

Camp Mothers of the Nation? Reading *Untouchable Girls*

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which the film *Untouchable Girls* mediates the apparent contradiction between the Topp Twins' representation as paradigms of "New Zealandness", and their cultural status as yodelling lesbian twins. Utilising Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it draws particular attention to the deployment of discourses of authenticity to legitimate Jools and Lynda Topp's performances and misperformances of identity. Through the characters of Ken and Ken, for example, the Topp Twins demonstrate an unquestionable fidelity to the inaugurating discourses of "New Zealand masculinity" while simultaneously disturbing the gender performance that such discourses might usually effect. What this article suggests is that *Untouchable Girls*, and its attendant publicity, is dominated by an insistence on the particularity of "New Zealand" as a cultural context willing to celebrate its own contradictions, and the Topp Twins as performers uniquely able to utilise those contradictions for potentially subversive ends. It argues that the film demonstrates that the Topp Twins' "authenticity" enables them to insist upon the ways in which their subversive confusions are to be read, and to potentially reveal and reconstitute a queer paradox as integral to New Zealandness.

Early in the film *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009) is a Television New Zealand clip first broadcast in 1982. In it, Jools and Lynda Topp are pictured fixing a fence as a voiceover outlines their rural credentials: brought up on a farm in Huntly, contract haymaking at age fourteen, and stints in a fencing gang. We are then informed that "the twins are lesbians" who "sing about homosexuality" (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). Crucially though "people don't seem to mind", and the narrator suggests that this general lack of concern by the public might well be because "they look wholesome, and have such an irrepressible sense of fun" (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). The linguistic proximity of "wholesomeness" and "homosexual" seems paradoxical to any ear more accustomed to homophobic associations of homosexuality with degeneracy. Indeed, such associations are rendered with appropriate vitriol later in the documentary in footage of Norman Jones condemning the 1986 Homosexual Law Reform Bill by telling homosexuals to go "back into the sewers where you come from" (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009)¹. Yet as a way of describing the Topp Twins' location in New Zealand's cultural imaginary, "wholesome lesbian twins" continues to seem entirely apt, even as it also continues to appear contradictory.

The surprising lack of tension between paradigms of identity usually imagined to be in conflict is a key framing narrative in *Untouchable Girls*, and an enduring paradigm in media coverage of the Topp Twins' success. The documentary takes the form of an intimate onstage performance in which Jools and Lynda reminisce and sing. This is intercut with archival footage and images; interviews with family members, friends, and other performers and assorted personalities; and interviews with the twins both as Jools and Lynda Topp, and in their various comedic guises. As the "Untouchable Girls Press Pack" available on the Topp Twins' website (Topp Twins, 2009b) comprehensively demonstrates, reviews and publicity for *Untouchable Girls* almost universally draws attention to the disjunction between their lesbianism, and their relationship with 'heartland' New Zealand. In the *Otago Daily Times*, for example, Christine Powley (2009) describes the film as "an attempt to explain to us and themselves how a pair

of yodelling lesbian twins became beloved comic icons in New Zealand". In invoking the unlikelihood of such a relationship, Powley and numerous other reviewers, suggest a paradigm of New Zealandness understood in the conservative, rural and gender-specific terms it is so frequently represented as².

At the same time, reviews of the film also suggest that it reveals much that is particularly and peculiarly New Zealand. The *NZ Women's Weekly* describes it as "a film that will leave you feeling proud to be a New Zealander" (Topp Twins, 2009b); reviewer Matt Lawroy (2009) suggests that watching the film is a bit like being at "a uniquely and proudly New Zealand party" and that "if you don't come away...feeling good about being a New Zealander then you should emigrate immediately"; and a review in *The Wairarapa News* describes the Topp Twins' story as being "as much about our identity as the traditional bloke stereotype of what it means to be a Kiwi" (O'Connor, 2006, p. 6). Less clearly articulated in those reviews is the connection between what the film says about what it means to be a New Zealander, and the icon/lesbian paradox that the media simultaneously draw attention to. Is the good feeling about being a New Zealander mandated by Lawroy, for example, connected to the country's apparent capacity to tolerate, or even celebrate, the yodelling lesbian twins?

