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Intersectional and Global Perspectives

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Intersectional and Global Perspectives

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 friendship with and scholarship on Audre Lorde, her activism on Black lesbian and gay issues, and her career in Women's Studies, among other topics. This section focuses on the intersectional and global aspects of Bowen's activism, organizing and scholarship including writing and speeches that range from connecting racial justice issues to LGBT issues to Black lesbians and reproductive rights. This section contains a rare signed early draft of Audre Lorde's poem "Women on Trains," dedicated to Bowen and M. Jacqui Alexander.

Keywords: Angela Bowen, Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, Simon Nkoli, Barbara McDonald, Cynthia Rich, Black feminism, Black lesbians, Black lesbian feminism, archive, Black lesbian archives, queer archives, Black feminist archives, lesbian motherhood, global feminism, transnational feminism, transnational LGBTQ activism, Black queer diaspora, history of women's studies, Nairobi United Nations World Conference on Women, racism in Norway, Ed Bradley, Charles Stuart, Black Nations/Queer Nations?, intersectionality, "Women on Trains," reproductive justice movement, Black lesbians and reproductive rights, Womanism, radical feminism

At the 1995 *Black Nations/Queer Nations?* conference, Bowen asked: "Is a global political movement among lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people in the African diaspora possible or desirable? My answer is yes and yes." From her childhood support of Jamaican-born activist Marcus Garvey's pan-African movement to her fusing of African and European dance traditions at Bowen-Peters School of Dance to her participation in international women's conferences in Europe and Africa, to her organization of a 1989 conference for gay South African activist Simon Nkoli in Boston, Bowen's work has always been rooted in an understanding that political work comes out of one's local positioning within a global frame. In several places, including a 2005 talk included in the previous section, she critiques Jesse Jackson's invocation of the new term African American to replace Black because the new term abdicates the global nature of Black identity. At the same time, her activism, speeches and writing embody an awareness of the inseparability and contingency of various aspects of any individual's identity, and the ways in which that awareness constitutes the roots of political consciousness. In other words, Bowen theorized and enacted intersectional consciousness before intersectionality was coined as a word by critical race studies scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.¹

¹ Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Today intersectionality is still invoked primarily within the context of a localized race/gender/class matrix, but Bowen's body of work serves as an important reminder of the need to keep this framework open and capacious to account for layers of identity such as dissymmetric global conditions, religion, age and privilege. We have included a 1985 interview that Bowen gave with Abod after returning from the United Nations World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, as well as one of several letters that she wrote as co-chair of the National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) addressed to leaders of Black churches around the country, asking for their support for a National Day of Remembrance for Black lesbians and gays during Black History Month. Her goal was to honor luminaries such as Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill and other activists and writers who died in their prime. While these artifacts from the archive may all seem to address different issues, they all highlight Bowen's philosophy that a deep understanding of the interlocking oppressions of any individual holds the key to political change, for it provides the opportunities to work in coalition with people and groups that are different than ourselves.²

These principles are articulated in the 1997 keynote address that she delivered at a national conference hosted by the MiRA Resource Centre for Black, Immigrant and Refugee Women in Oslo, Norway entitled "Is Racism a Women's Issue? What Black U.S. Feminism Has to Share with 'Progressive' Norway" in which she references the open debate between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly, emphasizes the need to recognize one's privilege, and outlines her principles of activism, which include persistence, inclusivity, person-to-person connection and outreach. In other words: "Allies, allies, allies."

Bowen's archive is rife with evidence of her ally work, including her co-chairship of the NCBLG and her friendships and collaborations with foundational Black feminist scholars and writers. Her commitment to allyship, however, was always founded in an opposition to cross- and intra-community prejudices as opposed to denying or ignoring these issues in the name of coalition. Bowen repeatedly aimed her critiques at homophobia in the Black community, for example, in her 1993 letter of protest to anchor Ed Bradley for his *60 Minutes* segment titled "Rainbow Curriculum," in which Bradley featured a Black woman who opposed a teaching guide that supported tolerance of homosexuality. Bowen takes Bradley's journalistic standards to task for ignoring the existence of Black gays and lesbians and for doing "a disservice to the intelligence of your viewers by simplifying the conflict as if only white homosexuals exist."

