



YEAR-IN-REVIEW 2023



Q T R





Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL)

The QTRL is a collaborative research project based at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, University of Toronto, focusing on methods in queer and trans studies across the disciplines as well as across creative, activist, and scholarly research practices. Our aim is to bring innovative approaches and solutions to entrenched and emerging social and political problems affecting 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC lives and communities.

The Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) is committed to:

1. Providing an interactive, creative space for scholars, students, artists, and community leaders to work collectively on their projects with the vital support needed to undertake them.
2. Welcoming scholars, artists, and 2SLGBTQ+ community leaders from across the country and around the world to conduct their work both at the university and in the community through talks, workshops, symposia, performances, and exhibitions.
3. Creating new research and study networks by providing its members with the opportunity to collaborate on complex issues in queer and trans studies and to imagine new approaches to research partnerships that will improve the lives of people in their and our communities.
4. Creating public-facing, accessible materials and knowledge delivery methods that stage and reflect the ongoing research collaborations as they take place at the lab.

Director's Message



Dana Seitler

I celebrate the work of everyone in the Queer and Trans Research Lab this year. It has been a deep honour to see everyone's projects unfold, and it has been a privilege to work together in collaboration and collectivity. It's the end of the second year of the lab's existence, and I am in awe of the work this cohort has accomplished, not least of which was demonstrating the type of knowledge production that is possible when the boundaries between activism, art, and the academy are actively traversed. Rhoma Spencer ended the year brilliantly with her showcase production of "Queen of the Road," which chronicled the life of Calypso Rose, queer Trinidadian vocalist, musician, songwriter, and

activist. Alphonso King Jr. used his time at the lab to publish his magazine POZPlanet (a space where HIV+ Communities share their stories) as well as to organize the monthly community event Mingle (where HIV+ folks meet and socialize). Ellie Ade Kur, a sex worker justice organizer, engaged in community work that strengthens Black sex worker mutual aid efforts. TL Cowan and Shana Ye joined us as the Martha McCain Faculty Fellows. T.L. worked on building trans-feminist and queer mental health networks in the university; Shana worked on her forthcoming book *Queer Chimerica*, a mix of autoethnography, science fiction, and queer theory that explores political economies of queerness in the interdependence of China and the United States since the cold war. Our Research Associate, Christopher Smith, shared his work on Black Pride organizing and collectivity through the concept of what he calls "itinerant hospitality." Our amazing graduate and undergraduate fellows worked tirelessly to support these projects and share their own. Together, we shared, learned, and collaborated; we fostered new connections and friendships; we worked hard and got tired and kept working.

This year, as with every year, the world brought new challenges in the fight for social justice. It seemed nearly every day that we awoke to read or hear about another violent legislative act that we know will be devastating to our friends, families, and communities. It is exhausting and we are exhausted. But everyone at the lab showed up and kept building. And it is this practice of showing up that I continue to believe in. You show up because what else can you do? You show up to make something with others that you can't make by yourself.

Program Co-ordinator Review

As the 2nd year of the Queer and Trans Research Lab ends, I am still in awe. When I joined the QTRL as Research Associate and Program Coordinator last July I was very eager to step into this role. What I did not anticipate was the breadth of innovative research initiatives being undertaken at the Lab. I can say with certainty that the work conducted over the past two years will continue to have a significant impact in the various communities that we work with and within.

This year was a first, as we were finally able to collaborate in person. I am certain the importance of this is not lost on anyone as we adjust to a post-pandemic reality. Despite various challenges adjusting to the pace and rhythm of an ever-changing world, we all did so with grace and immense rigor.

This year we have seen the work of our Community Organizers-in-Residence—Ellie Ade Kur, and Alphonso King Jr—who put the “unity” in community leadership. Bearing witness to the community-based research conducted by these individuals with undergraduate student researchers is inspiring. Such opportunities for community engagement are rare for students pursuing a future in queer and trans studies. For this reason, the QTRL is an exemplary model of collective research practice.

Working with Artist-In-Residence, Rhoma Spencer, we saw a work in progress blossom into “Queen of The Road: The Calypso Rose Musical” – which premiered at Hart House Theatre on Saturday June 17th to a packed house. Developing it from a local production to an international collaboration with the Tobago Performing Arts Company, she has raised the bar for what can be achieved when artists and academics work in concert with each other.

The work of our Martha McCain Faculty Fellows, and the primary investigators for the emerging projects funded by the QTRL offered new pathways and methods to do queer and trans research.




Christopher Smith

The opportunity to work with each and every one of those affiliated with the QTRL has made my role as Program Coordinator so fulfilling. The opportunity to mentor undergraduate and graduate research assistants as they engage their own research trajectories emphasizes the importance of the QTRL an innovative research hub. I am glad that I will be here to see it grow next year.

I am moved most by the fact that the connections we have built, as researchers, colleagues, and friends carry forward with each cohort. This praxis and tradition will carry on as we welcome the 2023-24 cohort at the QTRL.



community organizers in residence



or Ellie Ade Kur, joining U of T's Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) has meant finally finding academic support for her research and activism on behalf of sex workers.

"It's the safe space I wish I had had as an undergrad," says Ade Kur, who has been at U of T for 14 years, and is now completing her PhD. "It's one of the only places on campus where I'm exposed to integrating perspectives of social justice with academic work. It's important for academics to be actively working alongside sex work and social justice organizations."



“I’ve finally found a space that can walk the talk.”

“I’ve finally found a space that can walk the talk.”

Ade Kur – along with DJ, drag performer and activist Alphonso King Jr. – is a community leadership resident at the QTRL, part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies. The residencies allow activists and community leaders to share, develop and circulate their work, as well as to establish connections with students, teachers, artists and researchers.

Ellie Ade Kur

“If we treat sex workers like they deserve the violence that happens to them, we can’t be shocked when violence happens,” says Ade Kur.

Ade Kur is a sex worker justice organizer, who has volunteered with Maggie’s Toronto (<https://www.maggiesto.org/>) since 2016. She is part of their Sex Worker’s Action Project, which provides support, advocacy and a safe drop-in space.

Ade Kur vividly remembers the disappearance of sex worker Alloura Wells in July, 2017. Wells, a young Black and Indigenous trans woman, had been an active participant at Maggie’s. But when she disappeared, the community was unable to get help through official channels, and was forced to mount their own search. Wells’ body was found in a city ravine in August, 2017, but was not identified until November.

“The police just didn’t want to look for her,” say Ade Kur. “A sex worker, a racialized trans woman, the police say they disappear and reappear all the time. It was pretty brutal to have to do a lot of that work on their own.”

Even before she began volunteering at Maggie’s, Ade Kur’s academic work had focused on marginalized communities. She has a BA from U of T in sociology, political science and criminology, and a masters in sociology. But she says she found the sociology department too conservative. So, for the past seven years, Ade Kur has been working towards a PhD in geography.

Her thesis examines the ways in which sex workers and homeless people are marginalized by city structures and authorities.

“My focus is on Toronto, how the city implements local bylaws and zoning regulations to keep certain businesses out of it,” she says. “My thesis looks at the development of the Yonge St. strip and how the municipal government works with police to push sex workers and homeless people out of the downtown core.”

As part of the QTRL, Ade Kur is working on a project even closer to home: addressing the stigma and discrimination facing students who also earn money as sex workers. Ade Kur plans to hold a series of consultations and develop resource guides and workshops to help those students navigate the dangers and prejudices that they face.

Ade Kur says that, for her, sex work is an umbrella term that includes everything from full service escorting and exotic dancing to webcamming and sex phone work. It also includes sugar babies (young women who form relationships with older “sugar daddies” in exchange for money or gifts).

All of these women can face discrimination.

