



*Shawna Dempsey and Lorrie Millan survey the wilderness as Lesbian Park Rangers.  
Performance Piece by Shawna Dempsey and Lorrie Millan, 1997. Photo: Don Lee, Banff Centre for the Arts.*

# Presenting Adrienne Gender, Nation, and a

BY ANDIL GOSINE

*L'auteure explore les contenus médiatiques sur la récente nomination d'Adrienne Clarkson au poste de Gouverneur-général du Canada, et découvre des façons d'articuler le genre et l'ethnie quand il s'agit de définir la nationalité canadienne.*

My first and until recently, only encounter with images of Adrienne Clarkson was of flipping past her CBC arts program about ten years ago. I remember the moment well because my family had just immigrated here, and Clarkson's program came on the first time I turned on our TV. We had only a small black and white television set then, and I was sorely disappointed to discover that my viewing choices that afternoon were limited to two sports events and this Art show which seemed to be in equal parts dull and pretentious. The next time I noticed Clarkson on TV was during her introduction as Canada's new Viceroy by Prime Minister Jean Chretien. This time, my reaction was quite different. The moment Clarkson declared, "I came to Canada as a refugee" I was, frankly, surprised (I was not aware that she was "Chinese") and delighted. How brave, I thought, to appoint a Chinese-Canadian immigrant Governor-General, in the midst of all the (racist) outrage over the supposed Boat refugee "crisis" on the West coast. How splendid, I believed, that she would so adamantly identify her "refugee roots."

In the days that followed the announcement, a great deal of ink, paper, and airtime was dedicated to journalists and commentators contemplating her "curious" appointment. Those of us who knew very little about her before the appointment, who might have never watched any of her shows, were now unable to avoid the most intimate details of her life. We were told about her failed first marriage and her quickie new one, her "tragic" estrangement from her daughters, her uppity ways and exorbitant spending habits, her ambition and cunning, and her harassment of one neighbor, one *Toronto Sun* writer implied, to death (Woodcock). This interrogation into her personal life was unprecedented in Canadian politics, and

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prompted author Margaret Atwood to comment,

She's been given a scandalous, rocky ride in the press. It's been really horrible up to now. And they would never do that to a man.... She has had some press that I would consider basically sexist and racist. (qtd. in "Installation": A3)

Although media stories were supposed to shed light on the "real" Adrienne Clarkson, they in fact prove more informative in revealing how gender and race are collaboratively articulated in the production of discourses that define Canadian nationality. In telling the story of Clarkson, newspaper articles demonstrated that—as McClintock, Yuval-Davis (cited in Wobbe), and other feminist scholars have argued—notions of nation and nationality require and reproduce particular assumptions about, and organizations of, gender and race. In this essay I am not interested in finding the "real" Adrienne Clarkson—this, to me, is almost beside the point. I will instead consider how both the "negative" and "positive" reactions to her appointment invoke race and gender in inventing the nation of Canada. Some narratives, like those published in Conrad Black's *National Post*, emerge as anxieties about gendered and racialized difference that appear to threaten dominant, stabilized categories of Canadian nationality. Others, such as the Prime Minister's representation of Clarkson as a visible minority woman, a "reflection of the diversity and inclusiveness of our society" (McIlroy A3), attempt to confine and contain difference within a nationalist politic. Both responses are alike however, in that neither significantly undermines the gendered or racialized character of Canadian nationality.

Nationalism is, first and foremost, the construction of borders, about marking who belongs and who does not. In pointing out Clarkson's ethnicity and gender when he introduced her as Canada's next Viceroy, Chretien was clearly aware that his choice ruptured, at least symbolically, a dominant conception of Canadian nationals as white people. Many commentators were outraged that a woman of colour would assume the post of Governor-General. Referring to the tired thesis so often invoked almost anytime someone who is not white and male achieves success, several journalists opined that Clarkson's appointment has more to do with her gender and race than

# Clarkson New Governor-General

anything else. *Globe and Mail* columnist Hugh Winsor wrote that she was picked for the post because “it was time for a woman.” Clarkson also offered an additional “bonus” to the Prime Minister, he stated, in the form of “her Chinese ancestry.” “At this rate,” *Toronto Sun* columnist Connie Woodcock surmised,

the next Governor-General will have to be gay and handicapped—an opportunity, perhaps, for Svend Robinson, should he break a leg or require glasses. Gay, handicapped and Inuit would be nice.

