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## The 1848 Declarations of Sentiments: Usurpations and Incantations

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# THE 1848 DECLARATIONS OF SENTIMENTS: USURPATIONS AND INCANTATIONS

LEAH SHAFER, HOBART AND WILLIAM SMITH COLLEGES



The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. –Declaration of Sentiments

**I**n 2010, my colleague Christine Chin and I made video recordings of participants at the Seneca Falls Dialogues conference reciting the above selection from the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. In the edited work, the phrases are repeated over and over until they begin to sound like an incantation. The participants range from small children to college students to adults and include men and women of a variety of races and sizes. The video is meant to celebrate the radical power of diverse voices speaking as a community and to highlight the stirring language of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. Like the Declaration itself, the editing style of the documentary makes an argument for collaborative action.

The 1848 Declaration of Sentiments is particularly powerful as a call to action. The lines repeated in this video act as a conceptual and rhetorical hinge in the Declaration; they link the introductory section, which lays out the case for equality, to the list of abuses for which the document seeks recompense. In these lines, the framers of the 1848 Declaration reveal to us the careful labor that went into constructing the document by lucidly illustrating that their claims of abuse would be backed up with the submission of facts. The language is carefully controlled and powerfully evocative; by linking their cause to historical

fact, the framers of the document are able to make an unimpeachably persuasive case. Though women have gained the elective franchise, the language in the 1848 Declaration speaks to the twenty-first century audience with undiminished urgency.

The construction and conceptualization of the project are driven by the techniques and style of feminist avant-garde filmmaking, which emphasizes non-hierarchical and collaborative production processes. This style also embraces rough edges, non-narrative structures, and decentering techniques. These production choices resist conventional cinematic style in order to enhance and promote a feminist commitment to offering the world alternatives to the status quo. In this video, the repetition of the document's conceptual hinge is meant to reinforce the document's historical claims by emphasizing the power of repetition to create meaning. The mashup of different voices and recitation participants demonstrates that the message of the 1848 Declaration speaks of a great variety of people to a great variety of people. The mashup style also embraces gaps and fissures in sound and image: these gaps are meant to open space for viewers to imagine themselves speaking the language of the 1848 Declaration and to emphasize the do-it-yourself (DIY) production process of the video. The video is also a celebration of these particular speakers – people who attended the Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference in 2010 – and an invitation to viewers to imagine themselves as part of a similar community.

*Sentiments and Usurpations* is the first of a series of videos that engage the Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference and the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. At the 2014 Conference, a group of William Smith students and I recorded people reciting the entire 1848 Declaration of Sentiments in the Wesleyan Chapel, where it was first presented to the public. In this second iteration of the project, *Declaration of Sentiments 2014*, still images of those reading the Declaration accompany an audio track featuring the voices of the participants. The students and I felt that the still imagery would foreground the language of the Declaration and allow viewers to meditate on the range of speakers participating. This project was screened at the National Women's Rights Historical

Park during Women’s History Month in 2015. A third iteration of the project, Declaration of Sentiments Wesleyan Chapel, uses the audio track from the 2014 project as the background for an avant-garde exploration of the interior of the Wesleyan Chapel. The collage of images is meant to reflect the diversity of voices in the recording and to offer a meditation on the textures of the historically significant location. This iteration of the project was recently accepted as an entry in the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival’s “Iterations as Habitats” exhibition. My current plan is to continue producing iterations of the video at each Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference.



1. “Sentiments and Usurpations.” (Click on image to view video.) < <https://vimeo.com/122440382> >.



2. “Declaration of Sentiments 2014.” (Click on image to view video.) < <https://vimeo.com/122430475> >.



3. "Declaration of Sentiments Wesleyan Chapel." (Click on image to view video.) < <https://vimeo.com/126621782> >.