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## 1993 Hampshire College Talk: 'Black Lesbians and Reproductive Rights Movement' by Angela Bowen

Angela Bowen

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*the part of myself, always... that continues to do so.*  
*Complete*

WHEN I WAS ASKED A FEW WEEKS AGO IF I WOULD SPEAK TODAY TO A GROUP ABOUT MY THOUGHTS ON THE CONNECTION OF BLACK LESBIANS TO THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT, I SAID SURE. OF COURSE. NO PROBLEM. THEN AS THE DAY APPROACHED AND I BEGAN THINKING ABOUT IT, IT BECAME CLEAR TO ME THAT THERE WAS NO WAY I COULD SEPARATE MY THOUGHTS INTO SUCH A RIGIDLY DEFINED CATEGORY. FOR ONE THING, I'VE LIVED TOO LONG AS A HETEROSEXUAL MIDDLE CLASS WOMAN TO BE ABLE TO DO SO. WHEN I WAS DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE NEED FOR ABORTION I WAS IN MY TWENTIES, AND ABORTION WAS ILLEGAL. FOR THAT MATTER, FOR DOCTORS EVEN TO GIVE INFORMATION ABOUT BIRTH CONTROL TO UNMARRIED WOMEN WAS ILLEGAL. BUT I MANAGED TO FIND THE INFORMATION I NEEDED, AND I'VE HAD 3 ABORTIONS MYSELF. SO I SPEAK TO YOU AS A MIDDLECLASS, EDUCATED, SOMEWHAT PRIVILEGED BLACK MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, FOSTER AND STEPMOTHER WHO BEGAN IDENTIFYING AS A LESBIAN AT AGE 40 AFTER 15 YEARS OF MARRIAGE; WHO BRINGS EVERY PART OF HERSELF INTO THIS DISCUSSION.

I GAVE SERIOUS THOUGHT TO THIS QUESTION OF A BLACK LESBIAN VIEW OF CONNECTIONS TO THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT. AND IN ANALYZING IT, I CAN SEE STARTLING PARALLELS BETWEEN BLACK WOMEN'S CONNECTIONS AND LESBIAN CONNECTIONS. WHEN I USE THE TERM BLACK, YOU MAY ALSO SUBSTITUTE LATINA OR ASIAN OR NATIVE AMERICAN. I MUST SAY THAT THE ALL-INCLUSIVE WOMEN OF COLOR LABEL, ALTHOUGH SOMETIMES CONVENIENT TO THE SITUATION, VERY OFTEN MAKES US FEEL INVISIBLE. SO MAKE WHATEVER SUBSTITUTION YOU CHOOSE TO IN YOUR MIND, AND YOU WILL SEE THAT IT FITS WHAT I'M SAYING.

BLACK WOMEN NEED THE MOVEMENT BECAUSE WE NEED THE RIGHT TO PLAN A FAMILY AND KNOW THAT OUR EFFORTS TO PROVIDE FOR THE CHILDREN WE WANT AND TO TAKE CARE OF OUR OWN NEEDS WON'T BE INTERFERED WITH BY FUTURE UNEXPECTED CHILDREN. AND BECAUSE BLACK WOMEN'S CHILDREN HAVE CHILDREN, WHICH FALLS BACK ON US AS GRANDMOTHERS; NIECES, SISTERS, SONS' WIVES AND GIRL FRIENDS HAVE UNWANTED BABIES AND THROW THE FAMILY OFF BALANCE. LESBIANS NEED THE MOVEMENT BECAUSE WE AS WOMEN WITH FAMILIES HAVE PRECISELY THOSE SAME PROBLEMS. ADDITIONALLY, SOME WOMEN WHO IDENTIFY AND LIVE AS LESBIANS DO HAVE SEX WITH MEN AND DO GET PREGNANT. REGARDLESS OF THE DEBATE THAT OCCURS WITHIN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY AS TO WHETHER THEY ARE ANY LONGER LESBIANS IF THEY HAVE SEX WITH MEN, THE REALITY IS IT HAS HAPPENED AND WILL CONTINUE TO HAPPEN, AND THOSE WOMEN ALSO NEED THE PROTECTION OF ABORTION RIGHTS.

