After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp

Ann Pellegrini

One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that “sincerity” is not enough.
Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”

Morbidity was my first choice.
Susan Sontag, “Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture”

Introduction

The open secret of Bush-era American politics is not that President George W. Bush and his Administration have lied, a lot, but that so many Americans, for so many years, knew this and did not seem to mind. At minimum, this fact - President Bush has lied, a lot - did not matter enough or did not matter to enough voting-age Americans to result in his defeat in 2004. If many, if not most, Americans have long known that Bush does not tell the full truth and have not cared, this apparent indifference derives in part from the expectation many Americans now have that their Presidents lie. It is not that Presidential lies have no consequences - after all, William Jefferson Clinton was impeached, essentialy for lying about sex. Because sex is an overburdened site of moral anxiety and regulation, sexual lies partake of a dynamic that exceeds the category of the “Presidential lie.” However, the relatively free pass George Bush received well into his second term for his Administration's lies about weapons of mass destruction and Iraq's connection to 9/11 is due to more than just a chastened press corps, the special volatility of sexual allegations, or a Republican majority unwilling to investigate, let alone impeach, its own. These are all factors in the differential treatment and reception of Bush’s lies as opposed to Clinton’s, to be sure. But, this shrugging acceptance of something less than the truth depends as well on the way popular culture has habituated us to the manufacturing of reality as entertainment. Are we all postmodernists now, cynically decoding and avidly consuming the shimmering surfaces of the real? Against such a backdrop, what Bush says matters less than how he says it: “sincerely.” Bush’s sincerity converts surface into depth, where depth is not about facts but feelings. He really seems to mean what he says, something that his Democratic challenger in 2004 did not. Indeed, one of the reasons that characterizations of Democratic Presidential candidate Senator John Kerry as a flip-flopper stuck and worked so well has to do with their differing styles of performance. Kerry talked too much and said too little.

Facts be damned, Bush is nothing if not certain. Crucially, the measure of his sincerity is not whether or not what he says is true, but whether or not he conveys his own belief in what he says when he says it. In this circuit of feeling, the sincere performance latches onto and generates feelings of accuracy on the other side, confirming worldviews, assuaging conscience. Here, the suture is achieved not through postmodern ironizing, but through a management strategy that negotiates incongruities between feeling and fact. Comedy Central’s Stephen Colbert has dubbed this phenomenon “truthiness.” Of course, when Colbert’s faux newsman uses the term, his audience is in on the joke. Scare quotes slice the air. In pointed contrast, the phenomenon that “truthiness” names is actually profoundly anti-ironic. Bush’s notoriously garbled speech is an easy hit for late-night comedians (let alone grammarians), but for Bush’s true believers his misspeaking lends a down-home folksiness, sense of spontaneity, and “trusting” effect to his speech acts. This is a mutually reinforcing dynamic; his sincerity puts the “true” in “true believers.” But why? How have performances of sincerity (does he mean it or not) and feelings of accuracy (does this feel true to me) come to displace questions of fact? As a roundabout way into these questions, I want to turn, perhaps paradoxically, to the question of “camp.”

The paradox of this turn derives from camp’s own sideways relation to reality. As Susan Sontag writes, in her much-discussed 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’”

Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp”; not a woman, but a “woman.” To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand being-as-playing-a-role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.

At a historical moment when wink-wink nudge-nudge is the business as usual of both politics and commerce, a return to “camp” and its politics of incongruity may seem more of the same. To put a finer point on the matter: where politics is so openly and cynically performative, what remains of camp as an oppositional strategy? The answer to this question depends in large part on whose camp we are talking about.

More than 30 years after its first publication in Partisan Review, Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” remains the most influential and, for queer critics, the most controversial discussion of camp. Not the least of her contested moves is her characterization of camp as “apolitical.” To Sontag, camp is an aesthetic sensibility, a style, and precisely for this reason, she says, it cannot be or have a politics: “To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized — or at least apolitical.” For many queers, however, these linked assertions — style over content over politics — do not go without saying.
This does not mean that queer critics speak as one on the subject of camp or its politics. Far from it. Even as queer critics have uniformly rejected Sontag's characterization of camp as "apolitical," they have not always agreed as to what kind of politics it represented—or even if "political" can be applied to camp in an unqualified way. Esther Newton, for example, in her classic study of pre-Stonewall drag culture, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America,* argues that camp is a concrete "strategy for a situation." Camp responds to the experience of homosexual stigmatization by sending up and theatricalizing the stigma, thereby ameliorating its impact. As a survival strategy this is absolutely necessary; but, it is not yet a politics. It is rather a "pre- or proto-political phenomenon," at odds with the then-emergent politics of Gay Liberation.

Other commentators have been less hesitant. Like Newton, Michael Bronski understands camp as a survival strategy as well as a distinctive mode of communication. But he also sees camp as a "visionary" practice, through which gay men could "reimagine the world around them." In Bronski's estimation, these joined capacities—life-saving and world-making—make camp "not only political, but progressive." The title of Moe Meyer's edited volume states its claim up front: *The Politics and Poetics of Camp.* The post-Stonewall, Queer Nation moment of this volume is made clear in Meyer's introductory essay, in which he defines camp as a uniquely "queer parodic praxis" through which queers generate conditions for social agency and social visibility in the teeth of the dominant order. Meyer will go on to distinguish between "politicized, solely queer" uses of "Camp" and its "unqueer, apolitical, or Pop Culture" appropriations, marking the point with a shift from upper- to lower-case "c." In pointing out how the repackaging of "Camp" into "camp" has blunted the former's critical edge, Meyer is in good company.

