

# Homophobia, Fundamentalism, and Canadian Tolerance: Enabling Gay Games III in Vancouver

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Article abstract

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**Judy Davidson**

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**Abstract**

*Gay Games III were held in Vancouver in August 1990. This paper analyzes the effects of three different moments of homophobic backlash faced by organizers of that event. While quiet institutional homophobia might have been tolerated, public representations of blatant homophobia could be mobilized by the organizers of Gay Games III to their advantage. The effects of a hateful campaign paradoxically functioned as an interesting condition of possibility for Gay Games' credibility. I then suggest that the limitations of these liberal strategies were shown up by the fractures within local lesbian and gay communities, demonstrating the weaknesses of accepting tolerance as a limit to the possible.*

**Résumé**

*Les troisièmes Jeux Gais ont eu lieu à Vancouver en août 1990. Ce document analyse les effets de trois moments différents du ressac homophobe auquel ont fait face les organisateurs de cet événement. Même si l'homophobie institutionnelle discrète aurait pu être tolérée, les organisateurs de ces jeux ont pu tourner à leur avantage les représentations publiques de l'homophobie flagrante. Les effets d'une campagne de haine ont paradoxalement été favorables à la possibilité de tenir des Jeux Gais crédibles. Je crois donc que les fractures observées dans les communautés lesbienne et gaie locales ont fait ressortir les limites de ces stratégies libérales en démontrant les failles de l'acceptation de la tolérance comme limite du possible.*

Between August 4 and 11, 1990, the City of Vancouver played host to that year's largest international athletic event—Celebration '90: Gay Games III and Cultural Events. Over 7,000 participants and over 12,000 spectators took part in the multi-day festival, which celebrated lesbian and gay pride through an athletic and cultural spectacle. It was the first time the Gay Games were not held in their "birthplace" in San Francisco<sup>2</sup> or in the

United States. Gay Games III in 1990 were also the test run event for the newly formed Federation of Gay Games (FGG),<sup>3</sup> which worked in coordination with the local Vancouver organizing committee, the Metropolitan Vancouver Arts and Athletics Association (MVAAA). As outlined in their mission statement, the primary purpose of the Federation of Gay Games is "to foster and augment the self-respect of gay women and men throughout the world and to engender respect and understanding from the non-gay world through the medium of organized, noncompetitive cultural/artistic and athletics activities" (FGG Bylaws 1989). Such a statement follows on the trajectory of Tom Waddell, the Gay Games' founder, who had fashioned the Games to provide opportunities for gay and lesbian athletes to be "out" in a competitive sporting environment, so as to not have to hide or deny their sexuality (Davidson 2003).

This position works against the general orientation of mainstream sport, which is one of the last bastions of most forms of conservative sociality, homophobia and heteronormativity included. Sport is, after all, a manly man's domain where the effeminate stereotype of the gay man has no place. Women are always already interlopers in the masculinist confines of the athletic sphere, and therefore, heterosexual femininity is always put under question and suspicion—differently disciplining lesbians, straight women, and other minoritized sexual identities. In this context, it is tempting to simply celebrate the Gay Games. Indeed, the Gay Games have been read as contesting normative social divisions as certain authors have suggested (Donnelly 1996, P. Griffin 1998, Krane and Waldron 2000). However I will argue that Gay Games III also contributed to a version of normative sedimentations. The world's best known lesbian and gay athletic event, the Gay Games, has adopted and promulgated a very assimilative and conservative approach in attempting to gain public acceptance for their sporting event and lesbian and gay athletes.

It seems fair to say, in the historical moment that was 1990 in Canada, the legitimacy of a public lesbian or gay identification was perceived as tenuous and fragile. This deeply informed a gay and lesbian identity politics. Foregrounding gay pride, the push was for gay and lesbian leaders to downplay, negate, and push aside homophobic commentary. Gay Games III served as an exemplar of how the Canadian lesbian and gay movement turned more fully towards a liberal tolerance strategy, leaving behind a more radical gay liberationist approach that had characterized the 1970s and early 1980s (Warner 2002). Gay and lesbian identified events such as the Gay Games promote sexual minorities as exemplar citizens, as individuals who would be proud to take up the privileges and obligations of liberal democracies, and who will demonstrate their competence to do so. Tom Waddell's guiding philosophy of the Games—"to do one's personal best is the ultimate goal of all human achievement"—underpins how the

Gay Games are deeply implicated in the liberal ethos of individuality (Waddell in Labrecque 1994).

The need for "positive portrayals" that such a position entails, led some individuals to critique the gay community's analysis of Gay Games III. Halifax radio broadcaster Brenda Barnes (1991) was unimpressed with media attention on the Games, and, in particular, found the electronic media's coverage of Gay Games III "sparse and tokenistic" (6). Commenting on a television clip of the Opening Ceremonies, she had this to say:

The biggest chunk of time, over 30 seconds or one-fifth of the story, [was] devoted to providing a soapbox for four fundamentalists [who protested the Gay Games] thereby lending them credibility. They had already been mentioned in the in-studio set-up by the anchor. Why did they need to be mentioned again? Unless what they said was considered important? (6)

Barnes was referencing a blatantly homophobic, fundamentalist Christian campaign launched against the Vancouver Gay Games in November 1989. While the answer to Barnes' rhetorical question about importance is meant to be "no," I contend that media coverage of the fundamentalist protest was useful for Gay Games III. Contrary to Barnes' interpretations, this paper will suggest that the media's attention to the fundamentalists (and their extraordinarily negative campaign) was very important to Celebration '90s' success, specifically the media attention the conservative Christians generated paradoxically functioned as an interesting condition of possibility for Gay Games' credibility. I will suggest that in the context of Vancouver through the late 1980s and in 1990, while expressions of quiet, unobtrusive institutional homophobia from governmental departments and universities might have been tolerated, overt, well-publicized representations of blatant homophobia could be mobilized by the organizers of Gay Games III to their advantage. While the Games profited from deploying liberal strategies of multiculturalism discourse and identity-based politics, the limitations and constraints of these strategies were shown up by the fractures within the local lesbian and gay communities that demonstrated the weaknesses of accepting tolerance as a limit to what is possible.

