

History Happens

News from the



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August 2018

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Policy advisor, cultural strategist
and writer Aria Sa'id, founder of
the Kween Collective

Reflecting on the Compton's Cafeteria Riot: Why Transgender History Matters Today

by Nick Large

Three years prior to the Stonewall Riots of 1969, San Francisco experienced one of the earliest known acts of queer resistance against police oppression. The riot at Compton's Cafeteria, as the 1972 program for Pride in San Francisco noted, took place "in the streets of the Tenderloin, at Turk and Taylor on a hot August night in 1966." With no

news coverage at the time, the exact date is lost to history. Gaining significant attention after Susan Stryker's documentary *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005) was released, the story has been making its way into the mainstream LGBTQ narrative.

With ever-increasing real-estate development around the building that housed Compton's, its history has taken an important place in debates about planning and diversity in San Francisco. One of the activists leading these discussions is Aria Sa'id, a senior policy advisor, cultural strategist, writer and founder of the [Kween Culture Initiative](#). Sa'id also cofounded the Compton's Transgender Cultural District, recognized by the city in 2017. In this interview with *History Happens*, she offers her thoughts on why Compton's matters and on the role history can play today for the transgender and greater LGBTQ communities.

What makes the story of the Compton's Cafeteria Riot meaningful for the LGBTQ community – and particularly the transgender community?

What makes the story of the Compton's Cafeteria Riot meaningful for the LGBTQ community is the reality of how powerful queer and transgender people are. Transgender people have been intimately involved in social justice and liberation since the dawn of our existence, yet we are rarely acknowledged for that labor, that sacrifice and that altruism.

Often transgender people are the most visible targets of discrimination, systemic oppression and violence -- so often the only option we have is to fight back. I think it's an experience that still resonates with queer and transgender people today and is a core reason why we gravitate to the legacy of the Compton's Cafeteria Riot. It's also a story of unity, where transgender people and queer people were in the fight for equality together. There's a nostalgia in our community for that sense of unity.

How can this story and other moments in transgender history inform organizing for our communities today?

The Compton's Cafeteria Riot teaches us that our voices are powerful and they matter. The police would consistently harass and arrest male-assigned individuals who wore more than three articles of "feminine clothing." Transgender and gender nonconforming people were tired of this harassment. They had had enough -- and that's what led them to riot. Yet, transgender people are still having to fight for basic human rights: the right to use the suitable bathroom; the right to change government documents to affirm who we are -- and the list goes on.

When I think of community organizing for today, it's essential that transgender people -- and in particular, transgender women of color -- be provided leadership roles. Too often, we are an afterthought, and we are consistently disallowed from spaces that claim to empower us. That's it. That's the lesson. It is the responsibility of queer communities to

empower transgender communities both socially and economically. Simply put, queer liberation exists because of transgender people. History tells us that over and over again.

How can we make stories like the Compton's Cafeteria Riot, and transgender history in general, more widely known?

The reality is that much of queer and transgender history, especially involving people of color, is oral history because institutions did not deem us as possessing a culture worth documenting. Transgender people have existed since the dawn of time, and we've been called a host of different names and references -- but that history is inaccessible to us.

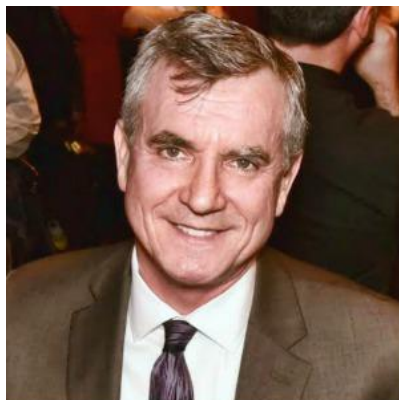
It's important that we broadcast our history and our culture in as many different ways as possible. It's important that we also acknowledge all the aspects of our history, both history that makes us proud to be a part of a magnanimous legacy and history that makes us deeply uncomfortable.

