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Review

Liberation on the Dance Floor: Reflective Nostalgia, The ArQuives:
Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto, ON

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Liberation on the Dance Floor: Reflective Nostalgia. The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives, Toronto, Ontario. November 7 – December 15, 2024. Curated by Craig Jennex.

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Liberation on the Dance Floor: Reflective Nostalgia, an exhibit from 2024, showcases the work of Toronto's Gay Community Dance Committee (GCDC), a prolific volunteer-run organization that organized over 50 dances between 1981 and 1992, raising over \$250,000 for many vital LGBTQ2+ organizations in Toronto. Present in this exhibit are ephemeral materials from the GCDC and the LGBTQ2+ community groups it supported, including the AIDS Committee of Toronto, Gays and Lesbians Against the Right Everywhere, Gays and Lesbians of the First Nations, Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund, Zami, and more.

Liberation on the Dance Floor is curated by Dr. Craig Jennex, a scholar of LGBTQ2+ culture and politics and an assistant professor of English at Toronto Metropolitan University. The exhibit is a welcome expansion of the chapter on activism, entitled "No More Shit!," from Jennex's book *Out North: An Archive of Queer Activism and Kinship in Canada*, which draws on a variety of material from the ArQuives. The chapter outlines Toronto-based activism in the years 1981–1999, when the GCDC took root. It was a tremulous time for the queer community in Canada, which was dealing with the profound impact of HIV/AIDS alongside state-sanctioned violence. Beginning on February 5, 1981, more than 150 police officers arrested more than 300 men in a significant number of



FIGURE 1 Image from the opening party, November 7, 2024. 24G_7409.JPG.
Photograph by Gilberto Prioste. Source: Courtesy of the ArQuives.

police raids on Toronto bathhouses.¹ While the bathhouse raids stand out as a significant and galvanizing event, many other acts of homophobia and violence against the LGBTQ2+ community are well detailed, with accompanying archival images and ephemera, in Jennex's book. Jennex reads the collective dances that emerged after the bathhouse raids as "symbolic of the subversive spirit that animated the following eighteen years."²

Liberation on the Dance Floor is housed inside the gallery space in the three-floor heritage property of the ArQuives building on Isabella Street, in Toronto's gay village. Founded in 1973 from *The Body Politic* newspaper collection, the ArQuives is one of the largest independent LGBTQ2+ archives in the world and has collections at a national level. Its collecting mandate is to "acquire, preserve, organize, and give public access to information and materials in any medium, by and about LGBTQ2+ people, primarily produced in or concerning Canada [and] maintain a research library, international research files, and an international collection of LGBTQ2+ periodicals."³

1 Craig Jennex, *Out North: An Archive of Queer Activism and Kinship in Canada* (Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing, 2020), 166.

2 Jennex, 178.

3 The ArQuives, "About Us," The ArQuives, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://arquives.ca/about/>.

In her article “Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive,” Elsbeth H. Brown writes about experiencing hesitation and feelings of otherness when entering the ArQuives, initially begun as an archive of the white gay liberation movement. Though the ArQuives and similar organizations are “classic examples of both activist archives and community archives,”⁴ the stories of transgender people, people of colour, and other marginalized groups are less present in the ArQuives’ core collections – a fact that is acknowledged in the organization’s Historical Inequities Statement.⁵ In the *Liberation* exhibit, archival materials from marginalized communities are centred to increase the visibility of these groups in the archives and to highlight their work. These community groups include Gay Asians of Toronto; Khush: South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association; and Zami, the first Canadian group for Black and West Indian gays and lesbians.

