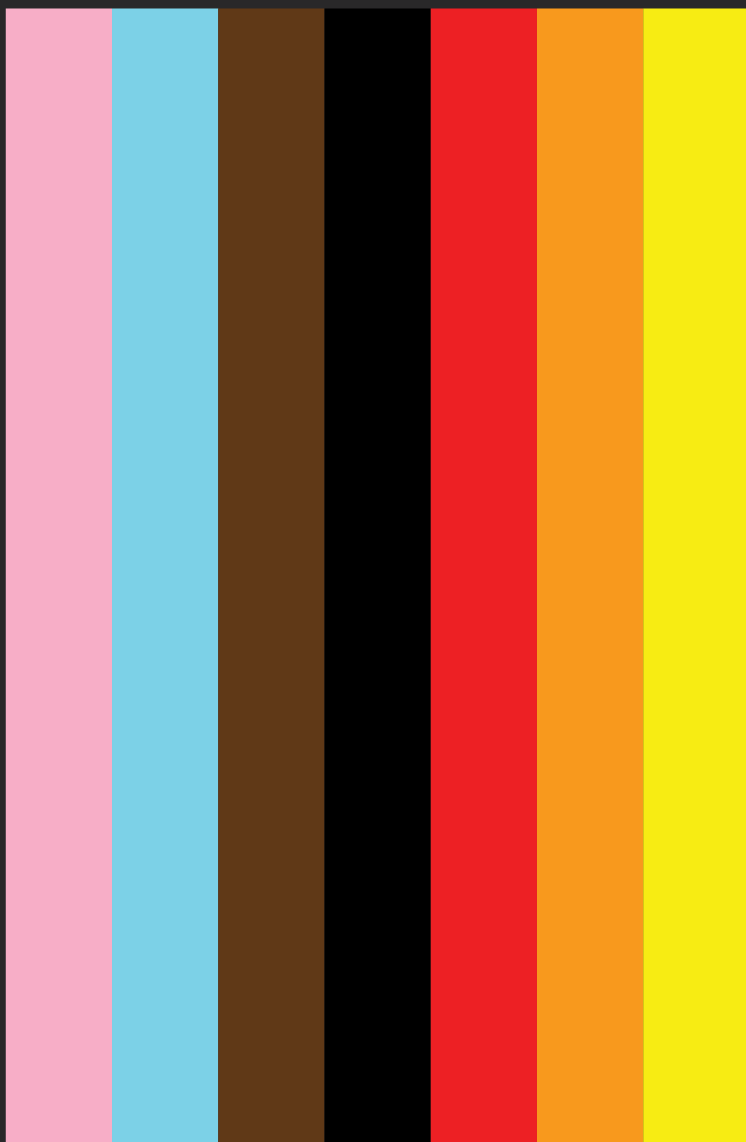


YEAR-IN-REVIEW 2022



QTR





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

In "Poetry is not a Luxury," Audre Lorde writes, "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized." The well-illuminated, sustaining, and transformative scrutiny Lorde describes has, in many ways, been a motivating force behind the formation of the Queer and Trans Research Lab, and the results have been nothing short of magical. Over the past year, we have met as a collective to share our projects and talk about the joys of the present, and the possibilities for the future. In this space, I have learned more than I have taught, and I have listened more than it was useful for me to speak.

We need light to see, but, as Lorde reminds us, what is its quality? The quality of light at the QTRL this year has had everything to do with the brilliance of its members: the artist-in-residence, Teiya Kasahara; the faculty fellows Andrea Allen and Jordache Ellapen; the community leaders Abdi Osman and Tatiana Ferguson; the graduate students; the undergraduate research assistants; our amazing program co-ordinator Nikoli Attai, everyone. Their light shone so brightly so as to make the world look very different to our eyes. I offer thanks for this first year of possibility, and I look forward to more years to come.

Program Co-ordinator Review

My experience at the QTRL has been nothing short of amazing. In one short year I have witnessed the creation of a space of community and belonging for QTBIPOC people, not only from U of T, but also from around the city of Toronto. All our lab members engaged in a wide array of exciting, critical, and necessary work that reflects our aim to foster approaches and solutions to entrenched and emerging social and political problems affecting 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC lives and communities. I am grateful for having an opportunity to work closely with each member of the cohort and will cherish all the valuable lessons that we have learned together. Although we were unable to meet physically for much of this academic year, the virtual spaces we shared certainly provided a sense of community that we quickly realized we missed.

As a lab, we acknowledge the deeply complicated relationships that exist with communities external to academia and the university. To develop more meaningful relationships with QTBIPOC communities in the city, we collaborated with two amazing community leaders-in-residence Tatiana Ferguson and Abdi Osman, from whom we learned so much about Black queer and trans experiences of love, intimacy, and community. I am excited to witness the kinds of bridges that we will continue to build as we grow. We owe much of our success to our hardworking and dedicated graduate and undergraduate research assistants who went above and beyond to assist all of us as we completed our projects amid an ever-changing pandemic environment. Their drive and passion certainly provided much-needed fuel for our endeavours.



Nikoli Attai

My time as program co-ordinator at the QTRL comes to an end after this inaugural year, much sooner than I had hoped, but, alas, opportunities are beckoning afar. I will hold the lessons learned and connections I've made here at the lab close as I begin another adventure at Colorado State University as an assistant professor in the coming months. I have no doubt that the QTRL will continue growing and becoming a space that fosters community and actively bring about change in QTBIPOC communities. I look forward to witnessing this growth.



Leading-Edge Queer and Trans Research Lab Opens at Bonham Centre



ana Seitler wants U of T's new Queer and Trans Research Lab -- the first of its kind in the world -- to break down barriers, shatter the traditional practices of ivory tower academia, and empower community activists.

The director of the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies -- which will host the Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) beginning this September -- sees the groundbreaking new initiative as a way to counter the isolation of queer and trans researchers, as well as a crucial opportunity to forge closer ties with the wider community at a time of increased systemic anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-queer violence.

"The Bonham Centre is already very good at fostering connections across the disciplines because our programs -- both undergraduate and graduate -- are interdisciplinary at their core," says Seitler, who is also a professor in the Department of English. "Moving to something like a research lab is a natural progression from there. We hope it will allow us to build ongoing relationships between researchers, artists, and community leaders who

are doing the kind of work that positively affects people's lives in LGBTQ and BIPOC communities. At the lab, we are committed to providing an interactive, creative space for collective work and to building the necessary infrastructure for this work to successfully evolve." Seitler is excited that participants will have the chance to work together and share cross-disciplinary and creative methods and challenges. "As yet, the U of T doesn't have a mechanism in place for faculty members who are doing LGBTQ2S+ research to collaborate with each other, or for students to learn from these collaborations. At the lab, we'll immerse students in both faculty and community projects and have monthly meetings which we'll call 'Share and Tells,' with everyone presenting their work on the different queer methods that inform their approach. The kinds of approaches that a researcher takes in sociology, for example, are very different from what someone does in law or media studies, which are very different from approaches taken in public health work or immunology. The lab brings with it a sense of possibility, of experimentation, and creative unpredictability. It's really important to us that we remain open and capacious as we grow."

Seitler is just as excited by the opportunity for academics to collaborate with artists and activists. For this purpose, Seitler developed the artist-in-residence and community leadership programs. The 2021-22 artist-in-residence is trans opera singer Teiya Kasahara and the two community leadership residencies will be held by Tatiana Ferguson, co-founder of the Black Queer Youth Collective, and Somali-Canadian multidisciplinary artist and videographer Abdi Osman. While the initial appointments are drawn from Toronto, the lab seeks to collaborate with future appointees from elsewhere in Canada and around the world.

"A problem that tends to exist with universities in general is a lack of accountability to our communities. The lab wants to break down those divisions by creating a space where community leaders and artists and others can work and create together with faculty and student researchers. The reality is that those of us doing this kind of work are

“The QTRL is founded upon the principle of creating connections to learn from one another, share our strengths, and work together to create change.”

also active members of the queer, trans, and BIPOC communities working for change,” says Seitler. “Many of us might even say we exist more in our various communities than we do in the university.”

The artist and community leadership appointees will be joined by research associates, postdoctoral fellows, faculty members, and student research assistants as part of the inaugural QTRL cohort. Nikoli Attai will be the new Research Associate and the QTRL program co-ordinator; Elif Sari will hold the Martha LA McCain Postdoctoral Fellowship; Andrea Allen and Jordache Ellapen will be Martha LA McCain Faculty Research Fellows; Mónica Espallat Lizardo, Ian Liujia Tian, Chido Muchemwa, and Elliott Tilleczek will be graduate research assistants; and Chelle Carter, Jade Nelson, Madison Garces, and Riya Joshi will be undergraduate research assistants.

