

August 2021

1987 Angela Bowen Talk by Angela Bowen 'What Radical Feminism Means' at Brandeis University

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Recommended Citation

Bowen, Angela (2021). 1987 Angela Bowen Talk by Angela Bowen 'What Radical Feminism Means' at Brandeis University. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(8), 184-191.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss8/61>

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December 1987 Brandeis

What Radical Feminism Means

Look at me. Take a good look and jot down some one word impressions you have of me. Just make a list. Anything that immediately comes to mind.

Well, at the same time, I'll be doing it too, so you won't be alone. Now realize that this isn't going to be collected or even shared. It's strictly for your own benefit. Aha! That changed things, didn't it? Now, you can really write down what you're feeling.

Okay, let's put it away and just talk. Let's talk about Radical Feminism. Radical Feminism. The adjective actually creates a redundancy, at least as far as I'm concerned. Feminism is radical. True feminism, that is. Because it defies a structure that we've all lived by, with some few exceptions, for thousands of years. Because it defies a construct that says if we don't accept the rules of the game, that we're not even real women. Men, of course, know who the real women are. And since their opinions, myths and prejudices have become codified and we were reared with these beliefs and passed them along, one generation to the next, it is certainly a radical act to begin to question, exchange ideas, defy, rediscover and write our own herstory and then to begin to study that herstory. So we are engaged in a radical activity at this very moment.

But it's very possible to begin setting ourselves up to become as entrenched in the same type of codifying and shutting out behavior as have the white male power structure we are in the business of replacing, and in fact the danger is upon us already. Those of us who call ourselves feminists say that we have an agenda that is inclusive, rather than exclusive. Do we? We say that feminism is not only about sexism, but is also supposed to be about addressing racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ablism, and any other type of behavior that excludes people and makes them feel less than. Is that what your feminism is about? It's what feminism started out to be -- at least the second wave of feminism, just about 20 short years ago. But, once we begin to codify the rules and put together anthologies,

study them, grant degrees and decide who has the right to call herself a feminist, what are we basing that label on? What she writes, argues, theorizes, and what institution she can afford to pay money to for her legitimization, rather than what she does about her life in the real world, who she decides to act for and what she decides to act about and what structures she decides to tear down? Have we already begun to set some things in stone that other women will not be able to chisel onto? I'm Just asking. When we take other women's lives, peruse their journals, write down the words of speakers like Sojourner Truth who couldn't write, study them, give tests on them, write theses on them while at the same time we know deep within that they could never obtain a degree if they were standing before you right now, while you become the expert on their lives, it's time to examine our feminism. Are you more of a feminist than Fannie Lou Hamer, who was beaten down to the ground when she insisted on exercising her right to vote? Time, I'd say to look again at feminism as a radical force for change. Time for those of us with white skin privilege or educational privilege to decide how we anchor feminism into the lives of the women in the world, this country, this state, the very city where we reside.

Radical is from the latin, radix, meaning root. So radical feminism is about fundamental change of the social structure. I am at a loss as to what else feminism could mean to anyone. That's why it's so exciting. It's the absolutely most thrilling movement to come down the pike in the herstory of the world. There is something about every other movement of the past that could allow some person to distance herself from it, no matter how much we may know that she is fooling herself by doing so. We all know people who could pretend not to be affected by the Trade Union Movement, Vietnam, South Africa, Central America, the Civil Rights Movement. Hell, I even had a relative tell me during those fervent years

of the sixties that she had not been affected by racism. Black woman raised in Boston -- never affected by racism. The same relative told me a few years back that feminism had nothing to do

with her. Now, she could certainly have benefitted from a 1973 book called "Radical Feminism" which states, "the movement of women's liberation requires re-examination of all institutions, both political and those not now considered political, in terms of how they keep women politically powerless. The concept of individual liberation is an illusion. The goals of the women's liberation movement can only be achieved by means of a united political struggle." There are plenty of people like that relative of mine. You probably know some too. But of course they're only fooling themselves. Because who in the world - - and I mean that quite literally -- in the world -- is going to be able to hide from the effects of feminism? No one. Not really. Not eventually. Not finally.

