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## Lesbian Rangers on a Queer Frontier

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Jennifer MacLatchy

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Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's 1997 performance art piece *Lesbian National Parks and Services* both invents and explores the frontier of a queer wilderness. They parody the historic role of the park ranger, which was key in composing the dominant narratives of nature that shaped the formation of the Canadian nation (Sandilands 143) as the white European settler expanded west into a new, unknown territory. By embodying this persona, minus the machismo and with their own added lesbian spin, Dempsey and Millan set out to explore a queer wilderness. This is the wilderness as it has not before been explored—at least any such explorations have not been recorded in dominant narratives of Canada as a nation, a nation defined by its wilderness. Dempsey and Millan frame their project using the discourse of conservation, thus aligning queerness with the environmental movement and providing a critique of this movement's embedded focus on heterosexual reproduction (*Field Guide* 21). By interacting with their audience and inviting us to participate, Dempsey and Millan pull us all into the exploration of the "lesbian wilds." Following

their lead and moving our attention from normalized heterosexuality to queerness might allow us to move further into this landscape—away from the masculinist colonial construction of Canadian wilderness, toward a narrative of nature shaped by desire, including queer desire.

### **Lesbian National Parks and Services**

*The Lesbian National Parks and Services*, first performed in Banff, Alberta, in 1997, uses parody to bring Dempsey and Millan's humorous queer vision of wilderness to life on the streets and trails of Banff National Park.<sup>1</sup> Their piece was a part of a group exhibition called "Private Investigators," curated by Kathryn Walter at the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre for the Arts. The eight artists exhibited in "Private Investigators" worked with histories of colonialism, homophobia and sexism, capitalism, and the various identities that have been made invisible and erased from the landscape as a part of the colonial capitalist project of nation-building (Crowston x). Dempsey and Millan employ a feminist and subversive performance art strategy of using personae to create dialogue that questions established norms. They create a parody of the "real" park rangers by standing in as representatives of the Canadian state and mediators of the iconic Canadian "wilderness" (that is, the ideal of a vast landscape that is untouched by humans and therefore pure and wild).

For the three-week duration of the group exhibition, Dempsey and Millan dressed in uniforms similar to those worn by real rangers, complete with the Lesbian National Parks and Services crest sewn onto their shirts and hats. They interacted with the public in Banff National Park and in the town of Banff and successfully "passed" as park rangers, only occasionally causing confusion for those who suddenly realized that they weren't talking to real Parks Canada park rangers after all. The promotional brochure

they distributed as part of the project directed people to visit such sites as the "Invisible Lesbian Heritage House and Gardens" and the "Invisible Plaque Dedicated to our Founding Foremothers," which pointed out that some identities (women and lesbians, specifically) and their accomplishments have been made invisible by a dominant narrative that excludes so many parts of history (Dempsey and Millan). They also provided visitors with brochures, presented in the style of informative pamphlets, to educate the public on the importance of respecting diversity in every ecosystem, including neglected lesbian species of all kinds. Dempsey and Millan kept up these activities for the duration of their three weeks in Banff, staying in character at all times such that their presence became more than a performance—their place in Banff and in the so-called "wilderness" of a national park started to seem normal to many who were there (Walter 45).

Their performance did not end after these weeks in Banff: in 2001 they created a small artists' book titled *Handbook of the Junior Lesbian Ranger*. This book includes instructions on how to maintain a proper ranger-like posture, attire, and behaviour, as well as providing a suggestive Junior Ranger motto and salute, and lyrics and music for a Junior Ranger song. The *Handbook* comes with a badge depicting the Junior Lesbian Ranger crest, which can be sewn onto a bag or jacket, so that others can join the performance. A year later, Dempsey and Millan published *The Lesbian National Parks and Services Field Guide to North America: Flora, Fauna, and Survival Skills*. This book covers various types of lesbian species in the lesbian wilds, and features sections devoted to lesbian-centric survival skills, such as starting a fire, finding your orientation, and what and whom to eat.

In the introduction to their *Field Guide*, Dempsey and Millan explain what gave rise to their vision for *Lesbian National Parks*

*and Services*. They describe feeling frustrated with the lack of attention paid to the plight of lesbian flora and fauna by official wildlife authorities, and their resulting decision to form an organization to focus on protecting and proliferating this neglected ecosystem (*Field Guide* 20-23). Here, they set up the purpose of their project in the language of environmental conservation, thus countering the common homophobic argument that homosexuality is “against nature.” By suggesting that lesbian species and ecosystems are being overlooked by conservation officials who are only concerned with heterosexual species and ecosystems, Dempsey and Millan highlight the heteronormativity of dominant ecological and national narratives.

