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Never Too Much: Notes on Black Camp and the Politics of Black Excess

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Ethnic Studies

by

Brian C. Stephens

March 2023

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Andrea Smith, Chairperson
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The Dissertation of Brian C. Stephens is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Never Too Much: Notes on Black Camp and the Politics of Black Excess

by

Brian C. Stephens

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies
University of California, Riverside, December 2023
Dr. Andrea Smith, Chairperson

The intellectual field of Black Studies has historically served as an organ of critique against western normativity. Additionally, the work of Black Studies has been an opportunity to examine intraracial concerns and debates impacting the black scholarly community as well as the everyday lives of black folks. My scholarship on Black Camp emerges from these practices and concerns. Camp is a queer aesthetic and cultural practice utilizing incongruity, exaggeration, theatricality, spectacle, satirical humor, and the playful elevation of discarded objects/people to challenge western overinvestment in the stability of gender categories, objects, and behavioral practices. Black Camp extends this practice to unsettle western investment in the idea of race, specifically racial blackness, as a fixed category of distinction. By doing this Black Camp disrupts the assumption that camp is a primarily European and gay male cultural practice, while also addressing silences in black uplift discourse concerning the utility of Black Camp for creating social alternatives—or Otherwise Worlds—for black culture workers seeking to queer normative expectations of blackness.

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Introduction

At the 2019 MET Gala, black R&B superstar Frank Ocean caustically demonstrated how race informs camp aesthetics. Ocean's attire for the event was a black hoodie, black tie, and black pants; a riposte to the spectacle usually associated with camp style. This wardrobe decision made him resemble many of those who were not invited to the event that day but were nonetheless present: security. Surely, black men are overrepresented in this service role at these elitist cultural events as much as they are also underrepresented as formal attendees. Ocean sardonically commented on these dueling cultural positions at such events via utilizing multiple techniques of camp aesthetic: incongruity and flattening. As a black male attendee at the Gala, Ocean's presence was incongruous or unexpected. Ocean comments on the incongruity of his presence by puckishly highlighting the perception of black masculinity at the MET by demonstrating solidarity with service workers at the Gala. Ocean's wardrobe was an intentional and sarcastic reduction of the idea of blackness. Camp style utilizes these techniques in addition to theatricality, spectacle, satirical humor, and the sardonic elevation of discarded objects, and ways of being, to critique different expressions of normativity.

"Camp style" is an often-misunderstood term. This misconception is largely because the term intentionally resists definition. The derivation of the word can be traced to the French word "camper" which translates to "portray or pose in an exaggerated fashion." Considering the myriad applications that camp style embodies, this definition makes sense. Camp is a queer performance practice, although it is not synonymous with queer style. Moreover, it is a sensibility grounded in queer underground languages and

culture that playfully undermine the stability of practices, objects, and identities assumed to be fixed in their (heteronormative) meanings through varied stylistic techniques. Drag; the strictly performative (as opposed to everyday) public or private wearing of clothing associated with the biological gender one was not assigned at birth is a prominent example of camp aesthetic. This is because it often playfully demonstrates the illusion of gender identity as a stable category. Anthropologist Esther Newton's influential field-work on drag performers in the 1970s did much work for articulating the implicit political utility of drag. Concerning the subject of gender she wrote:

> Drag questions the "naturalness" of the sex-role system *in toto;* if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the "wrong" sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not inherited, by the 'right' sex. Anthropologist say that sex role behavior is learned. The gay world, via drag, says that sex role behavior is an appearance [...] It can be manipulated at will. (103)

My work extends this analysis to the performance of race as something that "can be manipulated at will" as drag. Ocean, via the security outfit, was performing blackness in a scathing way intended to disclose investment in the meaning of blackness at such racialized elitist events.

Figure I.1**:** Image of Frank Ocean at the MET GALA 2019.

Unfortunately, camp aesthetic is misattributed as a specifically European cultural practice. This reading of camp places it in tension with camp artists and thinkers of color who have helped imagine the aesthetic in opposition to anti-racist and intracultural policing. As such, Black Camp is suffused with the spirit of a jesting, imaginative, and critical engagement with the discarded elements of black expressive culture, namely the non-normative elements. Non-normative blackness constitutes black ways of being and knowing that do not meet the standards of black respectability; such as black single parent homes, black queer sexualities, and black bohemian and anti-capitalist lifestyles.

Black Camp asks us to imagine different relationships with these forms of blackness. Indeed, Black Camp is an oppositional cultural and aesthetic practice that deploys multiple techniques such as incongruity, satirical identity inflation and/or flattening, and a re-coding and re-engagement with neglected forms of blackness. Incongruity is a strong feature of camp broadly and also black camp specifically. What I mean by incongruity is how camp style can exaggeratedly place opposed objects, people, or ideas together to make satirical commentary about the supposed essence of the things being contrasted. Identity inflation or identity flattening are aspects of the incongruity that often give camp its satirical impact. Indeed, people or objects seeming out of place often work as commentary on the conditions/forces that cause invisibility or overrepresentation at events like the MET Gala. Therefore, Ocean's blackness at the GALA is unexpected and incongruous because of how camp is constructed as a white and elitist cultural expression. Ocean theatrically (yet also subtly) utilizes camp to critique such a construction of camp, and the whiteness of the GALA more pointedly. These are camp strategies used to challenge anti-black visuality and romantic nationalism/black respectability politics. Black Camp also works to discredit the notion that camp is an exclusively white male cultural practice and invention. What is more, Black Camp is an oppositional practice that is a celebration of black non-normativity.

Accordingly, this manuscript is uninterested in final pronouncements concerning what camp is but is concerned with further discussion on camp in relation to blackness. I outline some of the negotiable parameters for the constitutive elements of Black Camp. This method is intended to generate conversation about the practice of Black Camp but

also to explore the political and psychological usefulness of camp strategy for black people. Camp is a useful tool for black cultural workers because rather than narrowing what is creatively and politically possible within black cultural work, it *imagines* alternative ways of pursuing questions related to blackness unbeholden to the disciplining of white, black, and non-black expectations. To borrow Ashon Crawley's phrase, it is interested in an "Otherwise" way of being. According to Crawley, "When we want to imagine *otherwise* possibilities—*otherwise* worlds—we must abolish the very conceptual frame that produces categorical distinction and makes them desirable; we have to abolish the modality of thought that *thinks* categorical distinction as maintainable" (29). Black Camp is undisciplined, wayward, queer; it improvises on the received meanings of categories like race, gender, and the category of "Man."[1] Black Camp works to call into being alternatives or "otherwise" theories and practices to challenge categories of distinction that reinforce power imbalances along racial and gendered lines. Black Camp, as part of its queer critique of normativity, undercuts ideas of distinct categories of authenticity, broadly speaking, and more specifically impacts claims to racial authenticity.

A Brief Rehearsal of Recent Camp History

In the 1950s Christopher Isherwood may have been the first recorded writer to use the term "camp" in the United States.[2] However, I find Andrew Ross's periodization of the 1960s useful to situate as the beginnings of camp in American popular consciousness.

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[1] Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, It's Overrepresentation-An Argument." *Coloniality's Persistence,* special issue of *The New Centennial Review,* vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 287–288.
[2] Isherwood, Christopher. "The World in the Evening." *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader,* edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 49–53.

This is because the 1960s ushers in the moment camp began to become a recognizable feature of popular culture in the United States due to the rising counter-cultural movement. These youth-led movements were skeptical of received traditions and openly questioned the conservative values of previous generations. In this context so-called junk culture seen as anathema to elitist tastemakers began to gain currency within these oppositional movements, and camp began to be embraced by audiences that did not identify as gay and male. Therefore, in what follows, I will briefly rehearse how camp is understood by key theorists since that time.[2]

Susan Sontag is the first prominent cultural critic to offer an extended public consideration of camp. Her influential fragmentary essay "Notes On Camp" was first published in *Partisan Review* in 1966 and continues to be the major reference point for all subsequent discussions of camp. In her essay, Sontag deliberately avoids definitional exactness, although she provides many striking suggestions about what camp constitutes. According to Sontag, camp is an aesthetic style and identifies its origins in 17th and 18th century European culture. She contends that camp qualities include exaggeration, travesty, and theatricality. Sontag writes, "The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (62). Indeed, Sontag views camp as a method to undermine the pretension of high culture through a reimagining of who is afforded the privilege of taste-making.

Consequently, according to Sontag, gay men are the most literate adherents of camp. They celebrate and deploy, most notably, a spirit of exaggeration and an interest in

artifice as a strategy to queer what is assumed to be straight and "serious." Gay men with camp sensibilities find unexpected humor in the rituals of heteronormativity and even find the repressed queer in some of these objects/behaviors. For example, competitive team sports such as American football feature men in tight clothing affectionately smacking each other on their rear ends to demonstrate approval and solidarity. A heteronormative gaze does not recognize the homoeroticism of such behavior, but a queer gaze would recognize veiled homoeroticism within this behavior. Therefore, a camping of football reveals the spectacle of hypermasculinity. The stability of the game's proposed meanings are thrown into question by camp. However, Sontag– very importantly– claims camp style and gay male tastes should not be understood as synonymous. Simply because someone self identifies as queer does not automatically mean they have a camp sensibility, and it is also possible for straight people to enjoy and practice camp as I will later explore. However, Sontag's essay has been lambasted by gay male cultural critics for removing queerness from camp. I strongly disagree with this critique. Sontag, preceding the intervention of Michael Warner utilizing queer theory to challenge normativity, significantly impacted the queering of mainstream popular culture in the 1960s. Certainly, this also led to straight audiences co-opting and monetizing camp style as well, but this also meant a widening of queer influence and a bending of American culture that once seemed unquestionably straight. For instance, Eartha Kitt as Catwoman exaggerating the feline qualities of the villain in the self-aware 1960s live action television series Batman is an example of camp and Black Camp from the era.

Moving into the 1990's camp critique, cultural critic Moe Meyers is an outspoken critic of Sontag's influential assessment of camp. Meyers places much of the blame for the alleged hetero appropriation of the queer identified hermeneutic on Sontag's benchmark essay. Meyers argues that only people with lived queer experience have access to camp; and this disqualifies Sontag from opining on the category. However, Sontag has disclosed that she has had lesbian relationships.[3] What is more, Sontag's sexual orientation should not preclude her from contributing to camp discourse. Sontag's refusal to be obstreperously public about her sexuality angered LGBTQ+ activists, and their anger/ disappointment around this subject is justified; but the choice to be public or private does not diminish her intellectual contribution to camp. However, Meyers argues, "Because the process of camp has for its purpose the production of queer social visibility, the same performative gestures executed independently of queer self- reflexivity are unavoidably transformed and no longer qualify as camp" (5). However, even Meyers suggest that queer—and by extension camp—is not always synonymous with sexual acts. According to Meyers, "What 'queer' signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts" (3). Many types of marginalized identities can and have expressed the power of "queerness" by adopting such a self-conception. Daphne Brook's incisive consideration of Meyer's critique in relationship to her own work on Black Camp illustrates this when she writes, "my aim

[3] Acocella, Joan. "The Hunger Artist: Is There Anything Susan Sontag Doesn't Want to Know?" *New Yorker,* 27 Feb. 2000.

here is not to extinguish the queer politics of Meyers's agenda […] instead I would argue for the repositioning of camp as a politically disruptive tool in the process of marginalized identity production, that is an equally significant element in the negotiation of African-American identity construction" (256).

Euro American Camp and Blackface Minstrelsy

Furthermore, it is important to mention that white iterations of camp may intentionally and unintentionally reinforce anti-blackness and misogyny, and this is rooted in American camp's messy relationship to blackface minstrelsy. Beginning in the early 19th century in America, the blackface minstrel show was stage entertainment where white men (but not only white men) would apply burnt cork to their faces and caricature black people as lazy, stupid, ugly, criminal, and vain to name only a few of the enduring stereotypes concerning blackness. The blackface minstrel show established the stage organization of what would eventually become vaudeville; the mainstream entertainment platform for the early 20th century. There were sketches, songs, dances, an "interlocutor" that served as master of ceremonies, and both a "straight man" and "funny man" (Tambo and Bones). The humor was always at the expense of a caricatured blackness and the primary political strategy of the minstrel show was to rationalize black social subordination. Indeed, Kevin K. Gaines writes, "minstrelsy functioned as a theodicy that provided the state and civil society moral arguments for the necessity of racist beliefs, institutions, policies, and practices, much as the quasi-religious ideology of the civilizing mission functioned to justify imperial conquest"(70).

In addition to blackface minstrelsy operating as mainstream entertainment that ridiculed black masculinity as vain, inarticulate, and lazy, to rationalize white exploitation of black labor, blackface minstrelsy was also an attack on women. The misogyny of the minstrel show is conveyed via the gender masquerade; an overlooked dimension of blackface minstrelsy. The gender impersonation of the minstrel show contradicts the narrative that “unlike in Britain, drag has never been part of mainstream American culture” (Senelick, 241). The liberatory and transgressive nature of contemporary queer-based drag performances are certainly not synonymous with the racist gender bending of blackface minstrelsy. However, blackface minstrelsy, as the first distinctly American popular entertainment, relied on some of the formal attributes of drag; and as I will later discuss vaudeville as well, to establish white male authority over black men and women (both black and white women, although black women suffered intersecting sites of insult). Thus, as scholars of African American theater Hill and Hatch, much of white male American drag was rooted in not only racism, but also misogyny and a response to women entering the workforce and advocating suffrage (Hill and Hatch 105–106).

Moreover, it is more difficult to deny the curious enthusiasm white men took in “becoming” the caricatured black femininity they so woefully misrepresented as credulous expressions. Eric Lott writes, “we do well to remember, in addition that [...] the blackface act was conducted in the realm of male mastery–courtship plots at best, misogynist joking at worst–in other words, over the bodies of women”(139). Not only did these men get to inhabit distorted blackness; a disfigured blackness that owed also quite a lot to the cultural idioms of working-class whiteness, even as the minstrel show

rhetorically debased black bodies for white economic gain[4]. Indeed, white men received an opportunity to express repressed (and disfigured) identificatory affinity for femininity–and also covertly express same sex desire– a significant aspect of drag within public spaces. Again, Lott writes, “It was perhaps the good and proper ‘vulgarity’ of veiled homoerotic desire that was the jewel in minstrelsy’s crown, ensuring crowded houses [...] given the drawing power of blackface “wenches” (169). Thus some of the earliest, if not the first, instances of *American* drag–and therefore a distorted camp– can be found in the blackface minstrel tradition via exaggeration, incongruity, spectacle, and the manipulation of gender (at the expense of black bodies).

[4] Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 48–49

Figure I.2: Joseph Sparks as female minstrel caricature, courtesy of University of Florida, Gainesville.

Therefore, contemporary discourse questioning whether camp is inherently radical is justified. Carol-Anne Tyler has rightly pointed out that camp and drag are not inherently progressive.[5] For instance, a prominent critique of cis men performing in drag is that it is a misogynist mockery of women that secures its distance from cis womanhood by a ludicrously theatrical performance of femininity. Moreover, the ridicule is intended to not only evince the distance between men and women, but also illustrate male authority over women via male manipulation of signifiers associated with the latter. In

[5] Tyler, Carol-Anne. “Boys Will Be Girls; Drag and Transvestic Fetishism.” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject,* edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 369–393.

other words, the argument is that drag does not subvert gender as some feminists and queer critics suggests, it insidiously reinscribes male privilege. This is certainly true for some male drag performers, particularly within the blackface minstrel and vaudeville traditions. However; following Eric Lott, there is room for ambivalence and contradiction within blackface minstrelsy. There may have been some obscenely clumsy and ignorant flattery coming from the white American working-class who found affinity with black cultural mannerisms.[6] What is more, I am interested in the ways that drag–and by extension camp– operates as an anti-essentialist strategy that reveals the fictional stability and coherence of gender *and* racial identity. Camp drag performances accomplish this through excess meant to simultaneously flatter constructed femininity (and masculinity) but also underscore how such posturing is never intended to reflect "authentic" female/male identity. This may not always be the political objective, but this is the progressive spirit of camp I wish to celebrate and explore. As camp theorist Pamela Robertson argues, camp is queer "because it enables not only gay men, but also heterosexual and lesbian women, and perhaps heterosexual men, to express their discomfort with and alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture" (10). Camp, although profoundly ensconced in queer social culture, thus offers the straight subjects of study in this project an opportunity to question black normativity.

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[6] Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 36.

Queer of Color Analysis and Camp

Queer of Color analysis is a useful and important methodological approach to my study for its capacity to create space for black people whose sexual orientation may not be gay, lesbian, or bisexual but through liberal society and historical materialism have been constructed as sexually deviant; and I argue; as queer. In *Aberrations in Black* Roderick Ferguson argues that black people are narrated as non-heteronormative because of their perceived inability/unwillingness to embody heteropatriarchal family structure. [7]Indeed, heteropatriarchal family structure is coded as "white" family structure. White patriarchal social discourse has consistently narrated black families as matriarchal and therefore pathological for the way this supposed matriarchal family structure either diminishes black men or exists independently from them. Black men have participated in this anti-black and misogynistic discourse as well[8]. As a result, black people are characterized as queer, or "non-normative," because of this perceived failure to meet heteronormative social expectations. However, Ferguson powerfully finds value within this designation. Ferguson celebrates non-normative black family arrangements, not because they are perfect but because such arrangements engender alternative modes that challenge the unquestioned supremacy of heteropatriarchal models of family structure. Ferguson also importantly finds alternative use value (this is camp) in white supremacist (and black patriarchal) discourse lamenting the unfitness of black domestic behaviors that

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[7] Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 20.

[8] Frazier, E. Franklin. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class.* Free Press Enterprise,1957, p. 220–221

cannot be separated from the anti-black and capitalist logics from which they partly emerge. Ferguson is subversively finding pleasure and meaning in constructing black folks as queer irrespective of sexual orientation/gender identity. As Michael Warner instructs, we should challenge the social legitimacy of what gets constructed as normal because what is "normal" is often violent, capitalist, racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic.[9] This is a queer social practice and opens space for someone such as Kara Walker. Though she may identify as heterosexual, however, her questioning of black normativity through her art may make her work queer, and as I argue, also camp.

Perhaps the earliest 20th century moment for the most explicit written consideration of camp in relationship to blackness comes from James Baldwin. As previously mentioned, Sontag's assessment of camp culture did not precede camp as a cultural invention. To be sure, Baldwin's valuation of camp does not antedate black involvement with the form. However, Baldwin and Sontag provide inaugural textual frameworks for public discussion. *The Devil Finds Work* is a compelling moment of overlap between camp and black cultural critique. Baldwin's incisive extended essay on American film culture and race compellingly describes his first encounter with the work of Hollywood icon Bette Davis. Indeed, Baldwin recognized the campiness lurking in Davis as other camp appreciators have also observed. As Andrew Ross has noted, the ability to find pleasure and meaning in objects, figures, and modes of production no longer in vogue is an element of camp sensibility.[10] Davis, a film icon at her peak in the

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[9] Warner, Michael. "Fear of a Queer Planet" *Social Text.* 1991, No.29, pp. 3–17

[10] Ross, Andrew. "Uses of Camp." *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture.* New York, Routledge, 1989, pp. 139–141.

early 1930's, was introduced to Baldwin sometime during her commercial decline. In an industry obsessed with youth, conventional Eurocentric norms of beauty, and heteronormativity (as articulated in rigid gender roles), Davis challenged these rules. Her onstage characters were often willful, confident, and sneakily resourceful in the face of power. She also openly challenged powerful men in her professional and personal life. As a result, queer people (and many gay men) saw in Davis a covert recognition of their own vulnerable positions. For example, Mark Booth describes how male drag-performers "continue to use the mannerisms of Bette Davis or Joan Crawford off-stage in a way which says as much about himself as it does the stars" (69). Baldwin, as a Black gay man, also perceived himself in the countenance and mannerisms of Davis, a recognition that shows Davis's subtle undermining of Eurocentric beauty standards. Baldwin writes:

> I sensed something menacing and unhealthy (for me, certainly) in the face on the screen, I gave Davis' skin the dead-white greenish cast of something crawling from under a rock, but I was held, just the same, by the tense intelligence of the forehead, the disaster of the lips: and when she moved, she moved just like a nigger. (482)

Baldwin is simultaneously repelled and drawn to the figure of Davis. This attraction and repulsion are partly because Baldwin projects his own features—and that of black people more generally—onto Davis. Baldwin, like so many "others" in the United States, grew up internalizing white norms of beauty. Thus, to see some of himself in Davis makes this famous white actor less distant and superior; and as more of an equal. Moreover, it represents an instance of black male identification with (constructed) white femininity. In Baldwin's words, Davis's "close up, over a champagne glass, pop eyes poppin" made her and by extension, himself; glamourous (482). Baldwin was able to

subversively locate blackness where many would only see its absence. Queer black people invented drag ball culture in Harlem; a culture that influences all expressions of drag as a performance art. Indeed, In the late 19th century and throughout the early part of the 20th century, the Hamilton Lodge in Harlem New York served as the the site of an annual well-attended multi racial and gender inclusive drag ball, allegedly the first of its kind, that could not have existed without the cultural and physical labor of queer black men and women.[11] As such, Baldwin's written words may have been one of the textual threads connecting black cultural politics to queer cultural politics, and not only connecting them, but showing them as covalent. In Baldwin's reading of Davis, we have a black gay male connecting the dots between his queer sensibility, his blackness, and old Hollywood glamour.