Assessments of camp and its politics are crucially bound to their historical moment; camp's meanings and possibilities have changed over time, and so too have gay, lesbian, and queer conceptions of camp. A helpful way through these queer debates over the politics of camp is provided by José Esteban Muñoz's reminder that camp is not "innately politically valenced." In some contexts, camp is conservative; in others, radical; in still others it may have little or no politics at all—or it might be a little bit country and a little bit rock and roll at once. To repurpose a point Diana Fuss makes with respect to "essentialism," the political meaning of camp depends not on some ontology of camp, what it inherently is, but on who is using it, how it is done, and where its effects are concentrated.

Sontag herself would come to qualify her pre-Stonewall and pre-Women's Liberation Movement assessment of camp as "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical." In an April 1975 interview with *Salmagundi,* she credits the "diffusion of camp taste in the early '60s... with a considerable if inadvertent role in the upsurge of feminist consciousness in the late 1960s." How so? Sontag elaborates that "the camp taste for the theatrically feminine [helped] undermine the credibility of certain stereotyped femininities—by exaggerating them, by putting them between quotation marks." The word "diffusion" indexes the complex cultural economy of camp as it crossed over from its homosexual context of emergence and was absorbed or appropriated by other interests. That Sontag was talking about the diffusion of a specifically homosexual male camp is made clear just moments later in the *Salmagundi* interview, when she again draws camp and feminism into relation: "What I am arguing is that today's feminist consciousness has a long and complicated history, of which the diffusion of male homosexual taste is a part— including its sometimes witless putdowns of and delirious homage to the feminine." This is an ambivalent commendation, to be sure, but the ambivalence is all to Sontag's point as she urges feminists, including herself, to see past what may offend them in camp to take in something of its liberatory force:

The theme you single out—the parodistic rendering of women—usually left me cold. But I can't say that I was simply offended. For I was as often amused and, so far as I needed to be, liberated... Camp's extremely sentimental relation to beauty is no help to women, but its irony is: ironizing about the sexes is one small step toward depolarizing them.

Sontag's ambivalence—she is as often offended as amused by camp—is also camp's. In its mode as drag, camp's idealization of femininity may serve to reinforce misogynist stereotypes of sexual difference. But camp also exceeds such a reduction; as irony, camp opens up distance between represented and real, forging a space for an altered political and ethical relation. Importantly, at least at this juncture in Sontag's thinking about camp, ambivalence neither equates to moral paralysis nor seeks its resolution in a Manichean pitch to one side or the other.

We are a long way here from Sontag's devastating indictment of camp in "Fascinating Fascism." Completed in 1974 and first published in abridged form in *The New York Review of Books* in February 1975, less than three months before the *Salmagundi* interview took place, this essay is best known for its blistering critique of the fascist aesthetics of Leni Riefenstahl and of the changing cultural attitude that looks through fascism to see only beauty. "Fascinating Fascism" also includes a brief but scathing swipe at feminists unwilling "to sacrifice the one woman [Riefenstahl] who made films that everybody acknowledges to be first-rate." This assertion played no small part in a heated exchange of letters between Adrienne Rich and Sontag, in the March 20, 1975 edition of *The New York Review of Books,* in which they argued over Nazism and patriarchal values, the relationship between intellect and feeling, and the version published in *Under the Sign of Saturn.*

The theme you single out—the parodistic rendering of women—usually left me cold. But I can't say that I was simply offended. For I was as often amused and, so far as I needed to be, liberated... Camp's extremely sentimental relation to beauty is no help to women, but its irony is: ironizing about the sexes is one small step toward depolarizing them.

Sontag's ambivalence—she is as often offended as amused by camp—is also camp's. In its mode as drag, camp's idealization of femininity may serve to reinforce misogynist stereotypes of sexual difference. But camp also exceeds such a reduction; as irony, camp opens up distance between represented and real, forging a space for an altered political and ethical relation. Importantly, at least at this juncture in Sontag's thinking about camp, ambivalence neither equates to moral paralysis nor seeks its resolution in a Manichean pitch to one side or the other.

The theme you single out—the parodistic rendering of women—usually left me cold. But I can't say that I was simply offended. For I was as often amused and, so far as I needed to be, liberated... Camp's extremely sentimental relation to beauty is no help to women, but its irony is: ironizing about the sexes is one small step toward depolarizing them.

Sontag's ambivalence—she is as often offended as amused by camp—is also camp's. In its mode as drag, camp's idealization of femininity may serve to reinforce misogynist stereotypes of sexual difference. But camp also exceeds such a reduction; as irony, camp opens up distance between represented and real, forging a space for an altered political and ethical relation. Importantly, at least at this juncture in Sontag's thinking about camp, ambivalence neither equates to moral paralysis nor seeks its resolution in a Manichean pitch to one side or the other.
Camp offers an antiseptic container. "Unfettered by the scruples of high seriousness," alarm bells Sontag rings about camp in "Fascinating Fascism" square with the qualified — or at least apolitical" camp we encountered in "Notes on 'Camp.'" Nor do thealist defense she had offered of Riefenstahl's films in the 1965 essay "On Style.

 already represents a change of heart, as Sontag backs away from the provocative forcal evaluations of camp? Part of the answer lies in the fact that "Fascinating Fascism"

interview, for camp's ironic send-up of
died appreciation she offers, in the

ened line "Fascinating Fascism" takes against Riefenstahl, Sontag gives a two-prongedase that much more than homosexual taste." Finally, and most notoriously: "Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would."39

In the eyes of some queer critics, Sontag has elevated this blindspot to the level of hermeneutic. D. A. Miller points to the essay's opening moments, where, he asserts, Sontag "justified her phobic de-homosexualization of Camp as the necessary condition for any intelligent discourse on the subject."40 The passage Miller has in mind bears quoting in full:

To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it. If the betrayal can be defended, it will be for the edification it provides, or the dignity of the conflict it resolves. For myself, I plead the goal of self-edification, and the goal of a sharp conflict in my own sensibility. I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.41

It is tempting to interpret "the sharp conflict" in Sontag's sensibility in the light of the closet — Sontag's own. This is scarcely an over-reading given the swirl of gossip that long circulated around her "personal" life — those things said and unsaid or, rather more nearly, whispered but rarely committed to print.42

This gossip has received posthumous confirmation from Sontag herself via the September 2006 publication of excerpts from her journals in which she discusses her passionate affairs with women, her struggles with homophobia, and the relationship between her homosexuality and her writing. In an entry dated December 24, 1959, Sontag explicitly links the guilt she feels at "being queer" to her "desire to write."

Arguably, if the sensibility of camp was as dangerously empty as Sontag asserts it had become by the time of "Fascinating Fascism," this may be because it had been emptied of its original referent: a homosexual life-world. Stripped of politics and sanctified of its homosexual associations save as an accident of history, Sontag's "Camp" was ready for its pop-cultural close-up and eventual massification as "style."
Jewish camp is another. When Sontag turns, at the 4 & such, -“besotted” versus “obsessed” - of Sontag’s dual commitments take the form of a own relation to camp is in no simple way homophobic. To my mind, Sontag’s H tion, and, I want to urge, “moral seriousness” in the face of vulnerability. When Sontag de-gays camp, she denies a precious form of queer resilience, irnae’ relation to homosexuality, homosexual camp taste, and the closet is never scholarship on camp; nonetheless, Sontag’s own interested - dare I say, “cafll- is) nor the closet (whether imagined as internalized homophobia, necessary self- protection, or canny careerism). Rather, ambivalence is the structuring condition of homosexualization of camp is neither a matter of simple homophobia (whatever th t is) nor the closet (whether imagined as internalized homophobia, necessary self-. homophobia: to my mind, Sontag’s inability to recognize camp’s moral seriousness - what I want to call “camp sincerity” - is one prominent casualty of this erasure. The possibility of a specifically Jewish camp is another.

IV

While Sontag has been rightly criticized for de-homosexualizing camp, her “de- Jewification” of camp has attracted scant notice. When Sontag turns, at the essay’s near-end, to discuss camp’s “peculiar relation” to homosexuality, her promised expla-
Sontag identifies both Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual camp as “self-serving” strategies of assimilation:

The reason for the flourishing of the aristocratic posture among homosexuals also seems to parallel the Jewish case. For every sensibility is self-serving to the group that promotes it. Jewish liberalism is a gesture of self-legitimization. So is Camp taste, which definitely has something propagandistic about it. Needless to say, the propaganda operates in exactly the opposite direction. The Jews pinned their hopes for integrating into modern society on promoting the moral sense. Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.54

Left completely out of view are the interrelated structures of dominance – Christian dominance and heteronormativity – within which these “hopes for integrating” are simultaneously solicited and thwarted. For those Jews and homosexuals who would be proper subjects of liberal modernity, the price of admission is the setting aside or bracketing of anything that sets them apart from the unmarked center.

Thus, if anyone should feel moral indignation here it is those who are asked to give up what makes them different from the norm – and all in the name of democratic inclusion.55 Cynthia Morrill states this objection nicely:

Central to Sontag’s claim is the presumption that camp is a discursive mode offered to heterosexuals as a means for homosexuals to gain acceptance. What is entirely excluded from her analysis is the possibility that Camp might be a discursive mode which enables homosexuals to adapt to the conditions of heterosexual homophobia.56

This is adaptation as a mode of survival. In such a context, homosexual camp may well flatter heterosexual stereotypes of who or what homosexuals are.57 Then again, it may not. It is best not to be too hard and fast about camp. The cross-over appeal of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which gay life-stylists are recruited to make style, good grooming, and closet organizers safe for heterosexual men, confirms that camp as appeasement is not a pre-Stonewall relic. In fact, it may be that the ongoing commodification of homosexual camp taste has permitted it to be de-politicized without being de-gayed. Of course, there is a larger liberal story to tell here about the assimilationist rhetoric and ambitions of current gay and lesbian politics.58

Just before her belated invocation of homosexuality in “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag had introduced a stand-in, dandyism, in notes 45–8: “Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.”59 Dandyism in an age of mass culture requires an “equivalence of all objects.” The unique object and the mass-produced object alike may offer camp appeal. Where the old-style dandy hated vulgarity (in Sontag’s colorful phrasing he “held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon”), the modern connoisseur of camp makes do with what he is given. “Sniffing] the stink” of vulgarity and massification, camp’s connoisseur “prides himself on his strong nerves.”60

In linking camp’s possibilities of enunciation to practices of consumption, massification of culture, and what she terms the “psychopathology of affluence,”61 Sontag unwittingly draws camp into the circle of Jewishness (as imagined by the anti-semitic), where “the” male Jew stands for capital and “the” female Jew for consumption – especially via her modern incarnation in the Jewish American Princess, or “JAP.”62 But the spectral trace of the homosexual lingers here as well, and not simply as the dandy’s latter-day representative. Rather, as Eric Clarke argues, the homosexual early on stood in for consumption and the ethos of “lifestyle.”63 It is not a matter, then, of choosing between two stereotyped figures, the Jew or the homosexual, but of elaborating what Janet R. Jakobsen has aptly described as the complex “genealogy of their interrelation.”64

There is, by now, a rich literature that examines the way fin de siècle stereotypes of male Jews as womanly, sexually degenerate, corrupt, and corrupting dovetail with stereotypes of male homosexuals.65 The racial difference of the Jew is thus made legible via a highly gendered apparatus of detection and enforced visibility. Through the co-construction of homosexuality and Jewishness in the late-nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, Jewishness as “race” becomes also Jewishness as “gender trouble.” This co-construction also implies the racialization of homosexuality.66

Not for nothing do I invoke the title of Judith Butler’s path-breaking 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.*67 Butler’s notion of gender performativity helpfully shifts the analytic focus from gender as a stable kind of being to gender as a compelled (and compelling) series of doings. In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” an essay published shortly after *Gender Trouble,* Butler credits Esther Newton’s discussion of female impersonation in *Mother Camp* for showing Butler the “very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed.”68 This insight crucially informs Butler’s conception of gender as an imitative practice whose performance fabricates its own origins and passes them off as law. Gender performativities in this sense are not volitional; they are rather a complicated and compulsory call and response through which individuals come to embody and, sometimes, up-end norms.

Camp is or can be crucial to this possible up-ending. If gender is a citational performance – an imitation with no original – then “man” and “woman” are always already in quotation marks. It is just that these scare quotes are not visible to the causal observer nor even to the everyday performer, for whom doing gender right may
be, quite literally, a matter of life or death. By putting quotation marks between quotation marks, camp throws into dizzying relief the everyday processes whereby gender—and the sexual norms fortified by the fiction of essential (hetero)sexual difference—are done and redone.

This is not just about gender or sexuality. Jewishness, too, is a complex doing, whose command performances engage stereotypes of Jewish difference, sometimes testing them, sometimes enacting them, sometimes doing both at once. Jewish camp calls upon—remembers—a history of anti-semantic stereotypes. It is Gilda Radner turning the other cheek and flashing her "Jewess Jeans," in a mock commercial on Saturday Night Live in 1980. It is Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz's fake objects into high fashion statements. Their Chanel Hanukkah menorah, for example, calls upon—remembers—a history of anti-semitic stereotypes. It is Gilda Radnor testing them, sometimes enacting them, sometimes doing both at once. Jewish camp, in the mode in which I am describing it here, is assimilationist, complexly queer, and profoundly ethical. It can also be profoundly uncomfortable.

In the wink of a camp eye, these acts of critical appropriation convert the sting of stereotype into the sharp wit of social commentary. These performances variously draw upon a genocidal history of anti-semantic depictions of Jewishness, but do so by refusing to refuse the stereotype. Camp's refusal to refuse recalls Homi Bhabha's conception of colonial mimicry as "at once resemblance and menace." This is a calculated and also ambivalent embrace of the despised love object that is oneself or one's "own." Jewish camp, in the mode in which I am describing it here, is anti-assimilationist, complexly queer, and profoundly ethical. It can also be profoundly uncomfortable.

VII

When the joke's on you, perhaps the best defense is getting there first? This was one of Freud's claims about self-deprecatory humor: by turning the joke on itself it disarms the anticipated criticism from another. This tendency to direct criticism against the self or against a group in which the subject has a share is especially pronounced, Freud writes, among Jews. Freud draws an important distinction between jokes told about Jews by outsiders and Jewish jokes told by Jews themselves:

The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates the subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke work.

Though Freud does not specify who the audience of the self-deprecatory Jewish joke is, it does seem to me that he imagines joking among Jews. Crucial to the particular efficiency of the Jewish joke told by and among Jews is the proximity of teller and hearers alike to the subject of the joke. To be sure, Jewish jokes might be told by Jews in mixed company, but in this instance the joke is subject to an appropriation comforting to those who have no share in it.

