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Not for Herself Alone

By Jennifer Abod, PhD

I first saw Angela Bowen on July 29th, 1979, in New Haven Connecticut at a Take Back the Night March on the New Haven Green. She followed the fiery American radical feminist activist and writer, Andrea Dworkin, best known for her analysis of pornography. Angela was the only Black woman to speak at the mostly white well-attended rally. I don't remember most of the details of Angela's speech, what I do remember was how taken I was with how she spoke to an audience. She brought us into her world.

She spoke about how protective her two older brothers were of her three sisters growing up in Roxbury, Massachusetts during the 1940s and 50s. She talked about the experiences of the girls and women she had known who experienced violence in their own homes. She was not the first Black feminist I met, but she was the first Black feminist I heard speak. I knew she was someone I would like to know more about.

I learned that she was the founder of the Bowen-Peters School of Dance, which unbeknownst to me, had been an important cultural institution in the Black Community since 1963. Although New Haven was a relatively small community I had only recently heard about the school, because a photographer friend showed me pictures that she took of the Bowen-Peters Dancers. The only reason I met Angela is because she agreed to speak at a feminist rally. Before I went to my late-night radio talk show host job, I found out about a brunch being held for all the speakers the following day. I spruced myself up and went to the brunch specifically to meet her. That day began what was to become a thirty-seven-year relationship, although we did not always live together in the same city because of our career paths.

I was witness to her transitions from artist to activist organizer, to national and international organizer and speaker, to professor and scholar. To Angela, feminism meant activism. Taking a stand, writing letters, finding her allies, creating conferences, literary readings. It meant discovering and broadening her own talents and experiences but "not for herself alone."

How many times I watched her envision and bring to fruition a project I thought was impossible. I would watch her put one foot in front of the other, ready her notebooks and pens, and carve out a space for herself to imagine, plan, and begin. She was a mother, and that responsibility increased the necessity for a room of her own.

When I asked her if I could make a film about her life, we had been together for twenty years. I wanted to know and better understand how and where she acquired and learned to sustain her strength and courage. What allowed her to remain true to herself and to her purpose in the face of unexpected challenges, deep tragedy, and great disappointment. As a broadcaster and filmmaker, I wanted to introduce the world to this transcendent woman, a Black Lesbian Feminist whose intelligence, love of history and literature, with a down-to-earth style, and fierce sense of justice and outrage, was a unique voice that so many of us needed to hear.

The roots of her broad vision and social consciousness, and development of her independent voice begins with her mother, Sarah Allen. Sarah arrived in Boston as a young teenage immigrant from Montserrat. When Sarah was born, her father bought and raised a goat with the intention of selling it for boat fare to the United States when she was old enough. Charles

Bowen came to Boston from South Carolina, after escaping racist brutality that killed his first wife. Mr. Bowen was an intelligent, well-read man, who had a heart condition. He delivered six of their seven children. But when Sarah experienced severe labor complications with their last child, Charles raced to the hospital for help but never got there. He died on the way. That was in 1938. Angela was only two years old. On that day, she remembers banging on a pot, repeating: "my father is dead, my father is dead." She never knew what he looked like.

Mrs. Bowen raised her seven children by scrubbing white people's floors. She raised her children to believe in themselves and reminded them always to "not let ugly white spoil their beautiful black." She nurtured her children to read and speak their mind. When Angela was 5 years old, Mrs. Bowen took her to the Boston Public Library where she got her first library card.

Angela told me stories about her mother's bravery. One day Mrs. Bowen marched into her classroom, holding a book. She watched her mother stand toe-to-toe with the white teacher, pointing first a finger at Angela, then at the book, then at the teacher. The book she was holding was *Little Black Sambo*. The boy named "Sambo" was a caricature version of a little Black boy that fed into the hatred and discrimination experienced by Blacks during the era of Jim Crow laws. Mrs. Bowen told that teacher in front of Angela's whole class that she had better not teach that book anymore.

Mrs. Bowen was deeply political and influenced Angela in a wide way. She remembers her mother coming home to their Roxbury apartment after work and dropping pennies into coin jars on the fireplace mantle: one for the NAACP, one for Marcus Garvey and the Back to Africa Movement, and one for Israel.

When Angela was a young teenager, her mother encouraged her to attend different churches and a temple. She wanted Angela to make up her own mind about religion. Although she became an atheist early on, Charles Smith, a clergyman and husband of Angela's childhood friend Marti, told me that to him Angela epitomized, more than anyone he ever knew, what it meant to be a good Christian.

Angela fell in love with dance in 1950 when she was 14 years old, a rather old age to begin dancing. Mrs. Bowen took her and her sister Lydia to the newly opened Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, the only Black school of its kind in Boston, because Angela got a "D" in physical education because of her poor posture. As with everything over her lifetime, if she loved something, she applied herself diligently, and within a few years danced the coveted part of Swan Queen in *Swan Lake*. As far as I know, she was the first Black ballerina to do so.

