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Angela Bowen

Enabling a Visible Black Lesbian Presence in Academia: A Radically Reasonable Request

When I met with the admissions committee for graduate school, a woman on the committee who was about my age asked, “Why do you want to be entering graduate school now at this stage of your life? They're very astute in the academy, you know.” My mental response was, “Oh, really, and not racist, sexist and homophobic as well?” In spite of my reputation as a smart-mouth, I managed to deliver a more considered response and gain entry.

I do not see my age, my color, or my sex as my biggest problems, but as a series of obstacles to step over in my determination to do this work. What do I see standing more firmly in my way? Not the difficulty of the academic work; not the patriarchal structure of the institutions; not the disdain, disregard and erasure of my Black, middle-aged, woman, lesbian, feminist, community-connected self by an omnipotent eurocentric patriarchy (although I am familiar with all of the above). What I am more apprehensive about is the disdain, disregard and erasure of my lesbian self by my Black heterosexual sisters, from whom I would rather anticipate comfort, encouragement, a safe retreat. So I pose these questions: Will our Black heterosexual sisters enable Black lesbians to do our work? Will they be allies or obstacles? Will they enable us to survive? For if we are all to fulfill our mission — to water the thirsting spirits and intellects of our precious young Black women and men — we visible Black lesbians in the academy must not only survive, but thrive.

If we are not out there visibly as Black lesbians, our young Black college students will not be able to locate us. They need to be able to look us in the eye and have us honestly say who we are. People have all kinds of reasons for not being

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able to do so, some valid ones. I'm sure. But I remember being at a university a couple of years ago co-facilitating a workshop about lesbian visibility within academia. There were about sixty women in the room, nearly all of them white, only a few of whom were out, and those few were generally teaching part-time or in community colleges. The reasons given for being closeted were those we are all familiar with: being out would retard careers, or make tenure difficult, or cause hostility, or keep the students from being able to relate to them. After about forty minutes of this, a woman named Vivien Ng spoke up. As I recall, she was the only woman of color in the room. She said that she went as an out lesbian to teach at the University of Oklahoma because the students were her priority, and she wanted to be visible as a lesbian for them. If she didn't rise in the academy, so what? She made enough to live on whether she ever got tenure or not, and that was the right decision for her regardless of the outcome. However, she had received tenure with no trouble and was very well liked and respected.

I read a similar story by Toni McNaron (1982) called "Out at the University: Myth and Reality". The myth was that if she came out "they" would attack her. The reality was that once she came out, she was respected herself so much that she began liking herself and became freer, which made other people see and appreciate who she was. McNaron had received tenure at the University of Minnesota in record time, only three years, but stayed in the closet for nine more, suffering panic, overeating, being alcoholic, and suffering from a variety of other ills until she gained the courage to come out. After reaching bottom, she took a year's leave to decide whether she could ever work at a university as a lesbian, or even as a feminist, and was encouraged to stay by Florence Howe and by Adrienne Rich who, she says, gave her "an afternoon of her self and a small piece of raw amethyst (given Rich in turn by Audre Lorde), for clarity!" She stayed, announced her identity to her chairman, and began doing the most powerful and creative work she'd ever done. Of course, McNaron didn't have the added oppression of being Black, or being Asian, as is Vivien Ng; nor do all stories of lesbian oppression end so happily — although mine does. Being out has been glorious for me!

True, ever Black lesbian cannot afford to come out within academia, for a variety of perfectly valid reasons. Still, closeted lesbians can help us to live visible lesbian lives by not "scaring us", not humiliating us, not killing us with hostility, but encouraging us, not underwriting us, but helping to watch our backs by feeding us the information we need to avoid traps, enabling us to be as out as possible, for all of us. That sounds like a bargain to me. It's the kind of bargain that sociologist Aldon Morris refers to in The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement (1984), where he writes about the bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins in the south in the 50s. Black businessmen who had money and goods to offer but were vulnerable to white retaliation if they were open in their support, kept silent but contributed in the background, keeping the movement going while the churches served as movement

1. Thanks to Vivien Ng and Toni McNaron for permission to relate their stories.
centers. The ministers, who were not directly dependent on the white economy, could take the lead because they bore less risk. Is it too much for us to expect similar support from Black women in academia?

Building such networks of support would allow us to provide a visible presence to all our students, thus helping them understand that we are existing and flourishing everywhere, even on college campuses as professors. Our visible, proud and matter of fact acceptance of ourselves would show them that all of our lives are valuable, precious and meaningful. Students would see that we command respect for who we are and what we know, just as all their professors do. This in turn would help foster respect in heterosexual students for their peers who are lesbian, gay or bisexual or may be struggling with sexual identity issues. And our visibility would allow them to carry positive images of Black lesbians into their lives beyond college. If we offered them this broader outlook, they, as well as we, would survive, thrive and contribute to the future of Africa's throughout the diaspora.

