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Black Gay Genius Interview with Lisa C. Moore

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BLACK GAY GENIUS INTERVIEW WITH LISA C. MOORE BY SHAWN(TA) SMITH

In 2010 I moved to D.C. for one month. An internship brought me there, but by the time I quit I realized my one real purpose for being in the city was to “run into” Lisa C. Moore.

Coming from New York City, that’s how you meet folks, and it’s a strategic practice. You fall into them in line at the Whole Foods, or end up at the same lesbian event. If you are in the city at the same time as another dyke, you “run into” her, guaranteed. I made it an objective to “run into” Lisa C. Moore.

Before moving to D.C., in the center of my twenty-seventh year, there were only two women I’d canonized as my black lesbian icons: Audre Lorde and Lisa C. Moore. Identification as a lesbian, librarian, separatist, writer, and ancestral medium came from Audre’s list of classifications. Yet my interest in disseminating information, writing for community, highlighting points of access to a world of black lesbians, preserving our history and our voices, came from witnessing the accomplishments of Lisa C. Moore. Lorde is no longer living, but since Lisa and I are contemporaries, it was my duty as a younger and in-progress dykeling to run into her.

In D.C. I wound up living with a black lesbian poet who was also RedBone Press’s intern. What a wonder for me when my roommate offered to introduce me to the RedBone operation. After arranging to meet at her place, Lisa and I shared hot beverages beside her cats;

she toured me through her apartment, which to my surprise and delight was the hub of RedBone. The visit culminated with Lisa resurrecting her grad school thesis-turned-film project of interviews with black lesbian elders — “the only thing that wasn’t damaged in the fire of 2002,” she said. While Sharon Bridgforth’s poetic voice colored the montage of images, we reminisced over our elder women, and discovered the death of yet another fallen flower. “I have to do something with these stories,” she said, over and over. Her focus on this knowing led her to travel with the footage weeks later, out of her house, to a book party my roommate hosted. Lisa presented the footage to a room of black lesbians, connoting the beginning of something yet to be named.

Only a few days passed before I, still gasping at the reality of our initial encounter, ran into her on the subway — she on the up-escalator, I, heading down: “Shawn, what are you doing here?!” We talked briefly, her telling me about the local theater, me describing my archival research. Two days later, I ran into her again at the local theater’s fringe festival. She was exchanging tickets on the same day I went to see the play she had mentioned: Margaux Delotte Bennett’s *Black and Kinky Amongst Brown Waves*, one black woman’s journey to India.

In 2011, my return to New York meant a run-in with Lisa was unlikely. Instead, we became acquainted by a series of text messages and phone tag. She sought me out on Facebook at first to connect me with Margaux, the playwright, hinting that I produce her show in NYC at my theater collective. Of course I did, and the two-weekend run was a success. Lisa also enlisted me to moderate a discussion on the launch of a yearlong venture with her and filmmaker Tiona McClodden. Adjusting to the new title of producer, Lisa, along with Tiona, constructed a project to continue to resurrect the stories of black lesbian elders. They “named” the resulting effort *The Untitled Black Lesbian Elder Project*, a feature-length documentary honoring the legacy of black

lesbian elders. A year after our first encounter, moderating the panel was grounding. Seventy black lesbians, elders, friends, filled the room; and I felt, for the first time, that our run-in was centered, a togetherness that felt right and true.

When asked to interview Lisa for *Black Gay Genius*, I planned it for before the New Year, when I would be visiting an aunt in Kansas City, Missouri. Lisa would be at home, likely sitting in the same place where we once sipped tea. What an honor, I thought, to formally interview Lisa C. Moore. In my lifetime, Lisa has hewn herself into the woman to turn to for all young black lesbian writers. She is the founder of RedBone Press, a small press with a wide distribution publishing work that celebrates the culture of black lesbians and gay men, and promotes understanding between black gays and lesbians and the black mainstream. Moore is the editor of *does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories*; co-editor of *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity*; and co-editor, co-compiler, and co-publisher (with Vintage Entity Press) of *Carry the Word: A Bibliography of Black LGBTQ Books*. She reprinted *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, the focal point of this interview. Finally, she is executive producer and writer of *The Untitled Black Lesbian Elder Project*, a feature-length documentary honoring the legacy of black lesbian elders. Moore is board president of Fire & Ink, an advocacy organization for LGBT writers of African descent.

Lisa said she didn't really celebrate holidays so it was no matter to her that it was Christmas Eve. While the rest of the world went shopping, for her it was quiet time. I called an hour early; we talked for two.

SDS: Lisa, what made you decide to reprint *In the Life*?

LCM: A large part of my sales come from the academy. When talking to academics, they'd say

when assigning *In the Life* as class reading that access was difficult. As a publisher, I have to think of my audience, and I want to reach out to a growing audience of younger people. These books are classics for a certain generation of black gay men, and so can be used as a tool to mentor younger generations. *In the Life*, like other books of its time, came together as an act of love, and I wanted to offer it again in that same vein. Really, it was running into people that had no idea that *In the Life* existed that made me realize getting this book into print had to happen. I took a look around and thought,; no one else would publish this.

SDS: Does that happen often, your impetus to publish what you find no one else will?

LCM: I ask myself, “Is it necessary?” I’ve always said that if it is important enough and necessary, then I should go for it.

SDS: Was it difficult to do? The entire process of republishing: how was it different from other projects that you’ve edited?

LCM: I had to write Alyson Books (then Alyson Publications) to ask them if *In the Life* was in fact out of print, and if so, who owns the rights. They wrote me and said it was out of print.

