

OWNING THEIR OWN STORIES

An Ethnographic Study of the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project in San Francisco



What is the issue?

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color often experience multiple forms of underrepresentation in the arts and in society at large. A mission to serve people at the intersection of multiple underrepresented identities often fuels everything these organizations do. This study highlights themes guiding how the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP) has made filmmaking more accessible to queer women of color for more than 25 years.

What is the research context?

QWOCMAP was founded in 2000 as a San Francisco-based filmmaking and media arts organization. From the beginning it drew inspiration from the writings, artworks, and lives of Black lesbian feminists, feminists of color, and transgender and queer feminists of color to guide the funding, creation, exhibition, and distribution of high-impact films that reflect the lives of LGBTQIA+ people of color.

What are the research findings?

This study describes how QWOCMAP defines and navigates toward their north star of increasing accessibility

Research Approach

Employing a participatory action research framework, Silvia Rodriguez Vega and QWOCMAP staff collaborated to design the research process and translate it into actionable steps to promote positive change for the organization and the communities it serves. Rodriguez Vega's study is based on participant observations in staff meetings, retreats, and programmatic events as well as interviews with QWOCMAP's communities.

in the film industry by nurturing LGBTQIA+ filmmakers of color, particularly women. Using the power of storytelling, QWOCMAP works to draw attention to experiences of inequality, dismantle stereotypes, and build a community around art and activism.

QWOCMAP was founded, in part, to address the prohibitive cost of filmmaking, which excluded many queer and trans people of color from telling their stories through

Brief based on a study by Silvia Rodriguez Vega, Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara

film. Queer and trans women of color, who are more likely to experience economic marginalization, also faced financial barriers to support their filmmaking. The high cost of film schools, explains Madeleine Lim, the organization's founder and executive artistic director, further restricts poor people's access to key skill-building and network-building opportunities. All of this led Lim to create QWOCCMAP and continue operating in the face of scarce resource investment. QWOCCMAP's managing director and fundraiser, T. Kebo Drew, describes the initial process of securing resources for the organization as "the biggest uphill battle ever."

QWOCCMAP is committed to putting the power of storytelling in the hands of queer and trans people of color. The organization and its members believe it is vital to portray a diversity of experiences on film. This authentic representation in the media can play a key role in helping the communities they work with recognize their value, potential, and purpose. Beyond representation, Kebo Drew describes how empowering trans and queer filmmakers can expand the craft of filmmaking, as people with manifold perspectives are likely to drive innovation in film as a storytelling vehicle. Their stories can help counter dominant stereotypes by building narrative power among underrepresented communities. Kebo Drew adds, "...what we see on screen influences how people see our communities, and then that also influences how they treat us." Filmmakers who participate in QWOCCMAP's program see it as a high point of their personal and professional growth. One participant

explained, "It was the first space where I really experienced self-actualization. Just seeing this work of art that I have created actually come to fruition, like a tangible thing...I think that was where this dream of who I really am meant to be...really started to take hold."

QWOCCMAP's vision is also building toward a future where disability justice is a part of everyday conversations and considerations. The organization demonstrates its commitment to collective care and disability justice by ensuring people are tested for COVID-19 and wearing masks, making accommodations for service animals and people who need larger seats, and following other inclusive practices. People with disabilities at QWOCCMAP can take the lead in designing their programs to be accessible to all. QWOCCMAP also assists other public and private organizations and community spaces to become more inclusive of all people's abilities.

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[Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project Zine](#)

Why does this matter?

Funders and supporters of arts organizations dedicated to assisting art and artists from underrepresented communities might consider:

- Contributing to endowments or other funds that support an organization's ongoing work can help ensure long-term stability in light of persistent financial challenges.
- Supporting the development of artist fellowships and training programs in more capital-intensive artforms like film to address systemic financial barriers to entry and participation.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the US arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.