Our adventure with the notion of black camp began in 2010 when we co-authored a conference paper on Michael Jackson and Prince. When preparing the paper, we were surprised by an almost complete lack of scrutiny devoted to race in the aesthetics of camp. What we found even more surprising was that—when we researched the field before releasing a CFP for the issue On Uses of Black Camp—the scholarship of the last seven years has not contributed any book-length volume on the topic. This was further confirmed by the response to our call: even though the submissions were not bountiful (which is symptomatic in itself), several authors explicitly expressed a need of adding such critical perspective to the field. Although the intersectional approach that focuses on the interrelations between the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality has become a standard in cultural studies, critics continued to focus mostly on gender and sexuality in camp performances without accounting for the race factor. In one of the few essays and articles on race and camp, Pamela Robertson points out to this omission, arguing that even when analysing the famous documentary on African American and Hispanic drag ball culture Paris Is Burning (1990), scholars do not examine “how inextricably race and sex are intertwined” and “how race discourse operates in camp generally” (393). Furthermore, she observes that although critics do not explore race as inherent in or significant for camp aesthetics, they frequently tend to compare camp to black culture or blackface. Such comparisons, she argues, indicate and strengthen the assumption that all camp is white.

An example of such a comparison can be found in Andrew Ross’s classic “Uses of Camp,” where he claims that “Like . . . ‘Tomming’ in black culture, gay camp was arguably a form of defense constructed by an oppressed group out of conditions not of its own making” (“On Uses” 162). Ross’s text remains seminal in academic discourse on camp and is critically important for this issue as he refutes Susan Sontag’s frequently cited claim that camp is disengaged and depoliticised (54) and argues instead for a political significance of camp. He contends that the aesthetic had a “significant effect on the constantly shifting hegemonic definitions of masculinity” in the 1970s and 1980s (162). Yet, in his focus on gender and sexuality, Ross does not discuss the function of race, although he points to Little Richard, Grace Jones, Prince, and Michael Jackson as emblematic of camp’s function “in changing social definitions of masculinity and femininity from the late fifties onwards” (156). In a later text “The Gangsta and the Diva,” published in a volume on black masculinity, Ross makes up for the omission of race in “Uses of Camp,” and points to the significance of cross-dressing and mannerism of black male performers such as Rue Paul or Little Richard and multiethnic cross-dressers from Paris Is Burning. His explanation that they exhibit “camp alchemist’s transmutation of black female assertiveness into diva-rich parody,” however, does not fully account for all the examples of black camp aesthetics. Taking Ross’s and Robertson’s analyses as a starting point, On Uses of Black Camp aims to further develop the fledgling attention devoted to the topic and thus contribute to the filling of this lack in critical discourses of both camp and black cultures to help us better understand the reasons for such scarcity of texts on blackness and campiness and to discuss the political effectiveness of camp.

That gap in critical discourse is largely connected with the regime of authenticity that has limited many studies of black culture and constrained the black canon. Although already in 1989 Henry Louis Gates argued that it was a dead end street for Black Studies to continue its insistence on judging black writers and artists according to their “fidelity to the ‘Black Experience’” (xxii), his study Figures in Black: Words,
Signs, and the “Racial” Self did not enlarge or redefine the canon. Recently, the notions of essentialism and racial authenticity have been more explicitly challenged in G. A. Jarrett’s Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature (2006) and Kenneth Warren’s What Was African American Literature? (2011). Warren radically questions the insistence on racial unity in the post-Jim Crow era (87), whereas Jarrett contends that since the late nineteenth century black authors were expected to produce “authentic literature demonstrating racial realism, which supposedly portrays the black race in accurate or truthful ways,” which “shackled the creative decisions and objectives of many African American authors to ‘the chain of reality’” (1). In black criticism, this insistence on realism goes back already to the Harlem Renaissance writings of Alain Locke and is later recast in the essays of Richard Wright, yet it found its most univocal and powerful expression in the 1960s. As David Lionel Smith argues, “Both writers and critics of the Black Arts Movement frequently articulated the notion that they had few if any antecedents. For them, past black writing was mostly a chronicle of evasions: failures or refusals to discover and express authentic black consciousness” (96; emphasis added). Although few academics have unreservedly embraced both the politics and aesthetics of the BAM, Black Studies were founded in its wake, and accordingly, the movement had an instrumental influence on both its academic methodologies and its selected corpora. The focus on racial authenticity in black culture has led to the privileging of texts embedded in historical discourses of resistance and to the marginalisation of texts representing inauthentic, that is non-black, white-looking, or racially indefinite characters (Fabi 1-6).