### **Early Resistance and Homophobia**

The MVAAA anticipated that public response to a large concentrated gathering of gay men and lesbians would be anxiety, especially given mid-to late-1980s moral panics regarding the "spread" of HIV/AIDS. Thus

attempts to manage public homophobic reaction to the announcement that Gay Games III would be held in Vancouver, started early. In 1986, in an attempt to avert a social panic, the MVAAA took the proactive step of encouraging the Chief Medical Officer for the City of Vancouver to make a public statement four years before the actual event was to take place. Dr. John Blatherwick went on record for MVAAA organizers, stating that there should be no reason to stigmatize Gay Games' participants (Blatherwick 1986). By the time the Games occurred in 1990, Blatherwick had refined and extended his position: "Wide community support for the Games will strongly assist those of us attempting to stem the tide of AIDS. The presence of gays in our community poses absolutely no risk to citizens" (Blatherwick in Temple and Hughes 1990, 3).

Despite such statements, expressions of public homophobia seemed more prevalent in 1990 than they had been at the two previous Games (Davidson 2003). There was quiet opposition from some groups in the Vancouver community, such as the Canadian Legion, which declined to lend flag-holsters for the Opening Ceremonies (Brunt 1990). Homophobic graffiti (such as "Death to Queers" and "Fags Go Home") was sprayed in orange letters, sometimes misspelled, on the West End Community Centre just days before the Games opened (K. Griffin 1990d). Before the Games were over, there were two more instances of homophobic graffiti and one reported incident of gay-bashing, in which a Seattle visitor was sprayed in the eyes (K. Griffin 1990g). Given such conditions, MVAAA organizers worked closely and extensively with Vancouver city police and the RCMP to anticipate security needs, develop contingency plans at every venue, and prepare for disruption, protest, or violence (K. Griffin 1990a, K. Griffin 1990c). However, some of the most pernicious, quiet homophobia came from well-established bureaucracies and institutions—governments and universities.

In typical Canadian fashion, the Vancouver organizers applied for several forms of government funding. At the federal level, Fitness and Amateur Sport gave them no funding, in all likelihood because the Gay Games did not fit their rationalized, Olympic-focused mandate and structure. The Federal Department of Communications' Cultural Initiative Program did provide Celebration '90 with a \$15,000 grant, but only after the MVAAA had applied for over \$130,000 and had actively lobbied several federal and provincial representatives (Amundson 1989, "Grant Applications" 1990, Kidd 1989). The British Columbia Social Credit provincial government, under the leadership of the very conservative Bill Vander Zalm, flatly refused to provide any money to Gay Games III, even after three separate grant applications. Lyall Hanson, the Minister for Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Culture, suggested in his refusal letter to the MVAAA that the province already funded

virtually every sport and recreation activity offered at your event... In light of this all-encompassing array of opportunity, it does not seem appropriate in a world of scarce public resources, to fund "Celebration '90" which basically duplicates activities already very successfully offered. Accordingly, may I invite you to consider participating in sport and recreation activities through our Province's outstanding existing system. (Hanson 1990, 1)

This seemingly benign response, which on the surface assumes an equality of opportunity, access and participation, was patronizingly disingenuous in its implicit homophobia and lack of recognition of the workings of heteronormativity in sport. While a generous reading of the letter from the minister could imply that identity-based sporting events were not what the province wanted to fund, such a reading would need to ignore that the province *had* supported other identity-based games. The BC provincial government had funded events like the Special Olympics, the Seniors Games, and the Police and Fire Games (all identity-based events) without referring these events to opportunities that were already being provided by the province through their existing sport system (K. Griffin 1991). In homophobic fashion, this refusal denied gays and lesbians the right to be considered provincial citizens who could hold their own identity-based athletic event with public financial support.

In response to the province's denial of funding, MVAAA treasurer, Bill Amundson, threatened to launch a human rights complaint (K. Griffin 1990h). In September of 1990, with Gay Games III completed and posting a deficit of \$140,000, the B.C. Civil Liberties Association sparked an investigation suggesting that Premier Bill Vander Zalm had blatantly discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation, both in the decision to deny grant funding and in his public explanations (K. Griffin and Bramhan 1990). One year later, after multiple appeals for donations, the MVAAA offered its creditors 21 cents on the dollar to wind up its affairs. MVAAA spokespeople continued to identify the provincial government as the reason for this debt (K. Griffin 1991). While no suit was ever pursued, acknowledgement that gay and lesbian organizations suffered (and continue to suffer) from this kind of systemic discrimination had to wait for almost another decade.<sup>4</sup>

Institutionalized expressions of homophobia were further highlighted by yet another incident. In its efforts to be well-organized, two MVAAA directors had an enthusiastic and positive meeting in October 1986 with UBC Conference Services staff to book residence, gym, and aquatics facilities for the 1990 event. By booking almost four years in advance, the organizing group knew they would not be in conflict with any other

events. However, shortly thereafter, the MVAAA received a short, two-line letter informing them that the university was not available to them. For the next eighteen months, the Vancouver organizers attempted to get some concrete reasons as to why they could not rent the *public* facility. They were finally directed to UBC president, Dr. David Strangway ("For Immediate Release" 1988).

Svend Robinson, the first publicly-gay federal Member of Parliament (NDP, Burnaby East), and an Honorary Board Member for Gay Games III,<sup>5</sup> managed to speak with Strangway in July of 1988. At that time, the UBC head claimed that dealing with the Gay Games was not in the university's best interest. Robinson reported back to the MVAAA and assisted them with strategy. As a former UBC Student Union president and representative on the UBC Board of Governors, Robinson was well versed in how to negotiate academic political channels. He advised the MVAAA to get on the agenda for the September 1988 Board of Governors meeting, and to have all members of the Games' Honorary Board write letters to the UBC President and Board of Governors. Robinson himself would speak with Canadian Prime Minister John Turner and contact the UBC Alumni Association (MVAAA Board 1988).