“There’s been a pretty significant increase in revenge porn. Students may be asked to leave residence, they can be kicked out their programs,” says Ade Kur. “If they’re even suspected of doing sex work, they’re seen as maybe a threat to other students, even if they’re not working out of the residence. Even if you’re a cam model, that toes the line. The idea is that sex workers make others unsafe and bring danger to others.

“You never know how people will react if they find out. If you’re a parent or a caregiver, somebody could call Children’s Aid, and you run the risk of losing your kids or your income.”

Ade Kur’s project will help sex workers on campus develop toolkits to deal with legal, economic and academic issues, including how sex work may affect international student visas or how cash payments may affect student aid.

“We’re looking at how you avoid exploitation, how you advocate for yourself, where student sex workers can go for support. We’re compiling it all in one place.”



Ade Kur says her academic experience has taught her that minority groups are often marginalized within the curriculum, as well.

"For a lot of my academic career, I've been looking at texts that sensationalize Blackness and poverty, that are voyeuristic accounts of Black life. But if I come into my undergrad class, teaching equity studies, Black students see someone like them who has values like them.

"I've faced a lot of disdain and resentment for my commitment to centering the community. But it's important to me that the people at the heart of those struggles get to tell those stories."

Alphonso King Jr.

Alphonso King Jr. has been an activist for people with HIV since he was diagnosed in 1990 at the age of 22. Today, he worries that it's taken for granted.

"There's this rebranding of HIV," he says. "Now that we have commercials for meds, it makes it look like you take a pill and everything's okay. We have to remind young

people that it can happen to you. The problem with PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis] is people having unprotected sex. They're still open to other STIs. Syphilis is on the rise.

"And if you're partying all weekend and you miss a dose, you can become positive. Even for those who are using it properly, it can still damage your body. It's not a walk in the park."

But even with the ongoing dangers, King says things have improved since 1990.

"I lived in Tampa back then. The only thing we had was AZT, and the people I knew who were on it were dying. When I found out, there were no resources, there was nowhere to go. I knew something had changed in my body, but back then you could lose your job, your housing, you had to be very careful about who you told. The woman who gave me my results said, 'If you're not religious, you might want to start.'"

Scared his parents would discover his status, King moved to New York City.

"I had seen the movie *Paris Is Burning* [a 1990 documentary about NY's drag ballroom scene], and I landed right in the middle of the cast. I became a member of the House of LaBeija."

King also started DJing under the name DJ Relentless, which he still uses. He also resumed performing as a drag queen, changing his name from *Ebony*, which he had used in Tampa, to his current name *Jade Electra*.

But King says NY changed after 9/11. He was also getting sicker, developing diabetic ulcers and with his T-cell count dropping. He finally went on medication in 2005, but with no healthcare coverage, found the city increasingly expensive.

"That same year, 2005, I met my husband in Montreal. We reconnected in 2009. Marriage wasn't an option in the States. I weighted my alternatives, NY wasn't getting any less expensive, so in December, 2009, I relocated to Toronto."

Seeing few events for people with HIV, King started a monthly social event called POZ-TO (now *Mingle*) at downtown club *Goodhandy's*. When *Goodhandy's* was forced to relocate, the event moved to dance club *Crews & Tangos*.

I didn't change the name. I wanted to fight stigma, and you can't fight stigma in a closet."

"At *Goodhandy's*, people weren't embarrassed to come in, because nobody would see them," he says. "But when we moved to *Crews and Tangos*, attendance dropped, people didn't want to be seen coming in. But I didn't change the name. I wanted to fight stigma, and you can't fight stigma in a closet."

The event, now held at *Buddies In Bad Times Theatre*, raises funds for HIV/AIDS support organizations like *People With AIDS* and the *Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention*.

In 2013, King started the *POZ-TO Awards* to recognize activists for people living with AIDS. In 2019, he began *POZPLANET Magazine*, where HIV+ communities can freely share their stories.

As part of the *QTRL*, King is mounting a project in *POZPLANET* called *HIV is Everyone's Business*, which will publish statements from people from all walks of life, whether HIV+ or not, about HIV.

The *QTRL* is helping to expand his own perspective on HIV, says King.

"I'm getting exposed to things I hadn't thought about, such as a presentation about sex workers, and how these things tie in to HIV. It's very easy to get tunnel vision. The *QTRL* is an opportunity to grow and learn."

He also continues to perform as *DJ Relentless* and *Jade Elektra*. In 2019, *Jade* became one of the first drag queens to perform at Toronto's *AIDS Memorial*, redoing *Nat King Cole's* song *Unforgettable as Undetectable*. The performance went viral, and is one of the songs on a new album released in December.

QTcast

QTcast is the official podcast of the QTRL. The QTcast explores the experimental projects created by the scholars, artists, and community organizers in the lab and beyond.



Elliott Tilleczek, producer of the podcast

Episodes are released monthly on most major podcast platforms, including Apple Podcasts and Spotify. The podcast offers members of the QTRL the opportunity to talk about their work and their lives in their own words, and to reach listeners outside the university community.

Elliott Tilleczek, the producer of the podcast, sees it as a means

of communication between the various worlds the lab brings together: academic, creative, and community based. Tilleczek is the multimedia specialist for the Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL), part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies.

“One of the things about academic institutions, when folks are buried in their own research, talking

about the same things over and over, is they don't always translate their work into accessible terms," says Tilleczek. Now in their second year with the QTRL, Tilleczek sees the podcast as an essential part of fulfilling the lab's mission to create conversations between academic disciplines, QTBIPOC communities, artists, activists and scholars.

"Coming back for a second year, it has been easier to see the bigger picture," they say. "We're growing our tone and outlook with the podcast, looking to activate community networks, folks who might be interested in the lab, but who wouldn't know how to find it."

Tilleczek tries to let the QTCast capture the excitement participants feel at being part of the QTRL, and how much they experience over the course of a year.

"We try to give folks a sense of what goes on in there and of how exciting multidisciplinary work can be. And we're not just presenting one moment in time; the person I sit down with in September has a very different perspective from that person in June."

Tilleczek is working on their PhD dissertation on queer and trans digital activism. It was their familiarity with social media that originally brought them into the QTRL.

"I was taking a class with Dana [Seitler, Director of the Bonham Centre] on queer theory and methods. I was writing a lot about doing a queer podcast. When she was setting up the QTRL, she wanted a podcast as a form of outreach for the lab, and she approached me because she knew I had previous aptitude with it."

Tilleczek is given the freedom to run the podcast as they like.

"I'm mostly left to my own devices, in coming up with the logo and look of it, and coming up with my own questions," they say. "It fits right in with what I'm researching: the intersection of queer and trans communities with communication and activism."

In fact, says Tilleczek, the QTCast is proving helpful in their thesis.

"Speaking to folks who are doing their own activism on the podcast is almost meta," they say. "It's very generative for my project."

The QTCast — which currently has 13 episodes — is also proving to be popular with the other members of the QTRL cohort.

"You almost expect more of a contrast in familiarity inter-generationally, but podcasts have become so commonplace," says Tilleczek. "But there are different tones that the undergrads bring vs. some of our older community organizers."

Tilleczek is particularly proud of the work their undergraduate research assistants have done. One of their favourite episodes was one where the undergraduate students assigned to help with the podcast — Ezra Skandalakis and Henry Yang — were left entirely in charge.

"Henry and Ezra had the idea of an undergrad space where not even I was sitting in the room. It was undergrads being interviewed by undergrads about undergrad issues."

Tilleczek also singles out a live broadcast, one that took advantage of podcasting's ability to capture events in real time.

"The SDS Annual Research Colloquium was at the same time as the rally for trans rights at the U.S consulate. So Dana had the idea to set up a kind of flash podcast, where we could bring in students participating in our event to record messages of solidarity. There were none of the other bells and whistles, we just jumped right into serious messages of solidarity."

