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Lesbian Feminist: Selections from the Archive
of Dr. Angela Bowen (1936-2018)*

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1992/1997 National Women's Studies Association Talk by Angela Bowen

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TALK FOR NWSA

ST. LOUIS

JUE 19, 1997

THIS TALK IS IN 2 PARTS. THE FIRST SECTION WAS DELIVERED AT THE FIRST BLACK WOMEN IN THE ACADEMY CONFERENCE AT MIT IN JANUARY OF 1992. I WAS THEN A GRADUATE STUDENT IN THE PH.D. PROGRAM AT CLARK UNIVERSITY IN WORCESTER, MA

PART I

WHEN I MET WITH THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL AND THEY ASKED ABOUT THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS I MIGHT ENCOUNTER IN OBTAINING MY PH.D., I MENTIONED PLANNING MY TIME AND FIGURING OUT HOW TO SURVIVE ON THE STIPEND OFFERED, AMONG OTHER THINGS. HOWEVER, MY RESPONSE DID NOT QUITE SATISFY ME, AND I CONTINUED TO PONDER IT FOR DAYS AFTERWARD. EVENTUALLY, I REALIZED THAT I DID NOT EXPECT THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO BE THE DIFFICULTY OF THE ACADEMIC WORK, LACK OF TIME AND ECONOMIC RESOURCES, OR THE DISREGARD AND ERASURE OF MY BLACK, WOMAN, LESBIAN, FEMINIST, COMMUNITY-CONNECTED SELF BY AN OMNISCIENT, PATRIARCHAL, EUROCENTRICALLY STRUCTURED INSTITUTION (ALTHOUGH I AM FAMILIAR WITH ALL OF THE ABOVE AND THE PROBLEMS THAT COME WITH THE LIST).

ULTIMATELY, IT WAS NOT GRADUATE SCHOOL ITSELF BUT THE AFTERWARD THAT I WAS (AND CONTINUE TO BE) FAR MORE APPREHENSIVE ABOUT: THE POTENTIAL DISDAIN, DISREGARD, AND OSTRACIZING OF MY LESBIAN SELF BY MY BLACK HETEROSEXUAL AND HIDDEN LESBIAN SISTERS, FROM WHOM I WOULD RATHER ANTICIPATE COMFORT, ENCOURAGEMENT, A SAFE RETREAT.

SURVIVAL IN THE ACADEMY WITHOUT THE HOPE OF BLACK SISTERHOOD WOULD BE A DIM PROSPECT INDEED. GIVEN OUR SMALL NUMBERS, THEN, IMAGINE THE JOY WITH WHICH I WOULD DISCOVER THE ONE

OTHER BLACK SISTER AT A CAMPUS WHERE I AM NEWLY HIRED--ONLY TO SEE HER TURN AWAY WHEN SHE REALIZES THAT SHE IS TALKING TO A LESBIAN. SINCE I CANNOT IMAGINE RETREATING INTO THE CLOSET AT THIS POINT IN MY LIFE, WE WOULD END UP SORELY LACKING ONE ANOTHER'S SUPPORT.

THESE, THEN, ARE THE QUESTIONS THAT CONCERN ME: WILL OUR BLACK HETEROSEXUAL AND HIDDEN LESBIAN SISTERS ENABLE OUT BLACK LESBIANS TO SURVIVE? AND, BEYOND SURVIVAL, WILL THEY BE ALLIES, ENABLING US TO DO OUR WORK? 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 THRIVE, WE WILL HAVE THE STRENGTH TO PUSH FOR BROAD ISSUES WITHIN THE ACADEMY, INCLUDING MORE SUPPORT FOR THE ACADEMIC AND PSYCHIC SURVIVAL OF OUR STUDENTS, THE ADDITION OF FURTHER DIMENSIONS TO BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSES, AND THE PURSUIT OF SCHOLARSHIP IN A WIDE VARIETY OF FIELDS, INCLUDING THE NEWLY EMERGING DISCIPLINE OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES.

