

**THE
CULTURAL
IMPACT OF**

RuPaul's DRAG RACE

**WHY ARE
WE ALL
GAGGING?**



**EDITED BY
CAMERON
CROOKSTON**

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RuPaul's Drag Race



Peppermint performing at Fly in Toronto, June 2017. © Cameron Crookston.

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Why Are We All Gagging?

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Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

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Queering Africa: Bebe Zahara Benet's "African" Aesthetics and Performance

Lwando Scott

Introduction

Watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* for the first time was like watching the first ever queer cultural Olympics. Like many people who watch the show, I am captivated by many of the drag queens. From the first season, I was and still am fascinated by Bebe Zahara Benet, and have quietly followed the development of her career since she was crowned the first winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Bebe (henceforth, I will refer to Bebe Zahara Benet as just Bebe, as she is affectionately known) returned to *Drag Race* as an All-Star competitor in *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, season three. While Bebe had a successful drag career before *Drag Race* in Minnesota, United States, being part of *Drag Race* and winning the first season catapulted her career to greater heights. Since *Drag Race* Bebe has had the opportunity to perform across the country in the United States and has expanded her creativity into music. Bebe is originally from Cameroon. She not only spoke about her African roots on the show, but she embodied and performed them through her drag art by embracing what I loosely call "African aesthetics."

A big part of my fascination with Bebe was precisely because she was from Cameroon doing drag on the world stage. As a queer kid growing up in South Africa there was little to no queer culture represented in popular media, so watching Bebe was a multilayered affirming experience. Living in a world that positioned, and continues to position, queerness as the antithesis of African identity, watching Bebe was a fantastic dispelling of the myth of queerness and African identity being

mutually exclusive. I was enthralled by Bebe because I wondered about the trajectory of an immigrant boy from Cameroon, a country that punishes sexual and gender nonconformity and criminalizes homosexual practices. Watching Bebe on *Drag Race*, I was increasingly fascinated by her artistic choices through the challenges, particularly how she used “African” aesthetics. At first, I read her as someone embodying queerness and “Africanness” all while being from a country that criminalizes nonheterosexual sexuality. I also appreciated her use of African iconography, to signal her African roots and to stamp a queer slant on African culture. Bebe’s embrace of the “African” aesthetic includes different kinds of references to the African animal kingdom, particularly leopard print materials. She uses “tribal” make-up on her face and sometimes wears wigs that reference a lion’s mane. While on the one hand, Bebe’s use of “African” iconography in her performances can be seen as an embrace of “African” aesthetics in drag culture, on the other hand, they can also be problematic because they essentialize “African” aesthetics, and use well-worn colonial tropes to “represent” “Africa.” This is not insignificant considering that both the *Drag Race* audience and Bebe’s own fan base are primarily comprised of North Americans.

Bebe’s existence as a drag queen in North America, her participation in *Drag Race*, and her artistic choices as an African immigrant from Cameroon living in the United States necessitate all kinds of questions. In this chapter I explore the multilayered character that is Bebe. I am interested in the political implications of Bebe’s aesthetic and performance style. How do we understand Bebe’s performance as a drag queen that goes against what majority Cameroonian society deems to be “normal” behavior? How do we understand her as a force of African queerness? What is the disruptive potential of Bebe’s drag act, considering her African roots and the North American audience she commands? What are the implications of the use of “African” aesthetics in her drag performances, given her audience and queer politics in her native country? In other words, what are the queer political implications of being a drag queen from Cameroon, particularly considering that in the place she is from homosexuality and its accompanying culture is illegal? Also, what does Bebe’s presence as an African drag queen do to drag culture in North America?

Moreover, as someone who watched and continues to watch *Drag Race* while situated in South Africa, how do I read Bebe and her drag act? What happens in the process of watching Bebe as an African queer kid and seeing her use of “African” aesthetics in her performance? Understanding Bebe’s history as a Cameroon-born gay man and her ascendancy to be a drag star in the United States is critical to appreciating her use of “African” aesthetics. I am intrigued by her particular uses of “African” iconography, and I am interested in the African femininity on display through her performance. What can be deciphered from Bebe’s performance?

On a personal note, what are the relational affinities created by Bebe through her performance for me as a black queer person living in South Africa?

