

ON CELEBRATING TRUST AND TRANSFER OF THE SALSA SOUL SISTERS ARCHIVE

— *A conversation with Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz*

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Her writing is featured in journals and anthologies such as *Reference Librarianship & Justice: History, Practice and Praxis* (2018), *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond* (2014), *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* (2013), *Out Behind the Desk: Workplace Issues for LGBTQ Librarians* (2011), *Films for the Feminist Classroom* (2010), and others. She is also a Zinester, disseminating her Zine, *Black Lesbians in the 70's and Before: An at Home Tour at the Lesbian Herstory Archives*.

SSC: Over 10 years ago, I was on a panel at the LGBTQ Community Center, formerly known as the Lesbian and Gay Center in Manhattan. It was run through AALUSC (African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change). I find that, in the history of the organization, most of what I know about them is that they're always sort of trying to get it together. Like, that's always the

narrative: we're meeting to meet, we're meeting to figure out how we're going to meet, we're meeting to figure out what's happening and to reinvigorate our organization. And that's what they're always doing, which is interesting. So, the AALUSC panel was about what was happening in Black lesbian organizing in New York City. In 2009, I sat on a panel with Olive Demetrius and Hanifah Walidah, who did a documentary called *U People* (2008). They were a power couple at the time but have since broken up. Another young woman sat on the panel whose name I can't remember; she was working on a social media documentary or YouTube series. Cassandra Grant was on the panel, and she was representing the Salsa Soul Sisters, the organization that AALUSC came out of. In fact, AALUSC's banner included, in parentheses, "formerly Salsa Soul." Cassandra introduced Salsa Soul Sisters to the community, and I still remember she was holding these papers and clutching them, and they were a bit disheveled. It was almost like she was, like, grabbing things to go. And she was like, "This is our archive. And I need some sister to come and collect our archive."

SM: She was holding the archive in her hands?

SCC: Yep. And I was sort of like, yeah, I'll do it. She said she had more at home, but she was the person who was bestowed the papers, and she doesn't trust it to go just anywhere. She talked to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, but she doesn't know, and she wants someone to take an interest, to gather and collect. The Schomburg Center would have been a likely spot for the Salsa Soul Sisters' collection. I'm not sure why they didn't send it there. Maybe there was an interest. Maybe they couldn't get it together. I'm not sure, but I sort of took it to heart. And then I thought, well, I'm a coordinator at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, maybe this is something I'll look into later.

The following year, in 2010, I was also working at the Center for LGBTQ Studies at the time as a Memberships and Fellowships Coordinator on a conference called *In Amerika They Called Us*

Dykes: Lesbian Lives in the 70s. That's its own story, but the goal was to have lesbians from the seventies return and recall this time. It was supposed to unfold over a full year, so there'd be a spring series and a fall festival. It was meant to be coordinated by lesbians from the seventies and as one of two staff people that was helping put it together, I coordinated a listserv and dealt with logistics. But when I was in one of the planning meetings, there was a conversation around how we would include representation of Black lesbians. Someone had alluded that there were no Black lesbians in the seventies.

SM: What?!

SCC: I know, right?! And others *agreed* with that. In *Sinister Wisdom 107: Black Lesbians / We are the Revolution!* I wrote about the zine I made that came from that conversation. So, for the 2010 CLAGS conference, there was an event every month in the spring, followed by a fall festival. I organized the April event with a Black lesbian focus at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) to recall what was in the archive. I made a zine to hand out so people could read along and follow along by decade and year, within the decade, what was going on. And I just pulled material from the collection. And so that was my second time gathering and putting my hands on Salsa Soul Sisters' material and transmitting it to an audience. It turns out that there was a considerable amount of Salsa Soul already in the collection from a previous LHA coordinator, Georgia Brooks, who also sat for some time as part of the Salsa Soul Sisters board of directors. She created a small Salsa collection of board minutes but also contributed images and clippings that were interspersed throughout the collection. Black lesbians, Georgia, and others, like Barbara Smith, Jewelle Gomez, and Irare Sabasu, to name a few, had always been active at LHA. I used the zine format to outline this herstory, and I also had women come and perform the zine interspersed throughout the room, and every time we would go to another page, it would be another year. And

then somebody would stand up and personify the voice of the woman who, say, wrote the poem, or had written the essay, or had been just sort of narrating the piece that was presented for that year.