That's why the GLBT Historical Society is necessary. It's why I created Kween Culture Initiative. It's why we need the [Generations: Black LGBTQI+ Celebration](#) every February in San Francisco and why we need projects like the [Queer Cultural Center](#) and [Peacock Rebellion](#). They allow us to embrace both the here and now, as well as the past.

Nick Large is an LGBTQ, API and Japanese American activist studying LGBTQ movements and place-based organizing in San Francisco. He recently joined the GLBT Historical Society Board of Directors.

From the Staff

Your Legacy Gives Our History a Secure Future



by Terry Beswick

Last year at the GLBT Historical Society, we launched our [Legacy Circle](#) program as a way to provide support and information about planned giving options to potential benefactors and to thank our supporters who have designated a gift for the Historical Society in their estate planning.

In just the past two years, the society has received almost a half-million dollars in financial bequests. For a growing nonprofit with great aspirations, these funds make a huge difference to our ongoing programs and give us the opportunity to invest in further capacity-building.

More and more people passionate about queer history from around the world have been visiting our archives and museum. To respond to this increasing demand, we have set as one of the central goals in our [Five-Year Strategic Plan](#) the establishment of a full-scale New Museum of LGBTQ History and Culture. The objective is to bring our archives, exhibitions and programs together in a much larger LGBTQ public history center in San Francisco -- the first such institution anywhere in the world.

Reaching the Goal: A New Museum

Reaching this goal will require creating a substantial endowment fund and launching a capital campaign to secure a site, build the new museum and make it fully operational. We know this is a big challenge, yet we are encouraged by the planning support we have received from city and state government, foundations and corporations, our members and donors -- and in particular, the members of our [Legacy Circle](#).

"Having been a volunteer at both the archives and museum for over 10 years, I'm clear on the importance of the work the GLBT Historical Society does," says Tom Burtch, who with his husband, Neil Austin, is a founding member of the Legacy Circle.

"My husband and I never dreamed we would be in the position to leave a legacy gift of any kind to any charity we support," Tom adds. "But our financial planner thought otherwise and asked us to think about a gift from our estate. We feel so blessed by the community here in San Francisco, and in no small part that community and its history are preserved by the contributions of all kinds by the heroes of the past. Our gift aims to support that work when we are no longer here to contribute in person."

Whether or not you have papers and memorabilia to donate to our archives, you can be a part of ensuring our richly diverse LGBTQ history is not forgotten. All our struggles and triumphs deserve to be preserved and shared today and with future generations. By joining our [Legacy Circle](#), your memory will live on through the work of our archives and museum. For more information about planned giving and to join the Legacy Circle, [click here](#).

Terry Beswick is executive director of the GLBT Historical Society.

In the Archives

A Trans Dyke in Search of Her Ancestors

by Alexis Benjamin



As a trans dyke interning at the GLBT Historical Society archives this summer, I'm constantly reminded of how women like me have been pushed out of queer spaces, had our genders invalidated by ignorance or malice, or were simply ignored. To step into the archives is to travel back in time, which for trans women can be a painful act. So when *History Happens* asked me to write about a favorite item I had found in the archives, the

choice was far from simple.

One of our oldest collections of trans material comes from *Transvestia* (1952-1979), the first magazine for trans women in the United States. But the content is assimilationist to the core, with no room offered for trans dykes. So instead I found myself drawn to less well-known things, such as *TransSisters* (1993-1995), a trans feminist magazine, and *Transsexual News Telegraph* (1993-2000), a magazine that proudly proclaimed you wouldn't see ads for makeup or shopping inside.

Discovering *Venus Infers*

Another item that caught my eye is the magazine *Venus Infers* (1993-1994) produced by the Cuir Underground: An article in the first issue deals with why FTM but not MTF spectrum trans people were allowed at a leather dyke gathering. The article criticizes the gender essentialism of the policy, but doesn't call for a boycott of such events. I was fascinated to find a subsequent letter to the editor by transgender historian Susan Stryker criticizing the author for not supporting trans women more strongly.