What is particularly significant are the ways in which discussions of *Untouchable Girls* seem to suggest that the relationship between the Topp Twins and New Zealand goes beyond one of either tolerance or celebration of them as a musical and comedy act. Rather the Topp Twins are repeatedly depicted as being somehow representative of the very New Zealand their "yodelling lesbian twin" status seems to so intuitively contradict. To celebrate the Topp Twins, it seems, is to celebrate New Zealand. As presenter Mark Sainsbury put it on TVOne's *Close Up*: "Who would have ever thought our national identity could be summed up so perfectly by yodelling lesbian twins from Huntly?" (Television New Zealand, 2009). The question that I want to pose in relation to *Untouchable Girls* is whether the fact that the Topp Twins make an odd sort of sense in a New Zealand context where they ostensibly should not, suggests that this New Zealand context may be imbued with a strain of ambiguity not normatively associated with its paradigms of identity. More simply, if there is something a little queer about the relationship between the Topp Twins and New Zealand, what does that queerness say about the New Zealandness on which the Topp Twins draw?

Queer jokes and "kiwi" disavowal

In "Queer Here: Sexuality and Space", Lee Wallace (2004) draws attention to moments of sexual and gender anomaly that have a particular relationship to New Zealand's understanding of itself. Among the examples she cites is the place of Frank Sargeson's *That Summer* (1982) in the New Zealand literary canon (Wallace p. 68). Sargeson is unarguably a key figure in this country's literature, and as John Newton (2000) suggests, *That Summer* "represents the crowning achievement" of the early style for which he is most celebrated (p. 100). Yet, as Newton demonstrates, in addition to the sexual encounters with transsexuals that form an important part of the plot, the novella is replete with barely coded references to male-to-male anal sex that trouble the heteronormative assumptions underpinning the ways in which its homosocial mateship is read (pp. 100-101). Part of what interests Newton is the extent to which Sargeson's "clamorous subtext" (p. 100) went seemingly unnoticed by reviewers at the time, particularly when those reviewers included people "as acute and as worldly" (p. 100) as James K Baxter. Newton attributes this blind spot to a homophobic social pattern simply unable to countenance the possibility of sexual relations between real New Zealand men. The ironic consequence, as Newton points out, is that Sargeson is able to play "an elaborate queer joke" (p. 100) on a

homophobic readership, a joke whose ultimate punchline must surely be the foundational status his oeuvre of queer texts are accorded in New Zealand literature.

For Wallace, Sargeson's capacity to pull off that joke might in fact reveal a shared national contract of disavowal around the queerness of 'New Zealand'. She thus positions the text as one of a number of examples of how "Transgenderism, and the homosexuality which it frequently screens, is something all New Zealanders know without being taught. It has something crucial to say about the formation of national identity, we all agree, though nobody ever says what" (Wallace, 2000, p. 68). In exploring what this "something crucial" might mean, Wallace resists locating these seemingly queer moments within "that self-congratulatory liberal narrative" that "complacently accepts" (p. 69) New Zealand's status as the first nation to give women the vote or extend human rights protection to non-heterosexuals, and instead considers how each example links "certain forms of sexuality to particular locations" (p. 68). As the Sargeson example demonstrates, alongside others such as transsexual Georgina Beyer's election as Member of Parliament for the rural Wairarapa (Wallace, p. 69) the complexity of that relationship lies in its unlikelihood. *Untouchable Girls*, and the career of the Topp Twins more generally, seem an obvious additional cultural moment to consider within the context described by Wallace. Sexuality and place, and the paradoxes their relationship seemingly engenders, figure as the two tropes that seem to frame almost all public enunciations about Jools and Lynda Topp.

