

*Out in the Wild:*

*Shawna  
Dempsey  
and Lorri  
Millan's  
Lesbian National  
Parks and  
Services*

*/Desiree  
Valadares/*

*As a performance duo, Winnipeg's Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan have received international accolades for Lesbian National Parks and Services, a multifarious, multi-year performance piece begun in 1997. "In full uniform as Lesbian Rangers," they travel to various locales such as festivals and parks to "challenge the general public's ideas of tourism, recreation, and the 'natural environment.'" While in Banff, Alberta, the duo created a map of the townsite with fictional heritage landmarks to assert a queer presence through humour, satire and play. Dempsey and Millan also create installations, publications and videos, including several components of Lesbian National Parks and Services, such as their 2002 PSAs, Endangered Species, featuring lesbians in decline. In 2018, the Rangers participated in an exhibition by Young Joon Kwak at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity entitled The Cave. In an interview with both artists in the fall of 2023 over Zoom, we discussed Canada's national parks as contested landscapes through the lens of queer ecologies, homosexuality, nature, and visibility while also featuring the evolution of their collaborative performance practice as Lesbian Rangers, and thirty-eight years creating a range of other live, video, and book works.*

## LESBIAN NATIONAL PARKS AND SERVICES

### DESIREE VALADARES

Tell us about your 1997 performance *Lesbian National Parks and Services*.

How do you remember this project now, over twenty-five years after it was first performed?

### LORRI MILLAN

We have been working in performance together since 1988 and have been making film and video since 1990. Live art is the focus of our practice and even in our films, or installations, or books, we begin with some sense of embodiment. Much of our work has involved telling and retelling stories from a feminist, lesbian, and queer perspective. Most narratives don't have great endings for women, so rewriting or creating new ones was a big part of our work in the nineties. Using the power of existing tropes has always been a big part of what we do. Familiar icons are a kind of cultural shorthand: they have power, whether they are a fifties housewife or Medusa or a park ranger.

### SHAWNA DEMPSEY

In 1997, curators Catherine Crowston and Kathryn Walter gave us an opportunity to make work at the Banff Centre for the Arts, in the national park. We had an initial idea that was kind of boring. We weren't excited or motivated and it was a hot day in Winnipeg. We were slumped in the living room of "Homo Heaven," which is a big house that we shared with lots of other artists, and Lorri said, "I just want to go to Banff, dress up as a ranger and drive around to doughnut shops." And then it was kind of like *ding!* We could be rangers... Lesbian Rangers! And that day, we went to a uniforms supply store, and—

### LORRI MILLAN

Started acquiring the uniform components and designing the patches. It sort of rolled from there. We realized that naturalists, rangers, and environmental scientists—people in the realm of natural

1 "Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan," <https://www.shawnadempseyandlorrimillan.net/>.

interpretation—tend to interpret information about the wilds from a distinctly heterosexual perspective. We figured, if they can interpret the data one way, well, there's absolutely no reason we can't from another. We felt like we were just as well-versed in our world of expertise.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Because we're lesbian experts. (chuckles)

LORRI MILLAN

Everything flowed from that. For us, we always need to have a job when we do these "real-world" performances. It's easier to interact with the public that way. We started building out a world that the Lesbian Park Rangers would exist in, to bring everybody else into.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We arrived in Banff in our 1963 Pontiac, in full uniform. And we didn't let anyone see us out of uniform for a month. We were really embedded in the town site. One of the interesting things about the piece for us is that we thought we were out—my partner at the time described me as the most "out person in Canada." But as uniformed Lesbian Rangers emblazoned with the word "lesbian" everywhere, we had to be out every second of every day.

LORRI MILLAN

It was work. It was challenging. It was tiring. We had to talk about the lesbian wilds all the time. For a lot of the people we encountered in the park, this might have been their first conversation with a homosexual, that they knew of.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Which seems incredible now, but in the 1990s, I think was true. What was lovely is that most people rose to the occasion. Human to human, face to face, it is much harder to be hateful. They would trade puns with us! They would play! It made us realize that people want to engage, and in some ways that performance and some of our subsequent work was about providing a stage for people to perform themselves.