Thinking with Camp

It does not require going out on a limb to say that *Drag Race* is a camp show that uses camp language and makes camp pop cultural references. As acutely demonstrated by Carl Schottmiller (2017, 66) *Drag Race* is a show built on camp queer cultural references that "frequently operates as a type of social memory within queer social groups." In fact, Schottmiller argues that understanding the "camp references requires that the audience possess a queer cultural capital (knowledge of the source material)" (59). Here, Schottmiller uses Pierre Bodurdieu's ideas of cultural capital to explain that in order to master the camp references in *Drag Race*, you need to have been part of or at least be knowledgeable of the larger queer North American culture. To some degree *Drag Race* takes for granted that the viewer is queer (which does not necessarily mean homosexual) and will have a kind of knowledge about the references being made in the show. Simultaneously, through the use of camp references, the show also functions as a school of camp in that those watching can learn camp references. This learning is not only for the audience; indeed, *Drag Race* is also a camp school for the contestants themselves, particularly young contestants who have not been exposed to queer camp culture. While some queer scholars such as Moe Meyer (1994) have accused Susan Sontag (1987) of appropriating camp for heterosexual culture in her 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," I find her description apt and particularly useful in describing camp. Sontag describes camp as follows: "It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed, the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (275). Further, Sontag argues that "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" (279). Sontag's take on camp is similar to the way that Richard Dyer (1986, 178) understood camp as "a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images, and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable." Sontag's description of camp speaks to *Drag Race* and its sensibility in general, and to Bebe in particular, with reference to her dramatization of "African" aesthetics.

Interestingly, Schottmiller (2018, 6) argues that "*Drag Race* scholars largely ignore the significant role that camp plays in this franchise." This silence on camp seems counterintuitive since camp is obviously an integral part of *Drag Race*.

Indeed, Schottmiller argues that “this limited engagement with camp scholarship troubles me because camp is one of the integral operating logics of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Indeed, camp infuses every aspect of this show and permeates the growing live economy” (7). This chapter takes up the challenge issued by Schottmiller to take seriously camp as a way to theorize *Drag Race* and its impact on queer culture. So, in thinking with camp as a lens, how do I make sense of Bebe's performance and articulations in the show and in her career at large? Through camp, how does one understand the intersection of Bebe's queerness and Bebe's “African” aesthetics and performance?

*“If she wears leopard print one more time”—Bebe's
“African” Aesthetics*

From the first season, it was clear that Bebe was partial to what can be described as stereotypical depiction of “African” aesthetics. These aesthetics were not only situated in Bebe's way of dress, but also in the way she was characterized in the show by others. For example, when Bebe appeared on the main stage, RuPaul would affectionately shout “Camerooooon,” dragging the “o” in Cameroon as if singing in a melisma-kind-of-way. This, in turn, became a popular way of addressing Bebe for fans. When RuPaul shouted “Camerooooon,” she signaled a tribal call, an ancestral call, a call that went beyond Bebe herself, but spoke to ideas about Africans and their cultures. This call was striking in that like Bebe's personality, drag identity, and performance, it had a regal sound to it, a royal inflection. The tone of expression and the endearment with which it was delivered spoke to an appreciation of African cultures and peoples.

The “African” theme in Bebe's aesthetic continued after she won the first season of *Drag Race*, signaling that the theme was part of her drag “brand.” It is because of this continued use of “African” aesthetics and performance that I can't help but be ambivalent about Bebe's representations of “Africa.” For instance, in the music videos for “Jungle Kitty” (2018) and “Cameroon” (2010) Bebe uses stereotypical “African” tropes. For starters, the name of the song “Jungle Kitty” is a revelation itself. It is a multilayered name for this song and demands some attention. First, the name of the song conjures up images of wild cats found in African jungles, such as the lion, the cheetah, and the leopard. When the music video came out, Bebe had been consistent with her stereotypical reference to Africa, which now included the animal kingdom. Bebe also tapped into an already existing drag queen language of referring to themselves and each other as feline femme fatales. Of course, this language is read as offensive by others as it references terms such as “pussy,” which is a staple term in drag queen language.

The name "Jungle Kitty" is thus the marriage of Bebe's two worlds, the world she comes from, Cameroon, and the world she currently lives in, North America.