New Zealand masculinity and performative force

In order to examine the implications and complications of the ways in which sexuality and place are connected in *Untouchable Girls*, the following discussion draws on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. What this theoretical paradigm enables is a way of examining the relationship between the Topp Twins' success, and the cultural imaginary on which their performances and personas draw. Butler is concerned, in particular, with how the conferral of subjectivity always simultaneously offers the possibility to trouble the terms of that conferral. Given that *Untouchable Girls* appears to repeat a framework of 'authentic' New Zealand identity even as it articulates a sexuality that sits outside it, a theoretical paradigm that draws attention to how certain performances of authentication might disrupt what they seem to repeat, seems a useful lens through which to consider the Topp Twins.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) argues that all gender is performative, and that the authority on which that performativity depends comes from the constitution of bodies within a heteronormative matrix of intelligibility. Butler's account draws, in particular, on J. L. Austin's theory of linguistic performativity, in which he argues that certain utterances enact the very actions that they describe. In these 'performative' statements "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (Austin, 1962, p. 6). Austin (1970) uses the marriage ceremony ("I now pronounce you...") and legal proceedings ("I sentence you...") as examples of speech acts that "do" as they say they are doing it (p. 235).

In addition to Austin, Butler draws on Derrida's emphasis on the mechanism of iteration that authorises only certain announcements as performative. Derrida (1982) argues that critical to this performative force is the way those announcements cite the power that enables them to produce their words as action (p. 104). In the courtroom, for example, the judge who announces sentencing both cites the civil authority or legal precedent directly, and implicitly cites its performative weight through the courtroom symbols of judicial authority. This mechanism of citation is an iteration of what is established through law or convention as the discursive authority to effect, rather than simply describe, an action. The judge who cites the authority of the law in sentencing reminds the subject sentenced, along with all the other subjects present, that

the law gives him or her the power to do so.

For Butler, gender performativity operates through the same constitutive logic of repetition and citation, and it is on these two functions that the efficacy of any performance of gender depends. She argues that announcements of gender, and performances of gender, are dependent upon a performative authority for their authentication as a legitimate gender performance. The announcement “It’s a girl”, for example, that follows the birth of the female child, means that the girl so ‘described’ is:

compelled to ‘cite’ the norm [or norms, of femininity] in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (Butler, 1993, p. 2).

The girl is “girlled”, as Butler puts it (1993, p. 2) and that body must remain recognisable in the terms of that interpellation³ in order to continue to be accorded the status of legitimately embodied subject.

The ways in which New Zealand masculinity is constituted at some of its most iconic sites of representation demonstrates precisely how Butler’s model of gender performativity works. As has been well established elsewhere (Bannister, 2005; Law, Campbell & Schick, 1999; Phillips, 1987) the paradigm of “New Zealand masculinity” has been produced and reproduced through what Jock Phillips (1987) describes as a “powerful legend of pioneering manhood” (p. 3) that constitutes the New Zealand male as tough, laconic, hard-working, resourceful and thoroughly committed to his mates. Even via the knowing lens through which this paradigm is (arguably) increasingly viewed (Law, Campbell & Schick, 1999, p. 17), the ways in which that legend is cited as a source of authentication remain a fixture of New Zealand media. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the beer advertising that sells the signs of authentic masculinity, alongside the products that will legitimate the subject’s gender performance.

An almost perfect example is “Bump,” an advertisement for DB Draught beer. It begins with an All Black, an old soldier, and an old farmer sitting in the “Patron Saints of Beer Drinkers” pub in an imagined heavenly afterlife. This three-man jury presides over the performances of masculinity taking place in the earthly realm below in order to see which men are entitled to drink the sponsor’s product. Access to this act of consumption is dependent upon their adherence to familiar norms of masculinity.