## PERFORMANCE AND PUBLIC INTERACTION

DESIREE VALADARES

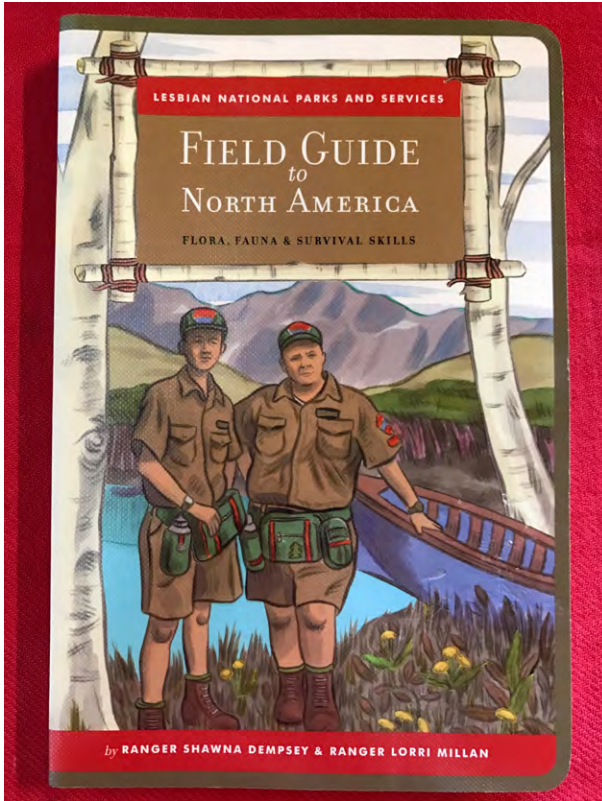
This is fascinating to hear that your performance and/or impersonation were something enacted for a month, in both public and private space. A serious dedication! Could you tell us more about your interactions with the public in the town of Banff? And how did your maps of fictional heritage landmarks, the "Invisible Lesbian Heritage House and Gardens" and the "Invisible Plaque Dedicated to the Founding Foremothers," interface with your performance as Lesbian Park Rangers?

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We had spent a lot of time at Banff before 1997 as artists on different residencies. We created some of our "Dress Series" of performances there. In was in the Banff woodshop that we figured out how to



/fig. 1/ Lesbian National Parks and Service "Maiden Mission," Banff National Park, 1997. Top and bottom photos by Kathryn Walter. Middle photo by Don Lee.



/fig. 2/ Lesbian National Parks and Services, *Field Guide to North America: Flora, Fauna and Survival Skills* (Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2002). Photo courtesy of Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey.



/fig. 3/ Lesbian National Parks and Services, Ephemera – Pamphlets. Photo courtesy of University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.



/fig. 4/ Lesbian National Parks and Services, *Handbook of the Lesbian Junior Rangers* (Winnipeg: Finger in the Dyke Productions, 2001). Photo courtesy of University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.



/fig. 5/ National Parks and Services, Postcard Print Proof. Photo courtesy of Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey.

build breasts into a kitchen counter for the “Arborite Housedress” dress. We participated in a spoken-word residency that led to a video we made, *What Does a Lesbian Look Like?*, being played on MuchMusic for years. It was a town we knew very well. And there was zero homosexual presence there then, like there were no gay bars and it was pre-rainbow flag decals everywhere. It was a super-straight town.

LORRI MILLAN

What you mainly saw were tourists that were either families or couples on romantic weekends, attending weddings, or shopping. There was this pervasive heterosexual presence.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

And there was no room for any kind of queerness within that.

LORRI MILLAN

Part of what the Lesbian Rangers did was look at the invisible lesbian wilds and point out what, without our expertise, you might not be able to see. So we were making queerness visible. We remapped the town of Banff to include sites such as the “Invisible Lesbian Heritage House and Gardens” and the “Invisible Museum of Homosexual Mountain History” that tourists wouldn’t get from the other Parks Canada rangers, tours, or pamphlets.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We looked like trusted authorities. Interactions often started out with, “Oh, you can help me? How do I get back to my hotel?” And we were so happy to show them the map on the brochure we created. And then later, they might be reading about nesting habits of lesbians and thinking, “Wait a minute...” So, there was a slow burn. The pamphlets were a great interface with people, who approached us to ask for directions because we were in uniform.

LORRI MILLAN

We didn’t otherwise mark the fictional sites. You had to have this map and an interaction with us to get this info. If they were there for a weekend or a week, they would come back to us sometimes and chat.

DESIREE VALADARES

I love that the maps worked in your favour to encourage interaction, dialogue, and play. How would you describe the range of responses that you provoked from the public at Banff? What did people make of your presence? How did the “official” Parks Canada rangers and wardens react?

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

I think it was not only significant that we were a queer presence, and we were interpreting nature from a queer lens, but that we were pointing out the truth, which is that in every ecosystem, every species, there is queerness, there is transgenderism, there is a—

LORRI MILLAN

Range of behaviours.



／fig. 6／ Lesbian Rangers, Frankfurt, Germany Tour of Duty, 2011.  
Photos: Wolfgang Gunzel.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

And they fuel evolution. We need variation. Of course, as well as us inserting that queer perspective in Banff, we were also women and the icon of the ranger is always a white guy. We subverted the icon in a couple of ways.

LORRI MILLAN

There were a range of reactions, but really only a handful of times did we ever get heckled or yelled at. Usually, they'd pass us and wait a good block before they'd turn around and yell at us. It was very feeble. By and large, it's not unlike the reaction to our work generally. Even though it's challenging or maybe political material that they might never seek out otherwise, our audiences usually engage positively. You know, it's the idea of things that's usually scarier for people than the reality, at least for our work.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

The Parks Canada rangers in Banff were very welcoming. Like, they would pose for photos with us, and they would say "Good morning, Ranger!" and we would say "Good morning, Ranger!" We got permission from Parks Canada to have the recruitment day in the park and give out lemonade. They were remarkably cooperative.

LORRI MILLAN

We learned a lot by doing the project for that month in Banff, and that really informed how we built the Range'r' world subsequently.

#### BEYOND BANFF

DESIREE VALADARES

What happened once the Lesbian Rangers moved beyond Banff in successive years? What types of responses did you both receive on your tours of duty outside Canada?

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We've ranged in a lot of different habitats: in natural settings and in cities in Canada and elsewhere, including the US, Australia, and Germany. We found that, in the US, people have a very different relationship to people in uniform and much less of a sense of irony.

LORRI MILLAN

We ranged in Sydney, Australia for the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras twice... Oh, and Australians totally got it. Both tours of duty were really fun. We trained a corps of Junior Lesbian Rangers in formation marching and we marched in the Mardi Gras parade, we judged a dog show....

LORRI MILLAN

We were on the cover of their national newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which is like their *Globe and Mail*. I guess no queer person had been above the fold in a positive light, or in any light, before. That was in 2000. Not only did the queer community really think that was a huge deal, but it also meant that while we were there everybody knew us.



/fig. 7/ Lesbian Rangers, Banff National Park, 2008. Photo: Laura Vanags.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Even when we arrived at the airport in Australia, one of the customs officials squealed, "Brian! It's the Lesbian Rangers!" In Germany, we did the Frankfurt Book Fair...

LORRI MILLAN

Everywhere we went, we made pamphlets as interfaces. Each one was specific to the environment where we were. Later, we developed a handbook and a field guide to North America, and that really created a solid sense of us in the world.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Yeah, a different kind of legitimacy.

LORRI MILLAN

The field guide was a lot of work. It contained real information to help you survive in the bush, and you can actually use it to identify North American species. But it was also dripping with double entendres and lesbian in-jokes.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We also created a wide range of other gear. Stickers for kids, decals for the sides of vehicles, a flag for the antenna of our car, swim wear, high arctic wear, rain wear, pouches and packs, infraction tickets...

DESIREE VALADARES

The ephemera that accompanied your performances is vast. How did you research each place? What went into "querying" or "queering" these places? What was your research process like and how does it reflect in your artistic process? Did you study rangers in each of the locations you visited? Or was it just more embodying an idea of who a ranger is and disrupting cultural norms?