SM: I just have to go back to this planning discussion for these panels and the discussion that there were no Black lesbians in the seventies because that seems ridiculous given the context of the conference — centering lesbians!

SCC: The opinions were they were there, they just weren't doing anything.

SM: What do you make of that statement? Was it sarcastic, to say, because it hasn't been documented it doesn't exist?

SCC: No, it wasn't said in a critical way; it was said in an unfortunately evidential way. The only two Black lesbians in the room were me and a young woman who was a doctoral student at the CUNY Graduate Center in environmental psychology. She was not around in the seventies. We were both like, well, maybe they're right. I knew of Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith, but I was tired of them being the people that everyone called upon — exhausted for them to be having to speak for an entire community at all times.

SM: Like tokens.

SCC: Exactly. And you know, under-appreciatively. So, like, are they going to get paid for this? How are they going to get compensated? Like, every five seconds, when someone needs a Black lesbian of the time, that's them. I figured I would do my best to be the coordinator of whatever would happen. I would go to LHA to determine if there might indeed be nothing to find. It turns out there was *so much* material that I was, like, laughing out loud. I had it all smattered across on the table — and in just one box of many.

So that's why I made the zine, because I felt the need for other people to see these materials in the same way, just, like, a smattering of clippings.

SM: So, when you came across that box of materials, what was that process like? As you picked out materials, were you discovering all-new herstory, or did you have specific people or events in mind?

SCC: I was looking for names of specific people and also discovering new material at the same time. I was looking to do a traditional panel, so I was focusing in on names, but then it turned into publications and organizations and experiences and themes that were appearing, some of which were surprising when you put the words “Black” and “lesbian” together. One example was women who were being “butched” because they were Black and not because they identified as a butch lesbian. There was this assumption that their race made them more masculine, and I’ve had that experience. I’m all about being a femme, whether or not it’s obvious, but I have had people make this assumption about me, too.

I went to a Fire & Ink Conference in 2009 at the University of Texas, which was a convening for Black LGBT writers, and they put the speaker photos in the back of the program. I did a presentation on grants, research, and writing, so my photo was in there. At the end of the conference, I walked up to someone and asked, “Oh, how did you like it?” And they were like, “Oh, I thought the conference is great. But I really wish that I met this one person.” And I was like, “Oh, who is it?”

SM: It was you!

SCC: And there were, like, four women having this conversation together. And then one of them goes to the back of the program, and they’re all collectively like, “Oh yeah, she’s so hot. I wish I would have met her.” It’s me! I’m standing right in front of them, and they didn’t know it was me.

SM: [laughs and groans] Wow, did you eventually key them in?

SCC: Yeah, I told them it was me, and they were just so disappointed. I call that my butch photo, which I have used, and it has gotten me far. So, it’s true that there is a butching that

happens in the Black lesbian community. Yet, that was a photo. It definitely happens almost always in any version of interracial dating I've experienced. White lesbians that I've dated have all except once (and I've dated a lot of white women in my twenties) assumed I would take on the masculine role. I dated femme white women so as not to have to perform the dichotomized role-play, but it always backfired. In their defense, I can be very handsome, and do have these Jamaican muscles, and there is a part of me that hardens around femininity that I am attracted to, so...

Going back to the event I did at LHA with the zine I made, I thought maybe twenty-five people would come because I do events with LHA all the time. Over a hundred people came! I know because I made eighty copies of the zine, and we were well out of copies. People were sitting on the steps. People were arriving after the fact. I mean, it was like people were piling on top of each other. And a lot of the women were women from the time who came, so a lot of elder-dykes came. And by the end, once we got past seventy-five people, people started volunteering to read parts in the zine, to voice the sounds of the letters. We also had audio and video going, so there were other components to how people were experiencing the seventies at that time.

SM: Were they reading their own parts?

SCC: No, they were sort of like, "I came out to this" or, "I recall this journal of *Conditions*, issue five, the Black issue." That was sort of a landmark issue because it had national distribution, and the editors, Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, were guest editors, and Elly Bulkin was on the *Conditions* collective. There had been Black lesbians featured throughout the journal's history, but that was, like, *the* Black lesbian — or, the Black woman's issue, 'cause, you know, it was too soon to be "L" wording it.