In addition, "Jungle Kitty" contains lyrics that signal both queer feline tropes and African signification. Bebe sings about her pussy being on fire, and part of the lyrics are "made-up" words/sounds like when she says "ra-ka-tiki-ta-ta." In the song, there is an overheard voice that asks, "What is she saying?" This is a layered question in the song, a question that obviously anticipates these kinds of questions from the audience about the words/sounds she is making in the song. Furthermore, "what is she saying" is a reference to the immigrant experience, immigrants whose language is often treated with hostility in North America (Mayora 2014; 2016). In another part of the song, a white female North American voice is overheard saying, "If she wears leopard print one more time ..." Immediately after the line, Bebe is shown defiantly wearing a leopard print catsuit that even covers part of her face. This line references people who have complained about Bebe's partiality toward leopard print. While seemingly innocent, the statement is encumbered by a confluence of race, class, and gender. The overheard voice is distinctly that of a white female, and this underscores the "fashion authority" assumed by white people in positions of power, who supposedly dictate what is fashionable. In this instance, Bebe's leopard print can be read as representing working-class black female aesthetics, and therefore outside of "high fashion," a style that is often the aim of *Drag Race* aesthetics. The irony, of course, is that "street style" (often code for black or people-of-color "style") plays a major role in influencing "high fashion" styles (Dant 1999, 91–92). In fact, in the contemporary moment, "street style" and "high fashion" have a symbiotic relationship, where there is a crisscross of styles (92). The inclusion of "if she wears leopard print one more time" in the music and then wearing leopard print is clever and ultimately defiant.

The video for "Cameroon" contains more obvious stereotypes about Africa than "Jungle Kitty." In the music video, where she sings about Cameroon, Bebe is winking back to RuPaul's 2009 season one tribal call of "Camerooooon" during the show. The video is filled with outfits made of feathers. Bebe is wearing a feather headgear and her face is covered in tribal paint. The other characters in the video who are dancing are covered in tribal face paint and they are also wearing feathers, albeit less glamorous than Bebe.

Intersectional Politics of Bebe—Race

Bebe's "African" aesthetics and performance reveal the complicated ways in which her identities intersect. Bebe comes from Cameroon, a country that outlaws homosexuality. Bebe is black and lives in the United States, a country with

a deep history of slavery and ongoing structural oppression of black people. Bebe is African. Bebe has a career as a drag artist, an art form that has historically not been highly regarded in mainstream society. Intersectionality is a way of describing the multiplicity of oppressions through the crisscross of multiple identities. It was first developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to demonstrate the ways that black women experience oppression both as gendered *and* racialized beings, and to show that an analysis of their experiences can't separate these struggles into primary and secondary struggles. Furthermore, Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 225) sees intersectionality as "interlocking systems of oppression" that provide a way to view Bebe and how her multiple identities shape her and influence her aesthetics and performance. So, first and foremost, Bebe's articulations should be read with her intersectional identities and how they impact her life and drag art.

Taking into account Bebe's race as a black person, and her African roots, in reading her "African" aesthetics and performance, Bebe consciously self-constructs her persona. Bebe is a "recent" black immigrant, and her experience and life history is particular to North America. Here I am reminded of Minelle Mahtani's (2001, 300) articulations that "the complex ways that racialisation is socially constructed within particular places" foreground the need to seriously engage with people's positionality. In the "Jungle Kitty" music video, it is not a coincidence then that the overheard voice that asks "what is she saying" and the one that says "if she wears leopard print one more time" are distinctly that of a white female North American. Referencing the fan base of *Drag Race*, this suggests the ignorance in the United States of other cultures but also speaks to anti-immigrant sentiments that are currently part of the discourse in North America represented by the election of, and the statements made by, President Donald Trump. As established by Tod Hamilton, Janeria Easley, and Angela Dixon (2018), the complexities of being a black immigrant in North America is demonstrated by forced occupational niches that people of color occupy in their communities. These authors also show how US-born black Americans and black African immigrants fare similarly in earnings, demonstrating that race affects the income potential of immigrants. In a similar vein, Patrick Mason (2016) argues that there exist labor market inequalities in North America, and Xue Lan Rong and Frank Brown (2002) articulate the difficulties that black immigrant children face in being incorporated into America society. These race-related struggles of black immigrants are linked to the long history of black struggle in America in general, as demonstrated by the works of Eli Reed (1997), Cornel West (1993), and W. E. B. Du Bois (1903). The continued black racial struggle in North America is acutely felt in the twenty-first century as the world continues to witness the murder of black young people at the hands of the state police in greater North America (Alexander 2012; Anderson 2016;

Coates 2015; Hill 2016; Lowery 2016; Taylor 2016). The atmosphere of white supremacy and continued destruction of black lives in America is the context in which all black people are functioning in the United States and it affects how black people do art.

