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### 2002 conference talk “Calling the Question; Is Womanism Feminism?” by Angela Bowen

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## CALLING THE QUESTION: IS WOMANISM FEMINISM?

Panel presentation and workshop; double session

NWSA conference. June 15, 2002. Las Vegas, Nevada

BOARDROOM C

EXPLAIN WHY ELIZABETH HADLEY IS NOT THERE, THEN START WITH INTRO AND A 2-MINUTE REVIEW OF LAST YEAR'S "IS WOMANISM FEMINISM?"

I. Where black women were once in the vanguard of a political movement for radical change (Combahee Statement, for instance), addressing race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in a simultaneity of oppression and of consciousness of that oppression, challenging and pushing the edges, we can no longer claim that edge if our feminist politics becomes a matter of identity only. The women of the Combahee River Collective was a group of black lesbian feminists of the 1970s, who used their ethnicity to construct a carefully considered analysis of the simultaneity of oppression, a new concept then but one of the earliest theories that fledgling women's studies students grasp and reiterate easily. They wrote it in 1977 and published it as a chap book. A more cogent theory has lyet to be rendered, which is why it shows up in so many women's studies anthologies and why we continue to teach it as a foundational theory. It would be difficult to locate a group more committed to the cause of black women and other women of color, yet they were committed to feminism, and the members of the group whom I know still are.

2. If the only difference between feminism and womanism is that women of color can be womanists and white women cannot, is there a reason for the existence of womanism beyond its exclusivity? We said last year that women of

color who move over into a womanist movement while leaving its goals undefined set themselves apart from feminists of color and also from white feminists, making no distinction between the least radical white feminists and the most radical, even those who have been committed to working against racism over a period of several decades. Thus they appear to be stereotyping and locking into a box all white feminists and feminists of color. Why should we care what women who are devoted to improving the position of women of color call themselves? Because we all know that naming oneself is claiming oneself; and therefore we are attempting to understand why we need this name and if so what it means for our future. We are hoping that womanists will pause and examine what awaits us on that path, especially as it affects young women of color. Will womanism allow them to embrace a radical vision for change; or will it lead them down a path of separation that is more dangerous than ever during these intensely perilous times when we need our forces focused on moving the work forward, dealing with each other and with forward-looking men who are learning to respect and speak out for the kind of changes in our society that will free them as well as women from these square-cornered boxes of stasis. Wasn't that the vision that feminists were once striving to live up to? Do womanists believe that feminists are no longer doing the original work that feminism claimed to be about; and have womanists decided that they will do that radical work? Perhaps that's the case. However, perhaps womanists might consider this: that simply abandoning feminism and moving over into womanism might mean abandoning even the possibility that we can indeed, and need to—*and need to*—push one another further to live up to feminism's best intentions, just as Martin Luther King, among many others, insisted that the U. S. must live up to its creed.

3. Moving over into womanism doesn't leave only feminists of color deserted but lessens the forces for change that are available. And that move might also serve to encourage those white feminists who have *not* been striving for radical change, allowing them to claim feminism for the liberal center, whence we might catch a giant whiff of relief that black, brown, yellow and red women will no longer be making demands for radical change but instead are assuming its impossibility for white women. Thus, white quasi-feminists will be happy to address us as womanists and themselves as the "real" feminists. As we conference, raise money and publish magazines and books touting womanism, squeezing ourselves ever more tightly into a separatist womanism box, white quasi-feminists eagerly pat our shoulders in understanding, rushing to help us re-name ourselves and cede feminism to them. But feminists of color have never for one moment believed that white women owned feminism; not at its inception, not during the beginning of 2nd wave feminism, and not now, during this period that some people, mainly journalists, insist on calling the "post-feminist" period. To which we, of course, reply, "We'll be post-feminist in the post-patriarchy," knowing full well that the time of post-patriarchy is still so far in the distant future that most of us in this room cannot expect to see it in our lifetime. And that therefore, arriving at post-feminism would simply mean giving up feminism by giving in to patriarchy.

But are womanists helping to do just that? Giving up the feminist fight? We women of color have been in the thick of feminist struggle from the beginning, including the first wave of feminism in the 19th century, which, as we know, grew out of the abolitionist movement, just as 2nd wave feminism arose out of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

We could of course be wrong in our belief that moving over into womanism delivers a slap against feminists of color who have borne a huge amount of insult, rejection, and pain, not only to help birth feminism but to force it open, to make it viable in whatever locale it arises, expanding its meaning, shifting its direction, while never losing its central, simple principle, which asks the question, “How does this make it better for women, here, in this place, now? Meaning, whatever you are doing, saying, building, listening to, reading, writing, singing, wearing, how does it relate in a positive way to the future condition of women, all women? And the people who know that feminism must exist for all women, of every ethnicity and age, in every locality and condition, are not only black women, not only women of color. Rather they are women and men who are of color and white. Simply being born a person of color does not anoint one with instant political consciousness or with an understanding of how to leverage the consciousness of one’s oppression into action for change. Nor does being a person of color mean that we will automatically embrace radical change for the greater good. We have only to look at Clarence Thomas to know that; or Ward Connerly, the black trustee of the University of California who launched the anti-affirmative action movement; or, for that matter, Condoleeza Rice.