Ultimately, at that LHA event, I made a lot of connections. In the fall panel — that was also a Black lesbian panel — Imani Rashid, who is one of the Salsa Soul folks, was put on the panel — "we" meaning Alexis Pauline Gumbs — who's a well-known Black

lesbian scholar who has done the mobile homecoming project — she and her partner, Sangodare. Alexis was on the final panel along with a South African intern who had worked with GALA, now named Jabu Pereira, an archivist. Although we were reading material from people of Salsa Soul and they were a part of the seventies outline, it was sort of like one of many things. But this LHA exhibit, event, and the zine I put together ended up being printed hundreds of times over. It traveled the country with a people of color zine tour with the POC Zine Project.

A few things would continue to happen throughout the years in relation to the Salsa Soul Sisters archive and my involvement in it. By 2013, I got platonically married, and we had a huge wedding at Imani's house in the Hamptons. Imani is one of the people that was on the board of Salsa Soul, and the wedding had a group of lesbians that were there to help perform the wedding — cook and serve the food, perform, and a DJ. Imani's friends came, and they were also Salsa Soul Sisters women.

This formal community meeting and conversations about history with the CLAGS conference turned into personal experiences and sharing family and witnessing life, all certain moments. I wrote about it in *Sinister Wisdom* 118, which pays homage to the Lesbian Herstory Archives turning 45. So, all of this sort of converged. That weekend allowed the trust to be gained for them to finally agree to have their collection sent to the LHA archives.

By 2016, I did a keynote at the LGBT ALMS conference (Archivists, Librarians, Museums, and Special Collections conference) in London on Salsa Soul Sisters as a current under-exposed and under-appreciated resource — but also about this hidden narrative of conflict that I find within lesbian of color communities. There tend to be issues with secrecy or distrust in general. And the distrust leads some people's stories to not be told because they end up not giving their materials to places that would preserve them. I compared it with Rivers of Honey, the cabaret that I helped to produce,

in that we had parallel issues where there was mistrust, infighting, and as a result, hurt feelings and lost friendships.

SM: Let's pause and trace the transfer. We start with you finding out about the Salsa Soul Sisters through the ALUSCC panel. You then begin research for the panel event and programming you're working on at LHA archives, and you're going through things, and they happen to be a part of your selected materials?

SSC: Well, the through-line is they were no longer just artifacts or documents — they were people. I'm sure I appreciated their work prior to that as well. But it was when I made eyes with them, broke bread with them, and constantly interacted with them in the community. In fact, a lot of the women who were doing SSS then are still active. They're currently doing LGBT Kwanzaa in New York. I've been to and performed at the Kwanzaa. Learning about their history — like, you're in a room full of elder dykes and they start telling you stories about back in the day and suddenly you really get a sense of what they were experiencing and where, what it was about, and what kind of spaces they were inhabiting, and what that must have been like. So, it's really about them being active and seeking out community still and working with women who are younger than them and passing it on and wanting to tell their stories.

The LHA event was a way for them to learn about me and know that I was connected to the archives. One of the women who I chose as a player for the zine performances is Kaz Mitchell, and I interviewed her partner, the late Jean Wimberly, for the Michigan Women's Music Festival issue of *Sinister Wisdom* 103 because she was one of the women who started the women of color tent there. Do you know about Michfest?

SSC: I do, and I've read that piece that you're talking about, but I never had a chance to go myself.

SSC: I was a Festie, and I think that the mission of the Michigan Women's Music Festival changed my life and really got me to understand the impact of the intergenerational nature of the

community, its culture, and the longevity of it. Michfest was also around from the seventies until now, or until then. The women of color tent there — there was nothing like it in the world. It was this magical possibility. Jean Wimberly was also a member of Salsa Soul, and she talks about how when she came to New York from Philadelphia, when she was just a young 20-something, she walked right into Salsa and that was sort of her connecting point to a community. And she had a van and would take women to Michfest. So, just the way that transferred on from everybody's individual story really did create community in different ways — those who are still around wanting to tell their stories.