Figure I.3: Bette Davis Publicity Image: Getty Images.

[11] Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. The New York Public Library. "The Hamilton Lodge Ball" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1939*. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/16910cf0-7cf4-0133-46b1-00505686d14e

It is fitting that Baldwin serves as one of the greatest enthusiasts of camp aesthetics in the 20th century because camp is embedded in black gay subculture. However, as Vincent Stephens has noted, expressions of Black Camp are viewed as inauthentic forms of blackness by black cultural nationalist ethos because it is viewed as white and gay. Stephens examines black involvement in cabaret culture as an example of a black cultural contribution to camp as an example.[12] Moreover, Stephens identifies how Black Camp is devalued or ignored in broader black communal discussions about black-expressive culture. Stephens points to the salient reason when he writes:

> Homophobia is an implicit thread that the symbolic annihilation of cabaret and camp traces from black cultural memory. Homophobic ideologies predate black nationalism, and while many of its leading voices opposed it, notably the Black Panther Party's leader Huey P. Newton, heteronormativity characterized much of its rhetoric. An outgrowth of such masculinist rhetoric is a chasm between inauthentic and authentic black culture. The clash between the camp and elitist overtones of cabaret and the rigid ideology of the mid-to late 1960s black nationalism was influential enough to create a historical gulf in black cultural memory. (68–69)

In other words, white gay male elitism and black romantic nationalism were both oppositional and oddly aligned forces devaluing Black Camp as expressed through cabaret culture. Black Camp is the oppositional aesthetic practice that disrupts these essentialist approaches to understanding both black aesthetics and camp.

Black Visual Culture

Visuality is a medium that enables engagement with Black Camp because camp lends itself to spectacle, and spectacle is often *seen* as opposed to heard. Moreover,

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[12] Stephens, Vincent. "Camping and Vamping Across Borders: Locating Cabaret Singers in the Black Cultural Spectrum." *Are You Entertained?: Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Simone Drake and Dwan. K. Henderson, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 62–64.

Visual Studies breaks down disciplinary barriers showing us that seeing is experienced in multiple circumstances and conditions. In the words of WTJ Mitchell, “It would seem useful […] to attempt an overview of the image that scrutinizes the boundary lines we draw between different kinds of images and criticizes the assumptions which each of these disciplines makes about the nature of images in neighboring fields” (12). This relational approach to theorizing the image, from photography, performance art, to film, allows for dialogue across genres that enhance our understanding of the image. Rather than impose discrete and often arbitrary boundaries on what epistemic province is the correct one for analysis; Visual Studies offers space for overlapping conversations to emerge and flourish. However, Visual Studies, including Mitchell’s own work, have historically privileged European imagery to the detriment of the breadth of the field. Therefore, Black Camp is a contribution to not only Black Studies and Queer Studies, but also demonstrates how black aesthetic labor has informed United States visual culture.

Moreover, I choose to work with black visual culture because black visuality is often subordinated to black aurality in discussions of black cultural work. The black oral and aural traditions are powerful but I believe black visuality deserves equal attention. Some scholars have begun this work. For example, Lisa Gail Collins is an art historian that has thoughtfully explored our contributions to visuality and aso critiqued the ways black theorists and artists ignore visuality. Moreover, Collins’s emphasis on black female contributions to black visual culture are worth noting for her scholarships’ focus on “considering the status of the black female body[...] and viewing the constraints on, and possibilities for, black girlhood”(9). However, in Collin’s work on black female visual

artists there is a glaring silence about the work of one of my subjects of study, visual artist Kara Walker.

Walker has entered a stage of her career where she is less controversial and more accepted amongst students and scholars of black visual culture. Nevertheless, when Walker burst onto the artworld scene in her mid-twenties she was a highly polarizing figure. Walker's silhouettes depicting vignettes of antebellum mayhem and violence were viewed as irresponsible and offensive by influential black cultural commentators and institutions. An aspect of the condemnation was informed by the viewpoint that Walker was creating sexually salacious imagery of black female bodies for white consumption and ridicule. Collins' silence around the work of Walker can be interpreted as a passive critique of Walker's work. Such critique misses the point that through the satire of Black Camp, Walker was deconstructing the myths around black bodies and examining an Otherwise where black people need not be conscripted into the service of making purely didactic work that must unambiguously uplift black people or explain anti-blackness to white people.

To be sure, there is still a strong demand within and outside the black intelligentsia for black visual culture to be "uplifting" and to often promote nationalist political objectives. Black aesthetics, including black visual culture, is judged by how it conforms to this expectation. Indeed, black cultural nationalism has played a tremendous role in raising the political consciousness of black Americans at different historical stages, beginning with the writings of Martin Delaney in the 19th century. However, Black Nationalism's most iconic and enduring expression emerges from the 1960's,

coincidentally during the same timeframe that camp begins to gain mainstream cultural attention. The visual art produced by those participants in this era clarified the awakened commitment to black self-love *and* revolution. It was a cultural expression mandated as the correct expression of cultural blackness by figures such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. According to Black Arts Movement logic, black art, for it to be accepted as black art, had to aid the political goals of black liberation. Everything else was considered inauthentic. Within this aesthetic criterion was often a very rigid disciplining of gender and sexuality. Such disciplining often saw any deviation from heteropatriarchy as an expression of internal colonialism. This meant keeping black women subordinate. This meant shaming black queer sisters and brothers. What is more, cultural hybridity was also discouraged. In other words, anything not explicitly about revolution as the leadership of black cultural nationalism understood it, was whiteness in blackface. To be sure, as previously noted per Black Panther guidelines under the stewardship of Huey P. Newton and less politicized members of the black working class, there were gradations of tolerance and acceptance of black queerness. There is no uniform black communal response to black non-normativity in its varied expressions. The subjects of my study use camp to challenge such narrow expectations around black visual aesthetics and black normativity more broadly. Therefore, Black Camp is committed to imagining different conditions for doing and being that can be seen as much as they are felt - in “The Otherwise.”

Subjects of Study

Chapter 1 examines Glenn Ligon's work with Black Camp. In recent memory, few black artists have challenged the heteropatriarchal aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as the aesthetic branch of black nationalism via the practice of camp as caustically as artist Glenn Ligon. I include some of Ligon's works as examples of Black Camp in this study. As an example, Ligon's reconstruction of his family photo album performs the political labor of camp in ways previously unremarked upon. Ligon's *A Feast of Scraps* daringly performs the political labor of camp through a brilliant collage incorporating Ligon's own family album. Images of his parents, Uncles, Aunts, siblings, and Grandparents are present, as are also once forgotten erotic photographs of black men Ligon discovered in an old Times Square adult bookstore. The juxtaposition of the conflicting imagery accomplishes the political work of Black Camp. It seamlessly employs multiple techniques of camp: incongruity, satirical identity inflation and or reduction, and the exuberant heightening of the marginal to perform caustic dual critiques of black respectability and racialist imaginings of black otherness. To be sure, *A Feast of Scraps* has been examined in thoughtful and compelling fashion but none have ventured to call Ligon's consideration of his family and personal history camp. I present Ligon, a black gay man, as one of the architects of black camp in the late 20th and early 21st century: indeed, as one of those figures that Sontag would have recognized as part of the vanguard of the cultural practice. And yet, Ligon is seldom thought of in those terms, which demonstrates how camp is still tethered to *white* gay *masculinity*. I additionally explore the black heteronormative remembrance of Malcolm X through Ligon's portrait

of Malcolm. While Ligon was an artist in residence at The Walker Art Center, he discovered Black Arts era coloring books containing images of black historical figures like Harriet Tubman and Malcolm X. Ligon invited students to color-in reproductions of these pages and the results were surprising, subversive, and illuminating. The children applied lipstick and eyeshadow to the visage of the great orator and activist. Ligon recognized that some might view this as slanderous, while others might view it as black camp. In other words, a sympathetic audience would recognize a puckish demonstration of an Otherwise through exaggeration, incongruity, and spectacle that envisions a world where Malcolm's queerness can be celebrated and remembered.

As I already mentioned, the art of the controversial and lauded Kara Walker is also a fascinating instance of Black Camp, and not surprisingly, she is a contemporary of Ligon. Walker's first installation, the mordantly titled *Gone: A Historical Romance as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart* expertly makes use of many conventions of camp, and thus is a strong example of Black Camp aesthetic practice. Walker presents the spectator with a plantation scene befitting its absurdist title, an allusion to 19th century slave narrative. A bold mix of horror and dark comedy, Walker's primary actors are a wealthy plantation master and his racially ambiguous mistress. Within this tableau a panoply of gender bending spectacles and racial violence is depicted. I explore what makes this specifically Black Camp in chapter two; but a few of the ties uniting it as a camp object include Walker's absurdist exaggerations of racial blackness and the bombastic gender indeterminacy of some of the figures. It is all intended to satirize the vivid yet repressed anti-black imaginary of the viewing public, but

also it serves as a prodding of black romantic nationalist artistic goals. Walker's humorous up-raising of the marginal through her use of silhouettes plays with gender instability and challenges black respectability politics. Walker's fierce commitment to challenging the innocence of white spectators through grotesquely satirical inflations of imagined blackness make *Gone* a bravura expression of Black Camp.

Walker's work also expresses a dimension of Black Camp not tied to queerness as lived sexual orientation. In other words, Black Camp is certainly an expression of embodied queer identity, but it is not restricted to these identities and experiences. Walker's work reflects this theoretical dimension of black camp. Camp theorist Pamela Robertson writes:

> Acknowledging the links between camp's sexual politics and race discourse may enable us to consider non-queer forms of racial masquerade—such as the over-the-top sensationalist stereotyping of Blaxpoitation, or the Auntie Tom performances of Mae West's maids—as forms of camp; to rethink what it means for camp to be a 'Stepin Fetchit' or 'Auntie Tom' and whether Stepin Fetchit and Auntie Tom were camp all along. (407)

This link is genuinely productive to consider. Blacks working within multiple visual culture industries have always had to labor under antiblack, or at the very least, a racialist representational logic that governed them. Per Robertson, it is interesting to consider that Auntie Tom's and Bert Williams were *disregarding* or working against the white gaze through subversive masquerade rather than pandering to it. Such performances operated as an implicit critique of white expectations of blackness that complicates the work of these now maligned artists. Rather than see them as self-loathing racial opportunists (as some have wrongly categorized Walker) within their ostensible self-abasing performances of blackness, we might find a brilliant camping of anti-black

preconceptions (within powerfully coercive anti-black economic conditions). After Walker received the coveted MacArthur grant there was immense backlash against her art. A letter writing campaign protesting the then 26-year old's work was inaugurated by Black Arts era icon, Betye Saar. Saar accused Walker of creating offensive and stereotypical black imagery to amuse white spectators. What Sarr failed to imagine was an "Otherwise" where Walker was conceptualizing how informed and visually literate spectators of color might interpret her complex visual politics. Walker anticipated anti-black assessments of the work, but she *imagined* an audience of spectators like herself that would understand and appreciate the satire. This was an Otherwise that Saar had trouble seeing.

Flip Wilson

Flip Wilson is a mainstream and yet overlooked example of Black Camp I examine in my manuscript. When camp was becoming a more recognizable feature of contemporary culture, Roger Baker writes, "The most popular black television star during the early 1970s was Flip Wilson, a male comedian whose best loved creation was Geraldine Jones. Whether Geraldine was meant to be a sassy black girl or a gay black man in drag *was open to interpretation*" (241; emphasis mine). This intriguing vagueness is something that often characterizes Black Camp. Indeed, in addition to the Otherwise what guides my analysis of the subjects of study is *Black Indeterminacy;* an important element of Black Camp.

Black Indeterminacy evades imposed conditions for possibility by refusing an either/or framework. Thus, Walker's work can communicate gradations of complicity and

resistance without judging the former position. Ligon's art imagines the black private and public family as potentially homophobic yet a place of refuge from white supremacy. Wilson's Geraldine Jones invites spectators to consider the character as male, female, or both. The viewer decides what they see based upon their identity position. The subjects of study refuse to offer a definite answer.

This approach allows for a multi-valent understanding of my subjects of study that avoids the politics of prescription and encourages the pleasure of considering the multiplicity of meanings in their performances. Indeed, indeterminacy disrupts the stability of meaning that black respectability and romantic nationalism seek while also presenting challenges to anti-blackness, capitalism, and homophobia.

For example, Wilson's ability to be seductive, comical, outspoken, and desirable creates viewer dissonance and invites a murkiness of feeling that can be part of the magnetic source of strength in matters of queerness. And part of the power of queerness is to unsettle expectation and engender a boisterous discontent with the confinement of hegemonic roles and their attendant tyrannies. Too often this viewpoint is interpreted as a failure to commit, and thus an evasion of political and personal responsibility in the face of a culture that remains heteronormative. However, what Wilson may represent *is a commitment* to the wonders and power of indecipherability or at least a wariness regarding the psychologically oppressive fixation on either/or pronouncements. Eve Sedgwick reminds us that binary thinking is heteronormative and Wilson further reminds us that queer, as I would like to understand it, is an ebullient campaign for the pleasures of indeterminacy and the discomfort this elicits in intellectual orientations focused on

experiential and intellectual closure.[13] Thus, Geraldine's catchphrase captures the ironic spirit of Black Camp in a joyous and emphatic way. Your eyes will betray you. What we see or want to see often reveals more about the spectator than the observed. The fun and brilliance of Black Camp is that it delights in being what it is not for many reasons. Wilson understood this well. Queer drag does this to undermine hierarchy amongst other things and accordingly, so does Wilson as Geraldine. Geraldine, in the tradition of Black Camp, inverts the meanings attached to blackness and femininity; Geraldine is a figure that exudes strength, not servility. However, Geraldine does so through glorying in an indeterminacy peculiar to camp. The character spills from the boundaries and blurs categories of distinctions to show their fictitious nature.

My engagement with the character of Geraldine Jones additionally comments on how Black Camp navigated the terrain of multiple black communities. Geraldine's legibility within black queer and heterosexual social spaces deflates preconceptions of a monolithic blackness. Geraldine's rousing popularity across the black class and cultural spectrum is testament to the dexterity of Wilson's performance and a celebration of the myriad iterations of identity under blackness.

Black Camp is a telescope that can see into a future where black folks can express our complexity in boundless ways. Black Camp visionaries like Walker, Ligon, and Flip are not irresponsible for exploring the aspects of blackness that some want to remain hidden out of fear. Black Camp is bold in its approach to securing a freedom that cannot be reduced to the concerns of inclusion via black respectability or the demand for

[13] Sedgewick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet.* Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990. pp. 11

cohesive group identity that black romantic nationalism calls for. Indeed, Black Camp's searching freedom veers toward the abstract and is always in conversation with the many conflicting strands that compose a variegated category such as "black." For Black Camp practitioners there is a restless curiosity about a racial designation that engenders farcical scrutiny via the techniques of camp style because the circumstances of black presence in the new world are absurd. Sardonic laughter at the way anti-blackness persistently shapes life chances from crushing student debt to being murdered by police for taking a nap in your car, can be healing. Mordant laughter at the way black folks can narrow the meaning of family to only those cis and straight can be healing. Irreverent deconstruction of categories of distinction through using exaggeration and incongruity can be helpful. Q-Tip and Phife Dawg, of the 1990's golden age hip-hop group *A Tribe Called Quest,* speak to the ironic benefits of a cathartic and mocking laugh amid ceaseless crises. Their lyrical exchange in the song "Steve Biko (Stir it Up)" effectively says it all with a few words. Phife Dawg shows concern for his rhyming partner rapping, "Yo Tip settle down, what's the reason for the laughter?" and Q-Tip answers back, "I really can't say, I guess I laugh to keep from crying. So much going on, people killing, people dying" (A Tribe Called Quest). The killing and dying can be a metaphorical murder we as black folks do to one another through exclusionary practices rooted in heteropatriarchal plantation logic as well as more literal dying; at the hands of the anti-black state or our misdirected violence at one another. To be sure, Black Camp, particularly in the context of the African Diaspora and the violent conditions of our collective dispersal, is serious about challenging anti-blackness. However, camp's methods of acerbic theatricality and gender

indeterminacy are forms of expression that challenge the normativity within our approaches to understanding the category “black” and our unfortunately destructive tendency to maintain these categories as if they were real. Some of us need to laugh, camp it up, and imagine an Otherwise for survival, and my study is a small contribution to this practice.

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Chapter 1

Around 2015, when I approached celebrated black American visual artist Glenn Ligon after he gave a funny, subversive, and illuminating talk on his presence within the overwhelmingly white artworld, he smiled at me with interest. I told him that my departmental affiliation was with Ethnic Studies and his smile began to bend at the corners and his posture relaxed. Before I had a chance to ask him about my question related to *post blackness*, terminology that he co-invented with curator and friend Thelma Golden, Ligon commenced with listing the glut of panels he had participated in about the police shooting deaths of unarmed black people. I never got a chance to tell him that I was not there to check his "realness" card, and that I admired his brand of restless, queer, and cosmopolitan black identity politics. However, I certainly sympathized with his unease, as some Black Studies scholarship have offered insightful yet withering critiques of the politics of post blackness for its perceived disavowal of blackness and black suffering.[14] Nevertheless, Ligon has produced some of the most bracing visual critiques of anti-blackness in recent memory.

Indeed, Ligon's text based work and re-articulations of fugitive slave posters mordantly expose what Saidiya Hartman describes as "the afterlife of slavery."[15] However, it is Ligon's forays into queer identity politics and his refusal to divorce such politics from issues of blackness that will be of primary focus in this chapter. Black Camp

[14] Synder, Greta. "On Post-Blackness and the Black Fantastic." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society,* vol. 16, no. 3–4, 2014, p. 340.

[15] Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 6.

unsettles the black politics of respectability and anti-black logics in American society through sarcasm, gender and sexual indeterminacy, artifice, and exaggeration to name only a few. When Ligon utilizes these techniques, his art arguably becomes Black Camp. To be sure, the explicitly queer dimension of Ligon's visual work has been noted, but no commentator has ventured to connect some of Ligons' work with the politics of camp. In this chapter, I analyze Ligon's *Malcolm X Version No. 2* and *A Feast of Scraps* to make the case for them as examples of black camp. This is important because it decenters whiteness within camp discourse and demonstrates how black queer cultural innovation has been a consistent and significant shaper of camp style. Moreover, it makes space for post-blackness to be understood as a queer disruption of black political normativity. Also, I hope this chapter adds to Ligon scholarship in ways that honor his transdisciplinary and multi-media scuttling. Ligon's *Malcolm X Version No. 2* and *A Feast of Scraps* are also examples of Otherwise Worlds because they *imagine* black audience reception to black male queer sexuality that is not homophobic. Open speculating about progressive alternatives to often interlocking systems of oppression such as homophobia, sexism, and capitalism or institutions like the prison is Otherwise work. It seeks to engender conversations about replacing these sources of oppression by daring us to consider living in a world where they do not exist. Such speculative thinking about replacing ways of being and thinking that seem permanent often provokes cynical dismissal. We "Otherwise" dreamers are thought to be naive, anti-intellectual, and immature. However, planting the seed that things can be different is part of revolutionary work. Ligon boldly imagines an Otherwise Malcolm X that is openly queer and conceives an audience

enthusiastically embracing such a version of Malcolm X; even as Ligon also understands that such an interpretation risks black cultural backlash. Developing an Otherwise World is not a safe activity. It requires vision, bravery, and the perils of being misunderstood. What is more, Otherwise Worlds also see objects, ideas, and identities relationally. Seeing things in relation to one another rather than as separate allows for generative conversations between opposed groups or circumstances (King et al. 14–15). Ligon's ability to place incongruous objects and ideas together in conversation fosters personal and communal healing around black sexualities in humorous ways.

Chapter Terminology

It would be helpful to provide a brief rehearsal of some of the terminology employed in this study: queer, camp, signifying, post blackness and Otherwise Worlds. To begin, Ligon's work is more than just a queering of Malcolm X and black family photo albums. To queer something is to challenge and disrupt the binary meaning of a given thing. In other words, queering is a rejection of an epistemological framework that produces and reinforces hierarchy via restricting performative and ontological options to two opposing categories.[16] What is further, to queer an object or concept is to contest the normative meanings of an object and or concept. Camp is a rhetorical tool emerging from queer identity politics and queers the proposed stability of identity, but what makes camp distinct (but closely related to queer) is that camp chooses to disrupt the stability of identity in a manner that playfully elevates the marginal. This does not mean that camp technique is not politically serious, it just prefers a frisky, spirited, and often humorous

[16] Sedgewick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990, p. 35.

way of deconstructing binary culture. As such, I understand camp as a political strategy, one that does the work of destabilizing gender, but also race. Queer political gesturing, on the other hand, may not decide to use a playfully ironic approach. Sometimes this refusal is rooted in a gay and lesbian politics of respectability invested in corporatism and representation rather than radical social transformation. Anthropologist Esther Newton observed that there always have been gay white men that eschew the public performances of drag for reasons rooted in internalized homophobia (25). Thus, Camp is not synonymous with queer identity and politics, but it is just one expression of queer identity politics. Analogously, soul music is not synonymous with black people. Clearly not every black person enjoys soul music. However, it is difficult to not view soul as a context specific cultural expression deeply informed by black participation and innovation. The same might be said of camp in its relationship to queer identity. Thus, a helpful way of seeing camp is by analogy: camp is to queer as soul is to black.[17] Thus, Black Camp is the theoretical framework I employ to analyze two visual pieces from Ligon.