Added *Macleans* scribe Allan Fotheringham,

It’s been an open secret in media and political circles that my old buddy, not a woman to trifle with, has been lobbying heavily in Ottawa for either the CBC Presidency or Rideau Hall. Visible minority, political correctness, all that.

Critics of Clarkson have also tapped into dominant North American narratives about Asian women to express opposition to her appointment. Recreated as our very own Yoko Ono, Clarkson is seen to have ridden the coattails of her spouse to achieve her ambition. Where Ono had Lennon to supposedly provide her career, Clarkson, we were told by none other than Chretien, could be Governor-General because her husband was a political thinker and could help her (McIlroy A1). On the day following Chretien’s announcement, one *Globe and Mail* headline read, “Clarkson has major job asset in husband” (A3). Lennon was said to abandon the Beatles for Ono; the *Toronto Star*’s Dalton Camp worries whether John Ralston Saul will deny his career for Clarkson.

Like Ling, the Asian-American lawyer on TV’s *Ally McBeal*, Clarkson is callous, manipulative, and unemotionally attached, as evidenced, especially, by her decision to give up custody of her children twenty years ago. Suggests one *Post* writer, “for many women that price would be too high, but for the ambitious and career-bound Adrienne Clarkson it probably was not” (Sexton 1999b). On *Ally McBeal*, Ling is famous for attacking or suing just about anyone who does anything to her. Clarkson is, in the words of *Toronto Sun* columnist Connie Woodcock, “quarrelsome.” Woodcock too repeats the story about Clarkson and Ralston Saul disputing a “neighbor’s

right” to extend her house. “The case dragged on through the courts for two years,” Woodcock says, “during which time the poor woman died.” Ono’s to blame for the death of the Beatles, her husband and ’60s culture, Clarkson for an elderly neighbor.

Just as Ling’s sexual prowess won her a job at Ally’s law firm, Clarkson’s fetishized “Asian-ness” makes for a good national symbol. Nationalism is, after all, usually represented through the visible ritual organization of fetish objects—flags, uniforms, airplane logos, national cuisines, and architectures, etc. Far from being purely phallic icons, McClintock says, “fetishes embody crises in social value, which are projected onto and embodied in ... impassioned objects” (374).

Worst of all, like Ono, Ling, and Imelda Marcos, Clarkson is “another” of those Asian women who thinks she’s better than the rest of “us” common folk. None of the media coverage of Clarkson’s appointment and inauguration has failed to mention just how uppity she really is, as Winsor’s remarks try to make clear:

Ms. Clarkson obviously has the intelligence, background and bearing for the job. But as they used to say around the CBC she never carried the sticks. That’s a reference to the tradition in television crews that the “talent”—the reporter, host or interviewer—assists the technicians burdened with equipment by carrying the “sticks.”

“Adrienne Clarkson is ‘madame’ and you’re not,” declared the headline of one front-page *Post* story which revealed that Rideau Hall officials were to use that title in addressing her (Foot 1). This was of course not new—previous Governor-General Jeanne Sauve made the same request, and as Gerda Hnatyshyn, the spouse of former Governor-General Ray Hnatyshyn pointed out to a startled *Post* reporter, “she’ll be called Excellency in any event. That’s what Ray and I were called” (Sexton 1999a). Another writer opined that Clarkson is so hateful of reporters that “she has been heard to say that she will burn

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all her private papers rather than let the press get hold of them" (Sexton 1999b). Indeed, so venomous have some responses been to Clarkson's appointment that one *Toronto Sun* writer actually took offense, at least to the sexist (not racist) undertone of the reporting (Sonmor).

One would think that all this fuss over Clarkson's identity might mean that her appointment is in fact actually threatening to the "normal" order of things. To some extent, it is true that having a Chinese-Canadian Governor-General shakes-up notions of Canadian nationality to some. But despite all the attention to Clarkson's sex and ethnicity, the appointment of a woman to a symbolic (rather than actively political) post is not as ground-breaking as it might appear to be, especially in the way that it seems threatening to her critics. Usually excluded from full citizenship, women, says Anne McClintock, "are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphorical limit" (354). (Canada does, of course, have a Queen.) Women, McClintock says, are "typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency" (354-355). As Elleke Boehmer notes, the "motherland" of male nationalism may "not signify 'home' and 'source' to women." She says that the male role in nationalist scenario is typically "metonymic"; that is, men are contiguous with each other and with the national whole. Women by contrast, appear "in a metaphoric or symbolic role" (qtd. in McClintock 354-355). The appointment of a woman to a symbolic post like Governor-General poses no challenge to this dichotomy.

