

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

CATHERINE ROMA

Interviewed by

JOYCE FOLLET

June 19 and 20, 2005

Northampton, Massachusetts

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

© Sophia Smith Collection 2006

Narrator

Catherine Roma was born in Philadelphia January 29, 1948, the youngest of three children of Italian-born parents. Her mother completed high school and, once married, was a community volunteer. Her father graduated from Princeton University and Temple Law School, but when his own father died young, he left legal practice to run the family's barbershops in Philadelphia and other East Coast railroad terminals. Practicing Catholics, Catherine's parents sent her to Germantown Friends School K-12; she remains a Convinced Friend.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Roma earned a BA in music and an MM in Choral Conducting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she became involved in socialist-feminist politics and began organizing a feminist choral group in 1974. Returning to Philadelphia the following year to teach music at Abington Friends School, she organized and conducted Anna Crusis, the first feminist women's choir in the US. In 1983 she undertook the doctorate in musical arts at the University of Cincinnati, where she founded MUSE, the community chorus she continues to lead.

Under Roma's leadership, MUSE is a vital group in what has become a national and international grassroots movement of women's choruses. MUSE is recognized as a model anti-racist community organization and a progressive force in Cincinnati politics. According to the group's mission statement, MUSE is "a women's choir dedicated to musical excellence and social change. In keeping with our belief that diversity is strength, we are feminist women of varied ages, races, and ethnicities with a range of musical abilities, political interests, and life experiences. We are women loving women; we are heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women united in song. We commission and seek out music composed by women, pieces written to enhance the sound of women's voices, and songs that honor the enduring spirit of all peoples. In performing, we strive for a concert experience that entertains, inspires, motivates, heals, and creates a feeling of community with our audience."

Roma currently chairs the music department at Wilmington College. In addition to serving as Artistic Director of MUSE, Roma is founder and director of UMOJA Men's Chorus at Warren Correctional Institution, Minister of Music at St. John's Unitarian Church, and co-founder and director of the Martin Luther King Coalition Chorale. Roma and Dorothy Smith, an archivist, have been partners for nearly 20 years.

Roma is placing her papers and the records of MUSE at the SSC.

Interviewer

Joyce Follet (b.1945) is a public historian, educator, and producer of historical documentary. She earned a Ph.D. in Women's History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is now Coordinator of Collection Development at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Abstract

Roma recounts her childhood in Philadelphia with emphasis on the importance of her Quaker education. The oral history is a detailed example of building community through music as Roma describes her thirty years of experience in directing women's community choruses as intentional sites of practicing anti-racist feminist politics through recruitment of members, decision-making process, musical repertoire and arrangement, performance venue and style, engagement of contemporary social issues, and sustained collaborations with musicians of color, especially Bernice Johnson Reagon.

Restrictions: none.

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Seven 63-minute tapes. Tapes 1-3 not adjusted for white balance. Roma wears glasses day 2 only.

Transcript

Transcribed by TechniType Transcripts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Reviewed and approved by Catherine Roma and Joyce Follet.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Roma, Catherine. Interview by Joyce Follet. Video recording, June 19 and 20, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Catherine Roma interview by Joyce Follet, video recording, June 19, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Roma, Catherine. Interview by Joyce Follet. Transcript of video recording, June 19 and 20, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Catherine Roma, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, June 20, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 34–35.

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted June 19 – 20, 2005, with:

at: CATHERINE ROMA
Smith College
by: JOYCE FOLLET

FOLLET: OK, finally. Here we are. We are up and running.

ROMA: Great.

FOLLET: Joyce Follet with Cathy Roma in Noho — as opposed to Hamp — in Northampton on Sunday, the nineteenth of June. And finally we get to sit and chat for a long time.

ROMA: Yeah, great.

FOLLET: You know what? I'm going to put a pillow under myself first, because I'm sitting kind of low. OK. We're back, up and running.

ROMA: Where to start?

FOLLET: Where to start. I'm so aware that we could talk for so long.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: Well, we've got two days, two chunks.

ROMA: That's fine.

FOLLET: Two chunks of time, and we'll make the most of it. So as we were saying on the phone last night, if today we can take a chunk of time and talk about your childhood and where you grew up and early education, and that may take most of the first tape.

ROMA: OK.

FOLLET: And then get you to Madison and that whole scene and what started happening there, and at least to the beginnings of Anna Crusis, if not well into it. And we'll just see how our fatigue level goes.

ROMA: That's good.

FOLLET: And then we'll move closer to the present tomorrow.

ROMA: All right.

FOLLET: So let's start with your family. You've just been with your family, I know. But as you think back to your earliest memories, what do you associate with your childhood?

ROMA: Well, I was thinking about this as I was walking this morning. I would say the most important thing was that my parents decided to send me to Germantown Friends School, and I just feel ever so grateful. K through 12 I went to Germantown Friends School. That's in Philadelphia. And I loved school. I loved what I learned there. I loved the people there. I loved my teachers. I wanted to be a teacher because I loved how they taught and what I was learning. And of course, I was nurtured musically there. I had a brother, Emilio Roma, and he went to Germantown Friends, and my sister followed, Patricia, and then I followed. So, um, I just thought it was the perfect place to be. And I was conscious of feeling that there.

Now it's a highly competitive, academic atmosphere — very un-Quakerly. And they talk about that. I mean, I think that there's an awareness that, you know, for Quakers, I think that that environment where you nurture the whole child and everything like that, they have mixed feelings perhaps about sort of being so highly competitive, very difficult to get into for kids at four and five. It's a trip. So I was blessed to be there. And I think the negative thing that happened for me there was, because of this academic competition, I was in sort of the middle of my class, and I maybe left with a little bit of an intellectual inferiority complex that I had to face. Or I thought I had it, and I had to undo some of that as I got to Wisconsin and further. And I think it was because of that really competitive atmosphere. So there's always that tug of something so wonderful and yet it's not perfect, as we know with any institution. However, I feel that the great things about it outweighed that particular struggle that I had.

I remember my musical nurturing there, and I had a really important person, Mary Emma Brewer, who was head of music in the upper school. And Alan Clayton also. I took theory. I mean, we were exposed to so much there. So that stands out really a lot, and I can talk more about that. I had a fantastic piano teacher that I started with at age four, and I only started at that age because my sister was taking [lessons], and she didn't really like it that much, so I would sort of sit up at the piano bench and sort of try and read her music. And the piano teacher, Louise Christine Rebe, a very important person, decided to take me on because I was so curious and into it.

So I just took it, and I did sports, and I took violin as well and I did a lot of things, but she always handled what I came with. In other words, if I hadn't practiced that much because of homework or because I was out playing or doing intercollegiate sports, she did something with me to make

it valuable. So we would sight read or we'd go over some particular passage that was hard. So I never felt that I was going to drop it. There was never a question that I would drop it, because she always sort of kept me going, kept me interested, never put me down for not being perfectly practiced and ready for a lesson. And I had a lot of good opportunities with her.

I did actually little assemblies at this public school called Jenks in Chestnut Hill. She had a very good friend that was headmistress there. And I would, I think starting at age fifth or sixth grade, do a half-hour or 40-minute performance. I'd get up in front of all these kids that were from, I guess, maybe third through eighth grade, and I'd stand up and I'd introduce the pieces and I'd play them on the piano. Then I'd get up and talk about the next thing. So I think that was really, really –

FOLLET: This was a solo performance?

ROMA: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: And your piano teacher made this opportunity available?

ROMA: Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: Wow. She saw something in you that young.

ROMA: Yeah. She was pretty great. She was really wonderful. But — now here's the interesting thing. Mary Emma Brewer, who I referred to before, she told me when I got into tenth grade, into upper school, and she sort of saw what was going on, she said, "You need a new music teacher, a new piano teacher. I think that you're not going forward as quickly as you might." And that might be true. I certainly said, "Oh, really?" I thought she — well, I mean, it was her taking me under her wing and saying, You [need to] move into a different direction, or whatever. So she said, "You need to study with a man." OK. That's what she said.

So I went and I did an audition at the Settlement School and also I went and interviewed with Dorothea Persichetti. I just clicked with Dorothea Persichetti. And I don't even remember the man's name — I think Levine or something like that. So she said, "Well, Mrs. Persichetti is as good as a man." Dorothea Persichetti is the wife and wonderful pianist and piano teacher of Vincent Persichetti, who is a pretty famous composer and taught at Julliard. They lived in Philadelphia, and both of the Persichetti kids went to Germantown Friends. So that was the connection there. And I was very nervous in front of Dorothea. She was wonderful. It was great because she'd have me do my scales, and I'd be practicing in this wonderful place. They had a great house in Fairmount Park. And one lesson I was having she called up to Vincent and said, "Vincent, come down here. You have to see this really funny thing." So, [she said to me], "Play those scales." So I played the scales, and I guess he has very short, stubby, Italian fingers like

mine, and she was just in hysterics because our hands looked so much the same. So that was fun.

I did a lot of his work, contemporary — that was sort of my introduction, I think, to a more contemporary repertoire. So that stands out in my youth, both those people, all three of those people: Louise Christine Rebey, Mary Emma Brewer, and Dorothea Persichetti. They taught me so much.

And, you know, I was thinking about this also before, because I'd like to try and write about it — piano was — I'm a very social person. I'm an extrovert and I love being with people and I love sports and I love interactive things and networking. And piano for me as a child was that time where I spent time by myself and I could imagine and play sort of in my mind. And I think I'm trying to make some connections and understand sort of my developing sexuality as well. So I think there's some connection with fantasizing and awakening in fifth and sixth and seventh grades at the keyboard, where I could express myself, my passion, my emotions. The piano was the place where I really think I lived my emotions, which I'd like to tease out a little bit more, and I've just been thinking about that lately.

So, what else stands out?

FOLLET: So the play and the opportunity the piano provided then as a solitary space, right, and you're playing music as an opportunity to explore sexuality — were you playing other people's pieces? Were you composing things of your own? Can you say more about how those things were coming together? And what age was this, would you say?

ROMA: OK. Well, first, I have not composed. I have never just played at the piano or improvised. And I can talk about this more later, because it's sort of my introduction to African American music and that whole oral tradition where I found how uncomfortable I am or have been — I'm getting more and more comfortable — to just let my ear work and listen and not have anything in front of me: a piece of paper or words to a song, anything like that. So I have not composed, arranged. That hasn't been my forte or where I've gone. I don't know if there's anything in me yet to explore there or not. I haven't done it, and I don't feel comfortable really in that realm. So no.

I was I don't know what age, but there were these large books that came out with large notes for musicals. And so I could see the words and either hum or sing and play songs that were — I could create people in my imagination. And the people that I thought about were women. But as a child or as a young person — junior high maybe, before junior high — I would say, Oh, well, I'm Italian and I love everybody. So I didn't have any sort of second notion or thinking I was weird or anything like that. I just had all of this effusiveness and emotion.

And, you know, I was a moody kid, I think, some of the time. So I got this expression out that way. But it was very interior. When I was at the keyboard, that's sort of what I remember. And, of course, I played a lot of

kinds of music, too. I'm amazed, actually. I went through some of my earlier music the other day, and I did so much repertoire. I guess that's not hard to imagine if you start at four. And I did some popular things, but I did a lot of classical things, too. But then I had these little popular books. I don't know whether my piano teacher got them. I think I must have gotten them on my own when a musical came out — *The Sound of Music*, *Pal Joey*, you know, *West Side Story*, things like that that I could actually play. That was pretty great.

FOLLET: Do you remember a particular piece that somehow opened things up for you at that point in time?

ROMA: Yeah, actually I can. Geez. What's the one, "I have often walked down this street before, but the pavement" —

FOLLET: (singing) "Down this street before" —

ROMA: "On the street where you live."

FOLLET: "On the street where you live," yeah.

ROMA: What is that? I can't even remember right now. Is it *Pal Joey*?

FOLLET: Is it *My Fair Lady*?

ROMA: Is it *My Fair Lady*? Yeah, probably. Anyway, I can't even remember right now.

FOLLET: We can both sing it, though. (laughter)

ROMA: Yeah, we can. And also, I have to say that one thing I was conscious of when I was a younger person was, I was the youngest of three, and my mother had me when she was — she lied about her age, so I'm guessing still — 42, 43. I still do not know the exact date of my mother's birth, and so I don't know how old she was when I came along, but 42, 43, something like that. I think 43. And so I always saw myself as having these older parents. So at a young age, I was aware that I was sort of drawn to young women who had families. I was an avid babysitter, and would look up to these young women. They were women in their twenties, late twenties. And when my brother married — he's 13 years older than me — Kari, his wife, became sort of a surrogate mother. So some of these women were surrogate mothers and important because I could talk to them about anything. And I was nervous, or my mother was nervous, I think, talking to me about growing up and sex and getting your period and all of that, boys, et cetera.

FOLLET: Now was that because she was older, or was this a function of her personality?

ROMA: Both. Both. I think she, you know — yeah.

FOLLET: You had an older sister, who would have been — your mother would have been younger when she had that sister — so I'm just wondering what the factors are here.

ROMA: Yeah, well, my sister and I — let's see. How would I describe that? Oh, boy. We were close in some ways, and there was a lot of tension. Five years difference, and I think she thought I was a big pain. And I think she sort of thought that I displaced her, you know, and was the baby and the favorite and all that kind of thing. She was very much a tomboy, and my mother nurtured me to be the little girl that she didn't have because my brother wanted a boy for a sibling. So, you know, my sister came out sort of fighting, I think. And she's amazing. She was amazing at sports. She's only four foot ten, so at a certain point, maybe fifth or sixth grade, I was taller than she. That wasn't happy for her, I'm sure — you know what I mean. So we had these tensions.

I looked up to her and I knew I wanted her approval. And she always did wild things, and there was something very appealing about that, as well as I knew I shouldn't do those things. There was that happening as well, so. My sister wasn't nurturing either, in that way. I'll give you a very clear example here. When I got my period, I was very young, and my mother said, "Go ask your sister for a belt and a pad." So then my sister, being my sister, you know, joked around with me. So I was at this very vulnerable time and moment —

FOLLET: What do you mean, she joked around?

ROMA: Well, she went to her desk and got a pad of paper and gave it to me and went to her closet and got a belt, you know, that you put around your waist. So that's fairly clear, (laughs) you know. So these kinds of things I could talk about with other people, but not my sister and not my mother about it, really. And they were both sort of independent: Oh, go take care of it. So my wanting to sort of explore these things and talk about them, I did it with these surrogate people. And they're the people who came in as the people I wanted to sing to, sort of, you know, in those moments when I was by myself at the piano.

FOLLET: Sing to. You imagined them as an audience?

ROMA: Well, no. I didn't mean that, sing to, [but rather] that those are the people in my mind that were important people.

FOLLET: And they were real people in your life at that time?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah. So those are — I'm trying to think of other — you know, my neighborhood was very important in my life.

FOLLET: Tell me about that.

ROMA: And the kids.

FOLLET: You were in Philly?

ROMA: Yeah, in Philly. I was in Mount Airy, born and raised in Mount Airy. I went to Germantown Friends. That's Philadelphia, the particular area we're talking about. You can think of Germantown Avenue as sort of going from poverty and inner city, and as you go up the hill you get to Chestnut Hill, which is where the private schools are, the all-boys private school, Chestnut Hill Academy, and Springside, all-girls school, and very elitist. And then going down the hill, Mount Airy was in the middle and then Germantown and Germantown Friends. So we were sort of in the middle. It's very middle class.

And I loved being able to explore. I had a gang, you know, a group of kids, five boys and two girls, and we sort of played sports and touch football and soccer, baseball, and biked everywhere. It was good. I really didn't go to camp because I always had people to play with. I think I went to one or two weeks of a camp, and then in eighth grade I went to a month-long overnight camp. But basically I wanted to stay home. I mean, I wanted to be messing around with all the kids in the neighborhood, because it was kind of fun.

And I had another really good friend, Marjory Snodgrass, and she was not in the gang because sports weren't very important and being athletic and running around. She was also diabetic, so her parents were more protective of her. But we were really, really close and had clubs and all the things you do — played dolls and all of that. And, yeah, Margie and I stayed close until she passed, and she passed because of her diabetes just around her fiftieth birthday, but we stayed close, you know, while I went away to college and came back. We were always in each other's lives.

FOLLET: Oh, that's so nice.

ROMA: And these other kids, these neighborhood kids no, not really, but it was great.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: So, yeah. We moved around the corner. I was born and raised in a kind of smallish — not really — I mean smallish compared to the house we moved to. My mother, she wanted to do great things with this house, and she did. She was amazing. "I want to have room for the grandkids," and, you know, they loved it, and I loved it, and I didn't want to move out of that little house. We just moved simply around the corner. But it was a good move. And then, of course, when I brought my friends home from college, there was lots of space for that, too. So, let's see. Youth.

FOLLET: Did it matter that the eldest child in your family was a male and then there were the two sisters? Were there gender dynamics or gender messages that came across because of that?

ROMA: Oh, first child, male, Italian family — very important, perfect, you know, my brother, Emilio Roma III. So, yeah, he had a lot of status. But he was the first, too, so I think it was my parents' first experience with parenting. But no, I mean, there was no question. He was the first grandchild, male, the whole thing. So yeah. My mother was an amazing wife and really an amazing mother and an amazing cook, a fabulous cook. And she was totally traditional, totally. She thought there was a special role for women. She went to a Catholic school. She didn't go to college. She thought there was a role to be played, and she played it fabulously.

And she trained — the tension between my sister and her was my sister lived outside the rules all the time and I think gave my mother, you know, angina. So I saw that dynamic. And my sister is very adversarial. She's a lawyer now. I'm the person who says, Oh, come on, let's get everybody together to make music. I mean, I clearly saw that dynamic going on and I said, OK, let's calm down. (laughs) You know what I mean. But you know, everybody who sees pictures of my sister and me from our youth, like my being four and her nine or five and ten, they look at it and they say, She looks like she's the dyke, not you. Because she's sort of protecting. I'm still in that sort of impressionable stage with my mother and I'm wearing the little dresses and my sister has these letter sweaters on and she's got jeans and sort of — you know. And she is, she's tough as nails, and she's strong and she's solid, and she would beat the guys. She'd say, OK, I'll challenge you to sit-ups or pushups, and she'd always outdo guys. I mean, she played football, you know. My brother did a great job raising her. (laughter) And she's tough in the courtroom, and she and I are much closer now, I think. After my mother passed, there was sort of that — things changed immensely.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: So yeah, gender roles. It was the '50s and the '60s, and I think I still wore skirts to school. You had to wear dresses and skirts, couldn't wear pants. My mother said, "You should be a teacher. Always have something you can do, a profession, because what happens if your husband dies? You have to be able to make a living for yourself. You have to know how to cook," you know. But she was always extremely critical of — I saw her being more critical, both with my sister and me, of the boys that we brought home than of our girlfriends. So I took that to heart, (laughs) you know. So, roles. She didn't question her role at all. And, you know, they didn't talk, my parents didn't talk a lot openly in front of us about any one of a number of things.

FOLLET: Did your folks have political views in these years that you were aware of?

- ROMA: Very much so. Both of my parents — I was born and raised Catholic. Let's talk about that, because they do sort of —
- FOLLET: This is an interesting mix here.
- ROMA: Yeah. So, OK. Both born and raised Catholic themselves, and my mother's only sister is a nun, a sister in the convent. They raised us as Catholic, but my father went to Princeton, and then Columbia Law School, and then finished up at Temple. And he said he didn't want any of his children educated in the parochial system.
- FOLLET: Because?
- ROMA: Warped. He was very clear that it was a warped view of history, and he didn't want us to understand the world through the eyes of the Catholic Church. I'm ever — I can't even say how grateful I am. OK, but then the rest of the story is this: He didn't want his children going to public school because there were too many black people there. So Germantown Friends at that time — now they are vastly different than they were — but at that time, they hadn't made a commitment to — I mean, of course, Quakers have always been very open, but Germantown Friends wasn't that diverse at that time. So the rest of the story on that line is that in, let's see, I entered school in what, '52, '53 — kindergarten, anyway. So I found a letter and asked my parents about this. The school wrote letters to the parents and said, We want to increase the diversity, you know, and we're going to have a plan of adding more African American children to —
- FOLLET: So this is in the what, the mid-'50s, about?
- ROMA: Mid-'50s, yeah. And so my father was one of like three parents that wrote back and said he disagreed with that. So this gives you an idea. So politically they were — my father was Republican, and my mother became Republican when she married my father, and always voted the way he told her to vote — so gender, you know, we can — which was Republican. She voted Democrat once, in my awareness, and that was when a friend of my brother's was running for clerk of elections or something in the neighborhood. But, you see, they sent us to Germantown Friends.
- FOLLET: Yes!
- ROMA: So this was the gift, I mean —
- FOLLET: Were they going to Mass at the same time they're sending you to Germantown Friends?
- ROMA: I only went to church once with my father, when my cousin got married.

FOLLET: But he continued to be a practicing Catholic?

ROMA: He's a European Catholic. He's an Italian Catholic, Italian male Catholic, and so he only went for the sacraments. He didn't go — I never saw him in church with my mother once, except for this wedding. My mother took us to church. My father was fine with that, I guess.

FOLLET: Your mother, weekly, took you to Mass?

ROMA: Absolutely, and I went to catechism.

FOLLET: You did?

ROMA: I went. She took me to a private girls' Catholic school. I remember it as a couple of times a week starting in first grade, to get my catechism.

FOLLET: But wasn't this the kind of instruction that your father didn't want you to have?

ROMA: Well, I mean, it prepared you for the sacraments, so it was legitimate. And you didn't learn history, you learned — well, I mean, you didn't really learn Church history and European history through the eyes of the Church, you got sort of indoctrinated with what the rules, I'm going to say, of the Church, what prepared you to be a soldier of Christ, you know, for Confirmation.

FOLLET: Did he say history specifically?

ROMA: He did say history.

FOLLET: What did he mean by that?

ROMA: Oh, gosh. All right. Looking back and trying to figure that out. Boy. No, but I do remember him saying very clearly that he didn't want — you know, because I asked him why, especially when we would talk about religion and things like that, because I had to participate in Quaker meeting every week. It was a requirement. And at a certain point, I had to get permission from the priest of the parish to go to Germantown Friends. And I think it was because after one confession I must have confessed so many sins that the priest wanted to see me outside of the little box, the little confessional.

FOLLET: Really?

ROMA: Yeah. And then went to my mother, because he saw my mother in the pew or had my mother come, and said, you know, where did I go to school. "At Germantown Friends." "Have you received permission from the priest

of your parish to do that?" And my mother, I think she was kind of scared. So I think she did get permission — or said, "This is where the kids are going to school."

FOLLET: Were other kids doing this? Was your neighborhood a Catholic neighborhood? Was this a class distinction of any kind that Germantown Friends represented a class distinction as compared to Mount Airy or the public school?

ROMA: I was the only Catholic in my class until we had a French exchange student.

FOLLET: Really.

ROMA: Now that's my class. I don't think it was that severe in all the other grades. In my neighborhood? Not a Catholic, more Episcopalian neighborhood.

FOLLET: More an Episcopalian neighborhood than a Catholic?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah. No, I don't even — I didn't go to church with any of those neighborhood kids. I never saw them at church. Was it a class thing? You know, I really didn't understand class at that age. And I was only — I would say the beginning of my understanding of race was because I was at Germantown Friends, and the education that I got there, that was the beginning of my becoming a liberal person.

And it happened — I can remember exactly when — when Kennedy and Nixon were running, and all of my very best friends and all of the people I deeply respected, the faculty, were for Kennedy. And my parents were for Nixon. And so that's when I realized that there was something really, really different going on with me, that all these people that I just admired and respected and everything, and my best friends, you know. So that was a real indicator. And then it just changed after that. I began to sort of break away politically. But then my brother, you know, he had already — I was aware that he was different and my sister was different, so that's how it evolved for me. I mean, I was aware of that, but I didn't really know what it meant, you know, about my brother and my sister.

FOLLET: They were different how?

ROMA: Well, my brother, you know, didn't get married in a Catholic church, he got married in an Episcopal church. He was a philosopher. He didn't even — it was, is God dead? I mean, he was an agnostic at best. And my sister lived with a Jew. So the time I told my parents when I was 17 that I wanted to convert to Quakerism, my mother cried and my father said, "You know, I might do that if I had to do it all over again. I might be a Quaker." So the religion thing played in, and I saw it — I don't know whether I saw it then — I see it now as connected politically somehow.

You know, I wasn't even aware — I was thinking about this when I got out to Cincinnati — I wasn't even aware of all the working-class Catholic liberation theology in the Catholic that I was at all. I didn't even know. I associate all the social justice and peace work and everything with Quakers, which is where I got it, you know, that's a pretty strong influence that affected me more than I can even say.

Like when I started out at the beginning of this conversation, they laid the groundwork for who I became more than I know. And I'd like to sort of tease that out a little bit more, too. But I had to go to Quaker meeting at Germantown Friends every week. It was required. You couldn't just opt out. And I was really glad about that; I loved it. And that's another — I was thinking when I was walking this morning that the places where I was most thoughtful or the quiet spaces I had were at the keyboard and at Quaker meeting, where I was centered in some kind of way.

You know, when I went to Catholic Mass, I did the church thing. I mean, I did the genuflecting and praying and everything, and you were involved in sort of — I wasn't thinking about the world. I wasn't making connections. I was sort of, you know, there. And when I started doing both, because I thought I'd get struck down by lightning or something if I didn't go to Mass in the morning, so in ninth grade my best friend was Betsy Bacon, a really wonderful friend and Quaker — and I went to Quaker meeting with her parents after Mass, after I went to Mass, so I went on Sundays, for probably two years I would do both things. When I went to Quaker meeting, I, of course, went to Mass before, until eleventh grade, when I was 17.

FOLLET: And at that point, you were ready to say, I'm going to pick between these two decisively? Was there something that made you say, I've got to make a choice here?

ROMA: Yeah, actually I can remember. I'm just remembering a lot now. I thought it was pretty amazing.

FOLLET: Could we stop for a second? There's that airplane that's — (pause in tape)

ROMA: OK.

FOLLET: OK. We're back. And now we have to remember what that exciting question was that we were delving into.

ROMA: I remember. You asked me why I made that change, right?

FOLLET: Oh, the decisive moment, to choose between Catholicism and Quakerism.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: OK, I'm clear on that one.

FOLLET: Go for it. Tell me.

ROMA: As I said, after the Nixon-Kennedy change, that was kind of important, what I realized when I sat in Quaker meeting was, the people who got up and spoke about things, it was enlightening for me. They were talking about things that were going on right now. They were talking about the Vietnam War, they were talking about pacifism, they were talking about all kinds of engagement in social justice activities. But people getting up just from the spirit moving them and saying this stuff, and then the sense of the meeting might be continued. And I just thought, Whoa.

And it's completely the opposite of Catholicism. You're sitting quietly, and you have your own little pipeline up there to the Creator. I don't know. It just was so dramatically different, and it touched me so much. You know, I was going through the motions in Catholic Church. I was sort of just doing it because I'm sure it was very important to my mother and pleasing my mother. I don't think my father cared that much, but my mother was the one. And my sister by that time had gone to college, so I'm there with my mom, and it just wasn't doing it for me.

And so I was profoundly moved, and I loved Quaker meeting. I mean, I went every week, Thursday, and then I went on Sunday as well. And I was totally open to the ideas of it. So, of course, I had the overseers, I told the meeting that I wanted to become a member of the Religious Society of Friends, and they were great. They came over to my house and we had tea. And they spoke with me and asked me questions. And they said, Of course, you're going to have to go to the priest, your priest, and tell him. So I was panic-stricken about that. But it was just exactly the right thing to do.

FOLLET: So you did? You went to the priest?

ROMA: No, I mean making that change. But yes, of course, I did. I knocked on the Holy Cross. That's where I was a — I guess it's called a member, a parishioner at Holy Cross in Mount Airy. But my mother loved to go to Chestnut Hill, to Our Mother of Consolation. So I had been going up there, not Holy Cross, in my later teen years or whatever. So I went up and, you know, knocked on the door, rang the bell, and somebody opened the door and received me, told me to wait. So then the priest came in and said, "What are you here for?" I said — I had to be, they told me, my overseers, when I had my little tea, that I had to stand firmly, otherwise they would try to change my mind. And I knew that.

FOLLET: You were by yourself?

ROMA: I went by myself. It was unbelievable. I'll never forget it. Yup — my mom, my dad, nobody.

