

The Lesbian National Parks and Services

Reading Sex, Race and the Nation in Artistic Performance

BY MARGOT FRANCIS

L'Institut d'été du Centre des Arts de Banff tenu en 1987 a présenté une performance de Shawna Dempsey et de Lorri Millan intitulée : "Les services et parcs nationaux lesbiens" (LNPS) D'après l'auteure, ce projet a permis d'observer les effets visibles-mais-non-visibles de sa blancheur sur ce qui fait un Canadien.

The *Lesbian National Parks and Services* (LNPS) was performance piece created by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan for a summer institute at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 1997. As interlopers in Banff National Park, the artists were "private investigators" *queerying* that icon of Canadianness, the intrepid Park Ranger, at the same time as they satirized the commodification of Banff. Performances took place in the day-to-day space of the town where the artists handed out brochures, engaged and assisted tourists, and staged specific events like a Recruitment Table in Central Park. Their brochure provided a handy map of Banff highlighting actual tourist sites, *and* imaginary institutions like the "Invisible Lesbian Heritage House and Gardens" and the "Invisible Plaque Dedicated to our Founding Foremothers." As Kyo Maclear suggests, these performances provide an ongoing "site gag" highlighting "the artifice of sight-seeing, [and] homing in on endemic preconceptions that shape the scripts for travel" (9).

However, an ongoing contradiction haunted the Lesbian Rangers performance. While Dempsey and Millan engaged in a hyperbolic display of "lesbianism," the best example of which can be seen in their Recruitment Day in Banff Central Park, they received virtually no negative response to their performance. On the contrary, they were treated with awe and respect. Anyone who has kept track of provincial responses to human rights legislation, particularly in Alberta, cannot fail to wonder about this. This article explores the obvious question: how did they pull it off?

I argue that while the central focus of the LNPS was to query the heteronormative status of the iconic Park Ranger, the project *also* stages, and provides an opportunity to observe, the visible-yet-invisible effects of whiteness, in representations of being Canadian. My examination of this project begins with an analysis of how the Lesbian Rangers performance works in the context of the representational history associated with ideas about the "wilderness" and national parks, particularly Banff National Park. I then examine how current tensions in the LNPS re-articulate this complex history. A central argu-

ment is that implicit in the Rangers queer subversions is the constitutive power of whiteness. In the LNPS, queerness and a supposedly "benign" whiteness intersect: ironically I suggest this is a central contradiction providing the sense of tension and surprise—that makes the project "work."

Re-thinking the "wilderness"

The links between national parks, imperial meaning-making and wilderness landscape can be traced to the first national park in the United States—and, the project on which Banff National Park was modelled:

Yellowstone. American painter George Catlin, famous for his portraits of Aboriginal peoples during the 1830s, is the person first credited with suggesting that the state establish national parks. Working under the assumption that both Native peoples and the buffalo were "under and equal doom," he imagined that the state could create:

...a *magnificent park*, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elk and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! (qtd. in Weber 15)

Catlin's vision of national parks was crucially reliant on forms of racialized spectacle in which Native peoples own interests in the politics of land were nowhere to be seen. Further, his idea of a park where human and animal specimens were preserved for public view suggests illuminating connections between Parks and other national institutions: museums. As Benedict Anderson notes, museums have been an important foundational tool for developing the idea of a nation. Jody Berland elaborates on this in relation to Banff, arguing that,

[Banff National Park] has been maintained for nearly

The links between national parks, imperial meaning-making and wilderness landscape can be traced to the first national park in the United States.



Lesbian National Parks and Services recruitment day in Central Park, Banff. Performance Piece by Shawna Dempsey and Lorrie Millan, 1997. Photo: Kathryn Walter.

a century as a kind of *natural* museum, in which mountains and trees function as testimony to the past ... as display objects in a museum without walls whose vistas commemorate the territorial triumphs of the land's founding fathers.... (14)

Here, Banff is a place of "staged authenticity" where a century of imperialist nation building has settled into every nook and cranny. This respatialization suggests that Banff was stripped of a whole range of earlier or alternative cultural meanings. More specifically, as Rob Shields has argued, the Native has been made to vanish into the wilderness (23).

Thus in both Canada and the United States, National Parks required the erasure of First Nations people's prior claim on the land—through a host of brutal material and discursive exclusions.¹ A century later, ongoing battles over land claims remind us that the preservation of the "wilderness" in Banff National Park has been crucially reliant on the genocidal take-over of indigenous territory.² While a few Indigenous peoples remained as "wilderness" guides, and on the outskirts of the park as small market traders—their presence was usually only visible in decorative mascots or through ritualized spectacles—like the *Banff Indian Days*. While these practices provided a certain visibility for Aboriginal cultures, they also confirmed a discourse of indigenous subordination while reproducing the idea that it was white tourists who were the legitimate heirs to these new gardens in the wilderness (Valaskakis).

