Editors’ Introduction—Doing her Work

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Jennifer Abod

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The Practice and Legacy of a Black Lesbian Feminist: Selections from the Archive of Dr. Angela Bowen (1936-2018)

Editors: Eve Oishi, Jennifer Abod, and Holly A. Smith

Note on the Author:

Eve Oishi (She/her/hers, They/them/theirs) is Associate Professor of Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Her primary research interests include Asian American cultural studies, independent and experimental film and video, transnational media, and gender and queer theory. They are the recipient of a number of postdoctoral fellowships, including a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship and Fellow-in-Residence at the Humanities Research Institute at UC Irvine. They are also an independent film and video curator. Oishi has published on numerous topics concerning gender studies and Asian American media and is currently working on a book-length project on the history of experimental Asian American film and video. For more information, please visit their faculty web page.

Jennifer Abod, Ph.D. is an American Jewish Lesbian Feminist, Filmmaker, Professor, Radio Host and Poet. Abod was the first woman in the state of Connecticut to have her own commercial radio talk radio show. In Connecticut, Boston and Philadelphia, she worked as a radio news host/reporter and producer on public radio. From 1970-1976, Abod was a singer/songwriter in the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band. Abod was Assistant Professor of Communications at Worcester State and at Hofstra University, where she chaired the Audio Radio Department. She has taught Women's Studies at University of Massachusetts Boston, and California State University Long Beach. As an award-winning documentarian, she envisioned and produced The Edge of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde, The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen, Nice Chinese Girls Don't: A poetry memoir with Kitty Tsui and Look Us in the Eye: The Old Women's Project. Her commitment to stories about women extends to her current project as she prepares Dr. Angela Bowen's archives for Spelman College and the Jerome Robbins Dance Library at the New York Public Library. Abod is creating an upcoming book which will be a collection of her own poems. More about Abod and her work can be found at www.jenniferabod.com.


The link below will take you to the edited forum (thirty-three min.) featuring the scholars, activists, archivists, and former students who contributed to this special JIWS issue: https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/697534121
Holly A. Smith is the College Archivist at Spelman College. She received her B.A. in History and Black Studies from The College of William and Mary, an M.A. in History from Yale University, and an M.S. in Library and Information Science from Simmons College. She co-authored the article “This [Black] Woman’s Work: Exploring Archival Projects that Embrace the Identity of the Memory Worker” (KULA Journal), and authored the piece “Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy” (Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists). She is passionate about community archives and archival advocacy related to collections for historically under documented communities.

Editors’ Introduction—Doing her Work

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.

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 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 her interviews and speeches.

This special issue is meant to give readers a sneak peak 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 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. 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, of working with others inside and outside of their intimate circles and communities, of 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,

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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.
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 up 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 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 wrote to Bowen to be read at her memorial service as well as a solicited piece from Dr. Loretta LeMaster, one of her 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
Witnesses to Inspiration

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M. Jacqui Alexander

Abstract: Introductory essays by Jennifer Abod, Eve Oishi, and Holly Smith, the editors of 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.) Also included is a piece by Lore/tta LeMaster, a former student of Bowen’s and M. Jacqui Alexander, a close friend and co-conspirator. These essays describe the authors’ personal and professional connections with Bowen and situate the special issue in relation to their fields of expertise, including International Women’s and Gender Studies and Black Archival Feminist Practice.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Eve Oishi, Jennifer Abod, Holly A. Smith, M. Jacqui Alexander, Lore/tta LeMaster, Benny LeMaster, Audre Lorde, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian feminism, archive, queer archives, Black feminist archives, Black lesbian archives, lesbian motherhood, history of women’s studies.