FOLLET: But you had told your mom and dad by this point?

ROMA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: And your mother cried, and your father said –

ROMA: “Oh, yeah, if I had to do it all over again, maybe I’d be a Quaker” — you know, so he was very open. And the fact that I was still sort of, had wanted to be spiritual or religious or have an organized religion probably was fine with him, at 17. I don’t think he cared after that. You know, I had my own life. I think my mother sort of felt that way in the back of her mind, too, you know, that I wasn’t — because here my sister had, you know, against my parents’ wishes, eloped. I mean, they didn’t want her to marry this guy, so she says, “OK, I’m going to elope.” And nobody was Catholic at this point.

Anyway, so I was sitting there waiting, and I was very nervous, so I very honestly and quietly said to the priest when he came in, I said, “Well, I’m here to tell you that I’m joining the Religious Society of Friends.” And he said, “That doesn’t sound like a Catholic affair to me.” And I said, “No, it’s not.” And he said, “I guess I could talk until I’m blue in the face” — because I was sort of, you know, I was very determined, even though I was quiet and nervous. “I guess I could talk until I was blue in the face to try to change you.” Mm-hmm. OK. And then he just sort of dismissed me. I mean, that was it. It was the shortest thing. So that was that. He *could* have talked until he was blue in the face.

FOLLET: Mm-hmm.

ROMA: So anyway, those were sort of momentous things that separated me away from my parents and [set me] on my journey. So yeah. And then I remember in my eleventh- and twelfth-grade years, conversations at the dinner table with my father, who felt that black people were biologically inferior. And I remember crying and trying to argue, trying to say what I thought, and you know, getting frustrated and crying and leaving the table and stuff. I remember definitely those conversations, and so — but they weren’t regretful that they sent me to Germantown Friends or anything like that. That never crossed their minds, or anything like that. So this is where all those seeds were planted.

FOLLET: Did you mother have opinions on the race issue that differed from your father’s?

ROMA: No. No. “Those people,” you know. No.

FOLLET: So she explicitly shared his view. She wasn’t just holding back on expressing her own? She really shared his racial views?

ROMA: Absolutely. Absolutely. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

- FOLLET: In this mix of Catholic catechism and Quaker education, and all the education that goes on outside of those institutions in the mid-'50s, were you getting messages about sexuality?
- ROMA: Oh, the usual — Thou shalt now put thy hands (laughs) in thy pants, you know.
- FOLLET: I just think of CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] in those years. I mean, did you go to CCD, the Catholic kind of teen formal instruction?
- ROMA: No. No, no, no, thank goodness. I only heard about that. No. My mom, you know, would put little articles on my bed, like the one about masturbation. Because I was social, because I am an extrovert, I went out and — you know, on the twenty-fifth high school reunion, they sent out these questionnaires to everybody to fill in their lives, what they had done and everything, and I came out, because I had been with Dorothea for, oh gosh, I don't know how many years, anyway, some amount of years. I put "lifelong relationship," you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, and coming out and everything. So when I went to the twenty-fifth reunion, some of the women in my class, they said, You are the last person I would have expected to be a lesbian. That's what they said, right to my face.
- FOLLET: Really.
- ROMA: Because I was — you know, I went out on dates — I was with boys. I was "popular." And I was sort of in that mode, you know, making out in seventh grade and petting in eighth grade, whatever. I sort of did the things that you expect any junior high, senior high kid to do. I had boyfriends for longish periods of time. I was focused — I always had boys that were friends, and I had boyfriends, and so — but then sort of the little bubbles in your mind, the little things outside your mind, the little things that say what you're really thinking, that all started fairly early on with girls in relation to women, but you know, it just — I wasn't really acting it out, except inside. And then it really happened in ninth grade that I had the first person my own age that I had a crush on who was a girl, and that was Betsy, the person I mentioned before, Betsy Bacon. So then, yeah, starting then there were girls my own age who I fantasized more about being with than actually being with the guys. You know what I mean, so —
- FOLLET: And what were the little bubbles, the little other messages outside your head at that point? What were they saying to you at that point?
- ROMA: Well, I don't think I was judging myself as a bad person. I really didn't have that. I didn't have a lesbian label. I didn't have any of those labels. Because I truly felt very embracing of people, you know, and loving. But all my fantasies and everything, the ones I really can recall right now and everything, were really about women. But I do think I had this excuse, that

I was Italian and emotional and welcoming the world and everything. So I think that that had a lot to do with it, really. It wasn't until I got to my second year in college that I really thought I needed to deal with this, you know, that something was going on that was, where I was thinking of, I don't know, I was knowing something else was going on that was more strong. In high school I couldn't — everybody could say, Oh, well, girls have good friends, very strong friends, so it didn't really — I don't know. I do have journals that I have not gone back and read. I have journals back to fifth and sixth grade —

FOLLET: Oh!

ROMA: — that I've been religious about. I mean, I have them. I haven't opened a page, but I'm sure they're — (mimics snoring sound) — who knows what's in those journals? But I do have them. I didn't write all the time, but I wrote fairly consistently, starting — I don't know, I'm guessing sixth grade, something like that. And I don't know if it's the kind of thing that I wrote also, because there's that person you always think is sort of over your shoulder writing it, and I didn't get out of that until way later, sort of censoring your own thoughts and stuff like that.

So, yeah. No, I was conscious that I loved these people, these women. And I didn't have a bisexual label or anything, either. I did when I was in college and sleeping with both men and women — I thought, OK, maybe I'm bisexual, you know, and then it was just sort of fearful of really making the decision who I am.

FOLLET: Yeah. But you also didn't have explicit negative messages that any inclinations you had were somehow wrong?

ROMA: No, not in high school, because, I mean, I don't want to say it was necessarily an open environment, it was just — I don't know, I can't explain it, except that I had these little excuses, you know?

FOLLET: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

ROMA: Or these little things that I could legitimately feel fine about it. And when I got to college — we're talking about the mid-'60s, and sort of everything opening up — so by the time I was thinking I needed to face these, I was in a different environment.

FOLLET: You graduated high school in what year?

ROMA: Sixty-six.

FOLLET: Sixty-six, OK. How did you choose [University of Wisconsin at] Madison?

- ROMA: It was easy, because my brother went to Wesleyan, and then he went to Wisconsin, and he went in history.
- FOLLET: Oh, wow.
- ROMA: But he switched to philosophy. And then my sister went to Wisconsin. And then I followed, because I went out to my brother's campus wedding when I was in fifth grade, and I thought it was the coolest place, you know. It was winter, and the lakes froze over and there were people (laughs) — I just thought it was magical. And then I went to visit my sister, and it was Hootenanny, you know, her husband was a quite capable musician on mandolin and guitar, and so I went to some Hootenannies — that was really cool.
- FOLLET: In Madison?
- ROMA: In Madison, yeah. So it was just sort of a natural that I would go. That's where I really wanted to go. I applied elsewhere, but that's where I really wanted to go.
- FOLLET: That's where you really wanted to go.
- ROMA: Mm-hmm.
- FOLLET: So there was that familiarity. Did Germantown Friends kind of approve of or steer you toward Madison?
- ROMA: Very good question. You know, most of the people went to the Northeast. I was one of six people that went west of Philadelphia.
- FOLLET: In a class of?
- ROMA: Sixty-something.
- FOLLET: Wow.
- ROMA: I mean, I can name — my classmates went to a lot of the Ivy League schools. Everybody went to college that I can think of. And another woman went to the University of Wisconsin. I don't remember what the other places that weren't in the Northeast were. A bunch went to Penn. But, you know, Radcliffe and Smith.
- FOLLET: Yeah, yeah. So you had to buck the trend to go to the Midwest?
- ROMA: Right. I was really ready to go to college at the end of my eleventh-grade year, because I went to Europe with a choir in the summer of my eleventh-grade years. And I had some friends who were seniors who were leaving. And that was a good feeling, to feel that I was really ready to make that

change, even though I'm a home person. But that experience sort of enabled me to know that I was going to be able to make a change. And also, I knew I was ready to be out of a small environment. K though 12 was a really nurturing thing, and I knew I could go to a big school and know exactly the right questions to ask so that I could find my own little community and stuff like that. So it was definitely the right move. After K through 12 private, all my schooling has been public.

FOLLET: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

ROMA: You know, Wisconsin for my undergrad and my master's, and Cincinnati for my doctorate.

FOLLET: Yeah, yeah. Was there anything about the music program in Madison particularly? I mean, you knew that you were going to be a music major, right — or no?

ROMA: No.

FOLLET: Oh, OK.

ROMA: With Dorothea Persichetti, I prepared tapes. I have some of those, very interesting. I was very nervous in front of a microphone after that experience playing as a young person in front of people — it seemed to be much easier than playing in front of a tape recorder — but I had to make these tapes. I didn't go out in person to perform. I applied to IU, Indiana University, Wisconsin, and Syracuse. And it was a respectable music department, and I did apply for a music scholarship. I was runner-up for the Elsa Sawyer scholarship. And I thought actually I was going to major in music. Actually, I was going to get a bachelor's of music, and that's what I got accepted to Wisconsin, in its music program. But it was within my first year already I knew there were too many things I wanted to take — history, cultural history. You know, [Professor of History] Harvey Goldberg was there.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: And he was like a magnet for all of the political people. [Professor of History] George Mosse, a cultural historian. And I love history. [Professor of History] William Appleman Williams was there.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: I took courses with him. And what else did I really like? History was a big one. I took some philosophy, but I think most of my credits — until I sort of got interested in education and met some wild people and we started a free school, you know, I took some wonderful experimental educational kinds of courses and stuff like that — but history is where the political

people went. That's where the community of left, progressive, SDS people were there religiously.

FOLLET: So you arrived in the fall of 1966?

ROMA: Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: Tell me about the political scene and how you fit into it.

ROMA: Well, what was profound was really in '67, for me. That changed me. That's when Dow Chemical came onto campus, and I was at the demonstration. And then because Germantown Friends gave me absolute discipline in relation to my studies — many other things came into my life and everything, but I was really disciplined. So I said, I'm leaving this demonstration, and I'm going to go to my music history class. So I did, and it was then that all the tear gas and the cracking of heads and everything happened. And so as soon as I left my class and went back up, I smelled all the tear gas and I saw people with bandanas covering their face and everything, and everybody obviously was being pushed back. But I tried — you know, my friends were there, hadn't left, and I knew that some of them were billy-clubbed and gassed and all of that. So that was profound. And I remember going to the dormitories. I was in a private dorm called Gilman House. I can't remember. Is it on Gilman Street?

FOLLET: Gilman, could be.

ROMA: Gilman and Henry. It had been there. I don't know if it's still there. It probably isn't. And I remember going to the big high-rise dorms, Sellery, Witte. Are they still there?

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: And going into the dining rooms and telling people what had happened. It was like, I had this — oh, I was just so moved, and so taken —

FOLLET: This is that same day?

ROMA: What?

FOLLET: That same day — right then?

ROMA: That same day. And, "Do you know what happened? This is what happened." You know, I had the story to tell. Of course, I had gone to my class for the most intense part of it, but that was OK, too, because I had been there before and after. But I was a part of it, and I'm sort of glad I wasn't in the center of it, because I think it would have been really scary, because we were up in the Commerce building —

FOLLET: Yup.

ROMA: – and we sort of had taken our earrings off, the whole thing, and lined the halls, and we had heard that the police were coming — and so most people stayed — and that heads were going to crack, heads were going to roll. Anyway, so with this newfound — it wasn't so newfound, but it was really strengthened — I went, and — I'm not good, really, at that sort of telling people and convincing people and trying to change people and getting them to come out to the demonstration, but I did it. That was pretty amazing. And so that was a big change. Then I was sort of always putting my body on the line and showing up.

And when there was — what happened, there was a moratorium, I think, maybe in relation to that or something else. I think after that there was some kind of demonstration or moratorium the next day, and I remember going to my teacher and saying that I couldn't be in class and that I needed to put my body on the line. And he was really respectful. It was great, because the music students were mostly conservative. So he had only a few of us. Another friend of mine, Martha Stanbury — you know, this was Walter Gray, he was a history teacher, music history. And I went and made up my exam and took it another time and stuff like that, and he was really good. So that was powerful. And then I became a part of just — do you remember the — this has happened so many places, and on the other side, we went to this eating co-op, and we created crosses. This is the Vietnam War, a demonstration that we did. We put them all up on Bascom Hill. Painted them white and put them all — I mean, it was powerful.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: So I helped do that. And oh, I was saying, [on] the other side, you know, you see these people who are against abortion doing that, now.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: So it feels like everything is being co-opted. But what was the environment like? It was vibrant. The [Memorial Student] Union — you can imagine. I mean, I was aware that there were all these sectarian groups and everything like that, but it was mostly, I guess, SDS and —

FOLLET: Excuse me. Do you see a red light?

ROMA: Yes, flashing.

FOLLET: Flashing, OK. I think we should stop and change tapes before it cuts out on us. OK?

ROMA: Mm-hmm.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

FOLLET: We're back at the Green Lantern Co-op in Madison.

ROMA: And we're making those crosses and putting them up there, yeah. There are a lot of things. I don't remember the order of them.

FOLLET: Yeah.

ROMA: I of course remember the demonstration when King was assassinated, the huge amounts of people that were in the streets for that. I remember — oh, the National Guard came out for the whole Laos, Cambodia, the bombing and the antiwar demonstrations. I remember the National Guard lining the streets, and got billy-clubbed and tear-gassed. You know, they were just — that was the time. I was not in Madison when the Army Math Research Center was bombed. I was out here on the East Coast, visiting my family or whatever. I think it was in August that it happened.

But it was a really, really, really important time in my education. You know, I was in the music school and doing my diligent practicing and everything, managing to find time, but that's what was going on outside of my studies, you know, my political work, or my understanding that I needed to be putting myself — I needed to stand, literally, with, backing up what I felt. I needed to put my body on the line. And so, I never did go to D.C. at that time when I was in Madison. I never made any trips to D.C. for demonstrations, antiwar demonstrations. But it seemed to be all happening in Madison.

FOLLET: Right. You mentioned being aware that there were a lot of sectarian groups around, and I'm wondering how many more political options were being made obvious to you from what Germantown Friends had been and how were you sorting this out politically as far as what you believed or how you assessed what was going on and what might be wrong?

ROMA: Well, I remember Socialist Workers. I remember the Trotskyites because they lived below me on Marion Street, and those were the — well, I'm sure there were more if I would dredge up my memory. I'm trying to remember how I conceptualized myself politically.

FOLLET: Did you belong to a group?

ROMA: No, I mean, SDS would be the one that I would say, but no. I mean, I wasn't connected really to the Quakers, although I did go to Quaker meeting some times when I was there. No, I don't remember being part of any specific group, unless it was — I identified, I think, with SDS. No, I was freelance. You know, I don't remember per se. And it was also at this time that I was dealing with my sexuality in this freewheeling environment, and so that was also part of what I was beginning to identify

with. And, of course, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, I was beginning to awaken to those things.

So we're talking about my political stuff going on in '67 and '68, but also that was about the time when I was beginning to realize that I wanted to act more on my feelings for women. So there was all of this going on at the same time. And that I was a music major and music was important to me was really over here. It wasn't until later that I began to put all of these things together. So they were sort of happening separately. My classical music and my love for piano and everything was happening.

And I was growing musically. There were wonderful things happening in Madison, actually. We had a convocation that we had to go to every Friday, a world of music that was sort of more wild and weird I was exposed to. Rene Leibowitz and the whole twelve-tone school and experimental music and Eric Satie, people who had I hadn't been exposed to in high school, I was exposed to there. So that was good. And it was still very meaningful and it connected me to all of my past. So I loved that.

But then there was this world of other, you know, Harvey Goldberg — I'd say if I was part of a group, it was an academic group of people, I'd say. I was in this group that religiously went to these lectures and then talked about them. And so we were trying to make all sorts of connections with history. I'm not speaking about it very articulately, but it was a very charged atmosphere and environment. In those lecture halls we didn't just sit there passively. I mean, we were all taking notes, but then we went to the Ratskeller and went to the [Memorial Union] Terrace and we went to the Union and teased all the stuff out that we were understanding and trying to make connections. It was incredibly exciting. But that's there.

And then also there is in my junior year, which is '68 — well, actually, no. I'm going to back up. I'm going to say my sophomore year I went to a therapist. I called my parents and I said, "I want to see a therapist." What did I say? I'd like them to pay for it, because I wanted to go to a specific person. I didn't want to go to the counseling at university. And this was the progressive guy, you know, this was Peter Weiss, who was phenomenal. A lot of the radicals went to him. He was a really, really good guy.

So my parents — my mother said, "Oh, can't you talk about these things with your father?" And I said no. And, "Is something wrong?" No. Well, anyway, so they said no, they wouldn't pay for it. And so I had saved between one and two thousand dollars from babysitting, and I hadn't used it. So they said, my mother said, "You have to use that." So I did, OK. That was all right with me.

So I saw Peter Weiss, and a lot of my real agenda was, in my dormitory sophomore year, I sort of fell head over heels over this person, Barbara. So I knew it was — I had done that the freshman year in this dorm with somebody different, and I knew it was problematic. It was the worst part of my Catholic upbringing, of agony and ecstasy, Mary the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, you know, were all getting mixed up and

messed up in what I wanted and picking the wrong people. And it was beginning to bust out or come out, you know, that I needed to look at it.

So Peter Weiss helped me a lot. And he also said, "We're done now," after a couple of months. He said, you know, "You need to just go out and do some things and make some decisions. You can't just keep it all in your head. When you've done that, come back and we'll talk about it," because he didn't think I was really dealing with deep-seated horrible abuse issues or anything like that. It was just stuff that I needed to work on. And he gave me some really good tools how to look at myself and think about myself and stuff like that. It was a very positive experience, actually.

FOLLET: So was it questions of sexuality that were primary, that you brought to those therapy sessions?

ROMA: How do I know if I'm a lesbian? You know, I'd do these things. I kept myself in positions where I would be hurt, where, you know, I wanted things I couldn't have. It had to do with picking the wrong people, and not knowing where to go and not knowing how to think about it. And so he enabled me to think about it, and just that everything that was happening was healthy. I was definitely in those situations putting myself in a situation that was hurtful because I was putting these people up on a pedestal, right? And eventually, when you do that, splat, people fall, then I'm hurt and — and I had this pattern doing that with women that I looked up to, that I wanted more from than, you know, you could get. And I sacrificed myself for these people. That was part of it, too. Giving up a lot of myself in a friendship or giving things that, you know — that part wasn't healthy.

So I was into these patterns that I needed to break. So that really started happening in my junior year, that I was breaking the patterns. Actually said, "I'm going to" — you know, I had a really good friend who's also dealing with coming out and we're still very good friends, and so I knew that I, calculatedly, I had to go make out with Ruth to see what it was like. I mean, I had to break this impasse, and I knew Ruth was dealing with the same feelings I was dealing with.

And so, that was a good thing to do, and then it was a short time later that I got involved with these people who were in education, in experimental education, and we together got started a drop-in center at a church, for kids. It was once a week, and it was for kids who — it was actually just a church group, but we were starting to do some — we took them out and did different things with them, OK? And we had a pretty progressive minister at this church. And that is eventually what became the Free School that we started in 1970.

So it was in '68 that we started this drop-in center and then took over this youth group, and I met a wonderful guy named Johnny and his wife. I eventually met his wife, Kathy, and they were sort of in the throes of looking at their marriage and sleeping with — he was sleeping with women and she was sleeping (laughs) — she wanted to be sleeping with

women. And that's the way I got involved with Kathy. And with Johnny. I mean, I was closer with him first, and we were involved in this really great program.

Actually, I wrote a little article about it. It was my first published article, in a magazine called *Focus*, and it was the congregational newsletter — I don't know if it was national or local — that went and told about this group that we had and what we did with the kids and how we got them talking about current events. Because Madison was pretty alive and lively, and for liberal parents whose kids were asking a lot of questions, we were sort of a buffer and good to engage the kids in — whether it was antiwar demonstrations and their city sort of blowing up (laughs) or whatever, you know.

FOLLET: What age were these kids?

ROMA: Junior high.

FOLLET: Oh.

ROMA: Eighth — seventh, eighth, ninth — in there. It was a good thing. So that's how I met Kathy, and Kathy and I had a pretty intense relationship. And Johnny, too, but I was mostly focused on Kathy. So then I realized that this was pretty important, my sexuality and my lesbianism — I didn't like that word then. I was gay.

FOLLET: Where had you heard it? What did you associate with that?

ROMA: Oh, gosh, you know, dyke, lesbian, too, didn't fit me, you know? And it was really — you know, there weren't that many women. I was aware of a gay movement, and it was more male, but I wasn't aware of a lot of women in '66, '67, '68 — even in Madison. (laughs)

FOLLET: Women who —

ROMA: Were lesbians, and gay, you know. I was, you know — what year was that? Jeff Panciera, a friend of mine, a gay man — you know, I knew gay men. And then the lesbians that were visible were sort of very — there weren't very many, and — I'm trying to think of names. I can't even think of the names. They were more — they were using language and words that were still too scary for me. They were so out and they were so sure that they were lesbians, you know, and they were doing political stuff around that, that it was — I wasn't there yet. I didn't sort of — I was scared, I think, and didn't identify that way yet.

It wasn't really till 1970, late 1969, that I fell in love with the woman who I was with for five years, and so then I really sort of came out and understood things much differently. I think in '68 and '69, I still was sleeping with men, and I had this cover, you know — I mean, Kathy was married — and so I was just figuring things out.

- FOLLET: You mentioned that, in the political mix here, there was a women's movement coming along. What was the evidence of a women's movement in Madison at this time, or when did it surface for you?
- ROMA: Well, it really blossomed for me — well, I mean, in 1970, it was very clear to me. Because in relation to the Free School that we started, there was a women's group, and it was all the women faculty and all the women students. And I remember reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, with the 75-cent newspaper print, (laughs) you know, version of it. I remember — I'm trying to think of what I specifically remember, and I'm thinking it actually revolved around *Our Bodies, Ourselves* at that time.
- FOLLET: Now this is — people who are running the Free School also have your own adult group going on, is that —
- ROMA: No, within the school. As part of the school, the women who were teachers — me, Kathy, and there were a couple other people — the women adults had a group with the women students at the school, the girls — well, by the time we got all of this started and everything, we had to have it only be high school, actually, when we started this school — nine through 12. And actually, as we went on then, it involved younger kids, 12 through 18.
- FOLLET: Oh, I see.
- ROMA: But when we first started it was ninth through twelfth.
- FOLLET: And was it with these kids that you started using *Our Bodies* —
- ROMA: Yeah, the high school girls and the faculty. I'm trying to remember, because you're asking me a very specific question —
- FOLLET: That's OK.
- ROMA: — about what I can remember in Madison. And —
- FOLLET: Yeah. Well, it's not really so much about Madison. It's about how you're starting to put these things together. A little bit ago you said there was the music over here, and it had its satisfactions and rewards and still engaged you, and there's the bigger political scene over here that you were very involved in, and then there's the personal stuff around sexuality that's going on, and you said awhile ago that for awhile they were kind of separate —
- ROMA: Right.

FOLLET: But how do they start to come together, and does the women's movement play any part in that?

ROMA: Yeah. I'm trying to think when that whole thing came in, and how much was lesbian and feminist tied together for me, and opening up. When did *Sisterhood is Powerful* come out?

FOLLET: Seventy.

ROMA: Yeah. See, I'm thinking we used that book and — you know, the women's movement, for me, came with being with other women and getting these books and reading them together. So what I remember first is this grouping of us in relation to the Free School. And then of course, the lesbian feminist thing all happening with the women's music movement that happened in '73. I'm a little unclear on '69, '70, '71 and what was going on, for me. I mean, I remember that book so clearly and reading it, and I remember *Our Bodies, Ourselves* so clearly. And then actually there were some other ones.

You know, the feminist and the women's movement, I became conscious of it in '67 and '68 as the political — as the male, you know, the peace and justice movement, the antiwar movement, everything — these roles were solidified and acted out in terms of the men doing certain things and the women doing other things. And so I think that that tension, for me, and for the women that I was doing this with, that was sort of the awakening. And then I think that we just started reading and stuff like that and talking, but I don't remember demonstrations or groupings of people or anything like that right now.

FOLLET: But do you remember specific incidents where the men's roles in the movement became problematic? Any especially —

ROMA: Well, I just know that some of us separated ourselves out, and just — that's what I remember more clearly, that we were not a part of that in the same way, and I wonder — yeah, I'm hazy there.

FOLLET: Well, it was so much a part of the ether in the air at that time, you know —

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: — so it's not surprising that there weren't —

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: It was just the way things were going.

ROMA: Right. And I also think, you know, at that time I was struggling with what was I going to do. [In] '70 I was supposed to graduate —

FOLLET: Uh-oh.

ROMA: – and I took an extra semester — and here's another time when my parents said, We're paying for four years, and if you're not going to graduate on time and with your class of six thousand, (laughs) you know, you're not going to graduate with your class. I said, "I don't care" — you know, my class is six or seven thousand — so they said, Well, we said we'd pay for four years. We paid four years for your sister. We paid four years for your brother, so you'll have to get a loan. So it was my first loan.

And I was — you know, it was because the Free School was starting. All these things were sort of overlapping. The Free School started in '70. I was supposed to graduate in '70. And I knew I wanted to do that, and I would postpone, I'd take an extra semester. So I applied for a loan, and it was easy then and it was very inexpensive then. I needed eight hundred dollars. So anyway, I finished a semester late.

And the Free School got off and running. I have a better recollection now of that and the women's movement and the women at the school and the girls and wanting to read things with them, and open them up. And we decided to do it sort of cross-generationally. So yeah. And I had some fear of what I was going to do when I graduated, you know, was I going to stay in Madison? And here was this school opening up. And we started in the spring of '70, and by the fall, the parents had formed a corporation so that they actually — we had tuition, and I actually made two hundred dollars a month from the school. They said, What do you need to live on? I said, Two hundred dollars a month. And so that's what I got paid.

And so then there was that transition, which was helpful to me. Because what was I going to do and how was I going to earn money, and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, that's interesting that it's sort of a blur there. I think it had a lot — there's a mix-up of coming out and being a woman and being strong about that and, you know, just — I haven't thought about those connections till now. So now I'm going to try and –

FOLLET: But by '70, or a semester later, you were getting your bachelor's –

ROMA: Finished my bachelor's. Oh, I did a recital, even though it wasn't required, because I thought, Well, I'm not sure what I want to do. I got a B.A. with a music major, piano emphasis — pretty challenging, and what would be acceptable for a person, as a piano major and as a music major. And I had this really psychedelic poster made for my concert. (laughs) It's really a riot.

FOLLET: Do you still have it?

ROMA: Yeah. It's just hysterical. It's so psychedelic. It's the epitome. And you know, I in the music school would be one of the only people that would be having a psychedelic poster for my concert. All the rest were sort of really square. But it was good, and I think my mom came out for it, and so all this stuff is going in. It was sort of ending, beginning, and changing.

FOLLET: What did you play, do you remember?

ROMA: I played a piece by Schumann. I played some Scarlatti sonatas. I think I played a piece by Vincent Persichetti. "Abegg Variations." Scarlatti. I think I played something by Beethoven. I'm unclear right now.

FOLLET: Were you still –

ROMA: Oh, Aaron Copeland. I played Aaron Copeland.

FOLLET: These were your selections?

ROMA: Yeah, that's what I played, pretty much.

FOLLET: Were you still finding that time alone at the keyboard was a time when you were exploring new things, making sense of other things? Did that setting still offer you a different kind of reflection?

ROMA: The tension was growing a little bit with what was I going to do with music. And it really came to bear in '73, when I got my master's, and I went back for my master's in piano performance. It was that year that I realized that I needed to spend at least three hours by myself practicing, and that was increasingly difficult. That became more of a challenge, because of feeling that I needed to be with people. I wanted to be teaching, or I wanted to be — I knew that piano performance was not going to be where I was going, although piano was so important to me. I mean, it was my main — it still was very much a vehicle of expression and creativity, absolutely.

But it was that year that — oh my gosh, it was hard for me to pull away from teaching at the experimental school where, see, I felt that was just so new and so — you know, there was a whole movement going on in the whole country of these experimental schools, and in Madison it was so great, because we had the support of these very liberal parents who had these kids who were dropping out, smoking — tuning in, turning on, dropping [out] — and they needed the structure, and we got to create the structure. And we had some pretty incredible things going. It was great. And so that was drawing me more than, you know, when I was sitting and practicing, I'd say, "Oh, I want to be doing this and this."