Appropriation is not the only story here. Newton's analysis of homosexual camp humor crucially supplements Freud's discussion of Jewish wit. "Camp humor," Newton writes in Mother Camp, "is a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying." This humor does not "cover up" what is painful or tragic, but "transforms" it. Newton is writing about homosexual camp, but her basic points regarding the moral transformation camp performs apply as well to Jewish camp. Camp embraces and even flaunts a stigmatized identity in order to "neutralize the sting and make it laughable." This is not a comforting performance; the humor is often sharp-edged—"extremely hostile," in Newton's words—and we are invited to laugh at situations that do not seem all that funny.

Camp helps to socialize individual conflict, by providing it with a shared community of interpretation. As a system of humor, homosexual camp can have it both ways. In "mixed" company, the homosexual camp can get a good laugh out of heterosexuals, who think they know what it is they are seeing, and get one over on them at the same time. Sontag is helpful on this point: "Behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing." At the same time, neither "zaniness" nor "privacy" quite gets at camp as a social practice and shared "structure of feeling" (to use Raymond Williams' term). Camp response, even if experienced one at a time, is not isolable from the experiences or histories of larger communities of interpretation. One has to learn to "read" and "get" camp. Eventually, you can try it at home in "private"—but this does not make it any less public or shared. Nor does "zany" always capture how camp feels as it finds its target.

Perhaps, then, camp does not so much "neutralize the sting" of social disapproval as multiply and extend it. The ethical call of camp extends itself in space, asking the audience to take up its share of the pain—and pleasure, too. It also extends itself in time. The transformed burden is no longer the social stigma "itsel," but the history of devaluation and its human costs. This is the sting of memory, which can be a gentle pinch or a punch to the stomach, as practiced by a range of Jewish performers and artists. It is the punch of Sarah Silverman sporting a Hitler mustache in publicity stills for her concert film Jesus is Magic or of Da Ali G Show's Sacha Baron-Cohen in drag as the thickly-accented Kazakistani "news" correspondent Borat singing "Throw the Jew Down the Well" at a Tucson bar. Contrastingly, it is the wry pinch of Melissa Shift's interactive 2006 video installation, "Passover Projections," which inserts Dr Ruth and Hadassah Gross, among others, into Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments and sets them a-walking (and a-talking) through a miraculously parted Red Sea. "Let my people go-go," Hadassah Gross commands.
This “punch” and this “pinch” also measure the distance between the CC-and-ginger-soaked “terror drag” of New York City cabaret artists Kiki and Herb (Justin Bond and Kenny Mehlman) and the rejuvenating ritual drag of Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross (Amichai Bau-Lavie). Kiki is an aging lounge singer, perpetually on the comeback trail. In between rounds — of song and drink — the once-married and thrice-blessed with children (only two surviving) Kiki spins harrowing tales of maternal rage, dead daughters, and gloriously awful familial dysfunction. It is a discomforting performance that exists at the razor’s edge of camp. As Shane Vogel points out, a Kiki and Herb “performance is both a comic and a disarmingly recognizable spectacle.” It is also, in Vogel’s interpretation, a performance that extends itself; the audience is invited — dared, really — to collaborate with Kiki and Herb in a project of queer world-making.

Like Kiki, Hadassah has an elaborated back-story, with its own share of tragedy. She is a 75-year-old Holocaust survivor, whose thick accent marks her Hungarian birth. (Her age stays the same from performance to performance; her birth-date fluctuates to keep in sync.) A rabbi’s wife and widow six times over, Hadassah is a bewigged and bejeweled Sabbath Queen, who joins the naughtiness of cabaret to the ritual seriousness of midrash. The hybrid performance is a kind of “holy chutzpah,” to use Bau-Lavie’s (and Hadassah’s) own words for it. Affectively, Hadassah is a kind of anti-Kiki. Where Kiki delights and terrifies her audience in equal measure, Hadassah offers a gentler, even, a “redemptive,” touch. Even at its raunchiest, there is a sweetness to the performance. For the Israeli-born and Yeshiva-trained Bau-Lavie, Hadassah is part of a larger project of reanimating Jewish ritual and history for the present. Bau-Lavie is also the president and artistic director of Storahtelling, a New York City-based organization that offers “a radical fusion of storytelling, Torah, traditional ritual theater and contemporary performance art.” Hadassah is not exactly “traditional,” but her — and Bau-Lavie’s — religious sincerity makes it hard to take offense.

Then again, transgression, like camp, may be in the eye of the beholder. Secular audiences, queer or straight, Jewish or not, may be discomfited, or disturbed, by Hadassah’s ritual seriousness. On the other hand, some religiously observant Jews might consider her gender impersonation and back-story irreverent, at best. Hadassah’s liberal sprinkling of yiddishisms throughout her performances offers yet another point of entry or exclusion, depending upon an audience member’s position as insider or outsider. This multiplication of possible responses makes sense because camp is not a stable thing. It is rather, as Newton argues, “a relationship between things, people, and activities and qualities, and homosexuality.” Hadassah’s queerness, in my view, is due less to her drag per se, than to the fact that she harnesses it to a religious project. Ultimately, her merger of traditions of gay male camp to Jewish ritual unsettles easy distinctions between the religious and the secular, and between Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aesthetics and irony. This is Jewish camp, to be sure; it is also camp sincerity.

