11. Notes on Andy Cohen

KEITH BERRY AND TONY E. ADAMS

Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary esthetic judgment. Camp doesn’t reverse things. It doesn’t argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards.

—SUSAN SONTAG, “Notes on ‘Camp’”

Andy Cohen is the Executive Vice President of Development and Talent at Bravo, the cable television channel in the United States. He is also the host and executive producer of Watch What Happens Live (WWHL), a live, thirty-minute talk show that airs on Bravo five nights each week. In its ninth season, WWHL is a multi-faceted promotional vehicle for Bravo’s numerous reality shows (e.g., The Real Housewives franchise, Million Dollar Listings, The Millionaire Matchmaker, The Rachel Zoe Project, Top Chef). WWHL is also an ecstatic, communicative event that brings people together in distinct, compelling, and campy ways.

In her classic essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag (1964) describes the performance of “camp” as a sensibility that is illustrated by a love of “artifice” and “exaggeration” (p. 515). Performing camp, or “camping,” is meant to “dethrone the serious”; it is a way of being “serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (p. 527), a “mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment” (p. 530). In this sense, doing and being campy entails celebrating the “off” or “things-being-what-they’re-not” (p. 518). Sontag contends that camp is best described through the (campy) use of “tentative and nimble,” non-linear “jottings” (p. 516) rather than a more conventional, linear essay.

Sontag (1964) also associates camp and camping practices with homosexual and Jewish sensibilities. These ways of discerning and relating in lived experience often re-appropriate hostile discourse of the dominant group and...
performatively twist it in exaggerated, humorous, and seriously playful ways (Babuscio, 1977; Feil, 2013; Muñoz, 1999). For gay and/or Jewish communities, camp becomes a way to spin/reframe hostile homophobic and/or anti-Semitic texts to highlight the irrationality and ignorance of normative cultural beliefs and practices.

But gay camp is not necessarily Jewish camp; each adheres to particular coding practices that make possible distinctive ways of understanding (e.g., Halperin, 2012; Weinstein, 2006). For instance, a person using a gay (camp) sensibility might read the film *Mommy Dearest* as an exaggerated, humorous, and playfully serious text about aging, troubled familial relationships, and fame; a person who does not use a gay (camp) sensibility might read the film in more dire ways, wondering how a text about child abuse could ever be humorous (Halperin, 2012). Further, a person using a Jewish (camp) sensibility may also not read the film in a gay, campy way. As another example, a person using a Jewish (camp) sensibility might read the Broadway play and film *The Producers*—especially the song “Springtime for Hitler”—as an exaggerated, humorous, and playfully serious text about Hitler and Holocaust; a person who does not use a Jewish (camp) sensibility might read the same text as terribly anti-Semitic, leaving one to wonder how anyone could find humor in anything related to the Holocaust (Weinstein, 2006). A person using a gay (camp) sensibility may also not read the play/film/song in a Jewish, campy way. These examples point to the nuanced and perspectival nature of camp, and thus, the importance of engaging with these sensibilities in complex and contingent ways.

Cohen offers many instances of gay camp and Jewish camp, as well as ways in which gay and Jewish camps can be understood in tandem. However, in this chapter—a chapter about sex and sexuality—we primarily foreground his use and embodiment of gay camp. Throughout, we read Cohen as an exquisite embodiment of gay camp, and we recognize that others unfamiliar with this camp might read his practices as hostile and homophobic. Another project could examine how he embodies a Jewish (camp) sensibility, and how others unfamiliar with Jewish camp could read his discourse as hostile and anti-Semitic.

In the spirit of Sontag’s essay, we use 27 descriptive notes to provoke an understanding of Cohen’s ways of relating to sex, sexuality, and Gay camp. The notes are not meant to indicate a strict and linear progression but rather to play off of each other and to suggest a range of ways of engaging with Cohen (as) gay camp. We aim to demonstrate, indeed, that the (gay) camp created by Cohen offers a curious and peculiar mix of openness and revelation, confidence and awkwardness, awe and concern.