But the Free School was also the place where I started my first choir, and it was a choir made up of the faculty and the students. And I also created, in that way, something very different and very unusual. I mean, we did madrigals, which is what you'd expect, and then I did this madrigal comedy opera, and I must've picked up some stuff going on in the music school. There were probably hundreds of these madrigal comedy operas that were written in Italy between 1600 and 1660, or 1550 and 1650, something like that, and we sang them and brought all of the *commedia del l'arte* into this, at the Free School.

So I was beginning to put some things together on my own, and it was feeling very creative. And the act of conducting, I was really turned on by it. And it was with people. I'm creating with people. I'm doing this all with people. It's music, it's art, et cetera. So I did a year towards my master's in piano, and then that summer I took a workshop in conducting, and that was the turning point. And so I said, "Oh my gosh. I can do music. I need the piano. I have to be at the piano. People. Lots of creativity." So I made the switch, and that was also a big turning point.

And then I had to leave the Free School because — I mean, I had to focus on really completing my master's, which I did. And all of this time, I'm involved with Kate, my first partner, from '70 to '75. So I had that support system and that new, wonderful situation, and, you know, it was a good time. And also, women's music was happening and Lavender —

FOLLET: Lavender Jane?

ROMA: Lavender Jane, and Holly Near, and all of that was just sort of opening up my eyes, and so I was beginning to see how I could put some very important things together — my interest in women, my classical music, and my politics. And so, let's see, in 1974 — this does fit in so perfectly here — I went to see — well, all right. I had no conducting experience except what I had done at the Free School. I had tons of singing experience from Germantown Friends, which I loved, and I did sing some at University of Wisconsin. So I needed more experience and I needed more teachers, and I needed to involve myself, so in '74 I took a two-week workshop with Margaret Hillis at Ravinia, in Chicago — and at Northwestern and at Ravinia. So I stayed two weeks with [historian] Ann Gordon.

FOLLET: Oh, yes! Let's —

ROMA: All right.

FOLLET: Oh.

ROMA: So this is crucial. I had only had a church choir by that time — not very interesting. I had apprenticed myself to the boy choir, because Carrel Pray, this wonderful woman, had sort of taken me in, and I needed experience any way I could get it — boy choir, it didn't matter. Conducting, just getting involved. So I went to a woman that was very important, Margaret Hillis, and she was amazing. And I stayed with Ann. So here I'm doing this very formal music with Margaret Hillis, and then I'm with Ann.

FOLLET: Who's an old friend from Germantown, right?

ROMA: Yeah, old friend from Germantown Friends — actually an acquaintance, because she was older than I was. She was more my sister's age, but we met politically in Madison. She was a friend of Kate Gyllensvard, my

partner. They knew each other from history and courses and stuff like that, and so I was sort of reunited and connected [with her] through Kate.

So I'm down there for two weeks, and oh, we got into incredible conversations, as you can imagine. I mean, I'm sure I came home and talked about things that I had learned and what I'd been doing and stuff like that, but then we're talking about this whole conducting — and so I'm saying, "OK, Ann, it's 1974 — 1976 is the bicentennial. I want to tell the story of America through song, and how can I do it with the boy choir? You know, am I going to dress some of the boys up as girls?" No, that wouldn't go over too well. And we got a big kick out of that. And so Ann looks at me straight in the face and she says, "Why don't you start a women's choir?"

And even [with] my budding feminism and my lesbianism and my interest in women and my interest in music and everything, I couldn't make the connection, or I didn't make it immediately, because this is my experience. All of the women's choirs at the University of Wisconsin and other places that I know — and as a student conductor, I was in on the auditioning by the professors, and it was cruel in a way, because the very select women would be with the men, right, for the mixed choir, and then you had hundreds of women who really wanted to sing, and what did you do with them? You put them in the women's choir or glee club, whatever you want to call it, and they had a male conductor. And the position of the male conductor was always a plum, right? And then you had all of these women. So they were the leftovers, you know, and the repertoire was not very interesting.

So Ann says, "Look, I didn't sing at Germantown Friends" — because, you know, she just never did — and under Mary Brewer, the person we both knew and spoke about and everything, she stayed away from it. But they made her sing, evidently, the first and second year. Some kind of all-girl — I don't know what the policy was at Smith at that time, but she said it was an incredible experience. And she said, "I never would've guessed that. I would've been in choir at Germantown Friends, had I known, but they made me at Smith."

FOLLET: At Smith College?

ROMA: Mm-hmm. So I went, Oh, all right, let's talk about this. So she told me about what it was like bringing women together and singing and the whole act of singing and the art of singing and the community and everything like that. And I said, "All right, Ann. If I go back to Madison and start a women's choir, then you need to find a bunch of songs that tells the story about American women, so that when we think about '76 and the bicentennial, we can have something."

OK, so that was July of '74. I go back to Madison, and I have what I wrote up. It's pretty amazing, all from that whole incubation period there in Northwestern, staying with Ann. And I went back, and I put these posters up, and I got a choir together by the fall of '74, found a place for us to rehearse. It was in the *Capital Times*. It was a little advertisement in the

Capital Times, and we met at St. Francis House. You know St. Francis House?

FOLLET: Oh, yes.

ROMA: And I found a friend to be an accompanist, and we were off and running. Now, what I did — I can't even remember when I started doing this research, but probably then, between being in Northwestern, everything, I decided I had to put some kind of parameters on what I was doing. So the first parameter was really interesting. I would only do works for this choir that were written for women's voices, which was very limiting, you know, because basically women's choral music consists of unchanged voices music — in other words, for kids, boys, children's choirs. What else would you have women sing for? Who's going to write for a women's choir, when they basically didn't exist? At least in the past, you know, we're talking about. So madrigals would be rearranged for women's voices — Renaissance music.

So of course I did some research and learned that there were specific places — nunneries, convents, et cetera — where women wrote. But you see, it was the time before women's history, right? And just imagine, everything comes late to the music department, so the idea that you would be studying women composers in history, that whole movement hadn't really taken hold yet. But there was a book that was pretty influential — two books, actually — that I read that were helpful to me, and so the first program was a really solid program with I think we had 30 singers — 15 altos, 15 sopranos.

FOLLET: And were they recruited to participate in this bicentennial program? Was that the focus?

ROMA: Oh, really good question. No. Because this thing with Ann hadn't materialized yet, right? I mean, I started the choir, and the repertoire of that choir was works that had been written for specifically women's voices — because we hadn't gotten back together. We got back together in May of '75. And she had this pile of music. And I said, "See, here's the program. I did what I was supposed to do." And she said, "Here's the pile of music. I did what I was supposed to do."

FOLLET: And the pile of music was?

ROMA: Was starting from 1620, pieces of music that women sang, whether it was — they came here as immigrants, and what did they sing? They sang religious music. They sang it with men, but this is what they sang. And then, you know, what did they sing when they were raising their children or what are the lullabies? What were the work songs? And then what were the sort of political awareness. So we had three sections. We eventually did that when we were there together in May of '75.

So that's different. The first [half of] the concert that we did in April was Porpora and Schumann and Brahms. I look at this and I go, Oh my God. We did everything in a different language. You know, that's what you did. And the whole first half was in French, in German, in Latin. Am I missing anything? French, German, Latin. No. I think that's what we sang.

And then the second half of the concert was, I commissioned my first woman composer, Royce Dembo. She was in Madison. I don't think I had any money to pay her, but I said, "We'll perform what you write." She set a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, and we also had a short piece, instrumental piece, on the program that she had written. And we followed that with this piece that she wrote for the choir — a piece by Vincent Persichetti that I had always wanted to do, that he wrote for women's choir, from *Corinthians*. Oh, and then we sang a beautiful piece by Vivian Fine, who taught at Bennington. And so I had to do a little research to dig that up. "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love and Her Reply," Marlowe, and I forget — there were two poets that she put together. Christopher Marlowe and — can't remember. A great, wonderful piece.

So there we had it, the first half, music written specifically for women's voices, and the second half, all twentieth-century male and female — oh, and a friend of mine, Paul Zeitz, wrote a piece that we did. So, there it was, and I think it was very good.

FOLLET: Now who was we? Who were the — you said 30 voices?

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: Who answered the call?

ROMA: Where did I collect them? (laughs) Some were students at Madison, and then I put — you know, I'm trying to think. There was no women's center or something that I went to. I went to churches, I went anywhere I could find, I put up posters, and got this little article in the *Capital Times*.

FOLLET: And how did you describe what you were trying to —

ROMA: Oh, it's fabulous. I have it here. That we were starting a women's choir, that we were going to — oh, man — "bring forth the slighted sonorities of the all-female choir," something like that, and sing works that were expressly written for women's voices, sing works by women. And that's what it was at that point. What else that was interesting that I put? I think works by women composers was good and contemporary, and works expressly written for women's voices, I think that's what I put.

FOLLET: And you have this poster in your stuff here?

ROMA: Yeah, oh it's —

FOLLET: Fabulous.

ROMA: – incredible. I hadn't even looked at it. And I have the little article from the *Capital Times*.

FOLLET: Ah. Perfect.

ROMA: So, it's great. Yeah, I took definitely all my training and — but it was the women composers and working with women's voices that was really important, empowering women's voices and having a choir that was women that was a community choir. Actually, that's an important aspect, too, that it wasn't associated with a university and that had some sort of independence and sense of — you know, I didn't say this to everybody, but as it turned out, all of the altos were gay and all of the sopranos were not. I'm not kidding. In that choir, it was just totally mind-blowing. So you have a little stereotype or something right there. Anyway, that was a riot. So yeah.

So then I had my end of the deal. I went down to Ann and we had a blast. She had all of this music, and so then she had conceptualized putting it into three sections, you know, women in religion — and that's what they did when they first came to the — men and women, they sang religious songs. So that was the first part of it, and she teased out some great ones. And then the second section was women's daily life, and we actually start with “What Are Little Girls Made Of?” And so it's sort of socialization. And we ended that section with lullabies, women giving birth. And so it was really great. And then the third section was women empowering themselves and their consciousness of getting the vote and politics and change and Mother Jones and winning the vote and stuff like that. So we only really got up to 1937 or something like that, and here it was 1970. But that was cool.

FOLLET: Now this is the program that you and Ann designed for the bicentennial?

ROMA: Right. Right.

FOLLET: Around the history of women —

ROMA: So this is May of '75. But then I'm realizing that I'm going to be leaving because I'm going to Philadelphia. I got a job at Abington Friends, and it was my first real job, and so I used Anna Crusis in Madison as the lab choir, because I had a couple months in Madison. So we actually looked at some of the music. I brought it right up, and after we gave our performance and everything — you know, we were still a choir. We didn't know what we were doing, and I thought I was leaving and I would find somebody to take my place with this little choir.

FOLLET: Did you call that choir Anna Crusis in Madison?

ROMA: I did.

- FOLLET: I want to hear about the origins of that name. Will you define it and tell me, was it your idea and why?
- ROMA: Oh, yeah, it was my — I wanted something unusual. It would be great if it was a woman's name. And I really wanted something good. So, thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking. Anna Crusis is —
- FOLLET: Could I stop for just a second? (48:10–50:00 adjusting camera shot)
- ROMA: OK. Oh, we were talking about —
- FOLLET: Anna Crusis, the name.
- ROMA: Oh, the name. Yes, absolutely.
- FOLLET: The name Anna Crusis. I want to hear your description of how you came to that, why you chose it, and what it means.
- ROMA: OK. I was looking for a musical term. I was looking for something that I could make into a woman's name. I wanted something really different and engaging. So I don't know how it popped in there, but Anna Crusis — maybe because somebody at school was using the word anacrusis as a musical term, and I was saying, "Oh, Anna!" because, you know, as a Greek word, it's one single word, A-N-A-C-R-U-S-I-S. It comes from the Greek, and it means upbeat. It's that beat that moves into the downbeat. It is also known as a pickup, so of course there were a lot of puns and everything — you know, it's a pickup choir of women, things like that. But anyway, so I changed it to A-N-N-A, Anna, capital C-R-U-S-I-S. And then we decided, Oh wow, Anna Crusis, let's create her history. So then, the original thing — (laughs) oh my goodness. She was a woman in the nineteenth century who was from Mazomanie, Wisconsin. I mean, we were just inventing —
- FOLLET: You dreamed this up.
- ROMA: Yeah, we were dreaming, you know, what would this woman's history be? So we had a lot of fun. And it's been magical ever since, I think.
- FOLLET: So Anna Crusis — as a musical term, I had the sense that it was sort of the taking in of breath and choosing to make — I'm making this up.
- ROMA: OK. It —
- FOLLET: Is that something?
- ROMA: It would be, absolutely, the inhalation of breath, the upbeat. But you can actually have a note or something on the upbeat. It wouldn't be just

necessarily the inhalation of breath going into the downbeat. But now, it's really interesting, because as, of course, feminist musicology has come along — are you familiar with the book *Feminine Endings* by Susan McClary? In music history, strong beats are masculine. Weak beats are feminine. So the fourth beat is a weak beat, the upbeat. So, it's turning that around. I didn't know I was doing that, really. Do you understand? So one and three — if you take regular four/four, one and three are masculine and two and four are feminine, because they're weak, and of course all of this can be explained by living in this sexist world that we do, in that everything gets translated into these languages, musical languages. But anacrusis, to me — upbeat, I think sounds good. I mean, an up beat, and it is that which leads into something else. And it also, yeah, it is called a pickup — pickup leading into the downbeat. So I don't know. I had a lot of fun with that.

FOLLET: And Anna, as you made her up, was from Mazomanie.

ROMA: Oh, yeah. Oh, we had many stories. She never married. She was very independent. You know, I can't even remember. Because we had a whole thing going one day. But yeah, we loved the name Mazomanie –

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: – and I don't remember. Born in the nineteenth century, never married, had children. I don't know, we just –

FOLLET: Yeah. Yeah. It was just a playful thing.

ROMA: Anyway. Yeah.

FOLLET: Yeah.

ROMA: So, oh yeah, we were sort of at that transition period where Ann and I worked on this, culling from the many songs that she had found songs that we thought would work. And so some I got arranged. I think maybe I arranged one. I said I hadn't done much arranging. I think maybe I did one. And then we sort of experimented in Madison, in that summer. Now, I don't think we did any little performances of those, but don't forget, in the summer of 1975, was the socialist feminist conference at Antioch. Were you there?

FOLLET: No, but you were.

ROMA: I went. Yeah, it was great.

FOLLET: OK. Do tell.

ROMA: I was very interested in doing some kind of music there, but I couldn't take Anna — you know, I couldn't take Anna, so I just went. And it was a great thing to be at. Don't remember much about it.

FOLLET: Really?

ROMA: Except that I wanted to do — I mean, I was aware that people — it would've been a good singing situation, but, you know. And I think I might have led some singalongs and stuff like that. So that was '75, yeah.

FOLLET: Tell me about that conference. It was a socialist feminist conference?

ROMA: Socialist feminist conference. So that was at Antioch. Was it the first time I went to Antioch? No. I had gone to meet a good friend who burned his draft card (laughs) in the '60s — one of my friends from GFS [Germantown Friends School]. A good Quaker. No, I can't remember. I remember sleeping in my car on the campus, which was [what] everybody else was doing. Oh well, I don't remember specifics about it all.

FOLLET: But how did you hear about it? You were part of a socialist feminist community? You identified yourself as a socialist feminist exclusively?

ROMA: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yup.

FOLLET: And how did you come to that, as opposed to being a Quaker or a person who loves people? How did you come to — I mean, did you come to that in the same way that you made a conscious decision to not be Catholic and to be Quaker? Had you made an explicit political decision to think of yourself as a socialist feminist?

ROMA: I mean — well, I think that I was definitely a lesbian feminist, and I think if I were to identify as anything, socialist made the most sense to me. You know, we did a lot of political work at the experimental school, so I read things with students that I hadn't read before that time. So I'm thinking of *Fanshen*, and I'm thinking of — just — oh, God. We had this course called Connections — that was also a newspaper on the campus at Wisconsin — do you remember that? It was a political newspaper. Oh, I think it was —

FOLLET: Well, I was later there, so —

ROMA: Yeah, I think it was a pretty amazing newspaper, if my memory is serving me right. But we had this course that we named Connections, and also I think this helped me with a lot of understanding about history and politics and class and work. We would take the students out to Oscar Mayer, and we would have a tour of the factory. And then we would come back and they would write about it, and then we would discuss their experience and what they wrote, and the connections were to be writing about things that

were relevant that we did, that they saw and they experienced. So we went to factories and other things like that. So my awareness was raised in relation to things like that, and understanding work, and poverty, and all of that I think came as much in relation to the Free School and experimenting and reading with young people. And we had a little reading group with the parents, also. We would read [R.D. Laing's] *The Divided Self* — and we read things like that with the parents. So that's coming back to me. But, so socialist, how did I label myself that way?

FOLLET: You got yourself to that conference. You were thinking beyond Madison or you were part of a network or –

ROMA: Don't know.

FOLLET: OK. Anything stand out about that conference itself?

ROMA: No, because — I think probably the reason it didn't — I mean it, right now, I mean, if I –

FOLLET: Have to go back to your journals. (laughs)

ROMA: I have to go back to my journals. But also I was in transition. I was going to be moving to Philly, so I think that it's a blur.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: I remember being on the campus and I remember feeling — truthfully, I remember feeling being a part of something that was very strong and very powerful and that resonated a lot with me, and it partly had to do with the last couple of years. And it felt so much more right to me than my schooling, you know what I mean, sort of being in this milieu and being a part of this change movement. I felt there were agents of change all around me, and I felt a part of it, that something new was being created. It was pretty neat. But I don't remember specifics and going to lectures and stuff like that. OK, then to Philly.

FOLLET: But before Philly, while you were still in Madison, the women's music scene is happening, right? Festivals are starting to happen. There are things going on in Champaign-Urbana, and in Bloomington –

ROMA: Not yet.

FOLLET: Not yet?

ROMA: Seventy-five.

FOLLET: Hmm.

- ROMA: Michigan is doing their thirtieth this year.
- FOLLET: Right.
- ROMA: So we're '05, right?
- FOLLET: But weren't there –
- ROMA: Seventy-four, Champaign-Urbana.
- FOLLET: Champaign. OK. Seventy-three –
- ROMA: I didn't go. I didn't go to that until I got to Philly, and then went.
- FOLLET: Ah-ha.
- ROMA: In '74 I was, you know, with Ann, and doing the — I was still sort of ensconced in school, getting my master's. Yeah, I think that Champaign-Urbana was '74, because the National Women's Music Festival just had their thirtieth this past year in Columbus, Ohio. And I was with MUSE in Montreal, at a big gay and lesbian festival, so, missed that. I hate that. I really wanted to be there. And I don't think I'm going to Michigan thirtieth. So yeah, no, that was, I think, '74, and then the socialist feminist in '75, and I was moving, so –
- FOLLET: Yeah, I see.
- ROMA: – you know, it was all — couldn't do it.
- FOLLET: You're doing your own thing, but not necessarily in connection with those.
- ROMA: Right. But I'll tell you, you know, wearing out the LPs on the record player (laughs) of “Lavender Jane” [“Lavender Jane Loves Women”] and some of those early LPs.
- FOLLET: You've mentioned “Lavender Jane” a couple of times, and I found a quote of something that you said about that. You said, “‘Lavender Jane Loves Women’ and '73 marked the beginning of realizing that there was a consciousness about music that didn't exist about women's lives.”
- ROMA: Hmm.
- FOLLET: Can you explain that to me? “‘Lavender Jane’ marked the beginning of realizing that there was a consciousness about music that didn't exist about women's lives.” Or another way of putting it is, What did “Lavender Jane” tap in you — or is that a piece worth singling out, in your experience?

ROMA: Yeah, it represented something — I'm going to try to figure out. (laughs)

FOLLET: Whoops. While you're figuring out, the light is flashing, is it not?

ROMA: It is.

FOLLET: OK. So you'll get to figure a little bit more while we change the tape.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ROMA: OK. Are we rolling?

FOLLET: We're running.

ROMA: All right. "Lavender Jane" was — all right, first off, I think I have to say that what fascinated me was that this music was about subjects that obviously hadn't been sung about before, or that I wasn't aware had been sung about before. And it was expressing something that was in the air and that was happening. And this lesbian identity, this lesbian feeling, not just of me but of a lot of people, sparked something that songs hadn't been expressing — feelings that women, not just lesbians, but women, were feeling. OK, so here was this world of music that was being opened that was about the lives of people around me, my life. So that's when connections began to be made.

But here, you know, I was stuck in graduate school. I was stuck getting my master's. And I was in a situation there in Madison in graduate school, I wasn't happy. I had male teachers. I had only male — you know, two conductors. I had to go find my women conductors. And there was probably a lot of tension just for me getting through that. I know there was.

FOLLET: You're describing it as being stuck.

ROMA: Yes.

FOLLET: Which you didn't describe your musical education before, as being stuck. Are you starting to feel stuck in something that isn't working?

ROMA: Well, the fact that I was conducting was the right place for me, I felt. That situation at Madison — I wasn't nurtured in my degree program, and I felt very fine going to study with Margaret Hillis, you know. And I felt very good working with Carol Pray of the boy choir. So, you know, there were some people who were telling me and urging me on in a very positive way. I didn't feel that from my teachers at Wisconsin in the degree program.

FOLLET: In the master's program?

ROMA: In the master's program. So here's this world where I think I'm beginning to put things together. "Lavender Jane," and also Holly Near, was very, very, very crucial at that point — equally so. So the possibility that I could take my classical upbringing training and put it together with something that — you know, it's like going to Quaker meeting when I described it. This was about my life, what I saw happening, the world as I knew it, that people were having feelings and they were making statements and they were standing up for what they believed. And I saw that in the midst of a spiritual environment, which was the Quaker meeting, and so different

from Catholic Church. So here there's maybe another feeling that something is touching me, and I'm making connections, that I want to do something different. So I think that that's what was unlocked with "Lavender Jane" and Holly Near and some of those early women's music things.

And I wanted to be able to do that with the women's choir. That also was clear after I started Anna, and that took me a little bit of time, but that's what I realized I was actually putting together these very important things — my Quaker peace and justice sensibilities, my interest in women, my lesbian self, and my classical training. So that's what was beginning to be released, I think, at that time. Did I answer better?

FOLLET: Mm-hmm.

ROMA: And, you know, I didn't know any of those people at that time. I didn't know Kay and Alix, and I never knew the third person, but I worked very closely with Kay.

FOLLET: Kay Gardner?

ROMA: Yes, I worked very closely with Kay Gardner, and with Alix, too. I've been in performance with Alix.

FOLLET: Alix?

ROMA: Dobkin. I can't even remember the name. Patches Attom? I don't know, the third person.

FOLLET: Third person. Mm-hmm.

ROMA: So, yes. You know, feeling really a part of something that was picking up was pretty great. Yeah, I didn't go to any of those music festivals until I went back to Philly, and took the name of Anna with me.

FOLLET: Yes, you did, didn't you?

ROMA: Mm-hmm. I mean, I said to the people who I left in Madison, I said, Well, you can be the Anna West, and I'll take it and we can be Anna East. So it didn't continue in Madison. It re-emerged as Womansong a year or two later.

FOLLET: Right. That's what it was when I got there. There was a very vibrant Womansong, but that's what it morphed into, huh?

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: I didn't know it came out of Anna.

- ROMA: Well, I don't know if it came out of, but it's in the path of — whatever.
- FOLLET: Did the groundwork.
- ROMA: Yeah.
- FOLLET: OK, so you moved back to Philly in '75 to take this job at Abington Friends to teach music, right?
- ROMA: Yes.
- FOLLET: And you take Anna with you, so you're clearly going to be doing both?
- ROMA: Teaching and –
- FOLLET: Both teaching and community chorus, right?
- ROMA: Yeah. Mm-hmm. I taught at Abington and I actually had middle and upper school when I first started — all the choral and all the music. And what a time to be going back into Philly.
- FOLLET: Why?
- ROMA: I was so glad. I mean — well, Susan Saxe, all of that, Philadelphia, the whole women's community, had been infiltrated with FBI agents and everything. There was a lot of paranoia amongst some communities and stuff like that. At the same time, that's the challenging part, there was a group in Philadelphia called Wine, Women, and Song, a bunch of lesbians, maybe six or seven or them, and they were great, but they had just sort of broken up. So I got several of those wonderful women into Anna Crusis. And I went down to Penn and I met some people very quickly and early on, and I don't even remember how, except maybe I went down to Penn. Or, actually, I found out about Wine, Women, and Song, and meeting some of those people. And I don't know how this happened. I met some Earhamites, graduates of Earham College. So I put out — I'm trying to think of what specific places I went into. I have also the advertisement that I put out about Anna in Philly.
- So I started it pretty quickly after I got there. And we had this body of music. I had a determination. I had this body of music that I wanted to do with Ann [Gordon]. It was '75, and we wanted to perform in '76 at the Berkshires [Berkshire Women's History Conference] in Bryn Mawr, which was great, because there Bryn Mawr was, and it was going to be great. So I did have an immediate goal, now that I'm thinking about it. We had this music. We had to breathe life into it. We had to see if it was going to work. Ann came and worked with us. So that was a pretty quick thing that we had to get together.
- FOLLET: And the Berks was going to be your performance date?

ROMA: Mm-hmm. So June of '76. We did a run of it at Penn the night before, I think it was, and then performed it at Bryn Mawr. So I think we rehearsed at a church in Germantown, and we didn't have a very big group. I think we had 17 for starters. And we had a mime. We built that in because one of the women who was a part of this, you know, connected to people, was a mime. She did phenomenal work. And then we, piece by piece, built this thing. And the opera itself, the folk opera, was an incredible feminist piece of imagination and collaboration with Ann, partly because she's the historian and put all of this in context. And she's written several — do you have that essay? I have it somewhere —there's an essay that she wrote to go along with it, because she really wanted to do something at the Berkshires. She wanted to have an impact. So it was pretty great.

FOLLET: Now what's the name of the piece?

ROMA: It's called *American Women: A Choral History*, but we called it *The Folka*. For a long time, we thought, Oh, that's not going to go over so well. But that's what we envisioned, something that would tell a story and was still opera, you know, but it was of folk music. So we decided we'd abandon that title. *American Women: A Choral History*, I think that's what the final title was.

And it had a profound effect on people because there were a lot of different sort of scenes, and we set it up with little introductions and little bits of information that would make people fit the story together of what women's lives were like in the sixteenth and seventeenth and eighteenth century with religion and spirituality. And then just how the whole thing unfolded with women's daily lives. We did a Bessie Smith song and I actually played the piano. And we did these wonderful two lullabies that were great. And "Who's Going to Shoe Your Pretty Little Foot?" I didn't know is a lesbian song, but Ann educated me with that.

And everybody bought into it as an unfolding of what women's lives were like and what women's struggles were like in the past, and then of course we did this great piece where we dressed up, wore little pieces of clothing that would indicate we were the male or the female for a discussion about getting the vote, the boys and the girls talking to each other. It was called "Winning the Vote." So there was humor, there was history — I don't know, it was such creativity and collaboration with history and music and mime, some instrumental music, costuming.

FOLLET: Was it recorded?

ROMA: Really good question. I don't know. I haven't looked at what the subject matter of the Anna tapes were that I found.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: I mean the big reel-to-reels I tried to look at, but I'll check it out.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: I'll bet it is. I'll bet it is.

FOLLET: Well, I know you have the program at least.

ROMA: Oh, yeah.

FOLLET: But I wonder if there's any kind of –

ROMA: We performed it at Douglass College, [and at] Columbia.

FOLLET: So you took it on the road?

ROMA: We took it on the road, because it was very well received in Bryn Mawr. It was just great.

FOLLET: I bet.

ROMA: And so it was that performance that got us the Douglass engagement that got us the University of New Haven, Choate Rosemary, the Radical Historians at Columbia. I don't remember where else, but it lived on for a while.

FOLLET: It got legs, yeah.

ROMA: Yeah, it did.

FOLLET: That's fantastic. Now Anna — I've seen it described as the first feminist women's choir in the United States. That's a fair characterization?

ROMA: Yeah, so [in] this whole second wave, or whatever we want to call it, it was the first. Within six months followed the L.A. Women's Community Chorus, and that was conducted by Sue Fink — it was about six months [later]. There was a chorus, a choir in New York, a women's choir, that was started by Roberta Kosse, but they only did works by her. So I don't count that, and I didn't know her or know that until I met her at one of these music festivals. So, yes.