But that's just the point. The world is a large and varied place, and we citizens of the U.S. are certainly a very privileged society. When you travel to other countries, particularly underdeveloped countries, you recognize just how privileged we are. And our so-called leaders, the men who run our countries, think that because they can distance themselves from the plight of citizens of underdeveloped countries, that we will do the same, considering ourselves in some way superior to them because we have more money, more goods, abundant land, etc. Well, women have come to the realization that in spite of all that, we women the world over are still a colonized people fighting for self-determination, as were the people of those lands until very recently. And we share with those colonized people the realization that we were brutalized: our labor stolen, our culture submerged, our sense of self-worth ravaged. And we are just beginning to recognize that women share, the world over, a common culture. Radical Feminism states, "A FEMALE CULTURE EXISTS. IT IS A

CULTURE THAT IS SUBORDINATED AND UNDER MALE CULTURE'S COLONIAL, IMPERIALIST RULE ALL OVER THE WORLD. UNDERNEATH THE SURFACE OF EVERY NATIONAL, ETHNIC, OR RACIAL CULTURE IS THE SPLIT BETWEEN THE TWO PRIMARY CULTURES OF THE WORLD - THE FEMALE CULTURE AND THE MALE CULTURE." Frantz Fanon and the black liberation movement during the sixties extended the

dictionary definition of imperialism or colonialism to mean a group which is prevented from self-determination by another group -- whether it has a national territory or not. The psychological and cultural mutilation is particularly intense and the colonialism more brutal when the group that colonizes and the group colonized have different defining physical characteristics that set them clearly apart. Women, set apart by physical differences between us and men, were the first colonized group. And the territory colonized was and remains our women's bodies.

Not too long ago, and all too often today, men considered female bodies as territory over which they fought for absolute ownership and control. Our bodies were free territory to other male colonizers when not "protected" by an individual male colonist. What is rape but an imperialist act upon the territory of our bodies? Consider these words that, Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Minister of Information, wrote just 20 years ago.

"Somehow I arrived at the conclusion that, as a matter of principle, it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women. The term outlaw appealed to me. I became a rapist. To refine my technique and modus operandi, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto -- in the black ghetto where dark and vicious deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day -- and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. I

did this consciously, deliberately, willfully, methodically -- though looking back I see that I was in a frantic, wild, and completely abandoned frame of mind. Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women -- and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge."

Now, to be sure, Cleaver goes on to say he was wrong in what he did; but the point is, he was using white women's bodies to revenge himself on white men. Territorial. And black women's bodies to practice on. That statement that he made took place on page 14. I never did get past that page for the past 20 years. It literally made me ill. But white and black

men hailed the book: men who wrote for The Nation, The Atlantic Monthly, The San Francisco Examiner, The New York Times. And their discussions were not about his using women's bodies as territory. That was left up to women. But of course, you couldn't take those women's libbers seriously. They were always bitching about something. No sense of humor, you know.

There's a song that Michael Jackson sing with Paul McCartney called , "The Girl is Mine," in which they bicker goodnatureedly over who really owns this woman; when it came on the radio last week, my 14 year old daughter stated indignantly that the picture on the album was offensive: the woman was being pulled by a rope that each man was tugging at from either end. So what else is new? The point is, at least the child and her friends knew there was something wrong with that picture. A few years ago, it wouldn't have even been worth a mention.

But you see, here and in other developed countries, we have the luxury of examining such issues; so, of course, we must. And comparable worth; and

affordable child care, health care, housing, etc. But in underdeveloped countries, women have such very basic needs: clean water; a home at all; female sexual slavery; illiteracy; bride burning; the list goes on. And on. Our task is to recognize that we don't have the only handle on what feminism means. It's different, far far different on every part of the globe. We musn't feel guilty; but we must realize that wherever we are, that's where we fight. We must realize that whoever we are, we must recognize all parts of ourselves and free those for the battle.

