

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

11/17 at 6PM

FREE EVENT at [New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park](#) visitor center

A statement from David France, director and producer of *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*

In 1992, the year that activist Marsha P. Johnson was killed, I was writing for the *Village Voice* covering AIDS and the general LGBTQ beat in New York City. Marsha had been a friend of mine, and her story fell to me to report. I started investigating right away, but with no active leads and the exploding AIDS crisis in New York, I let the story slip away. For years, my decision has haunted me.

When making my first feature, *How To Survive A Plague*, I kept a “Projects Board” of other stories I wanted to explore in future work. Marsha’s story was always the most prominent, because I felt a duty to investigate her death the way I had not been able to in 1992.

Reina Gossett has suggested that I’ve stolen both the concept and footage for *The Death and Life of Marsha P Johnson* from her work, the experimental short narrative *Happy Birthday, Marsha*. I owe a debt to those who have kept Marsha’s story alive over the years. My creative work builds on theirs. But it is its own scholarship. My research team and I spoke with every friend and associate of Marsha and Sylvia Rivera’s that we could reach, and poured through a vast archive to arrive at our film, aided immeasurably by the Anti Violence Project, whose story is at the center of my film. We sourced, digitized, and licensed the archival footage. Our intention was always to have archival footage allow for Marsha and Sylvia to tell their stories in their own voices. Nothing in the film’s concept, research or execution came from anyone outside of this process or our immediate team.

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I found out about the existence of Gossett's film years after I had started research for my film. I reached out to her to see about sharing resources, at which point she informed me she was working on a scripted short film about Marsha and Sylvia in the hours leading up to Stonewall, which is not at all the focus of my film. These stories seemed different enough to me that there was no cause for concern — they were both about Marsha and Sylvia, but Marsha and Sylvia are two of the most important people in the history of the LGBTQ rights movement, and there have been many films already made about them (including Arthur Dong's 1995's PBS documentary *The Question of Equality*, where I first witnessed Sylvia's firebrand speech at the 1973 Gay Power rally). It seemed there was room in the landscape for both films with very different stories, methods and approaches. As part of a sincere desire to see their film completed, I connected Gossett, her co-director Sasha Wortzel, and their producers with our funder.

I admire Reina Gossett and look forward to her beautiful film. Alone among researchers, she has dedicated her work to the legacy of Marsha and early trans activism. Yet in terms of funding and support, I witnessed the obstacles she faces as an artist who is also a transgender woman of color, obstacles that have been far less onerous for me in pursuit of my craft. Racism and transphobia are hideous cancers. By joining my voice to the campaign for Marsha's justice, I hoped to amplify that call, not complicate it, and to bring whatever attention I could draw to this history and those who defend it. But I have complicated it nonetheless. I know that history-telling is not a zero sum equation. But funding and cultural power can be. It is wrong that our projects have not received equal attention. I re-double my commitment to bringing *Happy Birthday, Marsha* the attention and backing it needs and deserves, and hope that you will too.

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From Instagram reinaxgossett



reinxgossett
Neptune

Follow

reinxgossett #deepshare #realtruth this week while I'm borrowing money to pay rent, david france is releasing his multimillion dollar netflix deal on marsha p johnson. i'm still lost in the music trying to #pay_it_no_mind and reeling on how this movie came to be and make so much \$ off of our lives and ideas. david got inspired to make this film from a grant application video that @sashawortzel & I made and sent to Kalamazoo/Arcus Foundation social justice center while he was visiting. He told the people who worked there -i shit you not- that he should be the one to do this film, got a grant from Sundance/Arcus using my language and research about STAR, got Vimeo to remove my video of Sylvia's critical "y'all better quiet down" speech, that i experienced so much violence to get, had his staff call Sasha up at work to get our contacts then hired my and Sasha's *ADVISOR* to our Marsha film Kimberly Reed to be his producer. And that's just the shit I have the spoons to name. TRUST THERE'S SO MUCH MORE. This kind of extraction/excavation of black life, disabled life, poor life, trans life is so old and so deeply connected to the violence Marsha had to deal with throughout her life. So I feel so much rage and grief over all of this & STAR must have some serious level plan on moving through many---and clearly by any means necessary---to get the message out... So tonight I'm channeling high priestess energy to show me the honey throne cuz this storm queen is 🤔🤔

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Further Reading on the Films and the Controversy

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/the-death-and-life-of-marsha-p-johnson-victoria-cruz>

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/reina-gossett-marsha-p-johnson-op-ed>

<https://jezebel.com/who-owns-marsha-p-johnsons-story-1819347978>

http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2017/10/13/marsha_p_johnson_netflix_doc_raises_questions_over_what_trans_led_storytelling.html

<http://beta.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-capsule-death-life-marsha-johnson-review-20171005-story.html>

<https://www.avclub.com/the-death-and-life-of-marsha-p-johnson-is-more-than-ju-1819107943>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/movies/the-death-and-life-of-marsha-p-johnson-review.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/05/death-life-marsha-p-johnson-review-documentary>

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-marsha-p-johnson-doc-reina-gossett-david-france-20171009-htmistory.html>

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/marsha-p-johnson-documentary-david-france-reina-gossett-stealing-accusations>

<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/icymi-filmmaker-reina-gossett-says-death-and-life-marsha-p-johnson-director-stole-her-work>

<https://www.allure.com/story/janet-mock-why-i-stand-by-reina-gossett-marsha-p-johnson>

<http://www.motherjones.com/media/2017/10/the-plagiarism-accusations-keep-rolling-in-for-this-netflix-doc/>

<http://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/netflix-director-david-france-accused-stealing-reina-gossett-research-1201884876/>

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<https://www.bustle.com/p/the-death-life-of-marsha-p-johnson-is-being-accused-of-using-work-by-a-trans-woman-of-color-without-credit-its-a-familiar-story-for-trans-artists-update-2892663>

The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson

<http://www.marshapjohnsonmovie.com>

<http://www.marshapjohnsonmovie.com/statement-from-david-france-in-response-to-reina-gossett/>

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/MarshaMovie>

Happy Birthday Marsha!

www.facebook.com/HBDmarsha

<http://www.happybirthdaymarsha.com>

<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/happy-birthday-marsha-post-production-lgbt#/>

Resources:

Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples 2nd Edition
by Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America 5th Edition by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva