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Editors’ Introduction—Doing her Work

By Eve Oishi with Jennifer Abod

Abstract

The editors’ introduction to a Special Issue of the Journal of International Women’s Studies dedicated to pioneering Black Lesbian Feminist scholar, activist, artist, teacher Angela Bowen, Ph.D. (1936-2018) Bowen was a friend and early scholar of Audre Lorde, and examples of her writing about Lorde are included. The special issue contains sample materials from Bowen’s archive, which will be housed at Spelman College, including writings, audio and video of speeches, and photos documenting her career as a dancer, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women’s Studies, among other topics.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Eve Oishi, Jennifer Abod, Holly A. Smith, Diana Fox, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Lore/tta LeMaster, Benny LeMaster, M. Jacqui Alexander, Audre Lorde, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian feminism, archive, queer archives, Black lesbian archives, Black feminist archives, lesbian motherhood, history of women’s studies, history of dance, Black women’s literature, Black women’s fiction, Black ballerinas, intersectionality, intercultural, Black dance and culture, Black cultural criticism.

In a 1977 essay titled “The Transformation of Silence into Action,” Audre Lorde wraps a declaration of self into a challenge to others. She writes, “I am myself – a Black woman warrior poet doing my work – come to ask you, are you doing yours?”

When Angela Bowen (1936-2018) artist, activist, and scholar met Lorde around the time that she wrote those words, they must have struck a chord, for Bowen was always herself, and she was always doing her work. Whether as a groundbreaking Black ballerina, founder of a dance school for Black children that taught classical ballet and African dance, fiction writer and nurturer of artistic community, cultural critic, community activist, advocate for global Black and LGBT community, early Women’s Studies scholar, and, always, a teacher and mentor, Bowen was doing her work. That work was rooted in her multiple, intersecting identities and communities, but she always conceived her work as being in coalition with other individuals, organizations and communities.

When Bowen died in 2018, she left a rich archive that had been collected and preserved by her life partner and co-conspirator Dr. Jennifer Abod. The archive has been donated to Spelman College, which also holds Lorde’s archive. It includes published writing for local and national newspapers as well as for academic journals. It contains drafts and scripts for the many speeches and talks she gave, spanning her work as a civil rights community activist when she was a married woman with young children in Boston in the 1980s, to plenary talks she gave at the National Women’s Studies Association conference as a professor and representative of an academic

2 Materials related to Bowen’s dance career, including the Bowen Peters School of Dance in New Haven, CT have been donated to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library.
discipline newly coming into its own, to invited speeches she gave at universities and organizations throughout the United States and internationally. The archive contains photos and ephemera, examples of her creative writing, and evidence of the extensive organizing she did for conferences that celebrated figures like Simon Nkoli and Audre Lorde. It contains her dissertation for Clark University, the first dissertation written about Audre Lorde, as well as drafts of her scholarly writings on Lorde. It contains syllabi and other materials from her career as a Women’s Studies professor at California State University Long Beach. It contains personal correspondences with figures like Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith. Because Abod is a documentary filmmaker with an earlier career in radio broadcasting, the archive also contains audio and video footage of some of Bowen’s interviews and speeches.

This special issue is meant to give readers a sneak peek into some of the materials of the archive to be housed at Spelman College. The online and open-access nature of Journal of International Women’s Studies allows us to feature some audio/visual material (speeches, interviews, television appearances and links to Abod’s films about Bowen and Audre Lorde) as well as digital reproductions of some of the written materials. We are planning a second special issue which will feature a more scholarly engagement with Bowen’s archive and will include her dissertation. For now, we hope that this special issue will encourage scholars of Black lesbian history and feminist studies to investigate for themselves what the larger archive will reveal.

We hope that future readers and scholars will discover insights and connections in this archive that we cannot anticipate. However, as we did the work of sorting through the vast trove of materials and deciding on what to select for this special issue, a few notable themes emerged that may not be apparent in the larger sections of this issue. The first is the way in which an archive, with its many traces of a life, can serve as a kind of map of community. Names appear and reappear and begin to reveal a network of friendships, collaborations, inspirations, and connections, what we came to call a Black Lesbian Feminist Footprint. The archive allows us to see the intimate, personal and professional connections that undergird the legacy of Black feminism and Black lesbian feminism. Key to connecting the disparate artifacts and making them cohere into a legible narrative is an awareness of Black women supporting each other and working with others inside and outside of their intimate circles and feminist communities. It is, first and foremost, a story about love.

But there is a darker story that is revealed as well about ways in which celebrated histories are forged through the sustained, unglamorous, and often unremunerated labor of movement building. While this labor provided the background for many successful events, this is also a story about projects not funded, publishing contracts not achieved, promotions not granted. This is a story about the physical and emotional costs of integrating spaces, of being the first to do the work, of breaking barriers and opening possibilities for generations of other cultural workers, activists and scholars who will not know your name.

The idea for this special issue originated with Diana Fox, the Founder and Editor of the Journal of International Women’s Studies, whose partner is Bowen’s son Jomo Peters. She ran the idea by Jomo Peters, Bowen’s daughter Ntombi Peters, and of course Abod, who flew out to Providence in 2019 for a week during which a general outline of the project’s goals started to take shape over dinner, brainstorming on walks, and at the beach. Eve Oishi, Bowen’s former colleague at CSU Long Beach and currently Associate Professor of Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University, and Holly Smith, College Archivist at Spelman College, joined the team as co-editors, and we were fortunate that Smith was able to fly to Abod’s home pre-pandemic to do an initial overview and sorting of Bowen’s papers. Once the pandemic hit, Fox, Abod, Smith and Oishi met
via Zoom, joined a few times by Bowen’s friend and colleague Beverly Guy-Sheftall to craft a vision and a plan. Oishi and Abod met weekly for close to a year, sorting through the voluminous store of documents and materials to select which ones to include, with the input of Fox and Smith, and to decide on themes to highlight from the archive. The process was intensely emotional, as each archival item sparked memories and stories from the past. Through the process we were intimately reconnected to Bowen’s voice and spirit on a daily basis along with the reminder of her loss.

By the end of the process, we had organized the special issue into seven parts. The first part includes personal pieces from all the special issue editors. These pieces chronicle our personal connections to Bowen, to her work and legacy, and our reasons for participating in this archival project. As part of this section, we have also included the letter that Dr. M. Jacqui Alexander, a dear friend and political comrade, wrote to Bowen be read at her memorial service, as well as a solicited piece from Dr. Lore/tta LeMaster, one of Bowen’s former students.

The other sections are designed to highlight various aspects of Bowen’s political, cultural and theoretical contributions that emerged from the archive. Each section features material from across her life, although the pieces are arranged chronologically within each section. We invite readers to enter and explore this issue in ways that make most sense to them, methodically and chronologically or guided by impulse and inspiration. We hope that the reader takes away a deeper understanding of this important yet underrecognized figure in Black lesbian history and feminist activism and scholarship. We hope that this understanding comes with a concomitant understanding of the communities and friendships that built this history and the structural barriers that led to the marginalization of Bowen’s story for so long. Most of all, we hope that this helps you, the reader, to do your work.

Photo: Angela Bowen, Clark University. Photo by John Ferrarone
July 22, 2018, New York Times obituary
Trailer for The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen