2000 National Women's Studies Association Talk: “Challenges: Women of Color within Women’s Studies and LesbiGayTrans Studies” by Angela Bowen

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CHALLENGES: WOMEN OF COLOR WITHIN WOMEN'S STUDIES 
AND LESBIGAYTRANS STUDIES

THIS PAPER ADDRESSES TWO DIFFERENT CHALLENGES:
WOMEN OF COLOR WITHIN WOMEN’S STUDIES AND THEIR
ABSENCE IN LESBIAN,GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
STUDIES, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS QUEER STUDIES.

WHEN A WOMEN’S STUDIES DEPARTMENT HIRES WOMEN OF
COLOR FACULTY, THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT AND
THE NEW FACULTY MAY MESH OR THEY MAY BE AT ODDS. WOMEN
OF COLOR EXPECT TO PRESENT A DIVERSE PEDAGOGY WHILE AT
THE SAME TIME OFFERING A SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLEX VIEWPOINT
WHEN TEACHING WHAT MIGHT OTHERWISE BE CONSIDERED
TRADITIONALLY WHITE COURSES. THE QUESTION HERE IS DO WE
GET TO TEACH COURSES THAT ARE CONSIDERED THE PROPERTY
OF WHITE FACULTY? ON THE OTHER HAND, THE MOST
IMPORTANT QUESTION FOR LGBT OR "QUEER STUDIES"
DEPARTMENTS MAY WELL BE WHERE ARE THE LESBIANS OF COLOR?

WITHIN WOMEN’S STUDIES, SOME ADVANTAGES OF HIRING
WOMEN OF COLOR FACULTY ARE IMMEDIATELY APPARENT. WE
ATTRACT STUDENTS OF COLOR INTO COURSES THAT HAVE
USUALLY BEEN TRADITIONALLY WHITE. AND WE OFFER ALL
STUDENTS DIFFERENT AND MORE COMPLEX VIEWPOINTS WHEN
WE TEACH WITHIN WHAT ARE USUALLY CONSIDERED
TRADITIONALLY WHITE COURSES. BUT, ONCE HIRED, HOW ARE WE
UTILIZED? THERE IS A CLEAR DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING ASKED
TO TEACH COURSES ON WOMEN OF COLOR AND BEING EXPECTED
TO TEACH ONLY THOSE COURSES.

WITHIN LGBT STUDIES A DIFFERENT PROBLEM ARISES. DO WE
EXIST THERE? ARE WE DESIRED, SOUGHT OUT, OR EVEN
CONSIDERED FOR TENURE TRACK POSITIONS? HOW ARE WE
PERCEIVED? IF WE ARE HIRED, WILL WE COME DRAGGING ALONG
WITH US AN EXPECTATION THAT PEOPLE PAY ATTENTION TO
THOSE BORING OLD MATTERS OF RACE/GENDER/CLASS? SIGH!! !!
BECAUSE OUR VIEWS ARE REFRACED THROUGH THOSE LENSES
AND OUR LESBIANISM COMES WRAPPED IN FEMINISM, ARE WE
SEEN AS IDENTITY-POLITICS MAVENS RATHER THAN LESBIAN THEORISTS?

HERE WE HAVE TWO DISTINCT DEPARTMENTAL NEEDS--ONE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES, THE OTHER IN LGBT OR "QUEER STUDIES"-- WHICH BOTH DEMAND THE ATTENTION OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN OUR PEDAGOGY, SCHOLARSHIP AND SERVICE. ALTHOUGH IT’S NOT STATED OVERTLY, WITHIN WOMEN’S STUDIES, WHITE WOMEN ARE CONSIDERED THE LEGITIMATE THEORISTS WHILE WE ARE SEEN AS ADDING COLOR IN EXPERIENTIAL MATTERS RELATED TO WOMEN OF COLOR. WITHIN "QUEER STUDIES," NOT ONLY ARE WHITE MEN AND WOMEN THE ACCEPTED THEORISTS BUT THE LARGER, AND FOR ME MORE IMMEDIATE, PROBLEM IS FINDING LESBIANS OF COLOR WITHIN THOSE DEPARTMENTS AT ALL.

IS IDENTITY THE ONE AND ONLY THING THAT WOMEN OF COLOR FACULTY HAVE TO OFFER?!! WITHIN WOMEN’S STUDIES WE ARE TOO OFTEN TREATED AS “ONE GIANT VAT OF HOMOGENIZED CHOCOLATE MILK,” AS AUDRE LORDE SAID. IF CARE IS TAKEN TO SORT OUT THE POTENTIAL FACULTY MEMBER’S SCHOLARLY AND PEDAGOGICAL AGENDA, HER EXPECTATIONS AND AREAS OF EXPERTISE, AS WELL AS THE NEEDS OF THE HIRING DEPARTMENT, A SMOOTH FIT WILL BECOME MORE POSSIBLE.

IT PAYS TO REMEMBER THAT WE ALL HAVE MUCH TO SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER. IF THIS APPOINTMENT IS FIRST ONE FOR A PARTICULAR WOMAN OF COLOR WITHIN ACADEMIA, SHE OBVIOUSLY HAS MUCH TO LEARN; AND AT THE SAME TIME, SHE ALSO HAS MUCH TO SHARE--IF SHE IS ALLOWED TO DO SO WITHOUT AN ASSUMPTION THAT ALL SHE KNOWS IS HOW TO BE BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, OR ANY COMBINATION THEREOF; THAT SHE HAS NO RESEARCH AGENDA, AND IF SHE DOES, YOU PRETTY MUCH KNOW WHAT IT MUST BE. IF YOU ASKED, YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED. WE NEED TO KEEP IN MIND THAT WOMEN OF COLOR HAVE HAD TO LEARN WHAT WHITE WOMEN’S STUDIES PRACTITIONERS KNOW IN ORDER TO DO GRADUATE WORK IN WOMEN’S STUDIES WHILE, UNFORTUNATELY, TOO OFTEN, WHITE WOMEN HAVE NOT HAD TO DO THE SAME IN RELATION TO THE
WORK OF WOMEN OF COLOR. BUT THESE WHITE WOMEN MIGHT ACTUALLY NEED AND WANT TO, EVEN IF THEY HAVE ALREADY BEEN TEACHING FOR YEARS.

IF WOMEN OF COLOR CAN LEARN AND TEACH THEORISTS SUCH AS ADRIENNE RICH, ANDREA DWORKIN, JUDITH BUTLER KATE MILLET, SHULAMITH FIRESTONE, CATHERINE MCKINNON, BETTY FRIEDAN AND DIANA FUSS, WHY DO THE MAJORITY OF WHITE WOMEN’S STUDIES PRACTITIONERS KNOW ONLY AUDRE LORDE, PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, BELL HOOKS AND ANGELA DAVIS? WHEN WE SEE LISTS OF FEMINIST THEORISTS, WHY DO WE SEE ON THAT LIST MAYA ANGELOU RATHER THAN MICHELE WALLACE, AND TONI MORRISON RATHER THAN BARBARA SMITH OR BARBARA CHRISTIAN?

WHITE WOMEN FACULTY HAVE THE ABILITY, IF THEY SO DESIRE, TO RESEARCH, STUDY, AND TEACH THE WORK OF WOMEN OF COLOR, LEAVING ROOM FOR WOMEN OF COLOR FACULTY TO STEP OUTSIDE OF THE BOXES WE ARE LOCKED INTO WHEN WE SEE NO ATTENTION BEING PAID TO SOME OF THE THEORISTS OF COLOR WHO NEED TO BE TAUGHT. WHEN WE STEP INTO THE VOID TO FILL IN THE HUGE GAPS THAT WE RECOGNIZE, WE ARE THEN LABELED AS IDENTITY HAWKS.

IS ANY ONE OF US UNAWARE OF THE DANGERS OF CLINGING TO IDENTITY AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR COMPREHENSIVE KNOWLEDGE? ANY DEPARTMENT THAT WOULD UTILIZE SUCH SHORT-CUT HIRING PRACTICES WOULD BE SHORT-CHANGING THE STUDENTS AND DEPARTMENTS, AND ULTIMATELY WOULD BE UNDERMINING THE FAITH AND CONFIDENCE WHICH MUST BE INVESTED IN THE VERY WOMEN OF COLOR BEING HIRED TO ASSURE DEPTH, RANGE AND CONSISTENCY IN OUR WOMEN’S STUDIES FACULTY. IF THAT IS BEING PERPETRATED, I DON’T KNOW WHERE. YET THESE ARE THE MUMBLINGS WE HEAR WHENEVER A WOMAN OF COLOR IS HIRED.

STILL, THIS IDENTITY BUSINESS IS A THORNY BUSH YOU’VE GOT TO MAKE YOUR WAY THROUGH CAREFULLY. BECAUSE WOMEN OF COLOR ARE HIRED WITH THE EXPECTATION OF POSSESSING
KNOWLEDGE SPECIFIC TO OUR IDENTITIES, WE ARE NOT NECESSARILY EXPECTED TO HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF ANYTHING ELSE, WHICH OF COURSE MAKES NO SENSE IF WE THINK ABOUT IT; AFTER ALL WHAT WHITE WOMEN MUST STUDY ABOUT WOMEN IS WHAT Women of Color MUST ALSO LEARN. IF WE HAVE EMERGED FROM WOMEN’S STUDIES COURSES, WE KNOW WHAT WHITE WOMEN KNOW IN ADDITION TO, NOT INSTEAD OF, WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT FEMINISTS OF COLOR AND WOMEN OF COLOR WHO ARE NOT FEMINISTS.

(THIS is to say that) IN THE (VERY )SAME WAY THAT WE KNOW WHAT EVERYONE ELSE KNOWS ABOUT HISTORY IN ADDITION TO WHAT WE HAVE HAD TO GATHER BY MEANS OF EXTRAORDINARY EFFORTS IN ORDER TO LEARN THE HISTORY OF PEOPLE OF COLOR.

YET, INSTEAD OF OUR BEING EAGERLY ASSIGNED THEORY CLASSES WITH THE EXPECTATION THAT WE MIGHT BRING A MORE COMPLEX PERSPECTIVE, OR AT LEAST A DIFFERENT ONE, TO MATERIAL, WE ARE AUTOMATICALLY EXPECTED TO TEACH ALL THE WOMEN OF COLOR CLASSES, LEAVING THEORY TO WHITE WOMEN, WITH THE FOREGONE CONCLUSION THAT THIS IS THEIR DOMAIN. NOT ONLY HAVE I REJECTED THAT NOTION BUT I HAVE BEEN PERSISTENTLY REQUESTING SINCE MY ARRIVAL WITHIN ACADEMIA (FOUR YEARS AGO) THAT I TEACH A THEORY CLASS. IT TOOK ME 3 YEARS BEFORE I WAS ASSIGNED A THEORY CLASS AND THE FOLLOWING SEMESTER I RECEIVED ANOTHER; NEXT SEMESTER 2 OF MY 3 (COURSES) WILL BE THEORY. AT THE SAME TIME, I HAVE DESIGNED MY WOMEN OF COLOR SYLLABI TO INCLUDE ABOUT ONE-THIRD THEORETICAL ESSAYS.

OF COURSE, AS I DIVERSIFY MY PEDAGOGY, I FEEL THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ASSIST WHITE WOMEN AND OTHER WOMEN OF COLOR WHO WILL TEACH THOSE CLASSES. EVEN AS I SHARE MY U.S. WOMEN OF COLOR SYLLABI, I EXAMINE THE SYLLABI OF THE WOMEN WHO HAVE TAUGHT THE THEORY CLASSES BEFORE ME. WE HAVE MET WITH ONE ANOTHER, RECOMMENDING BOOKS, DISCUSSING APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES, TAKING WHAT WE NEED, SOMETIMES GOING IN THE SAME DIRECTION AND SOMETIMES NOT. IT’S NOT ALWAYS EASY BUT IT’S WORKING.
THE TENDENCY TO WANT A WOMAN OF COLOR TEACHING A WOMAN OF COLOR CLASS IS UNDERSTANDABLE—AS IS THE DESIRE OF THE STUDENTS, WHICH NATURALLY RUNS IN THAT DIRECTION. HOWEVER, GIVEN THE REALITIES OF THE NUMBER OF WOMEN OF COLOR PH.D.S IN WOMEN’S STUDIES AND REALATED FIELDS, BOTH ALTERNATIVES ARE DESIRABLE: BY THAT I MEAN, HAVING WOMEN OF COLOR WHEN POSSIBLE (WITHOUT, OF COURSE, GHETTOIZING US IN ONLY WOMEN OF COLOR COURSES); AND MAKING SURE THAT THOSE WHITE WOMEN WITH THE DESIRE TO DO SO TAKE ON TEACHING THOSE CLASSES AND CAREFULLY AND RESPECTFULLY LEARN TO DO IT. SOME ALREADY HAVE THE BACKGROUND; SOMETIMES THE ONLY THING KEEPING THEM FROM DOING SO IS THE LIMITED THINKING WHICH SAYS THAT ONLY A WOMAN OF COLOR SHOULD OCCUPY THAT PLACE. BUT IF THIS CONTINUES TO BE THE CASE, WHAT HAPPENS TO THE LEGIONS OF STUDENTS WHO PASS THROUGH DEPARTMENTS WHERE THERE ARE NO WOMEN OF COLOR? SHOULD THEY NEVER BE EXPOSED TO THAT WORK?

I WOULD NEVER PRESUME TO DENY WHITE WOMEN’S PERCEPTION THAT STUDENTS OF COLOR ARRIVE IN CLASS EXPECTING TO SEE A WOMAN OF COLOR STANDING BEFORE THEM AND ARE DISAPPOINTED WHEN THAT IS NOT THE CASE. I RELATE TO THAT COMPLETELY BECAUSE FOR MY FIRST FEW YEARS AT CSULB, OFTEN ENGLISH STUDENTS WOULD ARRIVE AND BE SHOCKED AT MY STANDING BEFORE THEM AS THEIR UPPER LEVEL ENGLISH PROFESSOR. BUT DISAPPOINTMENT AND REJECTION ARE 2 DIFFERENT THINGS. STUDENTS ARE REALISTIC; THEY UNDERSTAND THE SCARCITY OF WOMEN OF COLOR FACULTY WITHIN ACADEMIA. AND ALTHOUGH THEY NEED TO SEE MORE OF US STANDING BEFORE THEM, WHAT THEY NEED ALSO IS ACCESS TO THE MATERIAL BY WOMEN OF COLOR THAT THEY ALL NEED TO LEARN ABOUT. IF THE MESSENGER ARRIVES IN WHITE SKIN INSTEAD OF BROWN, BLACK OR YELLOW, THEY WILL ADJUST TO IT IF THE ISSUE IS ADDRESSED CANDIDLY FROM THE BEGINNING. FURTHERMORE, COMPETENCE COUNTS WITH THEM. HANDLE THE MATERIAL AND THE CLASS WELL AND YOU’VE GOT THEM.
ON OUR CAMPUS: EXAMPLE OF PAMELA
END WITH THE LETTER WRITTEN BY STUDENTS AT THE END OF
THIS SEMESTER.

