

“To Make a Space for Ourselves”: A History of QTPOC

Written and edited by Sarah Bennett ('23), Shirley Liu ('23), Renee Mercereau ('23), Anastacia Negrón ('23), and Professor Enrico Bruno • Published July 2023

Picture this—it's November 30, 2018. You walk into the Marlo Room in Farinon College Center to encounter tables bustling with activity. One table contains watercolors and canvases that visitors can use to create their own paintings. At another table, participants write poetry. Another table is giving away free t-shirts screenprinted with the words: “QPOC Art Fest 2018.”

The event described hadn't been sponsored by an arts club or the college's Student Life division, but by Queer People of Color (QPOC). According to its [website](#), QPOC was a student organization founded in 2018 with the intention to “provide a safe and supportive environment within the larger Lafayette community to focus on the distinct needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, and queer communities of color on campus.” In addition to providing a safe space to queer students of color, QPOC also gave its members opportunities to socialize freely with students who share their race and gender/sexual identities. Many of QPOC's members were interested in art and culture, leading to events like the annually recurring Art Fest. In 2021, QPOC changed its name to Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC).

The history of QTPOC is necessary to better understand the experiences of students at Lafayette whose identities overlap and intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. An intersectional framework recognizes that individuals with multiple marginalized identities face unique and compounded forms of discrimination and inequality that cannot be understood through the lens of a single identity. Since Lafayette is a predominately white institution, or a PWI, QTPOC would have only developed if there was a need for it from the community.

Because QTPOC is such a new organization, through this narrative we strove to capture all time periods since its creation up to the present. We interviewed past and present QTPOC board members, as well as former and current administration who worked closely with the organization.

Purpose of QTPOC

In a [2018 article](#) in *The Lafayette*, then co-president of QPOC Alex Diaz '21 shared the example of queer people not wanting to return to Lafayette due to the homophobia they faced here. Diaz reported “hearing directly from lesbians [who went here] back in the 70s and 80s that people tried to kick them off campus.” Given the history of homophobia on campus, Diaz and the other founding members wanted to create a safe space specifically for queer people of color, who face more intense marginalization due to their overlapping minoritarian identities.

In an interview with Grayson Thompson, the former advisor of QPOC who worked as the Assistant Director of Intercultural Development and Coordinator of Gender and Sexuality Programs at Lafayette from October 2018 to May 2021, he stated that QPOC was “born out of a longing.” Thompson elaborated, “I think Lafayette is a really white space and white-feeling space. And the pervasiveness of whiteness, it impacted the students of color, even in spaces where there were mostly only students of color, the surveillance of whiteness. And I think QPOC was born out of that longing for a space for people who are queer, nonbinary or trans and not white.”

In other words, QPOC was created not only because of a lack of spaces for queer people of color on campus, but also because of the pervasive and insidious feeling of whiteness as surveillance that seeped into all other spaces on campus.

When asked about the purpose of the organization, founding board member of QPOC Xavier Walker '22 said, “The mission really was to just create a social space for people to come and to meet other people and to feel safe and build community. Because we have so many other student clubs that all of us were a part of, but QPOC was the one place where we can be both queer and of color. And there was no question or hesitation about whether both of those things at the same time would be accepted.”

Notably, QPOC was created out of a sense of feeling excluded from spaces like Quest—an LGBTQ and ally student organization founded in 1980—but has actually outlasted Quest, which is no longer active.



Grayson Thompson, former Assistant Director of Intercultural Development and Coordinator of Gender and Sexuality Programs, 2018-2021
Photo credit: Grayson Thompson

“I think it's amazing that the club was formed from an experience of feeling excluded from Quest, which no longer exists. [...] They had a negative experience with one group, created a whole new community that outlasted and out-survived the community that they felt excluded from,” Tommy Lee, Assistant Director of OID for Gender and Sexuality said. “So I think that speaks a lot to the importance of the group.”