The first two men under observation perform heroic feats in the countryside and on the rugby field, respectively. “Macca” puts out a scrub fire singlehandedly but understates his activities when he enters his local pub by suggesting he’s been “nowhere special” (“Bump”, n.d.). We then see the second subject demonstrating tenacity and teamwork in a game of rugby. The unanimous agreement by the jury in heaven is that both men “deserve a DB” (the campaign slogan) for their strength, ingenuity, and rejection of personal glory. The final subject for consideration is an urban office worker, who has spent his working day reading a newspaper. When asked, as he orders a beer, if he’s had a busy day, his untruthful response in the affirmative is in direct contrast to the understated hard work of the first two characters. His lack of industry, his overstatement of his own labour, and the relationship of both to his differentiated class position⁴ is deemed by the men in heaven to be not deserving of reward, and he has his beer glass “bumped” from his hand in a moment of heavenly intervention. The office worker’s failure to reproduce himself according to the framework of masculinity by which he is being judged disqualifies him from participation in the rituals of masculinity which would in turn constitute him as recognizably male – that man doesn’t deserve a DB, and is thus denied access to the ritualized performance of maleness being sold.

As Campbell, Law and Honeyfield (1999) argue, beer drinking continues to mark “a legal

and symbolic boundary between boyhood and manhood” (pp. 166-167) in New Zealand culture. Thus the two men who deserve a DB simultaneously deserve their conferral as real New Zealand men. The extent to which these performances function performatively is evidenced by the cultural norms cited in the text. The “patron saints” highlighted here as guardians of beer drinking are carefully chosen, and highly storied, archetypes. The battlefields of war, rural life, and the sport of rugby are three sites routinely mythologized in New Zealand culture as productive of its localized masculinity, and of its paradigm of ‘nationhood’ in general. Thus, that these three men are qualified to adjudicate on who does or does not deserve a DB, where beer drinking is understood as a masculine rite of passage, is a link made by a New Zealand audience that requires very little interpretive labour. “Bump” functions performatively, in the terms theorized by Butler, in that its repetitions are “at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler, 1990, p. 40), where the cultural knowledge being (re)produced gives these performances their “binding and conferring power” (Butler, 1993, p. 225).

Being Ken

Ken Moller (played by Lynda Topp) inhabits precisely the paradigm of masculinity performatively produced as authentic masculinity in a text like “Bump”. Described on the Topp Twins website as “your typical kiwi bloke,” who “comes from a long line of Wairarapa sheep farmers” (Topp Twins, 2009a), Ken, along with his mate Ken Smythe (played by Jools Topp), is among the most popular of the Topp Twins’ creations:

Jools: These are two of our most favourite characters that we play, and they are a tribute to the New Zealand, you know, farmer in a lot of ways cos they are true blue, you know, boys. They get asked to present the cup at the A&P shows for the best bull...

Lynda: And they’ve done, you know, rugby awards and everything. So they really have been accepted as Ken and Ken. You know, people believe that Ken and Ken exist. (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009).

What the Topp’s discussion of Ken and Ken suggests is that their authenticity, demonstrated in the apparent belief that they actually exist, is both predicated on, and authenticated by, the citational networks of New Zealand masculinity. It is precisely because they read as “true blue” boys produced so clearly from a place of affection and knowledge that they are in turn accepted within those contexts routinely deployed as a “test” of authentic masculinity – the rural (here represented by the A&P show), and the rugby field. Indeed, in their capacity to, in turn, bestow the cups and awards that mark other men’s successful performances of masculinity, Ken and Ken could be said to wield the same performative authority as the heavenly jury who decide which men deserve a DB. The *mise-en-scène* of their appearance in *Untouchable Girls* does little to dispel that kind of connection – they are in an old fashioned public bar, with a jug of beer duly sitting in front of them.

An anecdote by songwriter Don McGlashan in the film, in which he retells a story of Lynda Topp’s about being out at the Auckland strip club “Showgirls”, demonstrates the kinds of tantalisingly queer possibilities that the performative success of the two Kens can produce. As McGlashan tells it:

She [Lynda Topp] was there as Ken, and all these famers from Tuakau just invited her to their table, and they had this great rip-roaring night, you know, sort of leering at the pole-dancing, and I don’t know what was going on in those farmers heads. Were they thinking, you know, there’s this gay woman in a suit who’s sitting with me, and she’s got a stick-on moustache and she’s pretending to be a man, and I’m having a great night with her, or were they thinking: that’s Ken! I’ve got Ken with me, isn’t this great? (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009).