A media leak, just before the MVAAA was to present to the Board of Governors, proved very helpful. The UBC student newspaper obtained a memo from the UBC President. In it, Strangway "explained he had banned the Gay Games because he believed the activity to be more political than athletic or cultural and he did not want to involve the university in such a social issue" ("For Immediate Release" 1988, 1).<sup>6</sup> Mainstream media, surprisingly led by the conservative Vancouver newspaper *The Province*, picked up the story and challenged this position by supporting the Gay Games editorially. The MVAAA presentation to the Board of Governors received full press corps attention, stretching their allocated 15-minute slot to a full hour during which they addressed the most senior UBC arbiters. A day later, the MVAAA received a letter from the UBC President, requesting they submit their booking requests in writing: the Board of Governors had overturned Strangway's decision ("For Immediate Release" 1988).

The MVAAA used the university's about-face to full advantage. In a press release about the changed decision, an MVAAA spokesperson suggested that, while he was happy with Strangway's new request:

he [was] even more pleased with general community outrage which followed the press announcements. Every significant media outlet in the city has been in touch with us... Every person we have talked to is sympathetic and it's clear that the

media won't be dropping this issue until we have the booking confirmations in our hands... We have spent a lot of our time during the past two years educating the general community about all the positive qualities of the Gay Games movement... The feeling most frequently expressed by people associated with the university has been embarrassment... Our very desire to settle this through negotiations rather than confrontation underscores the fact that we are a sports and cultural organization rather than a political activist one. (McDell in "For Immediate Release" 1988, 2)

The media attention was positive, and the Gay Games was able to spin out of the situation an acceptable image of a reasonable group of athletes and cultural practitioners being unfairly treated. They were represented not as in-your-face queers, but well educated professionals (the press release indicated that nine of twelve MVAAA board members were UBC alumni, many of them holding two degrees from the institution), who were involved in a worthy cause—promoting the acceptance of gays and lesbians in mainstream culture. This kind of lobbying and political manoeuvring heralded the impending political and legal struggles the gay and lesbian movement in Canada was about to enter into over the next 15 years, with the struggle for Charter recognition and ultimately the legalization of same-sex marriage. Reading the history of the present (Foucault 1979; 1990), we might argue that leaders in that struggle were learning valuable political and legal strategies through Gay Games III controversies.

The successful protest to the UBC Board of Governors was well orchestrated, planned and quietly executed without placards and loud slogans. However, it posed no serious challenge to societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians; it simply allowed them access to a liberal mainstream institution. And while, in the end, the MVAAA did not register a human rights complaint against the Province for denying funding for the event, that option was considered and may have been a viable challenge.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, however, garnering even more public support for the event did not occur through formalized human rights challenges. One of the most blatant expressions of resistance to Gay Games III was a full page, fundamentalist Christian newspaper advertisement denouncing the Gay Games as a gay plot destined to ruin the souls and morality of Vancouverites. This ad ran in both of Vancouver's mainstream daily newspapers and was a much broader attack on the MVAAA than UBC's, but one they used in the end to further promote their event and to solidify themselves as decent, upstanding citizens. I turn now to that incident and the MVAAA response.



## **Fundamentalist Fervour—Gay Games Favour**

Many months before Gay Games III were to take place, a certain segment of the large fundamentalist Christian community in the greater Vancouver area had been praying for God to overturn and stop the “immoral” event (Brunt 1990). About one year after the reversal of UBC’s refusal to allow the Gay Games access to their facilities, a group of religious moral conservatives presumably made the assumption that they represented mainstream Vancouver values when they ran a full page ad (purportedly worth \$15,000 at the time) in both major daily Vancouver newspapers—*The Province* and the *Vancouver Sun* (Kelly and McDell 1989, Todd 1990b). On November 4, 1989, the ad ran under the heading “Time is Running Out—Concerning Gay Games Vancouver—August 4–11, 1990.” It was filled with quotes from Biblical scripture heralding the perils of homosexual perversion, wickedness, corrupted social values, easy sex, and incest, among others. The chilling ad ended:

We therefore with all reverence and serious intention, in Christ’s name, make a public statement: That because these Games will bring God’s judgment upon us all in this city, we therefore forbid them in the name and authority of Jesus Christ. We believe that they shall not take place... We believe that this is a clear call to spiritual warfare. (“Time is Running Out” 1989, A9)

The sponsors were identified along the bottom of the ad, in small print as follows: “The above declaration is initiated and paid for by Christian leaders who live in Greater Vancouver, and who love this city and its people” (“Time is Running Out” 1989, A9).<sup>8</sup>

The virulent quality of the hatred in the ad backfired on its producers. Fortunately, for Gay Games III organizers, public outrage about the ad was immediate. Spokespeople from the BC Civil Liberties Association and the BC Conference of the United Church of Canada both condemned the action. Letters to the editor were overwhelmingly opposed to the ad and the *Vancouver Sun* issued an apology: “We regret it went unflagged as advertising (its appearance was such that a reader might have perceived it as editorial material) and we unequivocally deplore its lack of signatures or attributions. In addition, we consider its message repugnant” (cited in Kelly and McDell 1989, 1). Given the *Sun*’s history of refusing to run advertising for gay organizations a decade earlier,<sup>9</sup> it is hard to know if this retraction is to be read as a positive sign of change or gratuitous damage control.

The effect, however, was that in the week following the publication of the ad, the MVAAA office was inundated with offers of financial and volunteer support. It appeared that large numbers of the public did not think Gay Games gay pride was about backroom perversion and wild sex, as the fundamentalist rhetoric implied. Richard Dopson, a board member of the MVAAA, called the phone number listed at the bottom of the ad. He introduced himself to the person at the other end saying, "Thank you very much for spending \$15,000 to advertise for us" (Dopson in Richards 1990a, 25). Further, Celebration '90 parodically reinscribed the hourglass that was prominent in the middle of the original ad. They superimposed the Celebration '90 logo on it, left the formatting and font the same, so that it read "Time is Running Out—Support Celebration '90 NOW!" The design was silk-screened on T-shirts and sold for fundraising (Richards 1990a, 39). It was a golden opportunity for the Gay Games to present themselves as a sane, tolerant, liberal event—a reading they widely promoted.

The outpouring of support from gay and non-gay organizations and communities buoyed the beleaguered organizing group.<sup>10</sup> Six months later, MVAAA director Betty Baxter was still making the most of the liberal angle. By appealing to and recalling experiences of social exclusion that gays and lesbians commonly suffer, Baxter made it clear that these stories would motivate the organizers to be as welcoming of as many kinds of diversity as possible at the Gay Games. Focusing on inclusion at the event, she suggested, "this is about gays and lesbians coming out and being part of the community and being respected as such" (Baxter in K. Griffin 1990a, B4). Conservative attempts to quash the Gay Games had, paradoxically, repeatedly turned into productive conditions of possibility for them.

