

## Chase Dimock: On "A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island"

A Few Queer Notes on Frank O'Hara's "A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island"

Without its title "A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island", the queer space of O'Hara's poem taking place on Fire Island could pass easily undetected without the image of hoards of tanned men partying on the beach evoked at the mention of the now famous gay resort. Although the poem itself has little to say explicitly about sexual identity or its attendant politics, I believe that it benefits from being situated in the specific context of Fire Island's history in the LGBT community. Today, Fire Island is a famous summer vacation spot populated heavily with gay men during its high season. While the 21st century discos, raves, and circuit parties on the island today make it a carnival atmosphere, in the time of Frank O'Hara, Fire Island was more of a traditional east coast village of summer homes—just prominently populated by queer men and women. Fire Island was an especially popular destination for gay writers and artists. In her ethnography of the resort, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*, Esther Newton mentions the legend that W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood once attended a party at the famous Duffy's Hotel dressed as Dionysus and Ganymede. Whether this is true or not, it establishes the space Fire Island occupied in not just gay culture, but also gay literary history, as a space that nurtured and inspired queer expression. Since even before O'Hara's stay, Fire Island has had a place in the gay imaginary as a queer oasis—an escape from the bigotry and obligatory discretion of urban life. Along with promising romantic liaisons (however brief their durations) Fire Island was also a rare space of queer domesticity where gay men and women could live almost like their straight counterparts in the suburbs and residential communities outside the city.

The "Hal" in this poem is Hal Fondren, a friend of O'Hara's who, according to Joe LeSueur in *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara*, rented a beach house on Fire Island every summer with his "longtime companion" Jack Shaw (183). O'Hara was staying with Fondren and Shaw in their summer home while he wrote this poem in mid July of 1958. It is then significant that O'Hara chooses this specifically queer space, a gay oasis, as the place of his quasi-mystical communion with the sun. Not only does the idea of the sun as a spiritual entity like God choosing to speak to O'Hara and give him encouragement to write poetry (even leaving him "a tiny poem in that brain of yours") speak to a certain narcissism, ("You may not be the greatest thing on earth, but you're different.") but he also writes the poem as an homage to one of his influences, Valdimir Mayakovsky who previously wrote a similar poem about talking to the sun at a summer cottage. Thus, it makes sense that O'Hara would have this spiritual experience at a gay Mecca, and by channeling Mayakovsky's poetic conceit, O'Hara queers Mayakovsky's original poem, rewriting it in his own space of divine sensual and sexual revelation.

There is a certain queer transcendentalism to O'Hara's communion with the sun on Fire Island. O'Hara touches on the specificity of Fire Island as a place where queers could be open in nature with the sun's explanation of why it chose to speak to O'Hara on the

island: ?Thanks and remember I?m watching. It?s easier for me to speak to you out here. I don?t have to slide down between buildings to get your ear. I know you love Manhattan, but you ought to look up more often. The sun explains that it would have been much more difficult to reach O?Hara in his urban home because it would be blocked by the buildings. Gay identity and culture was made possible in its present form due to urban spaces where single men and women could move away from the family home, work independently, and form communities based on common interest and desire. Thus, gay culture is overwhelmingly shaped by and associated with the realities of urban living in a cosmopolitan environment, represented by O?Hara?s mention of the buildings. Conversely, gay culture is rarely associated with rural communities or the wilderness. Fire Island would have been the one community in that era that constituted a well-known queer space outside of a densely populated metropolis. Living on Fire Island would be far from roughing it, but it is nonetheless an environment chosen for its natural beauty, including the beach and the pines from which it gets its name. Fire Island is the gay Walden Pond?where queers could escape the urban jungle and safely commune with nature (and sometimes commune with each other in the nature of the bushes). If Mayakovsky?s communion with the sun at a summer cottage could be restaged in a queer context amidst the sexually repressive cultural atmosphere of the 50s, Fire Island would have been the logical, if not only choice.

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