FOLLET: How did you define the chorus? It's defined as a women's chorus. Is it defined in '75 as a feminist chorus?

ROMA: Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: Yes. In your literature, or just in your it-goes-without-saying understanding?

ROMA: I don't know. You know, I'm wondering –

FOLLET: A goes-without-saying kind of understanding.

ROMA: Very interesting. I wonder if I used it in the advertising. I know I do with MUSE. I mean, it's in our MUSE philosophy. And I don't think — in '75, you know, when you created a mission statement or a philosophy, I don't think that was done then.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: Well, it's interesting. I think we thought of ourselves as a feminist chorus. Now I'm sure the word appeared somewhere, but I'd have to look through that stuff. Maybe it went without saying. But the interesting thing is, we were always lesbian and straight women, almost in equal numbers, maybe usually more lesbian, but a very strong presence of heterosexual women. And it wasn't until in Philadelphia that a gay men's chorus started that Anna all of a sudden became the lesbian chorus. (Follet laughs)

That pissed me off, actually, to be honest with you, because I think the power of Anna now, and then the power of MUSE, is that coming together, that cross section of straight and lesbian women, because it's just powerful. It's strong, and it makes for a more politically conscious organization. And I love it. And I never wanted to have a choir of just lesbian women. I didn't want to. So, for sure, lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual — and the trans-gendered is probably coming soon. But not to my knowledge with MUSE have we had transgendered people audition. But I'm aware of many of the women's choirs having that discussion and then moving into that whole realm, which we haven't done. But Anna, you know, did we use that word? I don't know.

FOLLET: Well, we'll see.

ROMA: I'll have to go through some of that literature.

FOLLET: Well, the good news is that you have that literature –

ROMA: That's right.

FOLLET: – that we can go through. OK, so definitely a women's chorus, feminist in fact, if not in public –

ROMA: Word.

FOLLET: If not in word. And you mentioned the mix of lesbians and heterosexuals, and that that's part of its power. How so? This is in 1975 now.

ROMA: Absolutely.

FOLLET: OK. What was powerful about that?

ROMA: And it's what's still powerful about it. OK, how can I articulate it? Well, all right, let me try. There's some kind of cross-fertilization. You know, diversity is really a wonderful thing, in all ways. Why, though, didn't I want to start just a lesbian choir? I think because of the dialog that for my life — whew. I don't know why this is so hard. In my experience, I have found that the political — when I started Anna, there was an importance to me to speak to all kinds of issues, because I come out of the antiwar, labor, peace and justice movements, and civil rights movement. Or the results of those or the fomenting of all of those movements coming together in the '60s, including the gay and lesbian liberation, I think that a cross section and a mix of women experienced in those different ways and areas made for a pretty amazing consciousness.

And what I found definitely to be true is that lesbian choirs — and they don't use that word; there's not that many that actually use that word in their title — tend to focus more on that issue as the foremost issue. And for me, matters and issues of lesbian and gay struggle is not the only issue, and I would never want to isolate it. So I think that straight women and lesbian women coming together and working together makes for a powerful sharing.

I can speak most recently of MUSE, and working across those differences has been something we started from the very beginning, and it helped us to be a stronger organization. And people helped each other talk across those diversities and work things out if there were tensions. And it was just the way it got set up in both choirs, actually, that I think is their strengths. And I think it has to do with just that both choirs are feminist choirs — lesbians coming to feminism, heterosexuals coming to feminism. Is this making any sense?

FOLLET: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

ROMA: OK. So, yes, that's what I'm going to say right now because I'm struggling here a bit.

FOLLET: OK. Did it, in 1975, did that mix present challenges in Anna?

ROMA: Huh. You know, I'm going back 30 years.

FOLLET: I know it.

ROMA: And do I remember this?

FOLLET: Well, you mentioned —

ROMA: Yeah. Wine, Women, and Song was lesbian, and then I came in and did a mix, and the same thing happened in Cincinnati. The year before I came, Dinah, an all-lesbian separatist choir, they had formed and they had fallen

apart the year before I got there. So actually, a person or two from Dinah joined Anna. I can remember more tension at the beginning of MUSE than I can with Anna.

FOLLET: OK. OK. OK. Well, all right.

ROMA: So I can't reconstruct.

FOLLET: That's all right.

ROMA: I don't think so.

FOLLET: OK. Great. Well, that's the news about that. But you said the choir became labeled from the outside, as it were, as lesbian, once there was a gay male chorus. Is that right? So someone else chose to label Anna as a lesbian group?

ROMA: Well, you have to remember I think people's perception is that, before men's choirs came or anything like that, that you would assume that a bunch of women getting together to sing are a bunch of lesbians. I mean, I think there was, conceptually, some of that. If you sing music that is lesbian identified — I mean, even in Cincinnati it still happens. And it especially happened when we were fighting some of the gay issues, the initiatives that we've had, anti-gay initiatives that we've had in Cincinnati. People think that if you sing a love song, if you get heterosexuals singing a love song about women, that oh, my gosh, they must be [lesbian], you know. So we had lesbian artists come all the time to Anna. We had Kay Gardner. We had Margie Adam. I think — we had Meg Christian. We had — who else? I'm trying to think.

FOLLET: Bernice [Johnson Reagon]?

ROMA: Bernice, we had. Ethel Raim came and did workshops with us. Rhiannon, I think, came. So you have all these. And the publicity that goes out is, with those headliners or something like that says, or people in the know know that those are lesbians, and so it must be a lesbian choir. Yeah.

FOLLET: And you were singing, you said, lesbian-identified music? Is that true early on?

ROMA: Oh, yeah, we did. Oh, yeah.

FOLLET: For example?

ROMA: I mean not solely. But absolutely as part and parcel of it, yes.

FOLLET: OK. Did that cause any internal dissension — women in the group who weren't willing to do that or weren't willing to do it in certain venues?

ROMA: Oh, boy. It's hard for me to remember with Anna, but I'm almost — well, I look at some of the pictures and I say, hmm, those are all lesbians, OK, when we'd go to a lesbian festival. We did, Anna did go to NEWMF, New England Women's Music Festival. And I think a lot of the women that went were lesbians. I do want to say, with MUSE, when we go to lesbian things, the straight women are there in number, and they have been from the beginning. But I'm sure with Anita Bryant and stuff like that, everybody showed up, whether you were straight or lesbian —

FOLLET: Mm-hmm.

ROMA: — for that kind of thing. Now I'm trying to think. For some of the — oh, it's really hard for me to remember. I think Anna Crusis — no. It gets kind of blurry.

FOLLET: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. OK.

ROMA: Anna did perform at Sister — a women's retreat. It wasn't really a music festival, and I think mostly lesbians went. And I think to New England Women's Music Festival, mostly the lesbians went.

FOLLET: But no big flare-ups, or no huge walkouts or —

ROMA: Not over that.

FOLLET: Over other things?

ROMA: What we wear. (laughter) I think it happened with Anna, you know, because when they had the thirtieth anniversary, I went to the thing that happened about six weeks before the concert. They tried to get all the alumnae together and everything. They did this great show, and they had women who were currently in Anna model all the different outfits that Annas have worn, and it was absolutely hysterical. I mean, one was so bad that they decided they would just talk about it. And this is when I was there. And they were sort of dental uniforms — that's what they described them as. And I would describe them the same way. It was totally a failure. But we wanted something that was sort of like a cloak, and we had all of these pastel-y things. It was really — it was pitiful. It was bad. (Follet laughs) But we started out with these yellow t-shirts with Anna and the logo on it, and then we had red and black. Then we had these dental uniforms. You know, we go through them. And then they had these flowing — Anna under Jane — they almost changed every year.

So, yeah, MUSE, the only time we've had an outside facilitator was having to do with dress. And I want to say that Anna — I mean, we've had some pretty amazing conversations around race and repertoire with MUSE, but we didn't have an outside facilitator, we did it ourselves. Anna — I remember one really big conversation about what we were going to wear,

you know. I don't think we had an outside facilitator. We did have an outside facilitator with Anna in relation to something, and I'm not clear on what that is right now. I don't remember. I remember who it was, but I don't remember –

FOLLET: The facilitator? You remember the facilitator but not issue.

ROMA: Yes.

FOLLET: What was I going to say? Were you connected — this is now the late '70s and early '80s — were you connected to a larger women's movement? You're teaching. You're conducting and running Anna. Were you involved or a member of any feminist organizations or engaged in any other issues?

ROMA: The women's choirs have been a vehicle for me to be present at many different political issues. In other words, you can't just have talking heads. So I feel like I am and have been involved in all kinds of organizations, doing benefits, doing run-outs — those are shorter appearances at big events — all along. So I'm not a member — I mean, I'm a member of NOW, or I have been a member of NOW, and you know, and I give money to this, and I give money to that, and I demonstrate and go to antiwar or pro-choice, all kinds of demonstrations and political activities. But the choirs have been a means to be present at all sorts of political functions. And especially with Anna — and I think that Anna still continues this — every spring concert was done as a benefit for an organization. So Women Organized Against Rape, Planned Parenthood, Artists Working for Choice, all kinds of things like that. I'm trying to think of what some of the other ones are. They're all written down, but at least for Anna I'm trying to remember. So that was — oh, we were at rallies and all kinds of events. Three-Mile Island. We did the Antinuclear Revue. We were part of an antinuclear revue.

So it's a way for me — but I think all the people in the choir, and they buy into this, that it's not just a singing group, it's a community. It's a musical organization, but there's something beyond that. In other words, if you want a musical organization, you can join — and you want to be with women, you can join the Sweet Adelines. You could join any number of musical organizations if that's your main thing. But for all of the choirs that I have been with, the element of making statements and singing songs that are not popular, or, you know, they're not in the Top Forty, but they sing about women's lives — we sing about things that affect us, that affect our audience, that are relevant, that are meaningful, that have to do with growth and change.

So I would say that, for me, I haven't been necessarily working on other issues. I also was working on my own conducting and becoming a better conductor, and so summers I went out, you know, to work with Helmut Rilling, and that was pretty important. Four of my eight summers in Philly, I went out there.

FOLLET: Oh, wow.

ROMA: But I also went to the national women's music festivals, most of them. I didn't get to Michigan until I got to Cincinnati. You know, I didn't go up to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival until quite late. And I was invited as a conductor. So mostly when I was in Philly, I went out to Champaign-Urbana.

FOLLET: You did? OK.

ROMA: Oh, yeah.

FOLLET: So you're starting to connect to the whole festival –

ROMA: Oh, absolutely. That's how I met all the musicians. I went very early. I think I went to the second or the third Champaign-Urbana. And that's how I met Rhiannon, that's how I met Holly Near, that's how I met Alix Dobkin, that's how I met almost all of the musical people that I collaborated with at those festivals.

FOLLET: So what was your take on the festivals? How did they mesh with or differ from what you were doing?

ROMA: Oh, they were — you know, it was great. The very early ones — Rhiannon was just this person who had a guitar who was — I had to sit by her, you know. I didn't want to go anywhere but just sit and listen to her. I was very aware that this incredibly talented person was just there making music. And then of course the next year she came with the group Alive, and then the next year, instead of three they were five, whatever. You know. So they were incredible because we were all part of this.

Now Kay Gardner and myself were a little bit different and felt a little bit different because we had all of this classical training, and there's mostly this incredibly songwriting going on with women and their guitars. There was not a lot of diverse music at first. Wonderfully creative, powerful songs and songwriters accompanying themselves, maybe with a rhythm section, but — where was I going with that? Kay Gardner and myself have all this classical training, so we were trying to figure out how do you fit that in here? So, early on we formed a festival choir. I helped form a festival choir, a pickup choir — anybody who will come, I'll work with.

So very early on, actually I was just reading in some of that Anna stuff, in '77 I put a pickup choir together, and we did two pieces, one of Kay's, and Kay directed it, although I prepared it, and then I conducted a piece by Francesca Caccini, I think it was. So here we are this point, where there's a lot of folk music and that's the main medium, being classically trained and wanting to do classical music. And so we started that. And then the next year, Kay was very instrumental in bringing Antonia Brico — is that right? — to one of the festivals, and then Victoria Bond. And so we had

orchestras and large choirs. Roberta Kosse came with her group also, the woman I mentioned before.

So then there was this classical element that was built into especially Champaign-Urbana, not really Michigan. But Michigan did bring in the concept of women's choirs, because it was so big, they decided to have an element. One of the tracks that you could do at Michigan would be singing with the women's choir. They always — they had a gospel choir that was going for quite some time, and even at the time they started the choir, they had a band when they started the — they had a bunch of people get together, and a woman was brought in to do a band.

FOLLET: The choir had its own band?

ROMA: No.

FOLLET: A band was part of the choir?

ROMA: Sorry. I didn't make that clear. I was asked to do the big women's choir. There was already a gospel choir that had been going on since early on at Michigan. But the same year that I was asked to do the choir, a woman was asked to come on and get a big band together.

FOLLET: I see.

ROMA: A band, a concert band.

FOLLET: Uh-huh.

ROMA: So Kay and I were a little different, you know, so. But then the women's choirs really got built into a lot of the Champaign-Urbana — and it's not just Champaign, you know, it moves to Bloomington.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: So. Yeah, so they were — what do I want to say — fertile ground there, those activities, those festivals. And that's where the big thing happened between — was it Malvina Reynolds and Holly Near?

FOLLET: Do tell.

ROMA: Women-only space. It had to do with women-only space.

FOLLET: Yes. Tell us about that.

ROMA: I'm trying to think. OK. Holly, in her out phase — this is on the campus of Champaign-Urbana, it was — wanted the night space, the night performance auditorium space to be women only. And she said, "If one woman feels uncomfortable with a male in the audience, I stand, and we

should stand, with that woman.” So she had little pieces of paper that she handed out, and she was on the steps and engaged people in conversation, and so did other people. And I’m pretty sure it was Malvina Reynolds on the other side saying, “No, men have to be allowed. If men want to be there, then they want to change and they want to grow and they want to learn, and we shouldn’t keep them away.” Of course, Title 7 — Title 9?

FOLLET: Title 9.

ROMA: Yeah, they had to go. They couldn’t be kept out. So I think that Holly knew that but tried to engage men in understanding what it meant to be in a women-only space.

FOLLET: Were you at this festival?

ROMA: Yup.

FOLLET: And what was your take on it? What position did you take?

ROMA: This is a hard one for me in the sense that I’m an educator and I’ve never been a separatist. I have been a separatist in the sense that I think it’s fantastic for not just women but Latino, black women, lesbians, whatever, to have separate space. I totally understand that and support it and value it and have been in those situations. Politically, I probably come down — you know, in performing I want to reach out to as many people as I can and I want to change the world, and so in order to do that, I need to have a bunch of different kinds of people to sing to. So that’s sort of my politics.

But I do understand that I, as a lesbian, at times seek out lesbian-only space, and other oppressed groups or groups that identify in any kind of way — I understand that. So I’m trying to think specifically what I was — I think I was very attentive and trying to figure it out. And the educational element was really important to me, that Holly didn’t just say something like, Screw you, you’re a guy, you can’t come in. There was an intended — there was an educational component, which was to try and explain what it felt like to create that space and to have all women feel safe.

FOLLET: Did it become very divisive at the time?

ROMA: Oh, yeah. People lined up on either side. And, of course, you know, I met Malvina Reynolds and went to her house on Parker Street, and that came out of being there at the festival, meeting her, and then being in California and going to her house and getting some of her songs and performing some of her songs. I mean, I didn’t even know how lucky I was at that time. But I don’t remember feeling that I identified with the separatists.

That’s what I mean sort of about lesbian and straight women working together, that, in the end, I want to be singing to a lot of different people. And the audience has to keep growing or you die. If you’re a performing ensemble, you have to appeal to — you want to draw in people. You don’t

want to change who you are, but you want reach out to people. So, yeah, I definitely remember being there, and I definitely remember the struggle and I remember the intensity of it. And I don't remember being strongly on one side. Bev Grant — all these people I totally respected were on the other side.

FOLLET: The other side being?

ROMA: The side that wanted men. Strong people. So —

FOLLET: Mm-hmm. Do you have any sense of why so much of this musical vitality was going on in that part of the country, in the Midwest?

ROMA: That's a really good question. The festivals — Michigan, Champaign-Urbana —

FOLLET: But why —

ROMA: — the women's choirs. There's a huge swath in the '70s and early '80s in the Midwest.

FOLLET: Yes. Minneapolis, Lansing.

ROMA: Chicago.

FOLLET: Chicago, Madison.

ROMA: Kansas City, even places — Saint Louis.

FOLLET: Yes, and the festivals are there. Do you have any explanation for that?

ROMA: Not yet. I'm thinking about this book that we're doing and everything — we're going to be addressing that. No. I mean, I really don't have a clue yet. But I think if we think carefully and we put our minds to it, we can. But Boden [Sandstrom, ethnomusicologist] is going to do a whole chapter or a whole section of a chapter on D.C. You were there when tons [was] going on in D.C. I think there are certain areas that are explosive and vibrant and have unbelievable things going on.

FOLLET: At the same time?

ROMA: Yes. So I don't know, but it is so strange. I would say, you know, if it was the upper Midwest, you could say, Well, there's a huge singing tradition. Like if you could take Minnesota as a state, it supports music more than any other state. You could say, OK, well, the Lutherans up in Minnesota and Wisconsin have a singing tradition or whatever, you know. But it's not that. It's sort of a wider swathe than that. Can I stop for a minute?

FOLLET: Absolutely. (pause in tape) OK, we've just realized we've got about 15 minutes left, and then we're going to turn into pumpkins for the day. So we're going to let you wrap up with Anna, with the things that you think are most significant.

ROMA: Oh, OK. Well, before that, just talking about the festivals –

FOLLET: Oh, yeah, OK.

ROMA: – and choral music becoming an important part of the festivals. I think that there was a resistance because it was classical, or people thought it was strange. And maybe that's when we were doing things that were — like Francesca Caccini wrote this beautiful piece, "Aria Volonte," and maybe doing pieces from the past that people said, Oh, that's different. But then when we started taking pieces by contemporary women composers — Holly Near, Bernice, or whatever — and doing those in a choral arrangement, people got the message that it was a way of empowering whole groups of people, and the strength that comes from women singing, and the power that they project. And the singing community, building a vocal community through singing is quite something.

So I think Kay and I actually had an effect, especially Kay, with the classical music in general, but both of us for sure with choral music at the festivals. It made a big change. I think that was important. Then, of course, as the festivals progress, it's not just women with guitars, there's many more different kinds of music. There's jazz, there's gospel, there's rock-'n-roll, there's rhythm and blues, there's blues, there's every kind of music, because women begin to do all kinds of music and do it well. So that's what that space is all about, of the festivals, women coming and seeing that they can do things — Rhiannon being the most wonderful example.

FOLLET: Why is Rhiannon such a good example?

ROMA: Because she started out — you know, she's there sort of watching and figuring out, and then realizing that she's getting a response from people, and then, what does she really want to do? She wants to perform jazz with a small ensemble. So the next year she appears, and then develops. The book I bought yesterday at the bookstore here is a sort of celebration of musical festivals. I'm guessing that Horace Clarence Boyer at Amherst must have put together these unbelievable forums and festivals of black music and black musicians, not exclusively black, but black music. And there Rhiannon was with Bobby McFerrin, you know, this wonderful picture. So she must have been at some festival there. And so she's just been growing.

FOLLET: I see. So the festivals as a culture, that nurtured her?

ROMA: Mm-hmm. And I think it did for many. So wrapping up Anna, OK. I think that I began to realize that Anna — that what we were talking about before

as the choir as a vehicle for all of us who were participants in it to be present and accounted for at political events, that it was a way of our being political. It was our politics. The personal was political and musical. So that when we did concerts for choice or for reproductive rights — same thing, excuse me — that we were learning. I mean, that's part of the whole process also. It's not just a choir, as I said before, but we then learn about the event that we're singing at, and we bring something that relates to that musically.

FOLLET: You do that by choosing a particular piece to sing? You do that through repertoire?

ROMA: Well, especially with MUSE. But I think that we did that as much as we could. And of course, I forgot to say this, that with Anna, everything — there was so much less music available. I mean, if you think about it, my first eight years with Anna, part of what I was about was commissioning works, getting women to write, unearthing things that had been written but not performed. So it was, in a sense, a struggle: What are we going to perform? Where's it coming from? If we're going to do something from the labor movement, we have to get it arranged. It's not for women's voices. And of course, if we wanted to sing a piece by Holly Near, we can't just sing a single line, you know. None of this stuff was arranged.

So that's been a very big part of my *raison d'être*, is to get really fabulous arrangements of all kinds of music for women's voices. So the struggle was huge. I remember feeling lost and — you know, I remember we did a piece from *Marat/Sade*, and we ended up just singing it because that was a piece we really couldn't make too complicated, so we ended up singing it as a single line. A Holly Near piece, "Take Back the Night" — sang it as a single, but that was very forceful and powerful. But we were constantly looking for music and getting women to write. I did a lot of that with Anna. Women within the choir wrote, and we performed their works. And so it was a workshop for some of those people, and that was part of who we were as well, because that's an environment that is nurturing people to create their own voice and then give it to many women to empower them.

Yeah, it's so different now I can't even talk about it. I mean, what's happened in 30 years is phenomenal. It's really great. And we can talk about that. In the national choral organizations, women's choirs really were on the bottom rung, and I will testify that a lot of those changes about perceptions of women's choirs and the status of women's choirs has changed because of this movement. Now they might not say that. The people that are part of American Choral Directors Association, the sort of straight choral, may I say, polyester, homophobic national organization, probably wouldn't acknowledge that, but —

FOLLET: Wouldn't acknowledge?

ROMA: That the second wave of the women's choral movement had an effect on raising the status of women's choirs so that even glee clubs on university and college campuses have a much richer repertoire to choose from, absolutely and positively. In other words, it's more status, or it has been, to write for SATB [soprano, alto, tenor, bass] — Wow, I got a commission to do that! Oh, I got a commission to write for some women's choir — you know, I think that's really changed. And I maintain, it's my strong feeling, that this whole movement has affected that. So that's how I feel, and I think there's a lot of truth in it.

And it's exciting. It's very, very, very powerful right now what's going on, and women writing for women's choirs, women setting women's texts, texts by women — and not sacred solely, may I say. Because heretofore, so much of the repertoire was sacred or about flowers and birds and bees, and now the significance and the depth of the texts is just very exciting. I see it as all connected, and other people probably wouldn't give as much credit as I feel is necessary to the second wave.

FOLLET: Where else would it have come from?

ROMA: Oh, well, it definitely comes from more feminists being involved in music and conducting, and times changing, more women composing. But the whole notion of significant things for women's choirs I think comes from this movement. So back then, '75 to '83, when I was with Anna, I was hunting madly for music and getting music arranged. And some of it was high quality, and some of it less so. And we did an awful lot of classical music — I'm really amazed. I don't do as much classical music now as I did then, because I really have made some changes in myself and my life and branched out into more diverse kinds of styles and repertoire and stuff like that.

FOLLET: Right. Right. We'll go into all that tomorrow with MUSE and where all this groundwork takes you. But before we leave Philly, you mentioned that Philly was quite a place to go in '75.

ROMA: Oh, right.

FOLLET: You mentioned Susan Saxe, you mentioned it as, this was the context in which you were doing your work. Well, the second part of this is, we've just flipped through your loose-leaf here of all the programs that Anna was performing for rape crisis centers, for marches, for labor, for solidarity movements of all kinds. What can you say about your audiences, the places where you performed? Who were you singing to in Anna? Where were you welcomed? Where were you pushing a limit with what you sang, with who you sang for or to? Do you remember any of that, about what the constraints or opportunities were in Philly as a site?

ROMA: Let me say just first that I've been visiting Philly a couple of times in the last year and oh, man, it's a great city, and they're doing more amazing

things there. And I think if I was there now, the opportunities are huge, and if I were doing the direction I am with MUSE in Philly, it would be really exciting, because it's a city that's doing, I think, so much on so many different levels, and in different communities, in the Puerto Rican community, in the black community, in neighborhoods, in healthcare, you know, I think they're going to have healthcare for every person in that city in the next five years, everybody in that city. I mean, that's the kind of stuff that they're doing. Amazing work with AIDS, and —

Anyway, that aside, I started beginning to understand, and we'll talk about this tomorrow, what Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon said. She kept saying it, and I think she probably said it in Philadelphia, but I really heard it in Cincinnati: What are you singing? And what you sing absolutely is important in terms of people coming to your concert and if they see themselves. So in Philly, in those eight years, we were not in as many diverse communities as we could have been. I don't want to say we were just singing to the chorus, to the choir, but you know, there was a ground swell of people becoming feminists, becoming lesbian, becoming political in that time period. So, you know, in Philadelphia, whatever it was, there were two thousand people at the Take Back the Night rally. That's a fairly sizable number I think. And then concerts, I don't know, they said six hundred, and stuff like that. So that's a pretty good draw. So we performed for women's organizations. The same as in lots of cities, you perform in churches. Too bad they're not incredible musical performance halls that seat eight hundred or something like that.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: They're not, in most cities, that are available financially.

FOLLET: Right. You've got two minutes.

ROMA: Oh, OK. Well, I was aware that before I left, you know, we were going into more working-class areas and performing at settlement houses and things like that, people doing grassroots kind of work, and I think that was beginning to happen there when I was there. Otherwise I think it's progressive people, mainly, so in a sense singing to the choir. Maybe more women in the audiences than men, not necessarily so now in MUSE. Maybe more lesbians, feminist people in the audience, because it was that time. It was just, you know, so much was going on and our numbers seemed to be bigger, or people coming in to us are [from the] progressive community. So I don't think there was the diversity in terms of outreach and repertoire and venue, so that then that affects who the audience is.

FOLLET: Yes. And that's what will happen tomorrow with MUSE, right?

ROMA: Yup.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: Big changes.

FOLLET: OK. All right. OK, great. We are down to the wire –

ROMA: OK. We're allowed to turn it off?

FOLLET: Oh, yeah. We'll wrap up Philly and call it a day.

ROMA: How many tapes have we done?

FOLLET: Three.

ROMA: Whew!

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4 [June 20, 2005]

FOLLET: We're in business.

ROMA: All right. I know where I want to start.

FOLLET: You do, already. All right. Do you want to — go for it.

ROMA: OK. I was thinking about this last night, and I want to talk about feminist models of leadership. I think that that is an important place to go. Because of my Quaker upbringing and the whole idea of consensus and working around collective work and collective decision-making that really came from not so much Germantown Friends, because I was a student and not paying attention, but when I was at Abington Friends and faculty meetings were held in the consensus manner, I think that had a big influence on me — and then just understanding more about Quakerism. So there's that element.

And then, with feminism, the advent, or my awakening to feminism, how was I going to be a conductor? I am at the podium. I am in a leadership position, and how was I going to negotiate that in a responsible manner, because I certainly was a singer under many more dictatorial conductor people who would never give over to figure out what was going on. Now with Anna, it's pretty funny because we would be having a rehearsal, and then an issue would come up, and boom, we'd be all sitting around in a circle and talking about the particular issue. I mean, we did it right there, you know, because that was sort of a description of the times. You had an issue, it came up, and you sat right down in a circle and you talked about it.

So that wasn't so conducive — people hearing this who are musicians would go, Oh my God, you know, because you're supposed to have a rehearsal. So we did realize that that sort of got unwieldy, and that we would sort of have meetings for business or we'd have a Monday rehearsal that would start later. We have rehearsals on Monday nights both with Anna and with MUSE. And then we'd have an hour where we would discuss any issues that came up, something like that.

So that's the kind of idea that, I mean, yes, I am the musician. Yes, I have the training, but there's more to it than that. And I notice that, you know, we talked about storytelling and collective voices and the stories of women — and we actually did a piece ["Somos Tejedoras"], I have to say, with Rhiannon, and it's on the first CD. And we tell actual stories within the context of the piece, and we did it in an improvisation, which she helped us with, which was pretty amazing. And we then learned to use that piece to bring out other stories, so that's something to talk about maybe a little bit later.

