

BITCH IN: REINA GOSSETT

“I feel like we should organize a Trans Nunchucks Club,” says Reina Gossett, half-jokingly, from her apartment in Brooklyn. The activist, archivist, and staffer at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a transgender legal aid organization, has both organizing and martial arts in her blood. She grew up with a union-organizer mom and self-defense-instructor dad who met at a meeting for the group ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) as part of the black freedom movement in the 1970s.

Wielding nunchucks was the only martial art she learned from her dad (“I don’t carry a pair, so it’s not too useful,” she says), but she takes the concept of self-defense for gender-nonconforming people seriously, due to the prevalence of violence against trans people. “I can’t count how many memorials I’ve been to in just the past couple years for murdered trans women of color,” says the 30-year-old.

As the mainstream LGBTQ movement continues to funnel funds into campaigns for gay marriage and more trans police officers, it has done little to stop the unrelenting violence against trans people or to improve the day-to-day lives of gender-nonconforming people. But Gossett is fighting back in a multitude of ways, including digging up the often-forgotten history of trans activism.

Gossett believes “the erasure of trans liberation movements is part of the transphobia that many of us have to navigate every day.” In 2006, she started collecting bits and pieces of the 1970s activist group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries

(STAR), cofounded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. As Gossett reached out to old friends and mentees of Johnson’s, they guided her to more footage, photos, and ephemera from the STAR cofounders. She cites an interview that Rivera and early *Village Voice* writer Arthur Bell did with a trans woman who went to New York’s Bellevue Hospital “for an asthma attack but was being held for a psychiatric disability” in 1970 as one of her favorite pieces, as it unites disability justice with queer liberation work. She’s put the archive up on the web (thespiritwas.tumblr.com), and some of it will end up in a film on STAR that Gossett plans to release in 2015.

One of Gossett’s gifts is integrating these historic chronicles of trans activism with current-day activism: speaking at colleges, at Zuccotti Park, or on network TV and inspiring audiences to work toward a world where gender nonconformity doesn’t come with a reduced life expectancy. She brings that inspiration to her work at the SRLP, where as membership director she organizes events that help trans people know their rights around police, in hospitals, and behind bars—and connects them to political campaigns, like a current one focusing on access to healthcare.

According to Gossett, Rivera’s and Johnson’s refusal to stay quiet paved the way for today’s slow-but-sure pop cultural acceptance of trans individuals. Actor Laverne Cox of the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* is one of Gossett’s friends. “Before *Orange Is the New Black*, there wasn’t a visible portrayal of a black trans woman



REINA GOSSETT WANTS YOU TO KNOW ABOUT:

BROOKLYN OPEN ACUPUNCTURE

Existing outside of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) this small business provides invaluable sliding-scale acupuncture to New Yorkers whose healthcare needs have been treated as disposable by New York City’s local government.

DISABILITY JUSTICE COLLECTIVE

A nationwide movement of loosely affiliated members, the Disability Justice Collective works to combat ableism through art, meet-ups, and workshops. At events like Detroit’s annual Allied Media Conference, the collective spreads the gospel of disability organizing as intimately linked to the struggles of queer and people-of-color organizing. Preach!

TRANS DAY OF ACTION

Held every June in conjunction with the anniversary of Stonewall, it’s a day to hold accountable New York City agencies and institutions that are violent toward low-income trans and gender-nonconforming people of color. Gossett says it’s also about “creating joy and pleasure with each other [and] developing relationships in our own community to end violence.”

TRANS JUSTICE FUNDING PROJECT

This organization pools funds for gender-justice projects, particularly in places beyond the queer capitols of New York and San Francisco. Past grantees include the Pennsylvania-based queer prisoner advocacy collective Hearts on a Wire and the Atlanta-based support group Transgender Individuals Living Their Truth.

navigating real issues. As the show reaches wider audiences, it “quote-unquote sensitizes people to trans life and the fact that trans lives matter,” says Gossett. That being said, “Just because queerness and transness might be extra visible on BuzzFeed,” it doesn’t always translate into an easier life for trans people.

More important than visibility alone is “people outside of the

binary owning the ways [their] visibility happens,” whether in a martial arts studio or on Netflix. But if those narratives “aren’t linked to ending ableism, decolonizing, or ending the prison-industrial complex [and] all other forms of oppression,” she says assertively, “those are not projects that I’m going to put my energy into.”

—Toshio Meronek