This exclusion is deeply connected to the gender politics of early Black Studies as what was left out from the syllabi was a large body of mostly women-authored texts, frequently featuring mulatta protagonists. This erasure has been problematised in numerous, mostly feminist studies since the late 1980s, and works such as Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983), Hazel Carby’s Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987), Ann duCille’s The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition In Black Women’s Fiction (1993), Deborah McDowell’s “The Changing Same”: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory (1995), and Claudia Tate’s Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century (1996) opened up the canon of black literature and culture. These feminist explorations, however, did not use camp as an analytical tool.

Parallel to the intersectional approach to blackness advocated by black feminism, there emerged the notion of post-blackness, most influential in African American art. According to Derek Conrad Murray, it questions “a particular regime of representation: specifically, the history of images depicting black men in the throes of collective resistance. The visual culture of normative blackness has been defined through the representation of black men as the defiant leaders of their beleaguered communities” (4). Yet, as Murray admits, the notion is still very controversial, and many critics distance themselves from the term as it is associated with “the rejection of blackness” or “a naïveté regarding an ennobled history of struggle and resistance” (2). At the same time, he argues for the usefulness of the notion, which does not need to stand in opposition to political resistance, and in fact what it resists is only essentialist and nostalgic “hetero-patriarchal expressions of blackness” (3). Murray’s definition of post-blackness evidences correspondence to the black feminist approach and highlights its inclusion of non-normative sexualities, whose enunciation is historically connected with the tradition of camp. Black camp, with its denaturalisation of essentialist categories, challenge to fundamental notions of blackness, and especially its liberating gender and sexuality politics can be both a useful tool for the project of intersectional feminism and a significant strategy of post-blackness as defined by Murray.

A further explanation of the scarcity of academic discourse on black camp stems from its relation to pleasure. As Sontag states, it is “a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy” (65). The assumption that camp aesthetics provides uncritical pleasure is a key reason which has led Black Studies scholars to reject it as an ineffective tool. This problematic issue can be further elucidated with Susan Gubar’s analysis of Mel Brooks’s The Producers and Spike Lee’s Bamboozled. In her article, Gubar discusses the theatricalisations of Jewishness and blackness in the films and claims that while racial camp in The Producers is largely unproblematic as the Nazi perpetrators, rather than Jewish victims, ultimately become the target of the joke, the humour in Bamboozled is disturbing as the theatricalisation of blackness draws on the tradition of blackface, whose oppressive impact is still visible in...
American culture. The difference between the two films illustrates the central problematic of racial camp: it can be safely enjoyed only when it is perceived as depoliticised or easily dissociated from traumatic history. Yet when the historical context cannot be glossed over, or the theatricalisation resonates with present politics, camp performances do not offer unproblematic pleasure. In the former case, it does not exhibit the critical potential that Black Studies scholars are interested in, whereas in the latter the tension between enjoyment and theatricalised stereotypical representations becomes too sensitive for academics to address. Nevertheless, since Gubar’s text, as authors of this issue point out, there have emerged black cultural productions—such as Kara Walker’s art, Wondaland’s music, or most relevantly, a black queer comic character in the mainstream sit-com Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt—that on the one hand, use the camp strategies of theatricalisation, excess, and artifice for enjoyment and, on the other, do not evade the political realm. They represent a mode of enjoyment that has a critical potential.

Apart from its power to denaturalise the essentialist categories of gender, sexuality, and race and to deflect the racial stereotypes in a theatrical way, camp aesthetics also contains a community-building promise. Akin to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, camp reduces the distance between the beholder and the artwork as the work is enjoyed rather than revered or critically examined. On the one hand, this lack of judgment has often been dismissed as apolitical, on the other, as the authors of this issue argue, it facilitates intimacy between the artist and the beholder, who frequently becomes an active participant. Such affective audience engagement helps build a sense of community which may attract diverse audiences, generating shifts in their social interaction.

The unwillingness to use black camp or post-blackness as critical tools in contemporary academic discourse stands in contrast to the plethora of camp performances in black culture. Already in the early twentieth century, Zora Neale Hurston pointed out the “will to adorn” as a key characteristic of black expression. She claims that what white people may find in bad taste or simply grotesque stems from black people’s radical “desire for beauty” (53). “[D]ecorating a decoration” or plastering walls with a patchwork of cheap images (53) as well as a complete disregard for the regime of good taste—mentioned by Hurston—represent early-twentieth-century black camp interventions. Analogously, both Hurston’s contemporaries, such as James W. Johnson or Wallace Thurman, as well as today’s critics point to the way that in the 1920s black Harlemites engaged in fashion parades in the streets of uptown New York: “their clothes were actual haute couture, a knockoff of high fashion, or, most often, a combination of pieces exemplary of white fashion and a more African-based sense of bright color and varied pattern (Miller 199). In the second half of the twentieth century, this love of self-stylization and glamour visible in prewar black urban community made a cross-over and became widely visible in American culture. It deeply saturated the aesthetics of the disco scene, stylizations of hip-hop, and became the trademark of the black superstars, notably including Michael Jackson, Prince, and Beyoncé, discussed by authors in this issue. It has also been a key element in the less mainstream tradition of Afroturism, most famously popularised by Sun Ra and George Clinton and today recast in the productions of artists from the Wondaland label.

