1996 Letter from Angela Bowen to the Chronicle of Higher Education

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May 10, 1996

To The Editor:

Russell Jacoby, in "Politcized Academics Seem to Have Little Interest in Real Politics" (April 12, 1996), sets his argument on shaky ground by using Audre Lorde as his example of an academic who has no interest in real politics. Quoting without attribution from Lorde's essay, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (Sister Outsider, Crossing Press, 1984) He states, "Now, one can be an activist by presenting oneself as a political issue: 'As a 49-year-old black, lesbian, feminist, socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple..." Here, having used only the descriptive half of her sentence that serves his purpose, he dismisses her with a casual, "More need not be said: This person's life is her political project." Jacoby is mistaken. Much more needs to be said. However, before proceeding, I must question why Jacoby refers to other (male) scholars in his essay by name and affiliation: Andrew Ross of New York University, Jeffrey C. Isaac of Indiana University, Noam Chomsky of MIT. Let me add: Audre Lorde (1934-1992), retired Thomas A. Hunter Professor, Hunter College of the City University of New York and Poet Laureate of New York State, 1991-1993.

Jacoby is mistaken if he believes that Lorde's words will not be recognized by thousands of academics who know of her work as a poet, teacher, and community-activist (She did not see herself as an academic or theorist.); and mistaken if he does not understand that Lorde was proud to claim her life as an ongoing "political project"—and an artistic one as well. She purposefully scrutinized every aspect of it as an interconnected learning lab for personal, artistic and political growth, and shared her insights, believing, "If it is useful, it will be used." Her pathbreaking 1980 book The Cancer Journals is useful enough to have undergone several reprints.

Jacoby's connection of Lorde with "... the rise of ...symbolic politics, a replacement for, and diversion from, the gritty politics of community and street," startles those of us who know her work. We number in the thousands, and reside on several continents: grass-roots community
activists, academics, women, men and youth of every ethnicity, class, age, gender and sexuality. Lorde's output was prodigious as she raced against time to pass along her knowledge as teacher, mother, cancer survivor, lecturer, and community leader; co-founder of both a U.S. women of color press and a financial and emotional support network for South African women; mentor of Afro-Caribbean, Afro-German, and Afro-Dutch women; and board member of a national black lesbian and gay activist group. She traveled the world lecturing and doing hands-on training workshops, initiating and participating in community groups of every size and dimension. Especially concerned with the poisoning of the earth and the land rights of indigenous peoples on several continents, she was invited all over the world as an activist/poet; and was a vocal part of a tenant group battling the city of New York about a sewer plant in Harlem. Is this an example of a "politicized yet apolitical" academic who ignores "structures of racism or economic injustice beyond the campus?"

A glaring disjuncture exists as well between Jacoby's concern that "In the face of massive opposition by faculty members and administrators, the University of California's board of Regents blithely votes to gut affirmative action" and his comment that "As academics engage in 'contestation,' the entire globe is leaping or slithering away from socialism, embracing various forms of American market capitalism." Is faculty members' "massive opposition" to the gutting of affirmative action an example of "contestation" or a serious effort to save it? Is Jacoby concerned about affirmative action while these opposing academics are not? On how many sides does Jacoby think he can position himself? Clearly, Lorde is not among those "slithering away from socialism" since Jacoby originally set up the reader to see Lorde's socialism as one of the life choices of a "politicized but apolitical" academic." Furthermore, since Jacoby is so concerned about affirmative action, it seems odd that he should choose to disparage someone who could fulfill three of the very slots that he condemns the regents for gutting. Why not target an apolitical white heterosexual male, of whom there are so many more within academia that choosing one should be a far easier task than finding an apolitical black lesbian feminist socialist?

In Lorde's 15 books, she used her multiple identities as a signpost to address and connect disparate audiences. In the ten page essay from which Jacoby extracted one half of a sentence, she addressed differences between women. In another, "Learning from the 60s," she tells black students at Harvard not to forget where their real interests lie and that the myth of individual solutions leads to a false sense of security. Once more she uses her identities to make a point: "Over and over again in the 60s, I
was asked to justify my existence and my work, because I was a woman, because I was not a separatist, because I was a Lesbian, because some piece of me was not acceptable." She then exhorts them to accept people's individuality in order to form coalitions that work.

Lorde would not have been surprised at Jacoby's treatment, for she knew that "...what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood." Indeed, George Will, squirming with delight, re-used Jacoby's remark in his nationwide column (syndicated in the Worcester Telegram and Gazette on April 18, 1996 under the title, "Political narcissism invading campuses"). Will sent Lorde's words forth to his conservative army, adding, "As Jacoby says, 'This person's life is her political project.'" No doubt we will see Lorde's words plucked from Will's column and re-used yet again, with Jacoby's remark attached to it as a serious analysis of a "problem," while Lorde's message is once again rendered invisible. For the record, the entire sentence reads, "As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong."

The proof of her entire statement is ironically reinforced by Jacoby's choice to use only the introductory phrase to support his opinion piece. By leaving out the conclusion of her sentence, he erases her invitation for the reader to examine her/his own reactions to the list of identities she lays before us. Whether intentionally or not, Jacoby has invited the reader to react negatively to those identities while eliminating Lorde's concomitant pressure to move beyond the reaction and engage with all parts of her and with her message. I suggest that Jacoby examine this message which Lorde left also: "...I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and...(i)f what I have to say is wrong, then there will be some woman who will stand up and say Audre Lorde was in error. But my words will be there..." Jacoby can misuse the words Lorde so painstakingly left behind. However, for anyone who wants to read the truth of them, there is much more to be said than what he threw at us.

END

Angela Bowen is completing a work at Clark University entitled: "Who Said it was Simple: Audre Lorde's Complex Connections to Three U.S. Liberation Movements, 1952-1992."