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## Lesbian camp: An unearthing

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### ABSTRACT



Camp—a sensibility, a style, and a form of artistic self-expression—is an elusive concept said to be in the eye of the beholder. To refute Susan Sontag's (1966) claims that camp is apolitical and not especially homosexual, a number of recent scholarly works have been geared toward revealing camp's fundamental gayness. With the odd footnote aside, lesbian camp has been collapsed into the category of gay male camp, if not eclipsed entirely. Despite the negligible efforts made to legitimize lesbian camp, there are numerous salient cultural examples one might draw on to illustrate, typify, and substantiate a lesbian camp sensibility. I lay the ground work for this scholarly exercise by outlining various definitions and critiques of camp, and by discussing its history and application to queer theory. Then, to unveil lesbian camp, three non-mutually exclusive categories are discussed: classic, erotic, and radical. By gathering various strands of inquiry, and various textual examples (e.g., photography, artistic performances, and literary tropes), this article attempts to reach a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of lesbian camp.

### KEYWORDS

Camp; lesbian women; art; performance; butch-femme

My queer mother is camp personified. I assume she always has been, but until I embarked on a comprehensive article on the topic of camp, I was unaware of just how campy she is. An artist by trade and by lifestyle, she has a taste for excitement and an eye for “style.” Love of vibrant and exaggerated colors and patterns (even her flannel is “bright”): *check*. Impromptu imitations of over-the-top, old Hollywood stars such as Judy Garland, Mae West, and Marlene Dietrich: *check*. Red hair dye and blue eyeliner before, during, and after the 1980s: *check*. Favoring of the “akimbo” pose; use of adjectives like “fabulous” and sayings like “far out”; and an obsession with “fun” decorations including pictures of the queen, pink flamingos, and plastic fruit: *check, check, check*. Moreover, although gay intellectuals have troubled camp's entrée into mainstream culture, my mother is also outwardly and unequivocally queer. It is in this spirit of blatant campiness that I wonder: Why do

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we not think of lesbian women as camp subjects par excellence? Why did I not know my “mommie queerest” was camp?

## Introduction

What is camp? Camp is undeterministic and difficult to define (Bredbeck, 1994). The spontaneity of camp (Newton, 1993) fuels its ambiguity: sayings such as “it is in the eye of the beholder” and “you have to see it to know it” are often invoked with respect to camp. In an attempt to define the indefinable, early scholars (e.g., Booth, 1983; Core, 1984; Sontag, 1966) attempted to taxonomize camp by listing campy things (e.g., Tiffany lamps, spaghetti westerns, ballet productions) or campy people (e.g., Oscar Wilde, Joan Crawford, Rudolph Valentino), which only deprives camp of its essential elusiveness (Bergman, 1993) and ignores the historical-cultural context—what is camp one moment may become pop camp (i.e., a mainstream appropriation of queer praxis; Meyer, 1994) the next.

Susan Sontag’s (1966) analysis of camp as “frivolous, aestheticized, and apolitical” (Meyer, 1994, p. 10) in her seminal essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” has promulgated discussions of great depths and distances among gay intellectuals (Ross, 1993). In fact, what Sontag was analyzing, camp scholars have argued, was un-queer appropriated camp. Meyer (1994) calls camp an activist strategy, not simply a style or sensibility; thus, he argues for it to be re-considered as political. But it was Note # 53 that was cause for particular recoil, in which Sontag (1966) alleged “camp taste is much more than homosexual” (p. 290). For many, Sontag’s “de-gaying” of camp robbed it of its buoyant response to the repressiveness of the closet; that is, its “precious form of queer resilience” (Pellegrini, 2007, p. 174).

To say that queer critics do not speak as one on the subject of camp (Pellegrini, 2007) would be a gross understatement. However, Sontag aside, one aspect scholars tend to agree on is that camp is a gay male phenomenon. Dyer (2002) and Babuscio (1984), for example, championed the unmitigated connections between camp and gay male subculture. Leaving lesbian women out of the picture, Halperin (2012) unequivocally stated that “camp is a gay male genre” (p. 179). Similarly, the efforts lesbian women have made to unsettle ordered gender categories is left out by Kleinhans (1994), who stated: “To some extent, camp originates in a gay male perception that gender is, if not quite arbitrary, certainly not biologically determined or natural, but rather that gender is socially constructed, artificial, and performed (and thus open to being consciously deformed)” (p. 162).

Camp has had its fair share of controversy. Drawing on Sontag’s early work, camp has been seen as a deviant and exaggerated approach to sex (Graham, 1995). For example, gay male camp is often associated with the adoration of female Hollywood stars. These larger-than-life women represent the “phallic feminine” (Graham, 1995, p. 135) since they are said to possess both masculine and feminine traits, and have often endured great hardships. Gay men find a sense of kinship and empathy among the women with whom they identify (Kates, 1997): they hold

up a mirror to gay men for they, too, have suffered the pain of being a (sexual) outsider. The emulation of female celebrities by gay men is marked by an incongruous, humorous tone (Dyer, 2002). Discussions abound as to whether this form of camp pays homage to femininity or simply reinforces misogynist stereotypes. But perhaps the debate on gay men's "fiercely fetishistic involvement with diva worship" (Harris, 1999, p. 912) as *the* camp manifestation is a moot point.