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*Eve Oishi, “We Must Witness One Another”*
*Holly A. Smith, “Black Women’s Lives in the Archives: Angela Bowen’s Ancestral Legacy”*
*Jennifer Abod, “Not for Herself Alone”*

Photo: Bowen and Abod at Boston Gay Pride Collection of J. Abod

*Photo: Jennifer and Angela, 1980s, Cambridge, MA* Photo by Marilyn Humphries. Collection of J. Abod

*Lore/tta LeMaster, “Push the Line”*
*M. Jacqui Alexander, “Oriki: Praise Song for Angela Bowen”*

Artistic Expression

Abstract: A section of 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.) 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 friendship with and scholarship on Audre Lorde, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women’s Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on Bowen’s artistic accomplishments from creative writing to the 1963 founding of the Bowen-Peters School of Dance in New Haven, Connecticut.
Although Bowen’s artistic expression and contributions are most notably recognized within the field of dance, she was also an active creative writer since childhood. Her interest in literary form made itself felt throughout her academic pursuits at Clark University, and in her career at California State University Long Beach, where she briefly taught and developed courses in the English department and regularly incorporated literary texts into her syllabi in Women’s Studies. Her creative writing often draws on her own life and provides a glimpse into her childhood in Roxbury, Massachusetts during the 1940s and 50s. The tensions between familial expectations and one’s own purpose are themes that appear early in her fiction. We have included “The Melody Lingers On,” Bowen’s first published short story, which appeared in her high school literary magazine as well as an excerpt from Folded Dreams, an unpublished play she wrote in 1988 at the age of 52.

When Bowen changed the course of her life from dancer to activist beginning in 1982, she began writing and giving readings of her fictional work, sometimes under the pen name Angelus. She also created cultural events featuring other Black women's writing as well as her own. Her short story “Cornelia’s Mother” was originally slated for publication in the Kitchen Table: Women of Color collection The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism edited by M. Jacqui Alexander, Lisa Albrecht, Sharon Day and Mab Segrest. As scholar Jennifer Gilley chronicles in her article, “Ghost in the Machine: Kitchen Table Press and the Third Wave Anthology that Vanished,” the volume never made it to publication with Kitchen Table Press, but a different version of it was published in 2003 with Edgework Press as Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray: Feminist Visions for a Just World, and Bowen’s story appears in this volume. Bowen’s short story collection Out of the Blue: Aleta’s Stories (Profile Productions) was solicited for publication by Kitchen Table Press, but the project also fell through, and Abod and Bowen self-published the collection in 2012. The story “History Lesson-1953” from that collection is included here.

This section also contains posters for a 1987 reading that she did with poet Kate Rushin (as well as a photo from that period), an excerpt from her high school yearbook, and photos of her family, her wedding, and her early life as a ballerina.

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Angela Bowen high school yearbook photo Collection of J. Abod
Photo: Bowen and Ken Peters wedding 1960 Collection of J. Abod
Photo: Bowen with Angela's sisters: Alphena, Lydia, and Catherine. Photo by J. Abod
1987 Poster for reading with Kate Rushin, Sharon Howell and Nancy Hughes
1987 Poster for reading at UMass Boston
Photo: Bowen reads at cultural event for Sojourner newspaper Collection of J. Abod
Poster of Out of the Blue: Aleta’s Stories
Photo: Bowen signing her book Out of the Blue: Aleta’s Stories. Photo by Jennifer Abod

Arts as Community and Civil Rights

Abstract: A section of 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.) 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 friendship with and scholarship on Audre Lorde, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women’s Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on Bowen’s work using the arts as a form of community organizing and civil rights work for Black and gay and lesbian issues from the 1960s to the 1990s in New Haven and Boston through organizations like the Bowen-Peters School of Dance, the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, and the feminist journal Sojourner.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Audre Lorde, Black Feminism, Black Lesbians, Black Lesbian Feminism, archive, Black Lesbian archives, queer archives, Black lesbian history, Black feminist archives, history of Women’s Studies, National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Kate Rushin, Billie Jones, Joseph Beam, Bowen-Peters School of Dance, Sojourner Journal, The Color Purple

For Bowen there was never a separation between her work in the arts and her work for civil rights. When she and her husband Ken Peters founded the Bowen-Peters School of Dance in New Haven in 1963, their mission was to bring both European and African dance training to the underserved Black community in the shadow of the cultural behemoth of Yale University. Several local newspaper articles and photos included here tell the story of the school and its significance to New Haven’s cultural and community life. After the school closed in 1982 and Bowen moved to Boston and came out as a lesbian, she continued to engage with artists and the arts. Included here is a film review of Stephen Spielberg’s The Color Purple that Bowen wrote for Boston’s Gay Community News (1985-86) and a 1988 speech she gave honoring the poet Kate Rushin on the occasion of her winning the Grolier Poetry Prize. Rushin’s poem “Bridge Poem” is the anchor for the landmark women of color publication This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color (First published in 1981 by Persephone Press and reprinted in 1983 by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press). Bowen contributed essays and commentaries to the Boston feminist journal Sojourner (1975-2002) and actively
participated in their fundraising events. We have included a news clipping about a fundraiser for Sojourner.

