When I applied for a RRASC internship I said that I was looking for an opportunity to live my politics because I believe that is the only way to fully understand and develop them. But even then I don’t think I fully knew what that would mean for me. My internship at QEJ was demanding, invigorating, and transformative. It seems almost impossible to describe all that I learned and did, but what I hope to convey is that my relationship with QEJ and this work is just beginning. The work I did at QEJ and the model the organization and staff provided will stick with me and inform the way I do social justice work: I hope to bring the same radical passion and vision to my work as QEJ staff do. I was challenged and inspired everyday by QEJ’s intersectional analysis and their prioritization of lived experience. To QEJ, campaigns can be won and lost, but the foundation of organizing is about building people’s power and dignity. Being a part of QEJ, I was personally and politically challenged in many ways: In order to do my work I had to constantly probe at the assumptions that lined my thinking. I learned to be critical of policies and victories won by the mainstream LGBT movement—I learned about the complexity of the queer movement. QEJ showed me that people’s needs are profoundly shaped by the way their identities come together. I was given the space to negotiate my own queer identity and was demanded to be aware of how I constructed my identity in relation to the various identities around me. I was able to imagine myself as part of an incredibly strong and fighting community, and I feel that I have a better
understanding of my place in economic justice, racial justice, and queer justice work. I have a clearer idea of what kind of community organizer I want to be and can be.

One of the main projects I worked on start to finish was *Queer Quest: QEJ’s Community Outreach Vision*. The goal was to promote QEJ’s work while engaging and organizing with the low/no income queer community of NYC. The months before the project and before I came to QEJ, in what was a hard time for QEJ, outreach work became neglected in light of an increase in development. *QQ 2011* re-launched outreach work. I was in charge of identifying and mapping over 80 outreach sites, including community centers, queer spaces, shelters, service centers, and needle-exchange sites. I worked with a team of three other interns to determine the goals and logistics of the project and to execute the outreach plan. My outreach partner and I visited about 35 sites and met with people to gauge their interest in working with QEJ, and determined the demographics of the space. I learned a lot about how to represent an organization and how to dialogue with people. I had to push my comfort levels and exude confidence when talking to community members and entering unfamiliar communities. I learned to read folks and make them comfortable enough to take our information. It became very clear to me how important outreach was—we reached people in need who wouldn’t usually hear about these events, and made QEJ a known resource and space in the city. It felt really wonderful when a community member would come to an event or meet with Jay for help because they had picked up one of our fliers or had met us at one of the sites. I had a lot of freedom doing this project and was trusted to accurately evaluate our outreach work and what it meant for QEJ. In one of the initial stages, the interns and I presented our summer program to the board of directors, and they reinforced for us how
important our outreach work was to QEJ. It is something QEJ has never done before mostly because they’ve never had enough staff (or enough permanent staff) to do so. I had the opportunity to network with some really amazing organizers and organizations, like Picture the Homeless, who were interested in creating a relationship with QEJ. I followed up with Amber and Jay to ensure that we keep in contact with these organizations and present to them ways that QEJ could come into their space and do our work.

Doing economic justice and queer justice outreach work in New York, I learned so much more about my city—as a site of incredible economic disparity and policed sexuality, but also a space where queer and marginalized communities were and are fighting, surviving and organizing. Personally, I was asked to be queer for others in NYC spaces (shelters, community centers, street corners) when I am now just beginning to negotiate my queer identity. I learned a lot about myself, my community, and my relationship to my community including the ways that I was a part of, in solidarity with, and outside of it.

Towards the end of my internship, I worked on QEJ’s Resource Guide. I experienced the limitations of a 10-week internship and some of the difficulties doing non-profit social justice work. QEJ wants to create an LGBTGNC-friendly reference guide with options for addressing the range of needs shelter residents and low-income community members may have. This was a huge task to undertake and one that past interns started multiple times but never finished. I worked closely with another intern on weeding through organizations and gathering resources: health resources (mental, HIV/AIDS specific, senior-specific), reentry programs, financial management, housing,
substance abuse programs, POC support, etc. I then had to organize the resources into an accessible and comprehensive format. I didn’t have a lot of supervision for this project and that was difficult. The resource guide is not just a listing of organizations with economic resources but the guide has to express QEJ’s politics, and so the organizations must be queer friendly, which can be hard to decipher. I was also pressed for time because I only had so many weeks to work on it. QEJ is very understaffed so I often was pulled away from these projects to do errands in and outside the office, write emails, and organize events. In the end, I solidified a template that would be accessible to subsequent interns and entered a solid listing of organizations. I wish I could have gotten more of it done but I definitely learned how to do work with a time constraint.