In reflecting on the importance of this new initiative, Nikoli Attai explains, “The QTRL is a new and exciting endeavour that will provide us with opportunities to do the necessary and critical work of addressing the deeply complex experiences and needs of LGBTQ2SA+ communities.” He goes on to say, “I am particularly excited and motivated by our inaugural cohort of community leaders, artists, students, faculty and our postdoctoral fellow, whose projects pay critical attention to a wide array of issues impacting queer and trans, black, Indigenous and People of Colour communities locally and transnationally.”

The QTRL has received support from across the university, says Seitler. In fact, the lab is actually launching this three-year pilot project ahead of schedule. The original plan for this year was to have only the postdoctoral fellowship, the artist-in-residence and one community leadership role. But the response, especially from sponsors Mark S. Bonham and Martha LA McCain, was so enthusiastic – especially when coupled with matching funding from the Faculty of Arts and Science – that this year will see the QTRL vision come nearly to fruition.

Bonham says he was delighted to support the addition to his namesake centre. “This is an exciting time for the Bonham Centre as it builds an impactful

research lab on LGBTQ+ issues,” he says. “Academic institutions have always been at the forefront of research on leading issues of the day, and the new Queer and Trans Research Lab will help fortify and expand the strength of the Bonham Centre in addressing the pressing issues of the community.”

McCain agrees that the QTRL can play a major role in tackling issues facing queer, trans, and BIPOC people. “I believe strongly that problems are best solved at the intersection of diverse learning, talent, and perspective,” she says. “For this reason, I am so very pleased to have played a role in the creation of the Queer and Trans Research Lab.

“The QTRL is founded upon the principle of creating connections to learn from one another, share our strengths, and work together to create change. I am convinced that the bridges built and communities formed through the interdisciplinary efforts of the QTRL can only assure progress in addressing the local and transnational LGBTQ2S+ issues of greatest concern to all of us.”

Seitler is quick to point out that the continuation of this pilot project will depend on ongoing funding from the university and others. But she feels, especially given the ongoing structural inequalities the COVID-19 pandemic has served to highlight, that the QTRL’s importance is clear.

“One of the things we’ve seen in the pandemic is how it has disproportionately impacted specific communities, including (or especially) undocumented, BIPOC, queer, and trans communities. But this didn’t reveal anything new. It just underscores what we already know about how particular people are actively targeted for neglect – this includes health inequities in LGBTQ2S+ and QTBIPOC communities, human rights abuses against gay and lesbian communities around the world, and the epidemic of violence against Black trans women. The QTRL wants to be a place where we can come together to address and actively challenge these problems.”

community leadership residents

Tatiana Ferguson thinks academia often leaves people like her behind. The longtime activist in Toronto's Black, trans, and immigrant communities wants to remedy that in her work at U of T's new Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies.

"A lot of times, historically, researchers have pathologized, and been very extractive of, my communities," says Ferguson. "I'm really ensuring queer and trans voices are centered, not the voices of those who may be investigating them. There's not a lot of literature that's documented the lives of Black trans women. I'm bringing a gender lens and a racial diversity lens."

Ferguson – along with artist and activist Abdi Osman – is a community leadership resident at the QTRL. The residencies allow activists and community leaders to share, develop, and circulate their work, as well as to establish connections with students, teachers, and researchers.

Tatiana Ferguson



Ferguson wants to launch a new version of The Dating Game. Not the TV show from the 70s that spawned a thousand clichés about heterosexuals, but one that addresses the realities of love for African, Caribbean, and Black trans women in Toronto.

The game is part of her project Transcending Love: Rings and Tings, which explores the dating experiences of Black trans women in the city and which is almost ready to launch.

"It's about exploring sex, love, marriage, and the long-term relationship needs among trans women," says Ferguson. "They experience a lot of microaggressions, misogyny, transphobia; there's murder of trans women, often trans Black women. They experience questions of belonging. I decided to focus on this demographic because there are these feelings of loneliness that sometimes only Black trans women have. I wanted to explore their hopes and their aspirations when they're pursuing relationships and how that fits with their livelihood."

Ferguson's residency at the QTRL also offers her the opportunity to bring her singular perspective to the work of academics, artists, activists, and students.

"I think I occupy a unique space," says Ferguson. "I do have sufficient experience in writing papers and designing studies that I can be part of the knowledge exchange that's taking place with other researchers. I've worked on about 10 research projects, all of which have involved Black and trans people. I want to be able to demonstrate that community members can contribute to projects in leadership roles, not just as participants."

Ferguson arrived in Toronto in 2014 as a refugee from the Bahamas. Her application was successful, but she has been trying to make things easier for other Black trans women in similar situations.

"I wanted a place where I could explore my gender," she says. "I was not being my authentic self in the Bahamas. But I noticed there was a big gap as a trans person who was going through resettlement. A lot of groups were not approaching things intersectionally. Newcomer groups were for all newcomers; every group you went to required you to present identification. If you didn't agree with the gender identity on the ID, a lot of newcomer groups were not open to it."

In addition, in Ferguson's experience, existing groups for trans people didn't address issues of race or the realities for trans immigrant women. So Ferguson decided to start her own group.

"I wanted a group more reflective of who I was – trans and immigrant – that helped people with gender navigation, with how they were reflected in their identification, with pronoun usage, with where to buy clothes."

Since her arrival in Canada, Ferguson has co-created the Perception support group for newcomers, refugees, and asylum seekers at EGALE Youth Outreach and has been a facilitator with Supporting Our Youth's Human Rights Equity and Access Team. She has also worked with Black CAP, The 519, Sherbourne Health, and the Canadian Council for Refugees Youth Gathering. She has been the project co-ordinator of the TransFormed Project at METRAC, which seeks to address partner violence from two-spirit, non-binary and trans perspectives, and with the Black Queer Youth Collective on the Domino Project at Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre, providing Black LGBTQ2S+ youth with a safe, supportive, experiential learning environment.

Ferguson is also a national project co-investigator and team leader for refugees and newcomers with Trans Pulse Canada (<https://transpulsecanada.ca>), a community-based survey of the health and well-being of trans,

non-binary, and two-spirited people across the country.

Ferguson received a Bonham Centre award for her community activism in 2019, which led her to apply for the residency.

"I think there are few labs like the QTRL that engage students in integrative learning experiences," says Ferguson. "It's been helpful for connection building and community building. I've been able to share my thoughts and impressions, and I'm benefiting from the knowledge exchange."

Abdi Osman



During the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto, Osman started researching another, earlier pandemic in the city: HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and '90s and how it affected the lives of gay black men.

The research was for Osman's new film – which he hopes will be ready next year – *Black Gay Pleasure/ Pleasures of Black Gay Men 1970 Until the Present*. The film will explore three eras of Black gay life in Toronto: before HIV/AIDS; during the pandemic; and its aftermath. It will be a mix of archival footage and interviews with men who lived through the pandemic about community, nightlife, and sex.

"This film is trying to counter the erasure of Black gay men from history," says Osman. "If you look at [queer Toronto] publications like the *Body Politic* or *Fab*, they erased

everything else and focused on whiteness."

Osman was previously a Fellow at the Bonham Centre in 2019 and teaches a course in visual arts and architecture to first-year students at U of T. He is excited to be part of the QTRL's mix of academia, art, and community.

"Scholars writing on queer topics or queer people have to get the information from the queer community," says Osman. "At the QTRL, you have community people, artists, activists, all working and sharing ideas. I think the work is not separate, everything is very interconnected. With the Lab, we're all learning from each other."

Osman has an undergraduate degree in African studies and environmental studies from U of T, and a Master of Fine Arts in documentary media from Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson). He became interested in art in high school after arriving in Toronto in 1990 at 17, having fled with his family from the civil war in Somalia. And after getting his BA, he decided to focus on it fulltime.

"I consider myself to be a multidisciplinary artist—painting, drawing, mixing different parts of media," says Osman. "I try to add a different layer to the work that allows the audience to feel they're behind the scenes. You see a beautiful photograph, but you can't read anything beyond the photograph. My works asks that you do."

"I concentrate on the documentation of Black gay men. There's not a lot of this kind of archival work in Toronto, especially about Black and Muslim gay men like me. I started documenting for myself at first, but even younger people who were born here don't really know the history."