Black Camp is a melding of the black cultural tradition of signifying coupled with the queer practice of gender binary disruption. Signifyin' is the black cultural custom of repeating and subversively revising hegemonic white meaning.[18] Both signifying and camp utilize sarcasm, deception, exaggeration, double coding, and mimicry to critique

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[17] Altman, Dennis. *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation.* London, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971, qtd. in Dyer, Richard. "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going." *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader,* edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 110–116.

[18] Gates, Henry. *The Signifying Monkey*

and disrupt hegemonic culture. Where the two forms tend to depart is that camp is more comfortable with gender and sexual indeterminacy (but white iterations of camp are less conscious of race), although signifyin' also utilizes gender and sexual indeterminacy. There are at least two qualities that make something an expression of Black Camp rather than signifyin'. First, whether something is Black Camp will often depend on how much an object, person, or artwork engages with themes of black identity formation, humorously elevates marginalized objects, and places such themes in conversation with binary disruption, and disrupting gender binaries more specifically. Second, Black Camp places the techniques of signifying (sarcasm, doublespeak, etc.) in the service of discrediting multiple modes of normativity that observes anti-blackness as a site of normativity but extends its critique *beyond* this important target.

On the other hand, white-dominated expressions of camp have not historically accounted for, or paid attention to, the significance of race within the construction of camp. What is more, white identified camp practice might borrow from black and brown queer lexical and stylistic disruptions of white heteropatriarchal hegemony while not acknowledging where such stylistic innovations emerged from. As an example, talented actor and comedian Illana Glazer frequently used the expression "Yaas Queen" on her show *Broad City* without providing context of the phrase's history in black and brown drag ball culture. It is a phrase of encouragement to drag performers in these spaces. To Glazer's credit she later apologized for the appropriation.[19] Indeed, there can be uncritical appropriation and reification of black and brown gay male expressive culture by white

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[19] Broad City Perf. Illana Glazer. "Broad City Yaas Supercut." YouTube, uploaded by Comedy Central UK, 27 July 2016, http://bit.ly/1gaKaZO

gay men and cis white women without consideration of the long history of white theft of the cultural productions of people of color. At the same time, black heteronormative iterations of signifyin' might fail to see and develop a relationship with the queerness of camp for homophobic reasons. For the two similar and overlapping survival strategies of the vulnerable to meet on equal ground there must be an attempt to not see the strategies as mutually exclusive. Differences should be noted and examined, but where the two practices coincide and supplement one another can be of equivalent intellectual and personal value for those interested in deploying cultural politics to dismantle white supremacist heteropatriarchy (a hierarchical heterosexual male dominated culture that devalues queer people and women).

It would also be helpful to reiterate how post-black as an identity practice is related to Black Camp. Post-black is a queering of romantic and nationalist conceptions of blackness. It is a relaxed theoretical frame developed by curator Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon to describe black postmodernists visual art beginning in the early 1990's. Derek Conrad Murray writes:

> One could characterize post-black as an anti-essentialism filled with good intentions: a choice to adopt a kind of creative and intellectual itinerancy, rather than seeking refuge within the fragile comforts of racial belongingness. The 'post' in post-black was always meant to reject restrictive and narrow conceptions of blackness by those who still believe that blackness has an essence, that it contains an authentic experience. (Murray 52)

In other words, post-blackness does not evade issues of blackness but it does reject prescriptive blackness. Post-black has had its fair share of criticism, and some critique has been insightful but also reactionary. Romantic and Nationalist articulations of blackness frequently describe a stable, heteronormative, cohesive, black experience. In

other words, black romantic nationalists believe in an essential black subject. Post-blackness is a continuation of the re-evaluation of black identity that began with Stuart Hall's critical disruption of essentialist thinking within black intellectual and activist discourse.[20] Black camp may be considered an expression of post-black because both projects challenge the legitimacy of binary logic in relation to black identity formation. Black Camp's sometimes surrealist deconstructions of black identity often simultaneously undermine the seeming coherency of gender but again, black camp does this political work in humorously irreverent ways deliberately designed to provoke black respectability politics. Accordingly, Black Camp art objects do not adhere to "serious" depictions, although the process of developing the object or practice might be highly rigorous and disciplined. However, though the object might produce guarded laughter, this does not mean that something serious—and anti-racist—about black identity in relation to a host of themes, including anti-blackness, is not being communicated. Indeed, what makes Ligon so interesting, and challenging, to critical observers is his fluidity which is a strong element of post-black ethos. According to Darby English:

> Like cultural studies itself, Ligon's oeuvre is irrepressibly, committedly undisciplined and obeys no law of genre—calling on traditional media such as painting, drawing, photography, and sculpture, enfolding into all of them snippets from literature, popular genres such as music, the family photo album, souvenirs, and other hard to classify materials such as jokes and personal fetish objects. (56)

In other words, Ligon is an artist that refuses to be pinned down. Ligon's insistence on creative itinerancy allows him to explore Otherwise Worlds.

[20] Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'black' in black popular culture." *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, London, Routledge, 1996.

Ligon participates in Otherwise Worlds by imagining a hetero black communal alliance with black queer people. Moreover, Ligon imagines a non-essentialist understanding of family–including our black cultural hero family. The editors of Otherwise Worlds theorize relational and dialogic ways of securing justice across the identity spectrum. Sometimes these conversations are intracommunal and demonstrate the multifariousness of our vulnerable communities. Ligon applies Black Camp as an expression of Otherwise Worlds to pointedly comment on practices of exclusion within the always constructed black community while also showing his affection for family.

Ligon's legibility as an artist is dependent on a knowledge of these subordinated black and queer rhetorical traditions. Indeed, Ligon grew up during a time that prepared him to greet the hegemony of received knowledge from the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and nominally but disingenuously progressive white ally-ship with lacerating skepticism. Glenn Ligon was born in 1960 in the Bronx to working class parents that encouraged his early interest in drawing. According to Ligon, "there wasn't a lot of extra money but there was an attitude that money could be spent for anything that bettered us—in that black working class, striving kind of way. Culture was betterment" (Interview 1). That striving also included securing scholarships for Ligon and his brother at an elite private school in the upper west side of Manhattan. English writes:

> Ligon spent these days moving between "worlds" (black and white, poor and prosperous, and so on) at a time when they were actively rethinking their relationships to one another, and having their relationships rethought in an unprecedented and very public dialogue around rights and "progress." (49)

Ligon was a young boy during the civil rights movement, and a recipient of some of the limited improvements deemed progress. Indeed, Ligon was a beneficiary of the

partial gains of the movement, but also endured the ambivalence and alienation of the worlds he navigated. To be sure, Ligon's black working- class background and mostly white educational experience, including an Art degree from Wesleyan, would inform his work in profound ways.

Ligon is primarily a painter, but also works in mixed media with great success. His early influences were abstract expressionists, especially De Kooning and Pollack. Ligon now persuasively dances between the formalism of these early influences and the identity politics of the Black Arts Movement. And he does so with an impish, skeptical distance that alternately angers and excites multiple audiences. This artistic approach is most famously reflected in Ligon's texts-based work. Golden has observed that his carefully selected words and phrases from black literary icons such as Zora Neal Hurston and Ralph Ellison blend abstract expressionism with the activism of the Black Arts Movement in captivating ways (40-41. For example, in his "Untitled: (I feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown against a Sharp White Background") (see figure 1.1), Ligon uses language from the sublime Hurston essay "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" to comment on continuing black awareness of the white gaze when entering white social spaces. In black print on a white canvas Ligon repeats Hurston's sentence, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," until it fills the entire canvas. However, another interesting thing begins to happen as the words eventually bleed into one another creating an indecipherable blend of black and white that becomes increasingly abstract. According to English, "He [Ligon] selects words connected to identity themes, words that would say what we are, but which must break up and

yield—literally disperse and lose their justifications—in order to capture the unwritable wreckage of social life" (42). In other words, the text of Ligon's message buckles under the weight of the contemporary relevance of a historical problem. Some black spectators might recognize this problem as so overly familiar that the text can slide into indecipherability from the sheer fatigue of having to repeat oneself. Indeed, Ligon visually shows us the fatigue of being black and inhabiting a supposedly equal-access public space. And yet the formal illegibility of Ligon's piece—or at least the formal language of abstract expressionism—demonstrates how "Untitled" becomes ironically decipherable through the vocabulary of a modernism associated with De Kooning and others. Ligon said in discussion about this piece:

> At a lecture a guy said to me, "you know, when I look at a De Kooning painting, I know what that is. I said, "Well, the paintings I'm doing have a very legible sentence at the top of the canvas." [laughs]. I think what he meant was, "I don't understand–or want to understand–your content. I understand abstraction but I don't understand these words. I had to point out to him that De Kooning paintings are a language to be learned. When they were first shown, they were ridiculed as being just drips and splatters and splashes. You had to learn to read them. (Paint Interview)

Indeed, Ligon's "I Feel Most Colored" reveals the limitations and contradictions of Eurocentric metrics for engaging with artists of color.

Figure 1.1: Untitled: Four Etchings, 1992. Glenn Ligon.

A Feast of Black Camp

Turning now to Ligon's approach to Black Camp, I see his roots begin to take shape with *A Feast of Scraps* (1994-1998) (see figure 1.2). *A Feast of Scraps* is Ligon's most explicitly queer treatment of identity in his work. The piece takes Ligon's family photo album and juxtaposes these photos with gay erotic photographs of black men. In the words of art historian Derek Conrad Murray, "*A Feast of Scraps* is an important work in Ligon's oeuvre because it signals a particular engagement with blackness: one that is resolutely self-critical in its satire" (71). *Feast* explores the profound ambivalence that

Ligon seems to feel about blackness in relationship to family. There are plenty of reasons for such ambivalence, but first it would be helpful to briefly discuss the politics of the family photograph to better illuminate Ligon's provocative *Feast.*

Family portraiture painting preceded the advent of photography and was largely a cultural practice of the wealthy within European society.[21] Family portraits often worked to stabilize gender hierarchies imposed by the power of the state. As such, the family portrait, on top of demonstrating the material status of a given family, reinforced the state as the public patriarch, and the male "head" of the household as the private ruling force within family networks. I want to be careful to not erase the sincere and often loving sentiment behind the desire to visually capture family logics and history, but it is important to recognize the family as a social construction with ever shifting meanings and members as Ligon's *Feast* will illustrate. Accordingly, the camera, a western invention, was created in the 19th century and provided a less financially prohibitive way to render and memorialize the concept of heteropatriarchal family. Moreover, family photographs were viewed as democratizing an elitist activity. [22]At the same time, in the United States, enslaved African families had no access to such cultural expression as European settlers still questioned if blacks belonged to the human family altogether.

Thus, the photographs of Ligon's family members in their "Sunday best" depict the deliberate attempts of black families to inhabit white middle-class identity norms. Black photographic expressions of affluence or other demonstrations of this kind of

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[21] Hirsch, Julia. *Family Photographs.* Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 35–36.

[22] Hirsch, Julia. *Family Photographs.* Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 44.

aspiration arguably began around the early 20th century. The "New Negro Movement" as popularized by the influential and closeted black queer intellectual Alain Locke was a progressive reimagining of black identity through the arts (Locke, 47–51). James Van Der Zee was the unofficial photo documentarian of the New Negro Movement. He captured the pictorial elegance and sophistication of black America during the early 20th century like no other before him, and arguably no one after him, as an informal defense of Locke's philosophical rejection of black inferiority. As such Ligon's photos of family members are illustrative of black aspirational desire to challenge anti-black narratives that consign blackness to pathology and poverty. The black intelligentsia, Locke and Van Der Zee being examples, felt one of the best tools for achieving full citizenship or "human" status in America was to produce evidence that blacks could embody white heteronormative norms. Thus, middle class blacks, and blacks with middle class aspirations, were compelled to document their humanity through family photography.

However, as understandable as this representational strategy was, it excluded black experiences that would confirm white supremacist perceptions of black family structure. Art historian Laura Deland has written quite brilliantly on the complexity of *A Feast of Scraps* in relation to this representational strategy:

> The fraught image of the black American family becomes at once evocative of respite—a shelter from the pressures of institutionalized racism, a site at which, the burden of "representing" for one's race may be temporarily lifted—and of suffocating responsibility as one is expected not only to represent on behalf of oneself in the world, but also on behalf of one's kin. (515)

Deland identifies the tension that Ligon communicates about black family dynamics; as a place of respite from white supremacy, yet also a cauldron of homophobia

and gender oppression. The black heteropatriarchal family can be at once a sanctuary from white supremacy and an environment of overwhelming expectation depending on the class ambition and position of the family. Such tension reveals how the white gaze can intrude into black intimate spaces. To be black and gay within such a framework is a violation of the black middle-class family imperative to never confirm white supremacist beliefs about black sexuality.

In most of the photos selected by Ligon for *Feast of Scraps* men are at the center and women mostly peripheral figures of support. The photo at the bottom left (see figure 1.2) appears to be a festive gathering for the young handsome man cutting the cake. If it is his birthday, it makes sense that he would be the focus in this photograph. However, in other photos of biological family members in *Feast*, men consistently occupy the nucleus of family activity, with black women on the flanks as adoring companions. By juxtaposing a glistening nude muscular black male body directly above the birthday gathering with a text that reads, "Necessity is a mother," Ligon seems to be playfully critiquing phallocentric adulthood within patriarchal expressions of family arrangement. The "mothering" women reinforce male power through their doting but outlying presence in most photos. They are *necessary* to the extent that they prop up the black male ego. What this photograph of the festive black family social occasion may reveal is that "most black men remain in a state of denial, refusing to acknowledge the pain in their lives that is caused by sexist thinking and patriarchal, phallocentric violence, which is not only expressed by male domination over women but also by internecine conflict among black men" (Hooks 79). That the eroticism/fetishism of the black male body at the far left can

be appreciated by a desiring gay male gaze demonstrates what many black men excise from the figurative and literal photographic frame to reproduce a white heteropatriarchy that they, due to white male emasculation, feel restricted from successfully enacting (Spillers 74). Indeed, the black gay eroticism is an interpolation of what has been omitted from not only Ligon's undisclosed family lore, but also a reinsertion of the alternative masculinities that are obscured in the varying types of black families (nationalism, Afrocentrism, the black church) as well. That the images of nude black men can be reductive and fetishistic depictions of black men, but also, as Ligon offers, "to say that stereotypical images of black men are constructed for white pleasure does not mean that the images have nothing to say to black people and that we must throw them out" (*Feast Intro*).

Figure 1.2: Feast of Scraps (1994–98) Glenn Ligon

Interestingly, on the one hand, Ligon's *Feast* pays tribute to black social grace. On the other hand, Ligon rather humorously exposes what black respectability politics effaces. The latter is a recurring thematic thread of Ligon's body of work. As Deland has suggested, "In Ligon's hands, the family album emerges as a text dually marked by

history and the ineffable, the vehicle through which the narrative of the heteropatriarchal family unity is mobilized, and the end product of the excisions necessary to produce it" (512). As I mentioned earlier, Ligon clearly reintegrates black gay identities that are often removed from black family experience. Through placing photographs of nude and semi-nude black men, black men engaged in interracial sex with white men, and recoding the language applied to understanding heteropatriarchal family structure, Ligon instantiates gay black identity within black family structure. For instance, as Deland observes, Ligon's multivalent use of the name for the family patriarch, "Daddy," explores the similarities and differences between gay male subculture and heteropatriarchal family logic. According to Deland:

> The queer desires animated within the album draw substance and verve through their articulation in familial tropes; it is the power and protectionism that is implicit in the patriarchal household that makes the word "Daddy" attach itself so seductively to a lover. Yet, this queer appropriation of kinship also points to the sober reality of many gay black subjects, rejected by their families and forced to seek new support structures within predominantly queer white communities. (527)

Indeed, Ligon confronts the silences and shame around black gay sexuality, and again humorously places the constructed experiences of black heteronormativity in contiguous relation to the constructed experiences of black male non-heteronormativity in awkward conversation at the dinner table. Ligon reveals what has been occluded within black heteropatriarchal discourse. Ligon also shows us that the construction of whiteness is predicated on Euro-American investment in indelible differences between "white" and "black" irrespective of self or family presentation. In other words, within white supremacist, anti-black, and white racialists contexts, black bodies can *never* be respectable simply because they are black. Therefore, Ligon's imagery does not produce

the representational damage that black respectability politics fear, because Ligon is disinvested in the white gaze. To put it another way, Ligon directly challenges white surveillance by returning the gaze back onto white spectatorship looking for evidence of black pathology or exoticism.

Yet, there is also something comical about *Feast* that remains under-examined. To be sure, there is a playfulness that informs the serious subject matter of much of Ligon's work. Interestingly, Laura Deland notes the signifying happening in *Feast*, but overlooks the humorous camp dimension of Ligon's family album. As previously mentioned, the depictions of black middle-class respectability in *Feast* are certainly constructed. However, the depictions of black gay sexuality are also constructed, arranged, and performed. The provocative photos of black men, almost always nude and muscular, are selected by Ligon precisely because they are fetishistic in nature. As such, Deland identifies the photographs' eroticism but does not see their humor. She seems to take the photos at face value in this respect. Interestingly, here Deland might be overlooking the exoticism of adopted white queer communities. Indeed, the photos were discovered in a times square adult bookstore and seem to be collaborations between the subjects and authors of the photographs. I suggest Ligon selected these photos for his project because the extremity of difference between the refinement of his family members and the prurience of the erotic photos demonstrate the unbridgeable distance between the two. And the distance, for some spectators, is funny. This is partly because Ligon selects photos of black men that reduce them—gay and straight—to one thing: sex objects. In Ligon's words, "Pornographic images of black men usually fall into a narrow range of

types: black men as closer to nature, sexually aggressive, enormously endowed. Black men as phallus" (*Feast* Intro). Susan Sontag has written, "What camp taste responds to is 'instant character' […] character is understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing" (61). This is true for the erotic imagery of *Feast* and the photos of black respectability. What is more, it is the seeming incongruity between Ligon's Times Square photos and the studied respectability of his family photos that also mark it as humorously camp. In the words of Esther Newton, "Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of *incongruous juxtapositions*" (47). *Feast* is filled with such images.

Moreover, Ligon locates the *value* within these old photographs understood to be trash according to heteronormative expectations. Finding value within the marginal and then elevating the marginal beyond what is deemed normal or appropriate are also hallmarks of camp. According to Andrew Ross, "Camp, in this respect, is more than just a remembrance of things past, it is the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*" (67). Ligon himself expressed this belief in the close study of the marginal, specifically the erotic photos featured in *Feast* when he shared, "My friend Wayne said that when we think we know something, when we deem a thing no longer useful and throw it on the trash heap, that's the moment to examine it closely" (*Feast of Scraps Intro*).

The Queer Malcolm X

We black folks think we know Malcolm X, for example. The coloring book image of Macolm X was intended to reveal and critique the binary logic that informs black

cultural stewardship of the late political icon. In 2000, Ligon was invited by the Walker Art Center to be an artist-in-residence. While exploring the Archie Givens Sr. Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota as part of his residency, Ligon discovered a black arts era coloring book for children. Coloring books have historically functioned as didactic forms of entertainment. Late 19th century child education discourse argued that childhood creativity should be strongly encouraged as part of healthy human development. Relatedly, the coloring book was viewed as an instrument for positive childhood expressive activity. "Little Folks Coloring Book" by the Mcloughlin Brothers is commonly accepted as the first popular coloring book, although the unrecognized labor of artist Kate Greenaway in providing the images for this book is less well known.[23] Theft of imagery—and the theft of human bodies—was common at this time, but it is worth mentioning the specifically gendered exploitation of labor that informs the very first coloring book. The images of 19th century white children enjoying leisure activities erased the subjectivities of people of color at a time when the nation state was experiencing ever increasing racial and cultural difference.