Most of the organizing work I had done before my internship was within an academic institution with other students. At QEJ I worked with folks (in my office and throughout the city) whose lives have been gravely shaped by multiple oppressions, but who continue to survive, grow, and fight. Being in that space pushed me to rethink my politics in more complicated ways and I was humbled. I was encouraged to face myself and had to face my privilege. It is difficult to completely strip yourself of privilege, but I realized how important and impactful it was to recognize my privilege, step back, and to have those moments inform the way I acted and heard people the next time. In the beginning of my internship there were moments I mistook my academic understanding for true personal understanding. Yes, theory and academia are important; my knowledge of feminist, anti-racist and LGBT movements’ histories definitely helped me tackle problems and situate my work in a broader framework. But I saw how people’s lived experiences fuel a movement. The first week, Jay gave me the run down on the New
York City Department of Homeless Services and the way the shelter system works. It was really helpful to understand the DHS so I had a more solid framework for when I went into shelters and critiqued the system. I learned about QEJ’s successful advocacy campaigns for fairer policies in the shelter system, the domestic partnership policy and transgender policy. However, I understood this on a much more profound level when I entered NYC shelters and spoke with domestic partners and many LGBTQ residents.

The work I did with the Shelter Project was some of the most profound and rewarding work I did at QEJ. I usually went to at least two queer support groups in different shelters per week. As a facilitator, I learned about the importance of stepping back without disengaging. I strengthened and learned to value my ability to listen. I made strong connections with the residents in our shelter groups and their voices and lived experiences always informed and inspired my work. I saw how homeless people are (although invisible in many ways) highly visible and targeted, and homeless LGBTQ folk are even more vulnerable. Now, I believe even more in the importance of a safe space, a space where queer residents are told that they have rights, a voice, and agency in a larger system that strips them of that. It is unbelievable to me that QEJ is the only queer organization in the city that enters homeless shelters to reach out to the queer communities there.

I helped coordinate a number of exciting summer events for shelter residents and community members: Leadership School workshops, a writing workshop and performance with Brooklyn writer Sassafras Lowrey, QEJ’s Annual BBQ, and the Pride Parade. Marching at Pride was one of the most important and memorable parts of my internship. My experience of being a part of Pride for the first time would not have been
as meaningful or powerful if I had not been walking with folks who are too often excluded from the mainstream movement. I worked hard to get a strong contingent of shelter residents to march with us. The day of Pride and the weeks leading up to it I ran around making lunches, buying donuts and metro cards, picking up shirts, informing shelter residents about the March, organizing our people to march, and coordinating volunteers. It felt like such an achievement to have our community members visible and proud on that day. It was equally a hard day because the March underscored for shelter residents all that they did not have and could not be a part of. In these increasingly commercialized celebrations you must have the economic resources to be queer. The Parade brought to the forefront issues of race and class that normally go unspoken. I saw how much the mainstream LGBT movement did not include low/no-income queers, and the effects of that exclusion. It was an important day for QEJ, and an important day for me in understanding the complexity and profundity of QEJ’s work.

I really respect and believe strongly in QEJ’s work, especially how they do it—I think that’s quite rare. I definitely look back and wish I could have done more or done some things differently. I wish I could have come to QEJ with more expertise. I think with more experience, I would have been more assertive and clearer about what projects to tackle and how to tackle them. I would want to work more closely with a specific QEJ project because I felt spread thin at times. In particular, I would have liked to work more on the Shelter Safety Campaign. It was difficult to hold the stories of shelter residents and I wish I could have worked on this project specifically directed at building a powerful constituency of shelter residents. I also would have spoken up earlier about needing more support and some sort of infrastructure as the shelter facilitator.
It’s hard to determine what kind of challenges you’ll face, but I would advise future interns to fully engage and not to hide from your potential. Be visionary and show that you are capable of doing more than just administrative work. QEJ gives you a lot of freedom and so don’t let that lead to doing insubstantial work. It is really important to be able to ask questions and confront yourself when you don’t understand or feel comfortable with something. I was really lucky to have the chance to work at QEJ and to be so welcomed there. I feel like I am now building a network for when I leave college and enter social justice work, specifically queer justice work. And for now, this experience will shape the way I make sense of and navigate the next three years of my college education.