ANOTHER PARALLEL IS THAT BLACK WOMEN NEED THE FREEDOM TO HAVE SEX WITHOUT THE FEAR THAT IF OUR BIRTH CONTROL FAILS WE WILL NOT SPEND THE REST OF OUR LIVES RAISING CHILDREN WE DIDN'T PLAN. AND SUCH AN ATMOSPHERE OF SEXUAL FREEDOM WILL ALLOW LESBIANS THE FREEDOM TO BE HAPPILY SEXUAL WITH THE WOMEN WE LOVE WITHOUT THAT SENSE OF NAUGHTINESS, THAT SENSE OF BEING A BAD GIRL THAT IS DRUMMED INTO WOMEN IN THIS SOCIETY WHO DARE TO ADMIT TO ENJOYING SEX WHILE MEN ARE ENCOURAGED, NO- EXHORTED, TO HAVE SEX AS FREQUENTLY AS POSSIBLE. I USED TO WONDER AT THE SCHIZOPHRENIC APPROACH TO SEX IN THIS COUNTRY, THE CONSTANT USE OF TANTALIZING SEX ADS, T.V. PROGRAMS, MOVIES, BOOKS; AND AT THE SAME TIME THE PRUDISH SELFRIGHTEOUSNESS AND LACK OF OPENNESS ABOUT INFORMATION ON HOW NOT TO GET PREGNANT, HOW NOT TO CATCH SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES, ETC. FINALLY I REALIZED THAT THE TITILLATION IS NOT MEANT FOR US.

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WE WOMEN ARE MERELY THE OBJECTS USED FOR AROUSING MEN, AND WE WERE NOT TO BE AROUSED UNTIL THEY AROUSED US, AND THEN ONLY FOR THEIR PLEASURE. WHICH IS WHY HETEROSEXUAL MEN HATE LESBIANS SO MUCH. WE GOT AWAY. BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY.

GETTING BACK TO MY PARALLELS, BLACK WOMEN NEED FROM THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT THE RIGHT NOT JUST TO ABORTION, BUT THE RIGHT TO PROCREATE AS WELL, WHEN THEY PLEASE. THAT IS TO SAY, THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT MUST ARTICULATE THAT MESSAGE LOUD AND CLEAR TO BLACK WOMEN BECAUSE THE REALITY IS THAT STERILIZATION ABUSE IS STILL A SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR BLACK WOMEN. AND THE FEAR OF GENOCIDE THAT EXISTS WITHIN AN OPPRESSED AND VISIBLE MINORITY IS VERY REAL. AND WHEN THAT VERY REAL FEAR IS ARTICULATED AND POOH-POOHED OR SCORNEED, IT TENDS TO MAKE A PEOPLE PARANOID AND ISOLATED. SO THE RIGHT NOT ONLY TO ABORTION BUT ALSO TO PROCREATION IS BOTTOMLINE IMPORTANT TO BLACK WOMEN.

THE RIGHT TO PROCREATE IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO LESBIANS. IN A SOCIETY THAT DOESN'T SEE LESBIANS AS WOMEN, AND THAT SEEKS TO DENY A WOMAN HER CHILDREN SIMPLY BECAUSE OF WHOM SHE LOVES, THE RIGHT TO PROCREATE HAS BEEN MADE MANIFEST WITH THE NEW REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY. IT DRIVES THE RIGHTWING ANTIABORTIONISTS RIGHT UP THE WALL THAT WE CAN GO AND HAVE OURSELVES IMPREGNATED WITHOUT BENEFIT OF A SEXUAL UNION WITH A MAN. STILL, IT'S NOT ONLY RIGHTWING NUTS WHO SEE LESBIANS AS NOT BEING FIT MOTHERS. HOMOPHOBIA IS ALL AROUND US. AND, AS WITH BLACK WOMEN, THAT KIND OF ASSAULT TO YOUR VERY BEING ON A DAILY BASIS TENDS TO MAKE LESBIANS ISOLATED AND CAUSE MANY TO LIVE IN A LESBIAN GHETTO.