So I truly feel that I do have a lot of the information, let's say, regarding musical selection. Let's talk about how we select music. Right now in MUSE, we have a group called the Dreamers, the Eaters, and the Philosophers, and we sit together and talk about what kind of music we

want to do. Now, I'm the person who brings the most amount of music to that group, but other people have absolutely important input and comments and bring music — everybody does. If we're lacking humor and we need pieces about humor, we might talk to a couple of the women who are doing DJ for the women's music show that happens every week on WAIF radio. So I feel that that collectivity, which to me is the essence of feminist theory or thought, is what makes MUSE so different. And I think that people, especially when we got involved with men's choruses and the whole GALA movement — Oh, sure, conducting by committee and doing everything by committee — they just couldn't, you know, no comprehension of it. And I think that it actually brings people much closer together, because they all have a stake in it and it's their choir.

And that's what a community choir is. We're not a professional choir. The first sentence of MUSE's philosophy, and we do have one, is, "MUSE is a women's choir dedicated to musical excellence and social change." And we're feminist women — we actually say that in the philosophy — of varying ages and races, whatever. And then there's another part that says, "believing that diversity is strength." And then I do want to say that sometimes we do make decisions because we have to see if we have enough people to go out and sing. So we say, OK, raise your hand. But I'd say we have a pretty equal working balance of working consensus and waiting for people to come around or whatever. And the best example I can give is we had a philosophy that was done maybe two to three years after we started, so we're talking about sort of mid-'80s, '86, '87, and then we wanted to change it a little bit. It was a time when we wanted to say, We are lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual women united in song. And that little piece right there took us a year to get everybody feeling comfortable about that.

FOLLET: Wow.

ROMA: Naming it, in Cincinnati. Now if we had a P&G [Procter & Gamble] executive who was a lesbian, she actually felt good about naming it because then she could say, if things got [bad], you know, that there were these diverse people and it wasn't just a group of lesbians. So we had some mighty amazing discussions. But then we put, "We are women loving women." "We are women loving women. We are lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual women united in song." So this invariably causes unbelievable consternation. When we appear places sometimes, they'll read everything in our philosophy but that sentence. Very interesting.

FOLLET: As they introduce you, you mean?

ROMA: As they introduce. This is MUSE, a women's choir, da, da, da, da, feminist women of varying backgrounds, da, da, da, da, and then they go, you know, We strive for a concert experience that entertains, motivates, heals, agitates — whatever we say — and they leave that out. This has happened, I can't even tell you. So we decided — and we never know. So

sometimes we say, If you're going to read the philosophy, you have to read the whole philosophy.

But getting back to the collective and the consensus and the idea of feminist leadership, we do music from the folk tradition, and often right in the middle of a rehearsal, now even, people will make a suggestion about something to do. And I really honor that because it's so important, and so many times the suggestions are really good. But with MUSE now we do have a business meeting — I don't even want to call it a business meeting. We discuss what's important, you know, the issues that come up for the choir, and we do it on a Monday night when everybody is there, because that's another thing. You don't want to just say, OK, well, we're doing this business and have people move in and move out and not be there for the ideas that are shared.

Also, opening up the choir in terms of our membership — we have a very diverse choir in terms of race in MUSE, 20 to 25 percent most of the time since we turned ourselves around and looked at what we said, you know, diversity is our strength. And at a certain point — this is when we were changing the philosophy, too — we looked around and said, Well, there are certain kinds of diversity, but we're really not diverse. And I feel like we're still not diverse enough. But when you're talking about collectivity and voices and women's thoughts and feelings, when an African American woman, when we're doing a lot of repertoire that's from the African American tradition, I feel fine about having one of the African American women saying, "Wait, wait, wait. This isn't right. This sounds too white. Let's do this." Or, "This can help it."

Or, at a certain point, Lois Shegog came in as our assistant director. She was in the choir, and actually, she got up to conduct a piece or to give us sort of a feel about a piece, and it was obvious that she got a totally different sound from the choir, a completely different sound. And that's what happens when people get up in front of the choir. Different conductors get different sounds, because they conduct from a different place. It depends on so many different things. Where is your center of gravity? And Lois just, you know, there's something that's different. So the choir responds in a different way, and that to me is some of the essence of what MUSE is about that is so very important and is so very different, and some people get it and some people don't. And the choir, you know, understands also that we have different abilities, we have different strengths, Lois and myself, and we work with each other.

But that's the kind of thing, when I'm talking about feminism and a leadership model, I have to be able to step aside. I have to be able to have somebody come in, and I can't, you know, I don't get all wound up. And that's why also when we do music from different cultures, I feel like I'm probably not the person — yes, I am, I have a doctorate in choral conducting and — it's western music. I mean, yes, there's folk and there's women's music and all those things that are related. But if I'm going to teach Balkan, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian, music from Eastern Europe and Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia, I need to bring in somebody from the outside — I feel better about that — so that that sound that is so very

different can be made by somebody who is from the tradition. When we do Latin music from Central and South America, I also feel better about stepping aside and letting somebody come in. Or when Dr. Reagon, Bernice Johnson Reagon, comes in, she shapes the music. We can work on it, but then something transforms and something is very different.

So that sort of has been a tradition of my working really from Anna, but it's flowered a lot with MUSE because my memory (laughs) is better. I can remember better the last 22 years than I can the first eight. But as I look at some of the things we've been talking about and some of the things I brought, that stands out, that it's so important to do music from other traditions, because these are women's singing traditions.

And of course the second wave and the opening of the feminist movement not only said, Well there were women composers that composed and so we're going to honor these composers from the classical music tradition, from the western classical tradition, but there are these women's singing communities that we haven't heretofore known and are very important. Like on the last CD, the whole walking songs, OK. It's women's work, and those songs, I mean, there are thousands of them, and they're very dark and very — we're talking about the Hebrides and we're talking about making wool into felt and the hard strenuous work and the thoughts that go through the women's minds as they're working. And we're going to do some more work, and it's very interesting.

I probably don't want to talk about it right now, but when we go Mexico in June, we're going to go to visit maquiladoras, and so we want to sort of think about women and work songs in the United States in the 1890s and "Jute Mill Song" and some other pieces that we actually have done before that educate ourselves about women and work, and then sort of understand women and working and the songs that we hope we discover from the maquiladoras, the women working there, and maybe share some of that music with them, and hopefully they're going to be sharing. That's our dream, anyway, or that's the beginning conversation that we've had. So when we sit together in conversation and allow the stories to be told and the connections to be made, it's so powerful, and that's the locus from which MUSE operates. So I wanted to sort of start out with that.

And I also wanted to maybe talk about some of the other groupings. We do have a committee called the Hunters and Gatherers, and they're the group that figures out how we're going to get money. And so we talk about hunting-and-gathering places and organizations and foundations and stuff. So we try and play with some of our titles. We have an organizing group within the choir that's called Ujema, and that's sort of the steering committee. In Anna Crusis it was called the steering committee and then when MUSE came along, we thought, Well, collective work, talk about Ujema sort of guiding and doing some of the board's work before we get to the board and presenting.

FOLLET: What's the origin of that term?

ROMA: Ujema is a Swahili term, and it's from the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa, and for a while we were naming a lot of our committees some of those Swahili names. So, collective work. Let me see. Umoja, that's unity. And then Ujema, collective work, working together. So I'm just trying to think of the committees and how we're set up. So there's a structure — that's very important. And then, how do we make it a collective, open structure. I have these handbooks that sort of explain this to new people. We decided we needed a MUSE handbook to help them survive. It's a survival manual, and so all of these things are explained. There's a little history of MUSE. There's a listing of every single performance that we've done, to let people see the variety. There are the affiliations. We're a member of Sister Singers Network. We're a member of GALA, Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. And then we talk about our willingness and desire to make connections and create collaborations with community organizations and stuff like that. We explain that a little bit. We try and explain our structure to people, the board's structure and what the board does, and then these various committees.

So all of that comes from my Quaker background and my feminist desire to change some of the elements and characteristics associated with a position of responsibility and leadership. And I'm always working on that. I used to do — and I have not done it recently — every January, which is our anniversary, I would create something called The State of the Choir. I would try and put together ideas, let's say from the last year, and where I thought we were. And this could be in relation to that we need to do some kind of workshop around racism or, um, what else have we dealt with? I mean, that's probably been one of the big issues. Internalized homophobia and heterosexism and things like that. And probably looking at what we've done and what we've accomplished and where we want to be headed, or where we are headed.

FOLLET: And then is this something that you write up and share —

ROMA: Yeah, yeah.

FOLLET: — and people discuss?

ROMA: Yeah, they can discuss. But I mean, I write it up and I share it and I put it in the — every week we have something called the *Choir Wire*, and this is a pretty amazing record of what goes on. It talks about where we've been asked to sing, and then we bring these things always to the choir. First they come to the board, then go to the choir. It could be me talking about a performance that they've just done and sort of saying this was really great, and of course, thanking people for showing up, and for the people who didn't, sort of filling them in. I mean, it has everything in it that you can possibly imagine.

FOLLET: Is this an email message, or what shape does it take?

ROMA: Well, now it's email, and it goes out to people on Monday morning before Monday night rehearsal. But then there's a hard copy in their file folder, because I think only two people out of 54 don't have email, so we have to be careful that we don't create sort of a cyber-ghetto or something like that where certain people aren't involved. We try to be pretty careful about that, so there's a hard copy for everybody. So that's a very important communication. And now we've just written a grant, and the whole website is going to be redone, yes, redone, and it's going to have a section where members can go in with a password and get the *Wire* and see people's phone numbers, because we have a membership list and we have to redo it every time somebody changes a phone or a cell or a job or an address, and it's fairly frequently. So that'll be easier. And I don't know, eventually we hope to be able to have access to rehearsal tapes and stuff like that, or CDs. That we haven't done, but that's sort of the goal.

FOLLET: Wow! Is this Dorothy's handiwork, this web stuff?

ROMA: Well, everything that's been done, everything you see when you look at that website right now is done by Dorothy Smith, and she feels it needs to be updated. She had a committee meeting actually on Thursday last, and seven people came, and they talked about what was important to put on it, and shared — you know, that's another thing. Nobody works in isolation or by themselves. So I think that's really great. So this new website is going to be — she wrote the grant. We got \$4,600 from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation specifically to update it, but also we want to make money, and so how to have a better store and have people be able to pay, write into PayPal or whatever it is so that the treasurer doesn't have to deal with, or the administrative coordinator doesn't have to deal with recording it and printing out an order form and everything like that and then getting a check, et cetera.

FOLLET: So this is a joint effort between you and Dorothy? You're both involved in this?

ROMA: Oh, yeah. Actually I don't do much with the web.

FOLLET: Right. But with MUSE, I mean, as a proportion of your life energy, how big is it?

ROMA: MUSE?

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: Well, you know, when I was coming up as a young activist, cultural worker, feminist person, my goal was to have my work be my play, my play be my work, and you know, that I really wanted to create work that I loved and that I love doing. And so to a large extent, I've done that. And so I live MUSE in a way. I mean, I never am away from it because I'm

constantly networking. That's who I am, and that's what I love, too. I love connecting people up, and I love making things happen. So I sort of live it, you know, a lot. And Dorothy does a lot. She's the archivist and she's the webmistress, or whatever. Then, you know, there are so many people. We have this incredible silent auction that we've started now in the last couple of years. There's a committee of three that's like this triumvirate that really gets all of that together — they work so hard.

FOLLET: But you're also selling hotdogs at the ballgame, right, to raise money?

ROMA: Yes. And last summer we went all the way through mid-July, our season did. It killed people. We went up to Montreal –

FOLLET: Your concert season?

ROMA: The concert season. We did our tenth New Spirituals, which was a very special concert I want to talk about –

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: – and then following that, we went to Montreal, where we participated in an international GALA festival. It was great. But that took us all the way into mid-July in Montreal, and so we didn't do the games, we didn't work the Reds games last year, but we had other sources of money coming in. And this year, I promised the choir that we would have a long summer break. We needed money coming in, and so people said, Oh God, we'll do the games again. Some people love it and some people hate it. Then this next year we're going to be going quite late because we're going to participate in a Sister Singers international festival in mid- to late June, and then we're going to also hook in to going to Mexico. So that's going to bring us through to the end of June.

FOLLET: So what's an annual budget?

ROMA: Roughly I'd say for the last four-ish years, we're about a hundred thousand. We don't want to go too much over that because of audits and stuff like that, but that's where we are.

FOLLET: And am I right that at some point you began to be paid for this?

ROMA: Yes. I did Anna, no money. Eight years. And I had a job at Abington Friends, and that was fine, and, you know, didn't do it. Then I came out here and I was destitute. I came out to Cincinnati and I was a destitute student, in debt, you know, a destitute, in-debt person. And I also said, "Gosh, this is the ninth year I've been doing this. Maybe it's OK to ask for some money." So I told the choir I wanted \$35 a week. I think that's what I said — something like that. Just whatever, you know, but let's try and make it work. So, yes, and now I have a little salary, which I appreciate so

much. I wanted to say something else related to this, and I can't remember. What were we talking about?

FOLLET: Let me back up. The Reds games.

ROMA: Well, it'll come.

FOLLET: It'll come. It'll come.

ROMA: OK, so the feminist model of leadership and getting back to the very first thing. So I feel like bringing people into that is a really important thing. And there's a constant education, you know. I mean, if you're dealing with a choir — you made the comment yesterday when we were looking at the pictures of Anna, "Gosh, everybody seems the same age." We were in our twenties and thirties. When I started MUSE, very much the same — I was 35, but we had some people in their twenties and probably through their thirties. And now, 22 years later, you know, the choir has an age range of 50 years. We have young college students and we have people who are seasoned, beautiful human women who love to sing who are 71, 72. And of course, it gets harder. People have to stand on the risers, and you deal with so much more. But you have to educate everybody, you know, about feminism. For our twentieth anniversary concert, every single woman in the choir wore a different colored t-shirt that said, "This is what a feminist looks like." It was very powerful, and people loved it. So we had lavender and pink and yellow and for one half of the concert we did that. It was the second half. The first half, we wore our regular sort of uniform. It's very much not a uniform, but — and then the second half we sort of let our hair down and did that.

FOLLET: I hope you have a color photo of that.

ROMA: I think probably we do. It might have been videotaped, actually.

FOLLET: Oh, fantastic.

ROMA: I think we have one or the other. So anyway, educating everybody along the way. You know, it's like people who don't know about choice, people who don't know about the struggle for that — constant education, really.

FOLLET: Because there's a connection between the content of the music and feminist politics?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so in those Dreamers, Eaters, and Philosophers, we talk about repertoire and how repertoire connects to issues and — do you understand? Because if we're going to sing — very early on — I was looking through some of the concerts, and I probably should check some more again. I mean, here's an example. Two abortion clinics were bombed in Cincinnati in '85, and MUSE, as a feminist choir, was asked to sing to

benefit the rebuilding of the Planned Parenthood building. And of course, I think the concert [flier] says, “fighting terrorism,” you know, which was the terrorism of people bombing the clinic. It’s so different than [how] we think of that [now] –

FOLLET: That’s what the program says, you think?

ROMA: Yeah, that’s what it was called — I can’t even remember exactly the title, but it had terrorism, or combating terrorism in our community, or whatever. Anyway, so discussion happens around choice, right, because some people — oh, this is not for — we had three people leave the choir [who said], This is not for a choir to do. A choir doesn’t have these conversations and a choir doesn’t support things like this, these people said. And, of course, then we talk about who we are, what we believe in, and if you’re personally against choice, can you be in the choir and support that other people would have that opportunity — you know, so conversations around that. But we ended up singing, and those people ended up leaving the choir. There were several benefits that we participated in that made some people very uneasy, and they ended up not feeling comfortable staying in the choir, OK?

So then what kinds of pieces do we sing? I’m having a little trouble sort of remembering the repertoire, whether it was, you know, “Still Ain’t Satisfied” or “Sisters, You Keep Me Fighting.” Actually, we took that song, “Sister Spring of Vietnam,” it was called, and Patty Huntington, Pasha Warren, who lives actually in this area, I think, changed the title to bring it more contemporary. And I think it’s called “Sisters, You Keep Me Fighting.” I can’t even remember, but we changed the verses. She allowed us to change verses. So we talk about choice in there, protecting our lives.

FOLLET: Could you stop for a minute? We have this construction noise outside, and I want to minimize it if I can. (pause in tape)

ROMA: Oh, man.

FOLLET: Say that again?

ROMA: Benefit for homeless children with Tibetan monks.

FOLLET: You’re looking at the list of stuff of all your performances?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah. So I remember that.

FOLLET: Read off some of the other ones.

ROMA: Oh, Vigil Against Domestic Violence and Abuse, we’ve done that every single October, which is Domestic Violence Awareness month. And I would say approximately 14, maybe 15 years ago, 29, 30, 31, 32 women were murdered at the hands of their (mimics quotation marks) “loved

ones” in Hamilton County, and people were like, the numbers were so huge that year that a group called — well, the YW[CA], and a group called Women Helping Women, now they’ve changed their title to let people know that it’s more like a rape crisis center — anyway, MUSE was asked from day one, from the first vigil, and we’ve done it every single year since at the end of October on the courthouse steps. So that’s a ritual that is very important to us.

I’m noticing here so many concerts to benefit — well, AIDS remembrance and tribute service, we’ve been asked by different churches. We’ve organized concerts to benefit people living with AIDS and around the whole issue. AIDS came up in the ’80s, and so a lot of our concerts during a certain time period reflect that. And we also sang — so much of the time we try and figure out what kinds of literature speaks to some of these issues. So I remember this incredible piece, actually it was written for the men’s chorus in Seattle, but we actually I think used that exact arrangement for MUSE, and it was stunning.

FOLLET: Do you remember the piece?

ROMA: And it worked. It’s called “Eulogy.” And it was, some of those performances that we did with artists singing and performing for AIDS, you know, December 1st, AIDS awareness, were some really, really moving performances that we did. You know, I’m looking through here and I see so much. International Women’s Day, we did that every March 8th, and now it doesn’t seem that many people were ever doing International Women’s Day performances, but we did it, and some of them we organized, and we always were organizing participants as well as singing participants in it. A lot of Pride concerts and performances we were involved in. And gosh, we did a lot of stuff around the Sanctuary movement and the Center for Women’s Studies in Cincinnati had Ximena Bunster, and so I remember doing several concerts around her being in Cincinnati and raising awareness around the Sanctuary movement and the social justice movement in Central and South America.

And we’ve always done music called Nueva Canción, which is music that comes from Central and South America. In the ’50s and ’60s Victor Jara and Violetta Parra are particular people that sing Nueva Canción, and it’s resistance music, struggle music, amazing folk music with texts that talk about the lives of the people, the beauty of the lives of the people working with their hands and respecting the labor that men and women do during that whole violent period when our government was really supporting the juntas and the land grabs that were going on and the resistance of the people. So since day one, actually, one of the first workshops we had was with a group of women called Sabia, so we learned a piece in workshop with them, a Nueva Canción, and even on the new album, you heard “Duerme Negrito.”

FOLLET: Yes.

- ROMA: So we'll be doing some more of that kind of work I think for our trip next year.
- FOLLET: As you make those kinds of choices, who's the audience that you have in mind?
- ROMA: Well, for International Women's Day, that audience, those people that are coming to that kind of event would very much appreciate that. I think that when you're able to — I think another really important thing we really haven't talked about is how you juxtapose music. It's not only the repertoire, but then it's how you highlight what different music says and what it communicates, its message as you put it next to something that's either the same or different to highlight it.
- FOLLET: Yes.
- ROMA: So programming is an art, and it's really important to me. So we could do something like Kodály, a Hungarian composer who was very connected with finding folk music and everything, wrote several pieces about mountain voices. OK, so you could take that and you could juxtapose that to "Listen to the Voices from the Mountains" by Ruthie Gordon, which is about the Appalachian struggle around mining. You could then juxtapose that against — well, I mean, you could sing something like Holly Near's, um —
- FOLLET: "Kentucky Woman"?
- ROMA: Yeah, "Kentucky Women." Thank you. So, you know, you can do things like that, and even if you do a piece, you could a classical piece that talks about Mary, and then you could do a piece from Central and South America that talks about the goddess or, you know, the female representation of Mary, who is very much among the women.
- FOLLET: Right.
- ROMA: So that kind of play really, I think, helps highlight — we also introduce pieces, not all the time, and not every piece, but in groupings often to help the audience make connections, or understand the connections we're making by placing these things side by side. So that would be a whole wonderful file in itself. We're trying to actually go back and find all the introductions that we've ever done.
- FOLLET: Oh, God.
- ROMA: You know, it'll be impossible, but 22 years' worth of people creating text to try and explain the process that goes on in the Dreamers, Eaters, and the Philosophers.

- FOLLET: And you think they might appear in your programs or elsewhere?
- ROMA: Oh, definitely there are things in the program, but then we sort of did these more personal things, and we're trying to get those together — a woman in the choir is trying to get all of our little pieces of paper together to keep a record.
- FOLLET: It's so fabulous to know that this has been so well documented. I mean, you have an amazing paper trail that is going to be so invaluable.
- ROMA: Yeah, yeah.
- FOLLET: Tell me about race and how it entered and the work on repertoire. You mentioned that — I know that you started working with Bernice Johnson Reagon back in '79, back in Philadelphia. How did that surface? How did that come about? How has that evolved?
- ROMA: OK. Let's see. I don't remember how it happened, but I do remember very clearly that I went down to Washington, D.C., and went to Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon's house to talk about her coming up to Philadelphia to work with Anna Crusis to learn some of her music. And so, how was that going to happen? Now, I mean, I actually read some of this the other day, that she gave me tapes to take up from that visit to give to the choir to try and learn, because it's all from the oral tradition, and not much of it had been written down. This was in '79. Oh my gosh, it's so different. And so she said she'd come up and work. There were three songs. And I guess we learned them from the tapes.
- You know, this is so foreign to me right now because something very different happened with MUSE. But she did come up on three Wednesday nights, I remember that very clearly, consecutive, in April of '79, and we were in people's houses. We decided not to be in a church, it would be more personal. And one of them was "Joan Little," a song about a woman who murdered her jailer after she was raped; "They Are Falling All Around Me," an incredible piece that she wrote about those mentors who had gone before her; and I can't remember the third one right now. Amazing — just the work that she did and empowering people's voices to sing out in a different style and from a different place. So it was very important. But nothing was written down. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Everything was done by ear, and her working with us, and her singing and us singing something back to her. Amazing.
- So it comes time for the spring concert, and this one woman who had worked so hard, Julianne Rametta, she worked so hard on this one solo, and I can't remember — I wish I could remember the piece because it wasn't the two that I named — she just didn't feel comfortable, wasn't getting it, wasn't getting it. What was I going to do? Here's a song and I didn't want to *not* do it. I had the nerve to call up Bernice and ask her if she would come up to sing the solo of her piece in the concert, and she did it. Now you know that this was like a long time ago. Sweet Honey [in the

Rock] was young. We were all young. And it was so meaningful. It was just amazing. And, you know, I think she was very — she's very watchful and everything. I think she loved some of the things that we did, and I think some of the things she thought we did — I think we tried to do in that concert — oh God, a Pointer Sisters' song, and it wasn't a very good arrangement. Anyway, you know, she was wonderful.

So that was my first experience with her. At that time, we had several African American women in Anna — not a lot. So it came time for me to leave Philadelphia, and I went to Cincinnati. In 1988 — oh, I went to see Sweet Honey in Dayton in '87, I guess it was, '87 or '88. And Bernice had just brought out her first book of compositions, *Compositions One*, it is called, and it was just being published. So she said, here — she wrote in it, Take this and learn some of these, and I'll come and do a workshop with you to see how they're working and see if it's really, if the notes on the page are really able to lift off the page. So I was really excited, and she came and did a workshop, and worked some of the pieces that we had worked and changed them a little bit here and there and everything.

And I remember so clearly people feeling like, Oh my God, their voices, the volume of which and the strength of which was increased so much, because she walked right up to people — she's short and strong and powerful — and walked right up this far to people and said, "Sing this," and she'd make a sound, and they'd make a sound, and she'd say, "Hooooo," and she'd say, "Sing it back to me." And I remember Dorothy was in the choir and she was on the third row of these risers we were on, and I've never heard her sing so loud and powerfully, and it was like unlocking gates of sound in people's bodies. And it was amazing. So I can't remember. I know one of the pieces was "Ella's Song," you know.

FOLLET: Ella Baker?

ROMA: Ella Baker. Just an amazing piece that Bernice put together, and —

FOLLET: I listened to that just —

ROMA: "Azanian Freedom Song."

FOLLET: I'm sorry?

ROMA: "Azanian Freedom Song," and she's changed the title of that as well now because people don't know what Azania is. Azania was the word that black South Africans wanted to call South Africa when apartheid finally fell. So she changed it to one of the lines in the song, "Crying for freedom in South Africa," but she changed some of that around, and she had some ideas as she was hearing us do it, and that's what is so wonderful, when you work something — something's on the page, you learn what's on the page, and then she gives you these amazing ideas to try something new. And then she likes them, and we like them, and then something new is produced.

So it was then, we were in dialog and conversing, and I kept saying — this was my sort of mantra. No, I should say it was a repeated question that I would ask her, and she would pretty much always say the same thing. I would say, “How do I get more women of color, more African American women, in MUSE? How do I do this?” And so she would repeat over and over again, What kind of repertoire are you doing? What kind of repertoire? What kind of repertoire? (laughs) So basically, saying to me, if she came to a MUSE concert and she didn’t see necessarily a lot of black women or women of color, African American women up there, could she see herself being there by the sound and the repertoire that was coming from the choir? So that was the key in terms of repertoire. That was what she was saying: Does it speak, could she see herself there, does it reach out and grab her and bring her up there?

So I thought about this. Having her come and do a workshop and all of that was pretty important. I know that we brought Ysaye Barnwell in 1991, another workshop that went for two days, and that was building on our commitment to learning new repertoire. Somewhere along the line in ’90, ’91, this time period, Ujema met, and some of the board met, and said, We say here in our philosophy we’re dedicated to — we feel that diversity is our strength. Where’s the diversity? We’re lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women. Wow, we can see that. That’s very much. Age? Maybe. Belief system? We had Jewish people, we had a rabbi, we had all manner of Christian and Wiccan and earth-based spirituality and no religious affiliation and practicing Catholics — a variety there. Race. Not so much class. We haven’t really dealt with that, I think, as much as there is to deal with that. We’ve always had some working-class people, but a very, very, very small amount. But African American women? Not so many.

So the choir — at that point, 48 was our maximum number. We didn’t want to go above 48 because we want to be a community. We want to know each other and be involved in each others’ lives. So we started talking about, Well, how do we change ourselves? How do we attract more women of color? How do we reach out? How do we make that change? So the people that were there gathered. This was in Crazy Lady’s Bookstore, I remember, the place where we had this discussion. It was in the summer, because we have auditions in the late summer, early fall. People said, Well, if we have 48 people, and we’re down right now to 39, we’re going to say seven of those slots have to be for women of color. So some people were very uncomfortable, saying, That’s a quota system, you know, you can’t do that. And we talked about it, how do we change unless we make space? So we figured out how we were going to reach out to different communities, different organizations.

We were very lucky that we had a person at that time — she’s since passed of cancer — Camilla Warwick did an amazing article in the *Cincinnati Inquirer*. We had a pretty wonderful article in the black newspaper, the *Cincinnati Herald*. Part of my changing, and this had a lot to do with what I thought I needed to do, I went and joined, with an African American woman in the choir, and we went and joined the Martin

Luther King Coalition, and actually that happened just before all this conversation began because I wanted to do something. So I just put my presence there, put my body there. But then **Gilda** and I told the coalition that we would do music for one year. Let us do the music. Let us, Gilda and me, take responsibility for doing something. Our idea was that Gilda was more connected — she was a Cincinnati person and was a member of the Union Baptist Church — that she would go to black churches with her connections. And anybody who wanted to sing, she'd go to choirs, say we were going to put together a choir to sing the following year at the Martin Luther King program. I went. You know, I had just started a couple of years [before] at St. John's, and I had some connections because of school and stuff like that.

FOLLET: So this is all aside from MUSE?

ROMA: Well, we represented MUSE. When it says, you know, everybody on the coalition comes from a union or an organization of some sort — links, you know, whatever. So we were MUSE, Cincinnati Women's Choir. That's who we were representing because we wanted a presence there, but we also wanted to be doing some different kinds of work. So it was through that. I think also that we had 57 people, a very diverse, mixed, completely diverse group singing on that first Martin Luther King Day in January of I guess it was '91. So all of this is sort of happening around the same time, and that's how Lois Shegog became involved.

FOLLET: In MUSE?

ROMA: Yes, because of the Martin Luther King Coalition Chorale.