IF WE THRIVE, THAT IS. HARDSHIPS ABOUND WITHIN THE ACADEMY NOW, PARTICULARLY FOR BLACK WOMEN AND ALL WOMEN OF COLOR, MAKING IT EVEN MORE DIFFICULT THAN BEFORE (AND IT NEVER WAS EASY) TO CONSTRUCT THOSE NETWORKS OF SUPPORT SO CRITICAL TO ALL WOMEN OF COLOR--AND TO LESBIANS OF COLOR--IF WE INTEND TO BE VISIBLE TO OUR STUDENTS AND IN OUR SCHOLARSHIP. BLACK HETEROSEXUAL AND HIDDEN LESBIAN SISTERS CAN JOIN US IN THIS CONSTRUCTION BY NEITHER FEARING NOR UNDERCUTTING US. RATHER, THEY CAN OFFER SISTERLY ENCOURAGEMENT BY ACKNOWLEDGING OUR EFFORTS, IF ONLY IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION. THEY CAN HELP WATCH OUR BACKS BY OFFERING US THE INFORMATION WE NEED TO AVOID PITFALLS, THUS 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 *ORIGINS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT* (1984), WHERE HE WRITES ABOUT THE BUS BOYCOTTS AND LUNCH COUNTER SIT-INS IN THE SOUTH IN THE 1950'S. 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 CENTERS. SINCE THE MINISTERS WERE NOT DIRECTLY DEPENDENT ON THE WHITE ECONOMY, THEY BORE LESS RISK OF RETALIATION, AND THUS COULD BE VISIBLE IN THE STRUGGLE. IT IS NOT TOO MUCH FOR US TO EXPECT SIMILAR SUPPORT FROM BLACK WOMEN IN ACADEMIA.

NO EVIDENCE LEADS ME TO EXPECT A CRITICAL MASS OF OUT BLACK LESBIANS WITHIN ACADEMIA IN MY LIFETIME, OR TO PRESUME THAT ANY AND ALL BLACK LESBIANS WILL FEEL, AS I AND SOME OTHERS DO, A NECESSITY TO BE OUT. NEVERTHELESS, IT IS COMFORTING TO KNOW THAT FOR THOSE OF US WHO DO FEEL THE NECESSITY, THERE EXISTS WITHIN ACADEMIA A STAUNCH GROUP OF BLACK SISTERS WHO ARE NOT LESBIANS, BUT OFFER CONSISTENT SUPPORT TO OUT BLACK LESBIANS, BOTH PERSONALLY AND IN THE WORK THEY ARE CREATING. GLORIA HULL DISCOVERED AND REVEALED LESBIANISM WITHIN THE WORK OF ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON AND ANGELINA WELD GRIMKE. BARBARA CHRISTIAN WROTE ABOUT LESBIANS IN THE NOVELS OF NTOZAKE SHANGE, ALICE WALKER, GLORIA NAYLOR, AND AUDRE LORDE. BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL AND JOHNETTA COLE HAVE INSTITUTED LESBIAN-POSITIVE PROGRAMS AT SPELMAN COLLEGE, THE ONLY ALL BLACK WOMEN'S COLLEGE REMAINING IN THE U.S.. THERE ARE OTHER SUPPORTERS/ALLIES AS WELL. BUT MY LARGER POINT IS THAT WE NEED TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR A BLACK LESBIAN TO EXPECT THAT SHE CAN ARRIVE *ANYWHERE* WITHIN ACADEMIA AND, KNOWING THAT SHE ALREADY HAS TO BATTLE RACISM, SEXISM, CLASSISM, AND ALL THE OTHER ISMS, EXPECT AT LEAST SOME UNDERSTANDING AND A HOMECOMING FROM WHATEVER BLACK WOMAN SHE ENCOUNTERS, REGARDLESS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

SUCH LIFE-AFFIRMING NETWORKS OF SUPPORT WOULD ALLOW US TO PROVIDE A VISIBLE PRESENCE TO ALL OF OUR STUDENTS, ALLOWING THEM TO SEE THAT WE ARE EXISTING AND FLOURISHING EVERYWHERE, EVEN ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES. OUR VISIBLE, PROUD MATTER-OF-FACT ACCEPTANCE OF OURSELVES WOULD SHOW THEM THAT ALL OUR LIVES ARE VALUABLE, PRECIOUS AND MEANINGFUL. STUDENTS WOULD UNDERSTAND 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 AFRICANAS THROUGHOUT THE DIASPORA.

