatever currency is better for them, regardless of means. And it means everyone in the room has skin in the game. No one in the room knows who's who on that level. Every room pays for itself. People who pay in full subsidize people are scholarship-ed. And there's a ratio. It's roughly two and half to one, maybe two to one. Between thirty and forty percent of every room has a scholarship, and if the scholarships are, if the room is high in revenue, our program manager is supposed to look for scholarships. If the room is low in revenue, they have to recruit people to--. Otherwise we don't deserve to exist. If we don't fill a room like that, what are we doing and who are we serving? So it keeps us honest, it keeps almost a hundred percent attendance. We don't have anyone not showing up. It's socially just, and it recognizes the value and market of our ideas.

We're not a charity. We don't treat women or whoever's in the room as a charity. If we thought that women's ideas didn't have a value and we're worth investing in, what would that say about our entire organization and belief set? Here it is: you and your ideas have a value, and we're going to invest in you and it is going to cost this and you can pay in words. I mean it's going to cost words or dollars. It's a beautiful model. That's the just baseline of what we do, and I want it to grow. I want that to be spreading everywhere, and I want other people to--. I share with people all over. A lot of people get funding to run a class, but how do you know people in the class really care or value it? Would they pay for it? Pay in some currency? Would they?

Some of our peer organizations have sought funding first and we did this model because this is what happened, and that's what I saw happening. It's an accident but it's such a happy accident because it forces you to be valuable to the people you serve at the grassroots level first, not to the funder, who you write a nice report to, to please and don't even know if people pay--. Would they pay for it? Would they show up? This is a pandemic problem. This is everywhere in the world of social justice. The client becomes the funder--.

Those programs, because each one costs out, maybe one makes ten percent and another loses but across the board on annual level they're designed to cost out, so they can't support our growth or any other activity. So the next level programs we do are custom programs, that we'll go in and do for any organization that brings us in and we charge for those, we charge on a sliding scale, but there are no free programs. Although we have relationships with funders who we connect with organizations that wouldn't be able to fund it and they can navigate that. Those programs, it's not consulting, it's not we

do anything you want. It's "this is our model, it starts with exploration of knowledge, credibility and expertise."

There's a hell of a lot of presumptions about what is our value on the planet, and then we move onto how do we cross-pollinate? Could we speed the pace of innovation? How do those ideas spread and infiltrate the culture, what are things we know about that? How do we think about what we want to leave behind? It's a progression of ideas. What we want to leave behind has become a big part of what we do, but it's not in that pipeline of paid programs until the very end of our fellowships. It's become a bigger and bigger part of what we do because we're thinking about what we're creating that will last. Those program actually have a margin, they're the only programs that have a margin. To me it's interesting because it's a new crowd, same program, new crowd, same program. It would drive me nuts if it were me but it's not, it's our whole team. People love those. I'd be dead, panting on the ground. Spread out among a team of people, it can be really rewarding because people have a lot of heart connection.

The third level of programs—and all of these lead to the others. So we do no advertising, no marketing, no pitching, no biz dev, not in any traditional way—what we do is we do a really good program open to the public, understanding that one or two people in every room will have some desire to do something more, just organically, if we are worth it. So our goal is to be completely as democratic and promiscuous as possible at the grassroots level and be really worth it. Then that seeds the next level.

The third level of programming we do is the fellowships, and that's a collaboration among many institutions now. Those institutions provide the revenue, or a foundation does, and in some cases I've matched philanthropists with an institution. For

example, Texas Women's University, which is the largest public women's university in the nation, wouldn't be able to do our program if not matched with a philanthropist. Actually there have been three matched with supporting our program there, so those are people who saw me speak and supported a program. We had an interesting discussion about whether they should fund us and I said no, you should fund TWU and TWU can contract us so that they're the client for us, not the other way. The relationship is a triangle where we all are very aware of each other.

I find our model really awesome. I hear people all the time, especially in women's groups, talk about how they need money, they're depleted, they're this, and I'm like that's not us. We have as much money as we need to do the programs that we need. We need to be bigger now, which means we'll need to figure out bigger funding mechanisms. We really do need to be bigger. I mean there's things we need to do if we want to solve the problem on the level that is worth our time on the planet.

RS: So where do you want to go? What do you want to do?

KO: We're working on this right now. We need some bigger funding mechanisms, but they're not like invisible pie-in-the-sky, godlike mechanisms. It's more a question of how can we bring together the interested parties that will benefit from these in various ways, how can we bring them together in some organized structure to allow us to do meaningful work on a scale where we will all be proud? Initially, we were doing shorter things, and now we're doing longer and longer term. We're trying to change the demographics of voice. We've created a program for people using ideas for public impact. An idea accelerator program, essentially, for public impact. We are aiming that accelerator at the most underrepresented, the best and brightest underrepresented voices.

That's not a one-year endeavor. It's not even a three-year endeavor. It's not even a hundred year endeavor. Somehow, to move from this year-to-year, or in some cases multi-year but sporadic, we need to move to a mechanism where it's a ten-year--. This is a ten-year plan. We will all be so proud. You can buy in for three years, and we need fifteen to twenty buy in for three years, and you can renew.