Osman says he uses his work to break down some of the myths around Black gay men.

"There's this belief that there are no black gay men, or that the Black community is very homophobic. With the work I do, I try to interrupt that narrative."

If Black queer immigrants in Toronto are represented, Osman explains, it tends to be through a Western, hegemonic narrative of "from persecution to liberated nation."

"A lot of the Toronto scene is focused on Black queer people who come from elsewhere as refugees. They talk about Black people who are fleeing from their country or their family because they are homophobic. You'd think Black people or nations are the most homophobic people and places around. Meantime, you have people from small-town Ontario, white people, running away from their town or their family because they are homophobic. There's not much difference."

"There's also still a lot of misinformation floating around that Black queer people are carriers of HIV, or Black men are seen as violent, or they are seen as sex objects. On Grindr, or other dating apps, those things are still very common."

By exploring lost or ignored history, Osman's work demonstrates how Black gay men have always been part of Toronto's queer scene. His film project, *Black Gay Pleasure*, has its roots in an earlier work called *Shadowboxing*, which screened this fall at the ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives. *Shadowboxing* looked at practices of black gay cruising in Toronto at the turn of this century and featured Black gay men talking about encountering each other and having sex in places like Queen's Park.

"When you listen to the video, there's a lot of conversations about different types of men meeting in different places and the tensions between race and class during those encounters. A lot of the men were Black men, people around my age or even younger at the time, who had these experiences. With *Black Gay Pleasure*, I want to look even further back into this history," specifically, to the 1970s before the AIDS crisis.

Osman sees his work as helping to build community, but community is also very personal.

Martha LA McCain postdoctoral fellow

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rowing up in Turkey, Elif Sari was aware of the many Middle Eastern refugees living there while seeking asylum elsewhere. But what she hadn't realized was how many of them were queer.

"In college, I had been interested in questions of marginalization and repression by the state," says the Martha LA McCain postdoctoral fellow at U of T's new Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL). "But it wasn't until I did an internship at a migrant organization that I began to learn about LGBTQ refugees. This group had been invisible to me. I had never met a queer refugee before.

"In the mid-2000s, queer refugees were not a concern in migration studies. It was a lot of coincidences, luck actually, that led me to begin my academic and activist journey."

This fall, after completing her PhD in anthropology from Cornell University on "Waiting in Transit:



Iranian LGBTQ Refugees in Turkey and the Sexuality of (Im)mobility," Sari has joined the QTRL at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies.

She says she plans to examine "waiting" both as a methodological tool and an analytical category to explore how the carceral politics of asylum are shaped by indefinite waiting, spatial confinement, and precarious material conditions, and how refugees develop everyday tactics to cope with violence, precarity, and uncertainty."

Sari also wants to examine the shift from government sponsorship of refugees to

sponsorship by private groups, and how this has affected the resettlement of queer Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees in Canada.

"Middle Eastern LGBTQ refugees are increasingly reaching out to Canadian queer NGOs, seeking private sponsorship as one of the few available resettlement paths. I will conduct ethnographic and archival research to explore the effects of this novel phenomenon on queer mobilities, race, belonging, and sexual citizenship in the current era of immigration retrenchment, growing xenophobia, and anti-Muslim racism."

Sari will be teaching an advanced undergraduate seminar for the Sexual Diversity Studies program titled “Queer (Im)Mobilities: Normalization, Resistance, and Emergence” in the winter term, and is looking forward to the opportunity to work on these issues in the Bonham Centre’s unique setting.

“I am particularly excited about establishing interdisciplinary conversations and collaborations with faculty and students at the Centre, the Women and Gender Studies Institute, Anthropology and Sociology Departments, and LGBTQ refugee artists and activists in the greater Toronto area.

“Even in the very first QTRL meeting, I was thrilled to see it included faculty, students, researchers, artists, and community organizers. It was a very non-hierarchical structure,” says Sari. “Most of the time, we’re immersed in our own field, we think what we see is kind of exclusive to our field. It’s very important to maintain connections between academia and the outside world. We learn from each other, and we learn together.”

Sari wants to use those connections to learn more about the reality of life for queer refugees. Canada is not necessarily the promised land, she says. Even being accepted for immigration is not as easy as many think. This is because Canada has inflexible expectations of what a queer refugee should be.

“Not all refugees identify as LGBTQ,” says Sari. “Think about all the people who do not fit into these categories, all the people who identify as non-binary or as non-gender conforming. But lesbian refugees need to show butchness, gay men need to act feminine; there’s no room for anyone who doesn’t fit into those categories. I know of a butch-looking lesbian who was accepted, but their femme partner was rejected for being a ‘fake’ candidate. People applying for acceptance are required to

provide documentation, such as emails and letters, proving they’re queer. But they don’t necessarily have personal sexual archives like this, because they needed to live in secret without leaving traces.”

And like any process controlled by government, the refugee claims process is subject to political changes. Sari says Canada used to offer an expedited process for queer refugees. But when the Syrian refugee crisis happened -- and now the Afghan refugee crisis -- they were prioritized over queer claimants.

“Noone is against resettlement of Syrian or Afghan refugees,

they get here. It’s very hard to reconcile what they see Canada as being and the reality of what it actually is.”

Contrary to popular belief, says Sari, for many refugees the place where they come to terms with their sexuality is on their journey, not in Canada itself.

“The journey to asylum is also a temporal journey,” she says. “Refugees end up spending a lot of years together. They engage in various conversations about sexualities, bodies, identities. Through these encounters, people acquire new knowledge about themselves and others, and it leads

“It’s very important to maintain connections between academia and the outside world. We learn from each other, and we learn together.”

but why do they always have to prioritize one group over another?” asks Sari. “It pits groups against each other, and then they have to compete for refugee quotas.”

That is also reflected in the move to private sponsorships, where LGBTQ refugees have to compete for limited spaces.

“What we’re seeing here is a neo-liberal shift,” she says. “Private sponsorship produces a language of ‘saving’ and ‘rescue,’ which has a very colonialist history when it comes to brown refugees from the Middle East.”

And for those lucky enough to be accepted, the reality may not be entirely what they were hoping for.

“In Turkey, we see intersections of racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia,” says Sari. “Refugees have to shift between different identities, or give up parts of their identities, and conceal their sexuality. Most refugees see Canada as a place where they can be themselves, and they’re disappointed that they still face prejudice once

to the emergence of new queer identities, new alliances, collective care and support mechanisms, and solidarity.

“Asylum is both a violent and productive process. Queer refugees challenge those images of being closeted and passive in radical ways by creating their own communities.”

Sari hopes her seminar will allow undergraduates to explore these ideas, perhaps for the first time, and use them in the future.

“It is very important to explore these subjects with undergraduate students who often take active roles in refugee, migrant and sexuality rights, and advocacy as volunteers, activists, social workers, and interns; who themselves might be refugees/migrants; and/or who might plan a professional career at the intersections of migration and sexuality.”

Written by Krishna Rau.

Krishna Rau is a Toronto-based journalist specializing in social, political, health, and queer issues.



artist-in-residence

Meet opera singer Teiya Kasahara 笠原 貞野: the artist-in-residence at U of T's new Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies.

Mozart's *The Magic Flute* holds an important place in Teiya Kasahara's life. It was the work that first inspired them to become an opera singer. But it was also the opera that crystallized their frustration with the industry's insistence on rigid stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and body type.

"I had always been trained to know and uncover the characters so I could bring them to life," says Kasahara (<https://www.teiyakasahara.com>), the artist-in-residence at the QTRL. "But playing the role of Queen of the Night from *Magic Flute*, I became more and more frustrated with how the character was quickly dismissed as a negative portrayal of femininity, as emotional, as someone who uses their feminine wiles to get what they want.

"Going about this career, I became more and more frustrated with a lot of the restrictive practices with regard to my

gender, with what I wore, with what I sang."

As a queer, gender non-conforming, part-Japanese performer, Kasahara wondered if there was a place for them in the increasingly stifling, restrictive, and white-dominated world of classical opera.

"I had to laugh off racist jokes for fear that I would offend somebody, even though I was the one being offended," they say. "Opera is a very heteronormative patriarchy, it's an elitist, classist way of being. There are not many lesbian or trans or non-binary folks, masculine-presenting women, non-cis-presenting performers. Opera was made for the people, but it quickly became something to be controlled."

In 2016, upon returning to Canada from Europe – where they had been performing as the Queen – Kasahara began to examine other creative options.