AND THIS IS ~~THE MOST~~^A CRUCIAL POINT FOR ME. IF WE ARE OUT THERE VISIBLY AS BLACK LESBIANS, OUR YOUNG BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO LOCATE US. THEY NEED TO LOOK US IN THE EYE AND HAVE US SAY WHO WE ARE. I REMEMBER ONCE CO-FACILITATING A WORKSHOP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO ON THE VISIBILITY OF LESBIANS WITHIN ACADEME. THERE WERE ABOUT 60 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 WERE THOSE WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH: BEING OUT WOULD RETARD THEIR CAREERS, OR KEEP THEM FROM GETTING TENURE, OR CAUSE HOSTILITY, OR KEEP THE STUDENTS FROM BEING ABLE TO RELATE TO THEM. AFTER ABOUT 40 MINUTES OF THIS, VIVIEN NG SPOKE UP. AS I RECALL, SHE WAS THE ONLY OTHER 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, WHAT DID IT MATTER? SHE MADE ENOUGH TO LIVE WELL, WHETHER SHE RECEIVED TENURE OR NOT, AND THAT WAS THE RIGHT DECISION FOR HER. IN FACT, SHE HAD RECEIVED TENURE WITH NO TROUBLE AND WAS WELL LIKED AND RESPECTED.¹ NG'S EXAMPLE WAS

The ~~rest~~ other ^{crucial} point is that of research about out black lesbians. Being out is essential
my work is

SET BEFORE ME AT A CRUCIAL TIME WHEN I WAS QUESTIONING WHETHER I COULD PURSUE A GRADUATE DEGREE AND A PLACE WITHIN ACADEMIA, BEING WHO I AM. CLEARLY, THE POLITICS OF LIBERATION ARE OFTEN AT ODDS WITH THE POLITICS OF THE ACADEMY, AND I NEEDED TO DISCERN AND ADDRESS THE DIFFERENCE, AS NG HAD DONE AND AS EACH OF US MUST DO, SHAPING OUR OWN VISIONS FOR OURSELVES.

to that research. Being out allows us to pursue that research without equivocation,

IF WE ACCEPT W.E.B. DU BOIS'S CONCEPT OF THE "TWO-NESS" OF BLACK FOLKS' VISION, WE MUST THEN ACCEPT THAT BLACK WOMEN BRING A "THREE-NESS" OF VISION TO ALL SOCIETAL RELATIONS. HOW, THEN, CAN BLACK WOMEN WHO ACCEPT THIS CONCEPT NOT ACKNOWLEDGE THAT BLACK LESBIANS CARRY A "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.

not only about lesbians but about f's studies

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 ONE, 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. SITLL, AS AUDRE LORDE ONCE SAID, DIFFICULT THOUGH IT IS TO BE OUT, LIVING IN THE CLOSET IS EVEN HARDER.

within our discipline and across the curriculum, which is the material a necessity if we are going to succeed with our mission. And if we are to succeed, we

need to find ways to re-locate ~~black~~ lesbians within ~~the~~ f's studies, that is, ^{vigorously} find every way possible to →

see that lesbian ^{material} ~~content~~ is threaded
throughout the semester within phi's studies
courses - and of course ~~any other~~ in
whatever courses we teach in ~~in~~ any
discipline. And at the same time work
diligently to bring into women's studies
lesbian ^{feminists} of color - and ~~let~~ let me say -
lesbians of color who understand