Drag Race does not exist in a vacuum but is heavily shaped by wider discourses of race politics in North America. This is an argument that was brought forward by Mayora (2014; 2016), who discusses the racial and cultural relations between mainstream gay culture (read white) and queer Latinx community. Mayora (2016, 190) observes that the complicated relationship between *Drag Race* and Latinx queens, and how these queens are received, "mirrors the actual dynamics between dominant subjects and queer Latinx," a relationship that is mired in stereotypes and unequal power relations because of the history of white supremacy in North America. The race relations articulated by Mayora (2018; 2016), albeit in different ways, can be linked to the racist attacks that Bebe and other black contestants have received on *RuPaul's Drag Race* targeting them for "eliminating" a "fan favourite," contestant who is often white (Instinct Staff 2018). Taking all of this into account, Bebe's "African" aesthetics and performance become more complicated because they can be read as reactions to the power of whiteness that other black and Latinx contestants have also felt.

Intersectional Politics of Bebe—Africa

For over ten seasons of *Drag Race*, Bebe was the only African immigrant to have been on the show. This changed in season eleven with the introduction of Mercedes Iman Diamond, an African Muslim immigrant, who is also from Minnesota, United States. Being an African immigrant carries its own set of politics and complications. It is important to note the nuances of the intersection of Bebe's African immigrant identity with her other already peripheral identities of being black and gay. Bebe's position brings to the fore Jeffrey Weeks's (2011, 96) articulations about how intersectionality is concerned with "overlapping, interweaving and multidimensional forms of power" that operate simultaneously to affect the lived experience of an individual. This tells us that blackness, gayness, and Africanness do not function individually in Bebe's life; rather, they eventually come through her aesthetics and performance and are "mutually constitutive" (Yuval-Davis 2006). An interesting moment related to Bebe's African aesthetics and performance was in the *Drag Race All Stars* season three variety show in the first episode ("All-Star Variety Show" 2018), when Trixie Mattel, a white presenting queen, remarked "Bebe is *The Lion King*." This was a crucial moment on multiple levels: it was

telling of the kind of imagery that was being used by Bebe; it gave us an idea of how the other drag contestants viewed her; it also gave us an idea of how she is possibly viewed by wider North America.

In that first episode of *Drag Race All Stars* season three Bebe performs a lip sync and dances to her own song “dirty drums/Cameroon.” She enters to take part in this variety show on a dark stage appearing through smoke. When she emerges from the smoke, she is wearing a patchwork African print dress with big curly hair and a large beaded neckpiece. Her face is painted with white dots going through the middle of her face and around her eyes, and her lips are painted black. It is as if she is wearing a face mask. She comes out and walks about the stage singing, and after a short while being on stage, she takes off the African print dress and reveals a dress made of feathers, lots of feathers. She then erupts into a choreographed dance. Generally, the dance immediately reminded me of the thousands of music videos from South Africa and Nigeria. Particularly, her dance moves made me think of Kwaito star Lebo Mathosa’s (2006) video for “Au Dede.” Furthermore, Bebe’s dance moves were similar to how young people dance in South Africa. Here, we see Bebe drawing from certain aspects of African popular culture, and drawing from popular culture is part of drag culture and performance. So, the question remains, what are the implications of this?