NO ONE IS SUGGESTING THAT EVERY EFFORT SHOULD NOT BE
CONSISTENTLY MADE TO SEARCH OUT, HIRE, NURTURE AND
SUPPORT WOMEN OF COLOR FACULTY. BUT THE LONG-HELD
NOTION THAT ONLY WOMEN OF COLOR CAN LEGITIMATELY TEACH
WOMEN OF COLOR STUDENTS IS PATENTLY ABSURD. AS AUDRE
LORDE AND TONI MORRISON, AMONG MANY OTHERS, HAVE LONG
MADE CLEAR, THIS IS NOT INFORMATION THAT CANNOT BE
STUDIED AND TAUGHT; ALL ONE MUST DO IS TAKE IT SERIOUSLY
ENOUGH TO IMMERSE ONESELF IN IT AND CONVEY IT WITH
RESPECT, VIGOR, INTELLIGENCE AND COMMITMENT TO THE
STUDENTS, WHETHER WOMEN OR MEN, WHETHER STUDENTS OF
COLR OR OTHERWISE, ALL OF THEM NEED DESPERATELY TO LEARN
AND APPLY IT. WHO HAS EVER SUGGESTED THAT WOMEN SHOULD
NOT BE TEACHING WHITE MEN’S WORK? SHALL WE JUST NOT
EVEN GO THERE?

LET ME RETURN IN THE TIME I HAVE REMAININE TO THE ISSUE
OF LESBIANS OF COLOR WITHIN LGBT STUDIES—OR QUEERS
STUDIES, AS SOME CALL IT. LESBIANS, PARTICULARLY LESBIAN
FEMINISTS OF COLOR, ARE BEING SUBSUMED UNDER THE
BLANKET OF QUEERNESS. THE QUICK ADOPTION OF THE QUEER
APPELATION REMINDS ME OF THE SWIFTNESS WITH WHICH THE
DESIGNATION “AFRICAN-AMERICAN” AROSE AND OVERCAME THE
CENTURIES OF STRUGGLE IT TOOK TO PROUDLY CLAIM THE TERM
BLACK—A STRUGGLE WHICH CAME TO FRUITION ONLY IN THE
1960S. THEN ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO I REMEMBER READING A
STATEMENT THAT JESSE JACKSON MADE TO A JOURNALIST THAT
BLACKS NEEDED TO BE CALLED AFRICAN-AMERICAN BECAUSE
IRISH ARE (REFERRED TO WITH A) CAPITAL I (AS IN) IRISH
AMERICAN, ITALIAN AMERICAN, JEWS ARE CAPITAL J, JEWISH AMERICAN, ETC. AND THAT WE BLACKS
DESERVED THE SAME RESPECT. I TOOK THE POINT BUT
DISAGreed, THINKING THAT MORE DISCUSSION AMONG BLACK
PEOPLE NEEDED TO OCCUR AND WOULD BEFORE SUCH CHANGES Began. I FELT THAT BY USING THE TERM AFRICAN-AMERICAN, WE WOULD BE PUTTING SPACE BETWEEN OURSELVES AND OTHER BLACK FOLKS HERE AND EVERYWHERE WHO WERE OPPRESSED NOT BECAUSE OF BEING AFRICAN AMERICAN OR AFRICAN BRAZILIAN, ETC. BUT BECAUSE OF BLACKNESS. SKIN COLOR WAS EXACTLY THE ISSUE. AND AROUND THE WORLD, OPPRESSED PEOPLE OF COLOR WHO MODELED THEIR STRUGGLES AGAINST IMPERIALISM, COLONIALISM AND RACISM ON OUR CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN THE U.S, AND CALL(ed) THEMSELVES BLACK WHETHER THEY ARE MAORI OR ABORIGINE OR BRITISH OR AFRICAN OR INDIAN, USING BLACK AS A PARTICULAR POLITICAL CONNECTIVE, WOULD NO LONGER HAVE THAT PARTICULAR POINT OF SOLIDARITY WITH US. MY MOST RADICAL LESBIAN TRANSNATIONAL SISTER-TRAVELER IS IN FACT TRINIDADIAN, NOT AFRICAN-AMERICAN ALTHOUGH SHE HAS LIVED IN THE U.S. FOR OVER 20 YEARS. SO BEING A BLACK AMERICAN (CAPITAL B) WAS WHAT MADE THE MOST SENSE TO ME AND IS WHAT I CONTINUE TO CALL MYSELF. I NEVER SUSPECTED THAT JACKSON’S SUGGESTION WOULD FLY ONCE WE HAD THE DISCUSSION. WELL, OF COURSE, SILLY ME. JACKSON SPOKE AND WITHIN DAYS WE BEGAN SEEING AFRICAN AMERICAN IN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES AS OUR DESIGNATION. BLACK PEOPLE BEGAN USING IT UNQUESTIONINGLY AND IT SEEMED WITHIN 2 YEARS IT WAS OVER.