That sort of immediacy illustrates the power of social media to boost activism. But Tilleczek says doing the podcast — as well as being the QTRL's jack of all technical trades — has also brought home to them some of the downsides they're exploring in their thesis, especially the 24/7 reach of social media.

"The strengths and weaknesses of social media are one and the same," they say. "A lot of folks feel the pressure to always comment on everything. There is a ubiquity of burnout for activists of any age in doing this work. Things have been getting worse for queer and trans folk, and if there's an act of violence against a community member, sleep comes second to the work activists are doing. And a couple of years later, they're completely burned out because of this constant demand for access."

The QTCast has also made Tilleczek think even more deeply about what they call "sticky activism," how much online activism translates to real-world results.

"I do think there are dangers to forms of activism that are entirely online. You can get the echo chamber effect. It may seem like, sociopolitically, it's the most queer-friendly space. But how robust is this safety? Where are the allies? I don't think it should all be done by the people who are directly affected by the issues," they say.

"The central tension is that digital platforms are coded to be rapid and ephemeral, while activists hope something sticks. It's the tensions between media and desired outcome that are difficult. How do activists understand what engagement is, how much are activists tailoring their content? How do we affect our audiences, and in turn how do activists themselves get affected?"

Tilleczek will be back at the QTRL next year, as one of the Graduate Dissertation Completion Award Recipients, because they feel the lab helps address many of those concerns.

"I'm just struck by the importance of a space like this," they say. "When I speak to undergrad students who have found the research lab, it can feel like a community to them, within a larger not-so-friendly sphere."

artist-in-residence

Rhoma Spencer



"It was the first time ever I wrote something that had queer content in it," says Spencer. "It was about a lesbian talking about her desire as she explained how she dealt with isolation."

Queerantime also led to Spencer applying to the QTRL. She had reworked the piece into a physical performance piece for Toronto LGBTQ theatre company Buddies in Bad Times, who were calling for virtual neighbourhood-specific pieces to celebrate Pride in 2020. Spencer turned her monologue into a dialogue-free piece of physical theatre set outside her home. The piece was seen by Nikoli Attai, the former QTRL Program Coordinator, who insisted she apply to be artist-in-residence.

As it turns out, Spencer had been working since 2019 on a jukebox musical based on the life of queer Caribbean icon and the "undisputed Calypso Queen of the world," Linda McCartha Monica Sandy-Lewis, popularly known as Calypso Rose. She had even interviewed her in her

This year, the Toronto-based, Trinidad-born actor, playwright and comedian, Rhoma Spencer, joins the Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL), part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto, as their 2022-23 artist-in-residence.

For Spencer, the Covid lockdown led to a significant first in her career. In May 2020, Spencer was chosen to help create Covid Confessions, an art project involving members of the public sending a short message, text, or email about their experience during lockdown, which were then sent to selected artists to incorporate into original works.

Spencer used nine of those messages as the inspiration for a one-woman monologue called Queerantime.

home in New York.

But she was sceptical that the work was Canadian enough to impress arts funders.

"I kept asking myself, 'Is there enough Canadian content?' and I kept coming up with 'no.' I never applied anywhere, it just sat there on the shelf. But I decided I am going to use this opportunity to write this musical. I submitted my proposal to the QTRL, and, voilà, I was selected."

The result is that Spencer's theatre project, *Queen of the Road: The Calypso Rose Musical*, will be presented in a workshop in June, with Spencer having already completed the writing of Act I and one scene of Act II.

But while Spencer has only recently started writing explicitly queer works, she has long been part of the LGBTQ and theatrical communities in both Toronto and her homeland of Trinidad and Tobago.

"I would throw gay parties...and I became known as an early pioneer of the LGBT community of Trinidad through those parties."

"As a kid, there was this Best Village Competition that happened around November," she says. "It would air live on national television, each village would put on a production, theatre, dance, music. I looooooed it. My siblings would go to sleep, it would be only my mom and me.

"I loved all the local stuff, seeing myself, people who looked like me, people who sounded like me. Growing up, being an actor was not something you were encouraged to be, so I never told anyone. Then around age 15 or 16, one of my cousins took me to see the Best Village Competition live. I said: 'this is what I want to do.'"

In 1980, Spencer joined Barataria, one of the Best Village groups, and was immediately cast for its upcoming competition.

"I was so happy," she says. "Over the years, I was getting more and bigger parts. I worked with that company for nine years, but even while I was doing it, I hungered for more."

Spencer auditioned for the National Drama Festival and won a part in a production of C.L.R. James' *Minty Alley*.

"The best village competition was called 'illegitimate theatre,' the National Drama Festival was called 'legitimate theatre.'"

But Spencer found she continued to crave the illegitimacy, a feeling that has inspired her whole career.

"The illegitimate was folk theatre, it grounded you in understanding your cultural heritage," she says. "Legitimate theatre was all about English classics, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Shakespeare. Illegitimate theatre is the impetus, the be all and end all of what I do."

While acting, Spencer was also working a full-time job as a broadcaster and joining, discreetly, the LGBTQ community in Trinidad and Tobago.

"Being an artist at home, the stereotype was we're all a pack of lesbians and gay men, 'a bunch of queers,'" she says. "It made coming out easy for me, but there was no sign on my back in public. My enclave knew of my sexual orientation; the general public would just speculate. But I gave them no reason to speculate. If confronted, I would have denied it, because there was that level of shame, which is why I moved to Canada."

In 1999, Spencer began graduate school at York University, graduating with an MFA in directing.

"I remember the first time I was asked in Toronto if I'm a gay woman, and I proudly said yes without thinking twice," she says. "I would throw gay parties in Trinidad, which also helped fund my post-graduate studies. They became very well-known, and I became known as an early pioneer of the LGBT community of Trinidad through those parties."

After graduation, Spencer worked at the AfriCan Theatre Ensemble, and then formed Theatre Archipelago, to perform work from the Caribbean and the diaspora. Along the way, she was also the recipient of a U.S. House of Congress Proclamation and the Borough President of NYC Proclamation for her contribution to Caribbean theatre while touring in the play *Jean and Dinah*.

Spencer has also become an acclaimed stand-up comedian. She began in 1991 in Trinidad and found that she enjoyed provoking laughter about serious topics. Since then, she has performed on the Caribbean comedy circuit in Washington, Boston, and New York. She was also part of the Nubian Disciples of Comedy revue at Yuk Yuk's, including being on the 20th anniversary recording. She also recorded her own comedy album, *Rhoma Spencer Caribbean Comedy 6.0*, which was released in June at the Black Women in Comedy Laff Fest at New York's Gotham Comedy Club.

Now, as artist-in-residence at the QTRL, Spencer is continuing to educate others about her culture.

"I can speak to students, faculty, and the public about my work," she says. "I am from Trinidad and Tobago, a queer Afro-Caribbean woman, bringing my own cultural background and heritage. A lot of students have never even heard of Trinidad and Tobago, never heard of calypso. Even my research assistant, and I'm proud of how much she's learning, her excitement."

But Spencer says she is also learning from those she's surrounded by.

"My presence at the QTRL is enlightening for me, it's giving me a narrative and a language. Where I come from, queer was a derogatory term for a gay person. I didn't want anyone calling me queer, but somehow over the years, I have learned to embrace it. I'm immersing myself more and taking hold of the language around diversity in this century."

The Martha LA McCain Faculty Research Fellows

T.L. Cowan and Shana Ye are not typical academics. From exploring how trans-feminist and queer methods fit into the world of scholarship to creating a fictional future where a Chinese-American empire exploits LGBTQ experiences, they offer unique perspectives in queer, trans, and sexuality studies.

Cowan and Ye are this year's Martha LA McCain Faculty Research Fellows at the Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL). Now in its second year, the QTRL, part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, aims to break down barriers between disciplines, between institutions and queer and BIPOC communities, and between artists, activists, and scholars.

Ye finds it invigorating to be in a setting where she doesn't have to constantly explain herself.