When she became co-chair of the National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) in 1989, she began a national campaign calling on churches and NCBLG chapters to establish a National Day of Remembrance to be held on the last Sunday in February, Black History Month, to honor the lives of Black men and women who have died. This section includes a letter from the NCBLG (note board members Audre Lorde and Michelle Parkerson) giving the history of the campaign, which began by honoring Joseph Beam, poet, NCBLG board member and founding editor of the organization’s publication Black/Out: the Magazine of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays. The letter also mentions the deaths of poet Pat Parker and activist Lawrence Washington, who also served as co-chair of NCBLG. The mention of Beam and Parker is particularly significant, as Bowen’s efforts around the National Day of Remembrance were largely organized around memorializing Black lesbian and gay artists and featured literary readings. Bowen also edited several issues of Black/Out, featuring essays, poetry, and reviews by artists like Joseph Beam, Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde and Kate Rushin.

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1985 news clipping about Sojourner benefit
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NCBLG Day of Remembrance letter
Black/Out Cover
Photo: NCBLG co-chairs Bowen and A. Billy Jones, Photo by J. Abod

Speaking Out: Feminism/ LGBTQ Writings and Speeches

Abstract: A section of 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.) 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 friendship with and scholarship on Audre Lorde, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women’s Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on her speeches and published writing on feminist and LGBTQ issues from the early 1980s to the early 2000’s on topics ranging from the first black Miss America to the relationship between racial justice and lesbian and gay issues to lesbian motherhood and gay marriage.
Keywords: Angela Bowen, Jennifer Abod, Audre Lorde, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian feminism, archive, Black feminist archives, Black lesbian archives, queer archives, lesbian motherhood, history of women’s studies, LGBT activism, Vanessa Williams, Bayard Rustin, Essex Hemphill, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Womanism, National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Cheryl Clark, Cathy Cohen, E. Frances White, Evelyn Hammonds, MOVE bombing, intersectionality

As Bowen recounts in her 1986 essay in Black/Out: the Magazine of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays as well as a 1989 radio interview, she came out to herself in 1976 at age 40. In 1979 she met Abod, who would become her life partner. She and her children joined Abod in Cambridge, MA in 1982, where she began writing for feminist and lesbian and gay publications. Evidence of her reputation as a political and cultural critic can be found in an article, included in this section, originally published in The Village Voice in 1983, in which she offers a scathing response to the Black community’s celebration of the crowning of Vanessa Williams as the first Black Miss America. She marked her public coming out as occurring at age 49 when she addressed a crowd at Boston Common as part of the 1985 Gay Pride Day. The speech, included here, is titled “The Need to Refight Stonewall,” and she makes the extraordinary move of linking the fight for LGBT rights with racial justice and civil rights, referencing the 1985 bombing of MOVE along with two blocks of houses in a Black residential neighborhood in Philadelphia (authorized by Wilson Goode, the first Black mayor of Philadelphia.) She ends the speech with a quote by Jamaican poet Claude McKay, signaling her understanding that LGBT rights and civil rights must be understood in relation to one another as well as within a global frame.

Through her writing and community activism, Bowen became a well-known public figure and was often invited to speak about Black lesbian and gay issues, in particular once she accepted the co-chairship of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, the first national organization for Black Gay and Third World rights in the United States. This section includes a 1989 radio interview that Bowen gave on Boston’s gay radio program Other Voices in which she mentions Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, relationships between white and Black feminists, and the role of AIDS in bridging differences between Black lesbians and gays. We have also included a video excerpt and newspaper story about her appearance on BET along with Essex Hemphill and Barbara Smith, as well as a 1988 appearance she made on the talk show People Are Talking on Boston’s WBZ-TV for National Coming Out Day, in which she defiantly stands up to homophobic audience questions.