The coloring book that Ligon found, however, was filled with images of heroic black figures from American history and popular culture like Harriet Tubman and Isaac Hayes. Indeed, it was meant to serve as a corrective to the erasure of black bodies in the most quotidian experiences and objects in popular culture. Consequently, the coloring book contained simple and wholesome scenes of black children playing on tire swings and blowing bubbles. Ligon thought it would be interesting to make copies of some of the

[23] Weinstein, Amy. *Once Upon a Time: Illustrations from Fairytales, Fables and Other Children's Books.* p. 21.

pages of the coloring books and allow children from the local community to color the reproduced imagery. The result was "*Coloring: New Work by Glenm Ligon*." The BAM era coloring book rediscovered by Ligon shares some of the representational objectives of Ligon's family photos of biological relatives featured in *Feast*. Like those photos, the coloring book is intended to "uplift" black people by offering imagery that humanizes people that, according to anti-black logics, are non-human. The coloring book, much like the family photo album, was a way to show to black people, as well as outside observers, that anti-black visual discourse was slanderous. Moreover, it was also a way for what WEB Dubois described as blacks from the dubiously labeled talented-tenth (black social elites) to demonstrate to outside observers the *truth* of blackness. According to Olukemi Ilesanmi, "Although it's somewhat hard to imagine today, in the late 1960s, representations of blacks simply living life—blowing bubbles, playing on a swing—were as radical and necessary as those of fiery revolutionaries" (26). Accordingly, the coloring books were designed to be instructional, not only for black children and their families but to interested and disinterested non-black observers as well.

Ligon was curious to know how young people that were mostly free from racial inculcation would reimagine the contested political meanings in the coloring book Ligon has said about the project, "I also love children's drawings because kids' relationship to culture, language, and identity is not yet fixed. They have not yet ingested all the rules and prohibitions adults have, so there is no one way that things have to be in their drawings" (31). The fluidity of meaning is a strong feature of Ligon's artistic practice in general, and "Coloring" is no exception. Indeed, it is safe to say that the young children

that Ligon recruited for assistance on "Coloring" did not possess the same baggage attached to issues of race and gender that their parents have. However, it may also be true that children as young as three—to varying degrees—internalize some of the attitudes of the adult world. Therefore, when considering the results of "Coloring" I suggest that we practice skepticism toward the idea of childhood innocence. While some of the children Ligon collaborated with may not have had a significant awareness of gender, sexuality, and race, some children may be more observant of the spoken and unspoken codes of the adult world. For example, Ligon had the children fill in the face of iconic black soul singer Isaac Hayes. During the 1970s Hayes was synonymous with hetero black male cool. Hayes was seldom seen without sunglasses or flashy gold jewelry. His distinctive bald head communicated virility, not premature hair loss. And his musical sound of funky, half spoken, half sung vocals pre-figured hip hop. To be sure, none of the children knew who Hayes was when they took crayon to page. But it might be harder to argue that they did not have some idea of blackness. One child colored the black power era soul icon a light yellow that resembles the pigment of Caucasian people. This child also colored in the beard to give Hayes blonde facial hair. The child presumably did not know that Hayes was not white. Indeed, the child may have been white herself. However, that the child chose to render Hayes in this way suggests not *only* naivete about blackness, but also an awareness of the way whiteness dominates her/his/their social world and visual field. That the child may have also been black and decided to color the image in this way is precisely why the coloring book was created in the first place. That is, to make blackness an accepted and positive site of visibility in American culture *and* to help black

people accept a *positive* self- image. Ligon is aware of the coloring book's political goal. In an interview he stated,

I agree that the question of beauty is a charged one for people of color. James Brown's "Say it Loud—I'm black and I'm Proud" came out when I was in third grade. I remember sitting in my bedroom singing along with the song on the radio. When I got to the chorus, I would shout the "Say it Loud" part, but only whisper the "I'm black and I'm proud" part. The coloring book images come from a time when there was a reevaluation going on in terms of how black people and other people of color experienced their self-worth and beauty. Theses struggles were the building blocks for other struggles, and certainly the moment we are in now would not have been possible without them (Interview).

In other words, the coloring book is grounded in a politics trying to deliver black people from the tyranny of internalizing white supremacist narratives about us. However, the brilliance of Ligon's artistic exercise is that it pushes beyond this important yet restrictive political objective. As Susan Sontag notes, "The camp sensibility is that it is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken" (57). For instance, the rendering of both Hayes and Malcolm X as white in "Coloring" is also a challenge to what has become hegemonic black masculinity within the Afrocentric and black arts paradigm that in turn made Hayes and Malcolm icons. This is because whiteness, within such frameworks, was often viewed as synonymous with homosexuality. Black male stylistic deviations from this model exemplified by Hayes were viewed with suspicion and derision, and quite often marked as counter-revolutionary. Eldridge Cleaver's brutal

literary attack on James Baldwin is the most well-known example of this attitude. Other than Black Panther Party founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, Cleaver was the most visible spokesperson for the beleaguered and heinously criminalized political organization after Newton was made a political prisoner. A convicted rapist, but also a fiery and important critic of anti-blackness in the United States, Cleaver was always controversial. He admittedly cut his teeth on the writing of James Baldwin while he was incarcerated. In sexually suggestive fashion, Cleaver acknowledges the importance of Baldwin's writing in his essay "Notes on a Native Son." Cleaver writes, "I, as I imagine many others did and still do, lusted for anything Baldwin had written. It would have been a gas for me to sit on a pillow beneath the womb of Baldwin's typewriter and catch each newborn page as it entered this world of ours" (97). However, Cleaver infamously follows this up with a tirade about James Baldwin and black gay sexuality that has often been quoted at length:

> The white man has deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on "whiteness" all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against "blackness" upon himself, what he is and all those who look like him, remind him of himself. He may even hate the darkness of night. The racial death-wish is manifested as the driving force in James Baldwin. His hatred for black, even as he pleads what he conceives as their cause, makes him the apotheosis of the dilemma in the ethos of the black bourgeoisie who have completely rejected their African heritage, consider the loss irrevocable, and refuse to look again in that direction. (103)

Cleaver is upbraiding black gay sexuality as an expression of racial self-abnegation. Cleaver explicitly tethers black gay sexuality to a desire to be white and offers James Baldwin as an unfortunate example. Furthermore, according to E. Patrick Johnson, "Cleaver insists that middle class status and homosexuality are unequivocally

antiblack" (53). Following such logic, Cleaver would have viewed everything in Ligon's *Feast* as anti-black, even the middle class posturing of Ligon's relatives. Moreover, according to Cleaver's logic, Baldwin and Ligon's dalliance with forms of cosmopolitanism also marks them as anti-black. E. Patrick Johnson has also importantly noted that Cleaver can only talk about black gay sexuality in interracial terms, obscuring black intraracial coupling, and thus Cleaver's own desire for Baldwin, and as well as Cleaver's own muted hybridity. In Cleaver's limited imaginative frame, to be queer is to be white, and to be white is to be middle to upper class, and all are entangled in anti-blackness. There is a troubling persistence in this trend of thinking that may be expressed in iterations not explicitly homophobic by black cultural critics.

Figure 1.3: "Malcolm X with Rifle" by Don Hogan Charles. Most likely taken from 1964 Ebony Magazine Photo shoot but unverified.

Malcolm X is one of the most important and discussed human rights leaders in American history. During the early to mid 1960's Malcolm X was one of the most

outspoken, articulate, astute, and controversial critics of anti-black racism and imperialism, not only in America but across the world. To many black people he continues to represent the epitome of black masculinity. Indeed, actor Ossie Davis famously eulogized Malcolm as “our manhood, our living black manhood.” Indeed, Malcolm’s impassioned eloquence and early career endorsement for armed self-defense was a clarion call for black men, particularly in Harlem, to excise servility from their gestural vocabulary. Interestingly, and not so coincidentally, another Harlem dweller; the writer and critic James Baldwin was also a widely read, discussed, and requested public intellectual at the time. James Baldwin was also gay. Malcolm and Baldwin were both equally distinguished figures during this time and yet the face of Malcolm X is on most posters adorning the walls of budding young black activists, not James Baldwin. Indeed, Malcolm X remains a crucial emblem of unapologetic and “macho” anti-racism and indeed, a black American that white racist critics spitefully continue to mischaracterize as a violent demagogue.

Nevertheless, black hagiography of Malcolm X obscures the complexity of the historical figure. The image of Malcolm as unflinching challenger to the white power structure should be valorized, but Ligon’s portrait seems to suggest such valorization should not deny his many layers. As Michael Eric Dyson has argued, Malcolm can be honored for his commitment to black advancement without turning him into a sacrosanct symbol of black moral outrage. Dyson writes:

> The overwhelming weakness of hero worship, often, is the belief that the community of hero worshipers possesses the definitive understanding of the subject […] and that critical dissenters from the received view of Malcolm are

> traitors to black unity, inauthentic heirs to his political legacy, or misguided interpreters of his ideas. (35)

One of the aspects of Malcolm X's lived reality that gets erased by a black masculinist/nationalist perspective, but that Ligon tries to make visible, is Malcolm's complex sexuality. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* Malcolm provides generous details about his participation in Harlem's booming sex industry in the 1940's. He relates the stories of Harlem's surely exploitative sex industry and sexualization of black bodies to indict hypocritical whites for participating in sexual tourism. However, Malcolm did not have to provide such salacious details of dark-skinned black women oiling their nude bodies to administer lucrative beatings to paying white male clients to make this morally conformist yet socially astute observation (X 119). Furthermore, there is controversial Malcolm X scholarship that argues Malcom had homosexual encounters as a hustler in Harlem and in his private life prior to 1952.[24] This is a contentious assertion of course, and the hard evidence to support such a claim is based upon Malcolm X historian Bruce Perry's interviews with some of Malcolm's acquaintances prior to Malcolm's conversion to Islam. However, journalist and public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates may have put it best when he wrote:

> There are many who will reject the notion of Malcolm having sex with men, because they think it's antithetical to masculinity. This is wrong and should be called out as such. Likewise, there will be those who claim it's irrelevant. That's a bit more credible, but I think given the fact that masculinity is often constructed in opposition to homosexuality and given that many [sic] of Malcolm's own acolytes have constructed it that way, the matter is quite relevant. (The Atlantic 1)

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[24] Perry, Bruce. *Malcolm: The Life of a Man that Changed Black America*. New York: Station Hill, 1991. pp. 77–78

In other words, Malcom X's debated sexuality is important to consider because it allows for a conversation about the homophobia underpinning assessments of his masculinity in romantic nationalist discourse. Indeed, It is relevant because there is a persistent, yet evolving, line of thought within morally conservative black discourse that black male homosexuality is the inverse of exemplary black masculinity. For example, the famous photograph of Malcolm X holding an AK-47 and peering from his living room window after receiving death threats from anti-black terrorists is an indelible image for many black activists, men, and women (see figure 1.3). Radical black activists are taken with this fierce show of armed self-defense; a mode of protection (and vengeance) that is linked with *straight* masculinity. From the viewpoint of one of Malcolm's political heirs, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm's purported bisexuality would not only undermine Malcolm's violent revolutionary authority as emblematized in the iconic photo but make him synonymous with whiteness. However, Roderick Ferguson reminds us that *all* "African American culture has historically been deemed contrary to the norms of heterosexuality and patriarchy" (20). To put it another way, blackness within a U.S. context has, at least since racial chattel slavery, been narrated as queer from a white heteronormative purview for perceived failure to embody heteronormative family structure. Indeed, Malcolm lost his father at the hands of white terrorists at an early age and was raised by the women of his family. According to heteronormative and anti-black logic this fact automatically makes Malcolm queer in the sense that his upbringing ran counter to patriarchal expectations. The pathological black matriarchy narrative, as promoted by Daniel Patrik Moynihan, has done the political work of justifying structural

and moral disinvestment in black people (although Moynihan's ostensible goal was to generate such investment).[25] However, Ferguson argues for black embracement of black contrariness to heteronormative norms. Ferguson calls for ironically embracing sociological assumptions of black pathology as a political act of refusal. A refusal to legitimate whiteness as the standard by which blackness must necessarily fall short.

Examining Ligon's *Malcolm X Version No.1* in relation to the under-examined camp dimension of pop art from the 1960's we may gather a stronger sense of how *Version No.* 1 fits within such a tradition of refusal—an Otherwise—and accomplishes something new. Derek Conrad Murray has very fruitfully linked *Malcolm X Version No. 1* to Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe (1962)* (69). It is in this relatedness that we can clearly see how *No. 1* is a camp object. *Gold Marilyn* is one of Warhol's best loved portraits of the iconic movie star. Warhol made this portrait of Marilyn around the same time he was producing other quintessential works from his canon, such as the reproductions of Campbell's Soup Cans and Coca-Cola bottles. In this, Warhol was taking everyday items associated with American commerce and elevating them by depicting such items as "objects of art." Such work was a refutation of the abstract expressionist vogue. Warhol's thematic interests in the excesses of capitalism and popular culture presented in a sardonic manner that eschewed the self-importance associated with abstract expressionism was a foundational element of the pop art movement. According to art historian Carter Ratcliff, "His [Warhol] pictures of soup cans, movie stars, and

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[25] Moynihan, Daniel P. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Transaction Social Science and Public Policy Report,* edited by Lee Rainwater and William L. Yandy, MIT Press, 1967, 47–94.

dollar bills refuse nearly all redeeming links to traditions of high pictorial seriousness" (29). However, Warhol's rejection of the abstract expressionism that connoted "seriousness" and his affectionate yet critical—despite Warhol's proclamations of an apolitical stance—celebration of the vulgar is also part of the construction of camp. Joe Thomas writes:

> Modernism clearly allied itself with the adamantly heterosexual, rigidly hierarchical ideology represented by the macho male artists of abstract expressionism. By rejecting this earlier generations' angst-ridden style, and by subverting Clement Greenberg's famous separation of kitsch and art, the Pop artists affirmed camp and its principles. The Pop artists not only chose a representational art, but also selected images reviled as kitsch. When the Pop artists elevated these images to the arena of high art, they paralleled the camp celebration of and commitment to the marginal. (Thomas 1999)

Joe Thomas critiques the "heroic straight male" institutional attitude that dominated modernist art prior to Warhol's entrance into the art scene. Moreover, Thomas identifies the ways that pop artists like Warhol challenged this institutional attitude by glamorizing the vulgar and marginal. And he importantly recognizes how such a practice is analogous to camp. Indeed, according to critic and camp enthusiast Mark Booth, "to be camp is to present oneself as being dedicated to the marginal with a commitment greater than what the marginal merits" (qtd. in Thomas). Therefore, Andy Warhol's *Gold Marylin Monroe* is a direct flouting of what modernism demands the proper subject of art should be. Warhol selects white Hollywood femininity as his object of choice and confounds modernist expectations of what belongs on institutional walls through his consideration/celebration of the low. Similarly, Malcolm X, although a looming figure in black American history, is still marginal in relation to American exceptionalist and white nationalist narratives of the United States. Indeed, it is frequently demonstrated that

blackness more generally is still understood as marginal and expendable in relation to whiteness. Therefore, Ligon's promotion of Malcolm X as a subject of artistic study is also a continuation of Ligon's commitment to the marginal.

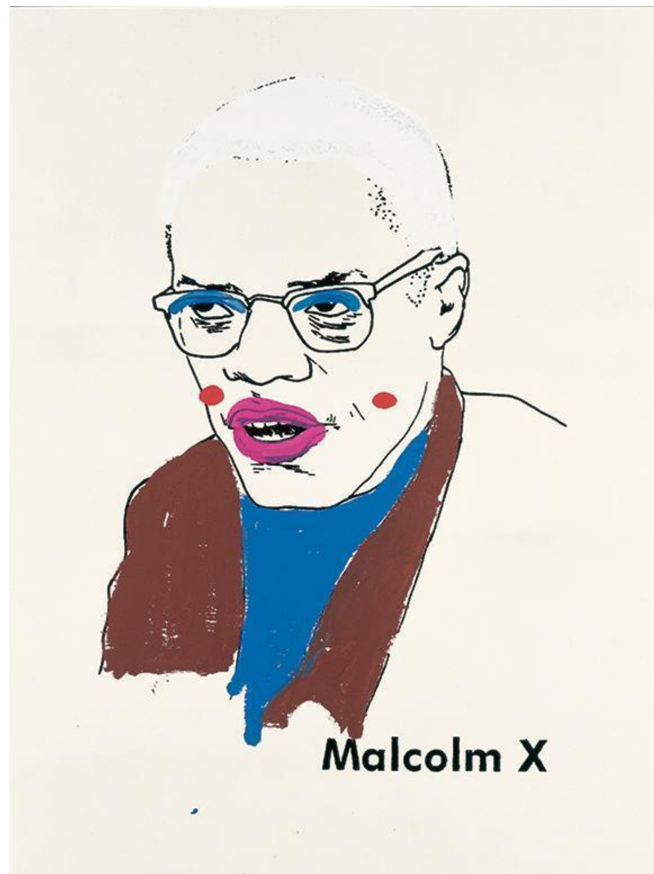

Figure 1.4: Malcolm X (Version 1) 2000, Glenn Ligon.

Gold Marylin presents screen icon Marylin Monroe, who was born a brunette named Norma Jean Mortenson, in platinum blonde hair with almost translucent skin and blue eye shadow at the center of a bronze canvas. It is a depiction of Marylin Monroe as fantasy, as a character. Norma Jean Mortenson invented Marylin through a stage name, dye, and purported plastic surgery. Malcolm Little also invented Malcolm X, with of course clearly different intentions, but the fact that both Malcolm and Monroe are

invented and *performed* should not be overlooked. Interestingly, the young Malcolm Little was captivated by the entertainment industry, and for a short while nursed a dream of becoming an entertainer. According to Bruce Perry, "He seemed to want to be out front, on stage, entertaining large audiences—making movies rather than watching them" (82). Marylin's iconicity for mostly white gay men interested in drag culture is based on the construction of femininity that Monroe represented. Monroe was impersonating a brand of femininity in the analogous way that a male drag performer impersonates often flamboyant and reductive expressions of femininity. Drag performers glory in the unnaturalness of hegemonic gender roles and identities while disrupting the idea that these roles are fixed. Esther Newton writes, "This theatrical referent is the key to the attitude toward role-playing embodied in drag as camp. Role playing is *play*; it is an act or show. The necessity to play at life, living role after superficial role, should not be the cause of bitterness or despair" (105). This life as theater approach offsets the tendency in the straight world to worry about authenticity in relationship to identity. Playing a role does not mean that the role should not be treated with respect, but it does mean that looking for any stable meaning for the role is dubious. It also does not mean that playing a role is automatically dishonest. Perhaps it reflects how multifaceted identity is. For example, the late Manning Marable writes:

> Malcolm's strength was his ability to reinvent himself, in order to function and even thrive in a wide variety of environments. He carefully crafted his physical presentation, the manner in which he approached others, drawing upon the past experiences from his own life as well as from African American folklore and culture…He was consciously a performer, who presented himself as the vessel for conveying the anger and impatience the black masses felt. (479–481)

To put it another way, Malcolm X's ability to invent multiple selves can be fruitfully linked to camp, signifying, and post black theory. Ligon's portrait offers us this.

Figure 1.5: Gold Marilyn Monroe. Andy Warhol, 1962, MOMA.

Malcolm X Version no. 1, where Malcolm is depicted with powdered skin, blue eye shadow, and red lipstick with scarf, is camp because it is a reversal of the expected hetero understanding of Malcolm as "our black manhood." Depicted in this manner, Malcom is strikingly like Warhol's *Gold Marilyn* as Derek Conrad Murray and others have pointed out. Derek Conrad Murray writes, "In his often-unsettling iconoclasm, Ligon ruthlessly exposes the machinery of racism and homophobia, while simultaneously refusing to critically ignore damaging intracultural constructions of blackness that produce their own annihilating logics" (70). Indeed, Ligon's portrait deliberately

undermines the hetero meaning of Malcolm X, and does so using humorous exaggeration and artifice to communicate this upheaval. In the words of Susan Sontag, "camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the *exaggerated, the 'off' of things-being-what-they-are not*" (57; emphasis mine). If Malcolm X is queered in Ligon's portrait, it is a queering that humorously inflates ostensible black queer masculinity. It presents Malcolm in a manner that, viewed from a position of black masculinist logic, marks Malcolm as unequivocally deviant. But reading the portrait as a recovery of Malcolm's buried, repressed, or selectively ignored bisexuality is also worth considering. Following this, there exists a great range of gay male performance practices, just as there is also a vast range of black male stylistic expression. Ligon is, of course, very aware of the range of performances possible, which is why representing Malcolm's queerness in this way simultaneously celebrates gay male expressions of theatricality but also ridicules hegemonic assumptions about gay male identity. Ligon knows that his portrait is not the "real" Malcolm X, any more than Andy Warhol knew his portraits of Marilyn Monroe were examples of "real" femininity, or the real Marylin. Camp does not believe in authenticity. Accordingly, Ligon deflates black masculinist ownership of the legacy of Malcolm and exposes black anxieties around the subject of authenticity. Moreover, Ligon revives Malcolm's queerness; a queerness that is erased by even Malcolm's own religiosity. Thus, Ligon makes space for queers of color to have access to a figure cordoned off as unimpeachably straight. According to Fabio Cleto:

> With a typically camp inversion, those who are 'normally' excluded becoming the subjects and objects of a cult, of a different variety of religion-in its etymological

> sense, as a tying up of relationships, recognitions, belongings—whereas those who are otherwise dominant are, for once, excluded. (31)

Ligon is not necessarily excluding hetero recuperation of Malcolm X, but he is complicating Malcolm X, and delegitimizing the authority of black masculinist possession of Malcolm's cultural and political legacy. With *Malcolm X Version No.1,* we now have a chance to openly consider the queerness of Malcolm X in exuberant and playful fashion that does not diminish the significance of Malcolm's commitment to racial and economic justice. But it does question those fervent followers that disallow such consideration as an attack on his masculinity, which is deeply and unacceptably homophobic.

