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

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## PANEL: The Promise and Limitations of inclusion in Women's Studies for Women of Color.

### One Step Toward Inclusion

Thinking about the inclusion of women of color faculty in women's studies, which is the angle from which I approach the discussion, it seems to me that the promise and the limitations often turn out to be one and the same. Within Women's Studies Departments and Programs, we are often the first of our color to be hired. Our very presence leads to huge expectations on the part of the department or program, the institution, and the students--not to speak of the expectations we place on ourselves as well.

When a women's studies program hires a woman of color, expectations arise on the part of both the faculty member and the program or department that hired her. For the new faculty, however, desiring and expecting to teach courses that include or emphasize the contributions of women of color and being automatically assigned to teach and/or design *only* those courses constitute two different means of achieving what might be seen initially as the same goal, but may in the long run prove limiting. I am here putting forth the notion that by hiring women of color, Women's Studies Departments and Programs have taken only the first step towards inclusion.

First, let's acknowledge that there are many advantages to bringing on women of color faculty, some of which are immediately apparent. We attract students of color into courses that have usually been traditionally white. And we offer a substantially different and more complex viewpoint when we teach within traditionally white courses

All right. But how are we utilized? There is a clear difference between being asked to teach a course called Black Women in America, one of my favorite courses, where I am free to revel in the contributions to feminism made by both first and second wave Black feminists; and being asked to teach a Women and Literature course, which virtually belongs to another faculty member, a white woman

jointly appointed in Women's Studies and English, as I am, and which I teach when she has a release or is on sabbatical. In the latter case, I teach Virginia Woolfe, Edith Wharton, Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson, and more of the white woman canon, as she does, but I darken up the syllabus considerably by adding Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and others. I have also made it my business to change the complexion of an introductory women's studies class, which has also generally been taught from a 90% white perspective.

But that's the easy part, taking on the task of darkening up what is already there. Or resurrecting Black women in America, which had not been taught for 8 years before I came on in 1996 because the Black English professor who originally designed it had retired 8 years before I arrived. What is much harder is recognizing that if I'm not careful, I might well end up being ghettoized; and this is a subtle point because, of course, had I not been given courses to teach that included people of color I would be battling to do just that.

#### AN EXAMPLE. TELL THE TONI MORRISON SEMINAR STORY.

Now, I'm aware that had I not arrived in 1996, Morrison would not now be in the curriculum in 1998 as an ongoing legitimate course within the Major American Writers listing, a course which anyone can teach, whether I'm at CSULB or not. By the same token, my action has added to the number of courses I teach that have people of color at the center. In the English department I now teach American Ethnic writers, which I have done for 3 semesters running; Women and Literature, which I will teach for the fourth time next semester, and Toni Morrison, which I can do only occasionally, having taught it for the first time last fall and will do again next spring. In the Women's Studies program, along with Black Women in America, I teach U.S. Women of Color, a course designed by three of us including Eve Oishi, the other woman of color hired along with me in 1996, and an introductory course, Women in Contemporary Society, which was considerably whiter before Eve and I arrived.

I have begun articulating my need to teach at least one feminist theory course that is constituted as a theory course; meaning that I routinely teach theory within both the Black Women in America course and the U.S. Women of Color course. However, I do not teach any upper level women's studies theory courses, where women's studies majors, who are generally white, get theory that is overwhelmingly concerned with white women's theories. This is, of course, not a deliberate exclusion of women of color. It is only natural that faculty generally teach what we are comfortable with, what we know best, and if white women have not studied closely the work of women of color theorists, the little that they include is usually brief and superficial at best. White women's studies faculty have mostly--not always, of course, but mostly-- learned from white women's studies faculty who themselves have not had a great deal of theory by feminists of color. On the other hand, I know that women of color who have obtained graduate degrees in women's studies cannot avoid knowing the work of white theorists.

Personally, as a community learner, I cut my teeth on Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt, and many other white theorists before discovering Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith and Merle Woo. Last year when I was submitting justifications for the Toni Morrison course, there was a juncture at which I had to point out to the man who had the task--a reluctant task, I might add--of getting my course through committees, that Morrison had already published more work than F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was in the list of major writers twice, once by himself and once with Hemingway. You see, because we as women of color have to read the white men, just as white women do, if we are to be considered educated, I knew his work. As an informed reader, I had already read his limited oeuvre many long years ago. But, all this is only to say that women of color faculty in women's studies have always needed to know the work of white women in order to be informed. That's a given. But the same is not true the other way around and never has been.

My partner and I are a perfect example of this phenomenon. Earlier this week in New York we attended 2 events, one on Monday, one on Tuesday. On Monday, we attended the Lesbian and Gay film festival to see a film by 2 Jewish Lesbians. Everything the filmmakers had to say about the situation in Israel, the history of the conflict, etc. I

knew about and in fact had been knowing about for years. On Tuesday, we attended an event in honor of Paul Robeson's 100th birthday. Beyond knowing generally about Paul Robeson as an important Black artist and dissident, my partner knew none of the details the speakers were discussing; but I had grown up knowing that history as well as the history of Israel. She, raised as a middle class Jewish girl, had no need to know the history I grew up knowing.

As young black children, we were educated in school by white people and about white people, but within our communities, within our families, churches, and community centers, we learned our own history, the stories of our heroes, our own songs, even our own Black national anthem. So we grew up knowing that we possessed a broader and more complex knowledge. We knew about Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, about Frederick Douglass and Denmark Vesey and the white revolutionary abolitionist John Brown, about Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson and Harriet Tubman and Mary McLeod Bethune. So, ultimately, what I am saying here is that if when we are hired, we are expected to teach only women of color courses, those who hire us and control what we can teach are depriving all students, including white students, of our broad knowledge and at the same time sending the message to all students that our knowledge is limited by the color of our skin. If this continues, upper level white students of women's studies--the very ones who will likely end up teaching women's studies--receive a skewed notion about what we can offer them.

My effort here today is all to say that this is a complex situation and that all of us in women's studies can work together to sort it out. But first we need to acknowledge some simple realities.

**1. STUDENTS AND FACULTY NEED TO KNOW THAT WOMEN OF COLOR HAVE GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF ALL WOMEN'S STUDIES AREAS**

**STUDENTS AND FACULTY NEED TO KNOW THAT WOMEN OF COLOR ARE THEORISTS ALSO**

## STUDENTS AND FACULTY NEED TO KNOW THAT WOMEN OF COLOR KNOW WOMEN'S HISTORY ALSO

I do not believe I am the only woman in the women's studies program who can teach Black Women in America, just as I do not believe that only white women can teach theory about feminism. My presence at CSULB has introduced several Black women into the women's studies program as majors and minors; however, it is just possible that if some dedicated white faculty member had resurrected the Black Women in America course before I arrived, she might have inspired those same Black women students to learn more about Black feminism and major in women's studies; we'll only know when we begin crossing the lines more seriously and with more determination than we are currently doing.