However, the fundamentalists continued their well-funded religious protest of the event. In the winter of 1990, they opened an office in Vancouver, the sole purpose of which was to work against Gay Games III. Founded by retired evangelical church pastor, Bob Birch,<sup>11</sup> the anti-Games group "Watchmen for the Nation" was formed as an ad-hoc assemblage of Christian evangelicals (K. Griffin 1990c, MacQueen 1990). Various rallies and prayer vigils were held, culminating with a huge spectacle, just as Gay Games III were about to commence (Canadian Press 1990, Richards 1990a). An American group of Christian muscle-men, the "Power Team," were brought in for almost a quarter of a million dollars by a coalition of Christian churches. They hoped for a turnout at BC Place of 40,000 people who would pay to listen to and be moved by the word of Jesus, as eight hunky bodybuilders smashed bricks and lifted weights.<sup>12</sup> The organizers denied that the event was organized to protest the Gay Games, but rather suggested that the team would draw "the atten-

tion of young people away from the Gay Games" (MacQueen 1990, A8; Todd 1990a).

In the end, despite a lot of money, organization, and advertising, only four protesters gathered outside BC Place Stadium when the Opening Ceremonies for Gay Games III were held. Three people were shouting anti-homosexual slogans through a loudspeaker and one person carried a placard prophesizing doom. They were quickly surrounded by six members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who, as good drag nuns, encircled the protesters in ridicule. Police removed the homophobic objectors shortly thereafter (Canadian Press 1990). Inside the stadium, lesbian comic and performer Robin Tyler, the emcee for the Opening Ceremonies of Gay Games III, referenced the fundamentalist Christian opposition to the huge crowd, wryly observing: "I don't mind them being born again, but do they have to come back as themselves?" (Tyler in Richards 1990b, 14). None of the events at the Games were disrupted; Celebration '90 received a large amount of positive local and national media attention, and the "only major protests by Christian evangelicals took place near the Terry Fox Memorial before opening and closing ceremonies" (K. Griffin 1990g, B1). They did not garner any mainstream media attention.

### **Situating Support—Historicizing Tolerance**

It is important to consider how the Gay Games were able to mobilize public support for their lesbian and gay athletic event against the strong fundamentalist opposition they faced. Part of this can be attributed to the choice of Vancouver as the city to host the third Gay Games. The fledgling Federation of Gay Games deliberately moved the event out of San Francisco, and the United States, partly to internationalize the event and organization and partly because a group of lesbian and gay Vancouverites had proactively lobbied and planned to host the event since the first Games in 1982. A third consideration, particularly important to my argument here, is that Vancouver was perceived to be a gay-positive metropolitan city in 1990 that could successfully host the Games outside of San Francisco, without attracting excessive homophobic protest (Davidson 2003). I suggest, in this instance, in the end, the "tolerance" associated with the urban core outstripped the "intolerance" ascribed to the sprawling suburban periphery.<sup>13</sup> At the time, urban Vancouver was a much more socially progressive constituency than many of the outlying suburbs and municipalities in the Lower Mainland area.<sup>14</sup> The West End of Vancouver had an established and burgeoning gay community in 1990 and parts of East Vancouver supported vibrant lesbian culture. While the right-wing Social Credit provincial government explicitly denied Gay Games III support of any kind, the City of Vancouver had supported the Gay Games,

officially sanctioning them, and the Greater Vancouver Regional Transit Authority provided the largest injection of public funds for the Games (K. Griffin 1990b).<sup>15</sup>

Yet Vancouver is and was not isolated from larger historical and political developments. How might a broader history have mattered in this specific time and place? In the 1960s and 1970s, the Canadian federal “government undertook widespread social reform designed to facilitate cultural expression, forge a strong national identity, and project an image of Canada as a model liberal democracy” (King 2000, 164). An effect of such a program was that progressive new social movements, such as civil rights battles, feminism, and gay liberation, emerged, and, in reaction, Christian social conservatives mobilized to counter their efforts (Escoffier 1996, Kinsman 1987, Warner 2002). Electorally, the Christian right in Canada, as embodied in the Social Credit party (and later in its Reform/Alliance/Conservative Party guises), was primarily viewed as a “Western fringe phenomenon,” one not “taken seriously by the traditional political elites or the media, especially in central and eastern Canada” (Warner 2002, 48). In 1990, the Premier of B.C., Bill Vander Zalm, a fundamentalist Christian, led a provincial government that publicly expressed hostility against homosexuality in its almost 20 years in power (Warner 2002). While socially conservative Christians were present in the Lower Mainland area (generally outside of Vancouver’s urban centre), and in the province more generally, organized political activity of the Christian right in Canada had, to that point, been disparate and amorphous (Herman 1994, Patton 2006), well behind the emergence of the Christian New Right in the United States.

Ronald Reagan’s election as U.S. President in 1980 signified the victory of the New Right as an American phenomena, which produced a potent alliance of “traditional conservatives preoccupied with communism and economic issues with religious fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell” (Escoffier 1996, 166). Deeply informed by American religious fundamentalists such as Jimmy Swaggert, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Phyllis Schlafly, and Anita Bryant, the New Right in the United States became identifiably American in their social conservatism, a fundamental aspect of which was an absolute hatred of and opposition to homosexuality. This American phenomenon first spilled into Canada with Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” speaking tour of Canadian cities in the late 1970s (Warner 2002). As Didi Herman (1994) points out, however:

Right wing moral activism in Canada has had a decidedly patchy and uneven development in the latter part of this [20<sup>th</sup>] century. A Canadian equivalent to the “Moral Majority” has not emerged; neither have the moral reform groups that do

exist been particularly successful at advancing their public policy agendas. (268)

One of the main reasons Herman cites for this lack of cohesion is that the Christian fundamentalist rhetoric is too illiberal, too bitterly anti-gay, and too hateful for the prevailing late 20<sup>th</sup> century social climate in Canada. As she argues, given "Canadians apparent intolerance of religious fundamentalism in the public sphere... a 'liberal consensus' dominates public debate and policy in Canada" (Herman 1994, 273). Christian fundamentalism has been unable to organize coherently enough to attract widespread support from a larger Canadian public. Arguably, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this has discursively produced Christian fundamentalism in Canada as a deeply American-influenced phenomenon—something that is not "really" Canadian.