Within a few years, she also became Miss Elma Lewis's right-hand teaching assistant. As she wrote in a biographical essay:

"In the family and the Black community where I grew up, "Each One Teach One" was no abstract, theoretical slogan. I cannot remember a time when I did not teach. As a child I read books to younger neighborhood children and tutored them in their studies. When I began dancing as a teenager, I soon began assisting my teacher and after leaving college and travelling to Europe as a dancer, I opened my own cultural center."

In high school, Angela was an A student and participated in athletics, French Club, and the debate team. Miss Palm, a white English teacher, recognized Angela's natural writing talent, and fought institutional racism which allowed her to attend Emerson College on a scholarship for two years, before she left to dance professionally.

Mrs. Bowen wanted Angela to become a lawyer, Miss Elma Lewis wanted Angela to continue to teach, but Angela only wanted to dance. This triangle of desire is beautifully drawn in a draft of her play, "Folded Dreams," which was never finalized.

When Sarah Allen died of a heart attack while at work, Angela decided it was the right time to leave Boston and dance professionally. She encountered the unofficial written rule: No Blacks on Broadway. As so many other performers of that time, she travelled to Europe (Italy and Germany) with professional Black actors, singers and dancers as part of *Jazz Train*, an all "Negro" ensemble. It was in Europe that she realized that being a performer wasn't enough. She returned home, accepted a long-standing proposal and married Ken Peters, a drummer whom she met at the Lewis's School. She liked New Haven, Connecticut. So, with their infant son they left Boston to realize Angela's dream of establishing her own dance school.

In 1963, when Civil Rights activists were being beaten in the streets, Angela and Ken established The Bowen-Peters School of Dance in the heart of New Haven's Black community at 14 Dixwell Avenue. They began with only \$300. They found their allies in the community and their school became known as an outstanding center for dance and Black culture for 19 years.

Two years after opening the school, Kippy, her beautiful boy, was killed in a car accident at the hands of a white drunk driver. Deeply depressed, Angela wanted to close the school. One day a teenager named Larry Ferrell saw her through the school window and knocked to get her attention. He asked her if he could audition for her because he always wanted to be a dancer. When she saw his talent, she was so impressed that Larry became the inspiration Angela needed to go on with her dream.

Angela and Ken created community by teaching a diverse group of children, training and developing students she identified as potential teachers, and sharing her love and knowledge of Black dance, art and culture with New Haven in the local schools and at Yale University. One former Bowen-Peters parent told me that before Bowen Peters, "New Haven was a wasteland for Black culture and the arts.

During the Bowen-Peters years, I learned that Angela had to juggle many things, especially when Ken was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which weakened his hands and required him to live his life in a wheelchair. Much rested on her shoulders; caring for her two children, Ntombi and Jomo, as well as a stepdaughter and a foster daughter, fundraising for the school, teaching classes, organizing presentations, and planning and choreographing yearly recitals.

When I met Angela, she was in her early forties. On her own, she discovered feminist writing in books and journals and had discovered the New Haven Women's Center, and met Black Lesbian Feminist poet and writer, Audre Lorde. Unable to find people who could sustain the school, she closed Bowen-Peters in 1982, a great loss to the community but the beginning of a new chapter in her life.

We became a family in Cambridge. Angela navigated the exciting, challenging, transformative next decade of her life with tenacity and determination, working as an arts programmer and then as fundraiser for Casa Myrna Vaz Quez, a battered women's shelter. Two early highlights were: the coming out speech she delivered to much acclaim on the Boston Common and attending what would be the last meeting of the now famous Black feminist Combahee River Collective.

Angela worked with two architects of Black Feminism, Barbara Smith, and Audre Lorde, who urged her to join the board of the National Coalition of Black Gays, to bring a strong feminist and lesbian voice into the organization. This was not part of her plan. I remember her telling me, "*How could I say no to them?*"

The Cambridge women's community welcomed Angela's writing. She contributed critical commentaries, articles and essays to community newspapers, and journals, and was an outspoken Black Feminist Lesbian on radio and television. When she was co-chair of the National Coalition for Black Gays and Lesbians, she appeared on Black Entertainment Television (BET). The host asked her if she thought that the Black community was more homophobic than any other, and she replied:

"No, but it was so much more painful to have homophobia coming from the Black community, because as black people we are already oppressed in so many other ways."

When Audre Lorde's, *Sister Outsider* was published, Angela wrote the first review (1985, *Sojourner*.) Angela wrote the first review for other important feminist books including, *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women Aging and Ageism*, (1984, *Sojourner*), a book that helped to launch (OLOC) Old Lesbian's Organizing for Change, and for the newly published journal, *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, edited by Patricia Bell Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1984, *Sojourner*).