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**Notes on Andy Cohen**

1. The general impression of Cohen’s camp: Fast-paced, energetic, enthusiastic, charming, accessible, and determined; timing and creativity mark *WWHL* and characterize Cohen’s (media) presence.

2. Cohen-camp is exquisitely staged. “I’m Andy inside the Bravo Clubhouse!” he often exclaims at the beginning of *WWHL* or when returning from a commercial break. The show is broadcast from a dimly lit, small studio set in the cute designer Manhattan, New York neighborhood of SoHo. Cohen frequently mentions the location and the smallness of the studio, which holds a small audience who are typically unseen, but easily heard through their laughter and cheering, a presence that is essential to the excitement of the *WWHL* party. Although it has never been shown on air, there is a “door” to the studio, through which surprise guests regularly “enter,” only after they ring the doorbell (of course!), which he and guests hear and about which they often act surprised.

   Relationally, this context matters. Cohen’s quaint, off-grid location portrays an intimate and exclusive location of the party, to which only the initiated and invited are able to attend. With an abundance of alcoholic drinks, he and guests play, lean in and to each other (Pellas, 2011), and seek to listen and tell about the latest gossip and opinions on events from many of the Bravo shows.

   Cohen and his guests are, at once, prudish and aware of the awkwardness of the set. They visibly love being present in the clubhouse, and yet, they regularly mock its prowess; if only it were a serious talk show studio. On one episode of *WWHL*, long-time “Bravolebrity” (a celebrity from one of Bravo’s reality programs) Jeff Lewis commented about the increased volume and energy of the audience, suggesting that perhaps the studio was bigger. Lewis sniped to Cohen that he (Cohen) “must have added two chairs.”

3. A closer examination of the *WWHL* set will show the campy ways Cohen stresses a commitment to play and frivolity. The set is filled with “bad” art—or, more appropriately, “tchotchkes” (the Yiddish term for “trinkets”). Tchotchkes include a rainbow-edged collection of encyclopedias (apparently the actual books from his childhood), a Snoopy figurine, two Justin Bieber dolls (one outfitted in a designer dress), a photo of a Pomeranian (“Giggy”) owned by one of the housewives, Housewife Tamra Barney’s breast implants, two Lite Brite cityscapes (which, according to Cohen, are an “ironic nod to
those cityscape backdrops you see on other talk shows” [cited in Van Buskirk, 2012]), and the “shotski”—a ski made and contributed to the show by television talk show host Jimmy Fallon and his wife; a ski designed for *WWHL* guests to drink shots of alcohol off of together, at least once a week; and a ski which happens to be a play off of the word “tchotchkes.” “I know that some people think [the set is] kitschy or tacky,” Cohen says, “but I think it’s really beautiful” (cited in Van Buskirk, 2012).

4. In describing early applications of gay camp, Meyer (1995) argues that camp was the “performance of homosexuality” and the “means for constituting a homosexual identity” (p. 277). Newton (2000) frames “camp taste” as “synonymous with homosexual taste” (p. 23) consisting of “incongruity, humor, and theatricality” (p. 35), and Schmidt (2009) calls camp a gay sensibility comprised of “irony, wit, role play, star worship, cross-dressing, bitchiness, and a love of ‘trash’ and ‘excess’” (p. 110).

In these ways, gay camp is an orientation, a way of relating, and a way of relating to (campy) relating and relational partners. As Newton (2000) writes, “Camp is not a thing. Most broadly, it signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality” (p. 23). Like with good theatre, camp is to relate to/with/for others in situated moments in time, rooted in ways of relating typically that are meant to create camaraderie for/with others, and spirited frivolity.

5. Halperin (2012) argues that camp “creates a basis for community”; it is “consumed in company, among friends, rather than by oneself” (p. 188).