I am arguing that Gay Games III was able to benefit from this distinctly Canadian disdain for intolerance. Without explicitly invoking Canadian national identity, Celebration '90 was able to capitalize on the strong sense of a distinctly Canadian liberal tolerance in their articulation of the Games as a healthy, clean cut, sporting event. In a seemingly unconscious differentiation, "Canadians" (or at least those tolerant, liberal Canadians in Vancouver) clearly indicated, through volunteerism, media support, and corporate investment, that American-style hate campaigns did not have significant purchase. While there is a body of work that considers how sport is often intimately tied to the project of nation-building and the discursive production of Canadian-ness (Gruneau and Whitson 1993, Jackson and Ponie 2001, King 2000, among others), it rarely considers how intolerance paradoxically benefits minority groups through particular Canadian values.

The mobilization of Canadian liberal tolerance of the Games showed up in mainstream media coverage. Stan Persky, a Vancouver print media journalist, suggested that:

Coverage in *The Sun*, *The Province*, and the *Globe and Mail* as well as on the three local TV stations was extensive, prominent, and positive. Both explicitly in editorials, and subtextually through such "gatekeeper" choices as story angles and placement of coverage, the media indeed projected the message that "being gay is not wrong but being intolerant of gays is"... In fact... Celebration '90 was accorded the utterly normal treatment that would be given to any large-scale successful trade fair, scholarly gathering or other public spectacle that was peaceful, profitable, and full of photo opportunities... In the same way that the media generally oppose

racism or sexism today, the message, tolerating homosexuality is, in large part, a reflection of the society upon which the media report. (1990, D2)

As Jhally (1989) contends, the sport/media complex, while never static and always contestable at all stages of production and consumption, often reproduces ideological messages that are consumable within the hegemonic norms of the day. While Wachs and Dworkin (1997) suggest that there can be no such thing as a gay sports hero, perhaps in Canada in Vancouver in 1990, a gay sports event was more heroic than a rabidly anti-gay Christian fundamentalism. In a tolerant Canada, even a lesbian and gay sporting event (and its media coverage) could be mobilized to keep the American-inspired intolerant fundamentalist threat at bay.

Fittingly, Gay Games III organizers carefully positioned themselves to avoid being construed as radical or deviant. Celebration '90, the innocuous title for the event, was a neutral name "chosen by organizers so as not to offend the Vancouver population" (Bociurkiw 1991, 6). In May 1989, in correspondence with an adolescent who was a potential athlete, the Gay Games' office manager, Mary Brookes, had to deny the youth the opportunity to participate, because all registrants for Gay Games III had to be of legal adult age. She wrote: "We must avoid accusations that we 'corrupt' or 'recruit' minors for 'deviant and/or sexual' purposes. We want Celebration '90 to be an expression of gay and lesbian pride, and *hesitate to give extremists a focal point*" (Brookes 1989, my emphasis added). Rather than openly question or refuse the classic homophobic stereotype of lesbians and gay men as rabid pedophiles, the MVAAA made decisions to simply minimize and avoid those kinds of interpretations. To access and maintain a positive and supportive response from Vancouverites and the mass media, the MVAAA had to ensure it could present athletes who "happened" to be gay, rather than opening up inquiry into the workings of heteronormativity. This is the paradox of in/tolerance—while it was a mobilizing condition for the Gay Games, it also came with its associated disciplining and disciplinary requirements, a position I will elaborate further in the paper.

While enduring the homophobic attacks from right-wing fundamentalists must have been unduly stressful, anxiety-producing, and frightening,<sup>16</sup> organizers were able to carefully steer their way through the hate-filled harassment. An MVAAA director noted how the radical Christian right assisted the event. "Most people were indifferent about the event until the campaign against it. The attacks pushed many people into supporting the Games" (Dopson in Matas 1990, A3). Small business owners were successfully approached specifically to support the Games because of the furor caused by the fundamentalists' protest (K. Griffin

1990b, K. Griffin 1991). The generally conservative daily, *The Province* issued a *mea culpa* editorial just before the Games started. "Almost a year ago, we called these Gay Games 'silly' ... Since then we've been educated. We've learned that these games are intended to build bridges, strengthen community, and bolster self-esteem" (Persky 1990, D2). The hate-filled ad was the limit of *intolerance* in this case. While quiet, bureaucratic forms of homophobic discrimination went relatively unremarked publicly (the denial of substantive government funding for the Games, the initial refusal to rent UBC facilities), it was the explicitness and virulence of the homophobic resistance to the Gay Games that rallied and motivated "normal" (read tolerant) Canadians to act to support a lesbian and gay athletic event.

The vast majority of media exposure was to represent the Gay Games as an exemplar of tolerance and as indicative of an acceptance of diversity. Examples of this assimilative discourse were especially abundant in mainstream media. Many major Canadian daily newspapers picked up on the Games' story at least once in 1990. The producer and choreographer of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies suggested that he was approaching the project as he would any kind of family entertainment that included participation and inclusion (K. Griffin 1990e). Echoing what it sensed was public opinion, editorial comments in Canada's national newspaper reiterated Vancouver's general openness to the event. The *Globe and Mail's* sports writer, Stephen Brunt, wrote, "As a whole though, Vancouverites seem comfortable enough with the whole notion [of the Gay Games]" (1990, A24). Other *Globe and Mail* coverage indicated that:

after several stormy debates over morality and human rights, the city of Vancouver is ready to open its arms to thousands of gays and lesbians for the third international Gay Games... [the event] blur[s] the boundary between homosexuals and others in an attempt to show that homosexuals have many of the same interests as the rest of the world... Canada is a tolerant society that accommodates personal differences. (Matas 1990, A3)

This gesture to the character of Canada was one of a few explicit references to Canada in the media coverage. A filmmaker from Los Angeles suggested "I think the U.S. is a lot more polarized on how it perceives and treats gays. Canadians seem to try to solve issues in the mainstream" (K. Griffin 1990f, B4). The lack of any explicit nation-based discourse activated by the Gay Games' organizers may be attributed to the Gay Games official policy of not organizing the sporting competition along national lines. Seeking to combat the hyper-nationalistic discourses that are produced at the Olympic Games, the Gay Games have consciously resis-

ted this impulse, and instead organize athletic teams along city affiliations.<sup>17</sup> Athletes paraded into the Opening Ceremonies under banners for Team Vancouver or Team San Francisco and so on (Davidson 2003).

