

BUNK BUDDIES: SEXING THE SUMMER CAMP

Alexis Mitchell

Bunk (n.) "Sleeping berth," 1758, probably a shortened form of "bunker." Bunk beds allow two or more people to sleep in the same small space. They are used in places with limited floor space, such as ships, army garrisons, dormitories, summer camp, cabins, hostels, children's rooms, or prison cells.

Cabin (n.) 1325–1375; from Middle English *cabane* —of uncertain, perhaps pre-Latin orig. a small house or cottage, usually of simple design and construction; an enclosed space for more or less temporary occupancy, as the living quarters in a trailer or the passenger space in a cable car; the enclosed space for the pilot, cargo, or especially passengers in an air or space vehicle; an apartment or room in a ship, as for passengers; cabin class.

Dear Mom and Dad,
This is the first chance I've had to write to you. The days have been a blur of sunshine, heat and so much fun! I can't wait to show you around the camp when you come visit. You won't believe how much there is to do here! So far I have been swimming every day, I've played basketball, I've been canoeing, sailing, and of course, I have water-skied many times (I think I'm already getting better at it). My



counsellors are so cool! One of them works at arts and crafts and makes all sorts of weird things every day—I'm sure we'll get the chance to make some ourselves soon.

The nights have also been very fun. We have a different program every single night. Yesterday evening we played this game where different



counsellors would present very unusual objects to the crowd and each one would have to pretend like they knew what it was, and then we had to vote on who was telling the truth about this strange thing we were looking at. My counsellor Daniela was up there, and she had to explain this object that looked like a tiny toilet bowl. Supposedly, it was the top of a drinking fountain for birds. Weird! My favourite part of camp so far, though, was on Friday night. We got to stay out later than usual (9pm) and watch this band play. They were a small group of three musicians playing the best music I had ever heard! The whole camp sat on the beach and watched them while they played around the giant fire pit. Some people even knew the words to some of the songs so they would sing along—but it was all new to me! I just loved watching them play by the fire.



*Dear Mom and Dad,
Camp has been very interesting over the last little while. Everything in my cabin has been going very well. Shari and Jessica got into a fight the other night about the boy that they both seem to have a crush on, but besides that, everyone has been getting along! I have to say, the food is not amazing,*



and because of that I've been eating my fair share of macaroni and cheese! We have been running around a lot though and I'm playing sports almost every day—basketball is still my favourite.

There was a bit of an incident in one of the younger girl's cabins the other day, though, and that seems to be putting everyone in a weird mood.



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Supposedly there was a girl in the cabin who was touching the private parts of another girl while they were lying in their bunk together. The counsellors caught them doing that and then the camp directors kicked the girl who was caught touching the other girl out of camp! She's only 10! It seemed like such a harsh punishment to me.

A few years ago I was having a drink with a friend at a bar in downtown Toronto. If my memory serves me, it was The Beaver, a local queer bar that has seen its fair share of sweaty dance parties and dramatic nights. This friend is a performer (in most senses of the word) and had tasked herself with enlivening me as my energy waned. She began by singing to me, quietly enough so that the rest of the bar wouldn't turn around, but still loud enough for me to feel awkward and slightly embarrassed. She then began to sing a song that was quite slow, at an even quieter pitch than before. After the first line of the song I interrupted her, asking how she knew this song. As I heard it, all these childhood memories came flooding back—I imagined myself sitting on the foot of my bottom bunk at summer camp, in the far right corner of the cabin (where I would write all my letters home), humming this same song to myself.

The song was “Gabey and Mike,” and as I recall it was about unrequited love between two young boys. The boys had a sweet, childish form of affection for one another that was cut short by their families' frustrations, and a potentially tragic ending (it's truly a “cliff hanger”)—a bike accident—that seemingly cuts this relationship off for good. My friend explained to me that this song was by a band called Mermaid Cafe and that everyone she went to summer camp with knew them. I had never even heard this song as a recording but remembered it being sung live, year after year, around the campfire—a quintessential camp song with a queer twist. I couldn't believe that this song had traveled to my summer camp by way of other camps, and that there was an actual recording of it somewhere that I had never heard. I also was in shock to find out that one of its members was Peaches, the performance artist/musician/queer icon.

These images are stills from a video I'm working on with Stephanie Markowitz—the friend who first hummed “Gabey and Mike” at the queer bar in Toronto. The video uses Mermaid Cafe's music to explore the peculiar yet utterly mundane codes of sexuality and desire that exist within and traverse through the space of the summer camp by questioning the role this music had in the hearts and memories of thousands of children in the circuit of Jewish summer camps in Southern Ontario. Though all built environments (houses, churches, tree houses, dancehalls, etc.) produce certain forms of desire through their forms, aesthetics, and rituals, the summer camp produces a uniquely vibrant and diverse set of desires that speaks to the theme of Eros. The summer camp is a space that is rooted in a specifically nationalist history (both in the U.S. and Canada) and persists as a pedagogical space outside the specific confines of the urban. It is a space that is meant to house a new set of ideals, rituals, practices, and relationships, a space that is perceived as “open” and “free,” and a space that has historically been perceived as a corrective to the gritty and “immoral” space of the city. In actuality, the set of ideals and rituals often practiced within the space of the summer camp not only oftentimes appropriate and oppress Indigenous rituals and culture (many summer camps take up debased versions of Indigenous rituals as camp activities), but they also ironically limit the same freedom scripts they seek to propagate. For example, the exploration of sexuality and desire is inhibited through the implementation of repressive punishments such as missing an evening program for “cabin hopping to boys camp” or even kicking children out of camp entirely (without refund), thus enacting strict and rigid social codes for the rest of the campers to bear witness to. At the same time, counsellors perpetuate their now clichéd role as the hyper-sexualized disciplinarian, which both maintains these types of punishment and also condones particular forms of hetero-normative sexual exploration through their performative re-stagings of summer-time love, lust, and everything in between. The inclusion of Mermaid Café's music into camp culture speaks

to the tension that exists between the hyper-sexualized and hyper-repressed forms of desire that are truly unique to the space of the summer camp.

¹ All stills are taken from video footage shot by Ava Berkofsky for “Gabey and Mike,” a project by Stephanie Markowitz and Alexis Mitchell.