THE JOURNEY OF THE LABEL QUEER WAS NOT COMPLETED QUITE SO SWIFTLY BUT THE BATTLE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN WON WITHOUT VERY MUCH STRUGGLE; STILL, JUST AS THERE ARE SOME HOLDOUTS FROM THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CAMP, SOME OF US WILL NEED MORE REASON TO BELIEVE THAT QUEER OFFERS US ANYTHING MORE DESIRABLE THAN A SHORTER NAME (I’VE HEARD THAT EXPLANATION MORE THAN A FEW TIMES). NOW, OF COURSE, WE HAVE ALL-EMBRACING QUEerness; WE HAVE HOMogenized QUEerness WITH or WITHOUT FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS. BUT BECAUSE WE BECOME “QUEER,” DOES OUR ETHNICITY DISAPPEAR? BECAUSE WE ARE QUEER, DO WE NOT NEED GENDER POLITICS? BECAUSE WE ARE QUEER, DOES PATRIARCHY DISAPPEAR? BECAUSE WE ARE ALL AT ONE WITH OUR
QUEERNESS, DO MALES SHARE POWER WILLINGLY? BECAUSE WE ARE QUEER ARE WE NO LONGER WOMEN?

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN MANKIND MEANT HUMANKIND; THEN WITH BLACKNESS WE HAD GLORIFIED BLACK MANHOOD; AND BLACK WOMEN—THOSE WHO EXISTED AT ALL IN BLACK MEN’S EYES—EXISTED ONLY IN THE ROLE OF THE BLACK MatriARCH, STRONG MOTHER OF US ALL, OR AS THE NEW BLACK AFRICAN QUEEN ON HER ALREADY-TOPPLING PEDESTAL; THEN CAME GAY LIBERATION AND WOMEN WERE SUBSUMED UNDER THE LABEL GAY UNTIL FEMINIST LESBIANS STEPPED FORWARD TO INSIST THAT THERE WAS A DEFINITE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LESBIANS AND GAY MEN; NOW WE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE IN SOME POSTFEMINIST ERA, SO BACKWARDS WE PEDAL SWIFTLY, ARRIVING AT—OH, WHAT A SURPRISE—THE ONE-NAME-FITS-ALL MODEL; NOW, OF COURSE, ALTHOUGH ANY ACTUAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS HAS DISAPPEARED FROM THE DISCUSSION, THE ASSUMPTION OF A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA SEEMS TO ACCOMPANY THE QUEER LABEL. BUT AMONG THE Hordes OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE ADOPTED IT, SOME OF THESE POSSESS CLEARLY RADICAL AND INCLUSIVE POLITICS WHILE OTHERS HAVE ONLY THE DECLARATION OF QUEERNESS ATTENDED BY AN IMPATIENCE IF EXPECTED TO EXPLAIN JUST WHAT THEY MEAN BY THE WORD.