Community matters on *WWHL* and Cohen uses camp to build community: a bartender who serves drinks to fellow guests; viewers who participate in the show either via Facebook, Twitter, telephone and/or through drinking games; a YouTube channel on which viewers are invited to post a recording of themselves, participating in the camp via camping, impersonating in their own ways the dramatic personae that have helped make *Housewives* (in)famous; and others who contribute to the composition of the set, either by way of giving Cohen one of her (former) breast implants, or a picture of a dog, or by way of a gift such as the shotski.

6. An array of people participates in (the) Cohen-camp. Two guests typically sit across from Cohen in an interviewer-interviewee mode. Sometimes partial or full casts of one of the Bravo shows appear as guests.

Rarely do many shows air without at least one Brawolebrite serving as a guest. Also, rarely is there a guest who doesn’t show up prepared to camp. Typical guest responses to Cohen’s questions, and their side exchanges between each other, are succinct, pointed, and expressive and, simultaneously, sarcastic, blunt, sexual, and embellished.

7. An eclectic mix of up-and-coming and legendary Hollywood actors, musical performers, and comedians appear on *WWHL*, often alongside a Brawolebrite. Many guests are often gay male idols, including dance pop singer Kylie Minogue, whom Cohen proclaims is the “queen of the queens,” talk show host Oprah Winfrey, actress Meryl Streep, singers Cher and Lady Gaga, comedienne and talk show host Whoopie Goldberg, and soap star Susan Lucci. He hopes these visits by the biggest stars well in advance, often providing a nightly countdown of the remaining days until their appearances. For instance, he dubbed Oprah’s upcoming appearance the “Oprahalypse”; on screen would appear a campy graphic of Oprah wearing golden angel wings and floating in the heavenly skies, serene goddess-like music included. Cohen celebrates these major guests and often says that he cannot believe that such mega-stars would ever show up to his “little Clubhouse.”

8. *WWHL* also features bartenders on each night’s show, party guests who might be doing any number of bartender activities—cutting lemons, aligning glasses, or serving drinks to Cohen and the other guests. The cast of bartenders is diverse and eclectic, including Marilyn Monroe’s best friend; Chris Kluwe, the former Minnesota Vikings football star who publically supported marriage equality; drag queen Lady Bunny; MSNBC political analyst and author Jonathan Alman; *WWHL* interns; Cohen’s parents; relatives of one of the night’s guests; the Stanley Cup (hockey) and US Open (golf) trophies; Cohen’s favorite Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agent; Jared “the Subway guy”; cardboard cutouts (e.g., the character Moe from *The Simpsons*, talk show host Kathie Lee Gifford); local SoHo bartenders; and a woman who chased the Jonas Brothers (a musical group) in the street before their concert. Bartenders often have a link to the topic of a particular show, or to a night’s guest, or are promoting some product, such as their newly released book.

9. There are a dramatic number of ways that interaction happens within Cohen-camp. At any time, Cohen will interact with his scared guests, and then with the guest bartender/s (including the trophies and cardboard cutouts), and then with viewers who have called into the
show, and then with Twitter users, and then with television viewers (e.g., encouraging them, nightly, to engage in a show-specific drinking game), and then with the live audience. He typically jumps from one kind of interaction to the other, keeping up the tempo and dynamism of the clubhouse. The camp is complemented by frequent mentions of how to use social media to participate in the party, such as posting questions or comments on Cohen’s Facebook page, going to the show’s Tumblr account, or watching videos on the show’s YouTube channel. WWHL relating is current, intricate, and dynamic—the elaborately wired party provides multiple ways for attendees to engage and contribute.

10. Newton (2000) observes, “Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of incongruous juxtapositions. Either way, the homosexual ‘creates’ the camp by pointing out the incongruity or by devising it” (p. 24, emphasis in original).