Contemporary black visual artists also creatively and mindfully engage with a camp aesthetic. Yinka Shonibare, a Nigerian-British artist, in one of his projects, Diary of a Victorian Dandy (1999), explores the potential of camp. Referring to this piece, Shonibare claims that “In dandyism, I found a subversive use of aesthetics as masquerade and mimicry. . . . The aesthete does not have to be reactionary. My reclamation of aesthetics has more in common with the strategies of a trickster who is utterly impossible to place because he is a fun-lover who is at home with confusion yet politically astute. Beauty is political when it is appropriated by the ‘other,’ of course” (qtd. in Griffin). “If you’ve actually lived in two cultures,” he explains, “you know that there are subtle things that are read differently. If you know them, you can choose to play on these things, titillate them, deliberately be camp” (qtd. in Hynes 65). In the American context, artist-photographer Renee Cox uses the political potential of camp to challenge the traditional representations of the black female body by appropriating the stylistic masquerade of the affluent white female (The Discreet Charm of the Bougies) and employing imagery connotative of the slave experience in her numerous photographies. What is more, in a way reminiscent of Cindy Sherman’s appropriations of classic European art, Cox provocatively inscribes herself in the canonical representations both of the Madonna and of Jesus Christ, overtly politicising her engagement with camp (Yo Mama, Yo Mama Last...
Notes on the Uses of Black Camp

Finally, as this issue demonstrates, Barkley Hendricks’s portraits and Kara Walker’s silhouettes also generate a strong political message concerning the discourse of blackness.

Although black camp has a long and complex history, there have been significant shifts in its political salience and reception. In the 1980s, Prince and Michael Jackson could be nationally celebrated because their engagement in a camp aesthetics was excitingly “off the wall” rather than explicitly engaged in representational problems when it comes to the black male body. The late 1990s controversy surrounding Walker’s *The Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* illustrates the initial public distance towards the growing political explicitness of black camp. The protesters directly related Walker’s images to the questions of historical memory and the politics of representation, thus widening the debate on how to aesthetically engage with the horrors of the African American past. Today, Walker is one of the most influential African American artists, and even mainstream musicians such as Beyoncé employ an aesthetic of excess to address the heritage of racial oppression head-on.

*On Uses of Black Camp* discusses these shifts in the history of black camp since the 1970s to today. The issue examines musical performances, fashion, and art, which are most compatible with the excessive stylistics, theatricalisation, and glamorous artifice of camp. In “Love is the Message: Barkley Hendricks’s MFSB Portrait Aesthetics,” Genevieve Hyacinthe argues that the camp stylistics that Hendricks uses in his 1970s portraits parallel the popular culture movement of MFSB in that both evoke a powerful affective reaction from their audiences and help build an inclusive, intersectional, diverse black community that has the potential to become cosmopolitan and multicultural. Our own article analyses the 1980s performances of Michael Jackson and Prince to demonstrate that camp aesthetics enabled the artists to disperse the limiting representational regime of black masculinities in a way that did not reproduce the hetero-patriarchal paradigm. We also refer to the artistic output of twenty-first-century African American performers of Queercore and Afrofuturist scenes to discuss the changes in black representation that were made possible by Jackson and Prince. In “If You Don’t Bring No Grits, Don’t Come’: Critiquing a Critique of Patrick Kelly, Golliwogs, and Camp as a Technique of Black Queer Expression,” Sequoia Barnes reads the fashion designer Patrick Kelly’s use of controversial black memorabilia as a camp gesture that subverts the racist imagery and endows it with queer coding, thus deflecting both racial and sexual oppression. Carmen Dexl and Katrin Horn, in “Beej Jerky in a Ball Gown: The Camp Excesses of Titus Andromedon in Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” examine the ways in which the camp performance of Titus Andromedon, an African American queer sit-com character, challenges the expectations of both black and gay TV presence. Brian Stephens in “Prissy’s Quittin’ Time: The Black Camp Aesthetics of Kara Walker” shows how Walker’s art challenges white supremacist discourses but at the same time defies the limitations of black uplift discourse and thus opens up the possibilities of new discourses of blackness. Constantine Chatzipapatheodoridis’s “Beyoncé’s Slay Trick: The Performance of Black Camp and Its Intersectional Politics” investigates the black queer traditions in Beyoncé’s musical output. All the cultural productions examined in this issue defy the regimes of authenticity and militancy, and thus they widen the range of possible representations of blackness. The authors of *On Uses of Black Camp* show how instrumental these works are in resisting hegemonic gender and sexuality politics, and they argue that at the same time black camp can help forge an inclusive and diverse, politically astute, black community.

**Works Cited**


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