Black Camp as an expression of the Otherwise helps black folks reimagine notions of family. Through the playful yet serious questioning of the heteronormative standards of inclusion within our domestic and public families we might develop a deeper understanding and love for our more vulnerable members. Ligon's artwork generates the kind of intracommunal conversations that demand more than economic justice or a call towards the comforts of romantic nationalism but asks us to honor the complexities and contradictions of lived black experience with a compassion that encourages relational rather than fixed ways of being. Ligon is encouraging us to laugh at "authenticity" while we do this important work. Black Camp would have it no other way.

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Chapter 2

"Prissy's Quittin' Time: The Black Camp aesthetics of Kara Walker"

Visual artist Kara Walker has been shaking America's family tree to see what rotten fruit falls since the 1990s. Walker's large-scale silhouette depictions of slavery and colonial narratives provoke outrage, confusion, and encomiums in almost equal doses. This is in part because Walker's silhouettes—and more recently her sculpture work—are not the comforting or didactic historical dramas of her talented forbearers such as Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglass. Rather, Walker makes satirical, ambiguous, and angry post-black art that is uninterested in grand-narratives or in positing a heroic and innocent black subject. Walker makes use of the painful white supremacist minstrel caricatures popularized in the nineteenth century and places them in perverse, macabre, and often sexually charged scenarios with white masters and mistresses. Themes from popular fiction and American folklore of the previous two centuries are bitingly reimagined to expose white supremacy's vicious staying power.

Through a close reading of Walker's first silhouette installment—the audaciously titled *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994)—I will explain how Walker utilizes Black Camp to undermine both white supremacist and restrictive black uplift discourse. To be sure, it is not my intention to conflate these two, for the former is powerfully worse than the latter. However, it is necessary to explore how both discourses reinforce essentialist articulations of blackness and to also examine how Black Camp is a provocative analytic for their simultaneous disruption.

As I previously mentioned, queer is both a sexual identity and a disruption of convention informed by such an identity. To put it another way, queer not only encompasses a range of sexualities and gender identities that practice alternatives to the discursive violence of compulsory heterosexuality, but queer is also a point of departure for questioning orthodoxy more generally. In the words of Michael Warner, "The insistence on 'queer'—a term defined against 'normal' and generated precisely in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance as a site of violence" (16). As such, queerness is certainly and inseparably rooted in the embodied experiences of gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, intersexed, and non-gender conforming people, but it is also a theoretical vehicle emerging from this embodiment to unsettle the predominance of normativity, understood as sites of intersections of violence. Walker's *Gone* is a response to the multitudinous violence of slavery, and it also prefers a queer mode of contestation rooted in, but not restricted by, sexual and gender orientation. Indeed, literary critic Arlene Keizer was the first to note that "though Walker is not gay, her work is profoundly queer, and a queer of color theory has produced a conceptual matrix that illuminates her artistic formation and practice" (1670). Accordingly, Walker's *Gone* can be read as a challenge to the tyranny of normativity as represented in black uplift. Thus, Queer Studies "disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no *fixed* political referent" (Warner 16; emphasis mine).

Walker's *Gone* deploys these qualities of camp—theatricality, humor, incongruity—through Black Camp to challenge white supremacist narratives of blackness

through ironic performance of racist stereotypes. According to cultural critic Susan Gubar, “Racial camp makes a mockery of romantic nationalism, religious grandiosity and folk sentimentalism,” and these are all defining characteristics of Walker’s *Gone* (27). Gubar’s development of what she calls racial camp is important, but I use the term Black Camp rather than racial camp to speak to the specificity of Walker’s mordant thematic material and the work it does in relation to blackness. And although black uplift discourse—as represented in the respectability politics of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and Afrocentricity (to name just two black social/political movements)—and white supremacy are in direct confrontation over the meaning of blackness, the two interpretive frameworks work in strangely similar ways. While black uplift discourse may rely on strategic essentialism, nevertheless they are both invested in essentialist understandings of blackness. In other words, both theoretical narratives attempt to circumscribe the possibilities of blackness. Walker’s use of black camp, on the other hand, fiercely resists the stifling politics of black uplift discourses while also challenging lethal white supremacist imaginaries. This is no easy feat, but camp’s playful way of inflating identity to expose the artificial nature of categories often assumed to be stable and real is precisely how Walker responds to both the lingering violence of slavery and the violence of normativity represented in black uplift.

Understanding Walker’s work as camp is not an attempt to uncritically appropriate the terms from LGBTQ+ practice and theory, but rather to demonstrate how blackness is inseparable from these identities and politics to begin with. Roderick Ferguson reminds us that blackness has always been narrated as queer from a white

heteronormative perspective for a perceived failure to enact heteropatriarchal family structures. Walker's art powerfully illustrates how white supremacist logics have historically understood black sexuality as fundamentally deviant. If blackness, within this racist perspective, is sexually aberrant, then blackness also has roots and access to camp aesthetics. Signifying, as the African American practice of sardonic repetition and revision of white cultural forms comprises a large part of Walker's work. Indeed, the antebellum slave practice of comically imitating the mannerisms of the white plantation masters through acts like the cakewalk where slaves mocked the stylistic pretentions of their unwitting masters at plantation balls and the "best" performances were awarded cake, is a hoary example of the practice. But signifyin's humorous use of incongruity, spectacle, and veiled critique illustrate the not-so-coincidental habits that also define queer survival strategies. Performance studies scholar Daphne Brooks writes, "I propose that we read cakewalking as a form of camp, not to replicate an erasure or colonization of queer identity politics and critical discourse but to broaden Meyer's definition of camp's currency and to make visible camp's black genealogical roots" (273). Therefore, camp and queer may be extended to include persons and cultural productions that are maligned by mainstream culture for being what Fabio Cleto describes as "strange,' slippery and undecidable, 'troubling'" (14). In other words, black expressions of camp can be opprobrious according to black uplift epistemologies for their errant indeterminacy. Specifically, *Gone*'s sexual irresolution, though arguably part of signifying practices, along with its outré surrealism in respect to black iconography make it closer to camp (although not detached from signifying). Indeed, this makes Black Camp, and much of

Walker's other art, anathema to a black uplift frame because it revels in an undecidability—often sexual—that doesn't *only* reproach white supremacist imaginaries.

The piece that launched Walker into art world notoriety, *Gone,* is a bravura first work from the then-24-year-old artist and is an excellent example of Black Camp. The use of the 19th century artistic innovation of the silhouette in *Gone,* and in much of her later work, signals Walker's fascination with marginalia, a theme that I will return to and discuss in greater detail. Camp is deeply interested in humorously centering the peripheral. The fact that silhouettes have been dismissed as minor "feminine art" partially explains why Walker brings the marginal form to the center. Art historian Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw writes, "Walker has stated on numerous occasions that silhouette cutting has historically been a weaker, more feminine form, one that might have been accessible to 19th century African-American artists" (20). However, much of the artistic output of silhouettes in the 18th and 19th century was a way to render and memorialize romantic white middle-class identities. These connotations were not lost on Walker when she decided to employ the silhouette as her primary artistic medium. Of course, African slaves were excluded entirely from these representational practices at a time when phrenology and other forms of specious racial science were emerging to measure innate racial differences. And if silhouettes operated as a sort of "feminine" branding of white middle-class identities – a reductive yet expressive way of communicating bourgeois status – then Walker, through the silhouette, radically deconstructs the meanings of the medium. Walker mocks the gendered pretension of the silhouette by using the very same artistic technique to reveal the underside that the scenes of middle-class gentility were

often predicated upon: the violent silencing of black bodies. And these were black bodies viewed as irreducibly and grotesquely different. Walker has stated, “The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as linked” (Alberro 25–26). In this way, through direct and serious engagement with a form coded as substandard and thus marginal, Walker is working within the aesthetic and political guidelines of both signifying and camp. She is producing Black Camp through this peripheral medium.

Figure 2.1: Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart (1994) Sikkema Jenkins.

To be sure, Walker’s *Gone* mocks the solemnities and pretensions of the old south in a darkly comic way that some black spectators may find objectionable, but Walker is very serious about the subject matter. Part of the dual critique of Walker’s Black Camp is that she tweaks the pretensions of the politics of black respectability as much as she ridicules the pomposity of white supremacist logics, both the subtle and thuddingly obvious. Walker employs a camp sensibility to do what Christopher Isherwood has described as “expressing what is basically serious […] in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (51). Perhaps fun is not the word that should be conjoined to Walker’s art;

however, there is complicated pleasure that *may* be derived from Walker's gallows humor. Of course, such "fun" does not diminish the profound social significance of Walker's treatment of slavery. I suggest Walker's use of camp (in some of her work) presents an overlooked and misunderstood point of access into the continuously significant consequences of American slavery. Indeed, it is worth repeating that her work does not trivialize the shame and horror of slavery, but rather offers a possibly new and admittedly controversial way of talking about slavery.

The connective tissue between the overlapping categories of camp, queer, and signifying present in Walker's work is that they are practices used by vulnerable populations that use humor, double coding, and performance to satirize normative practices and expectations of race, sexuality, and gender. As Jonathan Dollimore writes, "Camp thereby negotiates some of the lived contradictions of subordination, simultaneously refashioning as a weapon of attack an oppressive identity inherited *as* subordination and hollowing out dominant formations responsible for that identity in the first instance" (224). This is precisely what Walker achieves through her Black Camp aesthetic practice. Walker caustically inhabits maliciously constructed raced and gendered identities to wield an attack on those that would mistake such caricatures as authentic. Indeed, her work more broadly is a scathing critique of the politics of authenticity from multiple sides. Thus, Walker's *Gone* is an object of Black Camp because it values racial, sexual, and gender indeterminacy through a brassy and absurdist way of communicating the paradoxical power of the marginal.

The Problem of Black Uplift

Walker's *Gone* understandably ruffles the feathers of black uplift discourse. The events depicted in her installation presumably unfold under the moonlit tranquility of woodlands near or on an antebellum southern plantation. At the far left are silhouettes of a young apparently white couple; a woman and a man, on the verge of a romantic kiss. They both look to be dressed in the fashionable clothing of 19th century Southern American aristocrats. There is a pair of legs other than the woman's own underneath her dress. The man is wearing a sword that—possibly inadvertently, possibly intentionally—extends out to nearly poke a pre-pubescent black girl's bottom. The presumably black child in danger of being poked is crouched and holding a dead swan by its neck. She is showing the swan to a sitting black woman that is disapprovingly gesticulating to the child. Behind the supine black woman's back is the severed head of a man with Caucasian features. The woman is sitting in a pool of the man's blood. Beyond this woman and the severed head are a young white boy and a young black girl on a hilltop. The young girl is on her knees performing oral sex on the young boy as he extends his hands to the sky toward a thin figure floating in the air. The figure is propelled by their wildly cartoonish inflated penis. On the ground and to the right, a thin black woman joyously lifts her leg to discharge two infants from her uterus. To the right of the woman giving birth is a woman, ostensibly black, with a handkerchief adorning her head. She is holding a broom and being carried by a man in formal attire; his head cannot be seen because it is buried underneath her skirt. Obviously, this is a very charged scene that, like many camp artifacts, is designed to provoke.

Herman Gray is among the astute critics that recognize the subversive parody informing the kind of black cultural politics that is not specific to Walker. Gray writes:

> On the terrain of stereotypes […] black expressive forms operate using the tactical maneuvers of irreverence and spectacle—inhabiting and combining the most shocking, outrageous, and carnivalesque. These forms and tactics through which they are deployed produce for many a dangerous cultural politics, one that teeters on the divide between the pleasures and fun of subversion and the real politics of control, regulation, and reproduction. The political and aesthetic burden of proof faced by black artists and culture workers who draw on such tactics is decided in the end on the basis of self-reflexivity, location, and level of engagement. The artist is neither neutral nor absent, but always present and engaged. Indeed, for many artists (and the audience) this politics of self-reflection and irony is part of the fun, the point, if you will. (5)

Gray is arguing that the tactics employed by Walker and by black artists using similar strategies are undergirded by the artists' hyper-awareness of the self as performative. Walker's art demonstrates a deep awareness of the historical misrepresentation of blackness and, moreover, is too pointedly bizarre and impudent for it to be misconstrued as a factual remembrance of antebellum culture. Indeed, Gray speaks of a black cultural politics interested in manipulating the racial stereotypes that emerged from this American historical period in irreverent and outlandish fashion, and indeed this is a strong element of the "fun" of camp. And although Gray admits that such manipulation risks reinforcing hegemonic narratives of blackness, he argues that black postmodern artistic practice has reached a level of sophistication in which such an aesthetic style may be responsibly employed. However, this artistic and political practice should engender at least a modicum of anxiety in a world where a person's racial identity still affects everything from life chances to self-image. Painter and writer Robert Storr addresses this deeply felt concern and the way it relates to Walker's work. Storr quite

sensitively outlines the risk of clumsy artists reinforcing white supremacy with such a strategy but argues that Walker's art manages to sidestep this problem. In other words, Walker's decision to lampoon racist perceptions of black people through outlandish performance should be alarming; however, the elegant dexterity of Walker's engagement with such loaded material should be acknowledged. Indeed, Walker's work enables the spectator to recognize the lingering power of racist/racialist mythos in American life. Storr suggests that a lesser artist interested in re-coding stereotypes would not be able to convey the dark comedy, terror, shame, and ambivalence of a shared past that reverberates into the post-Obama moment. However, this article suggests that Walker's work isn't *merely* parodic or satirical. The "carnivalesque" and the undermining of power relations through self-reflexivity and performance that Herman Gray observes in Walker's work are also part of the political progressiveness of camp. Fabio Cleto writes:

> It has in fact been possible to trace a convergence between the camp scene and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, for the two share hierarchy inversion, mocking paradoxicality, sexual punning and innuendos, and—most significantly—a complex and multilayered power relationship between dominant and the subordinate (or deviant) and finally the whole problem of how far a 'licensed' release can effectively be transgressive or subversive. Just like the carnivalesque scene, while inverting the principle of normality, camp invokes it, for camp presupposes the 'straight' sense that has to be crossed, twisted, queered. (32)

One dimension of Cleto's "straight" sense is the increasingly common-sense acceptance of racism as something that the nation has moved beyond. Walker "crosses" this assumption through a re-examination of the "multilayered power relationship between dominant and the subordinate." The master/slave hierarchy created in antebellum America that continues to impact the present is the most prominent and consistent power relationship explored in Walker's work. Moreover, Walker *queers* the

straight (black uplift) approach to challenging and exposing this lingering imbalance of power by excavating anti-black iconography to illustrate how much these buried caricatures still shape commonsense perceptions of black people, although black uplift discourse would rather conceal this iconography. Indeed, *Gone* and much of Walker's later oeuvre moves beyond mere parody and satire because of the highly stylized and absurdly artificial imagery; it's "carnivalesque". Indeed, I highlight here the aspects of camp within Walker's *Gone interested* in the "mocking parodoxicality," "hierarchy inversion," and "sexual punning" that Cleto describes as strong elements of camp. However, I argue that in *Gone,* such qualities should be viewed as a critique of the white supremacist and black uplift perspectives that would only take Walker's imagery at face value, and that this connects Walker to a longer genealogy of what I am calling Black Camp.

Here, it would be helpful to briefly rehearse black uplift rejection of Walker's art. Black uplift discourse represents the "straight" and favored method within Black Studies of to confront questions of blackness. In relation to the work of Walker, the Black Arts Movement legend Betye Saar, who is roughly thirty years Walker's senior, has been the most visible advocate of the black uplift artistic position, launching a letter-writing campaign aimed at stopping Kara Walker's work from being exhibited in museums across America. Indeed, Saar's well-recorded letter writing campaign is understandable, but participates in a BAM logic of respectability that sometimes reinforced the very codes of creative stricture that it claimed to be against.

The Black Arts Movement played a powerful and necessary role in challenging the supposed superiority of European American artistic standards. Indeed, in the words of art historian Lisa Gail Collins:

> No other African American cultural movement has revolved so entirely around the purging, from the African American psyche, of racial self-hatred, the internalization of anti-black ways of seeing and thinking. Clearly the visual culture of the Black Arts Movement directly underscored the new ways of seeing. (8)

However, 'purging' carries disquieting meaning for those that question the value of purity, and perhaps even uncomfortable resonances with eugenicists and Social Darwinists' investments in racial purification in early 20th century America. Certainly, BAM and the visual work that emerged from it necessarily affirmed the beauty of blackness, but the directives of critics and artists like Larry Neal and Betye Sayre to expel whiteness from the black psyche discount the heterogeneity and enduring plurality of black ways of thinking.

Much of the criticism from black artists and observers of Walker's ascendancy in the predominantly white art-world is based on the expectation that black representations need to be unambiguously positive. For example, artist Howardena Pindell edited the book *Kara Walker No, Kara Walker Yes* that collects some of the writing of Kara Walker's black dissenters. In 2009 Pindell also organized a public event that allowed these critics to speak out. The tone of this event was mostly accusatory. Artist Theodore Harris accused Kara Walker of portraying slaves as "enthusiastically submissive." Harris also denounced Walker's art for allegedly "mocking artists in the emergency cultural coalition who in an ironic twist made it possible for Kara Walker to exhibit her work in

museums." Harris's estimation of Walker's work is that it is "pro-mammy art" and "a move to degrade the potency of revolutionary art." Journalist Gloria Dulan-Wilson claimed Walker has "deep psychological problems […] and for all of us that have been traumatized we say to you sweetie seek professional help." Wilson is convinced of Walker's sickness and wonders "what can we do to help the sister get whole again? Because she is not whole." The logic of black uplift discourse informs these statements. Such logic contends that black artistic representations should be noble, heroic, revolutionary, and uplifting as part of a struggle against anti-black racism. This 'respectable' blackness struggles against anti-black racism through the assortment of cultural tropes that have helped blackness achieve moral cogency and authority in the face of erasure and debasement. Moreover, black uplift aims to speak to an imagined collective that everywhere experiences such struggle in the same way. Indeed, the art that these critics demand is 'art' carefully selects the appropriate responses to that shared experience. Walker's critics demonstrate that there is a real investment in the idea that black people, with a few minor differences, are the same, and those that depart from a cultural politics that is not obviously about uplift, revolution, or even religion need to be monitored, corrected, and ultimately excluded. The late Stuart Hall called this the "first moment" of black cultural politics when, "the 'black experience,' as a singular unifying framework […] became hegemonic over other ethnic/racial identities" (443). Hall was critiquing the dominance of a spurious monolithic blackness that pretends to speak for every person within the imagined community. However, Walker's artwork upends the authority of black cultural protectionists who either implicitly or explicitly defend the

sustaining sameness of the so-called black experience. Walker's decision to make work that is intentionally disturbing and sometimes morally ambiguous is a decision to advance a project that shares the intellectual objective of what Hall calls the "new" or "second moment" of black cultural politics. It is a moment that ushers in what Hall described as the end of the innocent and essential black subject. Hall writes:

> Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction. Namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are *the same.* (444)

Thus, Walker's visual art is a reflection and continuation of this new cultural politics that is possible when we question binaries and grand narratives as the only legitimate way of articulating the complexities of being black in that it queers and confounds *any* straight definition of blackness.

The White Racist/Racial Imaginary

Due to Walker's Black Camp approach, her art is generally seen as out of sync with vindication aims. However, Toni Morrison's brilliant literary criticism *Playing in the Dark* may help unpack how Walkers' work sardonically challenges the white racist imaginary. Morrison provides an extended discussion on the "Africanist presence" within early American literature. Indeed, Morrison interrogates the ways in which white American writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe used blackness as a trope to articulate their fears, desires, and anxieties about the new world. Blackness was a rubric

employed to demarcate the unknown from what was presumed to be knowable: the European immigrant self. However, there was a creeping fear that the stability of whiteness was illusive. Morrison writes, “The ways in which artists—and the societies that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a ‘blank darkness’ to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme in American literature” (38). In other words, the use of black bodies to represent complicated and potentially dangerous emotions and situations (a blank darkness) is a pronounced feature of not only early American literature but also the construction of white American identity. Morrison suggests it is through the debasement of black bodies that whiteness is corralled into stability.

Walker also recognizes the imaginative dimension at play in constructions of blackness and how white supremacist perceptions utilize blackness to create immutable categories of racial distinction. Moreover, embodied blackness becomes a physical space for white racialists/racists to explore antisocial impulses because of the debased position of blackness within the imaginative framework. Morrison writes:

> Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (38)

Morrison’s insights are important to this discussion because the imaginative is exactly what Walker performs within a Black Camp aesthetic. Indeed, Walker’s work coincides with Morrison’s critique of the white imaginary, representing as it does the site

where white viewers continue to project their fears and desires. Specifically, Walker's characters burlesque white supremacist *imaginings* of black people. In other words, the logic that supports Walker's art is very similar to Morrison's exploration of the white racial imaginary. For instance, in public conversation Walker stated some of the motives and intentions of her art:

> The question was how could I turn this feeling that I had become a *blank space* into which people projected their fantasies into something concrete? What about the possibility that I might reflect those fantasies back into the projector's unsuspecting eyes, and cause them to want to face the shame of (our) collective psyche? And how could I do it politely and seductively? Would it be possible to fill in the silences in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*? Would it be possible to give structure to the lives of the cardboard Nigger Wenches who populate pornographic racial fiction? The Tawny Negress of white supremacist lore? What would I project into the imagination of a coon-show Rastus or the "wicked" pickaninny Topsy? (3; emphasis added).

