Camping Out With the Lesbian National Parks and Services

SABINE LEBEL

Cet article examine le projet Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan dans leur spectacle ironique et « camp »: "Lesbian National Parks and Services" parce qu'il représente une stratégie "butch" pour subvertir les stéréotypes lesbiens et une approche nuancée de l'interaction entre les genres et la sexualité. Cet article montre que le « camp » peut être un modèle pour critiquer les rôles sexuels et les genres, surtout ceux qui font référence à la construction du genre, de la performance et de la représentation.

In the queer community possibilities for a "dyke camp" occur in performances, videos, and other locations where brazen femmes,[1] postmodern butches, and parodic drag kings play with popular representations of themselves. This strategy exists where lesbians engage with these ideas and stereotypes, acknowledging the power they have other them, while simultaneously subverting them. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's "Lesbian National Parks and Services" project represents a "dyke camp" strategy because it employs humour and parody to perform and subvert stereotypes of lesbians.

"Camp" has long been associated with gay male culture. It has been suggested that Susan Sontag's famous essay, "Notes on Camp," helped to cement that relationship for the larger culture. In this often-cited piece she talks about the difficulties of naming a "sensibility" but points to an aesthetics of "camp": a valuing style over content, a love of exaggeration and artifice, and a failed seriousness. Camp is a slippery term. In Sontag's piece it is associated with gay men like Oscar Wilder and described as "a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers" (59). Since then definitions of camp have changed, expanded, and been theorized from a multitude of locations, usually in relation to gay male culture. In her book, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Pamela Robertson suggests the possibilities for a feminist camp. Here, camp can be a model for critiques of gender and sex roles, particularly with reference to gender construction, performance, and enactment. Because of the ways that camp can foreground cross-sex and cross-gender identification there is an obvious link between camp and gender parody. Robertson concludes her book with a call to think of the ways that feminist camp can be redeployed as an artistic practice.

Robertson extricates camp from the confines of gay male culture by insisting on a parallel and shared history between gay male culture and women's culture. She insists that pre-1960s camp was not one-sided as it has sometimes been theorized within gay theory, with gay men taking what they liked from women's culture, leaving women without access to a camp sensibility. Robertson contends that women, including lesbians and straight women, have always engaged in camp practices.

The tradition of feminist camp is parallel to, but different from, gay camp. Since Stonewall[2] in 1969, camp has circulated throughout the culture in a variety of ways. One trend has been the "heterosexualization" of camp that can be seen in television shows like *V.I.P.*, (starring Pamela Anderson as part of a private investigation team), where excessive performances do not necessarily critique traditional gender roles. In contrast, a radical queer camp sensibility has been strategically used by activist groups like ACT-UP, where members often deliberately draw on and exaggerate stereotypes of queers as part of their actions/performances. Camp can be mobilized as a deliberate queer performance, drawing from its history in queer activist groups and as a feminist political strategy, as discussed by Robertson. I would like to examine how dykes in queer and lesbian communities engage with camp.

Whether camp has a history in lesbian culture has been hotly contested. Camp has been linked with traditional notions of femininity, limiting and perhaps even excluding the articulation of a dyke camp that engages with androgyny or masculinity. In her essay, "Toward a Butch/

Femme Aesthetic," Sue-Ellen Case suggests that camp has been deployed by butch-femme couples as a strategy of resistance within, and as a reaction to, a homophobic society. This is taken up by Kate Davy, in "Fe/Male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp," who states that butch-femme is a part of a lesbian, but not a camp discourse. Judith Halberstam in her work, *Female Masculinity*, reaches the conclusion that only lesbian performances of femininity can be campy because of camp's traditional tendency to play off femininity. For Halberstam, camp is dependent on an outrageous performance, an "over-the-topness," that has been typically coded as feminine.

Robertson's definition concurs with this understanding and she says that feminist camp can be described as a female form of aestheticism related to female masquerade, especially in burlesque traditions, for example (9). An exaggerated and self-conscious performance of a specific type of femininity is crucial to these understandings of camp. Traditional notions of proper femininity as masquerade, and homophobic descriptions of gay men as excessively feminine, means that "feminine" women and gay men can access a camp sensibility. The failed masculinity of gay men and the empty masquerade associated with traditional notions of femininity can converge in a parodic, excessive camp performance or aesthetic that works to undermine, reject, and resist the limitations of gendered experience which is in line with the feminist project of critiquing gender and sex roles.