"Lots of times I find myself needing to justify my work," she says. "Here, my approach and baseline theoretical understanding is taken for granted. People are here to listen and be supportive."

T.L. Cowan

Now an Assistant Professor of media studies in the Department of Arts, Culture and Media (UTSC) and the Faculty of Information, Cowan's own early experiences of university have made her highly sympathetic to her students.

"It took me 10 years to do my undergrad," she says. "I thought of university as an escape from



a conservative, religious family in a very small town. Once I got to university, I was like: plan completed. But I didn't really understand how to succeed at university, and I ended up on academic probation."

Cowan moved to Vancouver and tried to go back to school, but dropped out again, this time to become a spoken-word and performance artist, and a queer cabaret performer.

"After five years, I got back into school," she says. "I had to explain the traumatic process of coming out and my struggle with mental health to get the bad marks off my transcript. With the help of amazing administrators and feminist faculty, I got a do-over. When I went back to school, I absolutely loved it."

Cowan got her Masters and PhD from the University of Alberta, where she plunged into Edmonton's arts scene. She became part of the artist-run centre Latitude 53, edited a journal of visual culture, and "further developed my chops as an artist."

Those early academic struggles and surviving what she calls an "extremely anti-feminist, homophobic home life," has made Cowan determined to offer students the same support she was able to find.

"Being disowned was not a great experience, and I still have a lot of students who go through that," she says. "When a student makes themselves known to me, I do everything I can to help."

Cowan is currently exploring trans-feminist and queer media practices, especially in the digital realm. She studies cabaret as a performance practice, but also as a form of consciousness and "as a way of thinking about research through cabaret methodologies." She is currently working on a book about cabaret methods, which, she says, the QTRL is already putting into action.

"Being able to work in a lab with community organizers and artists, as well as students and faculty—this is the cabaret method of distributed expertise," she says. "It offers a built-in community to develop our work."

Cowan is also finishing, with co-author Jas Rault, a book about "accountable ways for working trans-feminist and queer community practices into research methods." Heavy Processing will be published in 2023 with Punctum Books.

Based on her experience with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Cowan will spend her year with the QTRL exploring how cognitive disorders are treated in academic settings through a project called "Assisted Living in the Life of the Mind: Building Trans-Feminist & Queer Mental Health and Accessibility Networks in the University."

"It's not expected of a professor to have any cognitive disability," she says. "Professors are supposed to be smart. Cognitive disorders are supposed to be for people who are not smart. In this context, coming out as somebody with a cognitive disorder as a faculty member is similar to coming out as queer in a conservative family."

In the end, Cowan thinks her bumpy path to academic success has made her a better professor, because she doesn't take it for granted.

"Rather than thinking of it as series of hoops to jump through, I think of it as a bunch of trails I've walked down."



Shana Ye

Shana Ye jokes that reading in the bathroom while growing up in China helped her get where she is today.

"I would buy books on homosexuality and leave them on the toilet," she says. "My father would read those books as well, and then would put some books he found interesting on top of the toilet. It was my first homosexual library."

Ye says her family was always supportive.

"The normal narrative is that queerness is being oppressed in China," she says. "That was not my case. The idea running through my family was that people are born equal. My family had seen so-called homosexuals and how they were mistreated, and they were very sympathetic and also empathetic."

After obtaining a degree in International Relations in China, Ye attended the University of Cincinnati in 2002 as part of an exchange program, where she majored in Physics and Women and Gender Studies.

"At the time, the majority of Chinese students studied somewhat more conventional disciplines," she says. "I was only the fourth person from China who got a degree in Women and Gender Studies. I was intellectually curious, and I was struck by how queer theory, post-modernism, and post-structuralism overlap with physics." "Plus," she laughed, "I

was pretty bad at mathematics. I shamed the whole nation."

Ye got her Masters in Women and Gender Studies at Cincinnati, before completing her PhD at the University of Minnesota. Her thesis was entitled "Red Father, Pink Son: Queer Socialism and Post-socialist Queer Critiques."

"There was a lot of material in China about 'sodomites' in the 80s and 90s," she says. "Dad read them before I even touched them."

Ye had spent a year in Vancouver as a graduate student in 2008, but left determined never to return.

"I was paid so little, I absolutely hated Canada," she says. "But everything is fate, and when I applied for a position, U of T was the first university to give me a full interview."

Now an assistant professor of Women and Gender Studies at U of T, Scarborough, Ye is turning her thesis into a fictional work called *Red Father, Pink Son: A Queer Journal to Chimerica*.

"It's a speculative history, set in the near future," she says.

"China and America merge into one empire. The empire requires queer people to confess their experience of being oppressed, but the real purpose is to assimilate them."

Ye has found writing fiction to be freeing.

"I see myself as very creative," she says. "I used to write a lot in Chinese, but somehow that ability was lost. Then, when I was converting my thesis to a book in 2018, I was stuck. Suddenly, I started writing in Chinese, just random thoughts, and I saw my identity as a creative writer again. Good writing creates space, creates imagination. Academia, ironically, can limit that kind of imagination."

Teaching in Scarborough, where many students are South Asian or Southeast Asian, Ye has tried

to avoid hierarchies and explore diverse cultural views.

"The student population in Scarborough means engaging different views of sexuality, and of how it intersects with both race and family."

She hopes the QTRL will allow her to further overcome barriers between creative and scholarly work.

"We have faculty, artists, activists, undergrads, graduate students all hanging out," she says.

"We're trying to break down the hierarchy."

"I have multiple identities beyond the professor persona," she says. "What I do the best is research work, but I want to be seen as a writer, an artist and a person who does parkour."

Meet the Graduate Research Assistants at the QTRL

The graduate students of U of T's Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) are unconventional academics, and they're bringing a fresh approach to their fields. Whether in music, history, literature, or cinema studies, they're working to fill the gaps traditional approaches have left behind.

"It's the most pleasant academic experience I've had since being in the PhD program," says Anna Kozak. "After the first two years or so, you start to feel very alienated from everything. You get this little, tiny room in Robarts to work; you're isolated and alone. Having the QTRL has been a breath of fresh air, it makes you feel like you're not alone."

Elio Colavito and Kanika Lawton are graduate research assistants. Kozak and Camille Rogers are the recipients of the Graduate Dissertation Completion Awards.

Elio Colavito



"I'm a bit of a bad historian," says Colavito. "My research is a bit more personal than my department would like. But there's certainly space in the discipline to tell more kinds of stories. And I think we're in a moment when it's more important than ever to hear from the community, to have trans people themselves be in control of the narrative."

Colavito is a third-year PhD student in History and Sexual Diversity Studies, working on a dissertation entitled "Care Beyond the Clinic: Transmasculine Mutual Aid in North America, 1970-2000." The impetus, he says, comes from his own life.

"The idea came from my own experiences in transition. I selfishly needed to know where I came from and where I was going. My research started with how the hell did people do this in the 70s? And it snowballed into a lot of other bigger questions, like what do trans care and trans community look like? What do different points of entry into the community look like?"

Colavito, who grew up in the GTA, returned to Toronto to do his MA in History in 2019. When he began his PhD the next year, he also joined SDS.

"History is quite archaic. SDS was a place where I thought I could pour a little into that cup, find queer and trans people I could work alongside."

Colavito's work aims to document the unexplored ways

in which trans men, from the 70s on, have always built their own communities beyond medical clinics.

"Not only is transness not a new phenomenon, but these communities have a long history of wickedly smart organizing. There are more trans people now because all of these guys that did the work to make transness possible.

"From an historian's perspective, everything we knew was written by people who wanted to see us dead, or at best thought we were cool," he says. "But the sources I am working with are writings from trans people themselves and there's a trans person doing the research itself. And that is a relatively new phenomenon."