NOW, I'M AWARE THAT CLAIMING AN IDENTITY, OR EVEN SEVERAL IDENTITIES IS CONSIDERED PASSE, RETRO AND IN ALL WAYS POLITICALLY INCORRECT. BUT I REALLY DON'T CARE. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE IS NOT NEW TO BLACK PEOPLE. WE HAVE KNOWN THAT ALL OUR LIVES AND FOR A FEW CENTURIES BEFORE WHITE PEOPLE BEGAN ANNOUNCING TO US THAT THIS WAS SO. NEVERTHELESS, I WAS BROUGHT UP LIKE MOST BLACK PEOPLE I KNEW TO UNDERSTAND ALL ABOUT THAT CONSTRUCTION AND YET TO DECIDE FOR OURSELVES HOW WE WOULD IDENTIFY OURSELVES REGARDLESS OF THOSE WITH THE POWER TO CONSTRUCT. AT THE SAME TIME, HOWEVER, WE WERE ALSO TRAINED NOT TO DELUDE OURSELVES THAT NAMING ALONE WOULD PROTECT US.

SO I CONTINUE TO CALL MYSELF DISTINCTLY A LESBIAN, JUST AS I CALL MYSELF A WOMAN AND A BLACK WOMAN AT THAT, NOT AN AFRICAN AMERICAN. THAT IS MY CONSCIOUS, INFORMED CHOICE. I'LL LET OTHERS DEBATE WHETHER THE CATEGORIES I CLAIM EXIST AT ALL BECAUSE I REFUSE TO AVOID ADDRESSING THE REALITY OF MY CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE MATERIAL WORLD BY DECIDING THAT SINCE IDENTITIES ARE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED, I DO NOT NEED TO CLAIM AND ADDRESS THEM IN RELATION TO MYSELF--FOR, ONLY BY FACING REALITY OF OUR CIRCUMSTANCES CAN WE WORK TO CHANGE THEM. CONSIDER AUDRE LORDE'S REMARK TO MARY DALY, QUOTE:

WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF WOMEN, RACISM IS A REALITY FORCE IN MY LIFE AS IT IS NOT IN YOURS. THE WHITE WOMEN WITH HOODS ON IN OHIO HANDING OUT KKK LITERATURE ON THE STREET MAY NOT LIKE WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY, BUT THEY WILL SHOOT ME ON SIGHT. (IF YOU AND I WERE TO WALK INTO A CLASSROOM OF WOMEN IN DISMAL GULCH, ALABAMA, WHERE THE ONLY THING THEY KNEW ABOUT EACH OF US WAS THAT WE WERE BOTH LESBIAN/RADICAL/FEMINIST, YOU WOULD SEE EXACTLY WHAT I MEAN.)

LORRAINE HANSBERRY SPEAKS THE SAME CONCEPT THROUGH THE MOUTH OF TSEMBE, A CHARACTER IN HER PLAY, *LES BLANCS*. TSEMBE SAYS:

I AM NOT PLAYING GAMES. I AM SIMPLY SAYING THAT A DEVICE IS
 A DEVICE, BUT THAT IT ALSO HAS CONSEQUENCES: ONCE INVENTED IT TAKES ON A LIFE, A REALITY OF ITS OWN. SO, IN ONE CENTURY, MEN INVOKE THE DEVICE OF RELIGION TO CLOAK THEIR CONQUESTS, IN ANOTHER, RACE. NOW, IN BOTH CASES YOU AND I MAY
 RECOGNIZE
 THE FRAUDULENCE OF THE DEVICE, BUT THE FACT REMAINS THAT
 A
 MAN WHO HAS A SWORD RUN THROUGH HIM BECAUSE HE REFUSES TO BECOME A MOSLEM OR A CHRISTIAN--OR WHO IS SHOT IN ZATEMBE OR MISSISSIPPI BECAUSE HE IS BLACK--IS SUFFERING THE UTTER REALITY OF THE DEVICE. AND IT IS POINTLESS TO PRETEND THAT IT DOESN'T EXIST--MERELY BECAUSE IT IS A LIE!

SO, WHY SHOULD WE ESSENTIALIST OUT BLACK LESBIANS EXPECT SUPPORT FROM BLACK WOMEN IN THE ACADEMY? BECAUSE EVERY BLACK WOMAN IN THE ACADEMY, WHETHER SHE IS A HETEROSEXUAL, A CLOSETED LESBIAN, OR SOMEWHERE ON THE CONTINUUM BETWEEN (RICH, 1980), BENEFITS FROM LESBIAN VISIBILITY. OUR SCHOLARSHIP AND PEDAGOGY, OUR PARTICIPATION IN LESBIAN & GAY STUDIES, OUR RADICAL RESEARCH, THE CHANCES WE TAKE ALLOW US TO BE SEEN AS THE "FRINGE FOLKS." BLACK LESBIANS, BY EXPANDING THE EDGES OF EXPECTATIONS IN THE ACADEMY (AS ON THE OUTSIDE) MAKE MORE ROOM FOR ALL OF US.