Alright, let’s pause to look at Condoleeza Rice, Bush’s black foreign policy advisor, who has no trouble fronting for him, no matter what egregious insult he is perpetrating upon poor people and people of color of whatever gender; and on women. Condoleeza Rice’s background would seem to suggest a person who would be at least a Democrat if not a raging leftwing radical. She was born in Birmingham, Alabama to middle class parents who expected her to do well in school and attend college, which she did, on a scholarship she gained through playing classical piano from the time she was a small child. She lived in the

neighborhood of the 4 black girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing, quite close to the home of 2 of them. Angela Davis did also, practically across the street from them. Need we discuss the difference between Rice's politics and Davis's? Or the political connections of Condoleeza Rice **and those of her first cousin, ?????** Rice, a lefty woman lawyer about her same age, who works for political change with people like Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Beyond the color of people's skin, who are the people I want to work with; what do they believe in and how do they act in concert with their beliefs; what are we willing to do together, and toward what purposes? I have always worked with people whose politics match mine, who strive to act in a "politically correct" way. I use that phrase in its original meaning, distinctly and deliberately, not disdainfully. All the women I work with, or desire to work with, fill that bill, regardless of their color or ethnicity. To embrace the notion that all women of color have a transformative vision and no white women do is outside of my belief system. In 1994 in Cambridge, at the first "Black Women in the Academy" Conference at MIT, Angela Davis said in her keynote address that she had come to the conclusion that she needed to be wary of making alliances with people based on their skin color. She had come to the realization that if she was not careful, some black people could be damaging to her and her work. So we all need to examine what people are doing, not what they're saying, and not what they look like. Ethnicity is an easy marker but it doesn't necessarily reveal all that we need to know about a person before we assume an easy and natural political or social alliance.

Another irony of womanist exclusivity is that radical white women who have struggled for change within the movement for years--battling with other less

conscious friends and families, changing some of them, losing others, but pushing for change because it was the right thing to do— must now swallow in silence their disappointment at this balkanization. As they are deserted, they must remain silent lest they be accused of attempting to ignore ethnic or cultural differences and whitewash every woman. And feminists of color have generally spoken only occasionally and carefully among ourselves or ignored the phenomenon altogether as we see former feminists wrapping the label of womanism tightly around themselves, as if the mere re-naming signifies some magical power.

But isn't this re-naming—the running away from the label of feminism—forcing us down an alleyway of the narrowest kind of identity politics. And I ask this from the standpoint of one who has defended identity politics as a key step toward empathy and ultimately a bridge to radical change. However, doesn't basing one's politics ONLY on identity—naming a certain contingent of women's movement as inclusive of ONLY women of color—mean that no one who is not a woman of color can ever make it into this exclusive club? Can this really work as an ideological movement? Is it not reactionary to not be able to look toward changing one's self, one's ideas, one's actions, and to grow, to work, live and love beyond one's color? Don't we know that box already? Isn't it called apartheid?

So don't we need to ask if something deep isn't occurring when you walk away from feminism, declaring yourself a womanist? Especially when you do it without at least acknowledging that you've done something profound. after all, we are not speaking here about women who never declared themselves feminists in the first place; we are not speaking of those women who would never dream of being politically involved in efforts to change conditions for women, but who delight in declaring themselves strong women and standing up for themselves individually,

yet will not align themselves with women who believe in a collective effort, woman-identified, woman-directed, and woman-beneficial.

Actually, the womanists we are more concerned with are the women who knew what feminism really stood—and stand for—whether or not each individual feminist always lived up to its ideals or practiced what she preached. We are addressing those womanists who once understood that feminism meant something deep and serious but now have put their faith in womanism, and yet—and yet, have never thought it necessary to offer any explanation or open a discussion about why. So the question for them is: Why? And another question which goes along with it is: What made it so easy for them to do it? How come it didn't take them the years of consciousness-raising that it took feminists, sharing emerging stories, writing back and forth to one another, starting little magazines, marking out their own particular concerns, implementing them, publicizing and promoting their ideas, then creating art or theory from that work? Did womanists think that all that grunt work was unnecessary because so much work by women of color was already out there, published previously by feminists of color? Isn't it an ironic notion that as womanists move into exclusivity, they can attach feminism to their new name, equating it to womanism, as in "I'm a womanist/feminist," and, having said it, simply leave it at that?