Kanika Lawton



Growing up in the Vancouver area as a mixed-race child, Kanika Lawton, who uses they/them pronouns, was made aware of how differently people can be treated depending on how their identity is perceived and the ways that perception is bound up the trap of visibility.

As a second-year PhD student in Cinema Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies, Lawton is exploring the ways in which surveillance — ubiquitous in today's society — unfairly impacts minority groups. Their thesis is entitled "Surveillance Studies, Hypervisibility, and Queer and Trans Survival."

"A lot of people don't think about constantly being surveilled," they say. "But I'm interested in the ways in which it affects

marginalized communities. Surveillance itself is violence. The very conditions of surveillance produce violence."

A lot of Lawton's work has focused on trans people of colour and racialized communities, groups especially vulnerable to surveillance in today's political and social climate.

"The work is thinking about the heightened visibility of trans and racialized folks," they say. "There is a correlation between heightened visibility and violence. Surveillance is used by a heteronormative society to crack down on minoritized people.

"For example, a lot of the history of surveillance has its roots in the practice of apprehending escaped slaves. The history of police enforcement overlaps with these histories in the US., and racism itself is bound up in the idea of the need to watch the public. My work sees this violence as always inherent in the practice of surveillance."

Lawton says they are also using their own identity to explore the issues in their thesis.

"I wasn't active in LGBTQ+ communities in Vancouver because I was deeply closeted. But around the time I finished my Masters, I named my queerness as such. I'm also looking at queerness as a racialized person, and through that intersectional lens, at how surveillance harms all of us, but harms people unevenly."

As a Research Assistant at the QTRL, Lawton is working with Professor Shana Ye on Ye's manuscript *Chimerica*, a creative fiction about queer people in a futuristic merged Chinese-American empire.

"I'm Asian-Canadian myself, but I don't have a background in Asian-Canadian or Asian-American Studies," they say. "In my work with Shana, I'm learning what it means to think more holistically about the kinds of communities I'm part of."

Being part of the QTRL, and working with academics, activists and artists, has helped Lawton think more widely about those ideas of community.

"It's a very good opportunity to think beyond the ivory tower. It's solidified how much I want my work not to be stuck in academia with the six people who might read it. Surveillance is everywhere, and I want my work to have an impact in the real world."

Anna Kozak



It's certainly not the focus of her thesis, but Anna Kozak was fascinated to discover that Alice B. Toklas — the partner of groundbreaking writer Gertrude Stein — may have published the first recipe for pot brownies in her 1954 autobiography/cookbook.

Kozak, a sixth-year PhD student in English and Sexual Diversity Studies, actually has a far more serious focus in her thesis, "Gender, Genre, and the Queer American Autobiography."

"Queerness is the really interesting thing for me," says Kozak. "Every writer I'm looking at is queer, but queerness is also a method of questioning and challenging norms. Identity is at the core of autobiography, but identity is unstable. So, the question is, how do queer autobiographies engage this identity as a productive problem? In my work, I argue that queerness is both a marker and a theoretical lens to question identity."

Kozak herself originally thought her identity would include being

a scientist, even though she had always loved reading and writing, and had used it to question gender and sexual identity since a young age.

"I thought I was going to go into sciences. Writing had nothing to do with my career, I thought I'll keep this as a hobby."

She originally applied to study Life Sciences at McMaster University. But she switched to English and Cultural Studies and followed that up with an MA from Toronto Metropolitan University. Studying literature allowed her to find the language and vocabulary to discuss gender and sexuality the way she wanted to.

Kozak's thesis explores the autobiographical work of queer writers who pioneered much of that language and vocabulary. Her thesis includes chapters on Stein; poet and theorist, Audre Lorde; pioneering writer on trans experiences and gender identity, Kate Bornstein; and cartoonist and graphic novelist, Alison Bechdel. Each author, Kozak argues, works to deconstruct traditional ideas of autobiography and to expand questions around gender and sexuality.

"I figured autobiography would be the perfect place to start. You expect that to be the place where you can get to the truth of identity, but it's also the place where you see that questioned that the most.

"What these writers demonstrate is that the 'autonomous individual' is kind of a myth. Every individual exists in relation to other people. Autobiography is basically a biography of other people as well."

Being part of the SDS — which Kozak says "I joined the second I become aware of it" — and then the QTRL has led her to appreciate the role that a supportive community can play.

"It's not easy to find a like-minded group of queer people," says Kozak. "It's not easy to find your people."

Camille Rogers



Camille Rogers initially went into music as a practical choice.

"My parents are music teachers, and I started taking piano lessons when I was three," they say. "At the end of high school, I decided to go into music kind of ironically. I thought it would be more financially stable."

But now, on the verge of completing their Doctorate in Musical Arts — and already with an MA in Musicology and a Masters in Music Performance — Rogers knows they've found their passion. Combining academics with performance and their work as a program manager at Tapestry Opera and as co-artistic director and producer of the queer opera collective OperaQ, music is their life.

Rogers's dissertation — "Playing Queer and Performing Gender at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century: The Unconventional Life, Voice and Body of Julie D'Aubigny Maupin" — brings all of those threads together. Not only is Rogers researching the singer's life, they've also performed some of the same musical roles, and written and performed an opera about Maupin's life.

"I was interested in that time period in France," says Rogers. "There were some interesting shifts in gender and in music then. Maupin was queer by all accounts, and would probably have been bisexual if that were an option. She was very much gender non-conforming, and often dressed in men's clothing,

although she didn't try to pass as a man.

"She was known for being a very skilled swordfighter, she got into duels with lots of people, and she always won. There are all these swashbuckling stories about her adventures, and I always like to think there's a kernel of truth in there about her queerness."

That time in Europe marked a change in attitudes towards gender and biology, although not enough to allow Maupin to play male roles, or for queerness to be fully accepted.

"How people thought about actors and performers at the time, it was a very scandalous profession, like how people thought about queer relationships. If you were an actor, you were already a pariah in a way."

Rogers herself says they always felt accepted, even growing up in the conservative town of Lethbridge, Alberta.

"I feel like I was very lucky, my parents are very liberal," they say. "I didn't have too many bad messages growing up from them, although the surrounding general culture was very homophobic. But I didn't really come into realizing my own queer identity until my early 20s."

Since then, Rogers has used music, and humour, to further explore that identity and to find a sense of community.

"In 2021, I did a drag Messiah, by Handel, with a whole team of non-binary, gender non-conforming performers. It was an opportunity to take a very old and Christian work, such a very serious religious work, and be very silly with it."

Being a part of the QTRL is also helping Rogers to feel that sense of belonging.

"What I was looking for was that community, that breadth of different experiences, the chance to learn from other queer and trans scholars. It's nice to feel connected."

Under GRADS

The 2022-23 Undergraduate Research Assistants at the Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) are a diverse group. From Canada and abroad, from small towns and large, of varied heritages, interested in science and poetry, making art and creating books, they are united by a passion for activism and social justice.

But maybe not always in the way they had initially envisaged.

The QTRL is a part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies (SDS), and for the undergrads involved in the lab, being part of SDS and the QTRL has been transformative. Carrie Liu, another one of the Research Assistants, says she suffers from complex PTSD, the experience has literally changed her life.

"SDS offered me somewhere to ground myself when I couldn't really believe in my ability to think and act with confidence. It made me feel like there is so much wisdom around me, I should stay in this world just to absorb it all."

"It gave me such a huge amount of space to reflect on ideas of self-defense and gender, on how intersectional identities have shaped and formed these experiences," she says. "SDS offered me somewhere to ground myself when I couldn't really believe in my ability to think and act with confidence. It made me feel like there is so much wisdom around me, I should stay in this world just to absorb it all."

Liu and Faber are joined by Luna Okazaki, Annisa Azhar, Henry Yang, and Ezra Skandalakis.

Annisa Azhar



Growing up in Scarborough, Annisa Azhar didn't always find it easy to integrate the various aspects of their identity.