Considering the well-documented history of "ghosting"<sup>1</sup> lesbian women in literature, film, and television (Castle, 1993; Faderman, 1991; Robertson, 1996; Wilton, 1995), it should come as no surprise that camp—a clever act of subterfuge—would be an essential mode of expression for lesbian women. Oppressively referred to as "sexual inverts" (Faderman, 1991, p. 308) by early sexologists but "hungry for images of women loving women" (Robertson, 1996, p. 110), lesbian women historically have had to read between the lines for erotic value. Women are frequently excluded from the discourses on camp since, as mentioned, "most debates on camp equate it with gay male taste" (Robertson, 1993, p. 156). In particular, the crucial political functions of camp have been articulated solely within gay male subcultures (Robertson, 1993). Like Robertson (1993), I aim to "de-essentialize the link between gay men and camp" (p. 156) by asserting its uses with women, specifically those identifying as lesbian/queer. To do so, I analyze various cultural artifacts, and appeal to a queer "autoethnographic" approach (Jones & Adams, 2010), exemplified by the opening paragraph of this article.

In that lesbian camp has largely been sequestered away from public debate and consciousness, this scholarly exercise may be thought of as a "recovery project" (Julien, 2007, p. 116), which contains three major parts: the beginnings of this scholarly exercise will cover camp definitions and history; the second part communicates the ways queer theory might rectify some outstanding issues surrounding camp understandings and highlights the critiques of camp; finally, the third part of this article unveils lesbian camp by highlighting a number of textual examples which, for the sake of clarity and organization, have been termed: *classic*, *erotic*, and *radical*. All is done so in the service of legitimizing hitherto unexplored lesbian camp.

## Defining the indefinable: Camp

The etymology of the term camp may be traced to the French words *champagne*, "meaning the countryside where transient mime troupes entertained" (Bredbeck, 1994, p. 52), or *se camper*, "to present oneself in an expansive but flimsy manner (like a tent)" (Booth, 1983, p. 33). Camp, today, may be considered a sensibility and a form of artistic expression. Several qualities of camp are worth highlighting, such as the focus on exaggeration and artifice; the tension between camp and popular culture; the understanding of camp by those who fall outside of the cultural mainstream; and, unmistakably, the association of camp with queer culture (Kates, 1997). Camp is not irony, satire, burlesque, travesty, pop, kitsch, or schlock—although it may appeal to these elements—because at the root of camp, unlike the

rest, is queer expressivity (Meyer, 2010). Classic camp involves an elaborate style that, on the surface, appears superficial but reveals an unspoken subtext (Bergman, 1993).

Camp may be conceptualized as a queer reading strategy deployed to construct pleasures and meaning overseen by dominant, heterosexual culture (Graham, 1995); hence, many archetypal camp films (e.g., *Valley of the Dolls*, 1967; *Mommie Dearest*, 1981) do not contain overt references to queer life. The understanding of camp as failed seriousness (e.g., Kleinhans, 1994) is sometimes invoked as “pure camp.” “Such work, if not actually camp, certainly facilitates a camp reading because it invites scornful laughter due to its ineptness” (Kleinhans, 1994, p. 160). In Newton’s (1993) terms, unintentional camp is manifested when the subject is unaware of its incongruity (the most obvious being masculine-feminine juxtapositions).<sup>2</sup>

Although it may seem obvious to those with a gay sensibility, Dollimore (1999) points out that camp is not simply gender inversion. To Meyer (1994), a synonym for camp is queer parody and it is solely a queer discourse. Camp is the production of queer social visibility—it is an identity performance not merely an ironic moment (Meyer, 1994). It has even been conceived that camp carries a kind of hope, as a system of signs, a private language, where those who understand certain ironies can bind together and endure (Long, 1993). At the other side of the argument, some feel “the pursuit of art is at the expense of emotion” (Galef & Galef, 1991, p. 19) in that supreme artifice takes the place of honest and messy emotions.

### **Camp: A brief history**

Camp was first defined around 1909 and has an anchoring in gesturing (Meyer, 1994). King (1994), for example, traced the genealogy of camp using portraits of (effeminate male; Padva, 2000) aristocrats who demonstrated poise (i.e., their superior class status) through an “akimbo” pose—arm(s) bent with fist(s) sitting on the hip(s). Prior to the existence of the discourse of queer identities, actions were the only way to communicate a queer social identity (Meyer, 1994) and, thus, the individuals who utilized this politically meaningful pose made up an elusive and marginal social body. What lacked, circa 1895, during the trials of Oscar Wilde, was an ontological status for the homoerotic. Wilde is often given the mythical status of discursive creator of homosexual social identity as well as modern gay camp (Bredbeck, 1994).

Chronicling camp’s history is an important exercise. Camp opened up a space for queers to move by providing the “Other” with a means of expression outside the restraints of dominant society (Bergman, 1993). Although queer performance, such as camp, is regarded as seminal to gay sensibility and culture, scholars have lamented the death of camp. Due to advances in political climate, scholars argue that camp is at a time of crisis, since the urgency has faded (Bergman, 1993). Rather boldly, Harris (1999) asserts that “oppression and camp are inextricably

linked, and the waning of the one necessitates the death of the other” (p. 34). Camp may now be seen as a joke among some queer people, but its origins had serious value as a means to out oneself, communicate humor, and build solidarity during repressive times, and, remarkably, all was done so within the hearing range of heterosexual people (Bergman, 1993; Core, 1984; Harris, 1999).

However, camp’s provocative nature across time and space should not be overlooked. The idea that camp has become obsolete in a society headed toward queer acceptance ignores the fact that camp may have any innate, dispositional underpinnings and, thus, cannot die an easy death; downplays the multifaceted uses of camp, especially by dismissing the full range of camp characterizations *after* the closet; and overlooks the many battles against homonegativity and intersecting modes of dominations that still need to be won, including modern homonegativity (Morrison, Morrison, & Franklin, 2009), microaggressions (Smith, Shin, & Officer, 2012), and countless other legal and social injustices around the world (Wolf, 2013). A need for secrecy on the part of queer folk may have begun to disappear in many North American contexts, but prejudice and discrimination have not (Wolf, 2013).