In thinking about this question, I am reminded of the section in *ntozake shange's* 1975 choreopoem, "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf," where her character, the lady in green, says in her monologue, "Somebody done run off with all my stuff." She says it in a variety of ways: "Where are you goin wid all my stuff"; "I want my stuff back" "why don't you find yr own things." Having handed over her whole self, her inner feelings, her

mind, her body, her talents, everything precious of her self that she was saving up to share with that one somebody someday, she is now alone, disappointed, bereft, ripped off.

Within the play, the lines are overwhelmingly poignant, interspersed as they are with her story, making palpable her pain of being deserted. And, bringing the metaphor back home, feminists of color are not only deserted, as ntozake's lady in green is, but in addition, somebody HAS run off with all of their stuff. So for womanists we pose this question, which they might already be asking themselves: Which feminists do they quote when writing their papers or delivering their lectures? And which womanist theorists do they look to? And on what feminist woman of color's work did their womanists scholars build their work? Consider the source to discover whose "stuff" are womanists running off with.

bell hooks's "stuff"? She's proudly a feminist. I teach her book, *Feminism is for Everybody*, which my students say they give away to their friends and family, and then buy another to keep for themselves. I encourage them in that action. (H)ooks's book is a primer, published in 2000 by South End Press, explaining the basics of feminism in language anyone who's interested can grasp easily.

Whose stuff? Patricia Hill Collins's, whose *Black Feminist Thought* is now a decade old and who remains a staunch feminist?

Are womanists running off with Barbara Smith's stuff,, one of the founders of Combahee River Collective, who had a large role in writing that statement? Every time we use the expression the simultaneity of oppression, we need to remember

where it originated. How about Barbara Christian's, stuff, or Audre Lorde's, Adrienne Rich's or the work of Merle Woo, who calls herself a Yellow feminist?

Maybe Cherrie Moraga's or Paula Gunn Allen's stuff; perhaps Chrystos' stuff, or Pauli Murray's? Shirley Chisolm's?; June Jordan's? oh, maybe it's Beverly Guy-Sheftall's, or Gloria Anzaldua's. Or how about Angela Davis's?

Out of all these women—and I can name at least 50 more, or even 100 whom we'd all recognize, as can most of us in this room, no doubt—of all these women, not one ran away from feminism. They stayed in the trenches where the rain fell fearsomely on them during the worst of the feminist-bashing storms of the 70s and 80s. Stayed in there without umbrellas or tarpaulins. Just doing their work, paying their own dues; fighting battles alongside and against other women who understood the substance of feminism and were willing to struggle to change themselves, each other, and our society, daring to be angry and demanding, allowing themselves to shed tears and share laughter, struggling to forge ties that didn't necessarily mean friendship, but sometimes did; creating political and ideological bonds that might be based on cultural or geographical connections, but not necessarily; and establishing abiding connections that were rooted indelibly in trust, always.

So for many, many thousands of us feminism is still worth fighting for; it's a commitment, life-long, hard-won and cherished. If you believe in change and can take the weight, you own feminism proudly. You honor the feminists of color who struggled for all of us as they endured the pain of having to absorb the name-calling, sometimes being shunned or drummed out of their communities by people of their own ethnic background—men *and* women—who saw them as sellouts,

Aunt Jemimas, La Malinchas, fools, dupes of white women. Knowing this, should womanists adopt feminist theories, those epistemological insights forged in the crucible of change they moved through with other women—and some enlightened men, to be sure—and uncritically use those theories as the foundation of work re-named womanist? How does work that is written by feminists morph into womanist work? Where are the womanists who laid the foundation of womanist theories; and just what are those theories? Do they exist on their own, created originally by womanists?

And, finally, as we did last year, we continue asking the question: what are womanists running *from*? If a womanist is strong, wouldn't she want a man who is strong enough to embrace feminism, which is a movement for change; who would expect her to strive to better her own condition and that of her daughters. Indeed, oughtn't he be helping her to do the same for their sons as for their daughters, and to include him too as a change agent so that all of their lives would improve? If womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender, as the definition says, shouldn't a womanist be strong enough to withstand being called a lesbian even if she isn't; and, more important, shouldn't those who call themselves womanist/feminists be speaking up against heterosexism and lesbophobia since feminist principles and praxis is anti-heterosexist and that's what strong, grown-up, serious feminists do. And couldn't womanists who are closeted lesbians, even if they choose to remain silent about their sexual orientation, simply say, "Look, feminism is for everybody, including you. Here, read this book," and pass along bell hooks's primer? And since womanists "love themselves regardless," shouldn't they be able to reach beyond themselves to "love *women* regardless"? All women? That's the feminist agenda, however imperfectly some of us succeed in carrying it out. And if all this is impossible for womanists to do because they have something

to explain about womanism that we have not understood, please weigh in. Here are two Black feminists one year after their initial question, still seeking answers.