In order to understand the significance of “Bebe is *The Lion King*,” one has to understand what *The Lion King* as a popular Disney movie means to North American white audiences. Many young North American children grow up watching *The Lion King*, and this partially forms their ideas about “Africa.” So, when Trixie Mattel, who likely grew up watching *The Lion King*, says that Bebe is *The Lion King*, she is drawing from a reservoir of North American knowledge about Africa. Interestingly, it can be argued that Bebe herself is drawing from this North American reservoir of knowledge for her own gains. The recognition of Bebe as *The Lion King* tells us that Bebe is successful at Africanizing herself in *Drag Race*. The success of Bebe’s African branding is revealed in the popularity of her song “Jungle Kitty.” When “Jungle Kitty” came out, it was so popular that people responded to the #JungleKittyChallenge by creating their own videos mimicking Bebe and lip-syncing to the lyrics. The success of the song, and the video, can be attributed to the catchiness of the song, but also the “African” branding that Bebe has become associated with. *The Lion King* reference made by Trixie Mattel can be extended to the music videos for the songs “Cameroon” and “Jungle Kitty.” Bebe makes references to “tribal Africa” in these videos with feathers, the theme of the jungle, and warrior-esque depictions. In her portrayals Bebe clearly sends up *Lion King*-esque African stereotypes. What is of interest to me is how do we read the articulations or commentary that is made by Bebe about Africanness and “African” culture? How do we read Bebe considering the context of North

America and her identities? How do I read Bebe's articulations as a queer person watching from South Africa?

Intersectional Politics of Bebe—Sexuality

The space where sexual diversity and African identities intersect is contested ground. The contested ground of African queerness is the shaky foundation on which Bebe is formulated and becomes a Drag Superstar. An analysis of Bebe has to take seriously what it means to be queer and African. The popular sentiment that homosexuality is "un-African" (which often includes all kinds of sexual and gender dissidents) and that it is an "import from the West" (Morgan and Wieringa 2005, 11) has become a mainstay in different parts of the African continent, used by laypeople, the state, government officials, African traditionalist, and religious entities (Awondo 2010; Nyanzi 2013; Reddy 2009). This narrative of homosexuality being "un-African" is powerful because it uses anti-imperialism logic to build a case against sexual and gender diversity. It is a narrative that understands the power of anti-colonial sentiments in postcolonial Africa. The discourse of homosexuality being "un-African" takes place in different parts of the African continent, with differing consequences for people with non-normative genders and sexualities. Indeed, as demonstrated by Ryan Richard Thoreson (2014) there are stark differences in the homophobias contained in the Anti-Homosexuality Bill of Uganda, the arrest of Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Steven Monjeza in Malawi after being involved in a commitment ceremony, and the anti-homosexuality persecution in Senegal. Thoreson (2014) argues for a particularity in describing and discussing what others have called a "wave of homophobia" in Africa. He is reminding us that Africa is a big continent consisting of multiple countries with different histories and trajectories. The appreciation of the complexity of the African continent does not mean we do not address homophobia in certain parts of the continent, but that we are vigilant of history and be particular in how we talk about homophobia as we would other social issues.

The claim that homosexuality is "un-African" has no basis in reality, because as demonstrated by historical, sociological, and anthropological accounts (Amadiume 1987; Ekine and Abbas 2013; Matebeni 2011; Moodie 1988; Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Murray and Roscoe 2001; Reid 2013; and Tamale 2011) homosexuality has existed in different parts of the continent throughout history. Furthermore, the work of Amadiume (1987) and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (1997) demonstrates a complex configuration and nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality in some precolonial African communities. These gender and sexuality configurations were different from the simplistic European binaries, and they were

disrupted by the advent of colonization and forever changed. This is a history that is often missing in discussions of homosexuality as “un-African” because it is inconvenient to the politics of the day. What becomes clear is the power of this narrative for political gains by those who are in power or seeking power for different political gains in different contexts.

The intersection of sexual diversity and African identity is made more complicated by the transportation of US culture wars to African countries. The influence of the US Christian Right on homophobic policies in some African countries was made most obvious by the Christian Right's involvement in the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda (Downie 2014; Kaoma 2012; Thoreson 2014). The introduction of this bill in Uganda caused backlash toward Uganda from different corners of the world, including at the time US President Barack Obama, who issued a statement condemning the bill. The influence of US-based Christian Right organizations is felt as they push for “family values” in what Kaoma (2012, 2) calls “colonising African values” through a process of “Africanising American conservative teachings.” This process of colonizing African values is done through a process of demonizing sexual and gender diversity and the fight for equal rights (McEwen 2016). The amnesia about the colonial history of Christian missionaries who were instrumental in the colonization of Africa is palpable. The influence of the Christian Right in gender and sexuality politics in some African communities has proven detrimental to the lives of queer people.