A cursory glance at existing documentation suggests gay men have a monopoly on camp (Schuyler, 2011). Whether the origins are considered to be Oscar Wilde, dandyism, molly houses, and so on, the implications are gay male. Analyses of recent presentations of camp (i.e., “camp 2.0”) are also male; Christian (2010), for one, names popular celebrities RuPaul, Freddie Mercury, and John Waters when discussing camp. Furthermore, the overwhelmingly Western, English-speaking, urban, and predominantly White nature of camp, as it is commonly understood, has been troubled by scholars who call for the practice to be understood as “mutually constitutive (rather than oppositional)” (McMillan, 2014, p. 79) to Black, female-centered culture, for example.

Although camp is increasingly written into the history of gay male politics (Bredbeck, 1994), it has yet to be done so for lesbian politics. Critics who limit camp to gay men—the most overt consumers of it—deny the varying queer manifestations and consumptions (Schuyler, 2011). What is at the root of lesbian camp? The discursive creation of lesbian desire and social identity, including the public image of the lesbian (akin to Wilde’s case), requires an unearthing. Scholars on camp may ask: Is camp still critical to gay culture (i.e., do younger generations have an appreciation for it)? But, perhaps, the more pressing questions are: What kinds of camp, if any, are alive and well? What kinds of camp are yet to come to life?

### **Is queer theory the answer?**

Why is the “camp stance usually attributed to gay men” (Koller, 2009, p. 249)? If one of camp’s key tactics is to disturb the binary logic of Western culture

(Bergman, 1993; Morrill, 1994), then would it not open up space for more than gay men? As a threat to patriarchal power, throughout history, lesbian women have been made invisible in our culture (Castle, 1993). Moreover, a “double oppression” is a work when the invisibility of women as political subjects is taken into account (Butler, 1990).

It is arguable that the recent espousal of the umbrella term “queer” to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and so on (LGBT+) existence is essential to the unghosting of lesbian (or, as it were, queer female) camp. Morrill (1994), for example, posits “The term queer allows for a greater register of difference (there seems to be no limit to the expression of queerness) while at the same time it resists the sanitizing effects of status quo politics” (p. 108). Indeed, Butler (1990) also troubles the very category “women” as denoting a coherent and static identity which only stands to reify gender relations under the heterosexual matrix.

Queer theory is useful in its potential to create solidarity across gender identities and stress the performativity of gender (Julien, 2007). As Butler (1990) explains, when “gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice” (p. 6), and, hence, gender proves to be performative. A number of scholars on camp call on the Butlerian disruption of sex and gender to establish camp’s queerness. Frustrations come along with constrictions of social conventions (e.g., gender norms) and some queer subjects take refuge and interrogate gender through camp expressions.

With that being said, I invoke the term “lesbian camp” throughout in a strategic effort to reveal a marginalized queer mode. Post-Sontag’s “Notes,” scholars in the area have put tight restrictions around what constitutes camp. In particular, Meyer’s (1994; 2010) somewhat elitist, narrow scope with respect to camp may produce unfavorable counter effects. Although critiques of Sontag’s “Notes”—namely, the emphasis on camp as apolitical and not necessarily homosexual—are warranted, it does not follow that exclusive definitions of camp promote queer visibility (Julien, 2007). Quite the contrary: lesbian women’s propensity to poke fun, to turn norms on their heads, to camp, is a legitimate practice that has been overlooked. Unsurprisingly, then, criticisms of camp abound and should be further explored. But first, a note on methodology.

### ***Queer autoethnography: Theory and action***

The movement from theory into methodological activism is seen in the transformation from noun to verb: from “queer” to “queering” (Jones & Adams, 2010). One way scholars are queering and interrogating cultural logics and identity categories is through systematically analyzing and documenting “perpetual journeys of self-understanding” (Denzin, 2003; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Jones & Adams, 2010, p. 207). Through an autoethnographic approach, “ground-level criticisms” of the repressive structures of everyday lives (Denzin, 2003, p. 142) are accompanied by analyses of cultural artifacts and existing research (Ellis et al.,

2011). Autoethnographers seek to produce evocative thick descriptions of personal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). To engage in autoethnography is to “excavate the personal in the name of the political” (Denzin, 2003, p. 138). In the current article, autoethnography is used to unearth lesbian camp.

### **Criticisms of camp**

Scholars (e.g., Padva, 2000) have documented camp’s move toward commercialization (especially, pop camp) and trouble its vulgar entertainment manifestations, for which queerness is essentially erased. There is an important distinction to be made between texts that *become* camp through gay reading and mainstream texts that capitalize on the self-reflexivity and parodic wit of camp (Graham, 1995). Camp, at times, has been ineffective in challenging culturally constituted gender roles. Now that camp is popular in the mainstream and no longer a specifically gay discursive practice—or even necessarily gay addressed (Graham, 1995), it is, at times, difficult to see camp’s redeeming qualities (e.g., its means of achieving solidarity).

I am making a case for lesbian camp to be included in the camp lexicon, but to what extent do lesbian women desire to have their tastes, practices, and sensibilities be read as camp? Responses to camp—as it is currently understood—from the lesbian community are not entirely favorable. Take, for example, the lesbian feminist orientation evidenced by Jeffreys (1994), in which she troubles what is happening at the root of queer theory; namely, that by conflating lesbian and gay interests, history, culture, and experience, lesbian women disappear into “an economically powerful commercial gay culture” (p. 460). “The subject of camp and female parody has long been a bone of contention [among] feminists, lesbians and gay men” (Graham, 1995, p. 132). Camp film classics, for example, often affirm antifeminist messages. Graham (1995) begs the question: “Why, then, should any lesbians, or gay men, find pleasures in these films?” (p. 143).

