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A RARE SPECIES IN THE MIDWEST

Ruben Quesada

“Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” - Reinhold Niebuhr

In thinking about the impact of art on society, and in my case the impact of literature, I look back to the poetry of Walt Whitman, who in 1855 self-published *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s determination and willful inclusivity put him ahead of his time. Adapting to the changing pressures of the world around him, Whitman took the subject of the Civil War to render with convincing appeal the volatility of his nature and time. He resisted existing poetics conventions and used candid language to more accurately represent the world around him; he showed the beauty and ugliness of the men and women in America on equal terms. The subject of his poetry was of the ordinary—the working class, drug addicts, prostitutes, the rich and the poor. The tradition of Whitman’s “barbaric YAWP over the roofs of the world” continued to echo through most of the Twentieth century. It was subsequent generations of poets who sustained this idea (e.g., Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago*, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Gwendolyn Brooks’ *The Bean Eaters*). Poetry for and about everyday Americans was born with Whitman and for most of the Twentieth century it became the standard. Readers like to see themselves in the stories they hear; they like the familiar.

In many ways the stories found in literature help readers understand what is artful, beautiful, or good. As a poet the world around me informs the content of what I write. Often, as with any art, social and political movements influence its content and creation. Many social and political revolutions have been born through art because it has the power to make us question what is right and wrong. Take for instance the work of performance artists Karen Finley and Tim Miller, two of the *NEA Four* whose artwork led them to be denied an NEA grant because of the content of their artwork; the content of their work led lawmakers, artists, and art lovers to question what they considered to be art. Where do we draw the line between

pornography and art? What is art?

Today as a writer and reader in America I struggle to find visionary ideas, values, and models that reflect who I am; I am a gay, Latino in the Midwest. Where do I turn to find myself reflected in the things I see? Who is urging me to resist or question social conventions? Where is Walt Whitman when I need him? I have looked in my own backyard, and I was hard pressed to find these models and values where I live. And after sharing my experience with and speaking to numerous gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered writers and editors, I discovered that their experience wasn't much different. Whether an LGBTQ person was in a metropolis, or a college town, their experience in public never felt welcomed. There is a need for LGBTQ stories to be told in a public and meaningful way.

Last year, 2013, a study named the city of Champaign the fifth best place to live for a healthy work-life balance. I moved here for work. However, my work-life balance work has been challenged by the lifestyle that dominates this community. Like most cities in the Midwest, if I had been a white, cisgendered man I would easily find models and institutions to support my family, my values, and my community in the arts—but I'm not and I didn't find any support. It is with this in mind that I came to launch a literary arts organization to create safe storytelling space for people of color and those in the LGBTQ community. I found it necessary for other people of color and queer-identified people to see those like them represented in public venues within their own communities. Too often, underrepresented individuals in small communities are expected to move to the "big city" to feel safe or to find community, but this may not be a feasible option, especially in an economically depressed society.

The need for safety and community is why I created an organization called Stories and Queer (S&Q). S&Q is a traveling reading series that establishes relationships with community organizations like bookstores, colleges and universities, and with local arts organizations to hold readings and feature local poets & writers of color or those who identify as LGBTQ. These readings are open and free to the public and broadcast live online. This endeavor faced some challenges from the onset in the local community. Change is

difficult and the growing pains that S&Q has caused within my community resonate to the point of exclusionary practices by existing local literary organizations from literary festivals and community events. From the onset S&Q has looked beyond the immediate community to serve the needs of communities outside of its own.

It is with great satisfaction that S&Q serves underrepresented communities around the country. Within the first six months of its establishment S&Q featured over two-dozen artists in Illinois, Louisiana, Washington, Connecticut, and New York. The readings are held in both urban and suburban communities to enable local artists to tell their stories. As S&Q grows so does its infrastructure. S&Q is in the process of establishing an advisory board and relationships with national literary conferences. This year, S&Q plans to feature artists in Arizona and Missouri. Over the next 2 – 5 years, S&Q plans to partner with annual literary festivals to invite members of rural communities to tell their stories. S&Q is committed to creating community for people of color and queer-identified people who need a space to tell their stories.

Storytelling is a central component to Stories and Queer. We seek to offer a space for voices that go unheard because of economic and/or geographic marginalization. It is especially important to have the stories of people who have been geographically disenfranchised in rural communities to be heard. There are many organizations that have created oral history archives celebrating leaders and activists of the LGBTQ community. Organizations like the LGBT Religious Archives Network (LGBT-RAN), the on-going oral history project of the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center's Senior Services Department, the University of South Florida's LGBT Oral History Project, the Bay Area and Northern California's GLBT History Society oral history project, Rutgers University's Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rice University's Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality collaboration with Houston Public Library to collect oral histories of the Houston LGBT community, or University of Wisconsin-Madison's LGBT oral history project. There are a number of institutions that have recognized the importance of the LGBT experience, both past and present. And while the voices of these larger communities have an outlet and institutional support, there are

many in smaller communities who have yet to be heard. It is S&Q's mission to reach those who have no existing infrastructure or institutional support to be heard. We want to find you and have your story told.

Addressing the globalized dimension of geographic disparity is essential in understanding new and often unheard experiences by the LGBTQ community in the United States. The social, political, and economic marginality of queer people and people of color and what sustains them is essential in understanding and redefining what it means to be a queer person and a person of color in America. As the LGBTQ community makes strides in advancing civil and equal rights alongside white, cisgendered counterparts, it is S&Q's aim to have the stories of LGBTQ people & people of color in geographically marginalized communities to be told. I am delighted that there is a growing awareness of the many stories that encompass the American spirit. It is imperative to feature underrepresented voices in communities where these stories have always existed but have been unheard. It is the vision of Stories and Queer that many years from now the stories of LGBTQ people from the past and the present are preserved and available for future generations in order to understand and examine the struggle of all LGBTQ people across this country.