#### **Park Rangers and the Formation of Nation**

Dempsey and Millan’s choice to employ the persona of the park ranger for their parody is a strategic one, given certain stereotypes about rugged masculinity that are embedded in this role and what the park ranger represents in the context of Canadian national identity. Catriona Sandilands writes about the historical role of the park ranger in an article titled “Where the Mountain Men Meet the Lesbian Rangers: Gender, Nation, and Nature in the Rocky Mountain National Parks.” Historically, she explains, the typically white and masculinized park ranger’s role was to police the boundary between the European-settler “civilization” and the supposedly uninhabited “wilderness” of Canada—educating “citizens” (white European settlers) by providing patriarchal, heteronormative, and colonial interpretations of nature, while keeping both nature and the so-called “civilization” at a safe distance from each other (146). Of course, the dominant educational and cautionary story of ecology and history within national parks is a version that buttresses the interests of the Canadian state and reinforces the apparent naturalness of

colonialism, heterosexuality, and patriarchal gender roles. It does this, for example, by representing First Nations peoples as backwards and uncivilized, in order to frame colonialism as a positive step in an inevitable chain of human evolutionary events (Mackey 126).

If, historically, this role of the park ranger has been to mediate between so-called “civilization” (white European settler) and “wilderness” (as ostensibly yet uncolonized lands), it has served largely to reinforce the idea of Canada as a vast and supposedly empty land, a wilderness conquered and civilized by hardy white European settlers. But in order to imagine Canada as a vast, uninhabited wilderness available for conquest, the original peoples who inhabited the land had to be pushed out and then erased from the social memory of the landscape. Even more to the point, the very designation of certain areas as national parks that were “protected” from the damaging influences of human activity also involves restricting First Nations peoples from their original uses of their own land. The park ranger’s role was thus dual: on the one hand, to “protect” this wilderness by policing its boundaries and restricting First Nations access, and, on the other, to protect white settler civilization, with its feminized domestic spaces, from the incursions and dangers of the wild (Sandilands 146). Concepts of “nature” in the Canadian national narrative thus appear to be all about the naturalness and inevitability of heterosexuality and colonialism.

In the present day, park rangers, as employees of the federal agency, Parks Canada, claim a position of authority when they interact with the public, disseminating information that reflects the dominant national narrative. Thus, by initially passing as real park rangers while enacting a lesbian version of nature, Dempsey and Millan are able to reveal some fissures in the narrative of nature and Canadianness. Still, we must

ask: Why is it that they are able to so easily “pass,” and so successfully gain access to the authority and credibility necessary to carry out their project of disrupting assumptions about nature? Who has authority over any given matter, and what is it that makes observers so willing to unquestioningly accept their version as fact?

This question is partially addressed by curator Kathryn Walter, in the exhibition catalogue for “Private Investigators.” Walter gives an eyewitness account of how Dempsey and Millan interacted with and were received by the public. She explains that, as “out” as it may seem to be to wear the words “Lesbian National Parks and Services” emblazoned on every article of clothing, it was actually very “subtly inserted into public view,” because it was presented “with such formality and apparent legitimacy” (45). Walter suggests that it is this formality and posturing, along with their charm and friendliness, which lends the Lesbian Rangers the credibility and authority necessary to go about their project without much trouble.

But, in an article titled “The Lesbian National Parks and Services: Reading Sex, Race, and the Nation in Artistic Performance,” Margot Francis explains what is missing from this analysis. Historically, park rangers were white male representatives of the colonial Canadian state, managing the landscape to suit the interests of white European settler society. Dempsey and Millan’s whiteness allows them to be recognized as what Eva Mackey calls “Canadian-Canadian”: their whiteness means that they project an initial impression of belonging in this place, and the legitimacy of their Canadian citizenship is never contested (Mackey 19). Non-threatening to a mostly white tourist audience, their whiteness, in addition to their crisp uniforms and effective posturing, allows them to access an initial unquestioned authority. This permits spectators to be caught off guard by their

lesbo-normative approach to ecology and geography (Francis 133).

But, through trickery and parody, the lesbian park rangers do invite their audience to question the authority of the “real” park rangers and its legitimacy. We might then also question this notion of an idyllic and wondrously beautiful Canada that is presented through Canada’s national parks. Can we believe the stories on the placards and displays? Can we believe the stories from Parks Canada representatives, the “real” park rangers? What other stories, alongside those told by lesbian park rangers, are missing from the dominant narrative?