In 2016, there was the keynote and the actual donation. So, it was that November that Cassandra Grant, Imani Rashid, Nancy Valentine, and Brahma Curry brought their objects to the archives as the official Salsa Soul Sisters organization donation. It could've been a typical donation process — say, for example, putting it in the mail and I could just receive it, send them a letter thanking them. But this was so ceremonious: we had catering and we poured libations and there were speeches and it was recorded.

SM: It was a celebration!

SSC: It was! I remember talking to Steven Fullwood, who started the Black LGBT archive at the Schomburg, about the experience of the SSS donation. And he says, you know, that's perfect — that's how it should *always* be. Whenever someone donates their materials into an archive, it should be a celebration, and it should be a recognition of that moment of transferring their material to this other place that's going to keep it and hold it. Having said that, I'm a bit critical of archives because when you put something in an archive, it's sort of like a back closet and leaving it for the devices of archivists to be cataloged. Depending on the resources of the organization, that's how detailed the cataloguing will be.

SM: It's sort of like a holding place.

SSC: Right! It's not a guarantee of some immortalizing force. I felt like the response from the donors was, "So now what, where's our website?"

SM: They expected instant engagement and public presence.

SSC: Absolutely. I wanted to be sensitive to that because they were distrustful in general about giving their material to an archive. I didn't want them to feel like, well, we gave it to the LHA and then they didn't do anything with it.

SM: Sure. You wanted to be good stewards.

SSC: Right. And so I said, well, it's not really the task of the archive to do something with it, at that intermediary point. When you go to library school and you learn archiving, you don't learn about exhibitions. They do more so nowadays. It's about access to the material as soon as possible. But initially, when I was in library school, you learned about preservation, and that was pretty much it. Like, here's how to put it in an HVAC facility. Here's how to catalog it and make it discoverable when it's sought after, but not here's how to get a grant to make an exhibition. It doesn't happen without resources and a staff. At LHA, we do have a collaboration with the Pratt School of Library Science where the students, throughout a course, will process an archive and they'll put it online, but that's full-time students who are using this to get employed after and they have the energy of students who are paying, who knows what, \$40,000 a semester to go to Pratt. It's not like a volunteer who's once a week coming in and spending two hours. There's a very different power behind that. We also contract with Gale Cengage to have digitized some of our collections and have them accessible via their online database, but this is a closed resource for institutions who can afford access. And even still, this is item-focused, keyword searching, which is very different from a Salsa Soul Sisters website.

So, all of that is to say, I did want to respond to their interest, and that's why we agreed to do an exhibition.

SM: And this was in 2016?

SSC: Yes, and then, of course, like, they donated it in November, but in October, I found out that I was pregnant after trying for three years, so then everything had to be on hold. My pregnancy wasn't easy. Even now, my baby's turning one, and I'm like, okay, I have to do this exhibition, but I got to come home and breastfeed. I'm not the same person that I was in 2010 when I did a program that one hundred people came to.

The reason why the exhibition was able to happen is due to a few reasons. The archives had just recently done exhibitions. There was a relationship with the gallery for which we had the exhibit that was pre-coordinated by an LHA Graphics committee. Some backstory on the Graphics Committee and any conversation about LHA exhibitions has to acknowledge that though many of the LHA coordinators are activists, or are librarians, one of our coordinators has a doctorate in art history and is also a pioneer in lesbian art activism, Dr. Flavia Rando. In 2006, I discovered LHA through a class at Brooklyn College, "The Lesbian Experience," that I petitioned to take and have kept in the women's studies department, taught by Flavia Rando, one of the original Radical Lesbians, which is one of the first radical lesbian organizations. In the syllabus, she put in a tour of the LHA. I was completely overcome. I still remember that tour. I went to the second floor room. I opened Audre Lorde's box, and I swear, I heard angels sing, you know, like, there was light coming from it.

It totally changed my life, and this course ended up having the highest enrollment in the women's studies department's history. And, in the ten years since they had taken it off and after three semesters of it, they changed the title to "The Women's Experience." They took out lesbian. When they offered it in 2006, after not giving it for ten years, every class had new people attending, sitting on the floor. It was packed. The course ended up taking the space of a support group. It was people coming out in real space with real people. It was therapy. It was activism. It was real learning.

SM: What's up with the name change?

SSC: I would say it was a homophobic move on the part of the women's studies department chair at the time. Flavia ended up leaving. There were legal ramifications. I mean, there was, like, a big thing surrounding this course.