In discussing gay male camp, Kleinhans (1994) argues that “Camp, like any particular subcultural attitude in our society, operates within the larger boundaries of a racist, patriarchal, bourgeois culture. That it defines itself in difference [to] the dominant culture does not automatically construct camp as radically oppositional” (p. 168). Thus, this form of camp can often fuel misogynistic humor. As might be expected, lesbian camp does not fit into such anti-women equations; hence, lesbian camp is further eclipsed.

Assessments of camp are bound to the historical moment, and as a mysterious strategy, it can be read as conservative in some contexts and radical in others (Pellegrini, 2007). Some scholars (e.g., Bergman, 1993; Ross, 1993) communicate a somewhat somber, and at times scathing, account of camp. Bergman (1993) has pragmatically stated, “At best camp can be a strategy to win room, freedom for different ways of conducting one’s life; at worst, it can give the illusion of freedom when in fact it only repeats in a different key the old prescriptions” (p. 15). In other



words, camp has failed to produce transformative effects or undermine authority (Stallybrass & White, 1986), at times even promoting the status quo.

But should camp's inability to dislodge bourgeois categories be considered a failure? Should its "commitment to the marginal" (Berman, 1993, p. 106) not suffice as an act of resistance? And what of the value of camp to covertly articulate resistance "while cleverly disguising itself as a joke" (Wolf, 2013, p. 295)? Might the apparent frivolity of camp serve as a means of tension release while living in a social climate hostile to sexual diversity? Is it not a rather pragmatic feat that camp finds a way to exist within dominant society?

A focus on the incongruous juxtaposition (Newton, 1993) between male/female has permeated most discussions of camp. Davy (1994), like other scholars who merely graze the surface of lesbian camp, focuses on the inability of camp to serve lesbian women engaged in theatrical endeavors in the same way it serves gay men. It is hard to argue against the idea that lesbian women may find it difficult to embrace a practice that depends on the performativity of the feminine, since femininity is something that is compulsory for women (Jeffreys, 1994). But I would tend to agree with Meyer (1994; 2010) that drag and camp can, and have often been, conflated by scholars.

As we now know, camp is much more than a mode of aestheticism; its "deviant visibility" (Padva, 2000, p. 222) can contest oppressive social order and heterodominance. The nature of camp as an activity that highlights gender construction and performance is such that it may be aligned with feminist practice (Robertson, 1993). Robertson (1996), for one, asserts that feminist camp operates at a time of antifeminist backlash in order to revitalize seemingly outmoded feminist issues. Why, then, does camp need to be seen as inimical to (lesbian) women's interests? Why not, instead, call for a radical reconceptualization of camp as a queer counter-praxis,<sup>3</sup> one that is inclusive of both lesbian women and gay men?

## The life and birth of lesbian camp

But where the boys are archaeologists, the girls have to be alchemists. Their style is unlike almost anything that's come before. I would call it lesbian camp, but the species is, after all, better known for camping. (Rich, 2004, p. 56)

We, as a society, whether queer or not, do not know what to make of lesbian camp. Drawing on the above quotation, Rich (2004) saw a contemporary lesbian sensibility to emerge from the 1990s film movement, New Queer Cinema, which included "riskier" images of "queer" sexuality (Graham, 1995). Although Rich's language is distinctly tongue-and-cheek and deliberately essentialist, her message rings clear: lesbian camp was born with New Queer Cinema. Since there was no prior discourse on lesbian camp, there is no potential for pastiche; thus, the lesbian artists Rich was witnessing were accorded auteur status (i.e., "alchemists"). But surely such a vision of lesbian camp as newly born is short-sighted? Do persisting

stereotypes occlude the vision of a lesbian woman as campy? How did it come to be that lesbian women are better known for camping in the woods than having a camp sensibility?

Since literature on lesbian camp is scarce (Vänskä, 2008), it is exceedingly difficult to answer these questions. The semiotic mode has a long history of being buried under heteronormative readings. Like many before and after her, Robertson (1996) points her finger at Sontag to account for camp misunderstandings. In this case, Sontag's early work fueled the initial ghosting of lesbian camp, where it "came to be associated almost exclusively with a gay male subculture" (p. 3). Similarly, using critical literary analysis, Julien (2007) argues that the category of lesbian camp is especially "marginalized and contested" and deserving of "its own recovery project" (p. 116).

The most prominent authors on camp tend to overlook lesbian camp. Most state, rather plainly: camp is a gay male phenomenon, and literally bracket lesbian women out of the equation. Two specific instances aptly demonstrate the parenthetical treatment of lesbian camp: "situating camp within gay (and sometimes lesbians') subculture" (Morrill, 1994, p. 99); "Gay men (and to a lesser extent, lesbians) learn about and accept camp meanings into their lives" (Kates, 1997, p. 136). Readers are left wondering: Why do lesbians accept camp into their lives to a lesser extent than do gay men? How much "lesser" is lesbian camp in relation to gay camp? And finally, how is this "lesser extent" derived? (Of course, since there is a paucity of research<sup>4</sup> on camp, no empirical evidence exists to support these claims.)