What seems most likely is that it was some shifting combination of both possible readings.

The success of the citation seemingly enables someone we might otherwise consider a lesbian drag king to inhabit social spaces that lesbian drag kings would usually be unable to go. At the same time, the centrality of their lesbianism to the Topp Twins' public persona must at some level simultaneously ensure that the knowledge of it is always present in their reception.

In the songs, jokes, interviews and characters that they have performed throughout their career, the Topp Twins have ensured that their lesbianism is something their audience is always aware of. In *Untouchable Girls* it is returned to repeatedly. We hear the story of their coming out and see their parents discussing it, we are introduced to their partners, we hear them singing about being lesbians, we see them protesting in support of gay rights, and almost every person interviewed – whether they are real or whether they are the Topps in character – makes some sort of reference to them as lesbians. Former Prime Minister Helen Clark, for example, argues that having “real people...good people like the Topps” (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009) involved in the campaign was instrumental to the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill. And, Ken Smythe points out that he and Ken don't “mix in the same circles” as the Topp Twins, but he does highlight a similarity in that “we all go out with women” (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). Even when the Topp Twins are men, the audience is still not allowed to forget that they are lesbians.

It is perhaps for that reason, that for the farmers reading Ken, and for Don McGlashan and the film audience reading the farmers reading Ken, the pleasure of that reading might lie in the inability to make definitive sense of it. As Butler argues of drag, “part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance” (1990, p. 137) lies in the knowledge that its success as a coherent repetition will always, at some level, fail. For Butler, this knowledge is a critical site of politics. If the system of gender is dependent upon the naturalising of a system of authorised repetitions, then unauthorised repetitions that reveal the relationship between cultural intelligibility and norms, might, at some level, bring into relief a system dependent upon a naturalised invisibility.

As I noted earlier, in her account of how gender is naturalised, Butler draws particular attention to the importance of repetition to the mechanism of performativity. Part of why Ken and Ken work as comedic tropes is because they (like the DB Draught advertisement) (re)enact the “set of social meanings already established” (Butler, 1990, p. 140) around “true blue” New Zealand masculinity. It is that very repetition of norms, the “mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler, 1990, p. 140) that reconstitutes the masculinity that the two Kens embody with the status of ‘truth’ referred to by Jools Topp. It is in the importance of repetition, and its relationship to the iteration that Derrida describes, that Butler finds the possibility of troubling the system of gender. She suggests that disrupting the chain of citation by enacting citations that fail to cohere, or to make normative sense, threatens to reveal how gender is sustained through regulatory norms, rather than through some natural materialisation of sex. Butler argues that:

The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found...in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction. (1990, p. 141).

Given that it attaches a cultural performance of maleness to an anomalously male body, a cultural performance in which lesbians perform as men might just as other performances of drag, challenge the authentication of gender.

True blue kiwis

The contention that Ken and Ken denaturalise either New Zealand masculinity, or New Zealandness in general, is put under pressure when one considers how a nostalgic sense of the

authentic New Zealandness that both authorises and at times stands in for that masculinity, pervades *Untouchable Girls*. The film is a relatively chronological account of the Topp Twins' lives and careers. Early on, Jools and Lynda Topp, along with their parents, tell stories of an idyllic rural childhood characterised by a prevailing sense of freedom. From the performance of "Calf Club Day" (J. Topp & L. Topp) over images of children leading ribbon-strewn calves and lambs around a paddock, to Lynda Topp declaring the A&P Show her "local" as we see footage of wood-chopping, and sheep colouring competitions, the film is saturated with an idealised sense of rural New Zealand. This New Zealand is reproduced here for a New Zealand film-going audience that, as Lynda Johnston (2009) notes, "still imagines itself to be rural" (p. 71) despite the vast majority of its population living in urban areas (Johnston, 2009, p.71). Certainly, as Johnston suggests, the "emotionality" of the film "provokes New Zealand audiences to 'feel', laugh and cry" at something that is being framed as quintessentially of New Zealand (p. 70).

