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Speaking Out: Feminism/ LGBTQ Writings and Speeches

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 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 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 (a Google Books link to the republished article is included in this section.) 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 central to her Black and lesbian politics. Included in this section is a pamphlet (self-published by Abod and Bowen) based on a 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.¹

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 through line 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.

¹ The talk was later reprinted in *Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition, an Anthology*. eds. Adrienne J. Smith, Barbara Sang, and Joyce Warshaw. Spinsters Book Company, 1991.

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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