Given such limited understanding, discussions of lesbian camp are often quite literal. The available literature on lesbian camp (that does not collapse it with gay men) has a myopic focus on the stereotypes surrounding butch-femme role play, thus excluding other readings of the construct. For example, what has been considered the first film to center on "out" lesbian women, *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), caters to butch-femme stereotypes (e.g., aggressive/domineering butch; submissive femme). The film offers a purportedly realistic representation of a lesbian couple in the 1960s United Kingdom (Thynne, 2006). However, the depictions of butch-femme roles are reduced to uniform clichés. Depictions of lesbian camp are rudimentary and yet George's existence has been decisively considered "a very rare bird; a lesbian camp" (Newton, 1993, p. 52).

What are possible motives behind lesbians "camping"? Borrowing from more robust understandings on gay male camp, the obvious answer would be to challenge norms based on gender and sexuality. Recall that "camp has become recognized as an example par excellence of a postmodern denaturalization of gender categories" (Morrill, 1994, p. 94). To gain recognition in a heteronormative society, artists are often required to "give voice to the heartbreak of heterosexuality" (Smith, 1993, p. 193); however, such allegiance to the mainstream can have powerfully queer effects. To exaggerate heteronormative depictions to the point of absurdity through camp may ultimately end up queerer than to challenge it head on.

What, then, does lesbian camp look and sound like? How do expressions of otherness come out through the art of lesbian camp? What are its potential far-reaching effects? And how can one know lesbian camp when one encounters it?

### **Textual examples of lesbian camp**

Various textual examples (e.g., photography, artistic performances, and literary tropes) might be invoked to support the claim that lesbian camp has legitimacy, but three themes that showcase lesbian camp—*erotic*, *classic*, and *radical*—are particularly significant. It is worth noting, although the examples provided below are separately categorized, they often work in tandem and thus share common ground (e.g., classic lesbian camp might also have erotic appeal and communicate a radical message). Similarly, lesbian camp is not limited to the *erotic*, *classic*, and *radical*. Future explorations could (indeed, should) pursue other avenues.

#### ***“View from the deck”: Erotic lesbian camp***

*As a child, I recurrently gawked at one particular Polaroid photo of my mother. I felt if I were to look at it long enough perhaps I would be transported back to a foreign time and place before I knew her. The Polaroid was one that our small family of three found particularly charming and, thus, when we moved around from city to city and house to house over the years, we always found a special place for it in our eclectic and humble homes. “View from the deck” was inscribed on the white space at the bottom in my mother’s handwriting. My mother is standing confidently, one hand on the railing the other akimbo. She is looking out over the lush Mexican tropics; a slight arch to her back—à la Marilyn Monroe, her dramatic pose is unapologetically sexy, yet natural. She is clad in minimal white cotton clothes that in the heat of the day are practically dripping off of her fit, womanly figure. In sharp contrast to the verdant green landscape, her hair is fire engine red. Her head is tilted downward ever so slightly in such a way to amplify the appearance of a Mohawk, as her hair is cut short, but heavier at the crown, and slicked back at the sides. She looks utterly beautiful, and comfortable, at one with the habitat around her. Upon closer reflection, it becomes clear that the startling “view from the deck” in this Polaroid is not so much of the lavish, exotic scenery as it is of the magnificent woman who is occupying it...*

In paying inadvertent tribute to the naivety of children, I later learned this photo was sent to my other mother during a period when my parents dated long-distance—thus, I was certainly not the first to “gawk” at the photo. However, the fact that this photo made its way onto the wall space of our homes implies it is not your everyday “sext.” Unbeknownst to many, there is a long and complex history on how women created romantic unions in the face of enforced and compulsory heterosexuality. Lesbian women have not only had to read between the lines for erotic value (Robertson, 1996), but also had to create entirely new ways to communicate (read: embody) their sexuality—all, no less, in an aesthetically loud (i.e.,

exaggerated pose, elaborate colors and textures) but pleasing manner.<sup>5</sup> The “invisible wink” (Davy, 1994) that goes along with camp is one way queer women have expressed the sensual/erotic.

Photography has been said to be one of the best ways to capture the erotics of camp (Bergman, 1993)—a camp aspect that has generally been overlooked, likely due to the ingrained association between camp and humor. Writing over twenty years ago, Bergman (1993) invoked strategic camp art examples all of which, rather unsurprisingly, were produced by queer men. His analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography is particularly insightful. For example, Mapplethorpe photographed flowers as phalluses, an artistic example of gender inversion considering buds are symbolically associated with female genitalia. This artistic example shows camp not to be trivial, but as a reaction to trivialization (i.e., axiomatic gender norms) (Bergman, 1993).

Gender inversion per se, however, is not necessary to camp photography. Henderson (2013) offered an insightful examination of lesbian S/M as camp art. Her analysis of *Slit*, an Australian-based lesbian porn magazine, is that it displays lesbian sex as avant-garde. One avant-garde photo included in her article is that of a femme-tattooed woman who is staring down the camera while flipping the bird. She is clad in jeweled undergarments, wig, a pig nose, and theatrical makeup. Such artifice troubles classic pornographic orientations toward realism and voyeurism. Indeed, as Henderson (2013) poignantly inquires, “Is the artificiality hiding the ‘real’ woman beneath, or proclaiming that the codes of femininity are artificial and arbitrary, and hence that all gender identity is a simulacrum?” (p. 176). Although the poses for the photographs seem staged, the viewer is unaware if the women are serious or parodic—Henderson reads it as a vacillation between the two, which creates a playful twist. By showcasing lesbian camp desire, she deems the magazine’s high art to be postmodern: it is at once political, intellectual, and parodic. I concur with Bergman (1993) that such glossy surfaced photos are successful in showcasing camp queers not as “monsters born from the sleep of reason, but humans who do not fit the mold” (p. 103).