We have also included an article that Bowen wrote covering a forum on women’s issues by candidates for the 1988 presidential election in which she points out their failure to address lesbians as part of their discussion. For her community work, she received several awards, including the Money for Women Fund’s Fannie Lou Hamer Award for women whose work combats racism and celebrates women of color, and an award from the Boston Rainbow Coalition for her activism on behalf of gay and lesbian issues, presented by Maxine Waters. As a mother, Bowen frequently mentioned her children and the importance of her experiences of (biological, foster, and adoptive) motherhood as

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central to her Black and lesbian politics. Included in this section is a pamphlet (self-published by Abod and Bowen) based on conference 1988 speech at the University of Massachusetts, Harbor Campus about lesbians choosing children, a rare consideration of this topic in 1990 before gay and lesbian parenting became a more socially accepted and recognized choice.4

Bowen returned to school in midlife, receiving her B.A. from the College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts, Boston in 1992 at the age of 56. Her already prolific public speaking increased significantly at this point, as her intersectional perspective on Black gay and lesbian history and politics was in demand. According to her records, Bowen gave sixteen talks in 1994 alone, a combination of keynote speeches at colleges and universities, workshops, and classroom lectures. We have included the video of a speech she gave at a Goddard College in Vermont around this time that covers many of the topics she frequently addressed, including the importance of civil rights pioneer Bayard Rustin (and the fact that his homosexuality was the reason for his marginalization and obscurity from historical accounts of the movement), Louis Farrakhan (whom she knew growing up), her friendship with Audre Lorde, and the power of Black lesbian visibility.

This section then jumps to 2002, after Bowen had completed her PhD, when she engaged in theoretical and scholarly debate about the nature and future of feminism within the disciplinary boundaries of Women’s Studies. While more examples of her speeches and writings from this period are included in the “Women’s Studies and Interdisciplinarity” section, we felt it important to include some of the material from her academic engagement with Women’s Studies and feminism here because they illuminate the consistent throughline of Bowen’s insistence that feminist studies and women’s studies must acknowledge the foundational labor and presence of Black women and Black lesbians. This is at the heart of her critique of Alice Walker’s concept of Womanism, which she objects to as both a failure to recognize the integral role that Black women have historically played within feminist struggles as well as a missed opportunity to work in coalition with others and to keep feminism open as a space that welcomes and challenges a variety of identities and communities.

Finally, we have included a 2002 essay that Bowen co-wrote with her partner Jennifer Abod about their ambivalence, as radical lesbians, about the gains being made toward the legalization of gay and lesbian marriage around the globe. While the essay was found in the archive unlabeled, and Abod is unable to remember the context of its writing or its possible publication venue, the authors’ analysis remains a timely reminder of the importance of a global, intersectional perspective in the face of neoliberal progress narratives. In this piece Bowen and Abod challenge feminists and queers to stay true to their radical roots and to continue to demand that safety net benefits not be tied to personal relationships despite the comfort and privilege offered by legalized marriage.

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Intersectional and Global Perspectives

Abstract: A section of 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.) 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 friendship with and scholarship on Audre Lorde, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women’s Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on the intersectional and global aspects of Bowen’s activism, organizing and scholarship including writing and speeches that range from connecting racial justice issues to LGBT issues to Black lesbians and reproductive rights. This section contains a rare signed early draft of Audre Lorde’s poem “Women on Trains,” dedicated to Bowen and M. Jacqui Alexander.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, Simon Nkoli, Barbara McDonald, Cynthia Rich, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian feminism, archive,

At the 1995 Black Nations/Queer Nations? Conference, Bowen asked: “Is a global political movement among lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people in the African diaspora possible or desirable? My answer is yes and yes.” From her childhood support of Jamaican-born activist Marcus Garvey’s pan-African movement to her fusing of African and European dance traditions at Bowen-Peters School of Dance to her participation in international women’s conferences in Europe and Africa, to her organization of a 1989 conference for gay South African activist Simon Nkoli in Boston, Bowen’s work has always been rooted in an understanding that political work comes out of one’s local positioning within a global frame. In several places, including a 2005 talk included in the previous section, she critiques Jesse Jackson’s invocation of the new term African-American to replace Black because the new term abdicates the global nature of Black identity. At the same time, her activism, speeches and writing embody an awareness of the inseparability and contingency of various aspects of any individual’s identity, and the ways in which that awareness constitutes the roots of political consciousness. In other words, Bowen theorized and enacted intersectional consciousness before intersectionality was coined as a word by critical race studies scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.5