The exhibit space is separated from the rest of the second floor by a curtain of multicoloured streamers, effectively evoking a portal, or a walk through time, and an entrance into nostalgia. The streamers are a nod to the subtitle of the exhibit, “Reflective Nostalgia,” and a reference to cultural theorist and artist Svetlana Boym’s definition of nostalgia as a state that thrives in longing and lingers in possibilities.⁶ The space is not only an exhibit but also an immersive experience that relies on archival materials to inspire reflections on the past. Speakers play music curated by Deb Parent, a lesbian-feminist activist in Ottawa and Toronto, deejay of 50 years, and recipient of a 2007 City of Toronto Access, Equity and Human Rights Award. A plaque in the space links to the playlist curated by Parent, which features music she recalls playing at GCDC dances.⁷ A large projection screen in one corner plays a roulette of photographs and other archival ephemera from GCDC parties. The opposite wall features anonymous personal ads, old and new; exhibit guests are encouraged to write their own.

4 Elspeth H. Brown, “Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive,” *Archivaria* 89 (Spring 2020): 6–33, 10.

5 The ArQuives, *Historical Inequities Statement* ([Toronto]: The ArQuives, 2021), <https://arquives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Historical-Inequities-Statement.pdf>.

6 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvii.

7 For the playlist, see Craig Jennex, “Meet in the Music ...,” *Liberation on the Dance Floor*, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.liberationonthedancefloor.ca/deb-parents-gcdc-mix>.



FIGURE 2 Table closeup. IMG_4239.JPG. Photograph by Syriah Bailey.
Source: Courtesy of the ArQuives.

Framed event ephemera and posters from the 1980s to 1990s line the remaining walls of the space. Enlarged and framed event tickets demonstrate the dual-purpose nature of the tickets: on one side was the event information and, on the other, a list of associated volunteer organizations that the guest could select to receive part of their cover charge. A poster from the 1990 event *Classy-fied* reads, “Congratulations, you’ve helped raise over \$241,000 since our inception in 1981!” Showing up to an event was participating in the cause. The event materials communicated the organizers’ and participants’ radical



FIGURE 3 Opening party attendees check out the display table. 24G_7267.JPG.
Photograph by Gilberto Prioste. Source: Courtesy of the ArQuives.

efforts and roles in history making. The exhibit leaves the viewer to ponder how to continue this work in the present.

A disco ball lights up the main table in the centre of the space, which displays other archival and ephemeral material: flyers and pamphlets advocating services provided by affiliated groups (self-defence, fighting for child custody, the Gay Asian AIDS Project); police statement cards and support group cards; publications (issues of *Body Politic* and *Rites for Lesbian and Gay Liberation* magazine); and cassette tapes and buttons from the time period. Under the table and elsewhere around the exhibit are contemporary queer theory books and crates of records, locating the archives as part of a continuing legacy and source of history.

In an interview on the exhibit, Craig Jennex posits that

When we convene on a dance floor, there is an opportunity for queer performativity, play, and innovation; the same can be said for broader political movements: when we understand ourselves as part of a collective body, our individual bodies take on different meanings and possibilities. A sense of belonging can radically reshape how we exist in the world.⁸

⁸ The ArQuives, "Liberation on the Dance Floor: Interview with Craig Jennex," November 29, 2024, <https://arquives.ca/liberation-on-the-dance-floor-interview-with-craig-jennex/>.



FIGURE 4 Opening party attendees watch the slideshow of photographs from GCDC events. 24G_7381.jpg. Photograph by Gilberto Prioste. Source: Courtesy of the ArQives.

As evident in the many violent and targeted attacks against LGBTQ2+ communities in the 80s and 90s, not everyone would have felt safe at protests and demonstrations – especially not everyone from marginalized groups. The exhibit demonstrates that the dance floor was a safer space for LGBTQ2+ folks to meet and participate in activism and a conduit for radical queer joy. *Liberation on the Dance Floor* recreates that sense of belonging, of coming together on the dance floor, in the present tense by bringing back music playlists from committee dance parties. For those visitors who are new to archives, the exhibit provides access and invites interaction and engagement with archives, acting as a welcome, low-barrier introduction. The thoughtful arrangement of archival material, the convergence of past and present, creates an environment for an active and exciting contemplation of further possibilities of queer futures.