

WHAT THE TREES SAID: ARCHIVING A (FICTIONAL) BLACK LESBIAN FOREST

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If a black lesbian falls in a forest, does she make a sound?

I came into the Lesbian Herstory Archives with an intense adoration for lesbian land communities. One of the first objects I picked up was *La Luz Journal*, by Juana Maria Paz, which outlined her journey in search of women of color separatist lesbian land. Paz is Latina. She reached toward her of-color roots (instead of assimilating into whiteness) and this was important for me, having an Afro-Latina maternal lineage, to consider spaces where diasporic blackness and lesbian identity were coexistent. Paz wrote about women of color intentional community in Arkansas, but more than anything else, spoke of her displacement, her too-light skin, how even on the land there was still not a sense of home. This fascinated me—her insistence that even amidst a forest of lesbians of color she felt so alone.

If a black lesbian falls in a forest, does another lesbian help her up?

I traveled with Paz's feelings on my mind, that perhaps lesbians of color shared a specific kind of in-community lesbian experience after arriving at supposed gates of lesbian utopia: an incessant grappling with aloneness. The perceived absence of black lesbian presence in feminist spaces was a reality that I learned during both my collective practice and collection mining at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Additionally, engagement with other black lesbian artists and writers from across the world including interfacing with organizations like *Fire and Ink* an organization for black LGBTQ writers, or WOW Café Theatre, a feminist theater collective, or CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies, the first LGBTQ research center meant I was meeting my makers. The

largest lesson learned was that people are people—not as giant as I'd created them to be. Human. Beautiful and messy and human.

But sometimes black lesbians are not human.
Sometimes we are trees.

I shared my connection to *La Luz Journal* to Flavia Rando and as both my professor and mentor, she challenged me to imagine that *La Luz Journal* could be, or potentially was, fiction. This blew my mind! How would I approach the text differently if it weren't "real" and what did "real" mean, anyhow? Shortly after, I rewatched Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman*, canonically known for embodying the (fictional) creation of black lesbian visibility.

Are any of us who we think we are?
Are we solely what others perceive?
What are the qualifiers of existence?
Was I real?

Using the LHA collections, I began to witness a theme of fictional imaginings in the writings of many women of color. Whether it be Lorde's reaching to the "witches of Dahomey" tribes, "mute as a porcupine in a forest of lead," her curation of a black unicorn, or the Jemima Collective's highlight of poetry that created love possibilities, these women were constructing realities. Black lesbians were creating works of art for which a historical spin would be unable to discern its real from its fiction. Brilliant. Beyond creating works, the act of placing these works into a collectively run lesbian archive meant a timeless interpretation. Black lesbians were engaging in radical transformation, or more easily stated, magic.

And so, I became hooked and hungry.

I began to see the Lesbian Herstory Archives as this kitchen, the acid-free boxes as caldron pots. This place, this thing that it was, a tool for reimagining (some kind of smell to cook up), a world where reality as we knew it could be reclaimed and corrected in future tellings of our herstory.

If I am in a room, am I not in the room?

Staffing at LHA led to an occasional greeting of a black lesbian visitor at the door for her first time and being ignited by her sense of awe. Though it is possible no one understood what they would encounter once entering the building, it was the stark contrast of displeasure, the deep reflection of surprise and relief on their faces that I would learn was a symptom of their asking the same question I had learned: Is this even real? Are there black lesbians in this vast forest?

I first came to name this experience when Zanele Muholi visited on a trip from South Africa, her white lover approaching first and acting as proxy. Zanele was the most vocal about this awe. Our shared narrative, she and I, is about that initial encounter and how the awe hit her to the core. "I would have never expected a black lesbian to answer the door!" When other researchers seeking black lesbian material call or email, their introductions begin softly, "you probably don't have any material on black lesbians, but my research question investigates . . ." I am hysterical to respond, each time—"but we have so much," I cry. Why are we assumed to not be standing when in fact we are in the forest, many of us, waving, hollering, fucking, laughing, and some of us, planting.

How many trees make a forest?

In an affirmative fictional reality:
there were black lesbians.
we hear each other.

there are black lesbians.
we sway together.
there will be black lesbians.
trees have ears.
so mote it be.

African ancestral or Third World lesbians were politically present since the beginning of the civil rights movement and post-Stonewall gay liberation. An organized group began to meet in New York City in 1974, publishing an invitation and statement to their sisters to join them two years later, staking their claim in the herstory of the lesbian and gay community; embedding seeds, planting trees. The *Third World Gay Women's Organization Salsa-Soul's* platform read:

The necessity for third world gay women to organize in our own interest is paramount. Existing gay organizations have neither welcomed our participation, nor championed our concerns. Out of this reality, the Salsa Soul Sisters was organized and continues to grow. We function as a loosely structured collective, recognizing the varied age, academic class, and economic differences that exist in the group. We see this diversity as enriching our experiences and contributing to the emotional and intellectual growth of the organization. (1976)

The Third World Women: Salsa Soul Sisters is the first-known lesbian of color organization in the country, founded in 1976 as a group for Third World women who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or same-gender-loving, and who aimed to create a space where their identities could be examined and articulated. The founding group of black and Latina lesbians carved a separate space for primarily black lesbians, and inclusive of Latinas, Asian American, and Indigenous women of varying gender identities. The

organization held meetings every Thursday evening at accessible spaces throughout NYC where women could find each other, develop programs, and explore the burden and unifying triple threat of their identities.