The Topp Twins' character-based comedy is also a key factor in reproducing that New Zealandness. Alongside Ken and Ken, the characters who are perhaps the most obvious examples of this are Camp Mother and Camp Leader, who evoke real and imagined memories of kiwi camping ground holidays while clad in their towelling jumpsuit, and cardigan emblazoned with "I Love NZ", respectively. The Topp Twins' cast of characters have recently been joined by Mavis and Lorna, the bowling ladies, who as we see in the film, walk onstage literally under the sign "New Zealand", and who then cite an affectionate list of kiwiana in "All Things Kiwi", as Mavis inexpertly wields poi. Yet, tellingly (and as McGlashan's anecdote about Ken's night out at Showgirls also suggests) it is within the performance of that character comedy that some of the most paradoxical moments around the Topp Twins occur. The deliberate misperformance with the poi, for example, seems at odds with the way in which te reo Maori is enunciated with care in the accompanying song, and with the Topp Twins' affiliations with Maori political activism detailed later in the film. Equally as unexpected, is a joke relying on the signification of lesbian oral sex – "Why can't lesbians wear make-up when they go to Weight Watchers? Because you can't eat Jenny Craig when you've got Estee Lauder on your face!" – being told by Camp Leader in that green "I Love NZ" cardigan to an audience at an Australian folk festival. A question not explicitly posed, but nonetheless seemingly answered, in the film, is "How on earth do they manage to keep getting away with this stuff?"

Despite the pun that the title of this article clearly wishes for, a Topp Twins' performance is utterly devoid of the ironic distance of camp. In *Untouchable Girls*, songwriter Billy Bragg draws attention to the Topp Twins' subversiveness in using, what he terms, "the most redneck" and most "gender specific" music genre – country and western – "as a way of pushing forward gay rights" (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). Bragg suggests that the reason the Topp Twins can sing about lesbianism in country music is because the audience is clearly aware of their affinity with the genre: "It's so subversive. But they're not taking the mickey. And I think that's the key thing. That's who they are" (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). Their capacity to "get away with" their subversion, therefore, is indexed to the integrity and authenticity of their performance. Footage of the Topp Twins singing "Country Music" at the 1983 New Zealand Music Awards seems to underscore the point that Bragg is making. The Twins sing:

We sing country music, keeps us good and gay.
 There sure seems a lot of us are turning out that way.
 Yeah, we got country music coming out our ears.
 We've been singing Country and Western for years.
 We think country music is the best.
 You better watch out when the Topp Twins go west.
 (J. Topp & L. Topp).

Aside from the fact that the Topp Twins were performing these lyrics with evident glee at a televised mainstream music event in 1983, what is striking about the clip is that it is as much a celebration of country music as it is a performance of outness. While there can be little doubt that it is sung with twin tongues firmly in cheek, that the Topp Twins would suggest that it is country music that “keeps them good and gay” combines a refusal to countenance the “red-neck” tradition to which Bragg refers, with the suggestion that it inaugurates their non-normative inhabiting of the genre in the first place. Like their clear affinity with the kiwi farmer who ends up as Ken, it is a fidelity to another performance of belonging that engenders or enables an incorporation of lesbianism into an otherwise hostile context – they’ve been singing Country and Western for years, and they sing it in perfect harmony, but the lesbianism that accompanies that singing is never, in the Topp Twins hands, allowed to be read as incidental.

It is this capacity to set the terms by which their performance of contradiction is read that is part of what enables the Topp Twins to keep getting away with what they do. What we see in the film is how a performance of authenticity that seemingly cannot be questioned authorises a misperformance of the normative identity that is usually the effect of its citation. That authenticated performance (as New Zealander, as yodeller, as farmer) carries a particularly heavy performative weight in the contexts in which it is deployed (discourses of the “nation”, country music, the A&P show), and while that citation does not substitute that misperformance for the norm it misperforms, it does seem to authorise the terms of its reception.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler discusses the ways in which heteronormative culture can depoliticise the performances that draw attention to its array of contradictions. She argues that:

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and rearticulated as instruments of cultural hegemony. (1990, p. 139).