After all, feminism is a lifelong battle that we've only just begun to fight. If you think you'll see your goals realized in your lifetime, you're sadly mistaken. That's why we have to be careful not to suppress anyone -- any small part of anyone. Feminism is about honoring us all. Women need the strength of every bit of themselves, not the psychic danger of suppression. We all have ways of doing that, and we've got to watch it. If your main group of friends happen to be of a certain stripe, say anti-religious, and one of your number identifies strongly with a religion, give her a break. A good discussion if she wants to have one, is in order, but beating her down about how can she reconcile feminism and Judaism, or whatever, is not the way to allow her to keep some strength so that you can fight other battles together. If another friend is into crystals and you think it's all a crock, well, o.k., but a simple statement about not wanting to hear about it for the umpteenth time ought to suffice; no need to beat her to a pulp with your superiority. We all need different sources of strength to survive. I'm probably dealing with it from a religious point of view because personally, organized religion of any kind, including goddess worship, totally turns me off. Once, years ago, I sent a donation to an atheist organization because of a particular battle they were waging. For years afterwards, I was receiving mailings about atheist meetings, atheist books, pamphlets, etc. Now, what was I supposed to surmise from that? Was I now supposed to

join a group that spent all its time talking about how we hated organized religion? It struck me as ludicrous. But if a friend of mine had needed to go to those meetings, I would have supported her doing so. So the point I'm making is for you to give some room to another to find within herself her own parts, allow her to stroke them, allow her to see them grow, allow her to honor them, and honor those parts of her that you can honestly help her to rejoice in, so that you can work with her within the parameters of her own definition of herself. When I first came into the movement, I didn't get a lot of support for having children. And a boy? Forget it. They were not exactly

welcome. Just a couple of years ago, I had an experience where my lesbian friends tried to ignore the fact that I had been married. And I was married for 19 years. And these were friends! But this is Boston, and I live in a women's community. So how much worse must it be if you're a lesbian hiding in a closet in some other community? Or a black lesbian in hiding in the black community right here? I've got some friends who are. Suppression is ugly. In all its forms.

When Audre Lorde tells black heterosexual sisters that their homophobia robs them of the strength of Black lesbians, she speaks mountains of truth. Because the amount of energy it takes to live a secret is supremely wasteful. It's energy that could be put to better use furthering our cause.

When you read that pamphlet *I Am Your Sister*, I was hoping that you could put it into an even larger context. For instance, I wanted you to recognize that black women are not, as Audre says, one giant vat of homogenized milk. Think about that. Not just intellectually, but feel it. Absorb it. It's important to do that because it's the basis for the radical feminism that will see all women as having their own agenda, but as needing to find the bottom lines for working together so that we can continue to be different, continue to argue over strategies and issues, but not be defeated by our

differences. Our differences are real. They're healthy, too. But if we take a feminist view of the world, which is, according to International feminist Charlotte Bunch, that "feminism is a world political view that grows out of our struggles over women's oppression, out of our lives as women, out of our identification with each other and our love for women," then we see our future as dependent upon the expansion and clarification of feminism as a politics -- as a world view, a perspective on life that can be the most powerful force of transformation in the next century. Feminism is a perspective on life, a framework for thinking about everything -- everything, from the so-called naturalness of domination by sex, race class, or nation to the so-called unnaturalness of certain forms

of sexuality. Patriarchy and male supremacy are built on the notion that one group has to be better than or above another, but feminism questions everything we have been told is natural. It's redefining the social order.

So, the myths and stereotypes that women in other parts of the world have been fed about us are being broken down as we begin moving around the world, meeting our sisters on their own ground, rather than as tourists separated and being waited upon from a distance. In Nairobi, incredible discussions took place throughout the days and nights of the NGO conference. Sad to say that the same thing did not take place with the women who were sent as official delegates from their governments, who sat around those huge official rooms stating their government positions. But in our conference, we met one another face to face without male reporters telling us what women were in each country. We were able to discover ourselves for ourselves. And, in spite of the official government statement, we did meet African lesbians in Nairobi. They were very fearful and very careful, but they certainly do exist.

There is a global feminism, a recognition that women are going to change the face of the world. It's so exciting, because we're all so different. But that difference need not be the basis of division, but an opportunity for even broader feminist analysis and action. To deny these differences is to deny both our particular oppression and our particular strength. Feminism, because it is rooted in women's lives, grows larger to encompass the women who embrace it. True unity is grounded not on a false notion of sameness, but on understanding and utilizing diversity to gain the greatest possible scope and power. Feminism will truly unite us. If we live it, if we expand it, if we believe in it. I'm firmly convinced of that.