Impact and Member Experience

In its early years, QPOC functioned primarily as a social space for its members. According to Walker, the board of QPOC were some of his closest friends.

“We were all really into culture,” Walker said of QPOC. “So we would sit and watch films, and we would review music videos, and we would watch like the Fenty show. [...] As a Black man it's not likely that I could go up to another group of Black men and be like, ‘Ay, did you watch the Fenty Rihanna show?’ [...] There was that sort of just understanding that we could do what we wanted to do.”

For many of its members, QPOC was the only space where they could interact with other queer people of color.

“I think that was like my first time being around a group of queer people of color,” Walker said of QPOC. “My queer group of friends in high school were white. [...] So it was crazy to me to like, be around other queer Black or queer people of color, because I was like, ‘Whoa, not just on the internet, we actually do exist in real life.’”

Imane Halal '23, a former board member of QPOC, described a similar experience of feeling reaffirmed due to the visibility.

“All of them [QPOC Board] gave me such like, this confidence that I now exude on campus. If you physically see the way I presented freshman year versus now, I don't think that I would have been able to go through that metamorphosis or change without QPOC,” Halal said. “And not only that, [but] I was reaffirmed that this was like, this is okay. [...] I felt so seen, and when you feel seen, you exude this confidence, you exude this, like, I feel like I belong. And each of those people have gifted me that not only because they were committed to creating that space, but because all of them showed up as themselves.”

Former QPOC first-year representative Saide Singh '22 recalled feeling more comfortable on Lafayette's campus after joining QPOC.

"Lafayette, before I got into there, I'd just heard that Lafayette was the most homophobic campus. And I was like, 'Whoa, this is not going to work out.' I was just coming into my queerness. [...] So when I found this community, [...] the queer folks of color were just like bringing it with the fashion and just being themselves," Singh said of QPOC. "And that was something I definitely remember."

According to Walker, QPOC provided a haven not from outright acts of homophobia, transphobia, or racism, but from more insidious or hidden forms of it.

"I think Lafayette is really interesting because I never personally faced any direct or outright homophobia or transphobia," Walker said. "People are really good with language and saying the right thing, but I know that internally people have a lot of thoughts and opinions, which is another reason why QPOC was so important. Because you could be in spaces and nobody would ever say anything. But you would hear after the fact or, you know, you just feel things from people. And QPOC was the one place where I knew that everything was good."

QPOC did not partner often with Quest while the latter group was active. According to Walker, this was due to the fact that QPOC was primarily a social group, compared to Quest being more engaged in campus activism.

"I feel like white queers are just different, [...] so I think socially, there just wasn't common ground beyond the fact that we're all queer," Walker said. "And I also think we were very clear that we were not a political organization. We had our politics and we had our values, but we were not trying to do any sort of like activism. [...] We felt like we could do our political activism in other spaces, and so we just wanted a place to relax."

Campus Events and Involvement

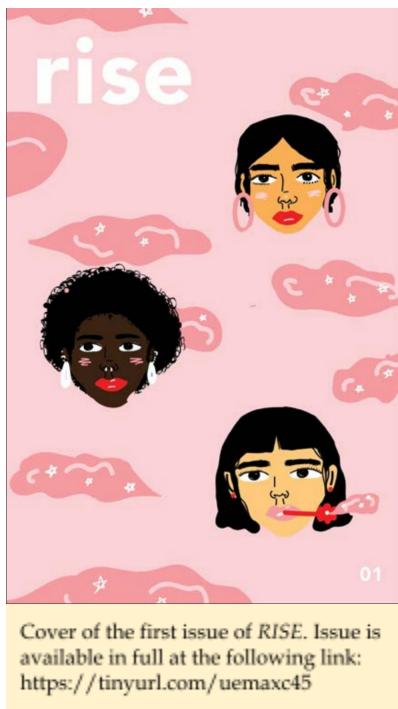
Q(T)POC has hosted a number of events on campus. Halal described the vibe of the space pre-COVID during the 2019-2020 academic year as, "a really good balance of like, it [events] didn't feel like homework, but we still got it done. And we still were able to do programming. It was a very relaxed atmosphere; I think we knew that we all navigated so many institutional barriers. So, the point was not for us to like, educate everyone. The point was to make a space for ourselves."