I'M TALKING ABOUT A KIND OF ISOLATION THAT EXISTS EVEN BEYOND THE NORMAL SOLIDARITY OF SAMENESS THAT LESBIANS WOULD NATURALLY FEEL IN A HOSTILE SOCIETY. THERE'S AN AWARENESS OF COMMONALITY WHICH MAKES ANY PEOPLE WHO ARE DIFFERENT WANT TO LIVE CLOSE AND INTERACT. SO THAT UNLESS ONE HAS INTERNALIZED THE HOMOPHOBIA OF SOCIETY TO THE EXTENT THAT ONE IS LIVING A COMPLETELY CLOSETED LIFE AND THE SIGHT OF ANOTHER LESBIAN STRIKES TERROR IN YOUR HEART BECAUSE YOU CAN'T EVEN FACE YOURSELF WITH YOUR LESBIANISM, THERE'S A CERTAIN LEVEL OF COMFORT IN BEING TOGETHER. AND OF COURSE THE SAME GOES FOR BLACK WOMEN WHO SHARE AN ETHNIC SOLIDARITY WITH ONE ANOTHER EVEN LIVING WITH THE HORROR OF THE INTERNALIZED RACISM WHICH BLACK PEOPLE HAVE ALSO ABSORBED FROM THIS SOCIETY.

ANOTHER COMMON BOND IN HOW BLACK AND LESBIAN WOMEN RELATE TO THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT IS IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN. BLACK MEN ARE SEXIST, NO QUESTION ABOUT THAT. AND NO AWARE BLACK WOMAN CAN DENY IT. BUT THE BOND WE SHARE OF OPPRESSION, THE HATRED AND FEAR DIRECTED AT US AS A PEOPLE CAUSES BLACK WOMEN TO PUT UP WITH A LOT THAT WHITE WOMEN HAVE LONG AGO DECIDED THEY SHOULD AT LEAST BE CHALLENGING THEIR MEN ON. WHETHER THEY'RE WINNING ANYTHING BEYOND A FEW MINOR SKIRMISHES IS DEBATABLE AT THIS POINT. BUT THE FRUSTRATION WHITE FEMINISTS FEEL TOWARD WHAT THEY PERCEIVE AS BLACK WOMEN'S PROTECTION OF THEIR SEXIST MEN IS UNDERSTANDABLE, BUT ULTIMATELY UNFAIR.

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IT WOULD TAKE A DAYLONG SEMINAR TO DISCUSS THE INTRICACIES OF IT ALL, BUT ON THE WHOLE I WOULD SAY THAT ONCE A BLACK MAN UNDERSTANDS THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RACISM AND SEXISM, HE'S GOT IT. AND I MEAN REALLY GOT IT. THERE'S RHETORIC AND THERE'S REALITY, AND THE REALITY IS THAT ON ANY SIGNIFICANT ISSUE WHERE WOMEN'S RIGHTS CAN BE VOTED ON, BLACK MEN WHO HAVE A VOTE INVARIABLY VOTE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS. THE ENTIRE CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS IS OURS. IF ONLY WE COULD SAY THE SAME FOR WHITE MEN.

NOW JUST AS IMPORTANT AS BLACK WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH BLACK MEN IS LESBIANS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH GAY MEN. FOR MANY LESBIANS THAT HAS BEEN A TRULY TROUBLED ONE ALSO. WHEN I FIRST CAME OUT AS A LESBIAN AND ..... NCBLG .....BLACK GAY MEN. DIDN'T TRANSFER INTO WORKING WITH WHITE GAY MEN, WHO ARE FAR MORE PRIVILEGED.....