Walker discusses blackness in the white imaginative frame as a "blank space," while Morrison very similarly describes this kind of blackness as a "blank darkness." Walker's aim is not to reify these distortions, but to encourage conversation on the American psyche through the very difficult and painful re-articulations of blackness that happen when she assumes the identity of characters like "Nigger Wench." Walker's project, if it could be said to have a definable goal, is to confront American slavery and expose how it continues to shape contemporary understandings of blackness. By performing absurdist caricatures of blackness, caricatures that become anti-racist when examined through a black camp lens, Walker caustically undermines colorblind political logic that studiously ignores the many racist meanings we still imbue to blackness.

Many of these themes come together quite brilliantly in Walker's first work, *Gone*. *Gone with the Wind*, the 1936 novel by Margaret Mitchell and the 1940 film

inspired by it (that Walker satirizes via a Black Camp aesthetic), needs no introduction to most; its status as a well-known American cultural object/phenomenon allows Walker to reintroduce and deflate southern plantation mythology. Philip Core described camp as "a lie which tells the truth," and Walker's *Gone* uses the lie of racist iconography to expose the truth of antebellum depravity (81). Indeed, the lie that is foremost in Walker's acerbic radar is the lie of southern romantic purity. In *Gone with the Wind,* this lie is magnified for weepy melodramatic affect. The man and woman that begin the scene on the far left might be Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler from the novel. But more importantly they are figures of white southern power, prestige, and glamour.

Initial criticisms of the novel and film mostly avoided any sustained inquiry into plantation culture glorification. Even as recently as 1983 critic Richard Harwell wrote:

> If it (Gone With the Wind) does not fit the history of the Civil War as revisionists since her time have seen it, Margaret Mitchell's view does fit the view that was the Southern view for many years and itself has a validity as history. To put it another way, it is that great desideratum of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an unbiased history of the war from the Southern point of view. (xvii)

Moreover, Harwell does not include a critical black perspective of *Gone with the Wind* in his compilation of criticism on the text and the film. Such a glaring omission can only express his accord with Mitchell's project of plantation glorification and a very troubling disregard for the descendants of slaves. In this way, *Gone with the Wind* still lives in the American imaginary as a tragically beautiful statement on the loss of white Southern grandeur as it supposedly existed in antebellum America. Indeed, the myth of white southern majesty continues to circulate through the sweeping romantic images of the popular film version of the novel.

Walker's version of *Gone with the Wind* takes a decidedly campy and acerbic knife to this toxic American myth. The swooning southerners are adorned in the symbols of their wealth. The woman wears a billowing and fashionable dress. The man leaning in to kiss the young woman appears to be in a uniform that suggests he is in a position of military authority. Perhaps he is a high-ranking confederate officer off to command his troops to protect the southern way of life. The idyllic intimacy between the man and woman is thrown into harsh and satiric relief by the chaos unfolding right behind their backs. Of course, the enraptured couple remains oblivious to the surrounding degradation. It is their idealized romance that Walker uses to address the contiguous counter-universe that props up the couple's lifestyle and ability to 'act' in-love. The figure beneath the Southern Belle's dress *could* be a young slave child literally elevating his/her mistress so she may perform the romantic act. In other words, the child underneath the Belle's dress is the physical/psychological support on which the southern couple depends upon to enact their corrupt fantasy. The couple, in order to preserve their fantasy, choose to turn away from the exploitation that creates the psychological and material conditions for their desire and status. In this way, *Gone* reveals more about the construction of white American identity than the caricatured blackness that constitutes the remainder of the scene. In Walker's words, "Whiteness is just as artificial a construct as blackness is" (3).

The Vagaries of Indeterminacy

During an interview that focused on *Gone*, Walker was asked how much of Mitchell's novel influenced her first silhouette. Walker talked about her preconceived

notions about *Gone with the Wind* and how some of her suspicions about the novel's racism were confirmed after reading it. However, she also admitted something else:

> My expectation, as I said, was to go in and be sort of horrified and disgusted with representations of happy slaves or ignorant slaves. The Mammy figure is both soothsayer and does everything to please her white folks. And I went into my reading of the book with a clear eye towards inserting myself in the text somehow. And the distressing part was always being caught up in the voice of the heroine, Scarlet O'Hara. Now, I guess a lot of what I was wanting to do in my work, and what I have been doing, has been about the unexpected. You know, that unexpected situation of kind of wanting to be the heroine and yet wanting to kill the heroine at the same time. And, that kind of dilemma, that push and pull, is sort of the basis, the underlying turbulence that I bring to each of the pieces that I make. (2)

Art critic Mark Reinhardt has suggested that the Southern Belle on the verge of kissing the soldier "could just as well be the Negress named by Walker's title" (113). The Southern Belle's profile is ambiguous enough to make this speculation hold. However, it is not necessary that the spectator be convinced that the Southern Belle is biracial because the camp inversions of the "historical romance" seen in the relationships between other figures in the tableaux still mock the purity of the Southern Belle and her gentleman. However, if Belle *is* bi-racial, it gives that primary relationship and subject of Walker's sharp ridicule *unexpected* pathos. Indeed, if we entertain such a possibility, it would be an artistic gesture in the spirit of Cleto's reading of the term queer. What this means is that identity is seldom an either/or ontological certainty. Rather, a queer conception of identity leaves space for contradictory, ambiguous, and indeterminate expressions of self. The connection of this queerness to Walker's *Gone* may be illustrated through a quote from Harriet Jacob's slave narrative. Walker places these words from Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* on one of her text cards to comment on black women using their

sexuality in extremely coercive conditions: “The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (290). In other words, Harriet Jacobs was a real-life historical subject that, under powerfully coercive conditions, consciously used her body to escape the more intolerable cruelties of slavery. The assumption queered through Walker’s representation of the Belle is that she is *only* a victim. Specifically, Walker *may* be linking Harriet Jacob’s reality with the Southern Belle/Negress of *Gone* to argue for the queer indeterminacy that also characterizes post-black conceptions of identity.

The pre-pubescent black girl performing fellatio on the pre-pubescent white child is yet another provocative and initially startling scene from *Gone*; however, when viewed as a camp inversion of the meanings accorded to the couple at the beginning of the vignette, one can see the satirical humor once the shock subsides. I suggested above that the Southern Belle on the verge of a kiss with the Southern gentleman may be bi-racial. If we follow this conjecture, we might see the young children engaged in sex acts upon the hill as funhouse distortions of the polite southern romance that sets *Gone* in motion. The children offer a comically vulgar contrast to the regality of the older couple’s moment of intimacy. In other words, the children could represent the older couple at some earlier stage in the tainted southern courtship. Is it a moment of innocent childhood sexuality or the incipient stage of malevolence undergirding the adult sexual situation? Once again, resorting to binaries to understand Walker’s work is inadequate because identity is seldom a matter of either/or. Black Camp is a vehicle for postblack understandings of self

that account for this complexity. In other words, Walker is bravely asserting that there is no such thing as an “innocent” black or white subject, although Walker’s *Gone* is always a powerful opprobrium of racial chattel slavery and the dysfunctional behaviors that emerge from its anti-black logics.

The black female figure raising her leg to give birth is *Gone*’s most disturbing camp performance of blackness. Here, Walker presents an image of a young, thin, visibly black woman cheerfully raising her leg to allow two babies to comically drop from her uterus. The charged image is meant to sardonically comment on the supposed extreme fertility of black slave women, while never losing sight of the dehumanizing historical institution where the stereotype emerged from. This image is also a sly reference to the character Prissy from the novel and movie. Prissy was a slave subjected to a violent and humiliating rebuke from Scarlet O’Hara for lying about being a midwife. Of course, the film and movie predictably obscure the many reasons why an enslaved person may practice deception, thereby shamelessly perpetuating the myth of black incompetence. In Walker’s piece, Prissy’s seeming inability to assist Scarlet with ushering in life is viciously camped. If camp has been employed as a strategic maneuver that embraces stereotype to demystify assigned identity through humor, then Walker is doing something remarkably similar with the figure of the birthing woman. Indeed, the figure is an intentionally ludicrous depiction of black femininity designed to caustically foreground a stereotype that has not yet vanished despite the minor cultural gains of the civil rights movement. In Walker’s typically brazen fashion, she humorously unearths what has been politely but insincerely buried: the trope of subhuman black women procreating at the

expense of the state. Of course, such a racist caricature disguises how slavery depended on the systemic rape of black women for the unpaid workforce that such sexual violence produced. However, for detractors like Sayre and Pindell, the satirical humor is too often misperceived as an earnest recreation of black identity. Philippe Vergne writes, "Walker's sin is her humor, which she uses to tear holes in our cognitive understanding of the world [...] she uses humor –against all catechisms, against the catechism of her community—to undermine all expectations about her role as an African American female artist" (24). To be sure, Walker's absurdist version of black parturition is an anti-racist mode of self-defense and self-distancing from the malicious stereotype of black hyper-fertility. However, Walker's typically darkly comic manner threatens the good taste of black uplift. Walker employs humor, a strong feature of camp, to display her contempt for all those that would fence her creative vision—both black and white—and assume to *know* her. Esther Newton writes:

> Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable. Not all references to the stigma are campy, however. Only if it is pointed out as a joke is it camp, although there is no requirement that the jokes be gentle or friendly. A lot of camping is extremely hostile; it is almost always sarcastic. But its intent is humorous as well. (107)

Walker very caustically and uncomfortably embraces the stigma in a clearly ironic way that becomes savagely funny when viewing it as an example of camp.

Figure 2.2: Gone: An Historical Romance as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart (1994) [DETAIL] Sikkema Jenkins.

The figure with the ridiculously enlarged penis propelling him—or her—through the air as if he/she were a float is the other camping of blackness that deals directly with stereotyped black sexuality, however the image also explores the power of queer indeterminacy. The gender indeterminacy of this figure is the most traditionally queer element of Walker's camp vignette. The slender figure with hips suggesting a female physiology also appears to be pregnant with the protruding phallus. Therefore, the androgyny of the floating figure is a dual critique of both traditional southern/antebellum gender roles *and* the sexual stereotypes affixed to black bodies. Accordingly, Judith Butler writes, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (363). Indeed, the gender ambiguity of the figure is part of Walker's general effort to destabilize bourgeois southern social order through the theatrical

undermining of the ‘straight’ dynamic that the couple at the far left of the vignette attempt to enact. In other words, Walker exacts revenge on multiple oppressive hegemonic categories through the enigmatic gender identity of the floating figure by aestheticizing gender and sexual indeterminacy. As seen in the writing of Butler, such a refashioning of gender identity is in strong contradistinction to the way gender is frequently positioned as something inherently stable within heteronormative culture.

Moreover, the giant penis attached to the floating figure camps white racialist imaginings of black male sexuality. Walker’s use of “sexual punning and innuendo,” along with the extreme artifice of this representation, connect her vignette to camp discourse. Walker caustically takes aim at this stereotype. To be sure, the myth of the big black penis is inextricably tied with reconstruction era vilification of black men as unchecked sexual menaces to white womanhood. Indeed, white male sexual anxiety about black men was the political pretext for the horrifically violent disenfranchisement of black people in postbellum America. Despite the violent consequences of the myth of the big black penis there is a crude flattery that some black men, pun intended, ‘hold onto’ in an anti-black social context where Richard Pryor famously quipped, “shit you done took everything else mother fucker.” But as discussed above, the backhanded ‘compliment’ extended to the criminalized yet desired black male body is interestingly not the case with the other caricature in *Gone*, the birthing black woman. There are no social prizes or psychic benefits attached to the stereotype of black female hyper-fertility. Such hyper-fertility, like that of the comically tumescent black penis, suggests a hyper-sexuality and all the carnal delights that the white gaze attaches to such sexuality.

But in a patriarchal and sexist context where black women have been sexually victimized because of this dangerous misconception, it is *even* more physically and emotionally detrimental for black women to live with the image of hyper-sexuality (however this is not to say that black women cannot have subversive fun with the stereotype as Walker seems to do). Because of the privileges of patriarchy and the ways that gender could sometimes work to the benefit of black men, the ostensible big black penis, though threatening to the white racist imaginary, also enjoys a contemptuous renown that black men would exercise to claim symbolic weight in a gendered world. Even so, the myth of black male hyper-sexuality *could* be used as capital, while the myth of black female sexuality is *often* a scourge in a patriarchal setting. Hence, the positioning of the black male figure with the grotesquely engorged penis *above* the grounded, comically birthing black woman underscores the constructed social distance between the two figures. This is not to suggest, however; that black women are restricted from camping racist assumptions about their bodies as a strategy for emotional and material survival that Walker illustrates. However, the key argument within racist/racialist conceptualizations of black sexuality is that black sexuality is animalistic and a gross departure from the human. The sexual stereotypes affixed to black bodies, stereotypes that continue to circulate, made it easier for antebellum whites to rationalize social and sexual exploitation of their property. However, Walker is suggesting that there is also a complicated value within these sexual stereotypes; there is a queer indeterminacy. Walker is of course aware of the ways that stereotypes of black sexuality can be ambivalent and ambiguous sites of pleasure for black people who play out such social/sexual roles.

Walker is without a doubt aware of the deeply contested site of stereotyped black sexuality. Indeed, I think that in her imagery in *Gone* and in her subsequent work, Walker pays excruciatingly close attention to the ambivalence inside of such performances. For what if the black female subject *is* sensual, seductive, and fecund? What if a specific black woman (*possibly* the Southern Belle in *Gone* as Mark Reinhardt suggests) enjoys her body and enjoys some of the slippery, messy power that comes from an extravagant performance of such sexuality? Although the birthing woman in *Gone* is an exceedingly outrageous (anti-racist) *stereotype of the stereotype* of black female sexuality, what if a particular black woman enjoys the complicated, contradictory, and tenuous power that comes from an extravagant performance of that constructed identity (Rihanna, Lil'Kim, Niki Minaj)? What of the black male that lacks sexual prowess or can't claim to possess huge genitalia? Does he live with a secret shame? What if he does live up to these expectations and performs such an identity? Walker seems to suggest that in the world of desire these things matter even when we wish them not to and may vex even the most sophisticated students of sexual and racial politics. The question that some of Walker's art may aim to answer is "what does the desiring black subject do with the imagery if he or she takes pleasure *and* pain from them?" The answer could lie in black experimentation with camp as a theoretical tool that may alleviate at least some of the psychic burden of these stereotypes in a way that does not diminish the inherent pleasure of sexuality.

Rashidah Ismali-Abubakr is an example of an African American critic gingerly embracing a similar perspective. What begins as firm criticism of Walker evolves into a complex meditation on pleasure, pain, sexuality, and blackness. Abubakr states:

> Kara Walker does not take responsibility for what happens on the other side of the canvas, nor does it move us in a humane way towards recognizing the humanity of all people [Walker's art] insulates an image that is already imposed on all of us, black, white, Asian, Jewish…we all have these images deeply ingrained in our psyches. Where does she take it? She could challenge us but she adds to it the element of sex and she adds to it a psycho-sexual dimension that triggers sado-masochistic responses in us. Some people are aroused by that. I do not condemn it or condone it. That's just a reality. And she understands it and that is the power of art. If it is erotic, if its powerful, if its focused, it makes us feel.

Abubakr is not fully committed to her view that Walker is irresponsible. In fact, everything that Abubakr says after the accusation of irresponsibility seems to betray her critique of Walker. When Abukakr discusses the sexual complexities of Walker's work, Abubakr is trying to formulate a stable and coherent assessment of Walker's work. However, much of Walker's work is a deliberate undermining of these modernist categories. At least a portion of Walker's work, and *Gone* in particular, seems to be suggesting that identity is queer in the post-modern sense that Cleto discussed as performative, situational, and multifaceted. The racial and situational indeterminacy of Walker's southern Belle figure attests to this.

Moreover, Abubakr seems to understand that a potential result of art is that it can elicit feeling. However, she also perhaps unintentionally suggests that it is not a requirement that black art has to elicit unambiguously positive feeling. Abubakr seems to believe it is unfortunate that black artists are held to a different standard than their white peers. Indeed, to expect all black art to conform to such a formula once again strips us of

our complexity. It may be true that a respectable black artist would want to put such images to bed, but maybe Walker does not think such issues can rest since we all know the bed isn't only for sleeping. Nevertheless, one cannot miss the angry mocking tone of her caricatures. It is angry because Walker has recognized that her racial body was a blank space for other people's reductive fantasies and fears. In an interview Walker admits:

> I got interested in the ways that I almost wanted to aim to please… and fulfill these assumptions and associations with blackness. I became very submissive and subservient to myths about blackness, the [kind of] blackness that's exotic, animalistic, or savage; or noble and strong and forceful—worth putting on display, something grander than grand. (1)

This culpability does not sacrifice anger. They, in fact, commingle and complicate black humanity. Walker does not ignore the disease of white supremacy or the reality of black complicity. Indeed, she sarcastically highlights the continuing significance of race as it exists in our most private interactions. Walker brazenly examines the taboo and, what is more, refuses to shy away from the troubling and fascinating power of indeterminacy.

Black Camp is the artistic vehicle that Walker uses to undermine the power of at least two kinds of discourses—the white racist imaginary and black uplift/respectability politics. They are not the same and one is more deleterious than the other, but both theoretical narratives attempt to circumscribe the possibilities of blackness and Walker's use of Black Camp fiercely resists the stifling politics of black uplift discourses while also challenging lethal white supremacist imaginaries. The macabre, yet anti-racist humor of Walker's dual critique is most legible within a queer of color critique that connects

camp and signifying through Black Camp and illustrates how the techniques and qualities of both traditions are performative weapons that come into sharp focus to serve the vulnerable in ways that are undertheorized. Walker manages to bridge this gap in a startling way that will continue to dazzle fans and befuddle her critics.

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Chapter 3

"Flip(ping) the Camp Script: Flip Wilson and Black Camp"

"What you see is what you get!" was the best-known line from Flip Wilson's most enduring and brilliant creation "Geraldine." The catch-phrase and character comes from the eponymous 1970s variety television program *The Flip Wilson Show*. The line is sardonic and ambiguous—as it comes from the lips of Wilson, the show's star, dressed in drag. Is Geraldine's statement to be taken at face value? The line is supposed to indicate a commitment to unapologetic transparency. Geraldine has nothing to hide and her refreshing candor is a significant dimension of the appeal of the character. At the same time, Geraldine is *a role* that Wilson is playing and this is always clear to the audience. It is a role that permits Wilson to discreetly introduce some of his most acerbic critiques of anti-blackness. However, might the role, this admittedly hyper-affected performance of black femininity, be closer to the "real" Wilson than the audience understands? The *ambiguity* of Wilson's performance of Geraldine interrogates common sense understandings of gender, especially black masculinity, in ways that depart from the tradition of vaudeville for which female impersonation is a frequent aspect. Indeed, Geraldine is closer in spirit to black queer articulations of drag than the history of vaudeville. In other words, the "too muchness" of Geraldine coupled with her very conscious destabilizing of gender, and pointed critiques of racial inequality mark Wilson's performance as Black Camp.

Geraldine is perhaps Wilson's most enduring comic *and* political creation. Wilson performed this character in full female drag. A reddish wig, usually a colorful miniskirt,

heels, lipstick, comprise a full ensemble of the codes that communicate a vibrantly sexy cis femininity and were put to use by Wilson to create Geraldine. Wilson modulated his voice to sound higher pitched. This pitching is in contrast to many of his vaudeville contemporaries that maintained their regular, but still performative masculine speaking voices to remind audiences that they were not "really" women. Drag chronicler Roger Baker writes:

> Many black male singers from *Little Richard* and his contemporary Esquerita, to Prince and Michael Jackson have chosen to utilise a drag of the voice, the falsetto, as well as adopting an androgynous look and the most popular black television star during the early 1970s was Flip Wilson, a male comedian whose best loved creation was Geraldine Jones. (241)

Indeed, all of Wilson's gestural flourishes and bodily markers *proudly* communicated a confident, sexual, cynical, working class, and stylish black femininity. Black audiences were already primed for Geraldine, because as this chapter will briefly rehearse, black drag ball culture was a feature of black working class experience, and a source of ambivalence for churchgoing and middle class blacks. Black folks recognized that Wilson was camping.