Although they published it first, fortunately for me, Beam had the rights, and I had to contact the estate in order to move forward. I also re-published *Brother to Brother*, another title initially published by Alyson Publications; I ended up researching the contributors for both books at the same time. I also had to retype the whole book (well, both books) because Alyson didn’t have a digital copy to pass on to me. It was in the process of doing this work of excavation that Dorothy Beam, who held the estate of Joseph Beam, transferred the literary estate over to me. This was a huge honor. *In the Life* contributor Brad Johnson later also transferred his literary estate to me, as he was very ill and wanted his writing to be available after his death.

SDS: Ah yes, Ms. Dorothy Beam. Please, please, tell me about your experience with her!

LCM: When we first spoke, she thought I was contacting her about printing a children's book she had written. When I explained that I was actually contacting her about her son, well, she opened up then. She's in her eighties; we would talk on the phone in the beginning, but eventually she let me into her home; and when not communicating in person, she liked to write letters. I've kept our correspondence in an archival folder alongside her son's estate. In her letters she said how thankful she was to have Joseph Beam's writing back in the world through publication.

SDS: And the men: How was contacting the men for you — digging to find everyone and tell them that you would revive their words?

LCM: I contacted the contributors one by one. I found some on Facebook, some through the grapevine; others were published elsewhere and I contacted their publishers. Doing the work of excavating these two books, *Brother to Brother* and *In the Life*, has taught me a lot about how much I love research. Overall it was like calling someone and telling them they've won something [*Laughs*]. They were all so surprised. It brought me a lot of joy to offer to them this second round, but I also got to see some of the pain.

SDS: How so? Pain relating to aging, being gay, black, male?

LCM: I came out in the '80s. My brother had AIDS (and died of a gunshot wound), but I had to deal with the pain of that loss and his diagnosis in the span of a year. Compiling this collection and talking to the men led me to see exactly how time affects pain. To be alive but know that all of your people are gone, every single one of your friends and lovers and enemies has just vanished, and it's because of this disease, encrypted by silence. That's pain! A lot of the black

gay men I contacted were kind of standoffish, and from doing this project, I saw that it was because they don't want to go back to that pain. That's a lot of pain that they're carrying around.

SDS: Were there any people that you could not contact?

LCM: After two years of searching and contacting I reached almost everyone. A couple of contributors have died, and I couldn't find their relatives. I published their pieces anyway; I'm hoping that their families find me through the words, hopefully proud and nostalgic. Two people refused to have their work in the book: one stated that he was straight, and no longer interested; the other refusal was about bad politics.

SDS: How did offering reprints of published works, namely *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, change the face of RedBone Press?

LCM: RedBone Press was originally a black lesbian press; I'll give you that. We published *does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories*, and then *the bull-jean stories*, by Sharon Bridgforth, both of which won Lambda Literary Awards. Broadening the audience meant slowly opening up to becoming a press that embraces all black gay and lesbian community. Once I put those books out, a lot of older black gay men were paying attention and contacting the press.

SDS: Yes, let's talk community. As a separatist, you know I have to ask: why men?

LCM: Wait now! I have to say that when reading Beam, you will see that even in his very first page, in the introduction, he points to consulting Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and others. These women were his inspiration for courage. You can't deny what I realized, which is that Beam was a feminist.

SDS: Are there any lesbian reprints that are on your mind to bring back to the world?

LCM: *Conditions 5* is on my mind. I don't know how to make an ISSN into an ISBN though. But like my working with these previous anthologies, I learn as I go along. I'm wrapping my brain around reprinting a journal into a book.

SDS: *Conditions 5* is a huge deal. When I worked with the Lesbian Herstory Archives in 2010 to put together the *Black Lesbians in the '70s Zine* during the Lesbians in the '70s Conference led by the CUNY Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, I included *Conditions 5* in my presentation. Many of the older dykes who attended were ecstatic to see an original copy. A couple of women stood and read from pieces that touched their coming out, and mentioned that *Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue* was their first indicator that they weren't alone.

LCM: Oh woe is you! You are always surrounded by lesbians. Since the publishing of *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, now I am surrounded by men. I mean, women send me stuff, but the men are surrounding me.

SDS: Interesting. I'm still coming to terms with black gay men. Even as a separatist, I still see black men as a source of community. How has your relationship to men shifted?

LCM: We are community, but there are still differences. Listen, they are gay, but they are still men. Since male and female dynamics exist, I have to be cautious. Some men I've worked with expect me to do all of the work. Men I don't know want me to reprint their books. As a result of publishing, I am friends with men, but it can be tiring sometimes. As a black woman, I'm expected to deal, but the reality is, I cannot deal with everybody's stuff. I find myself having to

constantly pay attention to how much I give to others, remembering to draw the line and take care of myself.

SDS: Thank you for speaking with me, Lisa; as always, it is a treat to hear your stories. In closing, I must ask: Since you typed the entire book, you must have grown close to the text. What was the most memorable section for you?

LCM: Of course it's difficult to pick one. I'll name two: First, the Samuel Delany interview called "Samuel R. Delany: The Possibility of Possibilities." This was my introduction to Samuel Delany. His intelligence kind of blows you away. Second, I'd choose Joe Beam's "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart." I got a piece of Joe Beam in that portion. I never got to meet him, so it was as if he and I were in conversation. There, he talks about the different types of black gay men. His message of black men loving black men as revolutionary is really the epicenter of the collection [*pauses*] ... 'cause there's so much hurt. There are so many men that I meet that don't trust black men, or each other. Black gay men have so much to deal with, so much pain; society doesn't support them in any measure. Joe Beam saw all of this and was hoping for a collection of writing that could speak to that. And it did.

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