How are these representational tropes re-articulated today? Images of a pristine northern wilderness, epitomized by National Parks, continue to function as crucial emblems of Canadian identity. Indeed, Daina Augaitis

and Sylvie Gilbert sum it up best in an apt Foucauldian turn-of-phrase, "Banff: tourist mecca and base camp for the production of desire" (2). While the mountains and trees of Banff remain at the heart of the nation's touristic and commercial self-imagining, the original bodies which Park Rangers were employed to exclude: First Nations peoples, are still "vanishing" in the wilderness. This absent presence can be seen in what might be thought of as some of the "museum catalogues" available to National Park visitors today: Alberta "Explore and Experience" brochures. Although these publications list hundreds of attractions in the Rockies, all but six locate Aboriginal peoples firmly in the past, offering repre-

sentations which equate them with "arrowheads and artifacts" (Baines 92-93). Thus the vast majority of current Canadian tourist materials continue to represent Aboriginal peoples as either "vanishing" in the past, (and incapable of adopting to modern society); or, through images which suggest Noble and/or Bloodthirsty Savages or Mystic Guides (Baines).

In sum, I argue that images of Banff National Park where the "wilderness" is portrayed as an empty space available for visual consumption are deeply performative representations. Further, I would suggest that the seemingly "natural" centrality of wilderness discourse to Canadian national consciousness is a disciplinary practice which has often worked to reproduce a host of racialized exclusions, while normalizing particular representations of place. However, historical claims are not written in texts alone: they are sedimented in the Canadian imaginary through the iconography which shapes our everyday associations with being Canadian. If the norms of citizenship have been hailed into being through the associations sketched above—then how are visual artists attempting to disrupt these connections? The rest of this article will examine *The Lesbian National Parks and Services* reconfiguration of the wilderness and the surprising, troubling, and sometimes hilarious results of this performance.

Reading Lesbian National Parks and Services: reading the impure Canadian

I have suggested that historic images of National Parks resonate as an iconic Canadian trope which is implicated in the national project of whitening, both the wilderness, and the nation. The Lesbian Rangers relied on taken-for-

granted assumptions about the “benign” character they inhabit to serve as the backdrop for a performative challenge to hetero-sexual norms. As a reader and viewer of the LNPS, my interest is in examining how this performance intersects with racialized axis of power.

As Judith Butler reminds us, resistance is never pure but comes into being through the frame, and at the fissures, of existing discourse. In the LNPS, Dempsey and Millan confound the disciplining intentions encapsulated in the figure of the hetero-respectable Park Ranger. Yet an important contradiction haunts the work: notions of “benign” white state authority are crucial to Park Rangers representational power—and to queer subversions. The artists use *camp*—artifice and hyperbole to reconfigure these contradictions (Bergman). Munoz suggests that camp can be understood as “a practice of suturing different lives, of reanimating, through repetition with a difference, a lost country or moment that is relished and loved” (128).

However, the “lost country” which is reanimated as queer in LNPS remains implicated in the tensions of a particularly national history. As suggested earlier, Park Rangers have been key actors in a imperial system of parks which facilitate the nation’s control over the “wilderness.” Given the overdetermined images of National Parks mapped out earlier—how can this icon go “undercover?” I suggest that the artists whiteness was crucial to their ability to *pass*. In other words, whiteness was enabling, it was a currency which gave them the respectability necessary to perform as queer.³ After all, non-white Canadians have almost never had access to a benign anonymity—quite the contrary, they have been the subjects of the state’s civilizing mission. The LNPS *works* however—because these are histories most of us, who are white, collectively forget. Instead, the taken-for-granted ideas about Park Rangers used by the LNPS, employ and subvert an image which is completely reassuring. In the LNPS, queerness and a supposedly “benign” whiteness form a campy embrace: here the hyperbolic display of “lesbian” has as its *necessary* contrast, the “benign,” white body of the Ranger.