Butler notes that the troubling of norms through “parodic displacement” is dependent on “a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered” (1990, p. 139). It could certainly be argued that the ways in which *Untouchable Girls* draws on and rearticulates a culturally hegemonic New Zealandness – with all the gender normativities that a text like the “Bump” advertisement suggests that New Zealandness includes – domesticates the queer possibility that the Topp Twins might otherwise effect. Yet, what I want to suggest here is the possibility that the ways in which the Topp Twins insist on the articulation of their lesbianism in unexpected places, while simultaneously demonstrating the authenticity of their belonging in such spaces, enables them to insist upon the context in which their performative confusions are read.

The point at which that insistence takes effect is impossible to say with any certainty. I am certainly framing it here in terms of the kinds of productive contradictions that Butler argues a system based on repetitions and citation provides. Within that explanation, however, due attention must be paid to the deftness and skill with which that citation is handled. Certainly, the suggestion that dominates the film is that the Topp Twins get away with what they do primarily because they are so good at what they do, so good at “gentling” the audience as Jools Topp puts it in the film, when she discusses how you get an audience to “come with you” to places they might be otherwise nervous about going (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). Comedian John Clarke describes how the Topp Twins do this, and draws attention to its affective results:

They’re relatively shameless. And that’s a good thing to be, and to know how far you’re prepared to go, and to know how far people are prepared to go with you. I think they’re very deft judges of that and they do it on the run... The whole thing’s a little bit of an out of body experience too, because you’re not watching something that’s terribly gender-specific, and it’s not quite the farming community, and it’s not quite country music, and it’s not quite busking, and it’s not quite prepared, and it’s not quite the same as it was last night. And all of

these things are resonating in an audience which is appreciating all of these little shades of meaning, and I think they're also having a very solid, old-as-the-hills, old-fashioned good time. (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009).

The receptive experience that Clarke describes also resonates with the kinds of confusions of identification that theorists such as Butler or Eve Sedgwick (1993)⁵ suggest is the experience of queer. Can we thus conclude that rather than being domesticated, the Topp Twins enact the kind of queer performance that Butler describes as “effectively disruptive, truly troubling”? (1990, p. 139). Revisiting *Gender Trouble* (1999) ten years after it was first published, Butler contends that questions around what can and cannot be claimed as genuinely queer in its effect are adjudicative gestures that “will always fail, and ought to” (p. xxi). Certainly, such gestures seem to originate elsewhere than a queer theory predicated on the rejection of a politics of authenticity. Far more interesting, in relation to the Topp Twins, is the “not quite” discursive contingency described by Clarke, be it the experience of the audience watching the Topp Twins, or the experience of the queer theorist watching their film.

John Clarke's discussion of how and why the Topp Twins' performances work is intercut with footage of their performance at the Port Fairy Folk Festival, the same performance at which we see Camp Leader telling her Estee Lauder joke, along with a few others of a similarly ribald nature. In the midst of Camp Leader's delight at her naughtiness, and the audience's laughter that demonstrates the kind of old-as-the-hills good time they're having, Camp Mother tries to restore a little order: “Calm down the lot of you” she scolds, “You've all gone crazy” (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). What we see here is precisely the interpellation that both Jools Topp and John Clarke describe. Camp Mother/Lynda Topp includes the audience in her remonstration, and ensures that they very clearly recognise that they have gone with Camp Leader/Jools Topp, and are thus equally responsible for all the citational mayhem taking place.