In addition to Wilson's exaggerated yet deadpan commitment, his outrageous and humorous flamboyance are constitutive elements of camp discourse. Indeed, humorous flamboyance were techniques of vaudeville, but distinguishing characteristics like Wilson's genuine respect for the character (opposed to vaudevillian contempt) and the playful sexual *indeterminacy* make Geraldine much closer to the politics of camp. Geraldine's explicit and implicit critiques of anti-blackness suggest Black Camp more than vaudeville or the mainly black heterosexual comic traditions that Wilson emerged

from, as not all chitlin circuit performances (The Chitlin Circuit were the informal segregated sites where black entertainers and audiences could gather) were rooted in such critique. Moreover, this was a drag performance that for a long time has been a contested yet visible dimension of black cultural life.

Flip Wilson and the other subjects of my work counterpoint camp scholarship that erroneously assume camp is both constructed by, and exclusively for white male subjectivities. For instance, Carol-Anne Tyler writes, "Camp…is really a white bourgeois and masculine fetishistic imaginary" (51). Such a position discounts the influence of Black Camp innovators like Little Richard, Rudy Ray Moore, and Ru Paul and most recently visual artist Mikalene Thomas to name a few. These figures have indelibly stamped American popular culture with their campiness. The white inability to imagine the complexity of black subjectivity and the continuous enormity of black contributions to how we understand identity cannot be overstated. Such a position also negates that women are not merely objects of camp, but active participants in its construction and dissemination.[26] It is also important to mention how tremendously popular Wilson and his best-known character Geraldine were fifty years ago. Indeed, to be as successful as Wilson was (in drag) in an anti-black and heteropatriarchal society is a remarkable feat. Especially when considering that Wilson's drag has genealogical roots in dubious American entertainment traditions.

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[26] Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp From Mae West to Madonna.* Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 6–7.

Vaudeville and Blackface Minstrelsy

Drag was an integral part of many vaudeville performances and vaudeville is rooted in the Blackface Minstrel Show. From the beginnings of vaudeville, it was a mostly white and male dominated exhibition. It reigned throughout the early to mid 20th century and before hip comics like Dick Gregory, Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby, Joan Rivers, and Mort Sahl brought a less stagey and more sophisticated brand of comedy to American audiences. Vaudeville wasn't only primarily comedic, but was a collection of entertainment acts under a single banner that might include music, acrobatics, pyrotechnics, or whatever else the promoters thought the public might readily consume. Drag was often a strong feature of many performances; however it was usually predicated on mockery rather than tribute to constructed femininity. Audiences understood that male performers wearing dresses were men, but audience pleasure emanated from the ostensible spectacle of incongruity between the performer's assigned gender identity and his often "unconvincing" presentation of femininity. For instance, one of comedy legend Jerry Lewis's most popular routines was his drag performance of Carmen Miranda. The character functioned simultaneously as gender and racial drag. Indeed, Carmen Miranda, ironically, may have been camping stereotypical assumptions about Latina femininity through her stage identity. In other words, the beginnings of this specifically American brand of drag was a strong feature of vaudeville and is rooted in the blackface minstrel show and the forms' lasting significance is difficult to overstate, as I have discussed earlier.

Female Impersonation as Art

The blackface minstrel tradition deployed impersonation of all types for insulting laughs that rationalized racial and gender hierarchy within the United States. However, some female impersonation, at least for a moment of time within mainstream American culture at the beginning of the 20th century was an earnest and respected art form. Julian Eltidge was the most popular female impersonator. Eltidge was a figure loaded with contradictions and as such illustrated the spectrum of American audiences' feeling about drag as an artform. Julian Eltinge with great sincerity and formal mastery wanted to make female impersonation a respected artform in the United States, much in the same way that Kabuki is a cherished expression of drag in Japan. Indeed, Eltinge was a *serious* performer that sold the illusion with aplomb (Senelick 134). To be sure, there was a commercial impetus tied with the emerging cosmetics industry of the early 20th century that made Eltinge a success. The sexist idea was that "if a man, and a large man at that, was capable of turning himself into an attractive lady, there was hope for all but the most deformed woman" (Senelick 308). Beauty creams, powders, and other products were pedaled to women seeking to emulate Eltinge; to ironically be more "womanly." Nevertheless, there was some open homophobic criticism of Eltinge and "He (Eltinge) made a point of distancing himself from the gay subculture and any hint of "perversion," overcompensating with macho behavior offstage—fist fights, beer drinking, boxing, horseback riding" (Senelick 134). This kind of self-conscious and stereotypical male behavior was used to conceal reports that "he (Eltinge) had an intimate and enduring relationship with a male sportswriter which almost erupted into scandal" (Senelick 310).

Therefore, Eltinge would break character and speak to his audience in his regular "male" speaking voice. However, Wilson never broke character as Geraldine to remind the audience of his apparent "maleness." Nevertheless, Eltinge was inviting audiences to delight in gender masquerade and thus was questioning the very stability of meaning attached to the categories of "man" and "woman" and doing so for quite a while with unprecedented success, and on some level established a stage for Wilson's impersonation and the celebrity that resulted from it.

While Eltinge remains a fringe pop culture figure, he still enjoys more renown than black drag artists from the same historical period. For example, very little is known about black drag performer Thomas Dilward. He worked under the stage name Japanese Tommy and was one of the first black performers to work with an all-white minstrel troupe, the popular "Christy Minstrels." Indeed, Dilward, like Wilson, broke white supremacist economic and social barriers while still laboring within an anti-black entertainment industry. Dilward also may have participated in Orientalism as can be inferred from his stage-name.

Little is known about his stage-act other than he performed in drag and was very popular with his audiences (Hill and Hatch 120). It is not known if Wilson was aware of Dilward before he began to craft the character of Geraldine, but nevertheless Dilward is a precursor even if there is scant information regarding Dilward and the nature of his stage performance. It is reasonable to assume that Dilward's Japanese Tommy was a mostly mocking portrayal of blackness, femininity, and possibly Asian identity. This critique is due to the inherently racist and sexist context of blackface minstrelsy and its progeny,

vaudeville. However, it might be generative to allow for inconsistencies, gaps, and polyvalent meanings within Dillard's performance as a black man impersonating a woman. According to black theater historians, Hill and Hatch, "Japanese Tommy assumed the role of a prima donna" in many of his performances (120). To be a "prima donna" or the lead female singer in an opera, is to conduct oneself with exaggerated importance. Often this self importance is viewed as unmerited and has sexist implications. Dillard's grandiosity is unearned in this anti-black, misogynist, and homophobic social context, for Dillard via his drag, is representing multiple and intersecting degraded identities. Although Dilard was playing this role for laughs within a highly coercive framework, it might be plausible to infer that he enjoyed the pomposity of the act because it allowed for alternative interpretations. Whether the audience recognized the prima donna behavior as a put-on or not, it is fun to imagine Dilard prancing the stage in grandiloquent fashion—launching a glib riposte at an interlocutor or an audience member seeking to humiliate him for his racial/gender identities. The performance permitted Dilward to express a non-binary way of being: to express an Otherwise via Black Camp. Thus, it might not be an imaginative stretch to consider how the similar performative instabilities of Geraldine and Japanese Tommy allowed for polysemic meanings to accrue in their racialized and gendered bodies. Like Japanese Tommy, Geraldine also brandished a confidence that others might read as similar to a "prima donna," but in Geraldine's viewpoint (and Wilson's as well) she was "a queen" in the least demeaning sense of the word.

Drag and Black Audience Response

Drag balls were a rich and vibrant subculture of African American life beginning in the late 19th century in places like New Orleans and New York. Drag Balls were criticized, but also tolerated by the Harlem intelligentsia. However, Harlem respectability politics didn't constitute what was popular. Indeed, up into the time of the beginning of the modern black civil rights movement, drag balls were no unsubstantial part of black public life. This partly explains the immense popularity of black musical icon Little Richard who "was the first star to bring self-conscious camp into rock and roll" (Baker 241). Richard's theatrical gender indeterminacy are certainly elements of camp (and precede the so-called innovations of Mick Jagger, Lou Reed, David Bowie and other white rock and rollers). Little Richard became an undeniable force in American popular culture. His popularity was so immense that a generation of white musicians would claim they were directly inspired by his innovations. What is less known about Richard is that he began his career as a drag queen. Therefore, camp, at least within American contexts, has always been intimately linked with blackness.

Indeed, the Black Panther Party, an organization rooted in working- class black leadership and experience, as articulated by the prescient and under-theorized voice of Huey P. Newton, speaks to Geraldine's legibility within black working-class settings. Wilson's performance is reflective of the anti-homophobic position Newton was fostering and attempting to solidify as party creed. According to Ronald K. Porter:

> Newton's stance on gay liberation represents both a criticism and a departure from the hegemonic heterosexism and homophobia that plagued both the Black Power and Black Nationalist Movements. His (Newton's) intervention illustrates how social movements can operate with a pedagogical force—via ideological

> reflection and coalition building—that offers everyone a richer notion of humanity that directly challenges dehumanization in all its forms. In order for some in the Black Panther Party to take up the issue of Gay and Lesbian oppression, a general openness to the issue had to exist within the ideological framework of the party, and complex coalitions had to be established and maintained between members of the party and persons who were involved in the burgeoning Gay Liberation Movement. (366)

Although Newton's message was met with some resistance, his position reflects a refreshing counterexample to the pervasive idea that heterosexual black male political militancy is always homophobic and sexist. Newton, as an important historic intellectual voice of the black working class, demonstrates the elasticity of black working-class attitudes towards non-heteronormative black people in the communities they shared. This elastic attitude is reflected in the black communities of the Hill District in Pittsburgh. In these communities, black men performing as women became an even more visible and celebrated form of entertainment that captivated interracial heterosexual audiences and often collapsed class differences as well. This brings me back to the point I am stressing about Geraldine in relationship to black audience reception. Black folks "knew" Geraldine as one of their own; as a gender non-conforming black male. Geraldine is a truth-telling and sexually desiring black woman, a member of the working-class, and a trickster. Geraldine's familiarity to black people did not guarantee unanimous acceptance from the always constructed and contextual black community, but Wilson's performance was widely legible within much of black cultural and social experience. And what is undertheorized within the Geraldine performance is that a significant amount of the positive recognition from black people is connected with our familiarity with gender flexibility/instability within our diverse communities. As comedian Chris Rock would

later humorously chastise his mostly black audience during a stand-up routine, “Ya’ll need to stop being so homophobic. Everyone in here (referring to the audience) at least got a gay cousin. You knew he was gay then […] he just didn’t have anybody to be gay with” (Chris Rock, Bigger and Blacker).

This receptivity to queer identities was especially more visible within the black working class. According to Thaddeus Russell:

> African American working class culture was far more open to homosexuality and non-heteronormative behavior than was the black middle class which led the movement, or than white culture generally. This black working-class openness was one indication of a broader evasion of the repression required of “good Americans,” as black homosexuals came to represent all the elements of African American working class culture that civil rights leaders identified as obstacles to the attainment of citizenship. (Russell 103)

Therefore, it is not coincidental that Wilson’s Geraldine found a mostly receptive working-class black audience already accustomed to these kinds of stylings. It is also important to remember that black sociality, no matter how respectable it attempts to make itself, always exists outside of the normative. Therefore, black working-class attitudes towards black queer identities are ensconced in flexibility. Indeed, there is a broad disregard for how they are viewed by white social observers. Consequently, black working-class folks typically did not view black queerness and black queer gatherings such as the drag show as inherently deviant. This is not to suggest that there was not also exclusion, harassment, and sometimes violence directed at non heteronormative blacks including members of black society now recognized as transgender. However, there was no singular communal response towards the black queer community. Indeed, black social

elites expressed a modicum of tolerance and condescending amusement for female impersonators and drag queens in places like Pittsburgh's Hill District.[27]

The lack of a stable and cohesive black communal response to black queer social existence allows for an entertainingly generative speculation about the gender identity of "Killer" and a chance to consider an Otherwise. Killer was Geraldine's romantic partner that is frequently mentioned, but the audience never sees. One way to understand Wilson's performance of Killer is to imagine, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that Killer was a transgender black male (or a black woman with a masculine gender presentation). Wilson's performative indeterminacy allows for this kind of speculative Otherwise. Although Wilson's show precedes critical contemporary attention to gender pronoun fluidity and the expansion of those terms to those long excluded from accessing them, Geraldine and Killer could be understood as a cis femme (or trans female) and trans male couple. Perhaps Killer is a Drag King? Additionally, Wilson's Geraldine could be understood as a black femme lesbian woman and Geraldine's partner "Killer" a name that, in its mildest and least literal expressions, denote an aggressive disposition or action. Perhaps she was a "killer" in the boxing ring or something of the like. However, Killer could certainly be associated with a masculine gender presentation style. A speculative possibility to entertain regarding the pronounced flirtation but lack of consummation with male guests might hinge on the possibility that Geraldine is never seriously interested in them. This speculative possibility could be because Geraldine is a lesbian committed to

[27] Grantmyre, Laura. "'They lived their life and they didn't bother anybody': African American Female Impersonation and Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1920-1960." *American Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2011, pp. 983–1011.

not only her partner Killer, but also the political investments attached to such a relationship. That Geraldine is maybe a lesbian cis gendered woman is just one interpretive window of many. This critical speculation is dependent on the narrative framework we employ to view Geraldine. These facets are what makes Geraldine both camp and queer: the humorous and playful *indeterminacy* of her/his/they're identity.

Scholar Kara Keeling might be instructive here on the openly wondering if Killer is non-binary because she describes black lesbian alternative forms of sociality. This framework describes how Geraldine and Killer rely upon these alternative forms as they encounter exclusion and punishment for their refusal to enact heteronormativity. When considering Geraldine and Killer in this queer context, it might be productive to understand that their affective labor is also an element of black female improvisatory labor. These elements have connections to the labor that sustained enslaved men and women, in addition to the labor they performed that enriched slave owners and white America (Keeling 148). Geraldine performs working-class jobs that consist of clerical work, bagging groceries, and other menial work. Enslaved black women labored teaching their children to read if they could and reimagined domestic labor distribution. Enslaved black women also devised strategies to escape, fought their rapists/owners, and generally tried to sabotage a system intent on dehumanizing them in violently gendered ways. Keeling writes:

> Just as slaves were forced to "improvise" forms of community and sociality that fulfilled some of their needs, black women 'in the life' forged a black butch-femme paradigm, a working class economic and social arrangement that emerged as one of the ways of accommodating their needs and erotic interests. (148)

The labor that Geraldine and Killer perform, if we take them to be a queer couple, does not exist outside of this narrative and historical frame. The offscreen social spaces that Geraldine and Killer may inhabit are sites like the drag ball.

Indeed, Drag-balls were ways for black and brown folks to access some of the glamor of hegemonic culture. Drag balls were also oppositional practices rooted in the embodied experiences of queer black and brown working-class folks. If the Lindy ball was the public space for zoot suiters, then the drag ball, like the Lindy Ball, was also a way for black people to as Robin Kelley suggests in a different yet overlapping context, "contest dominant meanings ascribed to their experiences and seize spaces of leisure, pleasure, and recuperation"(80). It is plausible that Wilson seemed to know that these forms were subversive re-articulations—or Otherwise Worlds—of dominant culture values that operated as implicit critiques of white capitalist heteronormativity. Literate black audiences of all class backgrounds understood this, while white audiences might have only been seeing a crude black femininity rendered through the performative logic of vaudeville drag vocabulary. Wilson's Geraldine being simultaneously glamorous and working class is a testament to Wilson's overlooked performative sensitivity and delineates his attention to historical details lost on uncritical audiences irrespective of color.

Nevertheless, some black male spectators committed to hyper masculinity may have been partially correct in their viewpoint that Geraldine was a popular performance with white spectators because a visibly queer masculinity was less threatening to white spectators deeply afraid of black male heterosexual bravado. Thus, Geraldine was a way

for white spectators to have control over the specter of black male heterosexual assertiveness by having Wilson “be a woman.” This viewpoint might be responding to a genuine anti-black technique; however, the argument is still at least partly and problematically rooted in a black cultural nationalist and heteropatriarchal framework. However, Wilson’s comedy existed between the tensions of straight black middle-class thirst for mainstream representation that paid attention to cultural blackness, while also managing to address white racism without too strongly reinforcing “negative” stereotypes. However, black working-class audiences got to see some of their experience reflected with more affection than judgment and took less conscious pride in Wilson’s representational trailblazing. Black queer audiences received all the interpretive freedom they needed from Wilson’s Geraldine. Indeed, it may have been only a macho-hetero black cultural nationalist audience that may have been in earnest admonition of Wilson’s ostensible effeminacy via Geraldine and the feeling that his brand of humor did not do enough work to hold white supremacy accountable in the public sphere.

Flip(ping) the Script

What is interesting about Wilson is the way he juggles the expectations of both white and black audiences, all the while knowing he would never fully be able to fulfill the needs of both audiences. Accordingly, to say that Wilson was apolitical is a misunderstanding of him as a performer, as I have illustrated through describing black responses to black drag culture. But to allow that Wilson was less threatening to white audiences than his outspoken contemporary Dick Gregory is closer to reality. Of course, this made Wilson an acceptable candidate for being the inaugural black comedian with

his own television sketch program on national television in a deeply anti-black country. However, to also insist, as some critics have, that the character of Geraldine was a ploy to emasculate black men and reproduce offensive stereotypes of black women for the amusement of white spectators is to miss the audacity of Wilson's subversive tactics (Bogle 156–161).

Indeed, as a comedian, Flip Wilson was doing a little bit of everything; perhaps attempting to please too many according to his detractors. Wilson scholar Megan Sutherland uses her term "the aesthetics of ambivalence" to describe the layered meanings of Wilson's performance within a cultural setting. This ambivalence coerces Wilson to never make his white audiences feel too uncomfortable with his blackness or any critique rooted in such blackness. Therefore, Wilson frequently imbued his performances with subtle acknowledgment of the cultural specificity of his racial origins and experiences while at the same time laboring to develop comedy that would not too forcefully disabuse white audiences of an unearned innocence. According to Sutherland, the *aesthetics of ambivalence "*refer to any strategy or discourse that the show employs to inscribe a full range of conflicting viewing positions, interpretive possibilities, political sensibilities, and audience demographics into its ostensibly singular address" (xxv). Indeed, Wilson's Geraldine most specifically becomes a sort of trojan horse for critique in circumnavigating a myriad of positions. Wilson's political objective was to disarm the white audience with the *supposed* foolishness of a black man in women's clothing before exposing racialized and gendered disparities that black audiences would immediately recognize; while blinkered white audiences would miss the irony altogether. In other

words, Wilson shows that he was in conversation with some of Newton's sexuality and gender innovations in leadership within the Black Panther Party. I would like to illustrate the polyvalent strategies employed by Wilson as Geraldine to show how he could address multiple audience expectations while considering; at least as Geraldine, never providing white folks or cis gendered men (black and white) an ounce of self- abnegation.

For this purpose Flip Wilson's album "The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress" and several sketches from his influential television show will illustrate the aforementioned points. However, before the close analysis of these objects, perhaps a brief discussion of Flip Wilson's biographical history might shed additional light on his art, and more specifically his most well-known creation, Geraldine.

Wilson had an especially disadvantaged childhood that would come to shape his attitude towards romantic relationships, money, and ambition in complicated ways. Wilson was born Clerow Wilson in New Jersey on December 8th 1933 and he was the tenth of twelve children. He lived with his parents Cornelia and Clerow Sr. in a cramped four room apartment in one of the poorest and informally segregated sections of the city. Wilson's father was a janitor and his mother the primary caregiver. The burden of primary caregiving within such a confined space, in combination with dire poverty, took an enormous psychological toll on Wilson's mother. She elected to choose a different life With another lover and left young Clerow and his other siblings in the care of her beleaguered husband. Cornelia's decision would reverberate throughout Wilson's life as he found himself in one unpredIctable and often dysfunctional living arrangement after another. These conditions resulted in Wilson never being able to fully trust any caregiver

and often wondering where his next meal would come from. Wilson found himself in the care of abusive and withholding foster parents more than once in his life. He would sometimes find his way back to his alcoholic father, who he would later learn was not his biological father. Thus, adding more coal to the flames of hatred for a mother that had abandoned him and led Clerow Sr. to believe that he was Clerow Jr's birth father. The irony of young Wilson being named after his deceived paternal caregiver was even more insulting and exasperating. Clerow Sr. must have eventually realized that young Wilson was not his biological son, but it didn't prevent him from treating him any differently than his siblings. This quality endeared Wilson Sr. to young Wilson. Wilson escaped his life of poverty and erratic/abusive adult supervision through joining the military. When Wilson later found his first small taste of economic success, he would consistently send money to his father.

The entertaining bug bit Wilson as a child. Entertaining was a way to command affection and attention in a family environment where there was little of it going around due to circumstances within and outside of family control. Jim Crow and other severe structural racism established the conditions for an assortment of family problems that might have been diminished in a more forgiving and less anti-black society than the United States. Nevertheless, Wilson received his first taste of unmitigated audience approval in a grade school play where he filled in for a female classmate suffering from stage fright. He played her part with cis gender female identifying markers and brought the house down. Wilson would later say, "that was my first gig—playing a girl. The play

became a comedy, and it was a smash"(qtd. in Cook 8). It was of course not the last time that Wilson would in his words "play a girl."

