**Episode 4: Killjoy Goes to Kamp**

Hi Folks. If you’ve been listening along, you know the drill. Here is the part of episode where I shout out to my sources and give y’all some audio cues so you will know when I am citing directly from a source.

This week we are exploring the connections between Killjoy and Camp. As always when you hear this inspirational tune…

[SFX – Killjoy cue]

You will know that I am quoting from Sara Ahmed’s Feminist Killjoy Handbook.

In terms of camp, I rely heavily on 1999’s Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader, which is edited by Fabio Cleto. The reader includes many pieces central to the field of camp studies. I will use the contributors name – like Susan Sontag, Richard Dyer, Pamela Robertson, Caryl Flinn - and the original date published to refer to the work.

When you hear this:

[SFX – Camp cue]

You will know that I am quoted at length and directly from a chapter in the reader. For shorter quotes, or general ideas, I just give a verbal shout out to the author/origin. Check the website soon, for a new section called “The Don’t Go There File” – while I do want you to go there, I’m campily winking and nodding to Ahmed… That page will include “scripts” for episodes which include citations and references.

But first – lets have some fun and get to the episode.

Episode 4: Killjoy Goes to Kamp

[SFX kids at camp]

Ah, Camp… the idyllic place we go to as kids to experience the joys of nature while making new friends, gaining independence, and building self-esteem and resilience.

[SFX record scratch]

Ah, Camp… the idyllic place we go to as queer folks with a wink and nod and our tongues in cheeks to experience the unnatural joys of gender play by being extra, too much, flamboyant, and grotesque. [SFX – queer camp]

In 1964 Susan Sontag proclaimed herself the first to describe the sensibility going that goes by the ‘cult name’ of Camp. Aptly titled, “Notes on Camp,” Sontag presents a numbered list – 58 points in all – in an attempt to “snare” the alive and powerful sensibility into words.

According to Sontag: camp is playful; it is style over content, aesthetics over morality Camp sees everything in quotation marks… being-as-playing-a-role (p. 56) and with this, it relies on one dimensional characters that are very intensely ONE thing…

NOTE #26 Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much.’ (p.59) [SFX – citation cue]

Camp is an esoteric way to be seen, and a way of seeing. It is a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of people. Accessible only to some, those who can read and perform camp wear this ability like a badge of identity.

Think, drag. Jimbo being-playing-the-role of Shirley Temple in Snatch Game of Love on Rupaul’s Drag Race All Stars Season 8, Episode 5.

[SFX Snatch Game of Love]

NOTE #16 The camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice. (p. 57) [SFX – citation cue]

Jimbo’s performance – while hitting all the iconic markers that conjure Shirley Temple in our collective memory - dimpled smile, bouncing blond curls, and, of course tap dancing – is far from artifice. Girl isn’t fooling anyone. Instead we see a deranged (yet loveable) drag artist putting their unnatural spin on “America’s Sweetheart.”

NOTE #8 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. (p. 56) ) [SFX – citation cue]

While much of Sontag’s musings on camp continue to resonate into 2024, some notes do not:

NOTE #2 To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral in respect to content. It goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical. [SFX – citation cue]

Say WHAT?? [SFX – record scratch]

Honing our lenses on systems of power, we can see how camp “provides the ‘other’ with a means of expression outside the restraints of dominant society” (Nielsen, 2016, p. 119, citing Bergman, 1993). To counter power, or to intervene against it, is to be political. More specifically, because camp highlights gender construction and performance, Pamela Robertson (1996) considers camp a form of feminist practice. You can’t get more political than that.

In addition to “depoliticizing,” Sontag has also been accused of “de-gaying” camp.

NOTE #53 Nevertheless, even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste. [SFX – citation cue]

Seriously? While definitions and examples of camp are all over the map, almost every description agrees on one thing – camp is affiliated with queer culture. In the Introduction to Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, editor Fabio Cleto refers to camp as “queer discursive architecture” (p. 35)

Others, like E.J Nielsen, hold tight to camp as a way of being – one that is inherently tied to queer expressivity – and to camp as a way of seeing, a “queer reading strategy” (Nielsen, 2016)**.** Richard Dyer argues that “camp is one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man… Camp kept, and keeps, a lot of gay men going” (p. 115). Dyer’s work originally appeared in 1976 and given how both camp and the “gay community” has changed since, it continues to ring true in 2024 in regards to a variety of queer identities within the LGBTQIA+ umbrella and beyond.