The year I was born, in 1983, Audre Lorde's special collection, Accession# 8323, was processed. My writing group would meet to annotate her edits to the original Zami manuscript. One day, her last partner, the late Dr. Gloria Joseph, asked Salsa women to detail their experiences with Audre, and I was sought to moderate the interview. Cassandra Grant, Imani Rashid, and their comrade Stahimili Mapp sat with me around the wooden table at LHA with Dr. Joseph on speaker calling in from St. Croix to recall Audre's spirit. Her impact on the group was pulled from memories and the collection. We looked at the *Black Lesbian Bibliography*, edited by a white lesbian, J.R. Roberts, as indicative of an ongoing dedication of LHA to capture the lives of all lesbians. We also opened Special Collection #8705—Salsa Soul Sisters, donated by Georgia Brooks, a black lesbian, past board member of Salsa, and previous LHA co-coordinator. Her donation was small, in it just a few sheets of paper that reviewed board meeting minutes and agenda items. Notations were made about drama and disbandment. Reading these notes and listening to the stories of contention had me reminiscent of Paz's description of lesbian land in Arkansas. LHA also had Brooks' donation of each issue of the *Salsa Soul Gazette*, an edited serial publication that included horoscopes, personals, editorials, poetry, and newsworthy updates. Eventually Brooks co-curated a traveling photo exhibition on black lesbians along with co-coordinators Paula Grant and Morgan Gwenwald called *Keepin' On*. The interview was published in Dr. Joseph's last collection, *The Wind Is Spirit: The Life, Love and Legacy of Audre Lorde* captured the witnessing of these artifacts and the energy of preservation.

When planning our wedding in 2013, my wife decided we would have a Yoruba wedding. We asked Imani Rashid to host in her Long Island home, which was more of a mansion—she had sixteen beds,

a pool, a tennis court, a jacuzzi, and lots of trees for shade. When sitting on a lawn chair, I recalled stories of Salsa retreats in the late 70s when the women caravanned from the city to be with nature, or the stories of Jean Wimberly, a previous Salsa member, recalling the cofounding of the women of color tent at Michfest. It was at my wedding where my lesbian of color friends, white dyke friends, and mix of Jamaican, Garifuna, and newly Puerto Rican family, that I saw a fiction-real world where brown lesbian bodies put their feet up and laughed together. I could hear their voices.

Off the Long Island grass, Cassandra who came with her partner, Sharon Lucas, held my mother's hand, escorting her along the rocky landscape to her seat, then told my father where to stand. It was also Cassandra who would eventually invite me to her Brooklyn brownstone to rummage through the "official" Salsa Soul collection, ensuring that the donation of letters, photographs, T-shirts, buttons, flyers, financials, correspondence, and other ephemera would come to LHA in November 2016. Yet, once the donation was in hand, the women wanted more; their branches began waving, leaves rattling in my direction, raining pollen in my hair and fruit seeds at my feet. It was Flavia who came to me again and said, "What about an LHA-Salsa Soul exhibition?" Ahh, yes, let us sound the wind!

In 2018 and 2019, *Salsa* exhibition materials traveled to the Robert Printmaking Gallery, the Brooklyn College Library, the Studio Museum, and the New York Historical Society. An LHA intern, Ruby Lowery created an Omeka website showcasing exhibition contents.

Cassandra, Imani, and Stahimili remained as the core bunch and became a roadshow, providing teach-ins and panel discussions, unveiling not only the happenings of Salsa, but pouring libations for the ancestors. Each presentation reminded the current community that Salsa lives on through African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change, or AALUSC, directed by Salena Mullen, and ready to receive them.

The June outdoor marriage ceremony began deep inside the cold grasp of Yemeya's waters. My comrade Tara Thierry played *A Love Supreme* on her upright bass; her soon-to-be wife, and my dear friend Olivia Ford stood smiling in my bridal party; the drummer-drummed; the trees cooled us and quieted the stage. When Imani officiated, she asked us to suck lime for the bitter times, honey for when it was sweet. Near the ceremonial end, she held two doves by the feet, sweeping them against Jaz and I as we spun, brushing us with their retracting wings, then released them to fly away. But as the reception commenced, we found them arched above us as we danced. Two doves, branch-clutched, nestled by leaves, high in the sway of trees.

Written in honor of the ancestors of the Salsa Soul Sisters:

Arisa Reed, Audre Lorde, Candice Boyce, Carol De Costa, Cenen Moreno, Christian O'Neal, Dianne R. Reid, Dorothy Moore, Ernestine Williams, Georgia M. Brooks, Inez Harrison (Tippy), Ira Jeffries, Jeanne Gray, Lee Leocadio Daniels, Luvenia Louise Pinson, Mari Blackwell, Monica Ranson, Pat Chin, Rose Morgan, Phyllis Clay, Sandy Adida Oxios, Sylvia Witts Vitale, and Yvonne Flowers (Maua)

And my own: Doreen Locario, Mary Meruca Lambey Locario, Cynthia Smith, Amanda Elizabeth Williams Tulloch, and Irma Iris Cruz