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## 1986 Black/Out essay “Coming Out” by Angela Bowen

Angela Bowen

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## Safer-Sex Guidelines

1. Don't pass body fluids (semen, urine, blood, etc.). The sharing of body fluids is becoming more and more implicated in the AIDS transmission process.
2. Use condoms during anal sex. This both reduces the risk of semen being released in the rectum and helps protect both partners from infection should the rectal lining be injured.
3. Do not engage in Rimming or Fisting. Passing fecal matter and/or tearing or otherwise injuring the rectal lining is very dangerous.
4. Limit the number of your sexual partners. Most indicators show that large numbers of sexual partners increase your chances of contracting the virus. Also, know your partner's history. If he has had a large amount of sexual contacts, has often contracted sexually transmitted diseases, and does not engage in "Safer-Sex" practices, then engaging in intimate sexual contact with him puts you at greater risk.
5. Do not use drugs during sex. The use of mood-altering drugs can interfere with your sense of reason, thereby increasing the chances of you allowing yourself to engage in risky sex practices. If you are an IV drug user, seek help and don't share needles.
6. Do be creative and enjoy yourself. Hugging, petting, mutual masturbation, and erotic games are all safe and fun. The more you put into them the more you get out of them.

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**National Gay Task Force Hotline  
1-800-221-7044**  
Toll-free national hotline run by  
NGTF to provide information and  
referrals.

## NEWS BRIEFS

### Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals of Color Meet

Ithaca, NY — Amidst anonymous phone threats and a lack of support from organizations of color on campus, over 75 students from northeastern colleges such as Harvard, Hunter, Lehman, and Yale convened April 11-13 at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. The conference, themed, "Our History, Ourselves, Our Visions, Our Pride," featured workshops; films; autonomous caucuses by race, gender, and sexual orientation; a dance; and a rally. Among the presenters were NCBLG board members Joseph Beam and Barbara Smith, NCBLG Executive Director Gil Gerald, Chinese activist Don Kao, Asian poet-writer Merle Woo, filmmaker Emily Woo Yamasaki, and New York community organizer Margarita Lopez.

### Hemphill Receives NEA Fellowship

Washington — Poet Essex Hemphill, publisher of Be Bop Books in Washington, D.C., has been awarded a 1986 Fellowship in Poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts. The purpose of the \$20,000 fellowship is to enable a writer to travel, study and compose for a year.

### Parkerson, Jones and Hemphill Awarded Grant

Philadelphia — "Voicescapes," a poetry and music collaboration of Michelle Parkerson, Essex Hemphill, and Wayson Jones, was the unanimous first choice for a Residency for New Works grant from the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia, said the Center's Program Director Chris Hayes. The \$3,950 grant will help finance the work-in-progress, which Hemphill says "explores people of color from an urban experience who have varying sexual orientations." Parkerson, Hemphill and Jones will perform "Voicescapes" on August 9, the last night of their two week residency at the Painted Bride Art Center. The Painted Bride received 122 applications for residency grants of which 11 were funded.

### Bowen Addresses NOW March

Washington — Angela Bowen, the newest NCBLG board member, addressed the crowd of approximately 80,000 people who had assembled for the National Organization of Women's (NOW) March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C. on March 9. Given two minutes on the official dais, Bowen spoke of the importance of coalition building if we are going to defeat the Right. On a more personal note, she added that she did not want her daughter to have the kind of abortion she had been forced to have as a young woman.



NCBLG at the NOW march for women's lives.

# COMING OUT

*By Angela Bowen*

**L**AST MONTH, I turned 50. At 49, I came out publicly. At 40, I came out to myself. It sounds so simple to say "I came out", but the incremental steps along the way, the feelings and thoughts that allowed me to do that are very clear to me. And dear! Just recently, having dinner with friends, the topic of being "out" came up, and in speaking that night, I was forced to define why it was necessary for me to be so "out". So far out.

When I fell deeply in love with a woman at the age of 40, I didn't question for even a second the fact that I was a Lesbian. My emotional connections had always been with women, and two light affairs spread over the previous 20 years had let me know that sexual relationships with women were exciting. Neither time had I suffered angst over it — just accepted it as one part of my nature. But suddenly at 40, I knew what all the songs and poetry were about. So I was delighted to finally have myself figured out.

That was the mid-70s, and it was important for me at that time to discover out Lesbians, but even more so to discover Black Lesbians willing to be out. And I wanted more than anything to be able to be completely out in the Connecticut city I lived in then. However, it wasn't safe for me, my business or my family.

But during that period, I saw Audre Lorde speak, and heard her siren call: "What are the silences that you swallow day by day? If we wait to speak until we are not afraid, we will be sending messages back from the grave." I knew then that I would live my life as an open Lesbian as soon as I was able, and I began working to extricate myself from my complicated heterosexual family life so that I could speak in exactly the way I am doing at this moment.

I moved to Boston in '83 and began writing for the women's papers. But my real debut as an out Lesbian came last June on Gay Pride Day when I spoke at the rally. Since that day, I've been living the open, free life I could only fantasize about ten years ago.

Let me say that the decision to speak to that many people on Boston Common was very scary. But, like Audre Lorde, like Barbara Smith, like Beverly Smith, women I had read and admired during my closet days, I wanted to be out there for that alone Black woman who might need to see me at a significant time in her life.

Sometimes we throw ourselves out there and we're never really sure whom we're affecting. But I've had feedback. One closeted woman who didn't feel safe enough to come to that rally, saw a tape of that Gay Pride speech on cable. She taped it herself, then managed to meet up with me later. She said she was so surprised and gald to see my Black face that she almost kissed the TV screen. Another closeted woman came to a Lesbian workshop I did on Cape Cod as part of a conference by women who had been to the Women's Conference in Nairobi last summer. She said she never even imagined that the woman leading the workshop was going to be Black. Both these women were as relieved to discover me as I was to discover them, and we're all now members of a large Black Lesbian support group.

A relative of mine recently called to say she had just discovered her son is Gay and she needed to discuss her feelings and talk about how to handle it. Everything is fine with them now, and I'm delighted I was out there so that she could have someone to turn to.

These are only some of the positive reactions to my being such an out Black Lesbian. However, lest you think this is an entirely altruistic undertaking, I must say unequivocally that I'm having absolutely the grandest, most affirming and uplifting time that I've ever had. Finally, I feel all together. Whole. Affirmed. Happy.

My dreams at age 40 didn't even begin to prepare me for the freedom I feel at age 50. So, for anyone shackled in some closet with the door locked, I say, keep picking at the lock. No matter how long it may take, you deserve to know this feeling, even if it's for only one day before you die.

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©1986 Angela Bowen. This commentary was delivered on WMBR-FM in Cambridge, MA as part of its International Women's Day programming on March 9, 1986.