Cohen (2012) calls his desire and ability to put “oddball combinations of people in one room” a “hallmark of Watch What Happens Live” (p. 56). He also writes that, on WWHL, he likes to ask “rude, invasive, and divisive” questions (p. 165), and he says that guests who do not get along make the show “interesting” (cited in Dominus, 2011).

It is beautifully incongruous to see hyper-masculine actor Ralph Fiennes, hyper-feminine actress Holly Hunter, and the always-sassy and often-efeminate Cohen juxtaposed, and, in addition, wearing pajamas for that night’s “pajama party” theme, and then, during the show, having a pillow fight.

It is pleasantly peculiar to see the pairing of the more “dignified” MSNBC and Today Show host Willie Geist with rapper Lil’ Kim. The incongruity of the two guests—guests who, viewers, may assume have drastically different lives outside of WWHL—fuels Cohen’s/our amusement.

11. Cohen is camp. He is brazen and flamboyant, relating to guests and topics with high degrees of self-disclosure and self-deprecation. He speaks using special and creative code words (e.g., games on the show are sometimes called “gamelettes”), often reveals the extent to which he is buzzed on alcohol or how hot certain men are, and he isn’t afraid to poke fun at his appearance. Self-critique on his body is underscored in his book and on WWHL, particularly where he reflects on how his “wonky eyes” initially kept him from working on-air. (In his book, Cohen also describes a time when hemorrhoids influenced his completion of a news story, and, on one of his birthdays, he fell on his “taint”—the space between “one’s butt and one’s balls” [p. 130].) Cohen embodies modest posturing, prideful self-deprecation, and altruistic narcissism; he is a model, for others, to embrace—and to treat as “artful”—their quirks, faults, and deviations.

12. Understanding Cohen’s gay campiness means taking seriously the ways in which he mocks the serious—the core characteristic of Cohen’s media persona and of WWHL life.

In his book, Cohen (2012) describes making history on television by officiating the “first televised wedding between a dog and a cat.” “I’m sure the American Family Association [a fundamentalist Christian organization that is opposed to marriage equality and who focuses on heterosexual family ‘values’ such as reproduction and patriarchy] let out a big ‘I told you so’ in seeing that gay marriage led to exactly what they’d feared,” he says, “unions of hairless animals of different species” (p. 186).

On one episode of WWHL, one guest (supposedly) did not show up to the (live) program. However, the program had to continue. Throughout, Cohen talked at/to the empty guest chair until the guest arrived—a jovial, frivolous act on a live program.

On another episode, Cohen says, “Adriana and Frederick’s nautical meltdown on the Yacht in Miami tonight was very tense. It was really tense. Here’s what we decided, to add a little comedy and turn it into a sitcom to make it more palatable.” The sitcom is titled: “Much ado a boat nothing.” In this moment, he plays off of “high art,” particularly Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing, and an explicit move to turn a tragic situation into one that is comedic.

On another episode, a viewer asked if singer Jason Derulo would do another nude advertisement, like the one he did for Cosmopolitan. Derulo said, “that ad was for charity, to raise awareness for testicular cancer. So, unless we’re going to raise awareness ... [there won’t be another nude ad].” To which Cohen unapologetically retorts, “Let’s raise awareness for butt cancer?”

13. Cohen typically finishes each episode of WWHL by acknowledging the “Jackhole of the Day”—a jackass/asshole person, organization, event, or thing in the news that he finds ignorant and offensive. Jackhole recipients have included:

  - Billy of Tennessee “who allegedly stole his neighbor’s ashes because he thought it was cocaine.” (Billy did realize they were ashes before he snorted them.)
The man arrested for allegedly trying to have sex with a cat, while dressed up as a dog. After hearing the shocked reaction from the in-house audience, Cohen seize the moment, saying to the camera, “Ewww... is he seeing [dating] anyone”—a question that alludes to Cohen’s mocking desire to date the man, a question also common to his shtick.