Often considered shallow or frivolous, Nielsen (2016) points to the deeper structure of camp as providing queer, political critique. As subject and object collapse into each other, camp is a disguise, that fails (Cleto, p. 80), which conceals and reveals at the same time.

As such, camp is a feminist phenomenological approach (reveals what is hidden, or which has receded in the background) – that is, the power structures that insure white, cis-, hetero, male privilege and hegemony.

According to Dyer (1976) “Camp can make us see that what art and media give us are not the Truth or Reality but fabrications, particular ways of talking about the world, particular understandings and feelings about the way life is.” (p. 115)

Two examples show both the political power, and queerness of camp. One, we’ve already heard about – Killjoy’s Kastle – where the Demented Women’s Studies Professors walked us through the Crypt of Dead Lesbian Organizations, Businesses, Ideas, and introduced us to characters like Da Carpet Muncha and The Ball Bustas. (give episode 3 a “re listen” if you need refreshing). [SFX – Bulldagger Swagger]

The second, which we’ll attend to now is performance artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s Lesbian National Parks and Services.

[SFX – clip of Force of Nature]

The artists engage the “subversive performance art strategy of using personae to create dialogue that questions established norms” (MacLatchy, p. 157).

Indeed, Park Rangers are a great strategic choice for Dempsey and Millan. Politically, it reiterates how our expectations of authority are rooted in whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity. It also brings into focus colonialism that is almost always erased within dominant narratives of nature and (home)land.

And of course, campily, they also get to make jokes about “the bush”….

The connections between Camp and Killjoy are plentiful. Some, like Flinn (1995) maintain that camp is fascinated with the “outmoded, the out of date, the artifact that is past its prime,” (p. 435)

KILLJOY COMMITMENT: I MAN NOT WILLING TO GET OVER WHAT IS NOT OVER. [SFX – killjoy cue]

Still, camp continues in the contemporary. Take badass feminist politics, explored in a 2022 book by the same name, edited by Sara Jane Blithe and Janell C. Bauer . According to these authors, “badass is a symbol of 4th wave feminists” who use gender play to reclaim badass’ normative “tough-guy masculinity” definition. Reclaimed by women, they argue, badass has become “shorthand for empowered” (Blithe & Bauer Eds., 2022)

When women take on the aesthetics of empowerment that are most often associated with masculinity or men, it seems over the top, excessive, grotesque. Reading it as camp brings to the front the unnaturalness of the privileged gender construction. Badass feminist phenomenologists ONE; patriarchy NOTHING.

Blithe and Bauer go on… “for us, badass denotes those who are unapologetic in their feminism, who will not be reined in, who take up their own power in the pursuit of social justice.” p. 3

KILLJOY MAXIM – BE MALADJUSTED; DON’T ADJUST TO INJUSTICE! [SFX – Killjoy cue]

KILLJOY COMMITMENTS – I AM WILLING TO CAUSE UNHAPPINESS; I AM WILLING TO BE INCONVENIENT [SFX – Killjoy cue]

I also hear a bit of the BRAT in both Killjoy and Kamp. You may remember Brat from a recent blog post on the Kamp Krystal Killjoy website. Brat means being out there, relentlessly yourself – self-confident and unconcerned with societal expectations;

[SFX – 360]

Charlie XCX brings brat to life by conjuring Julia Fox as a role model – we should all be “so Julia” – “pushing boundaries, no-holds-barred attitude, and raw honesty. She’s confident and unafraid to challenge the status quo”

Like the killjoy, those who are brat/so Julia are "willful subjects" who are "no longer willing to appear happy [or] to make others happy" [(p. 58)](https://www.dukeupress.edu/living-a-feminist-life). (LFL)

**Resources and References:**

Ahmed, S. (2023). *The feminist killjoy handbook: The radical potential of getting in the way.* Seal Books.

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MacLatchy, J. E. (2015). Lesbian rangers on a queer frontier. *Canadian Literature*, (224), 156-162.

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