Eyewitness Kyo Maclear explains that, by scrambling and cross-wiring the identities of lesbians and park rangers, Dempsey and Millan confuse the expected social responses to both of these roles. Should the audience vilify and fear them or revere their knowledge and respect them for their protection? Should they be trusted or mistrusted? Should they be kept away from children, treated as social threats, or presented as inspiring role models? (Maclear 57). This scrambled social script, composed of their effective presentation of charming and endearing helpfulness alongside a parody of stereotypes with thinly veiled sexual innuendo, seemed to leave the audience confused, though amused and engaged. The audience, including those of us experiencing their project indirectly, might then wonder: Why are they claiming that there are lesbian species of wildlife? How and why is this “art?” With this sort of questioning comes the potential for identifying cracks in the dominant narrative that naturalizes heterosexuality. Why not lesbian park rangers and lesbian wildlife and heritage sites? How many other identities have also been excluded and forgotten in the dominant (colonial white settler) narratives?

Despite the potential the project had for raising these questions, *Lesbian National Parks and Services* does not provide an

obvious critique of colonialism. Perhaps the artists could have addressed colonialism more directly in their performance or written materials, using satire and parody to highlight the absurdity of some settler claims to land and national identity. Once they had slipped past the public's defences and garnered the attention of their audience, they were able to disrupt audience perceptions by announcing the locations of invisible monuments and lesbian species of plants. They might also have pointed out invisible monuments to First Nations peoples who were driven off their own land in order to create Canada's first national park, or invisible monuments to the thousands of Chinese labourers who died while working to build the railway that allowed white settlers to move into the West to form the town of Banff (Maclear 10). If they had, would it have had the same effect of subtle critique through satire as their descriptions of invisible monuments to lesbians?

When Dempsey and Millan perform their satirical ranger personas, they are not directly presenting their audience with any harsh truths about violence against queer folks, and if they had been, it might have required a different tone from that of their light-hearted satire. Such a shift to the negative by white performers might end up only reproducing colonialism; the violence of colonial history could not be treated with the same lightness and humour that is central to their project. Can white performers taking on a persona that is riddled with a history of colonialism, the park ranger, unsettle heteronormative assumptions about the natural world, without also reproducing the effect of erasure on First Nations peoples? Would it be possible for white performers to critique the colonial role of the park ranger by poking fun at the absurdity of white settler claims to land and nation? How could it be ensured that this would read as parody and not as a repetition of colonial violence? Francis suggests that, in addition to performing

queer subversions, they are also performing the seemingly benign whiteness of the park ranger role (133). She argues that, nonetheless, upon deeper reflection, the lesbian rangers do pose implicit questions about how power relations structure the landscape of national parks by using the benign park ranger persona to subvert and fragment categories and norms (135).

### **Heteronormativity in Environmental Narratives**

As Rachel Loewen Walker explains in an article titled "Becoming Queer: Performance Art and Constructions of Identity," the Lesbian Park Rangers' "detailed re-telling of biology from the lesbian perspective . . . situates the queer—specifically lesbian—identity as the norm through which all else is read, effectively 'decentering the center'" (2). By "decentering the centre," or relocating the marginalized lesbian identity to the centre of their world view and treating it as the norm by which everything else is measured, the lesbian rangers end up performing a shift in what is considered normal. At first, Dempsey and Millan's lesbo-normative narratives about nature seem absurd to the point of hilarity. But, if one considers the reason for this absurdity—the fact that every plant and tree and animal and rock doesn't really embody lesbianism—it becomes clearer that, likewise, the plants and trees and animals and rocks don't adhere to or embody sexual identity at all, despite the way that humans have constructed it. Nevertheless, our dominant narratives suggest otherwise. By narrating a lesbian version of natural history, the lesbian rangers invite their audience to consider the roles of invisible (specifically lesbian) identities in shaping the current physical and social landscapes, and suggest that queerness is not something new, but rather, is rooted as deeply in history as any other identity.

How deeply embedded heteronormative assumptions are in narratives of nature is well-illustrated in David Quammen's 1998 essay "The Miracle of the Geese: A Bizarre Sexual Strategy among Steadfast Birds." Quammen describes heterosexual and monogamous mating habits of some geese, and characterizes these habits as somehow more virtuous than others for their efficiency, suggesting that any other flirtatious or sexual activity is a wasted effort: "They commit themselves to endurance, to each other, to the future—and not to maximizing their sexual options" (238). After extolling these virtues to be found in geese behaviour, he says: "I was glad to find an ecological mandate for permanent partnership among animals so estimable as *Branta canadensis*" (Quammen 240). He uses his selective observations and selective research to make geese into a shining example of the supposedly pure and natural heterosexual monogamy.