SM: I imagine they tried to couch it within an enrollment argument.

SSC: One thing I know is people were concerned about putting lesbian on their transcripts. That was a valid concern. There was too much attention paid to the course and the school wasn't comfortable with that kind of attention. At the end of the day, Brooklyn College is a very conservative CUNY school. It had a lot of money from its Hillel house and from the Jewish alumni, it's a lot of private funding into that college, and they really just had to follow the money. So, Flavia ended up taking her course to LHA.

SM: Oh, wow.

SSC: I think it's in the sixth or seventh year she started the Lesbian Studies Institute, and every semester she teaches "The Lesbian Experience" at the archives. It's a ten-week course and has full enrollment every semester. She uses the archive for the course, as the course. And the course is going through the collection. I interview Flavia in a similar vein as this interview for *Sinister Wisdom* 118: *Forty-Five Years / Celebrating the Lesbian Herstory Archives*.

So, Flavia with her art history background, she became a coordinator of the archives, and she also helped to do some exhibitions. We worked on an exhibition with the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, and because the gallery is also a printmaking workshop, I was asked to be a zine resident. I pitched the idea of the SSS exhibition as I was still processing this collection. I have a meeting once a month with a volunteer, Stahimili Mapp, a Black lesbian elderdyke, to process it, but I knew they wanted it more than just labeled boxes. I decided that I would make my zine residency the SSS zine.

It was through the making of a zine, in the same way that it had been in 2010, that this other thing came about.

SM: What do you think is notable about the zine format?

SSC: People are excited about zines because they're sort of like an art book, and they're easily transferable. The format is easy to produce and inexpensive to replicate. There's still something about it that's a little bit underground, a little bit retro, and bad ass — rather than, say, a chapbook, which is very formal.

SM: And editioned, usually. There are rules.

SSC: Yeah, exactly. A zine can be whatever you want it to be. That makes people excited about it. And you don't know what it is going to be until you see it.

The zine for the Salsa Soul Sisters exhibition is meant to unveil itself at the exhibition. I think part of what the zine will become is not a comprehensive biography of the group but about my story and process exhibiting them. Somehow, it's going to incorporate the conversation of getting it into the archive.

SM: What are some of the objects from the collection that you're including and some of the more personal moments? Are there photos from your wedding?

SSC: Salsa was a very social group — summer excursions, dances, consciousness-raising groups, and discussion sessions — so we're going to have flyers from each of those to represent the fact that they met every Thursday and had an agenda and a calendar. I'm working on trying to get a map made that had points for where they met in the city. I think that maps are fun to locate us in space and time. They'll have the coordinates on the map and say they met in the Bronx and in Brooklyn, but they were also often in the West Village, and part of what they wanted to do was to buy a building, and that never happened. It always boils down to space and access to space in New York City. Had they bought that building, you know, what would be different now in terms of culture and lesbian narrative?

SM: And would the archive have been transferred to you or would the archive be living, still being made?

SSC: Right! We're going to have an altar with obituary cards from women who have passed.

SM: Is the altar going to be Black women in the lesbian community?

SSC: I think it's supposed to be SSS members, but it's possible that it could be people's friends. I think that would be expected because we're going to have a panel in the middle of it. I feel like the exhibit can shift and move and bend depending on who's in the room and what they want to add to it. We do want to give people the opportunity to donate their materials to the archives. We'll share what was donated, and then hopefully it encourages people to share materials they might want to preserve.

SM: Transfer your materials to this archive so that we can continue to build it. Would that be your vision for the show and the way that people are going to experience it — to come and maybe leave something behind?

SSC: We don't think that's a good idea because you don't want things to get lost, but we do want it to be a reconnection for those who have been like, those were still around. I mean, since 2010, when we did the original talk at the archives, so many women have passed in the past eight years, you know, as they would have, and so we want it to be another place for them to see each other and go out and have an evening of seeing their friends. We also want to attract the younger crowd of people who haven't heard of SSS before, who can in some ways find some new meaning in what they already do.

SM: So, the concept of transfer is in every single aspect of this — programming, exhibition, and the impetus for the whole thing.

SSC: As a community archivist, I see archiving as no other way than in the continuous exchange of narratives, the respect, and receipt of our lives. An honoring.