About a strawberry that looks like a penis: Cohen states, “This is crazy. [The Jackhole of the Day] goes to this strawberry for being such a dick. How can a strawberry be a dick?” The television image flashes to the strawberry. “That strawberry looks like a dick,” Cohen continues. “How disgusting!”

14. Cohen-camp sexualizes events, people, and bodies. A night’s poll question asks viewers to select among the Bravolebrities or WWHL guest they would select for a “threesome”; Cohen asks the Jonas Brothers who their favorite past lovers were; a female viewer calling from Chicago let Cohen know that she “loves him so hard” to which he replied that “he loves her harder”; and Cohen has been known to ask a male guest about the celebrity that first gave him a “boner as a kid” and to even ask a female guest about the celebrity that first gave her a “lady boner” (a question that defines her first sexual celebrity crush on his/male terms, e.g., “boner”).

Regarding men, Cohen has a fascination with crotches, including segments on the show such as “Andy loves Crotchly,” “The Deadliest Crotch,” “Name that Package,” and “New Kids on the Jock.” In turn, he states to a perceived-heterosexual male guest: “I like it when you slapped my [Cohen’s] ass.” Cohen regularly speaks of the attractiveness of “gingies” (men with auburn hair). On one occasion, Cohen gave the Jackhole award to “the bathroom at Mandingo’s” (a sushi restaurant in San Diego) for the wall-to-ceiling Ryan Gosling wallpaper in the bathroom. “This was clearly designed by some woman who doesn’t know what happens when you try to pee with a boner,” he quips. “You cannot have Ryan Gosling wallpaper in the bathroom.”

Regarding women, Cohen says to mothers, on a Mother’s Day (US holiday) episode, as the guests drink tea: If the bartender, a man, acts up, he tells the mothers to “throw teabags at him.” The use of teabags here is an absurd and irreverent play on context and meaning: teabags, necessary for drinking tea; but there is also tea-bagging, the act of cupping testicles in a mouth. To ask a mother to teabag, or to give out teabags to the bartender, may suggest for these mothers, these women, and this man, to engage in tea-bagging. If the mothers have testicles, then they could tea-bag each other, or tea-bag the bartender. If the bartender has testicles, then he could tea-bag the mothers. Regardless, the testicles and the (subservient? female?) mouth become the key objects; whether or not the act is pleasurable or possible is irrelevant to the play.

15. Halperin (2012) argues that camp “exploits the most abject, exaggerated, and undignified versions of femininity that a misogynistic culture can devise” (p. 191). Some writers (e.g., Newton, 2000; Schmidt, 2009) characterize camp as a gay male sensibility, and, equally, a sensibility ripe with misogyny. In writing about male privilege and gay misogyny, Dyer (2002) notes that many gay men may not claim the “habits of male privilege,” but also “don’t think about them either and continue to enjoy and perpetuate them, at women’s expense.” For some, indeed, gay camp is successful only at the expense of women.

16. Gay Cohen camp often foregrounds conventional notions of femininity, beauty, and ways of relating. For instance, viewers typically see Housewives appearing on the show dressed in designer clothes and designer shoes and who wear abundant make-up and have manicured hair. Seldom does a show pass in which Cohen, at least once, does not mark, praise, and fawn over the appearances of (his) Housewives. He is “obsessed” with the women who come on the show wearing “side ponies” (pony tails that drape down one side of the head and onto their chests). These women often said that they wore the “side pony” because Cohen loves them.

Similarly, women’s appearance and their ways of relating are often positioned as issues in need of negotiation and manipulation. For instance, a viewer asks Lauri Waring (a Housewife) for an update on her face “augmentation.” She confirms a once-a-year touch up and also adds that she does not have a breast reduction, only injections.

On one occasion, the star of the Millionaire Matchmaker and popular Bravolebrity Patti Stanger tells a woman to make men want her more and that the woman should only call a man once for every two times that he calls her. Stanger also adds that “Guys like a busy woman” and that women need to make men curious, especially since “curiosity equals [wedding] ring.”