FOLLET: Really?

ROMA: Yeah, so it was, we were beginning —

FOLLET: She was in that first chorus?

ROMA: Yeah, because she was a member of Zion Baptist at that time, and so heard about us and joined. So things were beginning to shift and change a little bit, and it was because we were putting, you know, we had some determination to get the word out, to go to places we hadn't gone, to make connections with new people. So that was very powerful. I think Lois came in 1991, which is right around this time. So that newspaper article brought us an incredible woman, Mona Bronson, and Mona, her family were the people who brought the suit against the public schools in Cincinnati around segregation in the schools. So Mona — I wish she was singing with us right now. She has a family, and she's married, and she was just this little 20-something person and was so powerful and such a great influence in the choir and gave so much. And so we ended up making that commitment, fulfilling that commitment, and things began to

change at that point, because our repertoire — really, we just did more and more music from the African American tradition and didn't shy away from it and had more awareness, I would say.

And I also want to say at this point — I haven't talked about this — that another thing about MUSE which is so unique is that the altos, the second altos sing lower than so many groups. So the music that we were able to get arranged had quite a wide range. Some people will say to you that, Oh, women's choirs, you know, they really can't get the diversity of sound, the range. MUSE has been blessed for the most part with absolutely unbelievable sopranos, and then this amazing sound started to develop in the alto section.

FOLLET: Because?

ROMA: I think it's because we had less fear about exploring our voices, because we had more diversity in the choir, and we were not afraid to exploit that, OK. Whether it was because we had lesbians who loved to sing in their lower range and really exploit that, whether we had stronger voices and African American women supporting that sound, I don't know. I know that as a community choir, OK, we wanted to develop that sound and were able to — because, you know, nobody talks about the mature woman's voice. They didn't talk about what a community women's choir — people are very protective in the college and the university choruses that — voice teachers are worried that people are going to hurt their voices and stuff like that. But when you start adding — the experience of African American women is to use the full range of their voice and to just let it go. And I think that that had a big influence on us. And here we had this workshop with Bernice Reagon and Ysaye Barnwell, who were saying, Come on. And Ysaye, she's the lowest voice in Sweet Honey, and Bernice sings awfully low, too. So if we're doing that kind of music, which we were doing, we were beginning to do, and we sounded good, you know, we sounded vibrant —

FOLLET: You know, I keep noticing when, as you talk about this, you talk about when Bernice came to do a workshop with you and kind of getting in your face and saying, Sing! No, sing more! Sing louder! — and as you talk about it, even as you describe it, you're moving physically. There's a physicality to this experience.

ROMA: Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't know what to say about it, except that when we started getting pieces arranged for us, and I'm talking about Ysaye did some absolutely incredibly powerful arrangements, and she got to know us, so she was really writing for who we were, and already Dr. Reagon's music was seated low because it was for Sweet Honey, so MUSE developed that, and I think that that's a really important part of who we are. And it is absolutely physical, and it was what I was talking about when Lois conducts and where she conducts from and where she sings from and how she's able to coach the choir to get certain things to

happen from them, you know. OK, so we're talking about more and more

—

FOLLET: I want to ask — I know you're going somewhere, and I don't want you to lose that, but I think of you back at the piano at the age of whatever and the music and your imagination, and I'm wondering if this physicality that you're beginning to explore in MUSE, is there a way in which it connects to sexuality?

ROMA: Very interesting question. Well, uh, yes. Well, I mean, I just want to say immediately related to that is that we learned these two pieces from Zimbabwe in workshop within the last year, and Lois conducts those. And Lois conducts those pieces in such a way as, you know, it's just a loosening up. Whether it's related to sexuality, I don't know. I think Lois would probably say yes, and I'm guessing, you know, from the place where she draws all of that energy. And to watch Lois conduct — I get to watch. I don't sing in those pieces — she was the only person to direct those when we were learning them. It's blinking, by the way.

FOLLET: OK. Well, that means we've got two minutes.

ROMA: OK. She actually just goes into African dance and, you know, conducting is dance. And to see her is completely amazing and beautiful. It just loosens up the choir. So I think that when you're talking about that whole physicality, there is sexuality. There's just something that connects to all of us because the choir sings. You've heard it, right, on the CD, there's something they just love, where the sound comes from here (points to face), you know, where they're making it, and then their whole body is involved. So I don't know. That's a really good question that I think is wonderful. That's your second very strong question I have to meditate on. Yes. I think probably yes is the answer. I don't know.

FOLLET: Just wondering.

ROMA: Yeah. OK.

FOLLET: OK. We've done this tape justice.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

- FOLLET: I know you're thinking about stuff you want to say. And here's all these questions that just jump out at me as I listen, and maybe we can pick and choose.
- ROMA: Are we running?
- FOLLET: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- ROMA: OK.
- FOLLET: We're running, but I'm not clipped in here. But now I am, and you are, right? You're so much better about that than I am.
- ROMA: Well, you're juggling many things. I'm just looking at my notes, looking at these amazing things.
- FOLLET: Going back to when you started today, about how tough and divisive the decision about putting into your philosophy that you are lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual and why that was so divisive and how that plays out, if it plays out in people who don't want to perform in certain public places — or is the lesbian identification and bisexual identification too hot for certain people? So there's one question.
- ROMA: Within the community of the choir or out[side] —
- FOLLET: Or both.
- ROMA: I can speak to that. Within the community of the choir, I would say without a shadow of a doubt that everybody feels completely together about naming who we are and saying it, and that's the group that we are. That is the diversity that we have down, if you know what I mean. Like people who, if something insensitive is said, one person hears something said to somebody else — this happened quite a while ago. A woman therapist came in and she just had been dealing with women who were abused, and it was just more than she could stand, and she sat down, and she said, "Oh, I hate men," you know. And so the woman next to her is married to a man and has three sons and a daughter, and just took it, wherever she was coming from, it just kkkkkk, got her. So there was some tension. You know, when you're singing, you can't really sing very freely or feel your breath and let your breath out if you're tense, if you're angry, if you're whatever. So by the end of that rehearsal, those two people really needed to address what was going on. And Rhonda did say to Leslie that she was really hurt by what she said. So then the two of them spent time figuring that out, and there were a couple of other people who heard it, and so they were around that grouping. Everybody felt, just because of the talking and the working through and Leslie explaining what she had been

through that day and Rhonda explained where she was coming from — much better. So we've had that sort of working out.

So I think that when we first decided this, in the early '90s — also we hadn't gotten to '92 and '93, which was the repressive Article 12 — Issue 3, Article 12, which really served to bring the choir together. This was the issue where the city council had included gay and lesbian in their human rights ordinance. And then it went to the public for a vote because the Citizens for Community Values were outraged that the city council would do this. So it went to a public vote, and the public vote said, by 68 percent, take that little clause out of the human rights ordinance. In fact, let's go further and let's say that it's legal to discriminate in housing and in employment if you're gay or lesbian in Cincinnati.

FOLLET: It is legal?

ROMA: It's legal to discriminate. Fine, do it. If you let somebody go, no problem. You won't get — there's no suit against you. So that was, you know, a huge turning point. Where we did sing some benefits, and we came out, as a group, everybody, whether they were straight or whether they were lesbian, people felt very strongly. And that was the beginning of building more solidarity around that diversity, because people saw, Oh my God, this is real? This is really happening? So it was great. **Angie**, who's one of the founding mothers, she's a straight woman and one of my best friends, her husband, John, whom I adore, he was at his kid's soccer game. And somebody said to him, "Your wife sings with that lesbian group," insinuating that she was a lesbian, or something like that. So many conversations happened. Husbands were dealing with people who said, Your wife sings in that group — is she a lesbian? It was funny. So everybody — straight women had to deal with [it], straight women totally became more aware of what it was like to be a lesbian person, and then the husbands who were married to the straight women in the choir, they had a whole education. So I think that statement, nobody in the choir has a problem with at all and feels very proud that that's who MUSE is, in Cincinnati especially, I think.

FOLLET: So over the years it's evolved, because you said it was tough at the beginning.

ROMA: Right.

FOLLET: But now it's —

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: OK. So you said that diversity around sexuality is what you've got down.

ROMA: Yes.

FOLLET: You've dealt or are dealing successfully with that. Does that mean less so with race?

ROMA: Well, wait, before you get there, I want to answer that. I do want to say that [there's a] 21-year-old, Emily Joy, who wants the choir to have a workshop on transgender and all of that. So I think that when we're talking about sexualities, MUSE hasn't gone the distance yet, because in the '80s and the early '90s, the mid-'90s, we were saying straight, lesbian and bisexual, you know, and the whole [issue of] transgendered [people] is really something that I know a lot of women's choirs and a lot of men's choirs and a lot of Unitarian choirs are dealing with. So I don't think we've come the full circle yet. And I think that that's part of our education, and I'm sure Emily will be amazing. She's an amazing drag king, so she moves in and out of those circles, and I think she's a great person to do the workshop with us, or to lead us and help us. So we've sort of stepped into it. The board has talked about the need for this, et cetera, but we haven't moved there.

But [to] go ahead with your question in relation to matters of race, I think I said that — well, we've been through some events, and I can describe those. OK, in this time period we're talking about, there are a couple of things I want to say. We're talking about '90, '91. We took a tour. A gospel choir led by my dear friend, Reverend Todd O'Neal — he has a group called the Ohio Unity Choir. It's done some very powerful things, a wonderful gospel choir. And MUSE rented a bus, a huge 48-passenger bus and went to the two women's prisons in the state of Ohio, Marysville, the big max[imum security prison], the big main prison, and then a newer prison called Franklin Pre-release.

So we got on the bus, and the deal was, I said to the choir, "We're going to sing these songs, and Todd is going to teach us two of their songs. We're going to sing together two songs." So we get on the bus. Todd is a complete extrovert, he's an amazing musician, and he's a minister, too. But, you know, he's just — we work so well together and we've collaborated on many things and he's taught me many things. There were people who — I have to just, this is an aside. Dagmar Celeste was the wife of the governor for — he was a two-term governor. And I did an interview of her for *Hot Wire*. And she said, You're in Cincinnati and you haven't met Todd O'Neal? Then another Unitarian musician who I met because I got a Unitarian church job, [said], "You haven't met Todd O'Neal?" Blah, blah, blah. So, anyway, Todd and I are completely fast friends, and he's a generous, warm human being. Because of who he is, he taught the two songs, and then he taught three, and then he taught four — we're on the bus — then he taught five, just because he wanted to involve everybody. He wanted everybody to be together.

So we get up to the prison, and MUSE performs first. And mostly an audience of African American women on these bleachers — huge, sort of a gym-like situation. And we weren't that many at that time in MUSE, and not everybody went, but most of us did. They were starting to warm to us by the time we did "Study War No More," starting to get into it, and it was

a pretty great arrangement. Then we sang with Todd, and building, building, building, and then Todd's group. So Todd gets up there, and just because of who he is, and he also had a women's choir up there for three years at Marysville, just got the women to feel like they were forgiven. There was such release happening. It was so emotional, and the intensity was unbelievable.

FOLLET: Do you remember the music, the particular pieces?

ROMA: No. I'm sure it's a lot of stuff that Todd had written. "My house must be filled, come in. The table is spread, come in. You who are for righteousness, come in, said the Lord." Then some verses, but you know, wailing, just — they're joining in, and it's intense. It's intense. So they loved it. They loved the whole thing, the women. So then we pile in the car, and I think we went and had a little bite to eat, and then we went to Franklin Pre-release. And this was much more intimate, in a smaller room, and the same thing, we sort of ran — you know MUSE. And there was more connection because it was smaller and it was more interracial at Franklin Pre-Release.

FOLLET: You mean the inmates were more —

ROMA: The inmates, and also Mary Rose Zink, this wonderful person who worked for Wilmington College — this is sort of my beginning, I think I had maybe started to be an adjunct at the prison at this point, at the men's prison, so I knew her and this was this great energy and connection with her. So we sang. I was already beginning to cry because people were right there, and it was just filling, you almost lost your breath, you know, because there was real connection for MUSE just as MUSE. But then we collaborated, and then Todd's group did it. And it was just the same thing again. I mean, I'm sitting there, we're all singing together, and tears, I'm sure, are coming out of my eyes and —

FOLLET: "We" being MUSE and the prisoners are singing with you?

ROMA: No, no. We didn't —

FOLLET: You're singing for them, to them.

ROMA: For them, yes. Mm-hmm. So, OK, what happens. I can't remember if it happened in January or February. I think it was winter. So we come back and get dropped off and the next thing, you know, we have, gosh, I think it was Monday choir. We must have done Saturday, Sunday, Monday choir, and we had to talk about it because it was so intense, the experience, for everybody. So one of the women, a lesbian in the choir, said, "I felt tricked by Todd." She used another word besides tricked. "I felt tricked and manipulated," maybe, "by Todd." And the black women, their hair goes (gestures out), respond, you know.

People talked about their feelings, and it was obvious that some of the white women and some of the lesbians, they couldn't understand — there was a lot of Jesus music, OK. And I think if you know the history of the women's choral movement, there has been a decision on the part of a lot of the choristers, the singers, not to do sacred music necessarily, and especially sacred music from the western classical tradition, not to sing about Jesus and god and king and lord. And here we were singing about Jesus the savior and my sins and all of this. And there was just some visceral connection for some of the white women, the lesbians, that they were cast out of their church, that they couldn't go to church, couldn't feel comfortable there as lesbians, and that they were sinners, you know, the whole thing — so this strong, just, feeling. And they used the word trickster for Todd because he said two pieces, and they said two pieces, that Todd was going to teach us two pieces, and we sang all of the music with them. And that's exactly what Todd would want, but he did not do it in a way — you know, it's totally, Please do this. He's generous. He wasn't, like, manipulating. But some people felt that way.

So then the African American people, women — they're straight and they're lesbian and they're old and they're young — lined up on one side. And they were all together. They felt that all of these white women just didn't get it, really. And Tally actually said that. She said it was a black thing, and asked the women if they had been in such an emotional intense experience, if they had experienced that before, the intensity that was there. And most of them hadn't. Most of them hadn't been in a black church experience. So what they tried to explain to the white women was that this music comes from a different place — it doesn't come from the same place as the church-going people who felt so uncomfortable and cast out — that for black people, the church was the only place they could express themselves, if you look at the nineteenth century and the black church and the praise houses and everything. Where was the place that people could release, where they could be emotional, where they could let go, where they could shout, you know, where they could be free.

So people beginning to share that, but so much intensity in our group talking that I thought the choir was going to explode, was going to blow apart, and that all the beginning work that we had done around race and around bringing people together and collaborations and all of this, I was really scared. So it was snowing outside, snowing, snowing, snowing, snowing, and you know, normally if it was doing that, we'd say, OK, probably for people's safety, we ought to cut the rehearsal short. Well, talking, talking, talking. Trying to share, trying to get through it. A little bit happening, you know, of that. A little bit. I think people beginning to understand. But then I understand that the next day people were on the phone. There was a snow day, so a lot of the public school teachers didn't have work, and so people were calling each other.

What came out of that was that 18 of us in the choir read this amazing book called *The Spirituals and the Blues* by James T. Cone, and what it does is gives a feeling — it's a fabulous little book and I used it with a class of mine just this last semester — it gives people the understanding of

what Jesus in the context of the spirituals and everything means. And even Ysaye when she gives a workshop, she'll say, You may not believe, or this may not be your system of belief when we sing this, but you have to be able to understand where this music comes from and the freedom struggle and how this is really what this music is all about. It's liberation music, and Jesus is used, but the music has much more meaning and much more depth and many more layers than just, Oh, this is some kind of piece about Jesus, some kind of religious piece about Jesus, and it's the same Jesus. It's *not* the same Jesus. It doesn't mean the same thing. So 18 of us read that book. It was really great. Then about eight of us met every several weeks, White Women Against Racism. Then we read a book called [Judith Katz's] *White Awareness* together.

FOLLET: Now, did this group, White Women Against Racism, come out of this moment?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah. And then, shortly thereafter, we did an antiracism workshop, and we brought in Ellie DiLapi from Penn Women's Center and Gloria Gay. That was very powerful. Everybody who is in the choir now — that was very powerful. We actually brought them again last year. So it's work that is continuing and continuous. Once you move in that direction — for myself, once I opened up this world of understanding, it never stops. You know, I'm always peeling layers of my own racism and everything, being born in the society that I am and functioning in our culture. But I never want to go, I can't go back and I don't want to go back. And I think a lot of the choir has been moving in that direction.

FOLLET: Did you lose anyone in the process?

ROMA: Eventually. What happened was, there were some resentments. We didn't lose any black women, but in the process, you know, some people, some residual anger built up, and then they eventually left. MUSE wants to and is creating space for black people to be. And what I mean by that is be who they are. I just wish I had better words. Some people probably think, some white women probably don't get it, don't get what kind of environment and what kind of space is being created in MUSE around this issue. To me it's totally exciting, and I want to see the choir have more women of color. And we have had more Latino women. We don't have any right now. We've had two and three, and they've added to the mix amazingly. We had an Indian woman from India. We've had — but you know, we haven't had many Asian women, but then we don't have many Asian women in the population of Cincinnati. We have more and more Hispanic people, Latin people coming into the population of Cincinnati. So the population of Cincinnati has probably 43 percent black, and also I might as well say like 34 percent Appalachian, and we did a whole concert of Appalachian music, which was great.

But it's something I'm conscious of, that when we go out as a smaller group, let's say instead of 54 we do a run-out with 28 people, I hope, I

always hope, that that group will be representative of who MUSE is, that it'll be lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, old, young, blue hair, gray hair, black, white, you know, in proportion, so that people see who we are when we're in a small group. And the only way that happens is when the numbers really are balanced or more inclusive. So, but let me say a little bit more.

FOLLET: Go ahead.

ROMA: Because we were/are dealing with this, in the '90s, a group on the West Coast called the Redwood Cultural Workers, sort of a Holly Near-created organization, decided — the woman who was the executive director of that was Elizabeth Min, and she decided to write a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to get women of color to create something called New Spirituals. She and Linda Tillery collaborated to create this thing called the New Spirituals Project. Well, they wrote the grant, and they liked it, but they said that they had to form a consortium of choirs around the country, and that they would then get funded. It was first two years, and then two more years. And so the piece would be premiered in Oakland with this youth chorus, graduates of the Oakland Youth Chorus, and this is — so this is people 18 to 25, something like that, a very diverse ensemble. And then they had to find other choirs. So MUSE was a choir chosen by them, the Harlem Boys Choir, a choir in Texas, and then a choir in Philadelphia at Temple.

So it felt very much like we were being honored for our work by being chosen, and to this day — Redwood has folded, I'm not sure all of the other choirs followed through with doing all four performances, but we stuck to the letter of the law. We had Linda Tillery out every year. The first was Mary Watkins, a jazz musician, so sort of jazz idiom, called "We Are One." The second one was by Ysaye Barnwell, and it was called *Crossings* — no, *Lessons* — and it was a suite in five movements. The next was a Latino woman, Jackie Rago, and she did "Canto Para Todos," and then the fourth was Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, and that was called *Anybody Here?*

FOLLET: H-e-r-e, or h-e-a-r?

ROMA: *Anybody Here?* H-e-r-e, the same, in a way. Is there anybody here listening? You know.

FOLLET: Yeah.

ROMA: So we did those, and we were very excited, and we brought Linda Tillery each time. We did not bring Mary the first time, and Ysaye couldn't come, but then we had Jackie Arago and Bernice. And it was so powerful in terms of the outreach into the community, what it did for the choir, singing New Spirituals. And what are New Spirituals? New Spirituals are newly written works that contain elements of blues, elements of the

spiritual, elements of gospel, elements of rhythm and blues, elements of rap, elements of hollers and shouts, and taking the whole tradition of African American culture and styles and genres and making the piece speak to contemporary issues that the composer was thinking about at the particular time — '94, '95, '96, in there. And you know, it was very exciting.

The first two we did with the men's chorus, the Cincinnati Men's Chorus. And we had some mixed feeling about that, the choir did, because we didn't feel that the men were as prepared as they should have been. And these were actually written for SATB, soprano, alto, tenor, bass, because that's the original choir, and those are the two college choirs, and of course, the Harlem Boys Choir has men, so they were doing essentially SATB and capable of doing SATB. So we used the Men's Chorus, you know, and happy the first year and not so happy the second year, and decided the third year that we'd transform the music somehow and we'd make a decision not to work with the men but just MUSE, and did that the fourth and all the rest of the time. So now, here it is, we just had the tenth anniversary of the New Spirituals Project. We continued even though every other — it doesn't exist anywhere.

FOLLET: Except as an activity within MUSE?

ROMA: Yeah, except as a concert that happened yearly, years one to ten. And now we've gone on to an every-other-year cycle. So the tenth was our most spectacular. And I had gone out and gotten money. It was a miracle. I went and somebody said, "Well, if you ever need anything, let me know." I had done this big project of the seven-hundred-voice choir for the groundbreaking of the Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and the person who was head of that was very pleased and wrote me a thank-you note. And I said, Hmmmm. So I got up my gumption and went and had lunch, and I said, "I'd love for you to help MUSE in some way. This is what we're doing." This is two years away from the tenth [anniversary]. And I said, "We'd like to commission Dr. Reagon to honor the Underground Railroad Freedom Center and do a commission." So that's the particular thing that she wanted to fund. So it was great.

So Dr. Reagon, leaving Sweet Honey in the Rock in January of last year, spent all of February, wrote the piece. We got it in March, worked like crazy. I think she came one time to work with us and flew back, then came out for the June performance in a huge brand-new black AME church called Allen Temple. We did two performances, and we brought not only Linda Tillery, but the Cultural Heritage Choir from the West Coast.

So the first half was, MUSE did a couple of pieces, and then we did this piece called *Liberty or Death Suite*, which is the setting of the slave narratives of Harriet Tubman. So the text is partly by Bernice, and partly text by Harriet Tubman. And it's in seven movements, and you know, it was incredible. It was just simply incredible. And I hope it gets recorded. I hope we do it again. We did it in Montreal; it was very well received. Then

we had intermission, and then the Cultural Heritage Choir just bbbhhh, let loose.

So, um, we had those. I jumped to the tenth, but we sort of didn't always commission a big huge work from year five to ten, but we commissioned some amazing works, and some of them were big. We got Ysaye Barnwell and Jackie to collaborate, and they did a piece called "Spiritual Prayers," it has a Latin — everything in Spanish. Half the piece was in Spanish, half in English. And they collaborated on musical ideas. It was great because it's West Coast, East Coast, Venezuelan, Latin rhythms, African American, it's spiritual procession, but it has a — "Voices at the Crossroads" was the name of the [song], "Voces en el Cruce." I can't remember the Spanish title right now. It had some calypso and, you know, it's great. And we also had Rachel Bagby, commissioned her to do a piece, *Daughterwise Suite*, and Ysaye did the transcription of that. These are major works. And then the years that we didn't do major works, we commissioned arrangements. Jacqueline Hairston did several arrangements for us. Ysaye did several arrangements of individual spirituals.

FOLLET: I'm struck by — yesterday, when we were sort of summing up Anna, you said, you know, there wasn't much to work with then. I think back to Ann Gordon — it's a whole research project to find out what had been written for and about and by women. Then in Anna, you said a lot of your effort went into just finding appropriate material to sing. And now, you've found more, but you're also creating it.

ROMA: Absolutely. If you look at the MUSE website, we have a whole section of, I'd say — in 22 years we've commissioned 70 pieces. That's a lot. And we know that people hit on that website, that particular page of the website, because we can look at that. Plus, I also know that — we didn't even talk about this yesterday — I know that choirs around the country are using this repertoire. When we go to a GALA conference and there are lots of other choirs, they're invariably things that MUSE has brought into existence. When we go to Sister Singers, I'm sure it's going to be the same thing. It has been the same thing in the other Sister Singers networks, festivals. So, you know, this —

FOLLET: So once you create it, it's open for —

ROMA: We give it away.

FOLLET: You give it away?

ROMA: Well, I mean, in quotes, "give it away." You know, we want it — lots of times when you commission something, you're allowed to only be the performers for a year, you have sole possession [for a year]. But you know, I'm a generous person, and I usually don't say, Oh, we have to wait a year, because this is to be performed. It's music by women, for the most

part, and it's incredible, and it's different, especially some of these New Spirituals pieces. Bernice got a call — we did five of the seven in Montreal — she got immediately two calls. That's part of the reason we're getting together next month, is this music, we want women to be able to do it, but when she recorded it, it's really for SATB. And MUSE actually changed the keys of some, and didn't change the keys of others. And I did actually two movements in August for the opening of the Underground Railroad Freedom Center and she was there. It was great, and that was an SATB choir. So we're going to try to figure out what keys these things should be in and how it fits for the voice, whether it's SATB, because men and women — you know, SATB choirs want to do this.

FOLLET: Mm-hmm.

ROMA: Yeah, I mean, the music is to get out there. Things like *Liberty or Death Suite* need to be sung, need to be heard, and that's the way I feel about so much of the music.

FOLLET: Need to be sung, need to be heard, because —

ROMA: Need to be sung, need to be heard, because the text — I mean, Harriet Tubman's slave narratives are brilliant, and Bernice working with that and creating something — [in] the last movement of *Liberty or Death Suite* — she sort of sticks to Harriet Tubman for the first five or so, and then the sixth and the seventh are truly New Spirituals, and the last movement is, "When, when, when is my time gonna come?" meaning that we're still not free, we're still not there. It's the New Spiritual. Is it Dr. Reagon paying attention to what's happening with gay and lesbian people and the legislation and laws being jammed down everybody's throat about that? Is it having to do with voting and votes counting or not counting? I mean, there are other verses that I can't remember right now, but there's this litany of "When, when, when is my time" — you know, we haven't arrived. So that people would understand that as singers, and that it would be sung so that people try and understand that this is not something that just we arrive, we get there. It's a lifelong struggle, what we're doing. What we're singing about needs our vigilant attention as we live in this world to try and change it to be more just.

FOLLET: How do you see, experience, or witness that connection between the music and social change? Do you see the music — have you witnessed the music make change, witness to change? Is there any way you can describe how they relate?

ROMA: Music that contains these messages reaches and grabs and changes people, in terms of justice?

FOLLET: Yes. I mean, I know that's just a wide-open question, but I know you love history, and the fact that the first program you wanted to do was around

the bicentennial, and you dredged up all that music, and it was a history of America, of American women, and the sense of some connection between history and music or music moving history forward or witnessing history.

ROMA:

Well, I mean, just take, for example, what we just talked about, in other words, this rich body of spirituals, which to me is some of the most magnificent music that I just never tire of. But for the choir or for our audiences — because we bring Linda Tillery in and she's in performance speaking about the music and so is Dr. Reagon or whatever — and by the way, Bernice gave a lecture beforehand. We call them Chalk Talks, or that's what the people out on the West Coast used and we've sort of carried it forward, and that is the composer talking about the piece, why they wrote the piece, how they wrote the piece, how they engaged with the literature.

So the audience comes, and the choir usually participates and listens as well — and these are on tape, you know, for the most part they're on record — then the people are beginning to capture the intention, why write this piece of music. How did it come to be? When Rachel Bagby gave her Chalk Talk before *Daughterwise Suite* — how did she write about the intense relationship between mother and daughter? What was her experience? So you have people listening verbally to something and then experiencing it in music, which, you know, how can you talk about music? I mean, how do you talk about the goose bumps or the internal knowledge that comes or the release? It's hard to talk about those things, but I think it happens.

The spirituals — Ysaye's done two amazing arrangements that are virtuoso arrangements that exploit the ranges of the choir. The first one was "Wade in the Water," where she juxtaposed two spirituals. The most recent one she did was "Go Down Moses," and the reason we wanted "Go Down Moses" was because we were doing a concert that talked about the intersection and juxtaposition and cross-relationship of Jewish music and black struggle. So we thought that "Go Down Moses" was the piece that would be able to do that, and so she also uses two spirituals, "What a Beautiful Morning" — I can't think of what the other spiritual is right now.

FOLLET:

That's OK.

ROMA:

But your question is, How do we know? I think all of this is available to the choir, in other words, no question about that, because we do so much talking. We don't just sing, you know, we discuss and we share, and the people who we commission come in and talk to us. I think it happens to the audience because we do the talking also. But how do we know? People keep coming back. You know, a lot of times music is food for the struggle. What do I want to say? It empowers and it strengthens and it makes you connect to each other and feel strong. I mean, if you take the music of the civil rights movement, for example — I'm just thinking — or even music from the second wave, the women's music movement, I mean,

there's something that happens to you. Can you talk about it, necessarily? I don't know.