"I started to explore what opportunities there might be in theatre. I saw there were some really forward-thinking ideas.

I was welcomed, which was very different from the experiences I've had in opera.

People wanted to get to know me, to hear what I had to say; each artist had value."

Kasahara worked with Toronto's queer Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and wrote *The Queen in Me*, in which they use the Queen of the Night to dissect opera. The work contains 10 excerpts from various operas, "sometimes pulling them apart, sometimes performing them as written on the page," as well as spoken word.

"I've been workshoping it for a few years," says Kasahara. "I've given this character the platform to speak out about the tendencies of this opera industry, of which she's a part. She has a chance to advocate for those [non gender-conforming] bodies in the industry, to advocate for me. It was a healing, illuminating, and enlightening experience."

Kasahara hopes to perform the show next year with Amplified Opera (<https://www.amplifiedopera.com>), the Toronto company they co-founded in 2019, and the Canadian Opera Company (COC).

It's part of a journey they've been on since the age of 15 in Vancouver, when they first saw Ingmar Bergman's film version of *The Magic Flute* and became hooked.

Kasahara trained in opera at the University of British Columbia, and joined the COC at 22. They

something out of their range or weight. But composers began to write works associated with a certain kind of fach and developed certain expectations. For sopranos, if you have a high range and can sing things that go fast, you're going to play certain roles that have a very slight, svelte physique, very feminine.

"Body characteristics, even personality, became associated with roles. This type is expected even off-stage. It's just ingrained in a very surreptitious way, very veiled, conveyed to young singers by their peers or teachers."

Embodying that type became increasingly difficult as Kasahara came to terms with who they are.

"I think it was always there in the back of my mind, but I was wearing these rose-coloured glasses," they say. "I was so excited to throw myself into the career, to be the successful soprano my industry wanted me to be, the femininity, body type, even being white. Discovering opera was when I started to contort who I was—to sculpt myself—pitching my voice higher, growing my hair longer, wearing makeup."

"I had a few crises, moments of thinking, 'I hate the opera, that opera has betrayed me.'"

Kasahara says they considered returning to school to study gender identity. But through discussion with their partner—whose Ph. D. thesis was on lesbian loneliness—they realized that an academic degree was not required to include those elements in their work. But it's one of the reasons why Kasahara says they're excited to be part of the QTRL with other academics and activists.

"The pressure of being an opera singer was so great that I closed many creative avenues," they say. "The artist residency at the QTRL allows me to fuse two worlds together, be really supported, be in the mix with all these other thinkers. We're sharing back and forth, opening this flow of communication and expression, enriching my work and enriching their work."

Kasahara emphasizes they are still an opera singer, but they feel more emboldened to occupy this role on their own terms. In addition to the residency, they are also working on *The Butterfly Project*, analyzing "the racist, cultural, and sexist structures" of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, a project inspired by singing the title role just before the pandemic.

"It was so exciting to embody that role in a queer and trans body. So let's do these roles, but not keep re-traumatizing audiences. I feel like there's such a rich representation of characters, and being able to take them and queer them for ourselves and for audience members to queer them, is really exciting and empowering."

"Let's just make all the queer operas!"

were there from 2007-2010, and now work as a freelance singer, a common practice in North America.

As part of their work at the QTRL, Kasahara is working on *Little Mis(s)gender*, a project examining the restrictive norms the opera industry imposes on performers, in part through the emphasis on fach, the rigid categorization of voice and body type.

"It was initially created to protect singers," says Kasahara, "to ensure they wouldn't be singing

Meet the Faculty Fellows and Graduate Research Assistants at the QTRL



From evangelism to Black consciousness to a Marxist analysis of labour, and from Brazil to South Africa to China to the Caribbean, the faculty members and graduate students at the University of Toronto's new Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL) are bringing a uniquely transnational perspective and interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and activism.

The QTRL, part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, has set out to break down barriers between academic disciplines; between institutions and queer, trans, and BIPOC communities; and between artists, activists, and scholars.

"The lab definitely gives me a sense of optimism about what is possible in an institution, about what we might create," says graduate student Mónica Espailat Lizardo. "Spaces continue to be very violent for queer, trans, and racialized folk, but it makes me very hopeful to see people working across disciplines, across mediums, across cities, and globally. It gives me hope to imagine the types of relationships we might

create between folks imagining different freedoms."

Espailat Lizardo and the research team at the lab are using the opportunity to work on their dissertations or on books, while interacting with artists, activists, and leaders drawn from queer, trans, and BIPOC communities across the GTA.

The academic research team includes Martha LA McCain Faculty Research Fellows Andrea Allen and Jordache Ellapen; graduate students Espailat Lizardo, Elliott Tilleczek and Ian Liujia Tian; and Research Associate Nikoli Attai, who serves as the QTRL Program Co-ordinator.

Andrea Allen



Andrea Allen says she has the United States Army to thank for her interest in the lives of LGBTQ Brazilians.

While an undergraduate at Northwestern University, Allen — who currently holds a joint appointment as assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies — joined the Army Reserve.

"I was young," explains Allen. "Some people join the circus; I joined the military."

Allen was offered the chance to learn a language and was assigned Portuguese.

Learning the language sparked Allen's interest in Brazil, where Portuguese is the main language. And the fact that she was working on a double major in Afro-American studies and religious studies led her to want to learn more about Afro-Brazilian life and religions like Candomblé, an African diasporic religion that developed in Brazil during the nineteenth century.

"Candomblé is seen as accepting of, and even celebrating to a degree, same-sex relationships," says Allen. "It goes beyond gender binaries, and it consists of many different myths about deities in same-sex relationships."

Allen's interest led her to participate in a study abroad program in northeast Brazil during her undergraduate studies, where she interviewed a number of LGBTQ religious practitioners, work that continues to this day.

Her time in the U.S. military, however, was much more short-lived. Allen came out to her unit in 2000 via a letter, and, in doing so, fell afoul of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy in place at the time. She was discharged as a result in 2003.

"I told and was kicked out," says Allen. "It was a hunt for queer people in the military. I had a lawyer, so I got an honourable discharge. I'm glad I had that experience, but my political leanings are not aligned with the U.S. military's interests, or with U.S. interests in general. When you get older, you learn things."

Allen went on to get a master's in theology at Harvard Divinity School and a PhD in anthropology from Harvard. Her first book, *Violence and Desire in Brazilian Lesbian Relationships*, came out in 2015. Allen is now working on her new book, *Other Sheep Not of This Fold: LGBTQ Evangelicals in Brazil and the Brazilian Diaspora*.

Having spent her own childhood in a Baptist evangelical church, Allen has long been interested in how queer people fit into religious structures. In Brazil, mainstream evangelical churches do not accept queer people, and evangelism is more closely aligned with national identity.

"Queer people are not accepted, are not seen as Christian," she said. "They're seen as sinful. Evangelicals in general do not accept LGBTQ people."

The result, she says, is that queer people have started their own churches.

"The churches I visited in Brazil were led by gay people, the sermons were very similar to churches of my youth – liturgically similar, theologically similar – everything except for sexuality," she says. "When I was there, they didn't really have a relationship between inclusive churches and mainstream churches. But that may be starting to change."

Allen plans to continue her research among queer Brazilian evangelicals in Toronto and Lisbon. For now, she is also enjoying the opportunity to work with fellow QTRL members.

"Just getting to know the work of different people has been useful to me. It lets me ask, 'How can I make my research more inclusive of different ideas that are rooted in communities?'"

Jordache Ellapen

Growing up in South Africa as apartheid was being dismantled indelibly shaped Jordache Ellapen's perceptions of race, particularly ideas of what



constitute Blackness and Indianness in the country.

"South Africa became democratic in 1994, and it became known as the rainbow nation," says Ellapen. "There was hope for a multicultural state, where everyone belongs to the nation on equal terms. One of the most liberal constitutions in the world was introduced in 1996, and it was one of the first to protect sexual minority rights."

"But, ultimately, what we have is a set of constitutional protections that do not always translate into reality. Queer people in South Africa are still subjected to very high levels of violence. And we still have a society that is very much separated along racial lines. But those early days of democracy shaped how I feel about Indo-African relations. I've seen how the notion of what constitutes Blackness has shifted. And I'm rethinking what it means to be Afro-Indian."

In South Africa, the Indian community itself was used as a buffer between the black and white populations under apartheid, says Ellapen, and was falsely stereotyped as being completely successful economically.

"The Indian community in South Africa is not a homogenous community," Ellapen said. "The colonial and apartheid states did

not differentiate between trader and indentured classes."