On other occasions, Cohen objectifies Housewife Tamra Barney, telling a guest, “I will mail you Tamra’s [breast] implants”; on one show, the breasts of Bravolebrity Jenny Pulos, who very recently had given birth to a child, were referenced as “stripper tits”; and Cohen
proclaimed with an upset look on his face, “I don’t wanna talk about
lesbian sex right now!”

17. Gamson (2013) notes that a “prominent gay role used to target fe-
male viewers is an update of the classic image of the straight woman’s
“bachelor” sidekick: the gay-as-straight-girl’s-best-friend” (p. 52).

On reunion shows, they chat with the Chief BGF [Best Gay Friend],
Bravo executive Andy Cohen, who also hosts a talk show in which he
dishes about the latest happenings on the shows he oversees. The BGF
is often “feminine” in his tastes and manners—he is, after all, relevant
primarily for his role as lady’s auxiliary, a loyal male “girlfriend” on the
fringes of her social circle. (p. 53)

“The role of the BGF,” Gamson continues, “is to be, like a reverse
‘fag hag,’ a straight woman’s support, shopping companion, or
confidant” (p. 53). Dyer (2002) shares a similar observation: “a hetero-
sexual woman I knew who was going through a marital break-up
told me she’d been advised that the best thing for women in such
circumstances is to befriend a gay man” (p. 46).

From this perspective, Cohen is beneficial to, and even a neces-
sary companion for, heterosexual women, especially the Housewives.
There are no programs about the Real Housewives of Miami or the
Real Housewives of Atlanta, and husbands of the Housewives do not appear as often on WWHL. Cohen is loyal to these women;
at times, his campy ways may be exploitative and misogynistic, but he
is also their sidekick, support, and confidant. Ironically, even though
the Housewives programs may compel these women to participate in
ways that render them relational objects, witnessing his relating to
these/his women also demonstrates how they are perhaps some of
the most important people in his life.

However, let us not allow Cohen’s commitment to women to
overshadow the presence of another relational reality: He also serves
his heterosexual women viewers’ husbands. During an appearance
on The Wendy Williams Show, Cohen shared with Williams: “I get
the ladies a little drunk at 11 o’clock every night ... then they turn
to their husbands and say, ‘How you doin’? [the host’s campy stock phrase] ... I think I’m responsible for a lot of babies” (cited in Evans,
2013). He suggested that in this way he’s a “fluffer” (the person who
on porn sets helps stimulate the male actors so they remain erect).
Certainly he performs as campy patriot, with assumptions and com-
mitment to the emphasis on a conventional nuclear family embedded
within these relationships.

18. “Being a gay man is not the same as being a straight woman,” Dyer
(2002) writes, “yet when we get together, we often talk as if it were—
which means we often don’t really listen to what women say and may
even seduce them into casting their lives in our terms” (p. 47).

19. Occasionally, Cohen and his female guests will critique convention-
all notions of femininity and beauty ideas by treating as artful their
quirks, faults, and deviances. For instance, comedienne Wanda Sykes
has been known to refer to the fat roll at the bottom of her stomach
as “Esther Roll.” When Sykes appeared on the show, he mentioned
that he forgot to say “hi” to Esther. In a disgruntled voice, Sykes
spoke as Esther to reprimand him for his neglect.


no plans to advertise my sexuality in the workplace, but if anyone asked,
I'd promised myself I'd simply tell the truth. That decision proved to
be one that would guide my entire life: I've never hidden who I am,
and being gay doesn't define me. It is one of the things I happen to be.
I'm also a Gemini, an asthmatic, and a lover of disco balls. And long
walks on the beach. Call me! (p. 50)

Equating gayness with a Zodiac sign, asthma, disco balls, and walking
on the beach is a discursive attempt at normalizing gayness, making
same-sex attraction common, not-so-strange, not much different
from other characteristics of the self. The equation also normalizes,
even disregards, the lived, material effects of same-sex attraction,
heterosexism, and homophobia. Rarely do we see/hear accounts of
people being harmed or committing suicide for being a Pisces or
Sagittarius, or for being asthmatic, or for liking disco balls or long
walks on a beach.