TO THOSE PEOPLE TOO IMPATIENT TO EXPLAIN, THE COMMITMENT TO AN AGENDA OF ANTI-RACISM—IN THE ACTIVE SENSE OF THE WORD—IS ABSENT. AND WHAT ABOUT LESBIANS OF COLOR? AS QUEER STUDIES GROWS, AS MORE AND MORE QUEER ARTICLES AND BOOKS HIT THE SHELVES, ANTI-RACISM, LABOR AND ECONOMIC ISSUES, REPRODUCTIVE AND OTHER HEALTH ISSUES ASIDE FROM AIDS DO NOT SEEM TO COMMAND THE ATTENTION THEY USED TO. FEMINIST PRINCIPLES THAT CONCERN WOMEN OF COLOR AND ONCE CONCERNED A WIDE VARIETY OF PEOPLE OF EVERY GENDER, ETHNICITY, CLASS, AGE, AND STAGE OF ABILITY ARE BEING PUSHED TO RETREAT NOT TO THE BACK SEAT BUT BEHIND IT. WELL, WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED.

IN THE BLACK LEXICON THERE IS A SAYING. WHEN SOMEONE TELLS YOU THAT YOU HAVE TO, YOU SIMPLY HAVE TO, YOU MUST
DO THIS, THAT OR WHATEVER, THE RESPONSE IS OFTEN, “I DON’T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING BUT STAY BLACK AND DIE.” WELL, WHAT WITH MODERN CHEMICALS AND SURGERY, THE “STAY BLACK” PART IS NO LONGER ABSOLUTE. MICHAEL JACKSON PROVED THAT TO US. BUT FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF US BLACK FOLK, IT’S FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT WE WILL STAY BLACK, WHATEVER ELSE WE MAY OR MAY NOT DO. AND WE ALL DO HAVE OTHER THINGS TO DO. HOWEVER, LIVING IN OUR SKINS AS WE DO, WE CAN NEVER COMPLETELY STEP AWAY AND SIMPLY DECIDE THAT WE’RE TIRED OF DEALING WITH THIS BUSINESS OF BEING “CULLUD.”