AND NOW PART II

WHEN I WROTE THE PRECEDING WORDS, I WAS JUST FINISHING UP MY COURSE WORK AND BEGINNING THE PROSPECTUS. AHEAD OF ME WAS A DISSERTATION FELLOWSHIP AT AN ALL WHITE INSTITUTION, WHERE I WAS TREATED WITH JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF ATTENTION AND

RESPECTFUL DISTANCE, INCLUDING THE RIGHT PROPORTION OF OFFERS OF ASSISTANCE, REQUESTS TO SHARE MY RESEARCH AND INVITATIONS TO SOCIALIZE. AHEAD OF ME BACK HOME WAS ANOTHER YEAR OF WRITING THE DISSERTATION WHILE I APPLIED FOR POSITIONS; AHEAD OF ME WAS THE OFFER TO TEACH AT CAL STATE UNIVERSITY AT LONG BEACH, WHICH I ACCEPTED AND WHERE I HAVE JUST COMPLETED MY FIRST YEAR IN MY DREAM JOB, A JOINT APPOINTMENT IN WOMEN'S STUDIES AND ENGLISH AND WHERE I HAVE BEEN TREATED WITH UTMOST RESPECT BY ALL MY WHITE COLLEAGUES IN BOTH DEPARTMENTS.

AND DO YOU WONDER ABOUT MY EXPERIENCE IN DEALING WITH MY BLACK COLLEAGUES? THEY ARE NOT IN MY DEPARTMENT, SO I AM FORTUNATE THAT THEY HAVE NO POWER OVER ME. BUT, UNFORTUNATELY, MY EXPERIENCES HAVE BEEN ALL THAT I HAD ANTICIPATED: POLITE DISTANCE, WHISPERS TO ONE ANOTHER ABOUT THE INAPPROPRIATENESS OF MY BEING OUT TO MY STUDENTS AND WARNINGS TO STUDENTS TO STAY AWAY FROM MY CLASSES. WARNINGS WHICH SEEM TO HAVE NO EFFECT, SINCE THE STUDENTS, MALES AMONG THEM, ARDENTLY RECOMMEND ME TO ONE ANOTHER AND KEEP MY CLASSES FULL.

SO I DON'T HAVE SUPPORT ON MY CAMPUS FROM BLACK MEN. AND VIRTUALLY NONE FROM BLACK WOMEN, WHETHER THEY ARE HETEROSEXUAL OR HIDDEN LESBIANS. BUT I HAVE SUPPORT FROM PEOPLE WHO THINK THE SAME WAY I DO. WHITE, ASIAN AND CHICANA LESBIAN AND HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN; WHITE GAY AND HETEROSEXUAL MEN; AND STUDENTS OF EVERY PERSUASION. IF ANOTHER BLACK WOMAN FACULTY OR STAFF MEMBER DECIDES TO BE SUPPORTIVE, I'LL WELCOME IT. MEANWHILE, I MOVE FORWARD, FILLED WITH THE JOY OF MY WORK, RECEIVING SUPPORT FROM MY DEPARTMENT, MY COLLEGE AND MY UNIVERSITY FOR RESEARCH ON OUT BLACK LESBIANS. AND EVERY DAY I AM ASSURED, IF BY NOTHING ELSE THAN THE REACTIONS OF MY STUDENTS, THAT I AM IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME, DOING THE RIGHT THING.

AND I KEEP BEFORE ME THE ANSWER THAT AUDRE LORDE GAVE WHEN SHE WAS ASKED WHY SHE HAD TO CONSTANTLY ANNOUNCE THAT SHE WAS A BLACK LESBIAN, I HAVE TO