Ellapen — currently an assistant professor in the Department of Historical Studies at UTM — is using his time at the QTRL to continue work on his book *Indenture Aesthetics: Afro-Indian Intimacies*.

The book explores work by queer and feminist South African visual artists to examine the relationships between racialized communities that the apartheid regime often played off against each other.

"It curates aesthetic practices by Afro-Indian and Black South African artists, thinking about the relationships between communities historically racialized in opposition to each other," says Ellapen. "I'm interested in speaking to how we retrain ourselves to see Indianness or Africaness or Blackness as categories that intersect and bleed into each other and not as oppositional."

"The South African state, in articulating what constitutes genuine Blackness, excludes Black queer people from its construction of citizenship," says Ellapen. "But some of the most profound critiques of the nation-state are from communities who have been historically marginalized. And queer, gender-non-conforming femmes and women are at the forefront of challenging how the nation-state determines who its proper subjects are."

Ellapen turns to the murdered anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko's idea of Black consciousness to try to further break down the ideas of race in South Africa.

"Biko understood blackness to be very capacious, not something restricted to skin colour," says Ellapen. "Under the definition of Black consciousness, Indian, mixed-race, and Black people were all thought of as Black. For Biko, the fight against apartheid needed

to bring together all racialized communities to fight white supremacy.”

Ellapen welcomes the opportunity afforded by the QTRL to focus solely on his book. But he has also appreciated the chance to learn from others at the lab.

“Historically, the ways in which our communities have been studied has been from the outsider perspective of a white academic,” he says. “More and more of us who come from racialized, diasporic communities are engaging in scholarship about our own communities from our own perspective.”

“To think and work together and share in the way the lab encourages us to do is very generative for projects of this kind,” he says. “It’s always interesting when you bring together people from multi-disciplinary backgrounds. You see things you normally wouldn’t because you’re stuck in your own world. It reveals how important spaces like the QTRL are for the transmission of knowledge.”

Mónica Espailat Lizardo



The University of Toronto gave Mónica Espailat Lizardo the ability to understand all the difficult aspects of her life.

“In my first year of undergrad, I took a course in the equity studies department,” she says. “The course spoke about the processes of racial violence, colonial violence, diverse sexuality in a way I hadn’t heard before. I just remember being so absolutely excited and so tremendously angry. Growing up as an undocumented immigrant in the U.S. with parents of different races, it was very difficult. After I took this class, I remember calling my dad, feeling like I finally had words to explain the context of my own life.”

Espailat Lizardo had received an undergraduate scholarship to the prestigious Smith College in Massachusetts, but was unable to show proof of citizenship. And, following a visit to her birthplace in the Dominican Republic, she was denied re-entry to the U.S. Fortunately, she was accepted at the University of Toronto and was able to obtain a student visa to study in the history department. She is now a permanent resident in Canada and is able to visit her family in the U.S.

Espailat Lizardo’s visits to the Dominican Republic – coupled with her work in the history department and the Sexual Diversity Studies collaborative degree program – also led to her current PhD dissertation, “Transverse Movements: A Critical Trans History of Hispaniola.”

“Questions of citizenship and belonging have been a part of my life ever since I can remember,” she explains. “I remember going back to the Dominican Republic when I was 18 and finally feeling I was somewhere I felt I belonged. I visited a small town while I was there and saw graffiti saying, ‘Out to the Haitians.’ I had romantic ideas of going home, but I realized it was reliant on the exclusion of others, just like in the U.S.”

Espailat Lizardo quickly learned that Haitians weren’t the only groups excluded from life in the Dominican Republic.

“Gender and diversity in the Dominican Republic are treated quietly, as if there is no sexual diversity, there is no gender diversity,” she says. “There’s this idea of an ethnic intruder, but also of gender and sexuality intruders. There are lots of mechanisms used to exclude legally and socially LGBTQ Dominicans.”

As an example, she points to the citizen ID card. Until 2013, the card had a racial category which served to stigmatize Dominicans of Haitian descent. The cards also require the holder to register under the gender assigned to them at birth, and government rules state that photos of “people who are dressed or in costume pretending to be another sex cannot be taken.”

But trans Dominicans continue to fight for their rights, and support sometimes comes from unexpected quarters.

“There is something so profoundly moving about the ways in which LGBTQ mobilizing has occurred in the Dominican Republic,” she says. “One of the people I interview for my work, Anlly Rodriguez, was giving a talk in the capital city, and a teacher had brought her students all the way from a rural area to hear it. The teacher stood up and said, ‘I don’t have the right words, but we are affected the same way, we are in the same fight. I wanted my students to learn about your fight.’”

Despite what the University of Toronto has afforded her, Espailat Lizardo says she still feels a lot of discomfort working within an academic institution because of the ways these institutions so often produce exclusions of their own. But, Espailat Lizardo says, the QTRL is helping to dispel some of that.

“To move beyond discomfort into resolution, that’s what I’m learning from the community activists at the QTRL. What can I do with my discomfort in more practical ways?”

Elliott Tilleczek



After moving to the city to attend the University of Toronto 10 years ago from their hometown of Sudbury, it took Elliott Tilleczek a while to find their place. But as a graduate student at the QTRL, they feel like they belong.

"Growing up in Sudbury was weird," they say. "There's a small-town feeling and there's a sense of community. But as a queer kid, I always felt I was on the wrong side of that. I loved the idea of being that cliched small-town queer kid moving to the big city."

Tilleczek lived in Toronto's queer village. But at school, doing an undergraduate degree in English and anthropology — with a minor in visual arts — they found themselves seeking a more meaningful connection.

"It's kind of isolating being a queer student at U of T," they say. "There's a lack of community, a lack of feeling like I could be myself, to be taken seriously and not as some sort of curiosity. In English and art and anthropology, I didn't feel unwelcome, but I definitely felt a sense of otherness."

But as Tilleczek's academic life progressed, they began to find more acceptance.

"When I started taking anthropology of gender, I realized there was a space to bring the personal and the professional

together, to find a throughline to the disparate parts of myself," they say.

Tilleczek has their master's degree in Anthropology, and as a graduate student in sociocultural anthropology and sexual diversity studies, is now working on their PhD dissertation on queer and trans digital activism.

The lab, they say, feels like where they should be.

"There's a non-hierarchical approach," they say. "There's an openness, a supportiveness, with everybody standing on equal ground. The feeling and energy, everyone working on these really fascinating issues, it feels like the lab is building a very unique project. It's like a dream job, everything I've wanted."

Tilleczek's own work involves looking at attempts by online activists to build that sort of dream world for everybody.

"I'm interested in how people who identify as queer or trans engage on Instagram or Twitter and are trying to build community through queer erotic activism," they say. "I'm looking at influencer culture, consumer capitalism, and ways in which queer activists are changing the available platforms."

"I'm asking people if they consider what they do online to be activism and I am getting definitions that are sometimes at odds with each other. Simply existing as a queer person in heteronormative spaces online can be understood as activism. So looking at these very different engagements and understandings is changing what we can think of as activism in the first place."

Tilleczek has also taken on the role of multimedia content producer for the QTRL and sees a future as a professor.

"With the work I'm doing at the QTRL, I realize I don't need to be a stuffy academic," they say. "There's a space for me in academia, which feels exciting."

Ian Liujia Tian



Ian Liujia Tian's first experiences of Toronto came as an undergrad at Shandong University in China when he would watch episodes of *Queer as Folk* and the sci-fi thriller *Orphan Black*, both filmed in the city.

When he came to Toronto in 2017 to obtain his master's in social justice education at OISE, the reality was a little different from *Orphan Black*.

"Nobody is being cloned in Toronto!" he says.

He also initially found the city less welcoming than he had been led to think it would be.

"I found it a lot whiter than I had expected," says Tian. "There were not as many racialized spaces as I had hoped. But when I started working with ACAS (Asian Community AIDS Services), I actually found queer and Asian spaces in the city."

Tian also found working with queer groups in Toronto easier than in China. As an undergraduate at Shandong University, he had founded the first LGBTQ group on campus.

"It existed underground, not officially affiliated with anyone on campus," he says. "We had professors who were supportive. We were able to book classrooms and get some material support. And outside of campus, there are

lots of cafes happy to host film screenings, etc. We organized online and were able to fly under the radar.

"But yes, it put me in some danger."

In China, Tian also worked with a group called Queer Workers, which provides help to migrant labourers.