A final testimony of erotic lesbian camp—and one that showcases erotic, classic, and radical lesbian camp in perfect harmony (pun intended)—is the Canadian vocalist/performer k.d. lang. lang, who came out publicly in 1992, is a singer who relinquishes the “ladylike vocal styles” of traditional American country and western singers, but who has garnered success and popularity with mainstream and queer audiences alike (Hammond, 1997; Valentine, 1995, p. 476). The lesbian spectacle she has created has been deemed “contemporary ‘camp’ butch” (Hammond, 1997, p. 14; Valentine, 1995), through her mimicking and parodying of essentialized gender identities on stage, in music videos, and in photo shoots. Despite lang’s decision to publically come out, aspects of her music (e.g., lyrics) are sexually ambiguous (Valentine, 1995). Mockus (1994), for example, remarked on how the artist’s ambiguous pronouns in the lyrics of the song “Big, Big Love” invites her, as a femme, to imagine filling the role of “you” lang is singing of. As such, much like

the photograph of my mother I analyzed above, a “symbolic wink” in the lyrics (Hammond, 1997, p. 10) conveys subcultural erotic pleasures between butch-femme couplings, which are to be explored next.

### ***Butch-femme: The lesbian camp classic***

One of the main tenets of camp involves an ironic take on the incongruous contrast of masculine and feminine (Babuscio, 1984); specifically, the excess of femininity. The obvious manifestation of lesbian camp would then be to take the inverse of gay men’s camp: lesbian women’s parodic performance of heterosexual male virility (Vänskä, 2008). Much like gay men’s performance of the feminine, “no attempt is made to hide the lesbian beneath a mask of male or female gender identity; to fool the audience, even momentarily, is not the objective. As a dimension of erotic identity, butch-femme is about sexuality and its myriad nuances” (Davy, 1994, p. 123).

However, butch-femme role play, according to Davy (1994), is more a lesbian discourse than a camp one: while camp has an “invisible wink” and palatability to mainstream audiences, butch-femme role play is not reassuring to phallogocentric culture. The dominant narrative of butch-femme lesbianism was controversial among lesbian women (and everyone else, of course) during the heyday of bar culture in the 1960s (Koller, 2009). By the 1970s, lesbian feminism reached its apogee and butch-femme identities were considered an emulation of oppressive heterosexuality (Koller, 2009; Nestle, 1987). Under this line of thinking, “femmeness signified uncritical acceptance of patriarchal stereotypes of femininity, while butches were devalued as male-identified” (Koller, 2009, p. 259). What might be lost from such diatribe is that these different gender identities created lesbian visibility and mutually authenticated each other through interactive scripts (Hammond, 1997; Koller, 2009).

In a classic essay, Case (1993) looked at butch-femme aesthetics as camp performance. In particular, Case discussed a stage play performance entitled “Beauty and the Beast” by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of the *Split Britches Company*. Through a confessional duologue, the women interrupt the well-known childhood narrative of beauty and the beast by grafting it onto the butch-femme stereotype. The appeal to camp is indicative of the performers’ references to old film stars—the femme to Katherine Hepburn and the butch to James Dean. Camp, in this segment, serves the purpose of highlighting the women’s identification with actors who, they themselves, imitate “real” people. As scholars of gay male camp have pointed out, queer people fight back though imitation (Harris, 1999). Butch-femme role-playing has been criticized as heterosexual masquerading, but the *Split Britches* move through a multiplicity of roles and narratives, “playfully inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit, free from biological determinism, elitist essentialism, and the heterosexist cleavage of sexual difference” (Case, 1993, p. 305).

Butler (1990) contends that the presence of so-called heterosexual conventions (i.e., butch and femme) within homosexual contexts cannot be explained as

imaginary copies of the original, but rather as a site of denaturalization of gender categories. The mimetic rendering of heterosexual constructs within a non-heterosexual frame is not a copy of the original but, rather, a copy of a copy (Butler, 1990). Thus, in Butler's opinion, butch and femme identities are parodic representations of the "original" which in and of itself is a parody on the "natural" univocal posturing of gender. Parodic performance creates an occasion for subversive laughter; indeed, the "giddiness of the performance" (p. 137) is incumbent on the realization that no one can approximate such phantasmic constructions.

As mentioned in the previous category, country singer k.d. lang parodied and reworked the trope of traditional masculine cowboy into her lesbian aesthetic. Lang's butch identity, however, did not preclude her from parodying hegemonic femininity, as can be seen in the music video with the telling title, *Miss Chatelaine*, and at the 1985 Canadian Juno Awards, where she donned a white wedding gown and veil (Valentine, 1995). Her various gendered performances lead scholars to inquire: when is k.d. lang in "drag"? When in "campy 'country' skirts? A serious dress? Or a man's western suit?" (Johnston, 1995, p. 118).<sup>6</sup>

Those nostalgic for butch-femme role play need to look no further than the photo shoot lang and model Cindy Crawford did for the cover *Vanity Fair* for the month of August 1993. lang plays the role of butch, Crawford the femme. The two enact a scene of 1950s barbershop à la a Norman Rockwell painting, where lang is being "serviced" by a minimally clad Crawford. The campy image was lang's own design, and like the work of the *Split Britches*, she playfully communicates erotic undertones while simultaneously satirizing stereotypes surrounding butch-femme couplings, such as the view that butch women "just want to be men" (see Hammond, 1997 for a detailed, insightful account).