She also managed to find time for fictional writing and submitted a short story for a scholarship that gave her a beautiful week at a women's writing retreat. She had in mind a book of short stories based on her life and the lives of people she knew in Roxbury during the forties and fifties. *Cornelia's Mother* is the first story in the collection. (*Out of the Blue: Aleta's Stories*, 2012, *Profile Productions*).

Angela made an important connection with M. Jacqui Alexander an Afro- Caribbean American, mother, writer, and educator at the Third International Women's Conference in Nairobi, Kenya. They discovered they lived three blocks from each other in Cambridge. Both strongly influenced by Audre Lorde, they became sister activists, organizers, and dear friends. Together Angela and Jacqui remarkably orchestrated two international conferences, one for South African gay activist Simon Nkoli, and another for Audre Lorde, *The I Am Your Sister Conference (1990)* attended by 1200 women men and activist youth from 23 countries. There was a core group consisting of four people that I eventually joined. Angela oversaw the office, the finances, fundraising, and all conference applications. M. Jacqui Alexander oversaw national and international networking, and Virginia Chalmers, Jacqui's partner at the time oversaw the physical infrastructure and logistics. I oversaw graphic design, technical media, and organized a choir for the Audre Lorde conference.

After recovering from the yearlong exhaustion of organizing an international conference, Angela returned to college at the age of fifty-four to finish her bachelor's degree at The University of Massachusetts, Boston.

In an early college entrance for UMass, she wrote:

"I want to experience again the engagement with the minds of young people that I had been accustomed to in my years of teaching Black culture. "Equally important," she wrote, was her "long-felt need to research and write about the lives of certain Black women."

Encouraged by a Cynthia Enloe, a white feminist professor, Angela entered a master's and Ph.D. program at Clark University in Worcester, MA. She dedicated herself to scholarly research and loved it. Her interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Women's Studies focused on Biography and Social Movements, African American History and African American literature, her lifelong loves. In a draft of her academic interests and goals she wrote:

"There are far too few black lesbians out on college campuses, and these times are ripe for a testing of the waters. For several years as a black lesbian feminist organizer, I have been traveling to speak at campuses all over the country. The dearth of "out" role models and advisers who can speak to young women of color are pitifully small."

She wanted to:

"Design curriculum to make sure lesbians of diverse color, ethnicity and class were included in the canon when Lesbian and Gay Studies when it became legitimized within the Academy."

With Audre Lorde's permission Angela wrote "Audre Lorde's Complex Connections to Three U.S. Liberation Movements: 1952-1992," and received the first PhD in what was a free-standing Women's Studies program in the country. She began her academic career at California State University in the Departments of English and Women's Studies in 1996.

She came into the academy with a mission to encourage students to become leaders in their chosen field and to encourage the students she thought could pursue their PhD's. She was in the academy for thirteen years and more than a dozen students did just that.

Over her life, Angela lived in New York, Connecticut, returned to Boston, visited Africa and the Caribbean, worked in Europe, and spent the last two decades of her life in Long Beach, CA. Once claiming her lesbian identity, she considered herself a member of a "permanent diaspora...an ever-shifting ethnically diverse global lesbian feminist diaspora."

When Angela saw a mountain, she climbed the hills. She often reached the top. There were times when she did not, but she always gave it her best shot.

If you were lucky enough to have known her or been mentored by her, you would no doubt have had your assumptions about the world and your own self-limiting, self-doubtful ways challenged. That was Angela's way and her gift as a teacher.

When she decided to acquire her PhD at mid-life, she told me that she wanted me to reach for mine. I had a master's degree and didn't think I had it in me. She clearly thought I had.

Angela had an unshakeable belief in herself. She trusted her voice each step she took. That implicit trust in herself informed her leadership, running a business, teaching, activism, writing, and scholarship.

How many lives did she touch and influence because she passed along to others what she had to learn and teach herself? So many are grateful for her clear-eyed gift, really seeing in us what we may not have seen for ourselves.

Angela's way continues to inform me daily. And like so many, I miss her insights, her humor, and animated reactions. Without words she was a presence in any room. Daily, I ask myself, *What Angie would say or do about this?*

When I was working on the film about her life, she never questioned my selections about what to include, with one exception. Angela appeared on a Boston television program called: *People are Talking* to speak about the first celebration of National Coming Out Day. When an antagonistic young white man challenged the need for such a day, she gave a pointed response. The clip I first selected was too tame for her taste. She told me that I needed to replace it with something stronger. I did, and that second choice is one of the most often-cited scenes.

In putting this international on-line journal together, we carefully made selections to introduce you to Angela's extensive and rich archives. It wasn't easy because there is so much to choose from.

Nevertheless, anyone who is on their own journey of how to live their lives and develop and use their own voice will no doubt be inspired by Angela Bowen's largely untapped contributions to Black Arts and Culture, Black Lesbian Feminism, Women's Studies, and a feminist intersectional, intercultural vision.