These experiences led to his master's thesis on labour organizing in China, and to his current PhD thesis on Queer Marxist Approaches to Labour and Social Reproduction in China.

"My time with Queer Workers helped me start thinking about labour and sexual identities together," says Tian. "The thesis comes from my experiences, rooted in people's daily, material life, which itself comes from a Marxist understanding of labour. I'm looking at spaces where production happens, and looking at what happens after you finish work, at times of social reproduction such as having sex or cooking, washing dishes, socializing. I'm interested in how those aspects of life are tied to the productive aspects."

Toward this end, Tian is examining the lives of queer workers in Guangzhou.

"I approach this not through a heteronormative lens, but through a queer lens," he says. "I'm researching cruising sites in these spaces. I am looking at this through the lens of pleasure and how this relates to work. I want to find out how much of our pleasure is shaped by the productive aspects of our lives."

Being part of the QTRL has helped Tian further develop his dissertation through work with Professor Daniel Grace, from the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, who is also a part of the QTRL. Together they are working on a paper about race, racism, and sexual practices during the COVID crisis.

"Working with Professor Grace is really helping me think

through how pleasure is socially determined by race, and how for men who have sex with men, pleasure is always related to public health."

Tian says he had difficulty finding a knowledgeable professor to supervise his dissertation. The University of Toronto recently hired a professor who works on queer issues in China, he says – assistant professor Shana Ye – but that shortage has convinced him to help fill that gap.

"I want to continue in academia for that reason," he says. "There are not enough faculty members working on Asia in general."

But he cautions, "Everything is very precarious in late-stage capitalism."

Chido Muchemwa



The QTRL is making Chido Muchemwa contemplate how to talk about sexual and gender identities in her homeland of Zimbabwe.

"It's helping me develop the language to talk about queerness," says the graduate student in the School of Information Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies. "We tend to talk about it there as if it's vulgar. I want to find a way to talk about it in everyday language."

One of the ways Muchemwa is approaching that is through

analysis of the country's national archives, the subject of her PhD thesis: Nation, Narrative, and Archive: Reading for Freedom in Zimbabwe.

Muchemwa didn't set out to explore how queer people were addressed in the archives.

"When I started my PhD, I was a pure archive person," she says. "I just wanted to analyze the archives. But a year in, I just wanted to blow up the whole project. I felt I was getting nowhere. Then I ended up in a queer diaspora course and realized there's this thing called queer theory. And I realized it would allow me to analyze the archives in a way no one had before. I understood that the archives are not inclusive and that I was just helping to erase queer people. Instead, I'm re-imagining the national archives, thinking about displacing them as the ultimate source of history in Zimbabwe."

Muchemwa is also exploring the country's oral traditions, especially the praise poems clans and families use to tell their stories, and how queer voices can be incorporated into works that often perpetuate historic inequalities.

Muchemwa has a BA in creative writing and French literature from the University of North Texas and an MFA from the University of Wyoming. She uses her own writing – which can be found at www.chidomuchemwa.com – to explore those excluded voices. But she recognizes that achieving real-world change will be a challenge. The QTRL is helping to address those issues.

"People ask different questions when they're not in academia," she says. "People who are working with communities or are artists ask us to be more honest and fundamental. How do I make this project about more than my impact as a scholar? How do I make this have a positive impact on the communities I study?"

Muchemwa has found it especially helpful working with Professor Jordache Ellapen as a research assistant. Ellapen is one of the faculty fellows at the QTRL whose focus is on South African queer artists.

"What are the odds?" asks Muchemwa. "Someone working in my neck of the woods, someone who understands the sexual politics of being queer in southern Africa. When you're the only Black person in a course and everyone else is white, then for everyone else, it's purely an academic exercise. Finding other scholars who are working on potentially sticky situations, that's the best part."

Muchemwa recognizes that change in Zimbabwe for queer people will not happen overnight. But she is optimistic.

"The last couple of years, there's been a lot of people on social media, using accounts with real names advocating for real change," she says. "Hopefully, we can legalize things that have no business being illegal. There's a lot of potential here in the next few years. It's going to be easier to find other people like me now."

Nikoli Attai



Nikoli Attai wants to change the stories about queer lives and human rights in the Caribbean.

"I'm interested in thinking about how queer human rights funding affects the kind of activism we see," says Attai. "A lot of money is geared towards HIV and decriminalization of colonial sodomy laws, and there's a focus on extreme violence, on transphobia, and homophobia. But we need to see what money could do for queer people actively negotiating their sense of belonging, who cannot or choose not to leave the region."

"People in authority need to listen to persons on the ground. They need to work with working-class trans people, many of whom are doing sex work. But instead of using funds for safe housing or providing medication and food, they just want to do testing to find more HIV+ people to justify more funding. So what the funding is geared towards automatically influences the narrative, which means the funding can contribute to the violence and discrimination."

To explore these issues, Attai — who has a PhD in Women and Gender Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies from the University of Toronto — is working on his first book *Making Life: A Politics of Hope in the Queer Anglophone Caribbean*.

"I'm looking at the hope found where people are creating community: in queer nightlife and co-opted spaces, and how they are claiming agency in these spaces, and creating forms of kinship, and the different kind of politics we find when centering mostly working-class groups and experiences away from formal activism."

Attai got his BA from the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and his Master's from the University of the West Indies in his homeland of Trinidad & Tobago. In Trinidad, Attai began his work with a project examining sexual culture, learning how people negotiate sex and gender in urban night spaces.

"There was so much to learn about queer and gender issues," says Attai. "In Trinidad, there are a lot of queer people doing sex work. They have really interesting stories to tell, and I became more involved with this community."

Attai has maintained close contact with Trinidad's Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO: Sex and Gender Justice), which advocates for queer communities and works with other communities affected by injustice. Attai is also working with fellow Trinidadians to archive Trinidad's queer history through pictures, videos, and posters from the late '80s to create a digital platform.

In Toronto, which has a large Caribbean diasporic population, he is documenting the experiences of queer people from the Anglophone Caribbean who have sought asylum in Canada.

But, Attai says, Canada and Toronto are not always as welcoming as promised.

"You hear stories from queer refugees about how they hear of Canada as a place where everybody finds their place. But when they're here, they experience anti-Black violence, and they're highly sexualized even within the queer community. They can end up homeless and need to do sex work to survive."

The QTRL, says Attai, is an example of how those stories and communities can be centered in research.

"This community engagement model works to ensure we're accountable to our communities. We want to end the cycle of researchers exploiting communities," he says. "To do this we must foster closer relationships with the communities that we write about."

"That's what's really cool about this model."

Under GRADS

For the undergraduate research assistants at U of T's new Queer and Trans Research Lab (QTRL), being a part of the project has been an invaluable experience. While the academic knowledge has been priceless, what has been truly eye-opening is learning about racial, sexual, and gender identities, art, activism and community, and the ways they can all intersect with university life.

The QTRL, part of the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, has enlisted the students to help bridge the gaps between academic institutions and queer and BIPOC communities and to work with artists, activists, and scholars at the lab.

For Chelle Carter, being a student in the Sexual Diversity Studies (SDS) undergraduate program and a research assistant at the lab has

Carter — along with Jade Nelson, Riya Joshi and Maddie Garces — is currently one of four Undergrad Research Assistants at the QTRL. They have each been paired with one of the fellows at the lab to assist in their work and learn about topics like research practices, social justice collaborations, community outreach initiatives, database development and management, event planning, and creative practice.

Jade Nelson



Jade Nelson always wanted to study queer theory. It's why they came to U of T.

"When I was in high school and looking at universities, the Bonham Centre was a point of interest," they say. "I wanted to focus on queerness."

Hailing from Belle River, a small town near Windsor ("One Tim Hortons and that's it"), Nelson didn't always feel safe exploring who they were.

"I find myself changing identities at home for safety," they say. "As a POC (person of colour) queer person in Belle River, it's not even safe. Toronto offers a lot more space for authentic identities. I don't always have to think about safety when performing my identities here."

That safety has allowed Nelson to further explore their true self.

"I find myself changing identities at home for safety," they say. "As a POC (person of colour) queer person in Belle River, it's not even safe. Toronto offers a lot more space for authentic identities. I don't always have to think about safety when performing my identities here."

meant finding a place that validates her ideas and her identities.

"When I found the SDS program, I felt like I had found my people," she says. "Multiply marginalized people, interdisciplinary methods, you can really bring all the different parts of yourself to your studies."

"In the lab, we have community leaders and artists and activists, then we have PhD candidates and faculty fellows holding seminars and sharing their work. It solidified for me that I can find spaces where I can look at these things, at how fatness and colour and gender intersect. People at the lab get what I'm talking about."