A camp performance need not only concern aesthetics. Since language is a powerful tool used to perform non-hegemonic identities, camp talk was analyzed by Koller (2009). Recall that "the butch of butch-femme gender play is engaged in lesbian representation, not male impersonation" (Davy, 1994, p. 113). Koller (2009) specifically looked at butch lesbian camp through a discursive approach. The scholar provides a sharp textual analysis by noting how the butch writer employs "irony, paradox and parody to make for an entertaining text that also communicates her ultimately queer identity position" (Koller, 2009, p. 261) and simultaneously argues against stereotypes of butches as "stoic and taciturn" (p. 266). Indeed, Bergman (1993) called on the perks of the compelling nature of camp politics and its freedom "from the tedium of organizing, assembling, or lobbying" (p. 12). Thus, there is the potential for a radical message—the third theme of lesbian camp—to be carried along with the camp enactment of butch-femme identities.

### ***Camp-as-critique: Radical lesbian camp***

Lesbian camp may also be defined in terms of its subversive/radical subtext. Ironic gender play involves mimicry and masquerade (Morrill, 1994), such as butch-femme role-play, as the previous category explored. Lesbian women, like gay men,

have had to get good at disguise, to master the façade, to develop an eye and an ear for style (Dyer, 2002). Camp sensibility is a product of oppression (Dyer, 2002), and oppression is a legacy for lesbian women as much as it is for gay men.

A history of lesbian camp to scholars such as Smith (1993) includes 1960s British pop singer Dusty Springfield, who according to the author simultaneously expressed and denied her unspeakable lesbianism through an elaborate camp masquerade. Her androgynous name and husky voice challenged gender roles and stereotypes and her physical appearance challenged butch-femme categorization: from the neck up she was parodic femme (i.e., peroxide blonde beehive hair, thick layers of makeup), but thoroughly butch from shoulders down (i.e., denim and men's work shirts) resembling most closely a man in drag. Importantly, in a time when no lesbian aesthetic existed, this masquerade successfully deflected the heterosexual male gaze (Smith, 1993). It is also worth noting that Dusty Springfield, known for ironic camp, made orange juice commercials—a defiant play on homophobic ring-winger, Anita Bryant (Smith, 1993).

The above textual examples of k.d. lang convey her ability to “transgress and subvert traditional gender roles whilst still being accepted in mainstream popular culture” (Valentine, 1995, p. 477); that is, she has a remarkable “inside/outside” status. Thus, the radical potential of lang’s music is such that young lesbians can listen to “lesbian music” in constraining or repressive spaces, to in turn create what human geographer Gill Valentine (1995, p. 481) has called “counter-spaces.” The import of queerly created space and location extends to the aforementioned provocative *Vanity Fair* cover photo of Crawford and lang. Through her camp enactment, lang was able to create lesbian visibility and yet appeal to consumers of a widely circulated, predominantly White, affluent women’s magazine (Hammond, 1997). In a parallel channel, lang’s “lesbian embrace of country and western music” (Valentine, 1995, p. 477) reveals the inherent “dorkiness” (Mockus, 1994, p. 260) of the genre, as opposed to its hyper-traditionalism. In short, lang has had remarkable successes in queering the mainstream.

Examples of camp-as-critique (Meyer, 2010) demonstrate the political value and subversive potential of camp. This fundamental aspect of camp is cataloged in wray’s (2001) analysis of the performance art piece *The Lesbian National Park Rangers*. In wray’s (2001) words, the “vexed connection between national discourses of belonging and lesbian identity provides the backdrop for Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s 1997 site-specific performance” (p. 161). In line with “queer theory’s fascination with camp” (Leap, 2002, p. 132), the Rangers’ performance art queered the heteronormative status of the intrepid park ranger (Francis, 2000). Rangers are figures of hegemonic masculinity who occupy the great outdoors, but, ironically, butch lesbian women also have an affinity for the natural world (see Koller, 2009; Rich, 2004). However, national parks represent zones of homogenization with a colonial history. By employing parody, artifice, and hyperbole (Francis, 2000; wray, 2001), the Lesbian Park Rangers made visible lesbian history, culture, and identity within an ultranormative setting, where queerness

would be particularly susceptible to erasure. Through their camp tactic, the Rangers were able to reconfigure what it means to be a ranger, and what a ranger usually entails; that is, the imperial heteropatriach. Their khaki uniform and wholesomely innocent—indeed, geeky—aesthetic (wray, 2001) formed an unmistakably campy embrace (Francis, 2000).

Like Koller (2009), who discursively analyzed a butch lesbian woman's camp plea for social solidarity among lesbians during a time of ingroup upheaval (circa 1980, between butch-femmes and lesbian feminists), the Rangers' performance may be seen as a call for recognition of lesbian sexual citizenship. Their display is not only of two individual bodies, but upon a deeper reading, constitutes a ritual act of dissent representative of a larger social body under the reins of the governing body politic (Lock & Scheper-Hughes, 1996). By making their criticism public, the camp women made new forms of sexual citizenships possible "with the vision of a queer future" (Koller, 2009, p. 268).

Their performance actively engaged with dominant paradigms—it's one thing to exhibit queer art in a small radical arts museum, in trendy coffee shops in "gay ghettos," or during pride week, and so on; but, it's another to make a "showy, camp display" (wray, 2001, p. 163) in Banff National Park, Canada's highly commodified emblem of wilderness. Learning about their bold performance in a homogenized public space might make queer subjects who are all too familiar with the survival strategy of "passing" break out in a nervous sweat. But, astonishingly, the Lesbian Park Rangers were by and large warmly received (Francis, 2000). The use of their tagline "Lesbian National Parks and Services Wants You!" for their recruitment banner is ripe with meaning. It is an unapologetic exhibit in which lesbian desire is subtly implied. Homophobic stereotypes of contagion and "converting" (straights into queers) are confronted (i.e., "wants you") rather than swept under the rug, or, as wray (2001) said of their work, they "address and exploit right-wing fears by explicitly confirming the existence of a 'homosexual agenda.'" (p. 170). During this recruitment drive, the duo conversed with all manner of people, including children, and served them pink lemonade (Francis, 2000).