To repeat, camp is “a relationship between things, people, and activities and qualities, and homosexuality.” It is also a relationship to history and temporality. We get a glimpse of this in the “archival drag” of Joni Mitchell impersonator John Kelly, which is beautifully discussed by David Román in Performance in America: Contemporary US Culture and the Performing Arts. As Román underscores, Kelly’s impersonation is non-ironic and represents an attempt to keep faith with Mitchell’s artistry, the historical moment of her songs, and the political hopefulness that soared with her soprano. This keeping faith is more than a mere recitation of the past; it represents as well its re-imagination for the present. Román introduces the term “archival drag” to register the ways in which “theatrical performance lives not just in the memory of those who witness it but also in the vestiges, artifacts, and performances that survive into a later time.” Mitchell’s paean to 1960s utopian imaginings, “Woodstock,” is one such vestige of the past, and its possibilities are reanimated in Kelly’s re-performance of it, when he switches the location from Woodstock to Wigstock and references historical realities from his own era, such as AIDS. This switch is more than clever word play, Román urges; it is an attempt to drag into the present moment not just the past as event, but the past as feeling and potentiality. “Archival drag” summons the past for the present — and the future. In doing so, Román says, it refuses to “acknowledge the finality of death — the death of the artist, of the avant-garde, of queer culture.”

This is not a refusal of death per se, but a recognition of the ways in which we carry our dead before us. Another word for this is melancholia. In Freud’s classic formulation, melancholia involves an object-loss that is withdrawn from consciousness and absorbed into the ego. Lost, yet unrecognized as loss, the lost object cannot be mourned as gone. And yet this non-recognition of loss does not spare the subject of melancholia; the unknown loss produces internal work similar to that undergone in mourning. All unknowing, Freud observes, “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.” In Freud’s initial conception, melancholia is a pathological formation, a kind of obsessed over-identification. But his later descriptions of ego formation, in The Ego and the Id, seem to normalize melancholia. No longer does melancholia constitute a “pathological” turning away from the world. Instead, “normal” processes of identification come more and more to resemble the melancholic model of outside-in, offering a picture of a body-self forged in the wake of loss: “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes... and contains the history of those object-choices.”

Douglas Crimp, Judith Butler, David Eng, and Shinhee Han, among others, have all critically repurposed the concept of melancholia, illuminating the larger social and political contexts within which loss is lived and negotiated. All subjects are forged through loss, but not all losses are equally valued. Among other things, depathologizing and politicizing melancholia allow us to see how socially disparaged objects live on in the psychic realm, and how they are preserved even at cost to the ego who has
lovingly (if also ambivalently) internalized them. This aggressive and militant preservation of the lost object is all the more necessary for those who were told that their loved ones and their love were mistaken from the start.

In its near overlap with “concentration camp,” what I have been calling “Jewish camp” is over-burdened with a history of loss. But loss is not the all of it. As Laura Levitt has remarked, “Jewish camp” also resonates with the promise of “Jewish summer camp.” The levity of Jewish camp need not be a turning away from moral seriousness but might even be a life-preserving form of it. The past is burden and buoy at once.

This is a point made in a slightly different way by Albert J. Winn’s series of photographs “Summer Joins the Past: Deserted and Abandoned Jewish Summer Camps, 1997–present.” His images are stark and lush in equal measure. The silver-gelatin prints court emptiness, lingering over rough-strewn wooden barracks, graffiti-covered walls, and beds long bereft of their inhabitants. For example, one 2002 photograph taken in the Pocono Mountains shows us twin metal camp beds; the bed on the right juts forward, out of alignment, out of time, its fitted sheet pulled up at the top to reveal a glimpse of the striped mattress beneath (see Figure 9.1). Another photograph, from 1997, pushes its viewer into a warren of sleeping cells, a built-in ladder showing the way to nowhere in particular. “MEOW” streaks prominently up one of the wooden frames. The mattresses are long gone, but the trace remains (see Figure 9.2).

In a 2004 essay describing this series, Winn acknowledges that his images of derelict wooden barracks, empty beds, and broken-down furniture evoke memories of the Holocaust, but he also wants “camp” — both the word itself and his images of these “haunted” spaces — to generate other sites for collective memory. For Winn, a gay Jewish man living with AIDS, the abandoned landscapes of his youth at once summon the “vibrancy
of a lost world and also underscore it as lost: “Devoid of the vitality for which they were created, the empty summer camps were the reminder of not only lives lived and lost but also the loss of an ideal.” Awake to ghosts, these empty spaces hold out the promise of another vision, the revisionary promise of camp sincerity in its melancholic mode.

Can we choose our ghosts? It seems to me that there is something defiantly melancholic in the way camp sincerity recycles and recirculates our dead. The camp I want to resurrect is neither mass-market-ready nostalgia (recycling the past for its kitsch value) nor mascot-ready appeasement à la Queer Eye, in which homosexual taste is “safely” repackaged for an emancipated heterosexual masculinity. By contrast, camp, as I understand it and want it to be, is both “anticipatory,” in its ability to imagine different social worlds, and a form of historical memory, in its willful retention of despised or devalued love objects. The devalued love objects I have in mind are not the outsized divas whom gay male camp celebrated and stung prior to Stonewall (however much we might cherish them still). Rather, the devalued love object might be the outsized political hopes of queer sexual freedom, as opposed to gay and lesbian “toleration.” Or – and – the devalued love object might be the queer life-worlds in which pre-Stonewall camp circulated. Or – and – it might be camp itself, when it is too queer or too lesbian or too Jewish, or in my formulation of camp sincerity, too serious.