21. There are moments when Cohen’s sexuality could be read as hetero-
sexual, or a gay man wistfully acting straight. For instance, in talking
about women, Millionaire Matchmaker Patti Stanger told Cohen
that “Oxytocin” is a “hormone in the body that’s filled by estrogen.
The younger you are, the more you have. That’s the bonding agent.
That’s how you guys make us fall in love,” to which he responds, “Oh,
we do? Excellent!”

On another occasion, a viewer asks Melissa Gorga (a Housewife)
what her name would be, hypothetically, if she ever became a stripper.
Gorga replies, “Ashlee, with two e’s,” to which Cohen replies with a
“straight” face: “Oh, I’m getting turned on.”

On yet another occasion, Cohen comments on the painted nails
on the hand of actress Aisha Tyler, and camps, “I love a black nail.
I like my nails like I like my women. Black. Because I am down with the swirl!” (The “swirl” is the sexual intermingling of Black and White bodies.) One interpretation: He is “playing straight,” perhaps to embody what a heterosexual man might say and in ways that merge race with camp. Another interpretation: He is “just playing.”

22. “Have you ever dipped into the ‘lady pond’?” Cohen asks Oprah about same-sex attraction. In turn, he asks hunky (and perceivably “very heterosexual”) country music star Jake Owen if he would ever swim in the “man pond.” Owen’s long pause and austere smile frame the question as awkward if not a breach of Owen’s masculinity. (Moments later, Owen, who also shared that he doesn’t wear underwear and that he regularly “manscapes” [shaves his pubic hair] says that he would take a dip in the man-pond with actor Josh Duhamel.) Cohen asking Oprah and Owen, among many others, about the lady and man ponds is an asking that marks same-sex attraction as unique and racy; an absence that frames heterosexual talk as that which is assumed and needs not to be discussed; a question that still illuminates “cultural anxieties” about same-sex attraction (Chan, 2013, p. 26). It is also a relational breach that unsettles—or “queers”—heteronormative understandings of sexuality and sex/gender.

23. Gay camp transpires from and against shameful, oppressive, and hostile environments. Babuscio (1977) describes gay camp as a response to oppression—a response that uses irony, style, role-playing, appearance, passing, and humor to deal with a “hostile environment” (p. 47); it is a technique for “undercutting rage” through the use of “concentrated bitterness”:

Laughter, rather than tears, is [camp’s] chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society. ... Any appreciation of camp, therefore, expresses and emphasizes with typical gay experiences, even when this takes the form of finding beauty in the seemingly bizarre and outrageous, or discovering the worthiness in a thing or person that is supposedly without value. (p. 48)

Newton (2000) similarly describes camp an “assertion of gay existence” that was “self-hating, denigrating, and incompatible with the assertions of gay pride” (p. 31); Muñoz (1999) argues that camp is a “mode of enacting self against the pressures of the dominant culture’s identity-denying protocols” (p. 120); and Feil (2013) notes that camp redeems “the vulgar and low through love and identification,” thereby disputing the “dominate cultural equations of vulgarity and immorality with homosexuality, and tastefulness and morality with heterosexuality” (p. 142).

Through irony and humor and by co-opting or mocking common, homophobic positions against same-sex marriage, some of Cohen’s campiness serves as a response to contexts that deny persons of the same sex the legal right to marry. On one show, when he learns from actress Rebecca Romijn that she was recently at the same-sex wedding of actor Jessica Tyler Ferguson, Cohen proclaims, “I think gay people getting married is disgusting!” On another show, when talking of the engagement of one of the heterosexual guests and his girlfriend, Cohen matter-of-factly utters support that resembles the support often uttered by LGBTQ allies. “I think that men and women should be able to get married,” he says. “So if you two wanna get married, I’m not grossed out by it. Just want you to know. I think it’s fine. And I think it’s good, because if people at home see people like you getting married...”