One notable annual event was the QPOC Art Fest, which consisted of tie-dyeing shirts and other art activities. The event was held for the first time in 2018, in the Marlo Room of Farinon.

Halal describes art as one of the shared interests across members: “All the board members were creative in some way. And so like it wasn't this, like, oh, you just had to be queer and that's it. It was definitely like, we get to create, we get to make the space what we want. And Grayson was also very much very supportive in that sense, like, making sure what he wanted that space to be for us.” Through art, members of QPOC were able to not only express themselves, but support one another creatively.

“QPOC was a social group, but we were also very artsy,” Walker said.

Board members of QPOC also helped to edit [RISE](#), a zine which started before QPOC's founding. *RISE* created space for members of QPOC to showcase their art in a different way.



“*RISE* is an intersectional feminist zine that was started by two femme people on campus,” Halal explained. “And the founders, co-creators, that organization essentially wanted to create a space and create a space for people to like, be themselves, but also to be able to call out this shit and to be able to be like, hey, yeah, we're not gonna deal with that bullshit. And it was also an artistic and creative space for people of color.”

QPOC also partnered with other campus organizations to host more conversational events about specialized topics and issues. QPOC created events that were not only interesting, but important for their group and the greater general body.

“I know that some of the board members worked with Grayson to have this like trans masculinity talk, which was amazing. And they brought three speakers that were all like, trans masculine people of

color,” Halal said. “And it was like, it was so amazing. That was like, the first time I started questioning my gender identity, but it was really cool events like that, that you didn't see anywhere on campus.”

In another interview, an anonymous Lafayette senior talked about their experience at one event during their first year, which opened up a conversation about queer POC experiences on campus. “We played giant Jenga basically [...] in, like, a giant circle. [...] Each block had a question and you could volunteer [to go up.] There were questions about healthy relationships, and navigating campus as a queer person, and also just in general, like living and being a queer person, like what does that look like... I really enjoyed it,” they said.

QTPOC also brought many notable speakers to Lafayette, especially virtually during the pandemic. In February 2021, QTPOC hosted a Black History Month [conversation](#) with sex positivity influencer Ericka Hart, Black disability rights activist Imani Barbarin, and writer Da'Shaun Harrison. Singh described events like these as notable because of how different the speakers were from speakers Lafayette usually hosts.

“There was just an intersectional lens to everything that QPOC hosted. Lafayette will have folks from *The Office* come in; what does that say about the larger mission of Lafayette?” Singh said.

Challenges

QTPOC has undergone unique struggles that other LGBTQ organizations run by white queer students have not. According to Thompson, it was difficult for the QPOC founders and board members to create a sustainable organization because of the intersectional obstacles that prevented them from putting all their effort into the group.

Thompson explained, “I think when you step into a leadership position as a queer white person, the developmental hurdles are very different than if you're a queer, trans, nonbinary person of color. [...] I think as [the QPOC board members] were growing and figuring out what made sense for them and their reality, it was really hard managing the organization because you're managing other people's needs, or where other people were placing their needs. And that's nothing a student organization can meet for anyone.”

Although there are many resources for queer students broadly, these resources often end up serving white queer students most. In contrast, there are very few institutional resources for queer students of color; in fact, QPOC was one of the only—if not *the* only—highly visible

resources for queer students of color at the time of its founding, leading many queer students of color to understandably place undue pressure on QPOC to meet their needs. Of course, white queer students face obstacles of their own as well. However, due to their racial, cultural, and economic intersections, queer students of color are more likely to struggle with racism, cultural differences, and economic barriers, leading QPOC to be less stable as a student organization.