Today intersectionality is still invoked primarily within the context of a localized race/gender/class matrix, but Bowen’s body of work serves as an important reminder of the need to keep this framework open and capacious in order to account for layers of identity such as dissymmetric global conditions, religion, age and privilege. It is for this reason that we have included Bowen’s 1983 Equal Times review of Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism by Barbara McDonald with Cynthia Rich, written when Bowen was only forty-seven, along with a 1985 interview that she gave with Abod after returning from the United Nations World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, as well as one of several letters that she wrote as co-chair of the National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) addressed to leaders of Black churches around the country, asking for their support for a National Day of Remembrance for Black lesbians and gays during Black History Month. Her goal was to honor luminaries such as Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill and other activists and writers who died in their prime. While these artifacts from the archive may all seem to address different issues, they all highlight Bowen’s philosophy that a deep understanding of the interlocking oppressions of any individual holds the key to political change, for it provides the opportunities to work in coalition with people and groups that are different than ourselves.6

6 This perspective mirrors the statement of Bowen’s contemporary Black feminists in the Combahee River Collective, who write: “The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” The Combahee
These principles are articulated in the 1997 keynote address that she delivered at a national conference hosted by the MiRA Resource Centre for Black, Immigrant and Refugee Women in Oslo, Norway entitled “Is Racism a Women’s Issue? What Black U.S. Feminism Has to Share with 'Progressive' Norway” in which she references the open debate between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly, emphasizes the need to recognize one’s privilege, and outlines her principles of activism, which include persistence, inclusivity, person-to-person connection and outreach. In other words: “Allies, allies, allies.”

Bowen’s archive is rife with evidence of her ally work, including her co-chairship of the NCBLG and her friendships and collaborations with foundational Black feminist scholars and writers. Her commitment to allyship, however, was always founded in an opposition to cross- and intra-community prejudices as opposed to denying or ignoring these issues in the name of coalition. Bowen repeatedly aimed her critiques at homophobia in the Black community, for example, in her 1993 letter of protest to anchor Ed Bradley for his 60 Minutes segment titled “Rainbow Curriculum,” in which Bradley featured a Black woman who opposed a teaching guide that supported tolerance of homosexuality. Bowen takes Bradley’s journalistic standards to task for ignoring the existence of Black gays and lesbians and for doing “a disservice to the intelligence of your viewers by simplifying the conflict as if only white homosexuals exist.” Similarly, she did not let her own Black gay and lesbian organization off the hook in its failure to properly consider women’s issues as part of its platform. One of the things that archival collections make possible is a glimpse at rifts and ruptures expressed obliquely between the lines of archival content. In an article that Bowen wrote for the NCBLG publication Black/Out, describing the five-year plan that was set at the organization’s 1989 second annual Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Conference, Bowen slips in several references to concerns expressed by lesbian members around particular issues and “a general feeling among lesbians that the conference needed a more political and personal focus on lesbians.” Given that NCBLG had begun as a NCBGB, Black gay male organization and only incorporated lesbians in 1984, six years after its founding, this tension is not surprising. In her text for a 1993 speech on Black lesbians and the Reproductive Rights Movement, Bowen includes a series of ellipses around the name NCBLG, indications to herself to tell a story in an unscripted form. While we don’t know what the story was, the rest of this section of the speech, which addresses lesbians’ troubled relationships with gay men, hints at a history that included conflict as well as cooperation. One of the most painful areas of rupture that she and her sister friend M. Jacqui Alexander experienced is when Alexander and Bowen joined a Black lesbian support group in Boston. Bowen mentions this in her 1989 radio interview, and Alexander narrates this experience in the film The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen (Abod, Women Make Movies, 2016). Because both Alexander and Bowen had white lovers, they faced hostility and pressure and struggled with whether or not to remain in a group that did not respect their personal choices to be in interracial relationships. When they sought advice from their friend and mentor Audre Lorde, she urged them to stay in the group for the larger cause of community. After the dynamics became too painful and Alexander and Bowen decided to leave the group, Lorde acknowledged that she had “counseled you unwisely my sister” when she told them to “Stand and fight,” and she apologized to them in the 1993 poem “Women on Trains.” (Note: the early draft of the poem included here contains the line “I have just counseled [sic] a woman badly.” Later published versions of the poem contain slightly different lines. In the 1993 volume The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance,
the line reads “I counseled you unwisely my sister.” The version published in *Callaloo* in 1991 reads: “I have counseled a sister unwisely.” This section also includes a hand-written note from Lorde to Bowen promising her a copy of her poem “Outlines,” also about an interracial lesbian relationship, and referencing a new poem that she enclosed (possibly the draft of “Women on Trains.”)