While Games' organizers may not have overtly wielded nationalistic discourses, it is worth noting there was a context of quiet unease about Canadian identity in the late 1980s. Fears of losing a distinctly national identity were heightened by the 1988 Free Trade agreement with the U.S. (Jackson and Ponc 2001). As Samantha King (2000) reminds us, "Canada appears to be in a constant identity crisis" (163). To which Jackson and Ponc (2001) add, "crisis become[s] a contested terrain that reveal[s] a struggle over the past, present, future meaning[s] of Canadian identity" (47). In the case of the Vancouver Gay Games, the crisis of a sustained homophobic, Christian fundamentalist protest showed up a particular history of the treatment of gays and lesbians in Canada, the historical emergence of Christian fundamentalism associated with Americanism, how a particular sexual identity sporting spectacle negotiated that crisis in a particular historical moment, and how the future of Canadian gay and lesbian politics moved in a direction of assimilative rights along a multicultural model that was distinctly different from the path its American neighbour was to take over the next 15 years. So, while in the American context, the Moral Majority is much more influential in politics and policy direction, in the Canadian context, the Christian fundamentalists were positioned as somewhat fractured, marginal, and fanatical.

### **Subsuming Difference**

While these incidents of homophobic constraint are now the familiar hue and cry of a gay rights movement, what is often left aside is how gays and lesbians have used liberal tolerance discourses based on multicultural arguments to their advantage, but, in so doing, inadvertently contribute to the exclusionary impulses of such discourses. Even though the Gay Games' organizers attempted to discredit the Christian fundamentalists as being unfairly restrictive through their desire not to welcome homosexuals, the Gay Games, as suggested earlier, also participated in a practice of subsuming difference under an umbrella of a cohesive lesbian and gay identity politic. While appearing at first brush as inclusive, the Gay Games' own prejudices reared their heads. MVAAA member, Richard Dopson suggested right before the Games started, "The gay and lesbian community... has come out with tremendous pride. We're going to meet people here from all over the world who are very proud to be gay, very proud to be athletes. They are not leather and drag queens but they're athletes" (Dopson in MacQueen 1990, A8). Akin to the rhetoric the MVAAA mobilized after winning the concession from the UBC Board of Governors, the use of "athlete" here in contradistinction to "leather men"



and "drag queens" continues to discursively depoliticize and de-queer the Games. Leather and drag conjure up dissident sexual cultures and practices that were championed in a gay liberationist political movement. By insistently reiterating athletics and sporting culture as *not* political, the Gay Games further mobilized and entrenched itself into a version of multicultural acceptance. The MVAAA organizational discourse in mainstream media kept a sanitized, unsullied, squeaky-clean gay or lesbian intact.<sup>18</sup> Promotional posters were incredibly bland, reinscribing heterosexist imagery with the word Gay in tiny, almost indiscernible print (Davidson 1996, MacQueen 1990). Dominant, mainstream press responded with primarily sympathetic, positive coverage that considered the gay and lesbian angle to be diverse enough.

Even though there was an official brochure indicating that leather was welcome in Vancouver, and that Svend Robinson noted the drag queens, bull dykes, men in leather, and radical fairies in his opening ceremony address (Canadian Press 1990, "Letter" 1988), alternative presses told a bit of a different story about Gay Games III:

Celebration '90 was a celebration of jocks, kitsch, and mainstream silliness... It was a homecoming for every closeted gym teacher and dyke baseball starlet, a paean to Weimar-esque notions of the body beautiful, a reclamation of spectacle, a temporary utopia that removed the taboo and made queers feel normal—if only for a week. It was a week where you weren't supposed to wonder what it means to want to be normal, where you weren't expected to analyze the deeper meanings of say... the presence of Socred politicians [at the Opening Ceremonies], or the erasure of the word "lesbian," or the whiteness of almost everyone's skin. (Bociurkiw 1991, 6)

The questioning of very obvious attempts to re-create a conventional athletic event by a lesbian and gay community was not part of official MVAAA organizing discourse. Gay pride was the discourse, and its whiteness (and that legacy) permeated the event.<sup>19</sup> However, this was not seamless. Under-representation of almost all minorities came up as a discussion topic at many of the forums in the Cultural Festival. Toronto author Dionne Brand suggested that the very title of the literary festival—Words Without Borders—reinvented Columbus-like colonialism:

Sometimes in trying to say what is most fine about us, we borrow from the wrong terrain. We, as lesbians and gays, need to turn over these terms. We need to fight against the culture rather than fight for inclusion... We must take on dissidence rather than inclusion. (Brand in Bociurkiw 1991, 7)

The Gay Games imperative for inclusion effectively occluded the recognition of politically important differences amongst various sexual communities. This played out not only in terms of the lack of racial and ethnic diversity but also along gender lines. The women-only social events sanctioned by the MVAAA could not be advertised as women-only, and men were to be permitted to attend any of these parties. In the lesbian and gay alternative presses in Vancouver, there was lively debate and concerns expressed about the pervasive sexism and heteronormativity involved in many MVAAA board decisions. For example, a group of dykes had organized *Queers in Arts*, an artisan's bazaar meant to be one of the 75 events of the Cultural Festival. The group was forced to change its name by the Games' organizing committee, who felt the word "queer" did not promote a positive image of lesbian and gays, instead conjuring up the derisive slur of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a time period that the Games' discourse was endeavouring to make invisible, or at least produce distance from (Davidson 1996).