While QPOC gained the support of administration through Grayson Thompson, unfortunately he left the college at the end of the 2020-2021 academic year. Halal discusses that the loss of Thompson was definitely felt on campus due to not only a lack of support, but a lack of representation as well. Tommy Lee replaced Thompson in his role as the Assistant Director of Intercultural Development and Coordinator of Gender and Sexuality Programs. However, Lee did not replace Thompson as the advisor of QPOC, primarily because he believes that QPOC should have an advisor who is also a queer person of color.

“QPOC needs an advisor,” Lee said. “I don't advise any club and some clubs are okay with like, you know, ‘Oh, there's an advisor on paper. It's Professor So and So but we don't really interact with them much.’ In this club specifically, I think they really do need a person of color to be that advisor, mentor. And I think identifying that person is also a hindrance.”

When asked about administrative support after Thompson, Halal answers, “I've had to find support elsewhere. Like, I haven't found it in administration. The one faculty member that I did

find support in was in the English department, Professor Gil Sadler, but she left and so it's like, where else do you find support? Where can you feel seen? If not within your straight community, or like, the community, the student body, and again, like, it's there, there is no intersectional space for us, like that space has been absolved.”

According to Lafayette's Director of Intercultural Development, Robert Young '14, one challenge of QTPOC is that it's not enough merely for the space to exist; there also needs to be broader institutional support for queer people of color at Lafayette in general.



Robert Young, Director of Intercultural Development
Photo Credit: Robert Young

“I think we promoted diversity, and it looks like bodies. But we didn't have policies, practices and procedures to align with these bodies,” Young said. “So that's gonna be a challenge for any group that is not the majority, or a challenge for any group that hasn't been established for fifteen, twenty years.”

This constant lack of institutional support has left queer students of color feeling unsupported by the college. When asked to be interviewed, Kymble Clark '22, founder of the QPOC Art Festival, declined, but provided us with this statement to share: “Black gays of all hues of the rainbow ought not enroll themselves in places like Lafayette College. We are much more important than these bigoted neo-liberal self-righteous institutions and I find no desire or intrigue in giving breath to such an establishment.”

Another obstacle that QPOC faced was strained relationships with other student organizations on campus such as NIA—a support group for women of color—and Brothers of Lafayette (BOL). Thompson attributed this contention to the complicated and sometimes contradictory nature of identity that these organizations confront.

Thompson explained, “How do you collaborate with other organizations if you feel like some of the things they do or work they center is antithetical to what you're trying to do and who you are? [...] How do we work with NIA if NIA is a sisterhood? And what does it mean to be a sister? [...] How do you work with men's groups like [BOL] if they're trying to figure out what it even means to be a man? How are all these leaders trying to figure out their own identities within these roles, but then also trying to meet needs of these other groups?”

Although NIA and BOL are both organizations dedicated to people of color at Lafayette, the gendered nature of their mission statements caused tension between them and the many members of QTPOC who do not conform to the gender binary. This is just another way in which the complicated, intersectional identities of queer people of color complicated and destabilized QTPOC's place on campus.

While there were many issues with the gendered nature of NIA and BOL, that didn't stop QTPOC from collaborating with the organizations. Halal described a 2020 Valentine's Day event held with NIA where participants talked about sex and relationships. “So like, we basically get into a circle, and then we just get to have conversations, get to ask questions, and it was a really safe space. And it was no coincidence that the queer folks on campus were the ones that facilitated that. So it was really cool that QPOC was able to work with NIA like that and have that space.”

“We were just trying in general to consolidate funds and also bring two groups together that were working on campus towards similar goals of providing a space for folks of color, for women-identified folks, for queer folks,” Singh said of the collaboration with NIA.

Young said that right now, it is important to ensure that QTPOC’s members do not feel isolated from other affinity groups and marginalized people on campus.

“I think where we are now is how do we continue to support the narratives of BIPOC students within the queer community, but then also creating a soundboard for them to also be attached to other organizations and not feeling like they're on an island?” Young said.