It is in the context of contestations over sexual diversity in African countries that Bebe's aesthetics and performance make a vital intervention into queer representation in popular culture. In a context where both Christian Right fundamentalists and some African states are pushing for the persecution on queer people, Bebe's emphasis on African aesthetics and performance can be read as political. It is asserting a queerness in Africanness and Africanness in queerness. She defies both the Christian Right and the African traditionalists. In this I do not see Bebe as a representative of Africa or even Cameroonians; I read her as a comment on the power and possibilities of drag. Bebe's performance exceeds a mere “representative” of the African continent to speak to the potentials created through drag that unsettle narratives such as queerness being “un-African.”

Lost in Translation: Can Africa Be Camp?

In trying to understand Bebe's “African” aesthetic choices and performance, I wonder about the translation of camp. In other words, can Africa be camp? My instinct is to say yes, Africa can be camp. However, with the colonial history and the power imbalances in cultural understanding of Africa, there is a chance that

something is lost in translation. In pursuing my line of thinking about camp, I keep an open mind and remember Schottmiller's (2017) arguments that camp should be seen as an ever-evolving practice and not as unchanging or even singular. Thus, it should be possible for Africa to be read and/or performed as camp. Like in the history of the art of drag, Bebe sends up stereotypes about African aesthetics in her performances. The question then becomes, does Bebe challenge dominant ideas about Africa, or does Bebe reinforce damaging stereotypes about the continent. As demonstrated in the previous sections of this chapter, Bebe mines the "African" aesthetic and uses it as part of her brand. What does this do, and what are the implications of this work?

It would seem that Bebe simultaneously challenges and reinforces stereotypes. On the one hand, she is poking fun at herself and her "African" roots. On the other hand, she is feeding into an already existing narrative of associating Africa with feathers, wild animals, and face paint. In other words, she feeds into *The Lion King* narrative of Africa, which is the preferred North American understanding of the continent. In many ways Bebe's performance is the ultimate camp performance. Sontag's description of camp is embodied by Bebe in her drag aesthetic referencing Africa in the popular imagination. In performing "Africa" Bebe satirizes these tribal ideas that are synonymous with ideas about Africa. Bebe's drag performance as the "African Queen" complete with feather headgear and face paint is a knowing wink or even a middle finger to North America. In Bebe's case the simultaneity seems unavoidable in that in poking fun at the stereotypes by sending them up in camp style, she inadvertently reinforces stereotypes.

While camp is the mainstay of the show, there are moments where camp gives way for "real" reflection. For instance, in the variety show performance of *All Stars* season three ("All-Star Variety Show" 2018) Bebe sings, "I found my way back home, Cameroon. She is Cameroon. They call me Cameroon." She then goes on to sing-rap "the rhythm, the beat, pulsing, the heat." In between she is also making rhythmic sounds that do not really mean anything in the English language but go with the sound of the beat and the facial expressions she is making. In this performance Bebe seems proud of her heritage and her background as a Cameroonian. She claims where she is from and inserts her country of origin identity on stage. Bebe singing about "finding my way back home, Cameroon" takes on a deep meaning considering that she is living in North America and same-sex intimacy is criminalized in Cameroon. Bebe can be read as someone yearning to go home because the lyrics of finding her way home are accompanied by dress and body movements that beckon home. The performance represents a pride of where she is from, but in the process reveals the heaviness of knowing that Bebe can't live the gay life and have a drag career in Cameroon like she can in the United States. Again, here there is a simultaneous effect, a doubleness of

sort, of yearning for home but at the same time knowing that home is illusive, unreachable in many ways.

Reality Television, Affect, and Relationality

Pierpaolo Donati (2011, xvi) argues that

we are what we care about, and if we do not relate to significant others, we are nothing, we become nothing. We are our “relational concerns,” as individuals as well as social agents/actors, since we necessarily live in many different contexts that are social circles (like a family, a network of friends, maybe a civil association, up to a nation) which imply a collective identity.

