

RuPaul's Drag Race: intersections between race and camp

PYTA 2015 Conference

Bluegrass Room 11:00-12:30 (90 minutes)

Materials:

- laptop
- speaker
- name tags
- markers
- large paper
- post-its or small pieces of paper

Session Plan:

- I. Welcome** **11:00-11:10**
- A. Name Tags (if they don't already have one)
 - B. Play Drag Race Music
 - C. Write three phrases/words that are characteristics of or describe camp.
 - 1. If you are lacking words/phrases, feel free to pair up with a partner or take a guess. No judgement.
- II. Sociometrics** **11:10-11:30**
- A. Inner circle/outer circle
 - 1. Extent of your experience with drag and drag performance?
 - 2. Drag name and why?
 - 3. Style or genre or aesthetic: Are you a Sharon Needles? A Latrice Royale? An Ongina?
 - 4. If you had to lip sync for your life, what song would you choose?
 - B. Four corners
 - 1. Themes chosen/synthesized from the slips of paper during the above activities. Each corner gets a theme.
 - a) Why
 - b) Example
 - c) Exceptions
 - d) How might you put this characteristic in conversation with race?
- III. Introductions and roadmap** **11:30-12:00**
- A. Short bio
 - B. Overview of the session 11:40
 - C. What is Camp?
 - 1. How does camp show up in RuPaul's Drag Race?

2. How might this show up in our communities?
 - a) Town Hall in Austin about race and drag 11:50
3. What are some things to consider when camping race?
 - a) comedy as a genre and tool
 - b) intentions, tactics
 - c) audience and reception

IV. What else? 12:00-12:15

- A. "Think, pair, share" to generate/polish questions, responses, etc.
 1. What questions/thoughts/responses are coming up for you?
 2. What qualities of your identity would you/wouldn't you camp and why?
 3. How do/don't camp and race intersect in your communities?
 - a) How might this be a site for discussion, collaboration, and/or challenge norms?
- B. Also a chance to openly invite Tweeting and posting to Facebook
 1. #
 2. @

V. Checkout: RUNWAY 12:15-12:25

- A. All in two lines making wave motions
 1. Categories:
 - a) Conference Queen/King/Royalty Realness
 - b) First time at PYTA Conference

VI. Minute Paper Feedback 12:25-12:30

CAMP

- This space is for us to parse out what we're thinking about camp - how it functions, what the areas of contestation are, etc.

CHARACTERISTICS

Camp often features cross-identificatory practices wherein the performer does not possess the Essential qualities of (nor do they identify as) the entity(ies) they are representing. This distance between the performer and the performed is maintained and facilitates the perception of the performed identity as constructed and the performer's identity as separate from their outward performance. This gap is an example of the juxtaposition often present in camp and is heightened by the use of exaggeration. All of these characteristics rely on the circulation and reconfiguration of common, recognizable referents of identity. The final important characteristic of camp is its use of humor. While this is used to make levy serious critiques of hegemony, humor is important to the resistant and empowered attitude inherent in the creation and reception of camp.

GOALS

The overall goal of camp is to expose ironies, inconsistencies, and the constructed nature of identity. As such, it is a resistant mode of subversion, and can also be one of survival. Through the use of humor, power is drained from the hegemonic structure and redistributed to the community formed among the audience members and the performer. A particular performance of camp can have an impact well beyond the duration of the performance, leaving a lasting impression of the revealed referent and encouraging the questioning of other hegemonic assumptions about identity.

CRITIQUES

There have been many critiques levied against camp, and most of these are rooted in a perception of elitism. Indeed, as camp relies on a shared bank of referents and the ability to read critique and humor, it does require a certain amount of cultural capital in order to be produced and/or perceived. This elitism feeds into the concerns about the performance of race and gender. When race is one or more of the identities performed in the style of camp, the hyperbolic nature can be argued to support stereotypes and practices of minstrelsy. Similarly, when gender is on this list, another set of stereotypes can be perpetuated. As drag often features males impersonating females in a hyperbolic fashion – and drag is a common modality of camp – this particular practice has been seen as supporting misogyny.

Finally, the use of humor in camp can be argued to undercut the seriousness of the critique that the work is attempting to pose. This important tactic and joyful approach to life can efface the very real hardships and traumas and communicate a lack of dedication. The subversion and

resistance inherent to this modality is all-too-easily silenced by laughter and the invocations of stereotypes.

INTENTIONALITY

One of the main points of contention within critical theories of camp is intentionality. While some theorists and artists are content with both notions and/or simply place more importance on the eye of the beholder, there are two separate trajectories with regard to this concept.