These attempts by Gay Games III organizers to control language use, practices and/or expressions of anything overtly sexualized or visibly marked as "too" gender transgressive (for which the term queer was often used) exposed anxieties about appearing "normal" to a general "public." Instead of honouring and celebrating very brave, queer butch/femme cultures (both historical and contemporary), the Gay Games—in its efforts to celebrate gay pride *inclusively*—pushed already marginalized identifications further to the periphery. There were very definite limits to tolerance—both in public sentiment and within the Gay Games' community. The athlete was organizationally celebrated—not the queer, nor the drag queen, nor the leather man, nor any other transgressive, non-normative sexual minority. As such, other commentators indicated that Gay Games III—Celebration '90—was a week to provide a clear vision of what they *did not* want gay and lesbian utopia to look like. Critiques were made that at events such as these, issues of under-representation would often be noted and almost always overlooked (Bociurkiw 1991). The overt representation of anything "too sexual" conjured up the liability worries of an earlier, too radical, gay liberationist politics (Warner 2002, 214).

These dissident critiques from within evoke that very Canadian national discourse—that of multiculturalism. While the dominant, nation-building rhetoric is one of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and races co-existing harmoniously under a Canadian national umbrella, various authors have called into question how this policy masks serious systemic racism, classism and xenophobia (among others, see Bannerji 2000, Mackey 2002). With the enactment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, Canada entered an American-style of individual human rights discourse (Filax 2004). The claim of being a tolerant, inclu-

sive nation that celebrates diversity aligns with the Gay Games' claim to being the most inclusive athletic event in the world. No surprise then that strategies of tolerance were easily mobilized to claim legitimacy for Gay Games III within a "multicultural" nation such as Canada. While I have shown that this coalescing provided an important condition of possibility for Gay Games III, their policy of inclusion, like Canada's notion of multiculturalism, can be held up to the same kind of scrutiny—a critique of liberalism and identity politics that is well documented in contemporary social theorizing. The message that gays and lesbians needed to be considered (or consider themselves) as a fractured, polyvocal, and contested identity category was not effectively heard by subsequent organizers of the Gay Games, as they have carried on the unfortunate legacy of producing an exclusionary type of inclusive, normalized Gay Games athlete (Davidson 2003).

While there was criticism of Celebration '90 from the margins, this more radical critique of the adoption of liberal tolerance discourses by a gay and lesbian event was generally lost. The organizers of Gay Games III managed the public homophobia in such a way as to manoeuvre the stigma of queer shame (as promulgated by the fundamentalists) away from the Games, and in fact, used that stigmatization to show up the ridiculousness of its claim. They were able to distance themselves from the social opprobrium of being gay and managed to come up the middle rhetorically in mainstream media representations. The Gay Games were about pride, self-esteem, and tolerant goodwill. Even though there were several attempts to shame the Games by governments, universities, and religious organizations, that shame did not stick.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Gay Games III went a long way to positioning gays and lesbians as worthy Canadian citizens—a tack the lesbigay movement took in the late 1980s and which they have not left since (Warner 2002).

As Samantha King (2000) has observed, "the national public face of Canada's approach to sexuality [is] ... diverse, tolerant and even enabling" (164). On the surface, Gay Games III was able to benefit from this distinctly Canadian ideology. Unfortunately, what this liberal approach masks is the failure of a rights movement to address other forms of systematic homophobic state violence against sexual minorities. As one example, by way of conclusion, at the same time that the Gay Games were held in Vancouver, *Little Sisters*, a Vancouver gay and lesbian bookstore, was consistently having over 75 percent of their imported books from the U.S. seized by Canada Customs officials at the border (Fuller and Blackley 1995, Warner 2002, Green and Weissman 2002). This state sanctioned censorship of explicitly queer sexual material went largely unnoticed as a political protest opportunity at the Gay Games.<sup>21</sup> King notes that the weaknesses of a liberal rights approach is that it does little

to address less visible nefarious effects of other laws and systems that still unfairly and often violently (psychically and physically) affect queers and those occupying other non-conforming sexual identities. It leaves little room for imagining what transformational political change might look like. While surely liberal advances such as garnering positive public opinion for Gay Games III, gaining full human rights for lesbian and gays, and legalizing same-sex marriage are to be considered positive changes, other effects of a liberal tolerance political strategy (such as Gay Games III organizers drawing criticism for under-representation of diversity and charges of being sex-phobic) are crucial to consider in countering what seems to be a growing complacency to an emerging and powerful neo-conservative movement in the contemporary Canadian context. Only time will tell how successfully Stephen Harper's Conservative government can more closely align a Canadian identity as being more (fundamentally) American.

## Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the guest editors of this special issue (Christine Dallaire and Jean Harvey) for creating important interdisciplinary publication spaces. The comments of two anonymous reviewers were helpful in producing a clearer and more cogent paper. Special thanks to Sharon Rosenberg for living and loving alongside me in the production of this paper.
2. Gay Games I and II were held in San Francisco in 1982 and 1986 respectively.
3. The Federation of Gay Games was formed in 1989 to be the international governing body for the Gay Games and Cultural Events. Functioning much like the International Olympic Committee, they oversee the long-term development and maintenance of the Gay Games movement, ensuring that the event is hosted every four years, adjudicating site selection and maintaining trademark and marketing policies (Davidson 2003).
4. In 1998, the Supreme Court of Canada would rule, in the *Vriend* case, that sexual orientation was a protected category under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, legally bringing sexual minorities into the multicultural fold (Warner 2002).
5. Celebration '90 created an Honorary Board of Directors for Gay Games III. These publicly prominent Canadians represented a cross section of sport advocates, community activists, politicians, and writers who were asked to advocate for Gay Games III in a number of different political arenas. In 1989, the Honorary Board was comprised of Emery Barnes (MLA), Kevin Brown (Founder, AIDS Coalition Vancouver), June Callwood (Author, Columnist), Libby Davies (Alderwoman), Michael Harcourt (Provincial Opposition Leader), Bruce Kidd (Director, Olympic Academy), Darlene Mazari (MLA), Margaret Mitchell (MP), Jane Rule (Author), Svend Robinson (MP), Donald Saxton (National Volleyball Team Captain), Floyd St. Clair (CBC), The Very Reverend Robert Smith (United Church Minister), John Turner (Federal Opposition Leader), and David Watmough (Author) (Dahl 1989, 5).

Gay Games III. None of the subsequent Gay Games organizers have picked up on the idea (Davidson 2003).