I want to extend Donati's relational concerns to my relationship with Bebe in that in a queer sense I see our relationship as familial, connected through a queer African ancestry. The relationship with Bebe is one made through knowing without knowing, in that I have never met her, but I feel like I have and if we were to meet, we would already know each other. This is the power of reality television. As articulated by Graeme Turner in *Understanding Celebrity* (2004) the celebrity culture of “ordinary” people being “stars” is the “demonic turn” that has blurred the lines between stars and ordinary people. Elsewhere Turner (2006, 154) argues that “much of the participation in reality TV is aimed at a certain kind of recognition of the self.” I think Turner is on to something here, particularly for us who consume reality TV in that we see ourselves in the TV shows we watch. The question then becomes, what do we do with the stories we see, the stories we watch? What becomes of the narratives we recognize or identify with?

Gamson (2011, 1062) argues that

consumers of celebrity culture then do all sorts of things with these stories, often giving them new meanings. Some make use of celebrity stories to fantasize a different life, to construct their identities, or to model themselves on people they admire or envy; others use them as fodder for connecting socially with one another.

This is evidenced in my introduction, where I talk about my affection for Bebe, and in the earlier section, where I talk about her aesthetic, that we give meanings to the stories we see and apply them to our own realities. In my relational relationship with Bebe it is obvious that I see her queerness that is intimately linked with her Africanness as a source of admiration and something I identify with. This is

pertinent because the idea of queerness as "un-African" remains a forceful narrative in the ways that queerness is articulated in many African contexts.

It seems obvious to admit that my relational concerns with Bebe are entangled in the politics of affect. While obvious, I think it important to dissect what affect means and how it is deployed in this particular case. Taking my cue from Heather Love (2007) arguing for a considered uptake of the relationship between affect and politics, I am invested in the politics of affect that ensnarl my relationship with Bebe. As is often demonstrated in social science, human beings are more than just helpless actors controlled by structure. People have agency and use it to resist structural oppressions. Furthermore, people are emotive, they have experiences, they feel love, loss, and all kinds of emotions that are sometimes impossible to quantify or even verbalize. This is affect, and it influences our personal lives, our communities, and our politics. Affect is captured succinctly by Eric Shouse (2005, 6) in the assertion that "affect is what makes feelings feel." Moreover, Shouse (2005, 12) argues that "affect plays an important role in determining the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others, and the subjective experience that we feel/think as affect dissolves into experience." The assertions made by Shouse about the important role played by affect implicating our bodies, our environment, and other people speak to the affective relationship I have with Bebe.

My relationship to Bebe goes beyond just "identifying" and engages with the politics in her art through drag. In *Politics of Affect*, Brian Massumi (2015, vii) argues that affect is the primary politics and that it involves "dimensions of life which carries a political valence." Our experiences are often measured with the experiences of others, and through this process affect is experienced. My experience of Bebe and how I am affected by Bebe is not an easy emotion/experience/feeling to translate into something tangible. This is something that Shouse (2005, 6) has warned us about—that affect is rooted in feelings and feelings rooted in our bodies through experiences; therefore, it is not easily translated into language because in its abstract nature "the body has a grammar of its own."

In many ways affect has to do with the nonverbal. It has to do with the communication of the body without words. It is feelings that are transferred through experience. Since the focus on affect, what some have called the "affective turn," there has been much speculation about why such a turn occurred. Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn (2010, 8) argue that

one consequence of the heightened interest in the non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of experience is a re-engagement with sensation, memory, perception, attention and listening. If much of what passes as experience occurs in this realm, how then can we model the psychic and sensory apparatuses that afford specific kinds of embodied knowing?

What Blackman and Venn are gesturing to is really a bringing of the whole human experience into the academic realm. They are asserting that human beings are more than just “rational” thoughts, or that only rational thoughts should be seen as the primary focus in academic inquiry but that people have other ways of being in the world. That feelings, emotions, and experiences matter, that “sensory apparatuses that afford specific kinds of embodied knowing” matter. My sometimes hard to articulate feelings and experiences of Bebe occur in a psychic and sensory realm, in that I connect with her as this queer African goddess, to use drag lingo, who through her art of drag speaks to me, speaks about me, and asserts a queer African pride that is connected to those queer pioneers who came before me and her on the continent.