"My sexual orientation, my gender identity, have all changed within the last three years," they say. "I came out in Grade 12. But in second year at University, I changed my identity to queer. Lesbian and gay weren't broad enough for me, and I also began questioning my gender identity and came out as non-binary. Part of the ability to think about my own identities came from being in a safe place and being able to talk about it and investigate it in a way that made me much more comfortable."

Now a fourth-year student in history and Sexual Diversity Studies, Nelson has found working with community activist and community leadership resident Tatiana Ferguson — whose focus is on Black trans women — at the QTRL hugely educational.

"I'm learning about research and ethics and ethical ways of engaging with communities," they say. "I've learned a lot about marketing, creating surveys and focus groups, and analyzing data. We do bimonthly meetings with consultants within the community."

"It's very interesting coming at it from the community perspective. We're prioritizing positive outcomes, how to create safer spaces for trans women, what trans women really need, different ways to counteract the amount of violence trans women experience just for being trans. Every trans woman who participated in our study has experienced violence, but none have tried to access support, and that is a huge problem we are trying to address."

Nelson would like to continue in their academic career and has applied to get their master's degree in Sexual Diversity Studies at U of T. They are particularly interested in the ways in which queer fashion can be part of social and political movements to

"I would like to help create queer spaces in research and not sideline it. We need a bigger bridge between community activism and academic activism."

promote queer and Indigenous culture. But they also plan to continue the fight to bring queerness into academic settings.

"In an ideal world, I would like to take what SDS is and bring it to other universities that are lacking queer spaces," they say. "I would like to help create queer spaces in research and not sideline it. We need a bigger bridge between community activism and academic activism."

Chelle Carter



Chelle Carter grew up as part of Toronto's queer and Black communities.

"I'm biracial, but identify as Black first," she says. "My mum and dad divorced while she was pregnant. I was living in a white neighbourhood one week, a Black one the next. My mum came out as lesbian early on in my life, so I found out about the gay

community pretty young. She took me and my two sisters to parties."

As part of the QTRL, Carter — currently finishing her final year of a BA in Women's and Gender Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies — is learning about the Black queer communities that existed before her birth.

Working with artist Abdi Osman — another community leadership resident at the QTRL, whose current work focuses on Black gay men before and during the AIDS pandemic — Carter is researching gay nightclubs and bathhouses from the '80s.

"It's lots of fun," she says. "Some were more elusive than others. But combing through city directories to find them is really rewarding. Having grown up in Toronto, and living in St. Jamestown with my partner, I'm familiar with the gay village. And lots of the clubs were in that area, on Yonge, St. Joseph, Wellesley."

"But I knew very little about the actual spots. I was surprised there were so many gay clubs at the time. There were many more spots that catered to gay folks then than there are now. It makes me reflect and wonder what it was like back then."

Carter says the QTRL is also helping break down academic constraints.

"It legitimizes and validates and expands what is considered academic work," she says. "You can take something really transformative like *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, like queer bookstores, like magazines, movies, or social

media and transfer it to academic practice. SDS, as an academic program, never takes things for granted; it questions where foundational knowledge comes from, which is usually some sort of colonial or patriarchal regime."

The result, she says, is that she realizes she has a lot of academic options.

"I keep jumping back and forth," she says. "I do love school, theory, reading non-fiction. I love learning and coming to my own conclusions."

Carter has applied to do a master's in social work. She's also considering a master's in information science or museum studies. But she says she feels a calling toward social work.

"I've been through some pretty rough times," she says. "I feel like I could benefit people through my own experiences with social care and mental health. When the people who are supposed to be helping you have never experienced the things you have, that can lead to some extremely traumatic experiences."

Riya Joshi



Currently finishing her BA in Sexual Diversity Studies, Riya Joshi credits the field with breaking her out of her bubble.

"At first, I had my mind set on Political Science," she says. "Then I started SDS courses randomly in first year, and I realized it's more for me. Politics made me miserable. I can't believe I used to study politics."

SDS, she says, has allowed her to address topics that are, quite literally, closer to home. Home, in her case, being Brampton, a city with a large South Asian population.

"The essays and topics we read and explore are so much more open," she says. "For my research essay last year, my primary research was on queer first-generation South Asians. Being born to South Asian immigrants and being queer, it was such a personal issue. I know so many people who struggle with that identity."

SDS also allowed for more freedom than she had in Brampton.

"Everywhere you go, there's a family member, there's someone you know," she says. "It was never bad, just a little uncomfortable,

a little awkward. Whoever I know who's queer and South Asian, nothing's changed for us.

"At first, it was just going from home to school, then school to work. I never had a chance to explore that side of myself. SDS was kind of that community for me. I felt so isolated at school, but as I transitioned more and more into SDS classes, it kind of broke me out of the bubble I was in."

And being invited to join the QTRL has allowed Joshi to feel like she's making a real contribution.

"One of my profs recommended me," she says. "I felt I didn't really stand out, so the fact my prof recommended me was fricking amazing."

"The QTRL comprises so many different people in different areas," she says. "You talk to people, you learn what it all looks like, you hear about everybody's research."

Joshi is working with Nikoli Attai, the QTRL program co-ordinator.

"I'm creating guidelines for lab events, working on how our logo can be used by other organizations across U of T," says Joshi. "I'm working on creating letterhead, typography, making sure it's ready to go for the next generation, which fonts, sizes, colours. I'm creating a mood board of what our aesthetic is going to be."

"I'm working on a year-end review and a yearbook, and

worked on the QTRL festival, which happened in June. Last semester, I worked with faculty fellow Andrea Allen on a job hunt seminar series for graduate students, and I am helping Dr. Attai create an archive of all the QTRL materials.”

For her future, Joshi says she’s leaning towards getting a master’s in social work. But the lab has made her realize she has a lot more options.

“The QTRL comprises so many different people in different areas,” she says. “You talk to people, you learn what it all looks like, you hear about everybody’s research.

“I thought I had my future planned out. Of course, that’s not the case.”

Maddie Garces

Maddie Garces felt like part of the Sexual Diversity Studies program long before attending U of T.

“I’ve known I was queer since I was 13,” she says. “Because I was the first one of my friend group to be out, I was the person they came to with questions.

“It kind of feels like I’ve been part of SDS since I was younger.”

Garces, who grew up in Oakville, says she’s always felt accepted at university.

“Most of the friends I’ve made have been queer, but maybe I’ve been in a bit of a bubble,” she says. “There’s not a ton of socializing beyond the group you’ve made friends with. It’s not like it’s a big queer social party, a lot more like you make your own queer social parties.”

But Garces — now completing a BA in English and SDS — really hit her stride once she actually joined SDS.

“I really fell in love with it,” she says. “It really encourages discussion and creative thinking, encourages us to come up with

our own ideas, and bridge what we’re learning with our day-to-day lives. It felt like a really welcoming, but also thoughtful and creative, space I was really missing.”

When she was invited to join the QTRL, Garces jumped at the chance to use her English background to work with artist-in-residence Teiya Kasahara on their project exploring the heteronormative and gender restrictions of opera. To do so, Kasahara is developing an opera project called *Little Mis(s) gender*, which challenges the idea of gendered voice types that dominates the opera industry.



Maddie Garces

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“It started out with me learning more about opera in general,” says Garces. “Now I’m helping to develop the narrative as a reader, allowing it to be a bit more cohesive, reminding Teiya of the values that they had wanted to include. It’s a lot of world-building that Teiya didn’t expect. I’m helping point out where they need to draw back.

“I really appreciate the amount of trust Teiya has placed in me. It’s a huge confidence boost.”

Garces is also using her skills with illustration and animation on the production, as well as her experience with queer open mic and poetry slam collective Hot Damn It’s a Queer Slam.

“Through that I’ve learned how to consider the performance of words and story,” says Garces. “[With Kasahara’s work] we’re

talking about how written down, it looks like poetry, and on the other hand, how it sounds on stage.”

The collaboration with Kasahara has helped Garces expand her idea of what academia is and can be and, along with the other undergraduate research assistants, is grateful to the QTRL for the experience.

“Activism is something that seemed at odds with academia for a long time,” she says. “A lot of academics are studying data in textbooks. With this, it’s, ‘Oh yeah, there’s value in art.’ It’s nice to explore that, to work with people who get to showcase its value in an academic setting.”