Similarly, she did not let her own Black gay and lesbian organization off the hook in its failure to properly consider women's issues as part of its platform. One of the things that archival collections make possible is a glimpse at rifts and ruptures expressed obliquely between the lines of archival content. In an article that Bowen wrote for the NCBLG publication *Black/Out*, describing the five-year plan that was set at the organization's 1989 second annual Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Conference, Bowen slips in several references to concerns expressed by lesbian members around particular issues and "a general feeling among lesbians that the conference needed a more political and personal focus on lesbians." Given that NCBLG had begun as a NCBGB, Black gay male organization and only incorporated lesbians in 1984, six years after

² This perspective mirrors the statement of Bowen's contemporary Black feminists in the Combahee River Collective, who write: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*. United States, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986.

its founding, this tension is not surprising. In her text for a 1993 speech on Black lesbians and the Reproductive Rights Movement, Bowen includes a series of ellipses around the name NCBLG, indications to herself to tell a story in an unscripted form. While we don't know what the story was, the rest of this section of the speech, which addresses lesbians' troubled relationships with gay men, hints at a history that included conflict as well as cooperation.

One of the most painful areas of rupture that she and her sister friend M. Jacqui Alexander experienced is when Alexander and Bowen joined a Black lesbian support group in Boston. Bowen mentions this in her 1989 radio interview, and Alexander narrates this experience in the film *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen* (Abod, Women Make Movies, 2016). Because both Alexander and Bowen had white lovers, they faced hostility and pressure and struggled with whether to remain in a group that did not respect their personal choices to be in interracial relationships. When they sought advice from their friend and mentor Audre Lorde, she urged them to stay in the group for the larger cause of community. After the dynamics became too painful and Alexander and Bowen decided to leave the group, Lorde acknowledged that she had "counseled you unwisely my sister" when she told them to "Stand and fight," and she apologized to them in the 1993 poem "Women on Trains." (Note: the early draft of the poem included here contains the line "I have just counseled [sic] a woman badly." Later published versions of the poem contain slightly different lines. In the 1993 volume *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*, the line reads "I counseled you unwisely my sister."³ The version published in *Callaloo* in 1991 reads: "I have counseled a sister unwisely."⁴) This section also includes a hand-written note from Lorde to Bowen promising her a copy of her poem "Outlines," also about an interracial lesbian relationship, and referencing a new poem that she enclosed (possibly the draft of "Women on Trains.")

Included in this section are also several talks that Bowen gave that demonstrate her longstanding intersectional understanding of the links between feminist movements and a range of other social justice movements including reproductive rights and civil rights. A 1987 speech at Brandeis University on "What Radical Feminism Means", represents an excellent example of Bowen's early articulation of an intersectional understanding of interlocking oppressions, particularly for Black women. In a 1993 speech on "Black Lesbians and the Reproductive Rights Movement" at Hampshire College, Bowen advocates for the tenets of what would later come to be called the Reproductive Justice Movement, namely the right to abortion as well as the right to procreate and to raise children in a healthy, supported way.

Perhaps the most powerful example of Bowen's intersectional perspective is a speech that she gave in 1989 that addresses an incendiary racial incident in Boston. In October 1989 a white couple, Charles Stuart and his pregnant wife Carol, were shot in the primarily Black neighborhood of Roxbury in Boston. Carol and her unborn child died, and Stuart claimed that the shooter was a Black man, and a young Black man identified by Stuart in a lineup was arrested. When it was eventually discovered that Stuart himself had committed the crime for the insurance money, the case became a flashpoint for issues of racial tensions in Boston, including racialized policing. In her speech invoking this case, Bowen uses the occasion to name the deep socioeconomic divides within Boston across race. She ends by echoing King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech in a call for a cross-fertilization of political movements. This is the perfect expression of intersectionality before it had a name.

³ Lorde, Audre. "Women on Trains." *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993, pp. 31-32.

⁴ Lorde, Audre. "Women on Trains." *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, pp. 54-56.

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