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's past work is wide ranging and has dealt with issues of gender and sexuality—from a performance piece called "We're Talking Vulva" where Dempsey dressed up like a giant vulva and rapped about vulvas to the beautiful black and white film, *A Day in the Life of a Bull Dyke*. The "Lesbian National Parks and Services" project began in 1997 through a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts. The duo dressed up as Lesbian Park Rangers and tried to recruit people in Banff, mostly tourists, in to the Ranger program. The campy tongue-in-cheek project was founded in order to study lesbians, a species, that the nature loving Rangers found is not flourishing as it should. The guidebook appropriates educational and scientific language to explain why lesbians need to be studied,

> The history of biology has been negligent in acknowledging the full range of behaviour within a species, and particularly blind to lesbians. For eons, "Nature" and "The Natural" have been equated with retro-hetero mumbo-jumbo. But no longer! There is a whole world of lesbianism waiting to be studied and enjoyed! May this handbook be your guide. (Dempsey and Millan 16)

The project has evolved to include badges, a field guide, T-shirts, and a nature video. The project, through its strategies of parody and appropriation of ranger iconography, opens itself up to camp readings informed by feminism and dyke culture. The success of the project suggests that lesbians, as well as the larger straight and queer communities, are able to access and read the camp strategies and images of lesbians that Dempsey and Millan are circulating.

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Dykes in dominant homophobic discourse have been coded as excessively masculine women. This, of course, has meant that femmes, for example, are only read as queer when accompanied by their butch counterparts in both straight and queer communities. The construction of the mannish lesbian in dominant culture presents the first problem with reading the "Lesbian National Parks and Services" project as a camp pleasure. Halberstam's work on female masculinity suggests that masculinity is coded as natural and nonperformative. However, the mannish lesbian's masculinity is understood as excessive and unnatural. It can be butch, androgynous, or not quite right. This excess might be understood through stance, clothing, or manner of speaking but is simultaneously read as understated and nonperformative. Ranger Dempsey and Ranger Millan's deliberate performances invoke ideas of lesbians as masculine women. In their uniforms they call up stereotypes of mannish lesbians as earnest, sensible shoe wearing, serious, and unfashionable. In *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, Jennifer Fisher states that Dempsey and Millan stayed in character as Ranger Dempsey and Ranger Millan for their entire residency at Banff. This alongside the badges, fieldbook, T-shirts, and registration forms can be understood as a deliberately excessive performance.

Moreover, the "Lesbian National Parks and Services" project employs a number of strategies associated with camp. Camp is dependent on the appropriation of signs

that are available and circulating in the culture. Robertson suggests that,

> Camp redefines and historicizes these cultural products not just nostalgically but with a critical recognition of the temptation to nostalgia, rendering both the object and the nostalgia outmoded through an ironic, laughing distanciation. (5)

Millan and Dempsey deliberately pick up and recirculate objects, like uniforms, badges, field guides, and nature videos, that are widely seen as park ranger or Girl Guide symbols and objects. The project invokes the authority of those symbols and language and queers them. The field guide states:

> Biology, as revealed in this Field Guide, dismisses monolithic models (such as heterosexuality and patriarchy) and encourages a perversion of norms. It is only through plurality that any species, including our own, will continue to evolve. Herein lies the challenge for the lesbian-lover. It is simply this: observe, experience, experiment, and do not judge. Nature awaits within each of us. By studying Her manifestations throughout the North American continent, may we also learn about ourselves. (Dempsey and Millan 20)

Their performance and language deliberately draw on the authority of the image of the park ranger in order to open up a space to talk about lesbian invisibility.