Included in this section are also several talks that Bowen gave that demonstrate her longstanding intersectional understanding of the links between feminist movements and a range of other social justice movements including reproductive rights and civil rights. A 1987 speech at Brandeis University on “What Radical Feminism Means” represents an excellent example of Bowen’s early articulation of an intersectional understanding of interlocking oppressions, particularly for Black women. In a 1993 speech on “Black Lesbians and the Reproductive Rights Movement” at Hampshire College, Bowen advocates for the tenets of what would later come to be called the Reproductive Justice Movement, namely the right to abortion as well as the right to procreate and to raise children in a healthy, supported way.

Perhaps the most powerful example of Bowen’s intersectional perspective is a speech that she gave in 1989 that addresses an incendiary racial incident in Boston. In October 1989 a white couple, Charles Stuart and his pregnant wife Carol, were shot in the primarily Black neighborhood of Roxbury in Boston. Carol and her unborn child died, and Stuart claimed that the shooter was a Black man, and a young Black man identified by Stuart in a lineup was arrested. When it was eventually discovered that Stuart himself had committed the crime for the insurance money, the case became a flashpoint for issues of racial tensions in Boston, including racialized policing. In her speech invoking this case, Bowen uses the occasion to name the deep socioeconomic divides within Boston across race. She ends by echoing King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech in a call for a cross-fertilization of political movements. This is the perfect expression of intersectionality before it had a name.

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- 1987 Angela Bowen speech ’What Radical Feminism Means’ at Brandeis University
- 1989 Charles Stuart/I have a dream speech
- 1990 Letter to Black church leaders about annual Day of Remembrance for Black Gay Men and Lesbians
- 1993 letter to Ed Bradley
- 1993 Hampshire College speech: ’Black Lesbians and Reproductive Rights Movement’
- 1997 keynote address at MiRA Resource Centre for Black, Immigrant and Refugee Women in Oslo, Norway: “Is Racism a Women’s Issue? What Black U.S. Feminism Has to Share with ’Progressive’ Norway”
- Audre Lorde letter to Bowen
- Audre Lorde signed draft of “Women on Trains”
- Poem: 1993 Audre Lorde, “Women on Trains”

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Women’s Studies and Interdisciplinarity

Abstract: A section of 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), one of the first scholars to receive a Ph.D. in Women’s Studies. 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 friendship with and scholarship on Audre Lorde, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women’s Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on Bowen’s contributions to the field of Women’s Studies as a professor at California State University Long Beach and active member of the National Women’s Studies Association with publications and talks that highlight the advantages of interdisciplinarity and the need for the field to maintain a central focus on women and lesbians of color.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Audre Lorde, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian feminism, archive, Black feminist archives, Black lesbian archives, queer archives, lesbian motherhood, history of women’s studies, interdisciplinarity, women’s studies, feminist studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, Combahee River Collective, Clark University Women’s Studies, women’s studies Ph.D. programs, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Bell Scott, *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, National Women’s Studies Association, intersectionality, race and queer theory, California State University Long Beach Women’s Studies, Cynthia Enloe, Elizabeth Hadley, Eve Oishi