Nelson Mandela in a recent public statement embraced South African lesbians and gay men as part of the new South African liberation. By embracing them, Mandela honors their total humanity; for of course we are more than lesbians, just as we are more than Black, more than women, or mothers, or daughters or teachers. The point is not that we want to make ourselves into giant walking capitals. No. We insist on claiming the lesbian identity because without it we are not whole and without a sense of wholeness we lose our strength, our creativity, our sense of adventure, our vision.

If we accept W.E.B. Du Bois concept of the "two-ness" of Black folks' vision, we must then accept that Black women bring a "three-ness" of vision to all vision. We must then accept that Black women who accept this concept not only regard Black lesbians as "four-ness" of vision that pushes scrutiny and clarification to yet another level. If we are truly seeking more analyses that will broaden our approaches to our feminist politics, scholarship, history, our very lives, then the vision of Black lesbian feminists is crucial.

Sometimes Black lesbians who are quite brave about being out in all other aspects of their lives are paralyzed with fear when it comes to being themselves within academia because the Black sisterhood makes it clear that it will not abide a lesbian who brings attention to her sexual identity on campus. It's alright to be gay, just keep quiet about it. This silencing tactic is a reactionary holdover that refuses to recognize the radical oppositional stance of claiming lesbianism as a valid identity, not merely a "sexual preference", that old liberal canard which glosses over the political ramifications of choosing an out lesbian life. For some of us living as an open lesbian is not a choice but a necessity, although the difference between deciding and doing so are two vastly different realities. Still, as Andre Lorde said, difficult though it is to be out, living in the closet is even more difficult.

But should we Black lesbians expect support from Black women in the academy who are not out lesbians? I believe so. Because every Black woman in the
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Academy, whether she is a heterosexual, a closeted lesbian, or somewhere on the continuum between (Rich 1980), benefits from lesbian visibility. Our radical stance, the chances we take, the issues we choose to write and talk about, allow us to be seen as “bad girls,” “fringe folks,” the “nifties,” if you will. As we keep pushing the envelope closer to the edge of the table, knowing that we must take the heat, can we expect support and succor, or condemnation and chastisement? Living as a lesbian is no game, says Adrienne Rich:

For us, the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action. The word lesbian must be affirmed because to disregard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet-game, the creation of the unspeakable (1979, p. 202).

André Lorde almost commands us to speak:

What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sin and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours? (1984, pp. 41-2).

And Joy James and Ruth Farmer remind us of the compelling reasons that we Black women are in the academy:

We have chosen academe because of our commitment to education, to serving ourselves and our communities. Yet often it appears that the only way to survive is through silence. Silence is the absence of our words and the presence of our complicity if silent, we lose our ability to challenge (1993, p. 223).

Silences. gaps, erasures, lies. Who will rectify them if not our Black lesbians? Who has more of an investment in expropriating the myths, distortions and stereotypes and exposing the reality of our lives than non-black lesbians? Who will fight harder against the expositions which cast us to conform, to abandon our voices and our communities and step within the walls, within the confines of language? Who has more need to resist the insidious pressures of cooptation, the rewards of security and comfort dangled before us, urging us not to say too much, do too much, identify with our communities too much?

Yet the Black lesbian’s investment in withstanding the pressures, in struggling against cooptation, does not guarantee that we will be able to call up the strength to keep doing it over and over, coming out repeatedly, writing articles without knowing if they will be rejected—not because of the worth of the work, but because of their content. Having the investment and commitment does not mean you don’t have to walk the line, knowing that your honesty and openness can
lead people to attack you on every imaginable front because you insist on claiming all parts of yourself, that no matter how much you may talk or write about being a woman, being Black, a mother, a historian, a writer, or whatever else, as soon as you say you are a lesbian — and radical feminist — you are being “essentialist”, “blatant”, “political”, “unprofessional”, or in some other way unacceptable. Black women know the routine because we get the double dose of sexism and sexism. Add homophobia to the mix (which, when it comes from Black women, raises the intensity exponentially) and you might just begin to fathom the level of pain.

The truth is that we’re all in this together, and we need each other. So who among our Black heterosexual and hidden lesbian sisters will provide a safety zone when we stagger back from the front line of hostility, hatred, homophobia — the war zone? We need steady, unwavering support and encouragement. Our heterosexual sisters need the “fourth” dimension of our vision, and we all need each other’s strength, courage and fortitude. Do we Black lesbians have allies? This is not an academic question, for we are all beneficiaries of our struggle and the war really is the same, said Sister Audre:

We choose the earth
and the edge of each others battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday womens blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
but if we win
there’s no telling
we seek beyond history
for a new and more possible meeting
I look to meet you
upon whatever barricade you erect or choose.
(1984)