A recurring theme in the commentaries about Clarkson's appointment is her failure as a mother. Indeed, so much fuss has been raised about the former broadcaster's "estrangement" from her daughters that in a November 6 article, "Adrienne Clarkson's Painful Separation," writer Rosemary Sexton (1999b) acknowledges that she risks "flogging a dead horse" in bringing up the matter once again. In her article, Sexton tries to offer an apparently more balanced view of Clarkson's relationship:

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To be fair, Adrienne Clarkson herself is less than forthcoming about her relationship, or lack of it, with her daughters. When asked about them, she either refuses to answer or uncharacteristically bursts into tears. No doubt, as she claims, the pain is too great. As well, she may be deeply ashamed that in this one area of her life, the personal area, she has failed.

As McClintock points out,

"nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space." Developing Frantz Fanon's assertion that "the characteristics of the family are projected onto the social environment" (358) of the nation, McClintock suggests that the family trope is important to nationalism in at least two ways. It offers both "a 'natural' figure for sanctioning national *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interests," and "a 'natural' trope for figuring national time" (358).

The rather extensive attention to Clarkson's "failed" relationship with her daughters not only reveals mass media's sexism in covering politics (which reporter asked Mike Harris about his children when he got divorced? Who has asked about Bill Clinton's relationship with daughter Chelsea?) but it also calls attention to the way in which women are represented as producers of the nation. In taking on the role of Governor-General, Clarkson is effectively cast as Mother of Canada. Calling her a "bad (biological) mother" thus undermines her suitability for the post of Governor-General. Clarkson's ethnicity, according to her critics, makes her a bad mother too. A much-published remark (the *Post* has run it several times) is that of Kenneth Liebllich, the former chairman of the Vancouver section of the Monarchist League of Canada. He said that the choice of Ms. Clarkson "degrades Her Majesty, the office of governor-general and Canada as a whole" (Gillis). As Robert Young's work on culture, race, and hybridity, and McClintock's analysis of soap have determined, non-white peoples have historically been accused of "degrading" or "dirtying" the nation, particularly in terms of sex and reproduction. As a non-white head-of-nation, Clarkson's appointment "degrades" the very idea of nationality which is so dependent on white/black binarism.

Negative reaction to Clarkson's appointment has been clearly informed by racism/sexism. In the case of the *Post's* quite malicious coverage, racist and sexist discourses have been summoned in the pursuit of its publisher's personal battle with the Prime Minister (Chretien blocked an appointment of *Post* publisher Conrad Black to Britain's Upper House). Atwood is correct: Clarkson has been subject to "racist and sexist" press. But the "positive" reactions often also fail to challenge—and may well serve to maintain—gendered and racialized notions of Canadian nationality. For example, the Prime Minister's and others' celebration of her sex is problematic. We already have a foreign Queen Mother; is Clarkson's sex supposed to make her a good, local Mother of Canada? "Welcoming" her to the family-nation of Canada does not destabilize sexist or racist relations of power in Canada; indeed, it may well work to reinforce them. McClintock says,

The metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial—the "national family," the global "family of nations," the colony as a "family of black

children ruled over by a white father”—depended in this way on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere. (358)

The idea is that the welfare of its parts (women, non-whites, for example) is supposed to be served by the welfare of the nation-family as a whole. Unequal relations between a nation-family's parts are therefore deemed “natural.” Having a woman-of-colour Governor-General may be understood as an integrationist strategy which symbolically legitimizes social inequality.

McClintock's second point about the use of family in figuring time is also relevant in an analysis of coverage of Clarkson's appointment. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that nationalism,

presents itself both as a modern project that melts and transforms traditional attachments in favor of new identities and as a reflection of authentic cultural values culled from the depths of a communal past. (qtd. in McClintock 358)

Representing a “new” nationalism in that she is neither white nor male, but holding an “old” traditional office, Clarkson's appointment resolves the “temporal anomaly” within nationalism.