The Grammy winning 1970 comedy album "The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress" was Wilson's first brush with mainstream success. It is a quaint, and somewhat dated recording that bares its teeth whenever Wilson slips into the female voice that would become Geraldine. It is in these performances of female characters,such as the preacher's wife or the commanding Sarah Johnson, that his female characters frequently humble, deflate, and question male interlocutors. Drag queens often take this position in their shows: a strong element of camp and its spirit of triumphant and satirical gender reversal. The sympathy and admiration that Wilson seems to show towards his female characters is curiously at odds with how he felt about the primary injury of his childhood. If Wilson came to hate women because of his compassion for his cuckolded father, it is difficult to identify this scorn for black women in these performances and in other performances of Geraldine. To be sure, Wilson's performances are not devoid of sexist generalizations about women. However, he also gives his black female characters an easy confidence that allows them to challenge male authority. There is a tension within these performances that indicate Wilson might have been accessing feminine pieces of himself that were excised from his interiority, as he learned to cope with the loss of a mother; a figure he must have loved despite her abandonment. Part of this coping was surely accepting the invitation to participate in the widespread cultural practice of misogyny. Indeed, when Wilson played the dozens with neighborhood boys he admitted, "I always won. I could beat anybody talking that shit because they couldn't hurt my feelings about

my momma. I hated the bitch" (qtd. in Cook 13). On the other hand, Wilson's Geraldine and the predecessors of the iconic character belie this disdain for women in interesting ways. It was the same Flip Wilson that hated his biological mother that wrote this ode to a foster mother, an ambivalent figure in his life to be sure. Wilson used his allowance to buy a card for her which read: "Mother—to one who bears the sweetest name and adds luster to the same, who shares my joys and tears when sad, the greatest friend I ever had, no other could take the place of my mother" (Cook 17). Wilson, as an adult, later tries to undermine the sentimentality of the gesture towards his foster parent through enumerating the many grievances he had about women; thus, doing the emotionally unchallenging work of marking specific behaviors the unique and inherent characteristics of women rather than human flaws that people of all gender identities might share. But within this spectrum of feeling from Wilson, there lived, and based upon the performative consistency of Geraldine, a need to honor black women. To give them a voice in an anit-black and sexist culture where they are ignored, silenced, jeered, sentimentalized and brutalized. Wilson says of Geraldine, "She may not project the image of a refined, sophisticated, lady…but she's honest, she's frank, she's affectionate…Geraldine is liberated, that's where *that's* at" (Wilson 1). Surely, one could mine Geraldine to fit multiple interpretive frames, from a narrative of flippant mockery, affectionate tribute to black womanhood, or something else. Indeed, many could be happening at once. But I suggest Wilson's Geraldine is most interested in the pleasures of indecipherability. The multiplicity of meanings one can extract from Geraldine are largely intentional. A powerful current running through Wilson's performance language is the pleasure of

playing an ambiguous role: a role that I believe often implicitly makes critiques of gender stability and anti-blackness via its murkiness, and again, these are elements of black camp.

For instance, in an early routine from the album "The Devil Made Me Do It" (DMMDI), Wilson shares with the audience a supposedly overheard incident on a plane trip. He's discussing how great quotes can be very inspiring. The greatest quote from a woman he says is from Sarah Johnson. He describes Ms. Johnson at an airport and upset with personnel for misplacing her luggage. Wilson shifts into the voice of the woman speaking angrily at an airline pilot. The voice is high-registered and confrontational and with all the verbal quirks of what would become Geraldine. She exclaims, "If you can fly this plane 600 miles in the dark and find Los Angeles, you can find my bags!" The audience erupts in laughter. There is quite a bit to unpack in this seemingly facile joke. First, out of all the powerful words uttered by public women throughout human history, a fictionalized quote selected by a furious woman concerned about lost belongings at the airport is insignificant, and its insignificance is part of the joke. Indeed, that this "greatest quote" by a *woman* who is preoccupied with such a mundane occurrence rather than about matters of societal importance; the kind of quotes made by powerful and influential men like another figure in this same routine is clearly sexist. Wilson's Sarah Johnson quote is not intended to be a "serious" example considering the context. These are not the powerful words of a figure like Sojourner Truth posing the rhetorical question to white male and female audience members of "and ain't I a woman?" However, on some level is Wilson channeling Truth's confrontational energy? This is certainly not an attempt to

place Sarah Johnson's words of frustration and challenge about her lost baggage on the same footing of Truth's cutting intersectional exposure of white feminists occluding the experiences of black women while simultaneously challenging patriarchal demands that women remain silent. However, Wilson's vocal intonations as Sarah Johnson call to mind black female wit and intransigence in the face of institutional neglect and disrespect. She is communicating directly and forcefully to a probably white male pilot that she, like other passengers, are deserving of his cordial professional attention. In addition to this demand, she is questioning the pilot's capacity to do his job. It is a remarkable role reversal, as black women have historically been placed in service positions while having their abilities mocked and questioned at the same time. Wilson is admiring the intrepidness of Sarah Johnson, as he is also limiting the range and impact of what great words a black woman would have to say. Nevertheless, whether it is deliberate or not Wilson exaggeratedly deploys blackness and femininity to humorously undermine situational roles commonly understood as static: a consistent element of Black Camp. Moreover, this is a contradictory position from a figure with misogynist views rooted in childhood trauma.

Black Campy Role Playing

There are numerous examples of Wilson as Geraldine brazenly flirting with famous male guest stars. The scenes are laden with sexual double meanings and Wilson's co-stars are always enthusiastic collaborators. For example, Harry Belafonte, playing the island persona that brought him international fame, appears in season 4 episode 2 and Geraldine tells him, "if it weren't for Killer you could be the top banana in my bush!"

The bawdiness of this thinly veiled sexual invitation plays on tropes of hyper-black sexuality. However, there is also a mocking distance from the legend of black sexuality. Wilson and Belafonte are not so much pandering to white expectations of black sexuality as much as they are satirizing these very assumptions. In addition to this satirization of assumptions, there is a destabilizing of gender and sexual desire that is occurring between black men performing in "drag." Indeed, the Harlem born American music super-star and activist Belafonte performed the role of a Caribbean lothario. Belafonte's ethnic roots are certainly Jamaican, but also Scottish and Jewish. He was a student of black American musical traditions such as gospel, blues, North American Jazz, as much as he was a student of Calypso—the Afro-Caribbean style that would make him famous. Belafonte exaggerated a Caribbean accent in many of his successful recordings and performances. Very similarly, as much as Belafonte was clearly calling upon personal experience and his family roots to inform his most well-known stage persona, Wilson was also accessing certain personal and geographical roots/routes to create Geraldine. To be sure, these characters are referring to a significant—yet unstable—aspect of personal identity and experience, but also simultaneously these outsized exaggerations were *invented* to negotiate multiple audience expectations within a context where blackness is always a loaded category. Belafonte and Wilson's drag does not diminish the beauty of the "real" sources of themselves and the others that their performances reference. However, there is a palpable sense of tension being released by the camping of identity on stage and the salaciousness of Geraldine's language is a tribute to black female blue comics like Moms Mabley. It also is equally comfortable and rooted in the spectacle of a drag show emceed

by the raunchiest drag ball queen. What a specifically black male queer audience gets to take from this performance, as well as many other instances of Geraldine holding fabulous court, is black men openly flirting with one another on national television and getting away with it.

One of Geraldine's most entertaining and memorable sketches was with legendary white crooner Bing Crosby. Crosby was near the end of his career by the time he appeared on *The Flip Wilson Show*, but he was still famous and held in generally high regard by the American public. At this stage Crosby was probably most admired by the generation that grew up hearing his distinctive and comforting baritone on the radio. Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and the Jackson 5 had eclipsed him in national popularity, but for the generation of early radio listeners (and 1940s film fans) Crosby was an entertainer that was equal to their stature during his career peak. Crosby was certainly most popular with white America. Nevertheless, like many white 20th century singers, he was directly influenced by black musicians including Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. In 1972 when Crosby was a guest star, Wilson had arguably *the* most successful television show in America and was even a bigger household name than Crosby. None of this was lost on Wilson, who was a serious student of comedy and American entertainment history. Wilson seemed to delight in having Crosby as a symbol of white Americana on *his* television show and not the other way around.

But before describing and analyzing Geraldine and Crosby exchanging jokes, it is interesting to note that Wilson's stage queerness was not restricted to his performance of Geraldine. The episode guest starring Crosby is a strong example. There is a sketch that

finds Wilson and Crosby looking dapper in three-piece suits donning cowboy hats and singing western standards. It recalls the special chemistry that Crosby enjoyed with frequent collaborator and comedy icon Bob Hope. Surely, as a child, Wilson saw some of *The Road* films that Hope and Crosby made throughout the 1940s and 1950s.It was understandably difficult for Wilson to have imagined that he would one day be singing and joking with such a performer on stage and on his own very successful show. The compelling and fleeting moment of homoeroticism happens when they begin to sing "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," a wistful western styled standard. Wilson unexpectedly takes Crosby by his hips and arms. Wilson positions Crosby so his back is to Wilson. Wilson then brings Crosby close to his chest and rocks rhythmically back and forth. Wilson holds Crosby by the left shoulder and wrist, and they sway together in unison before playfully reversing roles. Crosby gets particularly close to Wilson when it is his turn to lead him and hugs Wilson by the waist. Wilson then clasps Crosby's hands and his eyes bulge in an expression (maybe his eyes are not the only organ bulging?) that, is again, deliberate in its ambiguity. It is an expression of surprise on Wilson, but it is difficult to explain it away as purely unpleasant surprise. As Wilson's eyes widen, he continues to sway and smile, and Crosby's grin is infectious, and amorous. Indeed, Crosby and Wilson on a national stage flirting with one another as equals is subversive stuff. Wilson, although sometimes is remembered by black activists as a milquetoast appeaser of the white power structure managed to simultaneously queer and "blacken" one of America's whitest and straightest Hollywood icons. Later in the episode, Wilson reprises his Geraldine character in a much more explicit camp romp with Crosby. Crosby plays a member of some sort of

Fraternity Club. He sits alone at a bar table on the set stage and loudly demands a drink. Classic brassy striptease music begins to blare and Geraldine unhurriedly and provocatively saunters down a gloriously long flight of stairs. Geraldine is wearing a hot pink Playboy Bunny server costume along with pink heels. The costume, arguably outlandishly objectifying, shows off Wilson's bare legs and arms which look smooth to the touch. Geraldine makes it down the steps and sultrily approaches Crosby's table. Crosby is smiling the entire time before he mutters, "Seeing is believing." Geraldine retorts, "Look all you want, what you see is a lot more than what you gonna get." Crosby and the audience erupt with laughter. This exchange of words demonstrates a lot of what Black Camp is about. The act of looking pretends to secure comprehensive meaning of the subject observed. It is through the authority of the gaze of the looker that knowledge of the race and gender of the observed can be determined and joined to immutable categories of distinction. The looker sees and then attributes meanings to the observed—meanings that ostensibly reflect the coherency and stability of the object– yet, also works to help understand who they are in relation to the observed. As Wilson sardonically exclaims, "What you see is what you get." What Black Camp does is caustically destabilize the idea of a knowable black subject through disguise, irreverence, exaggeration, and gender indeterminacy. This also throws the stability of the white spectators identity into confusion. When Crosby says "seeing is believing," he is obliquely referencing the white supremacist and heteropatriarchal gaze that has established still powerful (yet unstable) hierarchies of race and gender. Geraldine's clapback is telling Crosby "I am more than what you see, and I will withhold these selves

because you are undeserving of such revelation." What is more, Geraldine, and by extension black folx more generally, anticipate the white gaze and its need to secure validating meaning through it. Black awareness of the gaze can be immobilizing, but what black camp does is use it as the gift that Dubois described as "second sight." Black Camp helps black folx retain psychological leverage in this ongoing battle between blacks and whites in America. Dubois's early 20th century assessment, "the Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land" rings unfortunately true (Of Our Spiritual Strivings 11). When Bing Crosby attempts to impose himself on Geraldine, attempts to touch and dance with her without Geraldine's consent, Geraldine very assertively admonishes Crosby. "Don't touch me! Nobody gets to touch me!" Crosby is forced to respect Geraldine's personal space and autonomy, much in the same way that the police were forced to respect transgendered women and men and drag queens at Stonewall. There is something cathartic, even exhilarating in watching a black cis man dressed as "a woman" command respect from a figure like Crosby in this scene. Crosby is baffled, then desirous, then humbled by the power of Black Camp.

Flip Wilson is often forgotten in today's entertainment world and sometimes treated as antiquated. What I hoped to show is just how innovative, refreshing, and potentially productive Wilson's work, especially the character of Geraldine, can be in a moment with surging academic and personal interest in the spectrum of gender performance. Also, importantly; Wilson is part of a larger black cultural influence on how we understand camp. Too often camp is understood as white and male, and Wilson

contradicts this narrative in an acerbic and joyous manner that should be instructive to those writing histories of camp without a colorful palate. Black reclamation of camp provides a corrective to such glaring omission, but also gives black cultural workers and critics leery of essentialism a vehicle to truly be themselves.

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Conclusion

What I have tried to show the reader is that Black Camp allows us to see and represent alternative ways of being for black people through the lens of camp. Black Camp accomplishes this task through inflation, flattening, satire, theatricality, absurdity, incongruity, and mocking spectacle. Through Black Camp's assault on gender normativity (1), it also critiques racial capitalism and celebrates the ongoing ability of the black working poor to find creative and life-giving ways of investigating questions of blackness (2) and providing ground for fringe voices within black expressive culture to demonstrate ties to black vernacular tradition (3). With respect to Afro-Pessimism; Black Camp is in closer alignment with the imaginative work of the Otherwise. Black Camp lives the present and acknowledges the past but thrives in the open and sensual speculation of tomorrow. This necessitates a re-evaluation of what black as an identity category can constitute, yet while also being mindful to make use of the anti-white supremacist criticality that developed in the violent disruption of the middle passage. Black Camp, even as it anticipates uproarious and uncomfortable laughter within its theoretical application, is serious work. It is serious to imagine a world where blackness is an unrestricted discursive force that acknowledges the conditions of its emergence and survival on the global stage. Can we loosen these ties of blackness in a way that allows it to take whatever shape is next without being hemmed in by the tyranny of the white gaze that we as black folks give too much of our collective power? To paraphrase the late Tupac Shakur, survival was never intended for us in this racial capitalist system. So Black Camp, as a subset of queer of color critique, kicks down the table and questions the

normative rather than demanding a seat in the center. Because we don't like what the chef is bringing.

My selected objects of study may not, at least on the surface, seem to fit within the parameters of the Black Radical Tradition. However, upon closer inspection we witness Kara Walker's Black Camp from *Gone* powerfully explode the myth of the Happy Plantation Slave and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* as sharing in the black vernacular communal concern of witnessing the violence of anti-blackness and resisting its grasp. Moreover, Walker, although she herself does not identify as queer, operate within the purview of queer of color critique as she is disrupting our normative understandings of canonical work (Ferguson 138). She takes a knife to the myth and yet also ruefully examines the brutally coercive circumstances that produced a contaminated cross-racial desire which haunts *Gone* and much of her other work. But for all the accusations from her black critics that her work betrays the black community (as if there is only *one* black community), Walker's personal and feminist testimonial to the barbarity of slavery and its impact on her psyche as a descendent of enslaved people is no less an object of *communal* resistance than Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl but* delivered in an acerbic manner that employs the techniques of camp. It may not always be detected in her finished projects, but the affective process of creating her hilariously horrific imagery is laden with black creative joy at finding innovative ways to examine ongoing racialized and gendered pain rooted in history that we are still contending with.

Ligon's forays into Black Camp are more explicitly queer than Walker's. Family, and who gets included and excluded in both the literal and figurative sense of the word, is examined by Ligon through a Black Camp framework with sardonic aplomb. So much of anti-black discourse has concentrated on excluding black people from the family of "Man" that it is only understandable that the historical task of black cultural labor has been an extended argument for inclusion into the broader human family; although Sylvia Wynter has done outstanding work complicating such an overdetermined category. Indeed, what is refreshing and satisfying about *A Feast of Scraps* and *Malcolm 1* that I selected as objects of Black Camp from Ligon's impressive oeuvre is that it is less concerned with the politics of representing black people's fitness for inclusion in the human family and instead reorients the argument to explore how black people are excluded from their very own biological families. As a professed child of the "Black is Beautiful Movement," Ligon may have been directly inspired by Sly and the Family Stone's macabre dissection of the prototypical respectable black family in their song "It's a Family Affair." Sly sings, "One child grows up to be somebody that just loves to learn/And another child grows up to be somebody you would just love to burn." Ligon's *Malcolm No. 1* brilliantly explores the respectable black familial discomfort and/or violent rejection of the LGBTQ+ members of our immediate and distant families, although there has been considerable improvement in this arena since Ligon's infamous *Malcolm No. 1* and *Feast of Scraps* graced gallery walls in the late 1990s.

The contradictions of the queer black psyche attempting to negotiate a place within black respectable family logic are supremely evident in the best work of Ligon,

and it is not a coincidence that Black Camp serves as the analytic tool for this work. The tension between Malcolm X as the macho and militant "manhood" of black people and his time as a queer dandy are painted as discrete categories of time, bifurcated between hedonistic pre-racial/religious consciousness and the period of revolutionary martyrdom fueled by Islam and black social justice movements. There is seldom conversation concerning how these periods of Malcom X's life may bleed into one another. Did Malcom's conversion to Islam and his marriage to a woman end his queer desires and activities? It may be difficult to find concrete evidence to support that Malcom continued to, at least intermittently, give voice to this side of himself; but it is also more than plausible that it remained a veiled but present aspect of his life-energy and story. Importantly, what my investigation of *Feast of Scraps* and *Malcolm no. 1* evidence about Ligon's engagement with Black Camp is the Otherwise rooted in queer of color critique by questioning revolutionary nationalisms as the primary analytic for getting free. Indeed, an Otherwise imaginary can exist where a queer Malcolm X would not elicit reactionary homophobic responses. We can work and dream for a Black Camp Otherwise where black queer folk's sexuality is enthusiastically embraced.

Flip Wilson's engagement with Black Camp had the most public support; possibly because it was able to exist within the cover of the legacy of vaudeville gender lampoon. However, this is also what makes Wilson's Geraldine so subversive. In this study I have tried to show that Wilson was able to incorporate black camp into his comedic performance to significant effect partly because much of the audience either because of repression or naivete did not recognize what they were seeing as queer or camp.

However, whether unintentionally or intentionally, Wilson was gesturing to a black camp tradition that black working class and bohemian audiences recognized as their own. Frequently Wilson's Geraldine stepped outside of mere lampoon to proffer blistering critiques of anti-blackness. What is more, Wilson as Geraldine often attached such critique to gender inflation (as opposed to a flattening) of black working-class femininity that was still informed by affection for black femme stylistic decisions. Moreover, Wilson allowed for breaks in gender stability by the convincing nature of Geraldine's joyous sexuality. Wilson's daring utilization of these techniques show how black engagement and innovation within the framework of camp was happening just as its supposed mainstreaming was also occurring. Black Camp precedes Wilson's Geraldine but his character is an interesting 20th century example of the practice happening as the multi-racial resistance of Stonewall was capturing the public imagination. In this way, Geraldine is suffused with concern for the unequal distribution of capital and how it impacts women of color more specifically. Wilson, more than my other examples, illustrate how Black Camp attends to concerns that exceed representation and addresses how the practice also existed within working class/bohemian black communities. Indeed, Black Camp thrives in these communities and collapses class and racial differences in ways that capital has a difficult (though not an impossible) time co-opting.

I imagine opportunities for future discussion on how Black Camp as a practice opens space for reconsideration of some black entertainers work as camp and why this is important. For example, rock and roll legend Little Richard's androgynous and extravagant gender performance might be read as camp. Reading Richard as camp along

with other figures such as Screamin' Jay Hawkins shows how the foundation of rock and roll music is powerfully informed by black queer sensibilities that were later adopted by white musicians like Mick Jagger and David Bowie who reaped the financial and critical rewards on the backs of queer black creative innovation. Having these kinds of discussions can illustrate the importance of queer black creative labor in developing, at least within the United States context, many of the tenets of camp.

In closing, Susan Sontag did not invent camp, but she was a voice that persuasively articulated its distinctive features. Outside of Sontag's clear historical importance of bringing awareness to camp as a subaltern cultural expression for mainstream audiences, Sontag also offsets the misogynistic assumption that women are merely objects of camp. Women are also theorists and practitioners of the form. James Baldwin is another important yet overlooked black and queer voice, when thinking about the intellectual development of camp as I mentioned earlier; because his framing of Hollywood legends like Bette Davis, is keenly aware of how camp works; finding alternative meaning and value in discarded personas/objects. My work on Black Camp is a continuation of these feminist and black intellectual contributions to a category that too often is mischaracterized as a playground for the white cis male straight hipster bored with "high culture" or the private and elitist lexicon of middle class white gay men who are the "true" arbiters of what gets defined as camp. Black Camp breaks up this monopoly of camp and makes it accessible to all those vulnerable bodies seeking to subvert normative expectations of racial and gender identity in a jubilant manner that revels in the speculation of the *Otherwise*.