

One Thing: Gay Day 1971

by **Jamie Ross**

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I remember my first time on the dunes very well. In Grade 5, my class slept over at the nature school on the Toronto Islands, deep in the woods on the inland ocean. Beside myself with freedom, I learned to cross-country ski and heard the coyotes at night. Years later, I would sometimes—after kicking the bonfire out with sand—curl up on the couches and floors of friends’ studios in the same school, now emptied of children save for those of us who had become artists. I began to make an annual ritual of it, hoping to spend the Septembers of my life in a studio there. With the closest fridge to the beach, I would make rent slinging cold drinks with a wink to the tipsy queens.

It was 50 summers ago now that a special picnic was held on those western beaches. The widespread police violence against LGBTQ2S+ people in North America was more frequently being met with self-defense, defiance, and community organizing. People gathered in public, and especially in the secluded places where we had created sexual commons: the parks, ravines, bathrooms, and neighbourhoods of ill repute. Since the decline of the western peninsula in the early 20th century as Toronto’s wee Coney Island North, we’ve eked out a sanctuary amid the regrowing forest to fool around in and get high, relatively free from the over-policing of our downtown haunts. In the territory now claimed by Canada, the Queer summer celebration known today as Pride began on Hanlan’s Point with this picnic. The next year, the island picnic was but one part of an entire week of social and activist events. It had begun, for better and for worse.

In 1842, eight years after Toronto formed North America’s first urban police corps, and 27 years before the terms homosexual and heterosexual would be coined¹ the first two men in Canada were imprisoned for having sex. When Patrick Kelly and Samuel Moore were handed down life sentences to be spent at the nation’s first penitentiary in Kingston, on the shores of the same lake, Toronto Island was not even an island yet²

The last person imprisoned for being gay in Canada was released from prison only 11 days before the 1971 picnic. There was urgent work to be done. And although money was raised that day to fund a historic march on Parliament Hill, Cheri DiNov³—a member of the Toronto Gay Action collective which had a hand in organizing the Gay Day Picnic—remembers it fondly as a day off, when activists could set aside the urgency of their agitation. When I spoke recently with her on the phone, two of Cheri’s recollections really stuck with me. She reminded me that although the roots of Pride could be traced to the picnic of 1971, one could not forget Toronto’s raucous Halloween street parties downtown which predated the summer gatherings⁴ Night carnivals of drag and gender nonconformity would splash ecstatic public misrule along the longest street in the world. A skepticism about firsts and anniversaries of any sort is healthy.

And her other memory: what a shame it was to have to go back to the city at the end of the day, not a cop in sight.

Close your eyes.

You are walking a path through the dunes on an unseasonably warm evening. Light filters into the sandy hollow, casting gold. You’ve spent the day in delicious anonymity, resting, eating and flirting with people who consider this place a home—for some, more than any other place in the city. The bodies are more different here than in the gay neighbourhood you’ve nervously visited sometimes by night. People move through the woods quietly. It is here at some time today where you have begun to love your nude, late-adolescent body.

You bend down and scoop up a few condom wrappers as is customary in the care of the little rooms formed under the skirts of the pines big enough for two or three people. This one has a roll of toilet paper on a branch. The picnic has been packed up. The carnival is over.

The ferry home spits you out on Bay Street to walk past the stock-market towers, and those that house the headquarters of the international mining industry. An empire is built on sand. You ease into a long, full gait. Giggling, you make plans to sew a replica of the Gay Day 1971 picnic blanket tapestry, maybe with the words “Fairy Home / Ferry Home” to donate to the gay archives, plans that will be abandoned by sunrise. A monument to the semicentennial of the gay beach’s world-making party could only ever be something accidental, exceedingly difficult to photograph, and impermanent as the shifting shoreline. And it could only ever be cheap or free.

But wait... *you are still on the dune*. The last ferry of the century has left without you. From where you stand, alone on a mound of pounded flotsam facing a prone sun, you can see where the island’s thin loam trickles to the still edge of the water and continues under the waves. You feel joy. You have forgotten your name—and to what city, to what century, to what communities you belong. Your body, now levitating a few metres into the sky, is held in the unsung, word-of-mouth tradition of gay undoing inherent in this place. The homophile orgasmic summer-corn-roast Gay Day BBQ organizing committee has telepathically come to consensus on your body as the beach’s living monument, a role that everyone who has found belonging on the stretch inherits in turn, if they wish. It’s you tonight, kid. The wee bag of condom wrappers you held falls to the ground, and the Mississauga skyline twinkles its assent.

Public Lecture

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Event Details

Date

4 Aug 2021

Location

Harbour Square Park (immediately west of the Jack Layton Ferry Terminal), Toronto

Gay Day Picnic, 1971—50 Years On

6pm-7pm ET

Enjoy a summer evening in the park with Jamie Ross, Cheri DiNovo, C Magazine, and [The ArQuives](#).

In issue [149 “Community”](#) (Summer 2021), Ross reflects on the [Gay Day picnic at Hanlan’s Point in 1971](#), thought by many to be the origin of Pride celebrations in Canada. Intentionally taking place out of step with Pride as we now know it, Ross will give a reading from his text, steeped in the history, culture, and self-determination that permeates the infamous nude beach and cruising spot. Afterwards, he’ll converse with Cheri DiNovo, a queer elder who had a hand in organizing that day almost exactly 50 years ago.

Bring your own blanket, or whatever you prefer to sit on. We’ll have non-alcoholic beverages available, free of charge.

Please submit any accessibility requests to info@cmagazine.com.

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Rev. Dr. Cheri DiNovo (Order of Canada) was an active organizer in the 1960s student protest movement. During her 11-year tenure as a member of provincial parliament, she passed into law North America's first ban on 2SLGBTQ conversion therapy, and Ontario's Trans Rights as Human Rights bill. She performed Canada's first legal same-sex marriage and is currently Clergy at Trinity St Paul's Centre for Faith Justice and the Arts.