AND YOU SEE THAT'S THE FINAL THING WE MUST TALK ABOUT HERE. WOMEN WHO ASK WHERE BLACK WOMEN ARE IN THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT MUST PUT ALL THESE THINGS TOGETHER, AND THINK ABOUT THE CLASS DYNAMICS. WHITE PRIVILEGE EXISTS WITHIN THIS MOVEMENT. IT EXISTS. PERIOD. THERE'S NO NEED TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT IT OR TO DENY IT. IT EXISTS. RECOGNIZE IT, DISCUSS IT, AND USE IT. USE IT TO BENEFIT ALL WOMEN. NOW OF COURSE ALTHOUGH WHITES HAVE WHITE PRIVILEGE, ALL WHITES DO NOT HAVE THE SAME CLASS PRIVILEGE. THERE'S UPPER CLASS, MIDDLE CLASS, WORKING CLASS, AND THE UNDERCLASS, MANY OF WHOM HAVE NEVER HAD A JOB, MANY OF WHOM ARE HOMELESS, MANY WHO ARE UNEDUCATED, MANY OTHERS SICK, ETC.

AND THE LOWER YOU GO ON THE CLASS LADDER, THE LESS ACCESS YOU HAVE TO INFORMATION ABOUT ANYTHING, LET ALONE INFORMATION ABOUT ABORTION. THAT'S WHY THE LIMITED ACCESS OF THE GREAT MAJORITY OF WOMEN -- INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO BLACK WOMEN, LATINA WOMEN, ASIAN WOMEN, NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, NECESSITATES REMOVING ALL RESTRICTIONS ON ABORTION. YOU SEE, THIS BUSINESS OF INDIVIDUALIZING THE STRUGGLE FOR ABORTION RIGHTS BY CALLING IT PROCHOICE IS PROBLEMATIC TO ME. IT'S ONLY A CHOICE FOR THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD TO MAKE THAT CHOICE AND FOLLOW IT UP BY PAYING FOR IT. FOR A VAST MAJORITY OF WOMEN IN THE WORLD, INDIVIDUAL CHOICE EQUALS NO CHOICE.

WE NEED TO EXPAND OURSELVES BEYOND PROCHOICE FOR ABORTION. WE NEED TO THINK IN TERMS OF PROCHOICE TO HAVE A CHILD WHEN WE WANT ONE AND KNOW THAT IT'S NOT GOING TO DIE IN ROXBURY FOR WANT OF PRENATAL HEALTH CARE. PROCHOICE FOR A NATIONAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM. PROCHOICE FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR EVERYONE. PROCHOICE TO LIVE OUR LIVES OPENLY WITH WHOEVER WE LOVE WITHOUT BEING BASHED AND BEATEN UP. PROCHOICE FOR CHILDCARE FOR EVERYONE WHO NEEDS IT.

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IT'S A FUTILE EXERCISE OF THE TONGUE TO ASK YET AGAIN WHERE ARE THE BLACK WOMEN IN THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT? WE WOULD BE BETTER OFF ASKING WHERE ARE THE MIDDLE CLASS WHITE WOMEN IN THE MOVEMENT TO CHANGE THIS SOCIETY TO ONE WHERE WE CAN ALL GET WHAT WE NEED? IT DOESN'T NEED REFORMING, IT NEEDS RADICAL CHANGE. THIS MOVEMENT WOULD GROW BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS IF WE THOUGHT ABOUT WOMEN'S LIVES IN THEIR ENTIRETY AND WORKED IN THAT DIRECTION. NOT RHETORIC, BUT AN ABSORPTION OF THE REALITY OF WOMEN'S LIVES. ALL WOMEN. LISTEN TO US. ABSORB THE MESSAGE. LEARN, STUDY, INTERACT. THEN ARTICULATE THE MESSAGE TO ONE ANOTHER. EMBRACE YOUR SISTERS. ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND, YOU CAN PUT IT BACK OUT. TO PARAPHRASE AUDRE LORDE, OUR BRAVE BLACK LESBIAN WOMAN WARRIOR POET PHILOSOPHER, YOU HAVE THE PRIVILEGE TO BE PLACES WHERE MOST BLACK PEOPLE WILL NEVER BE. YOU HAVE PRIVILEGE, SO USE IT. DON'T BE EMBARRASSED BY IT, DEFENSIVE OR GUILTY ABOUT IT, ASHAMED OF IT - WHAT GOOD WILL THAT DO ANY OF US?