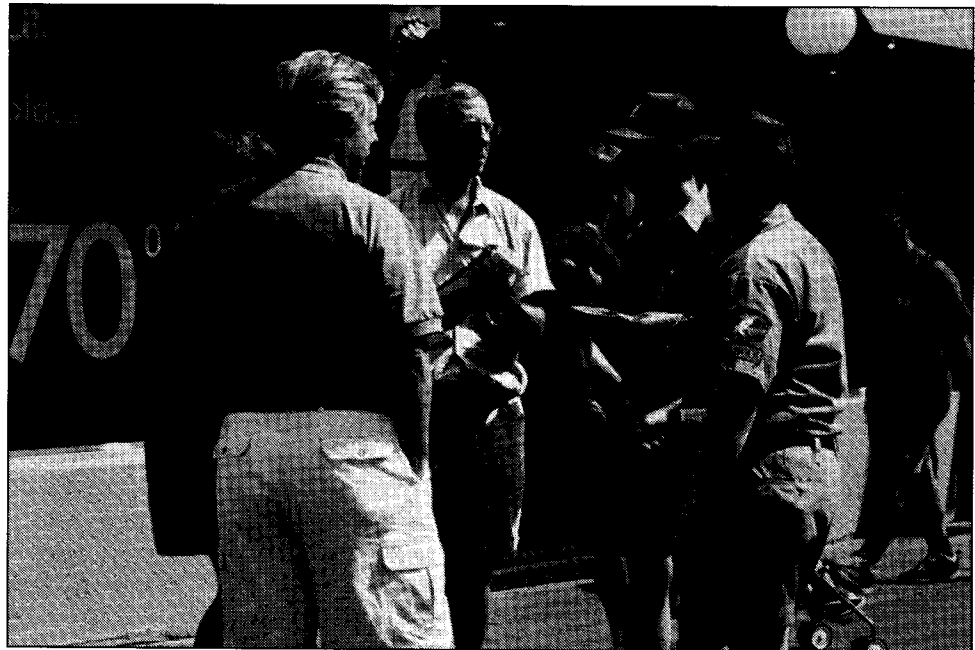
Kobena Mercer argues that white people “colonize the definition of normal” and in so doing mask whiteness itself as a category (qtd. in Dyer). Richard Dyer suggests that white dominance is seen to be everything and nothing—everywhere but never spoken. In Dyer’s recent work he attempts to construct language for the implicit markers of white supremacy, particularly in popular cinema. Here, he suggests

that both masculinity and whiteness have been characterized by the notion of “boundariness” (51). No doubt the sense of benign goodness associated with Park Rangers relies on the idea that they are engaged in legitimate forms of white, male boundary maintenance: the patrol of national parks. This “boundariness” is the necessary backdrop, constituting the “good citizen” to which the unbounded and outrageously campy *lesbian* is contrasted.

As Maclear comments, many of us have been semiologically trained—in summer camp, Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, or those grade-school trips to Algonquin Park—to see Rangers as “our friends” (qtd. in Walters 56). Yet, many of us also “know” that the boundary’s of national parks and the skills of interpreting the wildlife were only produced as “white” when Aboriginal claims to this same territory were discredited. As Kent McNeil argues, notions of scientific racism were crucial in judging Aboriginal people as unfit to claim territory (in and around Banff, and elsewhere) on which they had lived for generations. I argue that this is precisely the contradictory axis on which the LNPS turns: queer subversions *also* stage the “benign” boundariness popularly associated with the image of Park Rangers. So, while Dempsey and Millan never attempt to call attention to their own whiteness, or deconstruct it—my analysis attempts to develop a “viewing practice” which can bring both white normativity, and queer performance, into view.

Reading the queer foreground—and the white background—in straight space

If the iconic white Rangers served as the “respectable” foil for a “degenerate” sexuality to infiltrate public space—



Male tourists confer with the Lesbian Park Rangers. Performance Piece by Shawna Dempsey and Lorrie Millan, 1997. Photo: Kathryn Walter.

how did the specifically *lesbian* subversions operate in Dempsey and Millan's day-to-day performances? In short, they assisted tourists with photographs or directions—engaging them in conversation about the mandate of the LNPS when possible, and ensured they got a brochure into their hands before they left. This process of engagement produced many memorable encounters. Perhaps the most striking involved a middle-aged white Canadian man who spied the RANGER label on Dempsey and Millan's shirt sleeves and approached them to engage in conversation. As Dempsey described it,

When he got up to us he read the label of my shirt insignia out loud:

LESBIAN National Parks and Services. Realizing that he didn't know (or couldn't acknowledge) what he was dealing with, he suddenly had to improvise. His conclusion—"Now that must be Federal, isn't it!" (personal interview)

Here that oh-so-Canadian method of distancing oneself from "the problem"—the Federal/Provincial wrangle—is employed for the most unexpected of ends. When Dempsey responded (herself improvising) "Well no, actually we're international," the man remained steadfastly puzzled. Millan continues, "by the time we parted I still don't think the penny had dropped for him. Perhaps then he thought 'lesbian' was one of those supposedly obscure central European countries" (personal interview). Others caught-on to the "degenerate" nature of the performance more quickly, and decided it was something they definitely did not want to be associated with. As Millan relates,

