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Arts as Community and Civil Rights

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Arts as Community and Civil Rights

By Eve Oishi with Jennifer Abod

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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