"I carried that with me in some form when I went to university," they say. "Then I took a course at SDS that talked about the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and gender. And as someone who's not only queer, but visibly a person of colour and an immigrant, I thought, 'Why don't I go into this in more depth?'"

Azhar remembers the difficulty of finding like-minded people they could fit in with. Their family had emigrated from Bangladesh shortly after their birth, creating a complex maze for them to navigate.

"I only had one or two other friends who were out as queer. In some immigrant spaces, you're still not fully welcome to some degree. A lot of immigrants believe in the model minority myth, they really want to conform to some sense of North American normative ideals, and they pick up those prejudices.

"And queer spaces are predominantly white, and it's hard to articulate my experience as a person of colour. I have a hard time finding true solidarity. I felt backed into a corner, it was isolating, kind of dehumanizing, it's hard to navigate in a big city like Toronto."

When Azhar discovered SDS — now their specialty — they began making the connections they sought. Now a third-year student,

they say the courses, and being part of the QTRL, have helped them find their place.

"There's a consistent sense of community, in contrast to, say, my first year. It's not competitive, we're really cheering on one another. There's no sense of jealousy or envy. When we're down or not in a good headspace, there's a lot of camaraderie."

As a Research Assistant, Azhar is working with community activist Ellie Ade Kur, who is looking at issues surrounding sex work and ways to protect students who are also sex workers.

"Our main goal is to make a toolkit for sex workers on campus, researching policies about residences, internet usage, certain loopholes or catches that may harm them. We're looking for ways to prevent harassment or sexual violence, and to stop revenge porn. We're looking at campus police, their interaction with students, and how close they are to Toronto police.

"It's been eye-opening to get some sort of perspective from actual sex workers. It made me deeply informed on privacy and security on campus, and on my own rights as a student."

Working with Ade Kaur and the QTRL has also led them to think more about their future.

"It's made me more focused on what I want to do," says Azhar. "Maybe I want to go to grad school in the future. And maybe also get more into queer activism as well."

Zoe Faber



The initial attraction of U of T for Zoe Faber was that it was far away from her small hometown in Alberta.

"Fort McMurray is a small conservative town," they say. "There are some really nice things, people are really friendly, but I didn't know a lot of people who are out and proud. It was very isolating to grow up there. I wanted to be somewhere where a queer community would be, and that's hard to find in Alberta."

Now a third-year student at U of T, Faber eventually found what they wanted in Toronto and SDS. But making the initial move in 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, was not ideal.

"It definitely took a minute," they say. "I really didn't have any friends for the first nine months I lived here. But being able to become a part of the queer community in Toronto has really meant a lot to me. It's really amazing to see people be themselves so boldly. I'll go out and see people dressed so outlandishly, so different from anything I've seen before. It's so great to see people be so confident."

As a Research Assistant, Faber is working with HIV/AIDS activist Alphonso King Jr., especially on his magazine POZPLANET. The experience, they say, is teaching them both journalistic skills and the history of AIDS activism.

"I had taken a class on HIV at SDS, but there's a big difference between learning in a classroom and being around people who have lived experience," they say. "Queer people are often robbed of elders, people they can be around who can teach them their history. I'm learning a lot about the people that history might have forgotten, but who are still important."

"I'm really, really intensely interested in the queer history of Toronto in particular. It's not only good for me and my academic pursuits, but also in informing the way I live my life."

Faber has learned that HIV remains an ongoing issue that doesn't receive enough attention.

"People relegate it to the past, but it's still an oppression issue for a lot of people. For most people, their idea of HIV and AIDS comes from media they consume and the stereotype that's still present is that it's a 1980s gay men's disease. People don't consider how it still impacts people. College-age students are pretty unaware of HIV; I don't think they're being educated as much as they should. The university should have better programs on sexual health."

Working with the HIV/AIDS community and with the QTRL has intensified Faber's desire to do more volunteer work and has given them a new respect for activism.

"I've just been learning about how much resilience activism takes. My biggest takeaway is the importance of space and community and dedication to social justice. It's really solidified my belief that you can make a difference on an individual level, and it matters if you do that."

Henry Yang



Henry Yang says being part of SDS and the QTRL is influencing everything he studies. And as a second-year student majoring in biochemistry and SDS, with a minor in philosophy, that's a pretty wide range.

"SDS has helped me view a lot of the fields I'm doing now in a real-world way," he says.

In fact, SDS was one of the reasons Yang opted to come to U of T. Growing up in the suburbs of Calgary, he didn't have a lot of opportunities to study gender and sexuality issues. But neither was Calgary all bad, he says.

"A lot of people expect to hear a sob story about how hard it was to grow up in a heteronormative, largely white place. And I definitely faced my fair share of racism and homophobia as a person of colour, queer, often closeted. But one of the great things about the communities I grew up in was they were largely minority dominated."

But Toronto, he says, has offered a chance to explore all aspects of his identity.

"It has been a very meaningful experience. My specific identity is pretty minoritized, so one of the appeals of Toronto was getting to access various communities."

Being part of SDS has also allowed Yang to make connections in a way other departments didn't.

"I find that other departments tend to be a lot more competitive, and I think the level of stress that is expected is a lot higher. SDS is very open to accepting a lot of people and tries to flip a lot of these dynamics on their head. It's very cognizant of power dynamics."

SDS has also given Yang a new perspective on how his work in other areas could be used to help people.

"I want to go into HIV and AIDS research, and the only reason I became interested in HIV was through SDS. I took an intro class in HIV/AIDS in North America, which looked at elements of power, and discussed the cultural depictions of HIV and how stereotypes have distorted views of communities."

Yang is considering switching from biochemistry to a field that would allow him to more directly influence the ways in which research and treatment are conducted, especially among

disadvantaged communities. Law school is one option.

"A lot of what I learned about HIV was the horror stories about loved ones not being able to see family, not getting the right medications, the political difficulties preventing drugs being advanced. It's not just the HIV pandemic, it's how disadvantaged communities are placed in this position. I'm interested in advocating for these communities."

Covid, coupled with SDS and Yang's own Chinese background, made even clearer the importance of the impact on individuals.

"It made me a lot more interested in how disease interacts with international policy, government structure, immigration, and migration. With the intensification of anti-Asian racism, it cannot be overstated how important my time in SDS has been in making me want to learn more about lived experience in people who are directly implicated."

Luna Okazaki



Growing up in Japan, it was almost a given Luna Okazaki would go to U of T. After all, she had lived in North York with her family for three years when she was a very young child.

"Subconsciously, I always felt like I was coming back to Toronto someday," she says.

The fact that U of T offered a major in Sexual Diversity Studies made it even more appealing.

"I've been interested in those issues since middle school, when I was figuring out my identity," she

says. “And U of T had an actual major, not just a minor like most other universities.”

In Japan, Okazaki says she really had nowhere to turn for help with identity issues.

“I think it was around grade 8 when I started to realize I wasn’t necessarily heterosexual,” she says. “I didn’t have any resources to figure myself out, I had nobody to talk to. It wasn’t too difficult for me to come out, I didn’t have to deal with any hate, but being sympathetic and being knowledgeable are very different things.

“I was definitely isolated. Binge watching Ru Paul’s Drag Race, it was the only thing I had.”

Okazaki says that lack of support has left her feeling somewhat out of place when it comes to gender and sexuality issues.

“I do get really nervous when talking about sexual diversity. I doubt my ability to jump into those conversations. Part of me envies my peers who grew up here and are slightly more comfortable in their identities.”

She says being part of the QTR is helping her feel more comfortable, especially as a Research Assistant to Christopher Smith, the QTRL Program Coordinator. Okazaki is helping organize Smith’s archival material on Black Pride festivals.