I was thinking last night, when I would go to the music festivals, let's say at Champaign-Urbana or Bloomington, Michigan, and you're sitting there amongst a thousand, fifteen hundred people, and something is coming from the stage that fires up people, I mean, where does that go? It fills you up. You don't want to be anywhere but where you are, and it strengthens you and it gives you the ability to deal. I mean, some people use this music — one of the women in MUSE teaches second grade, and she takes a ton of the music that she learns in MUSE and takes bits and pieces of it and teaches her second graders, you know what I mean? So it's being used on levels that we don't — oh, Lois, teaches K through 8. She's finished now. She's retired after 30 years in the public school system. When she would — with Ysaye, she went and did workshops and was Ysaye's right-hand person — she'd take this music, and I mean, she worked with a very diverse, black-white group of young people at the Paideia School, where she taught. Those kids got so much out of it. So that's where it goes. It goes everywhere. So I don't know if that answers your question.

FOLLET: Sure does.

ROMA: I don't know if it's a tangible thing that you can hold, but all of us take this music. I take it to the prison and bring those people into the prison and that affects them. And so Eddie Robertson writes something, and he says, "I dedicate this to Ysaye Barnwell and Bernice Johnson Reagon," and stuff like that. How would he ever have met those people? So I think that it comes, it travels, it has its own way of traveling and getting around. Kids learn this, and every spring concert, all of us who are raising kids in any way, whether we're mothers or aunts or cousins or significant others, we get the kids up there, and they perform. That started in '87, and we've been doing it every spring concert. And 18-year-old guys get up there who are graduating from high school, and they still think it's fantastic. And if they're playing the violin, if we have a tenth grader playing the violin or a cello or a steel drum, we try and get them involved in participating. We might do a reggae number. So, you know, then it just travels. I don't know if that answers your question.

FOLLET: It sure does. It sure does. How do you insert yourselves in certain situations as a way of purposely bringing the music to a certain group or to a certain situation? I'm thinking about the piece that you commissioned. Is it "We Are Not Afraid," by Holly Near?

ROMA: "I Ain't Afraid." We commissioned the arrangement.

FOLLET: The arrangement, OK, around the referendum, the gay and lesbian referendum in Cincinnati as one specific example. And you've mentioned several times about what a tough place Cincinnati is to be right now

politically as a progressive choir with a progressive message, with the goals that you have. How do you engage that political reality with your music in either what you sing, where you choose to sing it, what venues you try to get into, in whatever ways that you do? Talk to me about the political and cultural context in which you're doing your work right now.

ROMA: Well, Cincinnati.

FOLLET: Do you want to take a little break before we start this?

ROMA: Yeah. Yeah.

FOLLET: Let's do that, because I know it's a biggie. (pause in tape)

FOLLET: OK, so we are back. After a deep sigh, you were going to tell me about life in Cincinnati and the political context and how that affects your work.

ROMA: Oh God. OK. Cincinnati is a midwestern town. Cincinnati is a southern town. Cincinnati is a company town and a conservative town, company meaning Procter & God, that's what they call it. (laughter) And GE is there, GE Engines and Jergens and Cincinnati Millicron — lots of business and industry, corporations. So I came from Philadelphia to this place. The progressive community is strong, it's small. I mean, Cincinnati is actually pretty small, maybe not even 500,000. But the surrounding area, of course, gets you up over 1.2 million, maybe more. It's right on the Ohio, right across from Kentucky. So let's talk about, in the most recent election, 2004, probably the strongest, one of the five strongest places where Bush gets his money, where he came Sunday before the election in November — all of the surrounding area is completely conservative, completely. And the county has a huge influence on the city. Hamilton County has a huge influence on the city. The African American population is conservative.

Cincinnati has a — I can't believe I'm going to say this — but sort of a religious pall over the city. It's unbelievably controlled by religion, and Cincinnatians for Community Values, Phil Burgess, they have a terrible influence over the city. Do you remember the artist Mapplethorpe? There was a fantastic exhibit. We had a wonderful director of the Contemporary Arts Center who brought in this wonderful Mapplethorpe exhibit, and Simon Leis, the sheriff, threatened to close it down; in fact, was going to close it down. The guy was arrested — the director of the museum was arrested. There were bomb scares. That's just one example.

So, operating, having a choir, having a progressive choir. So, first I've told you a little bit about having that line in our philosophy. Let me just give you an idea of date night. I remembered this the other night, and I thought I should say it. MUSE performed — there was a little men's chorus that was short-lived that was in Dayton. We performed at a big AIDS benefit down in Cincinnati, and there was not a Cincinnati men's chorus at that time, so we wanted to collaborate with a men's chorus. We

invited the men from Dayton down. None of them would have the last name on the program. Now that's 1988, but still it gives you an idea. We're not dealing with being in LA or Seattle or New York or whatever. No last names.

FOLLET: Because?

ROMA: Because they didn't want to be known. They didn't want their name [made public] because they were scared of [people saying] they're gay, or you know, what would happen to them in terms of their jobs or whatever in terms of being gay, or their families, you know. We have people in MUSE who were with their partner for eight, ten years, and then came out to their parents and were completely cut off from their families, completely, no contact, and not even allowed to get together with their nieces and nephews who were in their lives, you know. So this is just saying what was — but it makes all the difference. OK.

So the gay and lesbian issue is one thing. It's a homophobic community. It's a community that had Issue 12, you know, a large percent of the population, until it got reversed. And the way that Article 12 got reversed in November was door to door, straight and gay people going door to door to educate people about what Article 12 really was. It was people-to-people contact. And that was the thing that reversed it and changed it, even while Issue 1 in the state of Ohio passed by huge amounts. Issue 1 is a huge anti-gay campaign statewide.

Corporations understand how fabulous it is to have gay and lesbian workers — eventually. Like P&G stood on the side of ridding the city of Article 12. They have domestic-partner benefits, and so does the *Inquirer*, a very conservative newspaper, but nobody knows. It's not public information. The University of Cincinnati does not have partner benefits. Other state universities in Ohio do. Issue 1 that passed says that no other universities now can add that, and they think that they're going to keep the others — you know, there are so many messed-up things about that, I think there are going to be some legal issues and suits against it. So Cincinnati — Log Cabin Republicans, Republicans, conservative, stay in the closet. Probably OK to be gay, but in the closet.

What else? I don't even know how to talk about some of the rest of it. There's an area of Cincinnati called Over the Rhine, where it's, like, redlined around Over the Rhine. There's drugs, there's all sorts of things that people seem to be avoiding dealing with. Cincinnati had — after 2001, when Timothy Thomas was shot in the back, a young 17-year-old black young man was shot in the back by a white police officer — we had riots in Cincinnati, and I should say civil unrest, racial unrest. We were put on a curfew, the city was put on a curfew. There's a huge amount of tension between the police and the black community in Cincinnati. There's a collaborative group of people trying to work on this. Racial tensions are fairly elevated, I'd say, in Cincinnati. It's the eighth most segregated city in the United States. There are very segregated neighborhoods and communities, and it's said that people on the west

side, if you're born and raised on the west side, they don't leave it. They literally don't leave it. People are petrified to go in town! Now I can understand that some people might have been uncomfortable after the civil unrest and the curfew and everything like that, but people are scared to go downtown. And, you know, I don't get that at all. So it's fraught.

It's blinking.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: And Cincinnati has some real troubles. So I think it's a great asset that MUSE gets into as many communities as we do. I think it's a great tool. I think we are able to move in and out of certain communities, and I think we've made some pretty powerful inroads, because of the group of people that we are and because we're women. I think that's important because we sing about peace and we sing about youth and children and the lives of children, I think that's all very important.

But also we have this repertoire. We've been invited to sing at Damon Lynch III's church, New Prospect Baptist Church, in Over the Rhine as one of seven choirs, all the choirs gospel choirs, all black, and MUSE was asked to participate and sing, and I just thought that was incredible, for a benefit for an education center in Over the Rhine. And we sang pieces by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Ysaye Barnwell, and you know, we didn't do gospel music. We did spiritual and we did New Spirituals, and they were very well received, and it felt just good to be able to do that.

We went to York Street Methodist. We were invited by a black minister to perform there, to do a whole black history, a program during Black History Month. That kind of thing is really important. And our New Spirituals are often done in Reverend O'Neal's church, which is in an integrated community called College Hill, but it's primarily a black church. I feel good about it. I think there's always more that we can do, but that we can begin to move into these different communities — and we're not welcome, I'm sure, everywhere. So it's a little dance that we all do to make these things happen.

FOLLET: OK. Before we lose this tape –

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

- FOLLET: OK. As we start thinking about winding down, here are some of the questions that you might at least pay lip service to, like the relationship between MUSE and GALA.
- ROMA: Ah.
- FOLLET: The gay men's — the larger gay chorus movement. Is that something we should address?
- ROMA: Mm-hmm.
- FOLLET: Let's do it.
- ROMA: Mm-hmm. OK. Are we rolling?
- FOLLET: We are.
- ROMA: OK. Here's sort of the beginning — I'll tell you a little about my feelings about the beginning. MUSE very early went to a Sister Singers Festival, a year or two after we started, and we missed, I think, the first one or two. I was in transition — Sister Singers was sort of happening in the Midwest, and I was in Philly with Anna, and so didn't really do that till I got to Cincinnati. And very strong, grassroots feminist lesbian-identified Sister Singers — all of those things, OK. Primarily the choruses that peopled Sister Singers, more lesbian. Hardly any straight women in the choruses. More collective and feminist in a sense than MUSE or because they didn't have somebody who was trained, often, like I was trained, at the helm. So arranging space for women who were not trained to be conducting and sharing conducting as well as some of the other things. So MUSE went there, and we were very polished, and some people would say conservative, because we were, like, you know, I mean, we always sang pretty [much] literature.
- I remember the first time we sang "Biko," about Stephen Biko, Dr. Reagon's arrangement, and I remember that. I don't remember what else we did, but always hard-hitting literature, but we did it well. We did it with some musical excellence, you know, because I was of course in school right then and there, so I think I was a little more hard-assed than I eventually became, do you know what I mean, in terms of being uptight and being in that environment. But we were good, and so went to that.
- Then came GALA. I was invited in '86. I should tell you this. There was a big GALA — the second GALA met in Minneapolis, Minnesota in '86, and I was invited to be the guest conductor [for] a pickup, you know, a gathering of all the women there. And GALA, when I was asked to be on the board in '86, had maybe two, possibly three women's choirs. It was mostly started by gay men's choruses, and there was hardly any mixed choirs either and virtually no women's choirs. So I was brought onto the

board to bring in, to interest more women's choirs, to get all those Sister Singers choirs and other women's choirs that were starting up to join GALA.

So MUSE didn't perform in '86, but there was one coming up in '89, and I was on the board, and brought all the stuff back to MUSE that I had learned. Organizationally, the gay men's choruses are hierarchical. You know, there's been articles written about the sort of military model. They're very different. The conductor is the conductor, and don't mess around. You know what I mean — there's some real differences in structure, and of course, in repertoire.

But that was a special time for GALA. I met some wonderful people and people who I became very connected to, some of whom have since died of AIDS. But it was very exciting, because GALA was young and new and they really wanted to build it. What I felt about GALA was they valued musical excellence. So here was this organization that was valuing musical excellence and more of a gay organization, and then here was Sister Singers, which was feminist, grassroots, political, hard-hitting — both groups not dealing so much with diversity, inclusion of African American and different cultures, and also not so much straight people. I mean, in the women's choirs, there were always some, but they were always a token minority, in a way. And in the men's chorus, very hard to have straight men in those gay men's choruses, although in Cincinnati, when Cincinnati first began, some of the founding fathers were straight men, and it was so wonderful, and a good number. It's not that way anymore, but it was sure wonderful when it started. So MUSE has become, I think, a real mentor because of the hard work that we've done around issues of race and diversity and inclusion. And it shows up. I mean, you just, (laughs) you can't miss it.

And in '89 — let's go back to the first GALA. We upstaged the New York Gay Men's Chorus, and that was a big thing. We were the penultimate group, and they followed us on. I think it was very early in the festival, like a Monday night. And we were pretty amazing, and we were fairly diverse even then, compared to the rest of the choruses, and we had a great deal of variety in our repertoire, and everybody was, MUSE, MUSE, MUSE, MUSE, and it kept the Gay Men's Chorus from New York from coming on for — they must have lost two or three minutes, because people were just — you know, it was wild.

Now, of course, missed the next one, then we went to Tampa Bay. We did that, then San Jose, and then Montreal. And, of course, as women's choirs have come along, there are incredible women's choirs right now. It's great. And they're all so different. And you know, cities, geography, all of that matters as to what the choirs are like, for the men's choruses as well as the women's choirs. You take a city like Seattle. It's the biggest gay men's chorus in the world. They don't have gay in their title, but it's the biggest gay men's chorus — three hundred or something. And to give you also an idea, the women's choirs that began by women in the Midwest or Anna or L.A. or wherever, always had a more well-rounded political engagement and philosophy, OK, that means they were aware of all kinds

of issues of poverty, justice, peace, women's health, gay and lesbian struggle, all of those — sang about all of those. In cities where gay men's choirs started women's choirs, and there quite a lot —

FOLLET: Gay men's choirs started women's —

ROMA: Wanting a women's choir to start, so sort of giving it support. A lot of times there are these umbrellas, 501C3 umbrellas, that the band might be under in a men's chorus or a mixed chorus or a women's chorus. So lots of times gay men were the impetus for lesbian choirs beginning, and those are invariably different. So that's worthy of a study in itself.

FOLLET: Different in that they are —

ROMA: More gay, more solely single issue. I mean, apparently more single issue. And also in the case, if I may say so — I love Dennis, and he and I have been in this thing from the beginning. He's been in the very beginning from the men —

FOLLET: Dennis?

ROMA: Coleman at Seattle Men's Chorus, but of course Anna is the first of all of these. But the Gay Men's Chorus, San Francisco, was the first, and I think that's in '78, so Anna had a couple of years on them. Anyway, there was a fabulous women's chorus in Seattle called the Seattle Women's Ensemble, directed by a fabulously capable woman, Joan Szymko, who's now in Portland doing a couple of women's choirs, and a wonderful composer, great composer. She had SWE, Seattle Women's Ensemble, for ten years. It folded. Other people tried to take it over. She was a very powerful person and hard to follow. It lasted — there were people who filled her footsteps for a little bit, but eventually no women's choir in Seattle. Dennis says, Oh, I think Seattle needs a women's choir. Do you remember Gilda Turner —

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: — the woman who joined the coalition with me? She abandoned — she works for a union, so she left Cincinnati and went to Seattle, damn it. And she's a powerful founding mother of MUSE, and I love her, and we miss her and we hope she comes back, but for the time being she's in Seattle. She decided — I told her Dennis Coleman was beginning a women's choir. She was in on the ground floor. They did their first concert with 120 women. And I saw them — they've only been going a year — I saw them in Montreal. They were all in exactly the same clothes, exactly the same outfits. They're doing a lot of straight classical music, and then the stuff that they did that was humorous was very gay male kitsch, do you know what I mean? So the choice of repertoire, for the most part, it was in the image, it was a women's choir in the image of the men's choir. And

Dennis is the conductor. He has a woman assistant conductor, but for the time being –

FOLLET: Dennis is the conductor of the women's choir?

ROMA: Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: How interesting.

ROMA: Now they're up over two hundred. And, you know, it's not what I want to do, but I'm just giving you this as an example of the difference. And Gilda, because she speaks right out and says exactly — she's confronted Dennis on a lot of different things, especially when there were 120 women, four black women, not many Asian, not many Latin. And even in three hundred men, you know, and even in New York. You see, I've had conversations with both Bernice and Ysaye about this. In fact, Ysaye — just jumping here a little — there was a group called the D.C. Area Women's Feminist Choir, and now they're called Bread and Roses, because they sort of got the idea communicated to them, they got it, that how can you use "Washington" in the title and not have any black people? Call it something else, but don't call it by the town, you know.

So there has been that discussion, most definitely, at least within the women's community. And the women's choral movement is attempting to deal with this, and MUSE has led discussions at gatherings to try and work with people to move them forward and breaking through some of the barriers that they have about making change, making personal decisions to change and for the choir to look at themselves to make those kinds of changes. I can't say that any women's choir or any men's choir has 5 percent of men or women of color.

FOLLET: And MUSE's percent now is?

ROMA: We average between 20 and 25.

FOLLET: So MUSE really does stand out. I mean, you deserve the credit you get for being a model antiracist group that assertively works on these issues of diversity and change.

ROMA: Yeah. I mean, I think it's something we care about, something we work hard on, and keep working on, and it makes a difference.

FOLLET: What would happen if you were to move? This is your baby.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: You had Anna to build on, and it's been entirely — you've been the head of it since '83, when it started.

- ROMA: I hope, I pray, I want it to go on without me, just like Anna has. Anna is strong, they're different, they do incredible things. And I love who they are. I hope — really, all I can do — I hope that there's a structure in place that somebody could come in. And I fully believe that, that enough people have been in and out that the structure is strong enough that it can go on. I hope so. It'll be a big thing, but we don't have to cross that yet.
- FOLLET: Not yet, OK. You just said something else interesting when you were comparing the styles of the gay choruses and the women's, the feminist choruses. You said at your first performance at GALA, I think, that you were really intent on doing high-quality music, and you said that you were a little more hard-assed then than you are now.
- ROMA: Oh, the first Sister Singers.
- FOLLET: The first Sister Singers.
- ROMA: Yeah.
- FOLLET: So given all the things you're trying to accomplish — the internal community within MUSE, addressing diversity within that group, the social messages that you're trying to convey, the audiences that you're trying to reach, the musical quality — when push comes to shove, what yields to what?
- ROMA: That's a really good question.
- FOLLET: How do you decide, or is it strictly depending on the moment?
- ROMA: Really good question. I would say that — oh, man. What yields to what? All right. Here's an example. We haven't done a CD since — we did one, what, '05? Haven't done one since '98. That's a long period of time for an organization. Why haven't we? OK. We are a community choir, and we — I'll tell you why, in a sense. MUSE has done, starting about ten years ago, we decided to do a New Spirituals concert every year. So we do a fall, a winter, and a spring concert, plus we do 20 to 25 run-outs.
- You know, some people who talk to the people who are auditioning say, This is a way of life — the MUSE takes over your life. People in the choir can say, This is my issue, this is my group of people, come and sing. I'm organizing this, or this is really important to me. If it's a group of academics who are having a conference over at NKU, Northern Kentucky [University], or Miami [University], this is my department, I really want us to come — hey, we respond. OK, I'm working with this group of people over here and we're feeding the hungry and we want you to come and be at a thank-you dinner for the people who have been working. So we respond to issues or groups that the choir wants to sing for, for individuals in the choir, and then we are a community choir. So people say, Oh, well, we

know that MUSE stands for social justice, and we're going to have a moratorium on the death penalty, and so let's ask MUSE.

And by the way, I do want to say in here it's really terrific — yes, we had a discussion and came to consensus that we would sign the moratorium as a choir, as a supporting organization in the state of Ohio. So I was just so happy. My friend who teaches at UC, and he's a member of St. John's, a fantastic guy who's been head of the ACLU and works against the death penalty in Ohio, he said, "What do you think about MUSE signing it?" And I said, OK, well, we'll have that discussion. So put a lot of information out in front of the choir, and listed about 89, at that point, organizations around the state who were supporting the moratorium. And then we had a discussion, and we — I don't know. I felt really great about it. It was a consensus. We decided to have a consensus, and if somebody blocked, then we wouldn't have done it. But I did that parenthetically.

OK. What's sacrificed? Let's see. I guess musical excellence might be sacrificed, which I don't like to say, because the choir is perfectly capable of blowing people away in that category, you know, but because we keep commissioning works and we keep performing and we go out into the world all the time and make time for that, then I think that probably the musical excellence angle. And I'm mercilessly critical.

FOLLET: Well, I put that negatively, like what don't you do, what gets sacrificed. But maybe there's a positive way of putting it, you know, what's the —

ROMA: No, but I think about this. I think about this, because the choir is spectacular. It really is. And the kind of discipline that it takes to do a recording or to get a piece ready, but especially a recording, is wickedly challenging. And there's no audience egging you on. In other words, when you have an audience and you have them in the palm of your hand, the choir just rises up to that. But when there's an empty — you know, we did it at the Quaker meeting in Cincinnati, Friends' Meeting, an incredibly wonderful space, and nobody is there, you know, I had to of course try and do all sorts of things to enliven them, awaken them, get them excited, respond and stuff like that.

FOLLET: So the recording and distribution out beyond the community is not a top priority?

ROMA: Correct. It hasn't been, you know. I mean, maybe we need to because people say, Is this on your CD? Is this on your CD? Is this on your CD? Is this on your CD?

FOLLET: Yeah.

ROMA: But it takes money. It takes the most kind of exacting work and bringing everybody up to par. So that has its challenges. But when the choir does its cultural work and is an arm of the — what do I want to say? — of the

progressive community, you know, that's so important to so many of us that we be able to appear and perform and be a part of social change movements, justice movements, peace movements.

You can imagine after 2001 what we went through. And, of course, you'll hear on this CD "Mother's Prayer," "Foolish Notion," "Wage Peace." We did an incredible Phil Ochs song. Do you know "Power and Glory"? Here's Phil Ochs, a brilliant singer-songwriter, Jewish, sensitive person who committed suicide, wrote a body of amazing literature. And in this piece — it is a patriotic piece, and we wanted to do something that had that element in it, but the incredible verse that we really sing out is,

*Yet she's only as rich as the poorest of the poor,
Only as free as a padlocked prison door,
Only as strong as our love for the land,
Only as tall as we stand.*

— something like that. So here it is. The chorus goes, let me see. Oh, shoot. Oh, God, I can't even remember it and we just sang it!

FOLLET: I bet you can sing it.

ROMA: Yeah, I probably could.

FOLLET: Go ahead! Do it!

ROMA: Wait. Let me just — "from California, from Colorado, Kansas, and the Carolinas, too," and then we have, "this land is your land," we put in a little Woody Guthrie to it. So that was the first verse. And then — I can't. Everything is leaving me right now. So we have a song that is (singing) dum, da, da, dum, dum, da, dada, deda, dum, boom, "won't you come along with me," you know, very patriotic, and you sort of stand tall and everything, and then here's this incredible verse that really talks about what the real kernel of who we are as a nation, only as rich as the poorest of the poor, only as free as a padlocked prison door. Anyway, so people love that kind of thing, because we're playing with them a little bit, and what a powerful song that he wrote, I'm guessing, in the '60s.

FOLLET: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

ROMA: And we sang that, incidentally, we were asked to sing for the 350th anniversary of Jews in America, and that went over so big, I mean, just so big. We gave a little introduction, and oh, my God. And we sang that "Go Down Moses" there, and we sang a piece in Hebrew about the importance of — what are the three things that our world is built on: truth, justice, and peace. And usually we sign to it, everybody in the choir does the signing.

I didn't even mention that, that since maybe the second year of the choir, the same fabulous interpreter has been working with us, Ruth Rowan. She started out as an alto one, but was doing ASL [American Sign Language] in her teaching, in her work. She was working with deaf kids in the public school. Then she adopted a deaf daughter, and is doing amazing

things with Tammy. Tammy is a young African American girl, and Ruth and her partner adopted her, and Tammy has blossomed like you wouldn't believe. It's spectacular. So every one of our concerts is interpreted for the hearing impaired, and all sorts of performing artists, from Holly Near to you name it, has wanted Ruth, which is also a high compliment to us, to her. Yeah, so I forget where I was going with all of that.

FOLLET: OK. OK. I hate to have to pick and choose, but — go ahead.

ROMA: I haven't said anything about Umoja.

FOLLET: That's right.

ROMA: So I just want to say a little thing.

FOLLET: OK, let's do that.

ROMA: Umoja Men's Chorus is a group of 20 men incarcerated in Warren Correctional Institution, which is a state prison in Warren County in Ohio. And I had actually a choir at Lebanon Correctional as well when I first started working for Wilmington College, so I just wanted to put in and say it's been an eye-opening experience. And part of my — you know, what did I do when I got my degree in '89, my doctorate? I was looking around for a job, and I was adjuncting a bunch of different places, three different colleges, and I had MUSE and my church job, so I was running around everywhere. But Wilmington appealed to me greatly because it was a Quaker college and I knew that they had a prison program. So in 1990, what am I doing with my doctorate? I'm teaching, I'm adjuncting, teaching African American music in a prison with all, mostly African American men in my class. And when they asked me to do that — because I expressed interest in the prison program and administrating, but I didn't really want to do that, so they said, Why don't you do this class? So I said, Oh, OK, I've taught African American music at Abingdon Friends, the high school where I worked.

So I went and found myself a mentor. I went to IU, Indiana University, and Dr. Reagon actually told me about Portia Maultsby, and she was head of African American Studies there, and she was an ethnomusicologist and had been to the University of Wisconsin. I believe she was the first African American woman to get a doctorate in ethnomusicology in the '70s, and a generous academic. I fell in love with her, actually. You know, I went down there, thinking I was going to be there an hour or two one December day. She must have spent seven or eight hours with me, giving me books, giving me a syllabus, giving me ideas about CDs and what recordings and things to use. It was incredible.

So she mentored me as I was going in front of probably 14 or 15 African American men in Warren. And it was so exciting. I worked my tail off, and I read more and I listened to more things. I made tapes for the guys and I had some rigorous reading and some serious books for them to

read. And that was my beginning in the prison as an adjunct, doing that class. And then in '93 when I became full time [at] Wilmington, my location of teaching was the prisons. There are three prisons in Ohio that Wilmington works with and so my first two years as a full-time teacher, I only taught in the prisons. And I was the happiest of my life.

FOLLET: Seriously?

ROMA: Mm-hmm, during that time.

FOLLET: Why?

ROMA: Hungry, willing-to-learn and take-it-all-in students. They were just hungry. I could give them a book and they would read it. And I even had — do you know the book *Black Feminist* — is it called *Black Feminism*?

FOLLET: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*?

ROMA: Yeah, *Black Feminist Thought*. She teaches at the University of Cincinnati. And so — this is even I think before I was full time — I had a group of people, anybody who wanted to that was in the program that I was in touch with, I don't think it was a particular class of mine, although it could have been. I wasn't teaching *Black Feminist Thought*, but maybe I had a book club. I think I had a book club as an extracurricular, and 18 guys read that book. And I brought her in, and she said they were much more respectful, they asked much better questions. She was completely blown away, completely blown away. And she had not been in a classroom of all, mostly black guys.

FOLLET: This is in the prison?

ROMA: In the prison. She was completely, you know — so that was very exciting. So that's what I'm talking about, that they would read it, that they would want to discuss it, that they were honored to have her in and very respectful. It was high energy. She was flying when she walked out. She just thanked me a lot for that experience.

So, you can imagine. I taught World Music. I had so much fun teaching music of world cultures. I also started a jazz class, taught a sort of introduction to jazz history and analysis. And I had done that at the high-school level but also had to do some homework and some research. And they had a blast, you know. I brought all sorts of books into the prison, and I was lucky because I taught on days usually when there were nice people out front that I could sort of get this stuff in, and the college program was going full speed ahead.

And then the change happened with the Contract with America, Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms, and the Pell grant funding — 1.5 percent of Pell grant funding when Claiborne Pell created the Pell grants in the late '60s, early '70s, was set aside for incarcerated people — because the Pell grants

are for poor people — who are in prison. So that was taken, rescinded, taken back, and no Pell grants in the prison after '97. And then the states supplemented Pell grants, many of the states did. We have Ohio Instructional Grants, and so guys could supplement their Pell or whatever for their tuition. And so when Pell went, they decided to reduce the OIG and give a certain amount of money from the state budget to the prisons. Wrong.

So what's there now is barely a skeleton of its former self — there's no black psychology, there's no literature, there's no ethics, there's no history, there's no science, there's no arts. There's business. So they can take legitimate college classes in business and get a certificate, which then states that they've taken college-level classes and credit-worthy courses, and they can take it to a college. But they don't give an AA, they don't give a BA anymore. And all of these incarcerated people, like 90 percent are going to get out. And they're going to be your neighbor and my neighbor, and I would rather them know about how to take care of themselves because they've read and they love learning and they're curious and they — you know, there were incredible transformations that happened with people. When you learn about history, when you learn about black history or black psychology —

There was a little incident that happened at Lebanon Correctional just before I came, just when I started work as an adjunct in about '90 or '91. The college program had been going for some time, and the guys started talking amongst themselves and saying, you know, Here we are in this college and there's no black history, there's no black psychology. We're not even reading black literature. So they started talking and everything like that, and they decided to write a letter, a sort of proclamation, to the college.