Your average white guys would come up in baseball caps and plaid shirts and say, "so where's the good fishing around here?" And as we would launch into our response, which we would usually have to improvise, you could see them reading our caps (*LESBIAN* National Parks and Services) and the wheels turning in their heads ... and something would come over them and they'd say, "Oh thanks ..." and excuse themselves very quickly ... So it was during the course of answering these questions that the fact that the frame was hanging a bit crooked on the wall would dawn on them. I used to think it would be nice if we had a little video camera on those pamphlets to see what happened when they opened them and read it. (personal interview)

However, these resistant readings were not the only responses. Indeed, the artists appropriation of a national icon for "deviant" purposes blurred the boundaries of the real for even the most knowing observers. Coincidentally, the savvy cultural critic Kyo Maclear was at Banff in the summer of 1997 for an Arts Journalism residency and was asked to provide an "eyewitness account" of the Rangers.

It is amazing, but I have yet to see them out of uniform or off duty ... Gradually the surrogate rangers are becoming ever more real, ever more familiar ... the conceptual satire seems to have titillated visitors (myself included) to the point that we have become willing participants in the masquerade. Are we falling prey to parody? Or is the fiction unravelling the real, its centre and margins ... The LNPS make it clear that the social scripts, determining who will be loved, hated and revered, can be easily scrambled. Identities can be cross-wired and reprogrammed because they are based on unstable attributes. (qtd. in Walters 56)

Here the *Lesbian* in the Ranger insignia reminds us that Park Rangers, and other national icons, are only imaginable as straight. These queer significations highlight the continued force of heteronormativity in the imaginative construction of wilderness space, at the same time as some observers "titillation" signals the instability of these same (hetero)sexual assumptions.

Perhaps the practical connections between queerness and whiteness come most clearly into view with a closer analysis of the LNPS Recruitment Drive, detailed in Field Report No. 56 of the project. Here Dempsey and Millan describe a performance in Central Park, Banff, where they calmly attempted to recruit all manner of people, including children, into the Ranger Program. The pair provided a wry description of their performance:

Today's recruitment drive was very successful. The colourful "Lesbian National Parks and Services WANTS YOU!" banner and the pink lemonade attracted countless passersby, who were most interested in the Service and how they might become involved. Among our more animated guests was a day camp of thirty thirsty children who were very excited by our Junior Ranger programmes. (On a personal note I must say it is extremely satisfying to have eager young faces look up at our crisply uniformed selves with naked awe and respect.) (personal interviews)

So I return to the question I posed at the beginning of this presentation: how did they pull it off? I have argued that Banff is one of the ultimate sites of Canadian tourism's objectifying gaze. While most tourists remark that they want to "see something a little different" the success of any tourism enterprise rests on ensuring that differences "do not disturb" or, at least that the spectacle is manageable and predictable for the consumer (Baines 67). I would suggest that perhaps tourists *consumed* the spectacle of the LNPS Recruitment Table as an incidence of manageable, albeit risky, difference. Certainly, one of the key reasons for this was the *space* in which the Recruitment Table was located: the wide open arena of a park. The discursive rules of engagement are far different in parks, than—for example, schools. In a park, one can imagine tourists taking in

the spectacle of a recruiting table and banner as just one more, albeit unusual, difference. Tourists are, after all, on holiday and differently positioned in relation to the everyday practices of respectability. While most could just veer in the other direction with no “harm” to the children, others could avail themselves of some lemonade, even chat with the “girls” and then move on.

In a park, the LNPS Recruitment Table conjures up images of Girl Guides (senior Girl Guides are actually called *Rangers*). I would suggest that it is exactly this contrast between the way these visual references hail wholesome images of innocence, and the projects’ stated intent: to *recruit* for the Lesbian National Parks and Services—that makes it funny.⁴ Importantly, this image of innocence only works for a majority white audience, when it is materialized through whiteness, specifically Dempsey and Millan’s white female bodies.⁵ Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, Park Rangers, and many other North American icons can only be seen as benign, normative symbols if they are racialized as “just people” which representations of people of colour, have never been.