WHITE WOMEN HAVE THE POWER IN THIS SITUATION OVER BLACK WOMEN. THE POWER OF EDUCATION, OF ARTICULATION, OF MOBILITY, OF ACCESS. YOU HAVE THE POWER ALSO TO USE BLACK WOMEN AND THEN LEAVE THEM FLAT WITH NOTHING OUT OF THIS BUT ANOTHER BETRAYAL BY WHITE WOMEN. IT'S SO EASY TO GET WHAT WE WANT FROM A COALITION WITH ANOTHER GROUP, THEN WALK AWAY. JUST AS IT'S SO EASY FOR WHITE GAY MEN TO GET WHAT THEY WANT FROM COALITIONS WITH LESBIANS, THEN CHOOSE TO WALK AWAY FROM THEM. WE'VE BEEN WORKING ON THE GAY RIGHTS BILL FOR 17 YEARS. NOW MASS. HAS A GAY RIGHTS BILL AND ALREADY, MANY GAY MEN ARE TALKING ABOUT VOTING FOR FRANK BELLOTTI EVEN THOUGH LESBIANS OVERWHELMINGLY PREFER EVELYN MURPHY FOR HER PROABORTION STANCE. I ASK WHITE GAY MEN WHAT KIND OF SOLIDARITY AND RESPECT THEY THINK THEY OWE LESBIANS BEYOND A GAY RIGHTS BILL. WHAT WILL THEY USE THAT BILL FOR NOW? IS THE PURPOSE TO JOIN THE OLD BOYS' CLUB OF PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION OF WOMEN NOW THAT RESTRICTIONS ON THEIR RIGHTS TO JOBS AND HOUSING ARE REMOVED? DO THEY HAVE ANY LARGER VISION OF SOCIETAL JUSTICE IN MIND? THE GAY RIGHTS BILL TO WHAT END? AND I ASK THE SAME QUESTION OF THE WHITE WOMEN IN COALITION FOR CHOICE WHO ACCEPTED RESTRICTIONS ON ABORTION AND CALL THAT A VICTORY. PROCHOICE TO WHAT END I ASK? DO YOU SEE ANY OBLIGATION ON YOUR PART TO ANYTHING BEYOND THIS NARROW SO-CALLED VICTORY AS A POSSIBILITY FOR BLACK WOMEN? IF WHITE WOMEN DO NOT WORK TO SECURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK WOMEN EDUCATIONALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY, BLACK WOMEN WILL CONTINUE TO ASK PROCHOICE TO WHAT END? WHAT INCENTIVE DO BLACK WOMEN HAVE TO LOOK TOWARD PROCHOICE AS ANY KIND OF SALVATION IF WE DO NOT SEE DOWN THE ROAD SOME OPTIONS OPENING UP FOR US. WHITE WOMEN REALLY NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT AND WORK FOR RADICAL CHANGE, NOT SIMPLY SAY, NOW WE GOT YOU ABORTION RIGHTS, SO GO FOR YOURSELF.

WE'VE GOT NEW MOMENTUM FOR A NEW MOVEMENT FORMING HERE. SO DON'T SETTLE. DON'T STOP SHORT. DON'T SELL OUT. THERE'S EVEN MORE AT STAKE NOW. WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD ARE WATCHING US. THEY'RE DEPENDING ON US. LET'S BE SMARTER THAN WE'VE EVER BEEN BEFORE. LET'S KEEP GOING AND GO ALL THE WAY THIS TIME. THEY SAY THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT. THIS IS OUR THIRD CHANCE AT A WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, A REAL ONE THAT TAKES ALL OUR NEEDS INTO CONSIDERATION. LET'S NOT BLOW IT.

*If would do us well to remember that the same Jesse Helms who seeks to annihilate me as a Black seeks to annihilate me as a lesbian & seeks to annihilate you as feminist f. with ideas he can't tolerate & seeks to annihilate you as profeminist men. Together we'll survive 4*