24. WWHL is a very gay show. Cohen regularly flirts with male guests, especially men who identify as homosexual. He regularly talks about gay news topics and organizations, such as when actress Kyra Sedgwick was on the show to promote the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). The Real Housewives of New Jersey cast member Rosie’s identity as a lesbian is regularly engaged and used as a playful topic (e.g., she is shown on camera with her brother-in-law standing behind her, reaching around, and fully grabbing her breasts, seeming to show that the [intrusive!] breast-grabbing doesn’t appeal to her). Two same-sex couples comprised the list of finalists for viewers who competed to be married on the show. Even more, WWHL has a “ghark”—a dancing gay shark.

25. Cohen is ordained to perform marriages, a reality that queers heteronormative ideas of marriage. He often marks and celebrates LGBTQ Pride week and historic events, such as the 2013 rulings by the US Supreme Court on marriage equality. He issued a Jackhole award to Pat Robertson, who, according to Cohen, “said that when he sees a same-sex couple kissing on Facebook, instead of ‘liking’ it, he would like to press a ‘vomit’ button.” He issued another Jackhole award to Louisiana Republicans who want to ban the rainbow pride flag on all government property. And when he issued a “Mazel of the Day” award to President Obama and Hillary Clinton, he said “here’s to the ladies who lunch” while an image of Obama and Clinton having lunch flashes on the television screen.
26. On what we learn from Cohen about gay camp, relationships, and relating: Being campy, less serious, poking fun at material culture calls attention to the fabricated aspects of social life. However, there is also the ability to read him as less than serious—less credible—about social issues. In this sense, Cohen becomes a comedian, not to be taken too seriously, as nothing else is. There are benefits in this—showing the silliness of media production and to prepare us for tragedy. In turn, one can readily hear him, when confronted with the interpretation, suggesting that being taken seriously is the last thing he suspects viewers should do. However, at times, there does come the opportunity—the need—to be responsible, as a talk show host, to advocate and call attention to social injustice. We see this when Ellen Degeneres offers a monologue about an issue in which she’s passionate about, or Bill Maher’s segment on “New Rules,” or Anderson Cooper’s use of “The Ridiculist.” Cohen does offer the Mazel and Jackhole of the day awards—which, many times, he presents by using a comedic-yet-serious tone. He also very visibly and impressively advocates against many forms of social injustice. But combined with the other campy aspects of the show, how serious could he really be with his concern? How should we, the audience, react? There does come the time when “just playing” doesn’t allow any of us to be less accountable for being bystanders to potentially harmful ways of relating.

And yet, his mediated reality also comes across as responsible, owning up to his mistakes and faulty assumptions while continuing to press forward, probe others, and try to provide us all with a laugh. He pokes fun at the conventions of reality programming, while he also partakes in the reality program. The messy set is constructed in lavish ways, and he pokes fun at the artifice of media programming. This is not to suggest that Cohen is more real or authentic, but rather that his show revels in spectacle and rehearsed uncertainty.

27. Dwelling within Cohen’s camp is a commitment to an accentuated and exaggerated stretching of boundaries, a highly playful and creative experiment in the unsettling of assumptions and expectations concerning what it means to relate with others and ourselves. It is not that the play is devoid of the serious. He often invokes and draws attention to the serious, but in playful, if not mocking, ways. Even those brief moments of genuine and heartfelt seriousness are followed, sometimes abruptly, by a return to the play, and sometimes in ways that unsettle and, perhaps, make less meaningful the seriousness that just occurred. In these ways, it is reluctant seriousness, if you will, a style that takes the serious nervously, not out of a lack of competency to communicate well about the serious, but because of how the serious might dismantle, and indeed, make less fun, the overall frivolity of (his) camp.

References