According to Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias there are five ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes. Women have been located as “biological reproducers,” “reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups,” “transmitters of its culture,” “(symbolic) signifiers of ethnic/national differences” and participants in the national struggle (qtd. in Wobbe 91). Clarkson's significance derives from her symbolic value as “an immigrant woman.” The ways in which Clarkson has been presented in the media have clearly not dislocated any of these phenomena.

This is not to say, however, that her appointment makes no difference at all. There are ways in which ruptures in dominant gendered and racialized narratives about Canadian nationalism do appear. The installation of a non-white Governor-General sends the message, at the very least, that non-white people have rights to Canadian nationality and citizenship—albeit if this membership is determined by one's class and ability to integrate into the dominant francophone and anglophone culture. Her appointment undermines the racist and sexist attacks by those who believe non-white people cannot be Canadian and, interestingly, has even encouraged some Monarchists to re-think their continued support for colonial ties to Britain (even if this is obviously motivated by racist thinking).

Clarkson's name will surely now be called—and justifiably so, because her personal achievements are quite remarkable, whatever class advantages she possessed—at

meetings and functions for immigrant and community organizations across Canada henceforth as a “role model.” In some immigrant quarters, her presence will evoke the same kind of enthusiasm that I experienced when I saw the first announcement on television. There's some kind of vindication in seeing a non-white woman in a “powerful”—even if “only” ceremonial—role. But this kind of celebration too is extremely problematic. In declaring Clarkson's development “from refugee to G-G,” as the *Toronto Sun* noted, Chretien and others have told her story as a representative one. That is, Clarkson has achieved, as the *Toronto Star's* Judy Steed put it, “a classic Canadian dream.” “Work, ambition and tragedy,” Steed's article opened, shaped this “immigrant's rise to be Governor-General.” The sub-text is, of course, that with a little hard work, *all* immigrants can achieve the same kind of success. Any failure to do so, therefore, has less to do with systemic racism in Canada than with the individual immigrant's character him/herself.

As immigrants and feminists, we can take *some* joy in Clarkson's appointment—if, for no other reason than to see Conrad Black *et al.* bemused, and even to feel that white, patriarchal Canadian nationalism is threatened. But we must remember too, that nationalism, even when represented by a liberal woman of colour, is still conceived through an articulation of “race” and gender which will not, in the end, serve most of us well.

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### MARIE CLAUDE PRATTE

Le vent paresse il est absent  
 et les voitures passent  
 obstruant l'autoroute  
 et les fumées des cheminées  
 s'époumonent dans le ciel convexe

Je suis en train de perdre  
 ma tête et mes réflexes  
 ma langue a tellement tourné  
 de fois avant de parler  
 qu'elle est enroulée en escargot  
 et bloque ma gorge  
 mes oreilles ont tellement écouté  
 que les tympanes se sont renfrognés  
 par en dedans  
 mes yeux ont tellement vu  
 de souffrances et de tragédies  
 ou des visions ahurissantes  
 que mes pupilles rondes  
 abasourdies se carréfient  
 pour rationaliser l'épouvante  
 mon iris s'est décomposé  
 en milles flocons  
 pour geler mes émotions

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 l'Université Concordia. Depuis une dizaine d'années ses  
 tableaux ont été présentés dans divers lieux de diffusion,  
 notamment à Quartier éphémère et à l'atelier de Guido  
 Molinari en 1998.*

### WANDA HURREN

#### Borderlands

do not be fooled  
 into believing  
 borderlines  
 are imaginary  
 lines  
 on maps  
 and nothing else  
 they are real  
 I know a place  
 a borderline  
 between  
 where two countries end  
 there  
 is a space  
 a borderland  
 wheel tracks in a ditch  
 we used to go there  
 on warm summer evenings  
 park the car  
 open the windows  
 welcome the breeze  
 there  
 we crossed real  
 imaginary lines  
 on over under  
 into  
 between  
 where two countries end  
 there  
 is a space  
 a borderland

*This poem first appeared in the poet's book, Line Dancing :  
 An Atlas of Geography Curriculum and Poetic Possi-  
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