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Audre Lorde: Influence, Sisterhood, Legacy

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.) 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 activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women's Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on her friendship and scholarship on Audre Lorde, including the historic 1990 "I Am Your Sister" conference and her scholarly publications on Lorde's poetry and political significance.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian poetry, Black lesbian feminism, archive, Black feminist archives, Black lesbian archives, queer archives, lesbian motherhood, history of women's studies, *Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians*, Nancy Hughes, I Am Your Sister conference, "Blackstudies"

As Bowen narrates in a 1993 New York Pride Guide article, Bowen attended a reading that Lorde was giving at a women's restaurant in Bridgeport, CT. Lorde walked up to her, handed her a business card and said, "If you ever need to call me, I'm right at the other end of the phone." Bowen had already discovered Lorde's work in New Haven, when she was still in a heterosexual marriage, through the publication *Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians*, a quarterly magazine published by Salsa Soul Sisters, Third World Wommin Inc. Collective from 1977-1983. As Bowen recounts in a 1989 radio interview and a 1988 radio profile that Abod produced about Lorde, Lorde's writing showed Bowen the possibility of not only living as an out Black lesbian but of using her creative voice to make a space for others to live their truths for themselves and their community. In the film *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, Bowen describes the way that Lorde's writing inspired her to leave her marriage but also to see that action as helping to build as well as join a community and a movement. Bowen describes the sense she had that Lorde was doing the work of Black lesbian feminist visibility all by herself, and she recounts that she thought, "She's got to have help. She's got to have an army." She was determined to be part of that number.

In October 1990, following the success of their conference for South African gay activist Simon Nkoli, Bowen and M. Jacqui Alexander formed a core committee to organize a conference in Boston honoring Audre Lorde called *I Am Your Sister: Forging Global Connections Across Difference*. We have included the fundraising letter for this conference that lays out its purpose and vision and is signed by the core committee of Bowen, Jacqui Alexander, Jinny Chalmers, Becky Johnson, Mauri Mollan, Stephanie Poggi, Kate Rushin, Karen Schneiderman, and Laura Zimmerman. Several members of the original core committee ended up leaving, and Abod was added to handle the recording and other technology infrastructure issues.

When Bowen went to graduate school to earn her Ph.D. at the age of 56, it is no surprise that she chose as her dissertation topic, a study of the interconnections between Lorde's biography, political influences, activism, and writing, titled "Who Said it was Simple: Audre Lorde's Complex Connections to Three U.S. Liberation Movements. 1952-1992." What is surprising is that in 1997 Bowen's was the first dissertation to be written on Lorde. As she states in a document outlining her academic interests and goals for Clark University, Lorde was already a much lauded and influential poet, having been named Poet Laureate of New York State in 1991 among other honors. "Yet, in spite of all the accolades accruing to her," Bowen writes, "Audre Lorde could end up going down in history without being named a lesbian by mainstream publications and press."

In addition, Bowen saw part of her mission as being to build a critical body of scholarship that gave serious attention to Lorde's literary style and her political and theoretical contributions as opposed to the charisma of her personality. In a key scene in the 1995 documentary *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* by Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson, Lorde urges students in a poetry seminar to build community and help each other to find their own voice as opposed to relying on her as teacher and icon. "Don't mythologize me!" she exhorts them in a voice mixed with tenderness and frustration. Perhaps Lorde was also aware that the impulse towards mythology left her vulnerable to unfriendly critics who would use her commitment to making visible all of the parts of her identity as an excuse to misread and dismiss her, relegating her to a one-dimensional political category as opposed to a complex and multifaceted thinker and writer. Evidence of this tendency can be found in a piece written by Russell Jacoby in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "Politicized Academics Seem to Have Little Interest in Real Politics," in which he laments the rise of "symbolic politics," using Lorde as an example. We have included a scathing response that Bowen wrote 1996 in which she takes Jacoby to task for his dismissal of Lorde as "an activist presenting oneself as a political issue" due to the fact that she has claimed a public identity as a Black lesbian.

Although her academic interests broadened after graduate school to include a planned study on out Black lesbians in academia, she continued to be committed to creating a field of scholarship that engaged Lorde's body of work using rigorous academic methods. In a 2002 letter to Adrienne Rich included in this section, Bowen references an anthology about Lorde that she was planning, in which she hoped to "fulfill Audre's desire to have her work taken seriously and to have her 'person' stop being the focus of people's attention." She quotes a friend in this letter saying, "Too often people don't attend to Lorde's words, they simply wield them." We have also included a 2003 article that Bowen published in the journal *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* that examines Lorde's 1974 poem "Blackstudies" by blending a consideration of the biographical context of its production with an analysis of its aesthetic and literary style. Lorde's poem is also included in this section along with video footage of Bowen and Lorde at the 1990 "I Am Your Sister" conference and other photographs.

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