Although Women’s Studies as an academic discipline had begun to establish itself in the form of undergraduate minors and majors for several years, Bowen was one of the first students to receive her PhD in 1996 from the first free-standing Women’s Studies PhD program in the country at Clark University in Worcester, MA in 1997. We have included a photo of Bowen with one of her Clark professors, Cynthia Enloe and Black feminist academic, the late Elizabeth Hadley. Despite the inauguration of programs like Clark’s, Women’s Studies would continue to struggle to gain support and stability within academic institutions. In a biographical sketch Bowen writes, “I’m truly devastated that Clark University was not only one of the first to launch the freestanding PhD. in Women’s Studies, but ironically, the first to close it down.” Bowen was invited to give the keynote at the program’s reunion event in 2005 to mark its closing.
Even before entering the PhD program, however, Bowen was part of a network of Black and women of color feminists who were building political and intellectual communities and laying the groundwork for the field of Women’s Studies. In 1983 Bowen attended the last meeting that the Combahee River Collective would hold, and she used her writing as a way of bringing attention to this essential early work. Included in this section is a 1984 article that Bowen published in *Sojourner: The Women’s Forum* about *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, a new academic journal founded by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (at the time director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center at Spelman College) and Patricia Bell Scott (at the time an equal opportunity officer at MIT and co-editor of the influential 1982 anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies.*)

Once she entered graduate school Bowen was an active participant in building and maintaining the institutional structures of the field, particularly the annual conference for the National Women’s Studies Association, for which Bowen was often invited to give keynote talks and to which she often brought contingents of undergraduates. Included in this section are documents that demonstrate the evolution of Bowen’s thinking, including a NWSA talk, first delivered in 1992 at the first Black Women in the Academy Conference at MIT and later at NWSA in St. Louis in 1997, which would later be published in 2001 in the journal *Feminist Teacher*. In this piece, Bowen refers to the “life-affirming networks of support” that are produced and maintained through the visibility and presence of out Black lesbians in academic settings. Throughout her career, Bowen continued to address the challenges of keeping the history and contributions of Black women and lesbians, as well as women of color more broadly, central within feminism and women’s studies. She is particularly adamant that Black women and women of color not become marginalized as queer theory and queer studies became ascendant within the academy and activist movements in the 1990s. We have included several talks that Bowen gave at NWSA in 1998 and 2000 on these topics. Bowen’s suspicion of queer theory and politics as a space that was being dominated by white gay men and that required a truly intersectional orientation in order to fulfill its radical potential aligns with other important writing from the 1990s like Cathy Cohen’s foundational *GLQ* essay, ““Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics.”

We have also included some documentation of Bowen’s career at California State University Long Beach, including flyers for her courses and photos with students and colleagues.

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1998 NWSA Talk: “The Promise and Limitations of Inclusion in Women’s Studies for Women of Color”

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2001 article in Feminist Teacher “Interdisciplinarily Speaking”


Photo: Bowen on cover of Clark University newspaper. Photo by John Ferrarone. Collection of J. Abod

Bowen with Clark Professor Cynthia Enloe and fellow grad student Elizabeth Hadley. Photo by J. Abod

1996 Photo of Bowen receiving her PhD from Clark University Bowen receiving degree at Clark university. Photo by J. Abod

2006 Flyer for Black Women in American course at CSULB

Flyer for Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance course at CSULB

Photo: Bowen with CSULB students Erica Miller, unknown, Mae Henderson Photo by J. Abod

Photo: Bowen with Cal State Long Beach colleague Eve Oishi. Photo by J. Abod

Audre Lorde: Influence, Sisterhood, Legacy

Abstract: A section of 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.) 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. This section focuses on her friendship and scholarship on Audre Lorde, including the historic 1990 “I Am Your Sister” conference and her scholarly publications on Lorde’s poetry and political significance.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian poetry, Black lesbian feminism, archive, Black feminist archives, Black lesbian archives, queer archives, lesbian motherhood, history of women’s studies, Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians, Nancy Hughes, I Am Your Sister conference, “Blackstudies”

As Bowen narrates in a 1993 New York Pride Guide article, Bowen attended a reading that Lorde was giving at a women’s restaurant in Bridgeport, CT. Lorde walked up to her, handed her a business card and said, “If you ever need to call me, I’m right at the other end of the phone.” Bowen had already discovered Lorde’s work in New Haven, when she was still in a heterosexual marriage, through the publication Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians, a quarterly magazine published by Salsa Soul Sisters, Third World Wommin Inc. Collective from 1977-1983. As Bowen recounts in a 1989 radio interview and a 1988 radio profile that Abod produced about Lorde, Lorde’s writing showed Bowen the possibility of not only living as an out Black lesbian but of using her creative voice to make a space for others to live their truths for themselves and their community. In the film The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen, Bowen
describes the way that Lorde’s writing inspired her to leave her marriage but also to see that action as helping to build as well as join a community and a movement. Bowen describes the sense she had that Lorde was doing the work of Black lesbian feminist visibility all by herself, and she recounts that she thought, “She’s got to have help. She’s got to have an army.” She was determined to be part of that number.