QTRL

FEST
2022

The QTRL hosted this day-long event to celebrate the lab's accomplishments in its inaugural year as a research community. Guests from the SDS and QTRL family spent the day participating in games, viewing film screenings, and hearing about lab member accomplishments.

Land acknowledgements and opening remarks were provided by University College Principal Professor Markus Stock, SDS professor and director Dana Seitler, and QTRL program co-ordinator Dr. Nikoli Attai. This was followed by an introduction of the incoming 2022-2023 cohort comprising the Martha LA McCain Faculty and Postdoctoral Fellows, graduate and undergraduate research assistants, and the artist- and community leaders-in-residence.

The one-day event was filled with exciting discussions and entertainment by lab members and others from the wider QTRL community. Tatiana Ferguson, our 2021-2022 community leader-in-residence, facilitated a discussion of her research project, *Transcending Love*, which focused on Black trans women, and shared data collected on African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) trans women's experiences of love and intimacy in Canada. This was followed by a dating game of her own design that was developed from this research and aims to encourage trans and queer people to speak more openly about intimacy, love, and sex. Our other 2021-2022 community leader-in-residence, Abdi Osman, provided us with a glimpse of his work in progress on Black gay life in Toronto across three conjunctural moments: life

Jade Elektra

1 Rhoma Spencer 2 Makhism 3 unknown attendant
4 Tatiana Ferguson and friends 5 DJ Pothound 6 DJ Sofia Fly

prior to HIV/AIDS, the pandemic, and its aftermath. This important and ongoing work involves gathering and exploring oral and other archival histories of Black gay life in Toronto and assembling these histories into their own visual archive.

Another highlight of the day was our fellows chat between Jordache Ellapen, PhD, and Andrea Allen, PhD, who reflected on their experiences at the QTRL and the ways that their scholarship and research were developed over the fellowship year. Moderated by undergraduate research assistant Chelle Carter, the chat's audience had an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about their research and writing plans after they have ended their residency at the lab. The QTRL research assistants rounded out the Fest by also reflecting on their experiences at the lab and how it became a supportive space for learning and mentorship.

In addition to all these fulfilling discussions, guests were thrilled by performances from our incoming community-leader-in residence and drag performer Alfonso King Jr/ Jade Elektra, who performed their song *Undetectable* (2020) and a lip-sync piece titled *Take Time* by performing artiste Ledisi (2002). Iranian drag performer Makhism also performed two of their pieces titled *Khalvat* and *Khale Soskeh*, both recounting their experiences of queerness and exile in Turkey and Canada. DJ Pothound and DJ Sofia Fly, members of Toronto's trans community, also provided entertainment throughout the day.

The inaugural QTRL Fest was a great end to a superb start at the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies and the University of Toronto. This celebration of queer and trans excellence reminds us of the need to foster closer relationships with QTBIPOC people as we continue to address our needs and celebrate our communities.



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EVENTS

The QTRL hosted a wide range of exciting activities in its inaugural year, bringing together a students, faculty, researchers, artists, and community leaders from Toronto. The first cohort participated in an orientation session hosted by SDS and the QTRL at the start of the academic year and was introduced to all our planned projects. These included the much-anticipated artist-in-residence talk, a job hunt workshop for graduate students on the market, and the postdoctoral fellow public lecture. Our dynamic, intimate, and supportive monthly Share and Tell sessions also provided an opportunity for lab members to share our work, engage in discussion, and spend time together as we provided some insight into the various projects we worked on with the lab, at the University of Toronto, and in QTBIPOC communities outside the university.

July 9, 2021
QTRL Orientation

September 9, 2021
QTRL Welcome Reception

October 5, 2021
Artist-in-Residence Talk

October 7, 2021
Job Hunt Workshop

October 29, 2021
Job Hunt Workshop

Navigating the Job Market was the title of a job hunt workshop geared toward preparing QTRL members seeking jobs for various aspects of the academic interview process. With support from our Martha LA McCain Faculty Fellow Andrea Allen, PhD, QTRLers spent time reviewing job letters and CVs and discussing the strategies for a successful campus visit. Two of our QTRLers were successful in receiving tenure-track jobs and we are excited that this workshop gave them the confidence to shine at their campus visits.

Nikoli Attai, our outgoing research associate and program co-ordinator will be joining faculty at Colorado State University as an assistant professor in ethnic studies in August 2022 and will establish a Black Queer Research Lab inspired by his work at the QTRL.

Mónica Espallat Lizardo will be starting her tenure track appointment at Arizona State University in the Department of History in the Fall, and will continue her work on *Transverse Movements: A Critical TransHistory of Hispaniola*.

February 10, 2022
Martha LA McCain Postdoctoral Fellow Lecture by Elif Sari:

Stuck: Iranian LGBTQ Refugees in Turkey and the Sexuality of (Im)Mobility

This talk explored the carceral politics of asylum shaped by uncertain waiting, spatial confinement, and precarious material conditions, together with refugees' lived experiences and everyday negotiations to cope with violence, precarity, and uncertainty. Drawing on ethnographic research in Turkey with Iranian LGBTQ refugees awaiting resettlement to the United States and Canada, Elif developed an understanding of migration that foregrounds experiences of waiting, stuckness, and immobility, rather than movement, in the contemporary context of closed borders. As North American countries have cut their refugee quotas and tightened their asylum policies since 2015, the prospects for Iranian LGBTQ refugee resettlement have grown increasingly dim. Even applicants who have completed necessary asylum procedures and are formally eligible for resettlement remain stranded in Turkey with insecure status for an undetermined period of time. Moving between asylum interviews, NGO offices, informal workplaces, and refugee protests and parties, this talk explored how North American countries' tightening resettlement policies, combined with Turkey's strict control of refugees' gender/sexuality, mobility, and labour, subject LGBTQ refugees to multiple forms of violence. It also examined how LGBTQ refugees respond to structures of stuckness and uncertainty by cultivating a queer ethics of love, care, support, and solidarity. They develop and uphold novel practices of self-making, kin-making, and community-making despite the ways in which the transnational asylum system pits them against one another in competition for access to scarce resources.



February 18, 2022
Black Queer Experience –
What is Black Queer Love?

A panel discussion with Tatiana Ferguson, Nikoli Attai, Andrea Allen, Chelle Carter, Vanessa Carter and Iziah DB

The lab hosted an informative and enriching panel discussion about Black queer peoples' experiences of Love and Life. Panelists included Nikoli Attai, Andrea Allen, Chelle Carter, Vanessa Carter, Tatiana Ferguson and Iziah DB, who engaged in a virtual discussion that explored themes of intimacy, empowerment, resiliency, belonging, and kinship in Black queer and trans communities in Toronto and beyond.

May 25, 2022
QTRL Fest: A celebration of the Queer and Trans Research Lab's first year.

The Bonham Centre hosted this day-long event to celebrate the QTRL's accomplishments in our inaugural year as a research community. Guests from the SDS and QTRL family spent the day participating in games, viewing film screenings, and hearing about lab members' accomplishments.

June 18, 2022
Little Mis(s)gender: An operatic performance by Teiya Kasahara, the QTRL Artist-in-Residence

Our artist-in-residence Teiya Kasahara 笠原貞野 produced an opera project called *Little Mis(s)gender*, which challenges the idea of voice type that dominates the opera industry. Their project consisted of a one-person opera that used a transitional fash to disrupt and transcend the expectations of the operatic voice type(s) and prescribed gender and body

types that follow suit." *Little Mis(s)gender* was performed at the Tank House Theatre located at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto's Distillery Historic District.

QTCast:

<https://qtcast.podbean.com>

QTCast is the official podcast of the Queer and Trans Research Lab at the Bonham Centre. It explores the experimental projects created by academics, artists, and community leaders in the lab and beyond. Episodes are released monthly on most major podcast and social media platforms, including Apple podcasts and Spotify, Twitter, and Instagram. Follow us on social media to receive updates about our latest episodes:

📺 QTCast_ @qtcast_

Elliot Tilleczek reflects on his experience developing the QTCast

"The QTCast grew organically out of the desire at the QTRL to disseminate our research and engage with communities beyond and across academic spheres. Producing and hosting this show has been my absolute pleasure, and I have already learned so much in my year here at the lab. I have been a host of the Do You Queer What I Queer? podcast since 2017, and I am thrilled with the ways I have been able to translate my interviewing and production skills into the ethos here at the lab.

I am looking forward to what the future has in store for the QTCast and hope to keep experimenting with our multimedia presence and pushing what it means to be a queer and trans podcast at a queer and trans research lab."



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