Affect theory has not been without critiques. While Ruth Leys (2011) takes issue with many scholars who write about affect, she reserves the harshest critique for Massumi whom she regards as a leading scholar of affect theory. While Leys seems to agree that there is a need for research concerning emotions, and that leading scientists agree on this need, there is disagreement on how the science of emotions is to be carried out and how it is to be read. Leys primarily objects to what she calls the “false opposition between the mind and the body” that she sees as characterizing the majority of work of affect theorists (458)—a split between the mind and the body that has been heavily critiqued in post-structuralist thought. Here, I am in agreement with Leys about the suspicion of separating the body and mind or deciphering what comes first. For instance, in my fascination with Bebe and in my analysis of Bebe, there is no clear separation of “rational” thought and “emotions.” My analysis of Bebe is influenced by both mind and body as I try to make sense of what she means to me as an African queer person. I am writing an academic piece about someone whose identities are entangled with mine, whose aesthetics and performance cause me to reflect on the ideas of representation. What I see as important in debates about affect that Leys is engaged with is the taking seriously of emotions in the ways that people make decisions in their lives. Furthermore, I see it as important that academic research takes seriously how we think with our emotions.

Conclusion: Reimagining African Identities

To me, Bebe's allure lies in her being an African queen, successfully doing drag, and therefore creating a different narrative of what it means to be a man, to be gay, to have effeminate qualities, and to be of African descent. Growing up in South Africa, I suspect when Bebe was also growing up in Cameroon, there was a lack of alternative ways of reading “African,” let alone alternative sexualities. Bebe opens up a whole new world for many young South Africans, indeed Africans, which shows that there are many ways they can imagine themselves. Considering that many

LGBTQ+ people on the African continent continue to struggle to be visible and often adopt the inferiority complex projected on them by society, Bebe becomes a figure of different possibilities for queer Africans. She is a demonstration that there is a life beyond feelings of shame and self-hate regarding both sexuality and African identity. Through her drag art, Bebe embodies the essence of self-invention, which is the essence of the African Renaissance in the postcolonial era. The spirit of the African Renaissance was popularized by former South African president Thabo Mbeki (1998) placing emphasis on a creative, intellectually stimulating, and self-directing Africa. Speaking about Africans, Mbeki claims that "they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be." The ideals that are prescribed in the imagined African Renaissance include freedom of sexual identity, and I see figures like Bebe as contributors to the reimagining of queers in African societies.

I find linkages between Bebe's drag and the ethos of Binyavanga Wainaina's (2014) articulations through a series of videos titled *We Must Free Our Imagination*. In these videos Wainaina talks about the need to step out of the boundaries of what we know and into the creative world of imagining. He asserts we should let go of the blueprints of how African queer life should be, left behind by the colonial and apartheid administration, and imagine queer African life for ourselves. Our imagination regarding African identities, including sexual identities, in twenty-first-century Africa needs to exist without the boundaries, often set by colonial administrators through penal codes and now Christian Right evangelists. The human potential is infinite, and if we are to prosper as countries and as a continent we cannot limit the possibilities of innovative self-identities, like how Bebe has done and continues to do through her drag.

Among the many things that colonialism took away from Africans is people's ability to create themselves. To fashion a self that is not regulated by colonial ideas of what it means to be African. The colonial administration's strong hold was also exercised on the ways that Africans could craft themselves through sexuality. This restriction from creating oneself was expressed through segregation such as apartheid in South Africa and penal codes that were a reflection of European anxieties about African sexuality. These anxieties created in colonial times are still with us in the postcolonial context now being expressed by Africans over other Africans through narratives such "homosexuality is un-African." While it is a false statement, it has garnered popularity and is used to oppress Africans with same-sex desires. It is in this context that the visibility of Bebe becomes a defiant statement of Africans creating themselves in spite of the obstacles. By using African iconography, and playing with African stereotypes, Bebe uses the art of drag to make commentary about Africa. Granted, her use of African aesthetics is double edged in that it reinforces certain stereotypes, but by using her drag art and using African symbolism, she is also giving a nod to those in the know that she hasn't forgotten her roots. Using camp and sending up stereotypes of Africa, she is engaged in a conversation both with those in her new home in North America and

also those she left behind in Cameroon. Bebe is an example of a freed queer African imagination, existing in a place where she can reimagine and reinvent herself over and over again. I am fascinated by Bebe because through her drag art, she represents what is possible with just a little bit more imagination.

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