There are very specific kinds of displacement which mark the histories of people of colour in and around the Rockies and it is only our forgetfulness of these legacies which makes the commodification of Banff thinkable. As Maclear comments,

Without leaping into the archives, how are Banff initiates to know that the land they walk on is part of a Siksika Nation land claim ... , that the Rockies served as a physical and symbolic border for Japanese Canadians who [after their internment during WWII] were not allowed west of the mountains until the late 1940s ... that the peaks are unmarked graves for Chinese railroad labourers who *died in the thousands*? We turistas are encouraged to be flat broke on thought, dizzy on scenery ... stone[d] on beauty and apathy [emphasis in original]. (qtd. in Walters 10)

It is precisely our avoidance of these histories which haunts the visual repertoire informing the present. Indeed the one visual memorial near Banff which re-remembers the Chinese men who worked on the railway is called “Chinamen’s Peak.” Recent protests have forced the Alberta Historical Board to concede that the current name is racist and disparages the memory of workers who built the most dangerous sections of the railroad.⁶ Nevertheless the decision to re-name this one peak, amongst the hundreds of mountains in Banff National Park seems half hearted at best. Indeed, the story of how this landmark gained its name is telling. Apparently it was christened by local residents because a miner of Chinese origin, inspired by a wager, was the first person to ascend it. However, rumour has it that this miner was disbelieved upon his return and so had to make a second ascent, this time constructing a cairn which was more visible from Canmore

(Putnam *et al.*). Indeed, this story returns us to our introduction with uncanny circularity. More specifically, the narrative re-remembers notions of the “wilderness” where the non-white residents, *cannot belong* and *cannot be believed*.⁷

I argue that if the artists associated with the LNPS project had not been white, there is little doubt their performance would have been received with less equanimity. Perhaps threatening, perverse or inscrutable, its hard to say, but whatever the effect, non-white artists would not have been able to draw on a benign visual repertoire of national icons in anything like the same manner. Indeed, the ethics associated with iconic representations of National Parks, and the LNPS, pose an implicit set of questions. Specifically: how might the *enterprise* of touring the ‘wilderness’ of Banff look different if one attended to the relations of power which might fracture the view?

Conclusion

If identity politics continually ask us who we are—performances like the LNPS stage the contradictions in answering that question, and instead invite us, as witnesses, passersby, viewers and readers to reflect on the impurity of categorization itself.⁸ In this context, the LNPS staged much more than an opportunity to examine the normative relations of gender and sex. If white supremacy works best when it is everything and nothing, hypervisible but never spoken—then the Park Ranger performance, suggests the ways that whiteness is integral to symbols of Canadianness. This analysis asks that observers tour ‘the wilderness’ with more attention to the necessary tensions which fuel artistic practice, and structure its contradictory meanings. More specifically, it asks that we explore how ‘benign’ notions of white dominance may construct the gaze at the same time as these very operations may be hidden from view. This article suggests a reading or viewing practice which is mindful of the multiple and contradictory axis of power through which both national identity and artistic production, are fashioned. I write in the hope that this kind of ‘looking’ might enlarge our understanding of race, sex, citizenship and the very impure realities of being Canadian.

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¹One of the first was that the first superintendent of Rocky Mountain Park (later Banff), recommended that First Nations peoples be permanently excluded from hunting in the region (see Foster).

²The territory of Banff is part of a Siksika Nation land claim.

³Thanks to Dr. Ruth Pierson for suggesting this phrasing.

⁴The primary objection brought by conservative lobby groups against school boards which consider including sexual orientation in their Human Rights policy is that anti-heterosexism educators will "recruit" youth into a homosexual lifestyle. See Campey *et al.*

⁵The tourist population of Banff remains predominately white. Visitors come primarily from the United States, England and Japan (see Hock and Sisco). ⁶Maclear notes that the peak will be re-named after the Chinese-Canadian climber who was the first to reach its summit.

⁷The Foundation to Commemorate Chinese Railroad Workers in Canada erected a \$150,000 monument in Toronto by the Skydome in 1989 to commemorate the 17,000 Chinese men who laboured constructing the railway and the 4,000 who died at this task. Joel Baglole, "Wreath laid for railway workers: 17,000 Chinese were 'pioneers'" in *The Toronto Star*, Friday, July 2, 1999; B4.

⁸Thanks to Jean Noble for prompting this observation.

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CAROL A. ADAMS

Time After Time

Time after time
I am seduced by the art
work of nature

It captivates me with swift sketches of Red
Cardinals on a still canvas of air,
entices me in the black velvet brush stroke
of a river meandering
through snowy ravines,
captures me beside ocean whitecaps
highlighting against
a backdrop of night sky

More and more, as I ponder the constancy
of beauty, nature lies
in wait to tempt me with design
in the midst of a tapestry
that is never complete.

Carol A. Adams's poetry appears earlier in this volume.