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We went to Yogi Bear for that research.

LORRI MILLAN

I mean, in a way, being a ranger is like being a firefighter, like it's a figure of authority that everybody likes, right? It's a feel-good world of expertise.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We would research a place before we went and created the pamphlet. When we were creating the *Handbook of the Junior Lesbian Ranger*, we researched Girl Guides and Boy Scout handbooks. When we were doing the field guide, we read field guides about flora and the fauna to learn about the different species we were going to profile. We used the *Larousse Animal Encyclopedia* quite a bit, which had homosexual realities buried in it, and we read Canadian biologist and linguist Bruce Bagemihl's book, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (1999).

LORRI MILLAN

It was kind of the first book that came out about queer research on the animal kingdom, and on how a lot of that research has been suppressed, denied.

## SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Or reframed as anomaly. We did all the research we could, but I think the truth was we were creating something new. We wanted to take the image of the ranger in popular culture, which starts with Yogi Bear, more or less, and use that iconography, to not only embody it but make it better and make it lesbian. We were inventing the wheel, trying to cobble together the things that would give us legitimacy, like the uniform. As soon as we put the uniform on, we were different people. There was no process involved. We knew our jobs, we knew what we were going to do, we were Lesbian Rangers. And that is just part of the magic of creating performance. You get all the pieces in place, and then it unfolds. You have built a world. And people understood it, even though maybe they crossed the street because they didn't want to interact with us. Even with the word lesbian in front of it, they understood the notion of a ranger and that gave us a degree of power.

## PERFORMING LEGITIMACY AND AUTHORITY

## DESIREE VALADARES

Could you both discuss how your performance plays with legitimacy and authority? I think the uniform, which you both identified as one of the first things that you purchased and adorned, that inspired you both to perform, is also interesting. How did your many tools—the ephemera, the props, the world-building, the field guides—contribute to crafting a larger persona, identity, or a brand around the Lesbian National Parks and Service?

## SHAWNA DEMPSEY

An artist, Cyndra MacDowell, once said that Lorri and I are “taking the cultural artifacts from our childhood and remaking them to include our reality.” And I think there is truth to that. We have worked with a lot of cultural artifacts, a lot of pop culture, and reimaged or twisted it.

## LORRI MILLAN

We really like artifice. The pop culture of our young years was very much dominated by a kind of soundstage aesthetic in performance, TV, and movies. And we love that. That artifice was very good at creating iconic imagery, right?

Once we start performing the Rangers, other people said really smart things about the performance in reference to national parks. We didn't intend that. It wasn't like we went in thinking, “Oh, this is going to be about national parks.” But it became clear that the piece could be read that way because, of course, we were critiquing this history of land use for recreation for certain people and in certain ways. The history of national parks is a reinforcement of the status quo. And they were a colonial tool.

## SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We were kicked out of a park once.

DESIREE VALADARES

Could you tell us more about this incident? What does it mean to be policed yourself, to be regulated, as someone in uniform, by another uniformed authority figure? How was that experience for both of you, if you're willing to share?

LORRI MILLAN

In Banff, our tour of duty went well, and there's a nice picture of us—one of our favourite pictures actually—with a Mountie. He was confused, but he was friendly, but here in Manitoba...

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We were patrolling at Grand Beach, which is a beautiful beach in Manitoba.

LORRI MILLAN

A provincial park.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

And we were stopped by a ranger. He said he'd had complaints. "Oh, what complaints could you have had?" we asked. "Well, we heard that there were people dressed up as rangers on the beach," he replied. "Yes, we are rangers, we're Lesbian Rangers," we explained, and he said, "Yeah, you can't do that here." "Well, what are we doing?" we asked. "You're impersonating an officer." "No, we're dressed as lesbians." And he was, like, "No, you'll cause confusion. And if there's a crisis, it could go bad, because people will turn to the wrong people to help them." Anyway, we had a back-and-forth at length.