To speak of camp as anticipatory is to speak alongside José Esteban Munoz’s conception of queer hope. The language of anticipation recalls as well Michael Bronski’s earlier identification of camp as “progressive.” By “progressive,” I understand Bronski not to be making “essentialist” claims about camp (as in: the true, the good, the politically correct), but rather to be expressing a hope for what camp, as a critical act of imagination, might do. Camp engages in creative recycling of the past as a way to produce a different relation to the present and the future. “Progressive,” on this reading is less about a place on a political spectrum that moves from right to left, and more a matter of ethical horizon: what might be.

Postscript

In her wide-ranging Salmagundi interview, Susan Sontag reveals that she had initially planned to write a series of notes on morbidity. “Morbidity was my first choice.” Unable to face death, she had turned instead to camp, a turning she construed as a turning away. In choosing camp, Sontag says, she was “choosing to humor the part of [her] seriousness that was being zapped and loosened up and made more sociable by camp wit rather than to fortify the part of [her] wit that got regularly choked off by seizures of morbidity.” The way Sontag frames this choice, as a choice between two facets of her own personality, recalls her previous description in “Notes on Camp” of the “sharp conflict” in her own sensibility. But was this choice really so either/or? If we take seriously camp’s capacity to reawaken the dead, then perhaps in turning to camp Sontag was writing about death after all. This dialectical tension – between past and present, morbidity and camp, morality and aesthetics, sympathy and revulsion, melancholy and hope – is a space of ethics. It is also a reason to hold onto camp in a time of terror. With camp, the past may yet awaken to charge the present and reimagine the future.

Figure 9.3 Paige Gratland, “The Sontag,” 2004.

In death, Sontag herself has become an object of camp cathexis and creative extension. Canadian artist Paige Gratland has put Sontag between quotation marks, as “The Sontag” (see Figure 9.3). Riffing off of Sontag’s signature look – that shock of silver hair – Gratland used “100% real human hair” (so the packaging promises) to fashion “feminist hair wear.” The silver-grey hair extension is set on a clip with comb teeth, permitting wearers to attach it where they will. “The Sontag” thus transforms its wearers into Sontag impersonators, but also gives them considerable interpretive leeway. For example, one picture on Gratland’s website shows a man who has attached
“The Sontag” to his beard. The interpretations multiply. The instructions on the back of the packaging conclude: “Can be cut to any length that suits you. / Long love / Susan Sontag / (1933–2004).”

Graftland made 100 copies of “The Sontag,” 100 silver streaks flashing up to illuminate the present. Susan Sontag, you are missed.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank audiences at the University of California–Irvine, University of California–Santa Cruz, “Rejuvenation: The Futures of Jewish Culture” (University of Toronto), “Mapping Jewish Identities” (Lehigh University), the American Studies Association, and the Association for Jewish Studies, who responded to earlier versions of this essay. Special thanks are due the artists Paige Graftland and Albert J. Winn for permission to reproduce images of their work; Amy Sadao at Visual AIDS; and Nikki DeBlosi, who provided crucial research assistance. Finally, I am grateful to those colleagues and friends who have critically buoyed the conception and writing of this essay, in its various mutations: Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, Molly McGarry, George Haggerty, Linda Schlossberg, Carol Ockman, Janet R. Jakobsen, Stacy Wolf, Jill Dolan, Laura Levitt, José Esteban Muñoz, Michael Bronski, Bryan Reynolds, Paul B. Franklin (early companion in camp theorizing), and, most especially, Julia Bryan-Wilson.

Notes

4 Despite some rumblings from the left, it is not as if Democrats showed any appetite for impeachment once they ascended into the majority in both chambers of Congress after the midterm elections of 2006.
5 Conversations with Molly McGarry helped me to clarify this point. I am grateful to her, as well, for redrawing my attention to Colbert’s use of the term “truthiness.”
6 Some cultural activists on the right have derided irony and “air quotes” as the sensibility of anti-Christian homosexuals. For a lucid discussion of this, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Notes from the War Room,” The Reveal (April 5, 2006), www.therevealer.org/archives/main_story_002500.php.
7 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” 280.
8 My introductory discussion is much indebted to conversations and emails with Gavin Butt, with whom I organized a panel on “Camp Sincerity” for the June 2006 meeting of Performance Studies International.
9 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” 277.
Ann Pellegrini


29 My thanks to B. Ruby Rich (personal communication) for pushing me to think about Sontag’s two “bad” objects—feminism and camp.


31 Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 97; emphasis mine. Compare the same passage in the abridged *NYR* version: “Riefenstahl’s current de-Nazification and vindication as indomitable priestess of the beautiful—as a filmmaker and, now, as a photographer—do not augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst. The force of her work is precisely in the continuity of its political and aesthetic ideas. What is interesting is that this was once seen so much more clearly than it seems to be now” (28). In the *NYR* version, this passage constitutes the end of section 1.