This claim is countered by Alex Johnson in his article "How to Queer Ecology: One Goose at a Time" when he points out that there are plenty of other examples of all sorts of species, including geese, behaving in non-heteronormative ways. Johnson also points out how it is selective observation that allows Quammen to perceive geese as so noble and beautiful; he notes that geese may not always be perceived so positively when "they are shitting all over the lawn and terrorizing young children" (Johnson n. pag.). Quammen's account is just one example of how selective observation is required in order to perceive nature as a heteronormative example for moral order, and there are many more examples of heterosexual and homosexual interaction between animals, sexual and asexual reproduction amongst plants, as well as unruly displays of desire of all sorts between all kinds of creatures. These ecological examples of queerness, Johnson argues, aren't meant to be justification for the naturalness of queerness. Rather, he argues

for a complication of the concept of nature. "What, then, is natural? All of it. None of it. Instead of using the more-than-human world as justification for or against certain behavior and characteristics, let's use the more-than-human world as a humbling indication of the capacity and diversity of all life on earth" (Johnson n. pag.).

Indeed, with their performance of *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, Dempsey and Millan take their critique beyond the specifics of sexual practices amongst various species. Their lesbo-centric spin on everything in their path points out the unruly complexity of nature. In asking the audience to imagine the possibilities of a queer-centric narrative of ecosystems and nature and a queer-centric narrative of settler-Canadian national identity, they invite their audience to come along on their imaginative and exploratory journey into the frontier of a queer-centric concept of wilderness that embraces the vast capacity for diversity amongst the more-than-human world.

### **A Queer Wilderness Frontier**

Dempsey and Millan place their own lesbian feminist identities at the centre of Canadian national identity and ask us to imagine, and then understand, what kind of difference a shift in the norm can make to our understandings of nature. Their playful and humorous approach to the iconic park ranger persona thus helps us to ask questions about sexuality and gender in nature; and indirectly also about race and national identity. It seems, then, that perhaps instead of insisting upon a homonormative narrative of nature to override the heteronormative narrative, the homonormative narrative serves to uproot the heteronormative narrative by exposing its absurdity. A queer narrative of nature wouldn't necessitate that any form of sexuality or gender be natural or unnatural; rather, it would point to the complexities and fluidity of various facets of human identity. With the kind of

playful exploration that the lesbian park rangers invite their audience to participate in, we might find ourselves discovering seemingly uncharted territory. As lost as we may initially feel in a landscape that is no longer governed by predictable rules of heteronormativity, the welcoming of this unknown may be more crucial than any attempts at undoing tidy borders of settler-patriarchy-defined order in order to replace it with a new order.

So it seems that Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's original performance of *Lesbian National Parks and Services* has lived past the three-week duration of their original performance. Supported by their whiteness, their parody and critique was able to slip easily into the busy tourist spaces of a national park. It was thus able to do the work of confusing and unsettling assumptions about authority on national history, as well as the inherent heteronormativity and colonialism within narratives of national origins. By parodying the real park rangers, Dempsey and Millan use humour to point out some gaps in our histories and stories where certain identities are left out. Their performance counters dominant narratives about the naturalness and moral superiority of heterosexuality and makes use of the language of environmental conservation to emphasize the inherent value of specifically lesbian ecosystems. Most important, perhaps, is their invitation to join them and become complicit in this imaginative exploration of a queer-centric version of wilderness. They invite us all to become explorers, of a different kind—explorers who seek not to conquer or colonize or to write down any factual assumptions about the naturalness of any particular identity or desire or to define landscape within tidy borders on a map. Rather, they invite us to explore and question, and to find ourselves immersed in the complexity of an unruly wilderness that defies easy definitions.

Perhaps here, in embracing the unruliness of nature, and likewise, the unpredictability of human identities and desires, is where we might find ourselves at the frontier of a queer ecology: a different understanding of “wilderness,” without the constrictions of assumed heterosexuality, as inherently queer in its unruliness, messiness and unpredictability.

## NOTE

- 1 For more information on Dempsey and Millan's performances, see their website: [www.fingerinthedyke.ca](http://www.fingerinthedyke.ca).

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