RS: You mean something an institution would sort of subscribe for ?

KO: Maybe more than that. Maybe we want a consortium where they all buy in together, which is what I'm exploring, we're trying to. The big thing for me is I don't have the convening power yet, as an individual or as an organization. We need a network partner, like almost all--. We need to infiltrate a system, work with partners. We're exploring partnerships with prominent networks that could help bring together a meaningful consortium so that we can organize these powerful, individual, or paired, or small group initiatives, into a powerful fleet. And then with that fleet, we can say "what are we going to accomplish that will be worth it, that we're all going to be proud of and cry and scream about in years to come?"

No one wants to play small game. And I think what we've been doing is growing our game and our game skills. And the model we've built--is a model that—it does involves philanthropy. I used to hear people talk about venture philanthropy and I'm like, what does that mean? But our model, for example, where we have them invest in institutions that collaborate with us, or in some strategic investments which really are initial venture investment. Invest in this thing that allow us to do these things. We're not asking you to invest in our sustainability. We have a model that's sustainable, but we are asking for--. Sometimes, we have philanthropic relationships that allow us to boost to

another level. We do have that in our revenue. We have some, more than in previous years but most of it is a sustainable revenue model designed to be sustainable for as long as it has value to the constituents. I love that. I feel like it keeps us honest, it keeps us lean, it keeps us smart, it keeps us responsible in our generosity.

We have to fight for our model. We can't give away stuff as if it has no value. It has value. We have to give it away with consciousness. When we give, we give mindful of the investment we're making and the other thing is that at the very beginning of the revenue model, when I got an Echoing Green fellowship it was 2008 and they did a study. They were looking at men and women who were getting Echoing Green fellowships, and they don't care if you're for profit or non-profit—we have a hybrid model, by the way—I noticed that almost all the for-profits were founded by men and seventy percent of the hybrids were founded by men, but the non-profits were fifty-fifty, which means most of the women were founding non-profits. It occurred to me, this is more a frame of mind than a factual truth, but at the moment that I learned that I thought these are people who will want to change the world and who of them, in twenty years, will be the next Gates Foundation? It will be one of those guys. Who will be the next struggling nonprofit for women, begging for assistance and allowing them to narrate what's important, because money is a big narrator as well as words. Which side of that equation do we want to be on?

Maybe that's a false dichotomy. It's more a feeling, because there's other ways of looking at it, but our revenue model is not either side of that equation, but it is, we want to have a model that's sustainable and empowers us to make decisions about what we'll do with lots and lots of factors but not a model that is based in charity. I don't know if

that would work for everyone, but I feel like that charity might be--. Not every problem is going to have a potential revenue solution. But ours does.

RS: It's interesting. Did you read the FemFuture report, or were you part of that conversation?

KO: Yes, part of that conversation, friends of mine wrote it. I was at one of the initial meetings. By the way, when I said I looked in a room where everyone needed money, I think I was the only one in that room of thirty people who--. They asked what you're doing, one thing you need, everyone was like "need resources, need money." Some people were like, "need self-care." I felt like, wow. At a certain point, can we connect the dots? That's a deep conversation, that is an important conversation. The need for money, it needs to be unpacked, because the implication is that "we're not being given money to do--." Like the recipient of, and we're so angry at the oppressor slash funder. It's not a very empowering model and it doesn't lead us to questioning things in an empowering way. Is what we're doing valuable to others? What are the models? To whom and why? It doesn't lead to--. When you see a room like that, you feel really low at the end.

RS: Well, as I recall,--.

KO: By the way, I don't know if that should go on the historical record, it sounds so critical, but I was so "oooh! Look at our thinking that puts us in that place."

RS: That's why I was trying to remember, as I recall the focus of the report, was "hey you wealthy women with money, you should be funding these organizations."

KO: Oh my god. These are my friends and I don't go there. I just feel it's not pragmatic, first of all. It's not pragmatic. Put yourself in the position of those wealthy

women. Some of them fund our programs, but they fund them because it's an investment in something that's been made a clear, critical case. Or they won't.

At that meeting, somebody said, I don't know who, they said "Our funders don't understand our theory of change." And I looked at her and said, "Maybe you don't understand their theory of change." Then Courtney Martin said, "Maybe what we need is a theory of change exchange." I've always remembered that. Courtney is a bright and pragmatic mind, both visionary and pragmatic. That was a very warm summary of something that creates friction, which is all these people in their bubbles, me too, if we're going to have a relationship with the funders--. If we're going to have a partnership, you'd better understand what's in it for your partner. What's your partner's theory of change? Not that you can't have a conversation. It's not, "Here's my important work, it's your job to put money into it because you have it." That's just not pragmatic. I'm not even sure that's a very moral outlook, maybe you could argue that it is, but it's certainly not pragmatic.

RS: Well, this has been really great.

KO: It's been really nice.

RS: Are there things I should've asked you that I didn't ask you?

KO: No, this has been a pleasure talking about this.

END OF RECORDING