For some, camp cannot be created with the intention of being such, and may only be identified after the fact. This notion supports an elitist framework for camp wherein the viewer has more cultural capital than the creator. It also precludes the possibility of agency for the creator, as it assumes the camp in the work is a result of coincidence. Finally, this again reifies the power of the viewer by giving them the full responsibility of naming and claiming and completely dismissing the creator's right to do so.

For others, camp must be intentionally crafted. This notion also supports an elitist framework for camp – this time for both the creator and the viewer – as it requires both to have a particular amount of cultural capital. It again reifies the power of the viewer by making them the arbiter of both intention and interpretation.

- Camp
 - Survival strategy
 - Humorous mode of performed representation
 - Provides common ground for identification for those in marginalized communities
 - Theory around camp does not sufficiently engage race
 - It has the potential to simultaneously open possibilities and preclude them, to liberate and oppress
- Thinking points/questions:
 - How to do “damage control” for the negative possibilities of camp? Is this even possible?
 - Preparatory work before performing, how to craft the audience and their experience, etc.
 - 3 goals for a successful camp performance:
 - Don't exclude any identities, especially oppressed identities
 - Try to be mindful of any and all identities in the space
 - Signify awareness of self
 - Accountability
 - Attempt to sustain a contested space open to dialogue

The Blacker the Berry: A Pigmentocracy

Don't get me wrong, I love RuPaul's Drag Race as much as the next fierce queen, but my joy for Ru's success and the entry point she has provided for audiences into the multifaceted world of Drag does not excuse Ru from critical dialogue around the implications of her show. No T. No shade. When the legendary mother of the HAUS OF RUPANEL, Cassidy Browning, asked me to be a part of this dialogue, I was 'GAGGING' over the opportunity, but I also struggled to find a platform to interrogate race and camp within the context of the show. Yes, I've logged many hours watching Seasons 2-5, the untucked episodes, the All-Star season, and low quality youtube videos of my favorite queens in nightclubs across the country. (BTW, does anybody know how to find the first season? It's not on nextflix or logotv and I'm pissed! See me afterwards. *Thank you*). Yes, I have cried and laughed with the Queens as they reveal personal narratives about how Drag and Drag families are integral parts of their lives. And yes, even in my current community, Austin TX, I support drag performers that may or may not fit the aesthetics guidelines of RuPaul's Drag Race. But how in the hell was I going to talk about Race and Camp and Ru?

As it has been mentioned earlier, the town hall meeting that we attended this summer gave me my 'Ah Ha'! moment. The Facebook dialogue leading up to the town hall meeting was rich with numerous viewpoints on not only what Poo Poo Platter presented, but also thoughts and questions around: Who's allowed to do what type of drag? Is there a methodology to doing drag that is outside of one's identity? When does drag go too far? Isn't drag supposed to go too far? How do we define art and where is drag within that definition? Who has access? Who's visible and who's invisible? How do we hold drag accountable? Needless to say, the town hall meeting left me teeming with questions and excited to continue this dialogue. Suddenly, I realized that Race and Camp were not outside of this community conversation, but, in fact, it was at the center and we were all being held accountable.

I. Light skin vs. Dark skin

a. The title: *The Blacker the Berry: A Pigmentocracy* borrows from Wallace Thurman's book *TBTB* and language from Maxine Leeds' article "Young African-American women and the language of beauty. Both authors, along with many other scholars, write about colorism—intraracial discrimination based on skin color. Moreover, they tease how colorism is not only a hierarchy based on skin tone, but is also connected to feelings of self-worth and attractiveness, satisfaction, and quality of life.

i. "Blue Vein" societies – Franklin E. Frazier *Black Bourgeoisie*)

ii. Margaret A. Hunter ("If you're Light you're all right") "social capital" as a form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks. All of these forms of prestige can be converted into economic or educational capital.

iii. Colorism also includes eye color, hair texture, broadness of nose, full lips, and other body image facets.

GOOD AND BAD HAIR CLIP <https://vimeo.com/136433500>

II. Who can DO who

- a. When I shifted these questions to RuPaul's Drag Race, I began to hone in on the aesthetic flexibility of brown bodies in contrast with non-brown bodies. What were the physical characteristics of the queens that do well in the competition? What criteria is Ru using to assess the Queens? Queens of Color have won in the past, Other Tyra/Raja, but what about Queens like Latrice Royale or dare we forget Ms. Mystique Summers Madison (All T All Shade)? Whom made it to top 4 and has had major success after the show. Also appeared on the All-Stars season. Miss Congeniality. "I bow to you my Queen" Also, I'm going to see her tomorrow night—Eat it!
- b. How might colorism affect runway looks/realness?
- c. What identities can dark queens appropriate? How does this compare to lighter skinned or white queens?

Show clip of Raja and Latrice

III. Who gives a FUCK?

<http://www.dragulator.com/>