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Women's Studies and Interdisciplinarity

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Women's Studies and Interdisciplinarity

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), one of the first scholars to receive a Ph.D. in Women's Studies. 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 contributions to the field of Women's Studies as a professor at California State University Long Beach and active member of the National Women's Studies Association with publications and talks that highlight the advantages of interdisciplinarity and the need for the field to maintain a central focus on women and lesbians of color.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, 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, interdisciplinarity, women's studies, feminist studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, Combahee River Collective, Clark University Women's Studies, women's studies Ph.D. programs, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Bell Scott, *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, National Women's Studies Association, intersectionality, race and queer theory, California State University Long Beach Women's Studies, Cynthia Enloe, Elizabeth Hadley, Eve Oishi

Although Women's Studies as an academic discipline had begun to establish itself in the form of undergraduate minors and majors for several years, Bowen was one of the first students to receive her PhD in 1996 from the first free-standing Women's Studies PhD program in the country at Clark University in Worcester, MA in 1997. We have included a photo of Bowen with one of her Clark professors, Cynthia Enloe and Black feminist academic, the late Elizabeth Hadley. Despite the inauguration of programs like Clark's, Women's Studies would continue to struggle to gain support and stability within academic institutions. In a biographical sketch Bowen writes, "I'm truly devastated that Clark University was not only one of the first to launch the freestanding PhD. in Women's Studies, but ironically, the first to close it down." Bowen was invited to give the keynote at the program's reunion event in 2005 to mark its closing.

Even before entering the PhD program, however, Bowen was part of a network of Black and women of color feminists who were building political and intellectual communities and laying the groundwork for the field of Women's Studies. In 1983 Bowen attended the last meeting that the Combahee River Collective would hold, and she used her writing as a way of bringing attention to this essential early work. Included in this section is a 1984 article that Bowen published in

Sojourner: The Women's Forum about Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women, a new academic journal founded by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (at the time director of the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College) and Patricia Bell Scott (at the time an equal opportunity officer at MIT and co-editor of the influential 1982 anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*.)

Once she entered graduate school Bowen was an active participant in building and maintaining the institutional structures of the field, particularly the annual conference for the National Women's Studies Association, for which Bowen was often invited to give keynote talks and to which she often brought contingents of undergraduates. Included in this section are documents that demonstrate the evolution of Bowen's thinking, including a NWSA talk, first delivered in 1992 at the first Black Women in the Academy Conference at MIT and later at NWSA in St. Louis in 1997, which would later be published in 2001 in the journal *Feminist Teacher*.¹ In this piece, Bowen refers to the "life-affirming networks of support" that are produced and maintained through the visibility and presence of out Black lesbians in academic settings. Throughout her career, Bowen continued to address the challenges of keeping the history and contributions of Black women and lesbians, as well as women of color more broadly, central within feminism and women's studies. She is particularly adamant that Black women and women of color not become marginalized as queer theory and queer studies became ascendant within the academy and activist movements in the 1990s. We have included several talks that Bowen gave at NWSA in 1998 and 2000 on these topics. Bowen's suspicion of queer theory and politics as a space that was being dominated by white gay men and that required a truly intersectional orientation in order to fulfill its radical potential aligns with other important writing from the 1990s like Cathy Cohen's foundational *GLQ* essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics."²

We have also included some documentation of Bowen's career at California State University Long Beach, including flyers for her courses and photos with students and colleagues.

¹ Bowen, Angela. "Interdisciplinarily Speaking." *Feminist Teacher*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–26. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40545865. Accessed 30 July 2021.

² Cohen, Cathy J., "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. vol. 3, 1997, pp. 437-465.

Table of Contents

[1997 Article: "Enabling a Visible Black Lesbian Presence in Academia: A Radically Reasonable Request" by Angel Bowen](#) (in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*. Eds. Diane Bell and Renate Klein. Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 1996. A slightly different version of this was published in *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-first Century*, Eds. Bonnie Zimmerman and Toni A. H. McNaaron. New York: The Feminist Press, 1996.)

[1992/1997 NWSA National Women's Studies Association Talk by Angela Bowen \(later draft published in 2001 as "Interdisciplinarily Speaking" in *Feminist Teacher*\)](#)

[1998 National Women's Studies Association Talk: "The Promise and Limitations of Inclusion in Women's Studies for Women of Color" by Angela Bowen](#)

[2000 National Women's Studies Association Talk Speech: "Challenges: Women of Color within Women's Studies and LesbiGayTrans Studies" by Angela Bowen](#)

[2001 Article in *Feminist Teacher* "Interdisciplinarily Speaking" by Angela Bowen](#)

[1984 Article about SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women in *Soujourner: The Women's Forum* by Angela Bowen](#)

[Photo: Angela Bowen on cover of Clark University newspaper Photo by John Ferrarone Collection of J. Abod](#)

[Angela Bowen with Clark Professor Cynthia Enloe and fellow grad student Elizabeth Hadley. Photo by J. Abod](#)

[1996 Photo of Angela Bowen receiving her PhD from Clark University Photo by J. Abod](#)

[2006 Flyer for Black Women in American course developed by Angela Bowen at California State University Long Beach](#)

[Flyer for Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance course developed by Angela Bowen at California State University SULB](#)

[Photo: Angela Bowen with California State University CSLB students Erica Miller, unknown, Mae Henderson Photo by J. Abod](#)

[Photo: Angela Bowen with California State Long Beach colleague, Eve Oishi. Photo by J. Abod](#)