“How did we get here? It's just mind-boggling”

As *Untouchable Girls* opens, the Topp Twins are introduced to the stage as “cultural icons” and “a national treasure” (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009), and begin with a performance of “Untouchable Girls”, a rousing testament to the freedom of outsider status that references both their politics and their sexuality:

We live in a world that doesn't care too much.
 You've got to stand up; you've got to have guts.
 We're untouchable, but we touch.
 We're untouchable, touchable girls.
 (J. Topp & L. Topp)

The footage of the twins performing is intercut with images later elaborated on in the film of them busking, performing at political rallies, and performing as their comedic alter-egos. As the song ends to sustained applause, Jools Topp asks: “How did this happen... How did we get here? It's just mind-boggling” (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009). Jools Topp's question seems to, at least in part, reference the contradiction between highly politicised lesbian performers, and beloved entertainers who have made a successful career out of effortlessly and affectionately rearticulating ‘real’ New Zealand for musical and comedic effect: the cultural icons and national treasures are simultaneously “stropic and aggressive” untouchable girls, the two women photographed singing in front of a banner that reads “Lesbian and Gay Rights Now” are also Mavis and Lorna singing of “gumboots, number eight, indoor bowls, and ‘ladies a plate”” (J. Topp & L. Topp, “All Things Kiwi”). Coming as it does at the beginning of the film, the question of how the Topp Twins got “here” and why this paradox works is also set up as a way of framing the interviews and footage that follows. To that end, it both continues, and remarks

on, the enduring paradox that is the Topp Twins' success.

At the same time, if we consider that the "we" in question might refer not only to Jools and Lynda Topp, but also to their audience and to the cultural context out of which they emerge, then we also begin to see how *Untouchable Girls* separates itself out from the career of the Topp Twins that precedes it. Lynda Johnston (2009) suggests that the film "highlights major social and political movements that helped shape national discourses of what it feels like to be 'Kiwi'" (p. 70). What we see in the film is the role of the Topp Twins in the social and political movements that Johnston describes, and what we see in the response to the film is the connecting of the Topp Twins to the national discourses of what being a kiwi means. In as much as Christine Powley (2009) suggests that the film seeks to explain "how a pair of yodelling lesbian twins became beloved comic icons in New Zealand", the mediation of the film in reviews such as hers reproduces New Zealand's social history as one that demonstrates that New Zealand is the only place in which the Topp Twins could make some kind of "national" sense.

Immediately following Jools Topp's observation that the fact that "we" got here is "just mind-boggling" is the following anecdote told by comedy writer Paul Horan:

I was at the Montreal Comedy Festival...and I remember a guy from New York saying to me "So New Zealand, who's the big comedy act in New Zealand?" I said "Oh some yodelling lesbian twins", and at that point he just kind of went "Oh look there's someone I know" and ran off. Because on paper they should not work, on paper they should be commercial death. But, they totally deliver to the audience. Time and time again (Cuthbert & Pooley, 2009).

In both sentiment and direct citation, Horan's anecdote was echoed in the ubiquitous references to "yodelling lesbian twins" in the publicity and reviews that accompanied the release of the film. In the process, the Topp Twins' lesbianism is connected to the specifically New Zealand context on which their performances draw, and from which their comedy emerges. In media reports that suggest that the paradox that is the Topp Twins somehow "sums up" (Television New Zealand, 2009), however surprisingly, that same cultural context, the film is made to articulate the relationship between queerness and national identity, that Lee Wallace (2000) suggests "all New Zealanders know without being taught" (p.68). There is certainly a queer joke going on here, but its queerness seems to reside in the Topp Twins' insistence that it is one we are all in on.

Notes

1. In 1986, Jones was the Member of Parliament for Invercargill. The bill, which was successfully passed into law, decriminalised sexual relations between men aged 16 years and over.
2. Other scholars have discussed the representation of New Zealand in these terms extensively, and it seems unnecessary to reproduce that discussion here. See for example: Phillips (1987), Bannister (2005), and Law, Campbell & Schick (1999).
3. The framework of interpellation that I invoke here refers to Louis Althusser's (1971) discussion of how the subject is "hailed" into being by a figure of discursive authority (pp. 162-164).
4. See Phillips (1987) for an extensive discussion of the relationship between urbanity and effeminacy in images of New Zealand masculinity.
5. In *Tendencies* (1993), Sedgwick offers the following definition of queer:

That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when they constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically. (p. 8, emphasis in original).

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