Margot Francis, in her review of the project in *Fuse Magazine*, suggests that part of the success of the Ranger project and performance in Banff is dependent on Dempsey and Millan's whiteness. The authority of the park ranger is part of a racist colonial history that sought to tame the wilderness and impose European scientific understandings of nature on wilderness and Native people's systems of thought. Francis suggests whiteness functions to stabilize their performance and is perhaps what allows them not just to be readable as park rangers but what also allows them to queer the park ranger image. This has interesting resonances with some discussions of camp histories as being white histories. In *Guilty Pleasures,* Robertson suggests that although camp and queer representations may be non-normative with regards to sex and gender they are often defined through categories of racial difference. However, many drag kings of colour, for example, deliberately perform over the top masculine personas that can be read as campy with regards to race and gender. I do not wish to suggest that Millan and Dempsey thoughtlessly invoke whiteness in their performance but instead want to highlight the ways in which race inflects and interacts with our understandings of gender, sexuality, and performance.

Camp depends on stereotypes being recognized for what they are. The Ranger project does this with its dependence on the ranger image, which is available to a straight and queer audience. The project also depends on and exploits stereotypes of lesbians as suggested earlier. One of the pleasures of camp is its reliance on double meanings not always available to all readers (Robertson). In the guise of scientific information about nature, references to bush, beavers, footwear, and even a chart on lesbian sub-species litter the guidebook and Ranger performances. The dedication of the field guide reads "to Anne Murray, Canada's songbird." Murray is, of course, a well-known lesbian icon. The language and information in the guidebook offers this additional pleasure to readers or audiences who are "in the know."

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Robertson's discussion of camp is to mobilize it as a guilty pleasure and spectatorship position. She posits a feminist camp that functions as a parodic act where the subject can both laugh, play, and make fun of her image, while not losing sight of the hold it has over her. For Robertson, this is largely about gender and femininity. As Judith Butler reminds us, our understanding of sexuality is wholly dependent on categories of male and female. Because of the interplay of gender and sexuality, lesbians, as well as gay men, are often constructed in homophobic society as failed men or women. By deliberately engaging with stereotypes of lesbians, through the park ranger icon, Dempsey and Millan manage to both educate people about lesbians' invisibility, and homophobia while at the same time using those stereotypes to disrupt and make fun of those images and ideas. This project creates a location for an understanding of dyke camp because of the ways that it engages with and subverts an image of lesbian. Dyke camp explores possibilities that go beyond female gender that is understood in traditionally feminine ways and instead takes on a more nuanced understanding of the ways that gender and sexuality interact. While the "Les-

bian National Parks and Services" project may seem inaccessible to traditional understanding and definitions of camp, it can be read as an example of Robertsons's challenge to redeploy camp as a feminist artistic practice. It goes beyond a feminist camp, and along with brazen femmes, parodic drag kings, and postmodern butches suggests ways that dyke communities, cultures, and bodies can be read as camp, and as using camp strategies.

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[1]This term is taken from the book *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity,* edited by Anna Camilleri and Chloe Brushwood Rose.

[2]In 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn and queer patrons fought back resulting in riots, marking what many see as the beginning of the contemporary gay rights movement.

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CORNELIA C. HORNOSTY

Scraped Face

Somehow, and she'll never know how, Maureen had the presence of mind not to scream, not to overreact to the sight of her daughter, Linn. When she opened the door, Linn was waiting for Maureen to say Oh my god, and faint, or to start lambasting her for the situation. Instead, Maureen looked a bit surprised, perhaps, and then concerned that Linn might have been in extreme pain with half of her face scraped off, but she could also see that Linn was relieved and gratified that her mother was in control of her emotions. Linn had gone off to a retreat with other teenagers during school holidays, and they had been sledding, taking advantage of the lovely Ontario winter day, the packed snow, the joking and laughing, and she had slipped off the sled, but her body kept on sliding, and her face stayed in the lead and was the first to experience the hard snowy passage. She had such beautiful skin, people had remarked, and they would for years. Maureen wondered if she would be scarred for the rest of her life. Her anxiety was extreme, but she kept it in the dark corridor of her mind, and suggested that they go to the doctor as soon as possible, which would be tomorrow, and of course Linn agreed, and they went, and the doctor emphasized that she should put nothing on the scraped area, which they didn't, and it healed remarkably quickly, no scars. Twenty-five years later, Maureen still heaves a sigh of relief, but quietly.

Cornelia C. Hornosty's poetry appears earlier in this volume.