And the dean at the time who hired me, whom I adore, Mary Ellen Batiuk, got the message and said, "Whoa, this education system is really working, you know, we educate these guys and they say, 'Hey, where's this? We're not getting this.'" So the prison's response to this was, they're meeting separately, they're going to riot. They put them in segregation, solitary confinement, every single guy that signed that petition. So then the college had to deal with the prisoners — these kinds of things always happen — and Mary Ellen was magnificent and talked to the warden and everything. They still had to stay in solitary confinement, but the end result was that Mary Ellen Baddock brought in all kinds of faculty and changed the curriculum. So by the time I came along, there was a good number of black male and female faculty going in and working with the students. And black psychology was one [course], African American history, all sorts of — the literature classes were balanced with African American writers, and it was pretty great.

So this has been a very important part of my growing, my understanding about race. Talk about understanding about poverty and race and class and all of that — for me, that's been a very important part of my growing. Of course, understanding the prison industrial complex and all of that, I have to say that, because I've learned so much about that as well.

FOLLET: So you are able to continue the course there –

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: – even though all these other programs have been cut back?

ROMA: I wanted that more than anything, and they saw that it was — just before the fall of all of the money and everything, we made that first CD, which was pretty good PR for the college and everything.

FOLLET: Good.

ROMA: So I've insisted that I get adjunct status and so it's sort of like an extra class. To me, it would have been great if they had said, Listen, this is a really important thing, this is part of your load. That would have been a really good thing. But it's a teaching college, so I already teach four classes a semester. So, a really important thing.

FOLLET: So over and above the teaching four, you do the Umoja and the MUSE?

ROMA: Well, I do — yeah. Umoja is at Wilmington. MUSE is separate. St. John's Unitarian Church, I've been minister of music for 19 years there.

FOLLET: You don't sleep –

ROMA: Then I started the King Chorale, you know. I told you about that, and we're going into our fifteenth year.

FOLLET: This is a huge amount of energy. You don't sleep much?

ROMA: (laughs) Oh, gosh. The best thing is when I, you know, have the space, like right now, to plan, because the downtime creates space for new ideas. So, yeah, I don't sleep that much, although it's really important to. But I just — it's been very important.

I didn't talk about, you know, working in the Indian community and two big projects. There's a very big Indian population in Cincinnati, and my friend Kanniks Kannikeswaran, we did a collaboration called "The Blue Jewel," about the planet Earth. And then just last May we did "Shanti, Journey of Peace," and it's mostly — we sang in Sanskrit and Tamil. The first one we did was English — there was a lot of English. And this one was more challenging, and it was beautifully done. So we're actually going to resurrect that. The beautiful thing about that, "Shanti," is we actually had members from the Martin Luther King Coalition. So we had my church choir committed to doing it, and this huge group of Indian men and women, and then for the first time, different from "The Blue Jewel," we brought in members of the Martin Luther King Coalition, so that was very exciting. We ordered 120 saris for the women from — not

120, we had about 70 women, 70 saris — from India, and all of the women had these identical saris.

FOLLET: Ah!

ROMA: And they were — it was just amazing. And the men wore some kind of Indian shirt that was great. Anyway, that's another story.

FOLLET: Yes. Speaking of the saris, though, I can't let this go because you've mentioned a couple of times that what the chorus wears, what MUSE wears, is up for grabs, has been a debatable topic.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: Did you say that that's the only time you've had to bring in an —

ROMA: Outside facilitator?

FOLLET: — outside facilitator?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah.

FOLLET: What's so hot about that topic?

ROMA: Well, it was, you know, Should we be all uniform? How polished should we be in appearance? And of course then we'll have somebody coming in and working with Alexander Technique or getting us to open up, and they say, Oh, yes, performing in bare feet is absolutely the best thing you could do. So, you know, half the choir goes, Yeah, bare feet! Standing in bare feet and singing! So, kind of negotiating all of that. But right now, every woman can be her own individual self, and that's where we've gotten to, and people are comfortable with that. In other words, in the winter, we wear black and we can have a touch of turquoise, and it can be, we could wear turquoise shoes, earrings, a scarf, a vest, something like that, and of course, when you get your handbook, there is a swatch of turquoise, the exact color that you'd better get. And match that, bring that piece of cloth when you go shopping for your accent. (laughter) And then, you know, you could have blue hair, like Emily, turquoise hair.

FOLLET: She does?

ROMA: Yeah, yeah, often. Mm-hmm. Absolutely. And some people have something in their hair. Some of the African American women have worn beautiful blue headpieces and things like that.

FOLLET: Oh, it sounds gorgeous. Sounds so striking.

ROMA: Yeah, it's very different, and it is striking. And then in the spring it's white with turquoise. And so people, some wear dresses and do all sorts of things with their turquoise accents. So it looks uniform, but everybody can do their own thing. And then occasionally, you know, [we wear shirts that say], This is what a feminist looks like, when we all decide to wear a t-shirt. And then this year we did — actually, because the CD — we had four colors of t-shirt, and we had the logo from the CD cover. It was hysterical, because a couple of people said, Oh, you look like tulips. They were in the distance, and they saw all of us with our t-shirts, and they were four colors that sort of just looked like — you know, it was great.

FOLLET: (laughs) Oh, that's great.

ROMA: A bunch of tulips.

FOLLET: That's great. Well, this is just —

ROMA: Where are we?

FOLLET: Well, I think we're at the point where we need to —

ROMA: Cool it.

FOLLET: — think about getting you on the road. So let me just — this has just been such a fabulous, ever-unfolding and ever-growing story.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: I mean, it's clear that there are no horizons too far, that you will just keep going and growing and exploring. So what will you do in the near future? Do you see challenges ahead that you know you're going to take on? What do you want to do with the rest of this "one wild and precious life" of yours, as you sing so nicely?

ROMA: Well, actually, I was doing some thinking about the twenty-fifth anniversary concert, and I would like to commission — I have something going on in my mind about a commission. And it has to do with different movements created by different composers, all around a topic which I'm thinking very carefully about. And I don't know whether it's going to be about hope or justice or what, and whether we'll choose the choir. The Dreamers and the Eaters and the Philosophers will take texts by women, poems that talk about our lives in some way, and create a — I don't want to call it a canticle, I don't like that. I don't like oratorio — some feminist word that captures a cycle of some sort. You know, Kay [Gardner] did that wonderful *Ouroboros*.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: And MUSE, by the way, did a performance with an orchestra of 40 women, and we had a choir of about 90. We invited a couple of other women's choirs to join us. I prepared it, and it's the only one that she conducted. There's been three performances in different locations, and she conducted the one in Cincinnati in '99.

FOLLET: Kay did?

ROMA: Uh huh.

FOLLET: Oh.

ROMA: It was incredible. So she did this very Kay, fabulous oratorio, she called it, which was about the six passages of a woman's life. It was incredible to work on that. So I'm thinking, though, of something not similar, because she used so much of her background and knowledge about the stages of women's lives and Samhain and the different — well, she used so many different influences of Wiccan and earth-based and women's spirituality. This would be some kind of cycle using women poets and women composers. So I'm thinking something very special to capture the 25 years of MUSE's history. So I've got that on the horizon that I'm thinking about. And then of course right now I'm really glad that we have this whole year, we know what we're doing this year, which is great. And the collaboration — I think there are probably more collaborations in store.

FOLLET: Someone you'd love to work with in your wildest dreams?

ROMA: Hmm. Um —

FOLLET: Your ideal muse.

ROMA: I've been thinking about this, and you know, well, I mean, some things that are not ideal or whatever are in the works that I'd like to have happen. Ulali are three first world women, and we've been trying to get something with them. We're in negotiation, but it hasn't happened. So I think that there's — actually, we're trying to get to South Africa and Zimbabwe in '07. I think it might have to be pushed a little bit forward. So, travel.

One thing I didn't say that was great about the choir, we went to this conference in Sheffield, England, in '99. There is a great socialist choir movement in England that's been sort of like the feminist choir movement here. And Raise Your Banners is a socialist chorus festival, and we were invited to sing. And we sang in London with Holly Near beforehand and did a benefit for Medica Kosovo, and it was just at the time when the Kosovo war was happening. And you know that this whole Medica Kosovo was really started in Bosnia Herzegovina, actually before then, and it's clinics to help women deal with rape and violence, sexual violence around war. So we had an incredibly successful benefit that friends in London organized, and I think we got six or seven thousand dollars that we

sent on to the people who organized this for Medica Kosovo. So we had an incredible time traveling, and then we went up to participate in this festival –

FOLLET: (coughs) Excuse me. (pause to get water) We're back on. Now I know you — parting words.

ROMA: Oh, goodness. Still got lots to do, lots of music-making, lots of commissioning, lots of collaborating, you know, lots to affect and change, lots of social justice movements to be amplifying through music. So we're all young yet, aren't we?

FOLLET: Aren't we ever.

ROMA: I mean, aren't we just coming into our prime?

FOLLET: I hope so.

ROMA: Yeah, me too. So I don't know what to say except that, you know, I'm still excited. I've got miles to go. Probably not 22 more years, but who knows?

FOLLET: Hey, maybe.

ROMA: Yes. I guess I've been doing 31 [years], if '74 to '75 was my first, with Anna in Madison.

FOLLET: In Madison, yes.

ROMA: So 31 years. Not bad.

FOLLET: Fabulous work. Great work.

ROMA: Thank you. It's been great –

FOLLET: Very inspiring.

ROMA: – to be here.

FOLLET: Great story.

ROMA: Thank you. And I'm sure there's just all these empty spaces and spots.

FOLLET: Well, we couldn't possibly cover your whole life from Philadelphia on to the present, life and work, but I think we've done it a little bit of justice.

ROMA: Yeah, and I think –

FOLLET: And you've got your journals –

ROMA: That's right.

FOLLET: And you've got your records of –

ROMA: Dorothy's archives will blow everybody's mind. And those *Choir Wires*, they're a record, they're a weekly record.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROMA: And then we have *The MUSE News* that comes three or four times a year, those are our newsletters. They're a pretty good record, too. Oh, by the way, I should say the board and the choir got it together finally to have all of our MUSE wear is no sweat [no sweatshop labor].

FOLLET: Oh, good.

ROMA: So the caps we had to buy for the ballpark and all of our t-shirts that we got for the spring concert are going to be no sweat. There was one of our staff members who was saying, "You should practice what you preach." So we said, Oh, yeah, I think you're right. So we did some research and we wrote a little article about our process about that for *The MUSE News*. That's what made me think of it. So that's a good step.

FOLLET: It's beautiful the way you bring it all together and shout it out.

ROMA: Yeah. Well, thank you so much.

FOLLET: Thank you.

ROMA: OK.

FOLLET: To be continued in other forms.

ROMA: You're coming to Cincinnati, that's how.

FOLLET: I hope so.

ROMA: Mark my words.

FOLLET: All right. OK. And your records come here.

ROMA: Yes.

FOLLET: So we'll just widen the –

ROMA: You can count –

FOLLET: We'll widen the channels.

ROMA: Yeah. (pause in tape) Still there?

FOLLET: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Still there, and –

ROMA: Are we rolling?

FOLLET: We are rolling, and you just observed that you realized that there was — I'd better get this up here — you realized there was a missing piece.

ROMA: Yes.

FOLLET: Go ahead.

ROMA: I do want to give the final word about Bernice Johnson Reagon, and I say this because I think there's no question that she's been a mentor of mine since we started interacting, and that was probably in 1978, something like that. She's responsible for some of the major changes in my life, and that has affected my music and my music-making and my consciousness. And when I talk about moving myself physically into new spaces and being open in new kinds of ways and understanding what she meant by, What kind of repertoire are you doing? What kind of repertoire are you doing? — you know, all of that has gotten under my skin. She has gotten under my skin, and we are working on this second book of compositions, and I guess I've transcribed maybe 32 of her pieces, something like that.

And in fear and trepidation and great love, I look forward to her coming to my house and sitting on my piano bench and looking over the work that I've done and then changing it or saying, "What do you have there?" (laughs) And me getting very nervous and working hours at a time like we're doing right now, intensely. Or my going and sitting on her piano bench — although she says she doesn't have a piano anymore in her house, so she said she wanted to come out to see me for three days. She said, "Can you give me a week?" I said, "Oo, gosh, I don't know." Anyway, so three days. We've got three days scheduled.

And I mean, the content of the music, the character of the music, the subject matter — I mean, MUSE has done, and Anna before her, so many pieces by Bernice Johnson Reagon, and the political content, her political consciousness. You know, the choir really wants to do "Are My Hands Clean?" And Bernice didn't want me to transcribe that, because, you know, she is a historian, and I think she documented that pretty well, but there's some sections with it she's not quite happy with. So I'm going to ask her to try and redo it or rework it or something, because that is a piece that constantly comes up for MUSE that we really would like to do.

So, working with her in that capacity has been amazing. I have to say that, you know, I teach at Wilmington, and I didn't know when I first started working there that it was more of a teaching college, and you didn't have to publish or perish. But I thought it was — my brother was at SUNY

Binghamton, and I thought, Oh my gosh, I have to publish or perish. So before I even knew that, I wrote to Bernice, you know, sort of hadn't been in touch with her for a little while, and I said, "I think there should be a second book of compositions. Can I help you? Can I transcribe that?" So I got this letter back saying, "Sounds like a good idea." Then I didn't hear from her for a while, and then she was involved in the fourth New Spirituals. And so she had done all of that and she said, "Well, let's begin with this project and then we'll carry on with the rest." So that's exactly what happened. So I transcribed all of *Anybody Here?* and that was the beginning of our project together.

But I just owe my deepest respect and gratitude to her and to people like her. She turned me on to Portia Maulsby, as I said before, and really also Ysaye Barnwell, and I've become so very close with Ysaye. But about the personal changes in my own life and knowing that I needed to face certain things in myself and change myself, it's Bernice Johnson Reagon that opened those doors.

FOLLET: Those things being?

ROMA: My talking about race out here [gestures outward] and not changing myself [points to self] in relation to issues of racism, and being in communities of people other than white people, having my life be more diverse in all ways. How can you face if you're a racist or not a racist if you're only in a white community? You can't. I can't. I'm not complete — something is missing in me. And I'm just happy that I'm on the path that I'm on and she's helped me to set my foot out on it.

FOLLET: I wondered, when you talked about your first meeting with her and first going to D.C. to her house to consult with her back when you [went] from Philly, in '78 maybe, before she came to Philly in '79 — how did you get to her house? Where did that come from?

ROMA: I think it came from the political content of her music and from Sweet Honey.

FOLLET: Did you call her up? Did you write to her?

ROMA: Yeah, I think I did. I called her up.

FOLLET: You just said, Hello, I'm Cathy Roma and —

ROMA: Yeah, I think that's what I did. It's blinking.

FOLLET: That's OK. We've got a couple of minutes.

ROMA: I think I called her up and had a conversation with her and told her what I was about and that I was starting this women's choir. And of course I'll

have to look in my journal. I hope it's there, but I think that's the way it happened. I think I actually called her on the phone.

FOLLET: So you initiated the contact, and she accepted the invitation.

ROMA: Yes.

FOLLET: And you've been collaborating ever since?

ROMA: Ever since. Mm-hmm. Big, big, big for me. You know, I could almost cry just because it's that strong and that life-changing for me. And that's changed everything. It's changed everything. My saying after I got my doctorate that I can go to a prison, that I can just go to these different places — I'm not going to be climbing some ladder to get some position in some college or university that, you know, isolates me. And I do see myself as a cultural worker and activist, and that in large part has come from my contact with her.

FOLLET: And from your felt need to contact her.

ROMA: Yes. So that's the way we're going to end.

FOLLET: All righty.

ROMA: Thank you. I'm glad I remembered that.

FOLLET: Nice. Yes, I'm glad you did, too.

ROMA: OK. (pause in tape)

FOLLET: OK, say it again.

ROMA: It's hard for me to talk about because I feel so strongly about it and how it's changed me. But I think it's hard for me to talk about with other people, too, because it has isolated me, in a sense — isolated might be the wrong word. It's put me on a path that not many other people are on, I guess, to unearth these changes and facing racism in the culture, racism in myself, and even watching what happens within MUSE when you make a decision to change and open the space for more diversity and more African American women. It's just life-changing, and I don't know how to talk about it, especially in front of a camera. (laughs)

FOLLET: Let me — can I put in another tape and we'll try? Do you mind?

ROMA: No.

END TAPE 6

TAPE 7

FOLLET: OK. We're going to try and talk about what's too hard to talk about and so important that –

ROMA: Well, I'll give you an example that's totally different.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: Wilmington is opening a new arts building, so they're having some murals. So my good friend Win, who teaches theater, shows me this and everything. I look at it and I say, "Really? That's really nice, but you know what? There are no women in the picture." You know, I mean, here's this mural that's going to go up there — I mean, it's a first draft of everything, and there's this scene from this theater thing, you know, and all of them — no women. So the secretary is there, and she says, "Well, I put this together" — a woman — "Well, I put this together, and I didn't even notice." I said, "Well, that's just who I am. That's where I'm coming from. You asked. You're getting a lot of people's opinions." "Wow, I didn't even see that." And Win went, Oh, yeah, hmm, yeah.

So OK, there's that. That's where I'm coming from. And also, of course, I'm the person on the faculty who's saying, Something's missing: there are no African American people on the faculty and we're trying to attract students of color, you know. I'm the person that is saying that out. And I'm the person in MUSE who's saying, "Twenty percent women of color, African American women, is great, but I don't think it's enough."

And it was from the beginning, something is missing. Something's missing in my life. Something is missing in the life of the choir. So I was saying that it was Bernice Reagon, who just by her presence and by conversations that we had, even things that she didn't necessarily say directly, affected me. And she's a formidable person. I was also thinking about this this morning, when I was out walking, that, you know, I come across as what, relaxed and easygoing and stuff like that. But there are these people in my life who are not like that who have had a huge influence on me, who really put it out there and teach a hard lesson and speak truth so strongly and educate, sometimes harshly or sometimes in just the way it comes out for her, you know. It just really –

FOLLET: Can you give me an example?

ROMA: Well, I mean, I can, not in relation to me, but it was at the National Women's Music Festival, and Deuce was performing, Deuce preceded Sweet Honey. And here Deuce performed all this jazz, you know, mostly by black composers, black artists, and they did not once acknowledge where the music came from that is their being, you know, and especially the derivation of the pieces they were performing. So Bernice leads Sweet Honey out onto the stage — there were five. And she just said one sentence or two that completely hushed the whole — I mean, people were

rigid. They were. And it was something to the effect — well, she named it, what it was, that artists can't steal. They have to name — they have to say where this comes from. But she did it out loud to the audience. Now some people said, Oh, that was the wrong thing to do. But you know, when you have mostly white people and you have white performers who are just not acknowledging and respecting enough that they would say that's how they got there, doing what they're doing.

And so, I remember feeling very mixed about it. But at the same time, there was truth, there was just this level of truth. And that's what she did. She didn't say, Oh, I'm going to censor this, or, I don't know whether it's the right thing to do, or whatever. She felt it, and she had lived that kind of situation so often. It just got her goat, and she just did it. So, you know, that was a lesson that Deuce learned. I think they learned. And they might have been angry and resentful and stuff like that, but that's — hey, music is really important, that music that they were performing was really important, and they didn't think it was important enough to name where they got it and to honor the line from which all of that comes. (phone rings)

FOLLET: Was there ever a time when she was that direct with you? Was there anything she said to you that left that kind of impression?

ROMA: Yeah, you know, and I'm trying to — well, actually, I remember being so worried about something either she said to me — I think it was that she said to me — and this was back in the early '80s. It had to do with me being the director of Anna and just making some decisions. And it put me off balance in the sense that I was sort of after this different kind of leadership model. So I remember writing her a three-page, single-spaced typewritten letter, and I didn't get a reply. So when I saw her again, I brought it up, you know, the next time I saw her. And she was very loving and she sort of said, "Oh, listen, don't even worry about that." So it probably was one of those times when she said something to push me, to get me to think about something.

And that's what she did really with Deuce, and that's what she did for the whole audience, you know. This is getting you to think about something. And it might be a harsh way, or it might be the real way, it might be the truthful way without any frills around it, you know. So she spoke very directly to some people in MUSE, but just to get them to bring out who they were, you know, the voice that they had inside of them. And I think some people felt intimidated and some people walked right up to her and faced it, you know what I mean. So it depends on the personality of the people.

FOLLET: Right.

ROMA: So, but —

FOLLET: I notice that you are as likely to call her Dr. Reagon as you are to call her Bernice.

ROMA: Well, she lets me call her Bernice, but I've learned from my friend Todd and really from Ysaye, because I always call — you know, that titles matter a lot in the African American community. So when I would be working with the Martin Luther King Chorale, and I will say, Todd, will you do this, he would prefer me to call him Reverend O'Neal in that situation. Or when I'm talking to the men at the prison, Reverend O'Neal. And with Dr. Reagon, I really want to, I respect her so much — and with Dr. Ysaye Marie Barnwell. And I know that they care about that, and so I made sure to answer. So sometimes when I'm speaking, I want to say, Dr. Reagon, but she always wants me to call her Bernice. But like when I'm in MUSE and saying, you know, Well, here's Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, and then I would say, Bernice, so it's a little — you know, I'm never sure. So I'm beginning now to use Dr. Reagon maybe more because I know it matters, and I know it matters to Ysaye, too, in introducing her and stuff like that. Ysaye always uses Doctor before her name.

FOLLET: OK.

ROMA: And so, but I want to respect that. And I, on the other hand, I don't like it when, you know, this woman in MUSE who got her doctorate in psychology, had on her checks, you know, Dr. Leslie whatever. I thought, That is just pretentious, you know. I hope I never do that, you know, on my checks. So now I notice that I do it when, let's say, they ask for these damned prefixes when you're giving money or you're writing to your senator or whatever, so I always use Doctor. (laughs) Because I think, well, maybe, you know — but I'm a little bit more sensitive to it, and when I'm with Todd, he always says, Dr. Roma. So it's made me look at it differently, because I just didn't want to use it as some kind of status symbol. And I guess I feel a little bit differently, not that I want to use it as a status symbol, but I guess there's a time to use it. And when I'm with people who use it as a title, I really want to respect that and let people call me that. At the prison, they call me Doc, (laughs) you know, so —

FOLLET: Mm-hmm.

ROMA: And it's a Quaker college, so at the prison, it's the only time when the inmates can call somebody by their first name. They can call me Cathy, but they could never call any of the correctional officers anything like that — are you kidding? And they only get called by their last name. But because it's a Quaker college, and the students at Wilmington on the main campus call all of us by our names — I mean, once in a while you get somebody saying Dr. Roma, but you know. So I understand it differently.

- FOLLET: You have taken the road less traveled when it comes to pursuing music as your life's work and starting with classical and moving — and then becoming an academic, but it's not kind of a typical academic.
- ROMA: Right. No.
- FOLLET: And you have a sense, it seems, of going your way —
- ROMA: Mm-hmm.
- FOLLET: — in a way that is, can be, lonely.
- ROMA: Yeah, it's very different. I mean, you know, I think I was saying a little bit before that I have definitely close friends in the musical field, but I was asked — I got an email just before I came out east here from this guy who said, "I'd like you to contribute two to three pages in this book, and I've asked 57" — or something like that — "conductors, of a real variety of men and women, to talk about what it is that's their passion, you know, in their music." And I wrote back and I said, "Well, I don't know where you got my name. Where did you get my name? I'm a different kind of conductor. I'm a niche conductor," I said, or something like that. "I can't be put into a category. I have a men's chorus, a women's chorus, incarcerated men," blah, blah, blah, blah. And he said, "You're just the kind of person." He said he had heard a CD — I think it was the *Sing to the Universe Who We Are*, and really liked what was on it. I mean, all of these people — on being asked, I said, "Could you tell me some of the people who you've asked?" And, you know, they're some of the foremost conductors in the country.
- So I'm going to try and do it, but it was really — he said, "No, a niche, that's exactly why I asked you!" And I'm sure it will be really different, because I don't fit anywhere. I really don't fit anywhere. I'm not really a folk musician. I'm a musician with classical training, a choral person with classical training, but I've needed, for my own sanity and my own self-transformation, to go the path that I've gone. And as I said, really, Bernice is a big part of that, a huge part. And the good choice of my parents sending me to Germantown Friends.
- And I guess, you know, all of these movements that came together and started bursting with energy and change in the '50s and in the '60s, and I was just swept away, swept along with that. But, you know, the touchy issue of race in our culture — and you know, when I, in front of a class, I try and talk about this, Arts for Peace and Justice, I try and give examples out of my own life to try and help students understand.
- FOLLET: Is there one that works best, one example?
- ROMA: Um, I guess I go back to the time in MUSE when we — how were we going to increase the presence of African American women. I think that's what I use the most with them, or maybe the King Chorale — one of those

two. And what happens. And you know, I didn't even talk about what happens with learning styles, because the African American women hear something (snaps), they can sing it. Myself included, you know, reading notes on a page, holding on to the paper for dear life — this is how I learn, this is how I hear. You know, I see it and hear it. So then when it comes to memorizing, you know, the African American people have memorized it before they've even started. So putting that together, and that happens in the King Chorale so amazingly also, because it's a balance of black and white people working together, and the learning styles.

And that's why it was a trip when Ysaye came for that one night in January to teach two songs to the King Chorale — no music, no words, I mean, no anything. She let some people use tape recorders, but she usually doesn't let that happen. But she knew we had to learn these two pieces. So the African American people (snaps), they were in heaven, you know. They learned that stuff in about a split second, and they knew where the little repeated phrases went, because they heard the form, they heard it all. You know, all she had to do was sort of sing it a couple of times, and they had it. And the white people were really leaning on those black people, you know, to really, OK, they've got it. And they're listening and trying to figure it out and write things down and whatever.

So that happens — in a nutshell, that happens in MUSE, and it's a wonderful collaboration, that in itself. And I'm learning that way as well. It's been very uncomfortable in a way. And that's why I want to bring in people who work that way, because that's their medium. Teaching in the oral tradition is such a beautiful — I love it so much. And if I had to come back, if I will come back, you know, I want to be Nina Simone or somebody like that, being able to sit down at the piano and just sing, or Aretha Franklin or somebody like that, because I would love to be able to sit down at the piano and just play. Todd does that all the time, in any key. Ah, I just love that. So, anyway, that's just a little more. I'm going to figure out what to say in this two- to three-page passion piece, you know, that I'm writing for this book.

FOLLET: Yeah.

ROMA: But, though, how to capture it. Some of the things I'm talking about here is what I'm really like to capture, and how do I do that without sounding — I mean, I just don't know how to — I want it to deliver. He sent a couple of examples of what people have written, but you know, it's way off from where I am. So I've been trying — that little list of words I had, I showed you, in my journal the other day. I'm just trying to get a beat on how to —

FOLLET: What's the presenting question again?

ROMA: Oh, it has to do with sharing your passion, see, and it's really tricky, because I want it to grab people. So how to say this, and how to —

FOLLET: In print, no less.

ROMA: In print. Mm-hmm. So...

FOLLET: A story. An example. You'll find it.

ROMA: Yeah, I will. Because I want to do it, and I think I have until September. And two to three pages is not a lot, but it is a huge amount when I really want to do it and I want to figure out how to communicate some of what we've been talking about right here.

FOLLET: Well, what a wonderful acknowledgement, to have been invited.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: You have a passion that's unique, and it deserves to be shared.

ROMA: Yeah. I feel really good about it.

FOLLET: As you do. As you do.

ROMA: Thank you. Feel really –

FOLLET: You've taken all this sense of there being something missing and acted on it with such integrity and with such beautiful results that we can all enjoy and learn from and pass on.

ROMA: I hope so, yeah. OK. Thank you.

FOLLET: OK, Cathy.

ROMA: Oops! All right. Now I've got to go.

FOLLET: For real, huh?

ROMA: For real, yeah.

FOLLET: For real, for now.

ROMA: Yeah.

FOLLET: But only for now.

END TAPE 7

END OF INTERVIEW

© Sophia Smith Collection 2006