“I didn’t really know about Pride parades and certainly not what it means to have a Black Pride Parade. But, especially with the videos I have been archiving, it’s a way of telling a story that I can’t personally see through my own eyes. It’s helped me spread my worldview a bit.”

Smith has also helped with her struggles with mental health and anxiety, she says.

“Christopher has really taught me that I have to pause and think about the things I’m capable of doing, and what I can bring to the table. I don’t know what I was so scared of. This year has been a

real turning point for me, trying to be more involved in the city.

“I’m more compassionate towards myself, and I think that’s all because of the lab.”

Okazaki says she would like to help other children who might

“And while I’ve been learning more about sexuality and gender, a lot of those ideas will influence the subject matter of what I’m doing.”

Skandalakis grew up in Toronto, always as part of a close-knit community.

“My specific identity is pretty minoritized, so one of the appeals of Toronto was getting to access various communities.”

find themselves in the same situation she was once in.

“The way I was brought up, I remember books being a big part of my life, and my creativity has always been tied to books and writing short stories. I want to take that passion and combine that with what I’m doing right now. It would be cool if I could produce books that dealt with queer topics, especially if they were in Japanese.”

Ezra Skandalakis



Ezra Skandalakis has always been artistic. But being part of the QTRL has brought a new dimension to her work.

“It’s always been a form of expression, this is who I am, this is what I’m feeling,” she says.

“Collaging, painting, drawing, digital art, photography, across the board. It was just the activity I gravitated to the most even when I was a toddler.

“My family are second-generation immigrants from a number of places, Greece, Turkey, Iran, and also Romani,” she says. “It definitely affected the way I grew up, immigrant, but also working-class, and there is a Christianity aspect too. I had parents who loved me very much. They had to be forced to be open-minded, but they have been and I’m very grateful.

“Growing up, community was always integral. And finding that space still matters to me.”

But at U of T, Skandalakis struggled to find supportive spaces.

“My first two years were very lonely. I didn’t really find any sense of community until I found the SDS department. Suddenly, the classroom was an encouraging space rather than competitive.

“In the lab, I really enjoy the mixing of students with profs. It really humanized them for me, reminded me that these are people too.”

Skandalakis has been assisting with the QTRL podcast, QTCast, which she says pushed her out of her comfort zone.

“Behind the scenes, the production, it keeps getting cooler and cooler. I’m a very shy person, so I did find the hosting aspect really difficult, but overall, I found it really enriching. I also got

the benefit of learning a bit about everybody's research at the lab.

"I really tried to tailor the podcasts based on the person's research, what kind of person they were. I really liked writing scripts, coming up with questions, deciding what kind of vibe we're going for."

Skandalakis also feels she's been able to contribute by talking about her heritage and her experiences with autism.

"I was diagnosed six years ago, and I've always been very privy to accessibility gaps. I notice all these areas at U of T where I could be accommodated very easily, but I'm not.

"I also talked about my experiences of being a Romani person, being part of a culture of displaced people, directly linked to things like environmental racism, and very tied to Indigenous people. I hope that we're not forgetting about these other people who typically don't get a voice."

Skandalakis is also using her own voice to write, and sometimes perform, poetry.

"I started writing poetry to deal with difficult events or emotions. I would write it, and then I would literally just be over the thing, I've named the feeling, there we go.

"I have huge stage fright, so even though I know what I'm going to say next, it's terrifying. But it's also really exciting, and even if your poem sucks, people will still cheer you."

Carrie Liu



Carrie Liu has loved the English language since she was growing up in Vancouver. She may have even broken the law to teach it.

"In grade 11, I realized I had a long-running interest in English and in copy-editing," she says. "I spent a few years in high school teaching virtually at an academy in Shanghai. It was under the table, and kind of sketchy. I wasn't a qualified teacher, and I wasn't supposed to ever tell them that I was only 17."

Liu taught her students grammar principles and helped them build a toolbox to identify language problems, while also recording audiobooks. Now, Liu is using her love of language as the co-editor-in-chief of *Hardwire*, the official undergraduate journal of SDS.

"...it's a way of telling a story that I can't personally see through my own eyes. It's helped me spread my worldview a bit."

"People who submit are from any department," says Liu. "We publish work on everything from anti-colonialism to media studies. My role consists of copy-editing, so much copy-editing, managing the team, learning what it means to edit ethically. It's extremely rewarding, it's really enlivening to see what other people are deeply invested in."

Liu is also working as a Research Assistant to Rhoma Spencer, the QTRL artist-in-residence, on her musical *Queen of the Road*, about queer Caribbean icon Calypso Rose.

"I'm really looking forward to the upcoming showcase. I'm certainly no actor, so I won't be playing a role, but the cast is so exciting. I love reading stage directions, doing a performative version of my audiobook narration. I'm really excited to be involved in the in-person elements."

Liu is very proud of the work she's done with Spencer and with *Hardwire*, especially given her

ongoing mental health struggles. SDS has helped turn her life around, she says.

"SDS has given me a renewed way of relating to myself and to others in the world. It's maybe not a guidebook, but it's rooted in communal support and tangible hope. Nearly every course I've taken from this program has deep implications on my personal wellbeing."

Liu singles out SDS instructor David Anderson as being especially helpful, but says all SDS faculty have given her the support she lacked.

"My family and I have had a lot of issues. They don't understand; in China there is no mental illness. My parents have always thought,

when are you going to be cured of the PTSD, the anorexia.

"I think in some ways I feel ashamed of me. Anderson understood how limited I was by my health, and he gave me such compassion and understanding. I'm without therapeutic support, and at this point SDS has kind of become it."

Majoring in SDS, with a double minor in English and in Education and Society, Liu would like to eventually return to teaching, though legally this time. She hopes to use what she's learned.

"I would like to incorporate ethics and diversity in terms of curriculum development."

For now, Liu is looking forward to beginning her yoga teaching certification.

"Yoga unites mind and body, it's really healing," she says. "Yoga really filled my heart; it genuinely brings me back to the world."

emerging projects

This year the Queer and Trans Research Lab began a new initiative, the “Emerging Projects Fund” that provides grants to UofT affiliated scholars and external community partners to engage in collaborative research. The exciting collaborations that occurred in 2022-23 are highlighted below. This work, as much of queer and trans research, are on-going projects and we celebrate the milestones each group of researchers have achieved.

End of the Line Press: a publisher of poetry, prose, and visual art monographs by trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit artists

Primary Investigator: Hugh O'Neill

The first of its kind, End of the Line Press is an independent publisher of prose, poetry, and visual arts monographs with a focus on support for emerging trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit creators. As the organization grows in the coming years, the press will form a worker cooperative constituted by its authors, editors, designers, and artists. The primary goal is to enable and to uplift emerging authors and artists by offering editorial assistance tailored to their projects and promotional backing to advance their work and build their audiences. Established artists will provide guidance for each author to be published, thereby ensuring that they have a network of encouraging readers and designers with which to work in collaboration. Trans literature, as a nascent tradition, is making space for itself in universities and on library shelves. End of the Line Press aims to be a part of this growth and to shift the power of representation, especially in gender expression and identity, from media industries writ large to the very artists who do the creative labour yet lack institutional access and support.

Black Gender-Expansive Youth: Exploratory Research on the Lives of Black Gender- Expansive Youth in School, Family, and Community

Primary Investigators: J. Garrett-Walk and Lance McCready



Recent research has shown that 40% of 2SLGBTQI+ individuals endorsed expansive sexual identities (i.e., asexual, pansexual, and queer) outside of traditionally defined sexual identities (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual) while 34% of participants indicated an expansive gender identity (i.e., transgender, genderqueer/non-binary and “other”—agender, androgynous, or bigender). However little work has examined how Black gender expansive youth understand, conceptualize, or experience their gender at the intersection of their other identities (such as race, sexuality, religion). Their experiences of identity development and community dynamics have a long-standing history in the socio-political and cultural landscape of their educational acquisition. Black queer and trans youth are oftentimes rendered invisible within educational contexts and are also profoundly aware that if they choose to be “out,” this visibility may also add another layer of vulnerability. Research with Black 2SLGBTQI+ youth in Canada remains nascent in its scope, and what available literature does exist, lacks deep insight into the experiences of Black gender expansive youth. In collaboration with the Toronto District School Board the current study seeks to explore Black queer youth’s experiences. This study hopes to 1) gain insights into the experiences of gender expansive Black young people and 2) begin the process of developing best practices for supporting them in their schools and communities.

