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Black Women's Lives in the Archives: Angela Bowen's Ancestral Legacy

By Holly Smith¹

Black women's lives in traditional archival spaces have tended to be fraught and complicated. Our experiences have been marginalized, disregarded, or not even considered. White supremacy and oppressive practices have not amplified the experiences of women, queer people, indigenous communities, and other communities that have been historically marginalized. Black women scholars and other memory workers have frequently spearheaded the reparative work in recovering and restoring Black women's experiences - through research, literature, and the archives. It is through this framework, and as a Black woman archivist myself, that I first encountered the life and work of Dr. Angela Bowen.

I first connected with Dr. Jennifer Abod, Dr. Bowen's wife, in 2019, a year after Dr. Bowen passed away. Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Director of Spelman College's Women's Research and Resource Center, introduced us as Jennifer was considering a home for Dr. Bowen's papers. I currently serve as Spelman's College Archivist and have the pleasure of being one of the stewards of the amazing archival collections at this historically Black college founded in 1881 to educate women of the African Diaspora. The college archives document faculty, students, staff and other members of the Spelman community from the late 19th century to the present. As a component of the Women's Center, the Archives also document Black women in the areas of Black feminist pedagogy, LGBTQ rights, civil rights, and social justice. Our two most heavily used special collections are from lesbian feminist activist Audre Lorde and feminist cultural worker Toni Cade Bambara. So the Spelman Archives are situated in an unapologetic Black feminist radical space, and unapologetically amplify the lives and work of Black feminists and other communities.

The more I learned about Dr. Bowen through Jennifer, the more I was amazed by her experience - her career as a dancer, her decision to go back to pursue her undergraduate and later her doctorate after being a married mother of two, her writing about being an out Black lesbian woman in academia and systemically working to dismantle racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. Particularly powerful was learning that she did her dissertation work on Audre Lorde's work with Lorde's early blessing. I was eager to make the trip to California to visit Jennifer in person and to be "in conversation" with Dr. Bowen's archives. It is a humbling privilege to access the private materials of a person's professional experiences and their personal interactions. It takes on a whole other meaning when that person is not here physically. Jennifer welcomed me into their home and provided access not only to the collection, but to her and Dr. Bowen's life together. To say the collection is rich is an understatement - there were numerous drafts of essays she had written throughout her academic career, speeches given at conferences and other events, photographs for the Bowen-Peters School of Dance, which she co-founded, newspaper articles, flyers, correspondence with numerous colleagues (including noted Black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith), syllabi from her courses in English and Women's Studies, and records from her involvement with the National Coalition of Black Lesbian and Gays. There were also numerous recordings of interviews done for her dissertation on Audre Lorde. It was particularly poignant and touching to see drafts of short stories she had written as a young girl of around twelve years old.

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Jennifer also provided her own loving and fascinating anecdotes about Dr. Bowen throughout their life together, which provided a very special and intimate view of her. I am truly grateful to Jennifer and Dr. Bowen's family for the gift of her collection to the Spelman Archives. Her papers will be housed alongside the works of Lorde, Bambara, Johnnetta Cole, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, all iconic scholars and Black Feminists. It will be incredible to have these papers "in conversation" with each other.

My initial response was disappointment that I had not been familiar with Angela Bowen until now. So often the lives of Black women in the written record can be fragmented, incomplete, even invisible. However, that is one of the lessons of this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies*. It will introduce Dr. Bowen's work to a larger audience and situate her work with other feminists' scholars and writers who were her contemporaries. It has been a pleasure to work with Jennifer, Dr. Eve Oishi, and Dr. Diana Fox on this issue. Jennifer and Eve particularly have done incredible work to bring this issue to fruition, and carefully selected diverse writings from various points of Dr. Bowen's career in research, highlighting myriad topics. Readers will get a critical glimpse into her archives, which will encourage further scholarly research and engagement with her collection. Her writings about the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class fit within current discourses on intersectionality. Readers can connect her career in dance with the amplification of performance, culture, and Black history that informed her later academic and social justice work. This special issue highlights the breadth, depth, and richness of the life of my ancestral archival foremother Angela Bowen, and contributes to the reparative work of restoring, recovering, and amplifying Black women's lives in the Archives overall.