The textual examples above suggest a critical distinction between gay and lesbian camp in that the former involves a resignification of cultural products designed for the heterosexual majority whereas the latter involves creating products that serve to parody gender/sexual conventions. Thus, important differences in production, intentionality, and targeted audience seem to exist. However, similarities are likely to exist as well, and there is no essential way gay or lesbian camp may manifest itself. Returning to scholars' common focus on gay men with respect to camp, Dyer (2002) has stated that "camp is a way of being human, witty and vital, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role" (p. 49), which is precisely what The Rangers were able to accomplish. Of course, the intentionality of Dempsey and Millan's performance could be criticized as an aspect that takes away from camp's "purity." However, considering their witty and parodic presence



revised queerness into the mainstream, the camp effect is certainly recognizable to one with a camp sensibility.

### Conclusion: The future of lesbian camp

As an elusive concept said to be in “the eye of the beholder,” camp may live right under our noses, yet go undetected. Criticisms of camp include its antifeminist messages or trend toward commercialization; conversely, camp has been praised for its ability to cleverly critique the mainstream and bind queer people together. In both situations, it has been afforded thoughtful debate.

However, have certain expressions of camp been privileged recognition in scholarship over others? What scholars have considered to be camp in the first place requires scrutiny. Eminent pioneering scholars like Dyer, Babuscio, and Meyer, whose voices have far-reaching implications, agree explicitly that camp is a gay male phenomenon. Critiques of Sontag’s de-homosexulization of camp should live on, but other queer modes require analysis. Through an autoethnographic account, I exposed how I—a person heavily steeped in queer culture since birth—managed to overlook lesbian women (i.e., my mother) as camp. To rectify this omission, I began the process of “unghosting” lesbian camp in this article.

By highlighting three interrelated forms—*erotic*, *classic*, and *radical*—the structure of lesbian camp is beginning to take form. Few works have discussed camp’s erotic value, yet the theme *erotic* lesbian camp evidenced queer counter-praxis, particularly through complex, meaningful photography. *Classic* lesbian camp, the most established of the three, revolves around the ironic take on gender usually seen in butch-femme role play. Last, the category of *radical* lesbian camp involves a spectacle or poetic that disrupts tacit understandings of what abstract citizenships (e.g., Canadian) entail. Whether queer autoethnographic accounts, site-specific performances, musical style and lyrics, pornographic art, and so on, the examples of lesbian camp offered herein connote critical sites for social change.

The future (read: survival) of lesbian camp is contingent upon the queer collective carving out its existence. I do not wish to say that one group (e.g., lesbian women or gay men) has a stronger affinity to camp than the other. In fact, what might be at work is that camp is “attractive to a certain type of personality” (Galef & Galef, 1991, p. 11). Future research on camp should sample a variety of gender and sexual identities to uncover which queer personalities are drawn to camp. To Ross (1993), camp is reserved for those who have a high degree of cultural capital; indeed, to gain a more fruitful and complete understanding of lesbian camp, queer women from a number of social locations should be probed.

Lesbian camp, like most queer praxis, has evidenced a long and rich history buried under heteronormative readings. Whether it is considered something entirely new (Rich, 2004), a rarity (Newton, 1993), “lesser” than that of gay men (Kates, 1997), or an appropriation of gay male culture (Henderson, 2013), the existence of lesbian camp has been minimized and, often, denied. In this article, the curtain has

been lifted to expose lesbian camp; hence, the arduous archeological task of bringing the lesbian out of the margins, shadows, and back into focus (Castle, 1993) has lived on. The “worldliness, comedy, and humanity” in lesbian performance contains a sensibility and strategy no longer reserved solely for “the male homosexual” (Castle, 1993, p. 2). Camp’s purpose as a political tactic of social visibility/signification (Meyer, 2010) is indispensable for all queer people.

## Notes

1. The term ghosting is used throughout to discuss the phenomenon by which people from a particular identity standpoint are made invisible in our culture and consequently erased from public consciousness. See Castle’s (1993) *The Apparitional Lesbian* for a more detailed account.
2. The ironic take on the incongruous contrast of masculine and feminine has been seen across countless androgynous film characters, but an early and particularly rich example is Greta Garbo as *Queen Christina* (1933) (Babuscio, 1984; Castle, 1993).
3. Counter-praxis in this context refers to camp’s political deviation from the social and sexual consensus and its refusal to be visually and poetically silenced by dominant ideologies (Padva, 2000).
4. To the author’s knowledge, empirical investigations on camp are limited to two studies, Kates (1997) and Christian (2010), both who targeted gay/queer men as their samples.
5. Although the erotics of this photograph are being showcased, this photograph also reminds me of Dyer’s (2002) discussion of gay men, camp culture, and their tendency to have “style professions.” The art my mother produces does not necessarily “have a practical use”; instead the “forms taken accentuate artifice, fun and occasionally [the] outrageous” (p. 52). Thus, although I am reading the camp aspect of the photo to have a crucial erotic function, one could easily argue from the Wildean vantage; that is, that the “style for style’s sake” (Dyer, 2002, p. 52) is pleasurable but devoid of “serious” content. Such is the ambiguity of camp.
6. These questions are equally applicable to the 1960s pop/country star, Dusty Springfield, which begs the question if lang’s choice to use artifice and camp motifs to spoof the equation of biological sex with gender and sexuality pays homage to Springfield. Springfield’s camp persona will be explored further in the following section on radical lesbian camp.

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