LORRI MILLAN

It was a fairly circular conversation, because we kept saying, "but we are rangers, we're Lesbian Rangers."

And it just irritated him.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

We put it down to envy of our superior uniforms.

LORRI MILLAN

Uniform envy is something we've had to deal with—

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

A lot.

LORRI MILLAN

A LOT.

I think we might have even told him that as we parted. Then we just went to a different provincial park, and it was fine.

LORRI MILLAN

It came down to this word "confusion," which seemed to be the worst imaginable outcome.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Well, actually, what he was saying was that the worst outcome would be if people wouldn't see him as the ultimate authority.

**DESIREE VALADARES**

Interesting. One would think that you both might have had more encounters where people feel like you're diminishing their authority by belittling or satirizing them or just playing with their conceived notion of how much authority they have over others. In the US, park rangers and wardens have the authority to arrest or to limit subsistence and gathering, so I think you're really playing with power, and role reversal and ultimately, asking much bigger questions of who gets to perform, police, or dispense information about public space.

**LORRI MILLAN**

At Grand Beach that day, the rangers were big guys who were kind of throwing themselves around the way cops can do. They were more like mall cops, though. Like, there was nothing to do there—it's not like they were gonna go in the water to save anybody, not in all their gear. Most of what they do is catch people drinking or throwing trash in the wrong place. I don't know what they do most of the time. So yeah, you're right, they probably already were feeling wrong-footed by not having—

**SHAWNA DEMPSEY**

Enough power. I suppose critiquing power, taking power, is a lot of what we have done in our work. And not just for ourselves, but for others like us.

**THE 2SLGBTQI+ NATIONAL MONUMENT****DESIREE VALADARES**

How do power and authority play out in your recent work? Could you perhaps tell us more about the monument you are designing in Ottawa to commemorate the memory of state-sanctioned violence against 2SLGBTQI+ peoples, created with funds from a class-action suit against the federal government by survivors of the LGBT Purge? [The LGBT Purge was a decades long campaign to purge gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender members of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the federal public service.]

**SHAWNA DEMPSEY**

We were part of the only all-Canadian team to get shortlisted to design the 2SLGBTQI+ National Monument that will be unveiled in Ottawa in 2026. And, amazingly, we won, which was especially remarkable because we are an all-Winnipeg team consisting of longtime friends and teammates Liz Wreford, Peter Sampson and Albert McLeod. One of the things we wanted from the very beginning for the monument was a stage that people could use, either for performances, because performance is the queer superpower, or for protests, or for everyday people to take up space. So out of the cylinder of the monument, there protrudes a stage.

**LORRI MILLAN**

This project seems very different and yet similar to other work we've done, creating space for women, for queers, for lesbians, for whoever. Creating space where there has purposely not been space. The



／fig. 8／ Breaking ground for the monument, May 1, 2024. Left to right: Michelle Douglas (LGBT Purge Fund), Pascale St-Onge (Minister of Canadian Heritage), Liz Wreford (design team lead), Liz's son Theo, Lorri Millan, Shawna Dempsey, and Elder Albert McLeod. Photo courtesy of Canadian Heritage.



／fig. 9／ The National 2SLGBTQAI+ Monument, Ottawa. Concept renderings.

National 2SLGBTQAI+ Monument will be right there amongst other national monuments – right there as part of the Capital Precinct, as it's called. So, not a national park –

**SHAWNA DEMPSEY**

It is a park! The site is quite large and the flora is key to the metaphors we are working with. There will be a mature red maple tree, symbolizing the Canadian employees who were systematically purged by their employer, the Canadian government, from the 1950s to the '90s. There will be a fruit orchard, because we are fruity and nourish each other as a community. There will be a healing circle and a fire pit. Many different elements will hold different emotions and histories.

**LORRI MILLAN**

It will be anchored with an architectural element – a mirror-ball-filled thundercloud – holding meanings about a very serious subject. Our team, which includes Public City Architecture and Elder Albert McLeod, is working super collaboratively with the Purge Fund to make a space that recognizes all the trauma, celebrates all the gains, and is a testament to vigilance: until we are all free, none of us are free.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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