An anonymous senior interviewee mentioned that a part of QTPOC’s challenges has been “a lack of unity within the BIPOC community on campus.” They feel that unity is “kind of the foundation for QTPOC – so if you don't have that foundation, [...] then you can't have anything else.” They mentioned that due to multiple different intersectional identities in one organization, in QTPOC they have experienced “a lack of feeling like a community and feeling of welcomeness. [...] Like, you're supposed to feel safe, and you're supposed to feel like, brave to share your identity, and you're supposed to feel welcome. It's hard to have that if the foundation is so tense within the BIPOC community.”

Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was another big challenge for QPOC. According to Singh, it was difficult to maintain the group’s function as a social space during quarantine.

**WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH:
FT. SEX EXPLORATION & EDUCATION WEEK**

**MAR 11TH
SEX & RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION
"LUNCH PROVIDED"**
CO-SPONSORED BY: THE OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS & SPIRITUAL LIFE
INTERFAITH CHAPEL | 12PM - 1PM
Many people believe that sexuality and religious/spiritual expression don't share the same bed. This brown bag discussion is an opportunity for students of all religious or spiritual backgrounds to share their perspectives on positive intimacy, relationships, sexuality, and health.

**MAR 12TH
VISIONBOARDING HEALTHY LOVE
"WOMEN-IDENTIFIED STUDENTS ONLY"**
CO-SPONSORED BY: QUEER PEOPLE OF COLOR (QPOC)
PORTLOCK | 7PM - 8:30PM
What do you think of when you think of the relationships in your life? By creating Vision Boards, we will be exploring Intimacy with honesty as we come together creatively to envision what healthy love and healthy sexuality looks like.

**MAR 13TH
CLEAN & SEXY: ADULT TOY DEMO & LEARN
(MEN DON'T BE SHY)**
CO-SPONSORED BY: EROTIC DREAMS
KIRBY 104 | 7PM - 8:30PM
Everyone loves to feel good. Whether you use them or are involved with someone who does, it's always a good idea to know what's up. In collaboration with the professional staff from Erotic Dreams, we invite you to learn more about how to take care of your pleasure toys, their ins and outs, and the how-to's. Open to all genders.

**MAR 14TH
90S - EARLY 2000S SLOW JAMS KARAOKE & TEA**
GILBERT'S CAFE | 7PM - 8:30PM
Wrap up Sex Exploration & Education Week by slowing it down with the throwbacks that got us in our feels before we even knew what feels were. Don't worry, we'll take it slow.

**MAR 29TH
FILM SCREENING: "TANGERINE"**
CO-SPONSORED BY: QUEER PEOPLE OF COLOR (QPOC)
BUCK HALL - LANDIS CINEMA | 8 PM
Winner of the 2016 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Film, Tangerine is brash and brave film that presents two fiery heroines, fiercely individualistic trans women, trying to survive the streets of Los Angeles via any means necessary.

**MAR 29TH - 31ST
CHAS WOMEN OF COLOR CONFERENCE**
Register Here:
<http://bit.ly/chasconference2019>

LAFAYETTE
Office of GENDER & SEXUALITY
PROGRAMS

LAFAYETTE
INTERCULTURAL
DEVELOPMENT

Poster for a Sex Exploration & Education Week event in 2019, with two events co-sponsored by QPOC.
Source: <https://sites.lafayette.edu/qpoc/qpoc-archive/>

“The majority, if not all my time, in QPOC was during the beginning of the pandemic, and the biggest challenge was just organizing and also finding a collective space to be. And that wasn't easy to do on Zoom,” Singh said. “We did have a few events, I do remember, but it was just very hard to convene as a group together on Zoom online.”

Art Fest was one of many in-person events negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during the pandemic, QPOC was able to mail physical care packages to its members in lieu of Art Fest. According to Singh, these care packages contained an Art Fest t-shirt, notebooks, miniature paint sets, and other art supplies.”

