



A place of connection

BY AUDREY KWAN

Audrey Kwan (she/her) is a Chinese-Filipina, born and raised on unceded Coast Salish land. An experienced arts administrator and fundraiser, she is currently the managing director at The Theatre Centre in Tkaronto (Toronto).

I was halfway through my master's degree in communications and culture at York University when I was brought into the Robarts Centre as a graduate assistant. Under the direction of Jean Michel Montsion and Laura Taman, my role was to highlight the Centre's research and to help coordinate the annual graduate conference. Their warm and welcoming support was always encouraging, not only in this specific role but also for my personal and professional growth. They were always looking for opportunities to help me develop my skills further, and, as a manager myself now, that's something I seek to nurture for those around me.

I was immediately drawn to the role because my own research focused on representation, identity, and settler-colonialism in a Canadian context. My project was interdisciplinary in nature, and while it was interesting to connect with researchers exploring wide-ranging topics, I found it challenging to find like-minded peers within my cohort. I saw the Robarts Centre as a unique place where I could meet and learn from more academics with shared research interests. It was a centralized place to share knowledge, connect with other researchers, and learn about their projects.

Looking back on my time at the Robarts Centre, understanding the value of finding and being in a community is one of my most memorable takeaways. Research can be a lonely process. Reading and writing my own thoughts is necessary at times, but I always find that discourse is both generative and clarifying. Other people's perspectives will propel your ideas forward—whether you agree with them or not. For this reason, organizing the graduate conference was one of the most impactful experiences during my time at the Robarts Centre. Seeing the diversity of research emerging from Canadian Studies was a fascinating process gleaned from reviewing abstract proposals alone. However, sitting in on various panels, being able to engage directly with other researchers, and seeing the collaborative work of the conference committee come together was most meaningful.

People need connection, and this learning is something that carries over into my work at The Theatre Centre, a non-profit arts and community hub in Toronto. The work of artists, much like the work of researchers, can be isolating, at least until you're ready to share something with an audience. As a hub, we work to create opportunities that bring artists together as often as we can. Sparking conversations in the in-between moments—at an informal gathering, after encountering another artist's show, or even while grabbing a coffee—can be the start of a new partnership or collaboration that helps the seed of an idea to develop. I immediately recognized the value of what The Theatre Centre sought to foster, as it was something I had already experienced first-hand with the Robarts Centre. ■