In October 1990, following the success of their conference for South African gay activist Simon Nkoli, Angela and M. Jacqui Alexander formed a core committee to organize a conference in Boston honoring Audre Lorde called *I Am Your Sister: Forging Global Connections Across Difference*. We have included the fundraising letter for this conference that lays out its purpose and vision and is signed by the core committee of Bowen, Jacqui Alexander, Jinny Chalmers, Becky Johnson, Mauri Mollan, Stephanie Poggi, Kate Rushin, Karen Schneiderman, and Laura Zimmerman. Several members of the original core committee ended up leaving, and Abod was added to handle the recording and other technology infrastructure issues.

When Bowen went to graduate school to earn her Ph.D. at the age of 56, it is no surprise that she chose as her dissertation topic, a study of the interconnections between Lorde’s biography, political influences, activism, and writing, titled “Who Said it was Simple: Audre Lorde’s Complex Connections to Three U.S. Liberation Movements. 1952-1992.” What is surprising is that in 1997 Bowen’s was the first dissertation to be written on Lorde. As she states in a document outlining her academic interests and goals for Clark University, Lorde was already a much-lauded and influential poet, having been named Poet Laureate of New York State in 1991 among other honors. “Yet, in spite of all the accolades accruing to her,” Bowen writes, “Audre Lorde could end up going down in history without being named a lesbian by mainstream publications and press.”

In addition, Bowen saw part of her mission as being to build a critical body of scholarship that gave serious attention to Lorde’s literary style and her political and theoretical contributions as opposed to the charisma of her personality. In a key scene in the 1995 documentary *A Litany for Survival: the Life and Work of Audre Lorde* by Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson, Lorde urges students in a poetry seminar to build community and help each other to find their own voice as opposed to relying on her as teacher and icon. “Don’t mythologize me!” she exhorts them in a voice mixed with tenderness and frustration. Perhaps Lorde was also aware that the impulse towards mythology also left her vulnerable to unfriendly critics who would use her commitment to making visible all of the parts of her identity as an excuse to misread and dismiss her, relegating her to a one-dimensional political category as opposed to a complex and multifaceted thinker and writer. Evidence of this tendency can be found in a piece written by Russell Jacoby in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “Politiced Academics Seem to Have Little Interest in Real Politics,” in which he laments the rise of “symbolic politics,” using Lorde as an example. We have included a scathing response that Bowen wrote 1996 in which she takes Jacoby to task for his dismissal of Lorde as “an activist presenting oneself as a political issue” due to the fact that she has claimed a public identity as a Black lesbian.

Although her academic interests broadened after graduate school to include a planned study on out Black lesbians in academia, she continued to be committed to creating a field of scholarship that engaged Lorde’s body of work using rigorous academic methods. In a 2002 letter to Adrienne Rich included in this section, Bowen references an anthology about Lorde that she was planning, in which she hoped to “fulfill Audre’s desire to have her work taken seriously and to have her ‘person’ stop being the focus of people’s attention.” She quotes a friend in this
letter saying, “Too often people don’t attend to Lorde’s words, they simply wield them.” We have also included a 2003 article that Bowen published in the journal Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism that examines Lorde’s 1974 poem “Blackstudies” by blending a consideration of the biographical context of its production with an analysis of its aesthetic and literary style. Lorde’s poem is also included in this section along with video footage of Bowen and Lorde at the 1990 “I Am Your Sister” conference and other photographs.

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1990 I Am Your Sister Conference fundraising letter
1993 New York Pride guide article
2002 letter to Adrienne Rich
Photo: Lorde and Bowen at 1990 “I Am Your Sister” Conference. Photo by jean weisinger
Photo: Audre Lorde, Nancy Hughes and Angela Bowen. Photo by Jennifer Abod

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