6. Strangway attempted to mobilize a particularly homophobic rendering of multicultural logic here. By positioning the Gay Games as political rather than athletic or cultural, the UBC President mobilized the discursive multicultural logic, which "excludes people seen as divisive and political (lesbians and gays, Oka warriors, people who raise "women's issues"). It reifies a set of norms which act to categorise and isolate social deviants" (Mackey 2002, 134).
7. When, in October 1991, an NDP provincial government was elected in British Columbia, it moved quickly to add sexual orientation to the province's Human Rights legislation (Warner 2002).
8. One year earlier, in October 1988, a monthly newsletter called *Life Gazette*, which self-described as "non-partisan in politics and biblical in religious perspective," ran a front-page headline story entitled "Sodomite Invasion Planned for 1990" (1988, 1). While I cannot ascribe a direct connection, the fundamentalist Christian, hyper-homophobic perspective in the publication is akin to the kind of rhetoric presented in the "Time is Running Out" advertisement. In wonderfully queer fashion, *Angles*, at the time the main gay and lesbian newspaper in Vancouver, ran a literary supplement in August of 1990 to coincide with the Gay Games Cultural Festival. It was aptly dubbed the *Sodomite Invasion Review* (Larventz 1990).
9. In 1976, the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper refused to run an ad for the *Gay Tide*, the newspaper of GATE (Gay Alliance Towards Equality). It was the first time a human rights complaint was launched for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The challenge was ultimately unsuccessful at the Supreme Court level; the *Sun* was granted the right to exclude content from its advertising as it so chose, based, in part, on its ability to maintain subscribers (Warner 2002).
10. Anecdotally, I recall a moment of expression for that support. While I was in California at the archive in San Francisco, I stayed with my sister and her male partner who lived in the Bay Area. One night over dinner, we were discussing my finds that day in the library, one of which was the information on the fundamentalist ad. My brother-in-law immediately remembered the incident, and talked about how in 1989 his family and teenage peer group from suburban Vancouver were generally disgusted by it. This response, and my sister's partner's crystal clear memory of the event, surprised me. I had not expected that the support for the Gay Games was really as palpable as the historical texts were portraying it. It must also be acknowledged that there is likely some revisionist memory work going on knowing his "sister outlaw" is a lesbian writing about the Gay Games (S. Paranjpe, personal communication, October 2000).
11. By late July 1990, Bob Birch, as pastor emeritus of Burnaby Christian Fellowship, was taking responsibility for sponsoring the "Time is Running Out" ad of the previous November (K. Griffin 1990c).
12. Almost parallel in a queer kind of way, the very popular Gay Games male physique contest commanded the most expensive ticket price at the Games at fifty dollars a pop (Davidson 2003). One can read this through a gay camp ironic sensi-

bility, understanding the economy of chiselled male bodies at both the Gay Games physique contest and the Power Team event as eroticised, fetishized objects of gay male desire—a reading that exceeds the limits of a particular Christian morality and political strategy.

13. While Eva Mackey's (2002) work around tolerance and inclusion in a multicultural Canada focused on racial and ethnic identities, this analysis speculatively borrows from her findings. I suggest that the boundaries and limits of sexual identifications can be read in an analogous manner in this case. The tolerance for gay and lesbian community building and politics is expected to be higher in large metropolitan centres (such as Vancouver), whereas the assumption is there would be less support outside of those areas (such as the Lower Mainland in BC). But, and again following Mackey, what the incident with UBC and the federal and provincial governments shows up, is that even in the "progressive centre," there are definite limits to that tolerance of sexual diversity, ones in which particular norms must still be kept intact. As the end of this paper argues, anything *too* "queer" was not encouraged as it was perceived by Gay Games organizers as too "divisive and political" (Mackey 2002, 134).
14. A majority of urban Vancouver ridings were held by the NDP (seven of ten seats) in 1990 (Elections BC n.d.). In 2006, Steven Harper's (neo)Conservative party was unable to win any urban ridings in the major Canadian cities of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal in that year's federal election. Much of this has been attributed to his neo-conservative and regressive social agendas not winning over more progressive metropolitan areas.
15. In a province with a history of polarized politics, British Columbia elected a socially democratic, leftist NDP provincial government a little more than a year later, a government that addressed minority claims more directly (see note 4 above), and which put itself more in line with federalist multicultural discourse (Warner 2002).
16. Fear of violent retribution against Gay Games organizers would have been completely understandable and is historically supported. There are many instances of not only state-sanctioned violence against sexual minorities in Canada, but specific instances when Christian fundamentalists have perpetrated violent acts or have threatened to be violent. In 1978, San Francisco municipal politician and gay activist Harvey Milk was publicly murdered by a "disgruntled conservative Family Values politician" (Escoffier 1996, 171). In Alberta, Edmonton out gay city councillor Michael Phair had violent death threats left on his telephone answering machines in the wake of the Vriend decision in 1998 (Phair 2005, Warner 2002). Rumours of organized violence to disrupt the Vancouver Games were running through the gay community, and while there turned out to be no substance to them, the existence of the rumours warranted coverage in the city's mainstream press (K. Griffin 1990c).
17. For an extensive analysis of the Gay Games and its founding relationship with the United States Olympic Committee, please see Davidson 2006.
18. The Gay Games certainly do not have a unique position in this production of a "clean" version of lesbian and gay subjectivities, identities, or culture. Among

others, this has certainly been an issue in many Gay Pride Marches across North America, and the issue of gay marriage is predicated on assimilating to a particular heteronormative ideal. In many ways, this event capitalized on, and further sedimented, the mainstream lesbian and gay rights movement discourse that has emerged as hegemonic in the rest of the decade and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

19. The Gay Games continues to struggle with its whiteness and imperialistic legacies. The development of the Outreach Committee and the sponsoring of "Third World" athletes in subsequent games are just two examples of many that need further analysis (Davidson 2003).
20. For a different analysis on shame as constitutive and sustaining for the Gay Games, please see Davidson 2003 and 2006.
21. This was not the case, though, across the country where many different communities mobilized in support of the bookstore.

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The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited materials.

**FGG** – Federation of Gay Games.

**GG** – Gay Games

**GLC** – Gay and Lesbian Center Collection in the SFPL History Centre.

**MVAAA** –Metropolitan Vancouver Athletic and Arts Association

**SFPL** – San Francisco Public Library—History Centre and Archives.

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