AND NOW, AS IT HAS BECOME ACCEPTABLE TO MOVE AWAY FROM WORKING ACTIVELY TO COUNTER THE ISMS EVEN AS HATE CRIMES ARE ON THE RISE; NOW, AS ACADEMICS CHASE THE NEWEST “CUTTING EDGE” SCHOLARSHIP OF QUEERNESS WHILE SNICKERING AT ANYONE WHO BELIEVES THAT FEMINISM NEEDS TO INFORM ALL THEORY, INCLUDING QUEER THEORY, WHICH IS BUILT UPON THE INSIGHTS DEVELOPED BY FEMINIST THEORY, WHETHER ACKNOWLEDGED OR NOT, JUST AS THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT UTILIZED THE SOCIAL ACTIVISM THAT MANY WHITE FEMINISTS LEARNED WITHIN THE CIVIL RIGHTS AND LEFT MOVEMENTS; NOW, AS GENDER STUDIES, AS LGBT STUDIES, AS QUEER STUDIES DEPARTMENTS PRO-LIF-ER-ATE, LESBIANS OF COLOR MUST TAKE CARE NOT TO BE SO CONCERNED WITH BEING CALLED “ESSENTIALIST,” AND “OLD-FASHIONED” THAT WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO TURN AWAY FROM THE FEMINIST AGENDA THAT HAS STILL NEVER LIVED UP TO ITS PROMISE. WE LESBIANS OF COLOR, NO MATTER HOW MUCH WE KNOW ABOUT THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE, GENDER, CLASS AND EVERYTHING ELSE—indeed, we did not ever need academic discourse to tell us this—we who must deal with the realities of how our ethnicities circumscribe our own lives and those of our children and our students-- need to place ourselves determinedly within whatever LGBT or queer studies departments arise and hold fast to the still-unfulfilled promise of an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-ableist, anti-ageist feminist vision; or to put it in more positive terms, an inclusive, all-people movement informed by our feminism. From that perspective, women of color will
MANAGE TO PERFORM OUR PEDAGOGY, OUR RESEARCH AND OUR COMMUNITY SERVICE, WHETHER WITHIN WOMEN’S STUDIES, GENDER STUDIES, LGBT OR QUEER STUDIES WHILE ALSO HOLDING ONTO AND NURTURING OUR STUDENTS, ENCOURAGING AND TRAINING THEM TO DO THE SAME FOR ONE ANOTHER. THEY TOO WILL DECIDE HOW TO GO ABOUT STUDYING, WRITING, THEORIZING, TEACHING, ORGANIZING, AND WORKING TO KEEP BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE, ALL-PEOPLE MOVEMENT, WHATEVER THEY WANT TO CALL IT, IN AND OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA, THAT RECOGNIZES THE HUGE IMBALANCE OF POWER WITHOUT SUCCUMBING TO IT. WE WILL EXHORT THEM, RATHER THAN SPINNING THEORY WITHOUT END, WORDS WITHOUT ACTION, THAT THEY FEEL THE JOY OF REVELING IN AN ALL-PEOPLE MOVEMENT WHICH BY ITS VERY EXISTENCE DENIES THE RELENTLESS BACKLASH AGAINST FEMINISM, THE DECLARATIONS OVER THE PAST 2 DECADES THAT OUR SOCIETY HAS BEEN IN A POSTFEMINISM ERA. OUR CURRENT STUDENTS, WITH THEIR LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE, INCLUDING BECOMING WOMEN’S STUDIES PROFESSORS, KNOW THAT WOMEN’S STUDIES PROGRAMS AND ON-CAMPUS WOMEN’S CENTERS ARE GROWING, NOT SHRINKING, AND WITH THAT KNOWLEDGE, OUR STUDENTS WILL UNDERSTAND THAT THEY NEED NOT RETREAT. RATHER, THEY CAN RECOMMIT, DOING WHATEVER THEY DECIDE TO DO, NOT NECESSARILY OUR WAY, BUT THEIRS. AND LIKewise, WOMEN OF COLOR, LESBIANS OF COLOR, FEMINIST LESBIANS OF COLOR MUST DECIDE WHO AND WHAT WE WANT TO BE. JUST AS WE DEMAND THE RIGHT TO BE WHO WE WANT TO BE AND DO WHAT WE WANT TO DO WITHIN WOMEN’S STUDIES DEPARTMENTS, WE ALSO EXPECT TO FIND OUR PLACE WITHIN LGBT PROGRAMS. BUT THE PRICE OF THE TICKET MUST NOT INCLUDE BEING WIPED OUT BY ALLOWING OURSELVES TO BE THROWN TOGETHER IN A COMMON NAME WE DID NOT CHOOSE. THOSE WHO LIKE IT ARE WELCOME TO IT, ALTHOUGH I’M STILL WAITING FOR A MORE THOROUGH EXAMINATION OF THE TERM. STILL, GIVEN THE SCARCITY OF LESBIANS OF COLOR WITHIN LGBT, OR QUEER STUDIES, ACCOMMODATIONS NEED TO BE MADE FOR DIFFERENCE, INCLUDING FEMINIST LESBIANS, SOME OF WHOM WOULD EMBRACE THE TERM QUEER, AND SOME WHO WOULD NOT. SPEAKING STRICTLY FOR MYSELF, I REJECT CUDDLING TOGETHER
UNDER A QUILT OF HOMOGENIZED QUEER WITHOUT ADDRESSING THE PATCHWORK NATURE OF THE QUILT OR THE FRAGILITY OF THE WORN-OUT THREADS STITCHING IT TOGETHER.