So what I've found in the archives isn't a single favorite artifact or text. Instead, I've gained an understanding of what the generations before me fought through -- and a feeling of camaraderie as my generation continues to fight. I've found a sense of the spaces those trans dykes in earlier years made for themselves and how I can inhabit them in the present. And from a painful past, I've gained inspiration to continue building a better future for trans dykes.

Alexis Benjamin is a trans dyke graduate student at the Faculty of Information of the University of Toronto. When she isn't in an archives or museum, she's active in martial arts, roller derby and challenging transphobes.

Upcoming Events

[Community Forum](#)

Fighting Back: Transgender Rights Activism



Wednesday, August 22

7:00-9:00 PM

The GLBT History Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

[Free Tickets](#) | \$5.00 Donation Welcome

The latest in our monthly "Fighting Back" series exploring contemporary queer issues in a historical context, this community forum will

offer a multigenerational conversation about the emergence and evolution of transgender rights activism in San Francisco and beyond. A panel of historians, veteran organizers and younger activists will highlight the struggle and self-determination found in transgender lives, politics and cultures and will discuss how this history can help inform today's resistance movements. The event will mark the 52nd anniversary of the Compton's Cafeteria Riot of August 1966 in San Francisco's Tenderloin, one of the earliest instances of militant transgender protest against police oppression. Reserve your free tickets [here](#).

[Panel Discussion](#)

[Latinx Queerness: LGBTQ Visibility in Latinx Arts](#)



Thursday, August 23

7:00-9:00 PM

The GLBT History Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

[\\$5.00](#) | [Free for Members](#)

LGBTQ artists in a range of media have long played a vital role in Latinx culture in the Bay Area -- and Latinx culture contributes to the wider diversity of the region's arts community.

This panel brings together local Latinx artists and activists to discuss this cultural dynamic, with a particular focus on how art can address issues of LGBTQ Latinx visibility and can raise awareness about violence against LGBTQ people. The discussion will be moderated by Orlando de la Garza, artist and curator of "Intimate Aphorisms: An Anthology of Queer Latinx Narratives," a recent exhibition at the [Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts](#) (MCCLA). Panelists include photographer Fabian Echevarria, MCCLA gallery coordinator Angelica Rodriguez and performer Shane Zaldivar. Purchase advance tickets [here](#).

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THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY GALA



FRIDAY OCTOBER 5, 2018

FEATURING
MX JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND!

THE GREEN ROOM
SF WAR MEMORIAL
& PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
VIP: 5:30-6:30 GALA 6:30-9:30

 **GLBT Historical Society**
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PHOTO: DAVID KIMELMAN

TICKETS: WWW.GLBTHISTORY.ORG/GALA/

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EXHIBITIONS & PROGRAMS

The GLBT History Museum

4127 18th St.

San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 621-1107

www.glbthistory.org/museum

Monday - Saturday: 11:00 AM - 6:00 PM

Sunday: Noon - 5:00 PM

ARCHIVES & RESEARCH CENTER

The GLBT Historical Society

989 Market St., Lower Level

San Francisco, CA 94103-1708

(415) 777-5455

www.glbthistory.org/archives

Call to schedule a research appointment.

CREDITS. Feature: Photo courtesy Aria Sa'id. From the Staff: Photo of Terry Beswick by **Gareth Gooch**. In the Archives: Alexis Benjamin at the 2018 San Francisco Dyke March; photo courtesy Alexis Benjamin. Upcoming Events: 2018 San Francisco Trans March; photo by Nalini Elias. Latinx Queerness: Detail of *No Me Toques, Ando Chida* (2018), acrylic on canvas by Orlando de la Garza; courtesy of the artist.

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