The pandemic also presented issues with a change in administration. Josh Joseph '24 stepped into the presidential role in 2021, only to leave the role shortly after due to burnout. Joseph explains, “I just got really tired, I got really burned out, because I was trying to do so many things at once. And then there was like, budgeting was confusing. The people before really didn't give that much information. It's kind of just like a ‘figure it out on your own’ sort of thing. I had two other people on the board, but I don't think they were too into it. So it was just basically like me most of the time doing the work. And I was just like, I don't want to do this anymore. So I kind of stepped down. It's a lot of trauma.”

The Future of QTPOC

With COVID resulting in lasting impacts on the organization, QTPOC has not yet fully recovered.

As of the spring 2023 semester, QTPOC is not an active organization due to problems with obtaining funding. After stepping down from the presidential role, Joseph described issues with Student Government communicating with student groups in terms of funding. “The email wasn't properly written. And everyone was also just like, kind of frantically looking for stuff as well. Like, not just me, like, every other club was just like, What is going on with budgeting? And I talked to the old treasurer [in student government]. And I was like, I don't know why I got this email. Why was it sent to me? We don't have a budget, is there a way to, like, do anything. And she was like, ‘No.’ It was like, straight up, ‘No,’ like, ‘we're not gonna help.’ So it was like, ‘Okay, thanks for like, not being useful, thanks for nothing.’ So last year was just like, no budget, like nothing.”

QTPOC may continue to have trouble obtaining funding and even remaining a recognized student organization due to forthcoming rules that mandate clubs and organizations to have at least 20 active members.

Lee cited requirements like the member minimum as possibly inequitable for organizations that serve marginalized groups.

“You have a system that's trying to be very blind in the sort of SG [Student Government] funding sense, like, ‘We're going to treat all clubs the same, everyone's on equal playing field, you have to advocate for yourself,’” Lee said. “But that completely ignores that equity lens, that we know a lot of these clubs are representing marginalized communities. They are built to serve underrepresented groups, and then you're putting them through a process where they have to then advocate for funding and resources against clubs that are more kind of activity-based.”

“I think that the college lacks a funding mechanism, a system, something built in, that accounts for that marginalization, and that sort of historical disadvantage that a group ... [QTPOC] is a club that is currently, I think, experiencing a lot of transition; a lot of the original OGs of QTPOC have graduated,” Lee said. “And now you have definitely not 20 active members. [...] It would be very bad for the college to say next year, like, ‘Oh, you don't have 20 members, we no longer need a club like this.’ That's completely ridiculous.”

Although Lee acknowledges that the Office of Intercultural Development (OID) could also provide funding to QTPOC, he argues that this is a temporary solution to a systemic problem.

“A lot of times they come to us, and we have resources and support,” Lee said of affinity groups like QTPOC. “And sometimes we're able to supplement what they're doing with more money. But then that creates this really negative narrative that like, ‘Oh, we don't need to give that club money because they can get money out of OID.’ And that's not how it should work, right? One's a band aid and one's a more permanent solution.”

Lee said that if QTPOC were to disband, that would send a negative message about how much the college actually supports inclusion and equity.

“It would suggest that all of a sudden, there's less queer and trans people of color on campus,” Lee said of the possibility of QTPOC disbanding. “And that's not true. I think we're actually getting more and more queer and trans people of color on campus. And there are spaces on campus that they can certainly be a part of, but they're not uniquely designed for them.”

“Even if there's not twenty active members, who cares? That's not how equity works,” Lee said. “We should allow this space and this club to still exist.”

After stepping down from the presidential role, Joseph discussed the future of the organization. “And then this year, it was more of just like, completely remove myself from it. And I was talking to Alex and Kymblye about it. They're like, yeah, if you want it to just like die, you have our blessing, basically. Yeah, like it's okay. I feel like 'cause I think we all agreed, like the time. It came at a good time. It did what it needed to do. People were seen, people were heard. And now it's kind of just time to like, just, yeah, time to kind of let it float away. It was an amazing thing while it lasted. But some things just happened and now it's kind of just like, okay, let it die.”