Full Moon Fire Keeping Capacity Building in Toronto

Primary Investigator: Rebecca Beaulne-Stuebing



The Full Moon Fire Keeping Capacity Building Project is a research collective of Indigenous women, two spirit and LGBTQ+ indigenous people in a process of relationship building, dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and mentorship to develop

community capacity for keeping of sacred fires in the context of full moon ceremonies in Toronto. The project is focused on learning from Indigenous women and two spirit people about what safety and welcoming can mean in relation to sacred fires and full moon ceremonies. The project will bring ceremony Elders, knowledge keepers, helpers, and learners together to facilitate mentorship and co-learning. By reducing barriers to access skills, knowledge, and teachings in relation to sacred fires, this research aims to build community relationships and capacity. The project will be collaboratively facilitated by Indigenous community members as co-researchers and co-learners.

QTRL

FEST
2023

Throughout the academic year the QTRL hosts monthly gatherings we call “Share and Tells,” where every member of the lab has the opportunity to share and discuss their current research projects. Following this format, this year’s QTRL Fest was an intimate moment of reflection which provided past, present, and future QTRL members to meet and commune with each other in the Paul Cadario Conference Centre. This indeed is how you build the knowledge sharing communities we need in these uncertain times.

As a half day event, the current cohort reflected on our experiences while welcoming the incoming residents and research fellows. It was a

blessed event that closed with a performance by performers from “*Queen of The Road: The Calypso Rose Musical*” – led by Musical Director Roger Gibbs.

Following the performance, we continued to build relationships at a reception where music was provided by QTRL Community Leader-In-Residence, Alphonso King Jr (AKA DJ Relentless, Jade Elektra) who rendered two wonderful sonic encounters. In the conference room attendees had the opportunity to engage Jade Elektra’s recently released album: “*Legendary, Darling!*” Framed as a radio show “*WJEB - Legendary, Darling! – The Backstory*” provided attendees with an oral history of Jade’s engagements with the ballroom scene, internationally, and how it has shaped their artistry as performer and producer now.

“Such engagements are momentous, as is this annual celebration of the work undertaken at the QTRL”



1 Graduate Research Assistants Jad Sinno and Elio Colavito **2** Undergraduate Research Assistants Anissa Azhar, Henry Yang, and Sunnie Hu **3** QTRL Roundtable Participants **4** Alphonso King Jr., Rhoma Spencer, and Michelle Walker **5** QTRL Director Dana Seitler and audience **6** Celebrating in a Conga Line **7** Alphonso King Jr. and Friends **8** Michelle Walker



The QTRL a wide range of events this year, bringing together artists, community members, academic scholars, students, and researchers from across the GTA. We began with an orientation in early September. This was accompanied by a welcome reception at Bickford Park where incoming affiliates had the opportunity to commune with the previous QTRL cohort. Our conduct collaborative and community-based monthly meetings—called “Share and Tells”—provided members of the lab an opportunity to share their work, engage in robust discussion, make connections, and spend time together in order to achieve our goal of imagining news ways to conduct research, make art, and build community beyond the usual silos in place at the university.

September 8, 2022
QTRL Orientation

September 9, 2022
QTRL Welcome Reception

October 22, 2022
Symposium titled “A Rose Among Thorns: Calypso Rose | Life, Music, and Impact”



Rhoma Spencer hit the ground running with a virtual symposium “A Rose Among Thorns: Calypso Rose | Life, Music, and Impact” which brought together leading

Caribbean studies scholars to discuss the legacy of Calypso Rose. Considered the “Mother of Calypso” and universally acclaimed as the undisputed Calypso Queen of the World, Rose’s influence over the calypso music genre forced the renaming of the decades long “Calypso King” competition to the “Calypso Monarch” instead. Her calypsos on social justice and issues of gender equality have initiated change in legislation and policy in both Trinidad and the US.

This symposium explored the rise of Calypso Rose and her music through the years. The event featured a moderated panel, Q&A, and as well as performances by calypso artists. **Attendees at this event engaged from regions as far as Japan. This event was graciously co-sponsored by the Women and Gender Studies Institute (WGSi) and the Centre for Caribbean Studies at University of Toronto.**

November 4, 2022
Artist-in-Residence Talk

In early November, Rhoma Spencer offered an Artist Talk at University College that was attended by students and members of the public. These engagements would be a precursor to Spencer’s stellar end of year production *Queen of The Road: The Calypso Rose Musical*.

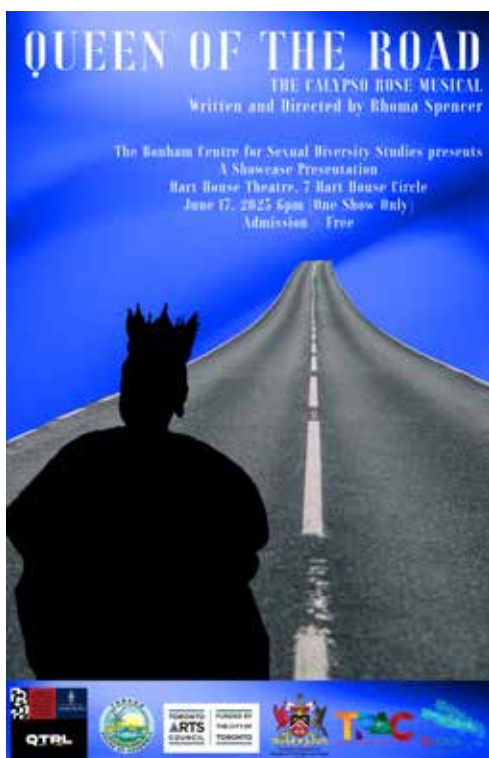
March 24, 2023
Trans- Feminist & Queer Neurodiversity in Academic Work - QTRL & SDS meet-up - Fri. March 24

Faculty Research Fellow T.L. Cowan and QTRL Research Assistant and Doctoral Candidate Elio Colavito organized a meet up to support Cowan’s project with the lab on building TFQ mental health networks at the university. The meet up invited faculty members (contract or continuing), graduate students, and Postdoctoral Fellows at the University of Toronto to gather for a reading and discussion group on the theme of “Assisted Living in the Life of the Mind”. In the intro meet-up we discussed neurodiversity as a framework for thinking about academic work and how ableism informs dominant understandings of what constitutes productivity and (individualized) originality in the context of scholarship.

May 24, 2023

QTRL Fest

The Bonham Centre hosted this full day event to celebrate QTRL's accomplishments in our second year as a research community. Guests from the SDS and QTRL family spent the day together reflecting on our year, listening to music, and sharing food.



June 17, 2023

Queen of The Road: The Calypso Rose Musical

A workshop presentation premiering at Hart House Theatre on Saturday June 17th. Performing to a full house, the collaboration of Toronto-based performers, University of Toronto students, Trinidadian musical artist Stacey Sobers, and members of the Tobago Performing Arts Company, the event has been critically acclaimed as a beautiful tribute to Calypso Rose's legacy throughout local and international media outlets.

This production was in collaboration with the Tobago Performing Arts Company as an international educational exchange among performers and artists. We are grateful that this endeavor was supported by the Consulate General for the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. We at the Queer and Trans Research Lab are looking forward to the world premiere of this work in Tobago in 2024.



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