33 Ibid., 94.

34 Susan Sontag, “On Style,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990 [1966]): 15–36. In “On Style” Sontag calls *The Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad* “masterpieces” (25). She does not want to “gloss over the Nazi propaganda with aesthetic lenience. The Nazi propaganda is there,” she continues, “but something else is there, too, which we reject at our loss” (25). This “something else” is the films’ ability to “project the complex movements of intelligence and grace and sensuousness—a nourishment of consciousness she has moments earlier identified as at the heart of the moral service that art performs” (24). For the Sontag of “On Style,” then, Riefenstahl’s films serve as an example in extremis of her argument for the ways in which content comes to function as form and, so, lose its specific referent. “The work of art, as long as it is a work of art, cannot— whatever the artist’s personal intentions—advocate anything at all” (26).

35 Sontag, *Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture*, 32.

36 Ibid.

37 This is a point Sasha Torres makes in a slightly different way (“The Caped Crusader of Camp,” 248).

38 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 290.

39 Ibid., 291.


45 Ibid.


47 Both Michael Moon and Andrew Ross briefly discuss Sontag’s linkage of homosexual camp taste and Jewish moral seriousness. Ross sets it in the context of Sontag’s argument for the “tradition of Jewish moral seriousness that had governed the cultural crusading of the Old Left and Cold War liberalism” (“Uses of Camp,” 147). This break did not go all the way through, he suggests. The reservations she continued to express about camp—here, Ross points us back to Sontag’s “deep sympathy modified by revulsion”—showed, in Ross’s words, that she had not given up “entirely the prerogative of moral discrimination” (ibid., 147). Although I find Ross’s contextualization helpful, it misses the ways in which Sontag’s linkage of homosexual camp and Jewish moral seriousness actually functions to delink the moral and the aesthetic—as well as queers and Jews.

Moon comes closer to this point in an essay on Jack Smith’s well-known 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*—a film famously reviewed by Sontag, in 1964, the same year as the publication of “Notes on ‘Camp’.” In a long footnote, Moon criticizes Sontag’s elision of the political and the moral from *Flaming Creatures* in favor of aesthetic playfulness. He goes on to locate a similar false choice between the aesthetic and the moral in “Notes on ‘Camp’.”

Moon rightly rejects what he calls Sontag’s “reductive hypostatization.” I am more interested in his next move, though. He writes, “categories and categorical dyads such as Jewish moral seriousness versus gay ‘playfulness’ fall explanatorily flat, especially in view of the subsequent history of these two groups in the quarter century since Sontag’s essay, during which time many of her New York Jewish liberal intellectual confères of the mid-to late sixties have turned neoconservative and gays have been engaged in a series of political struggles that have for the most part been anything but ‘playful.’ Although I concur with Moon’s measurement of the ‘flatness’ of Sontag’s ‘categories and categorical dyads,’ in my view, his sketch of the ‘subsequent history of these two groups’ as two groups actually reinstates the opposition ‘Jewish moral seriousness versus gay ‘playfulness.’’” See Moon, “Flaming Closets,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995): 305, n. 17.

In his work in progress, tentatively entitled “The Cross-DressingSchlemiel or the Genre of Jewish Camp,” Menachem Feuer also criticizes the way Sontag separates Jewish moral seriousness and gay male aesthetics. He makes this point along the way to proposing the Schlemiel as a Jewish camp figure (personal communication with Feuer).

48 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 290; emphasis in original.

49 Ibid.

50 There is by now a rich literature debating the question of lesbian camp, a debate pushed forward by Sue-Ellen Case in “Toward a Butch–Femme Aesthetics,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 294–306. Case’s attribution of camp to butch–femme bar culture...
has been contested by Esther Newton, in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 63–89, 273–4. Newton does not rule out lesbian or even butch–femme camp, but argues that a lesbian camp sensibility “has been and continues to be mediated through the fact of its primary production in the particular suffering, creativity, and social networks of gay men” (65).


Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 287.
51 Ibid., 288.
52 Ibid., 290.
53 Ibid., 290.
54 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” 290.
57 Newton, “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen: *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, xi–xii.
59 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’.”
60 Ibid., 289.
61 Ibid.
Ann Pellegrini

84 Ibid., 43.
87 www.storahelling.org.
88 To minimize offense, the publicity and websites for Hadassah Gross and Storahtelling are carefully distinguished. Although Hadassah's site does make reference to Storahtelling, there is no link between the two sites. Further, a click on Bau-Lavic's biography at "who's who" on the Storahtelling site reveals no mention of his alter ego Hadassah. This is less a matter of closeting, than of what David Shneer has described as carefully "segregated marketing strategies." Shneer, "Queer is the New Pink: How Playing with Sexuality Has Become a Marker of Hipness in New Jewish Culture," paper presented at "Re{j}ewvenations: The Futures of Jewish Studies," University of Toronto (October 31, 2005).
89 Newton, Mother Camp, 105; emphasis in original.
91 Ibid., 172.
93 Ibid., 171–2.
94 Ibid., 174.
98 Eng and Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," 695.
99 Personal communication with Levitt.
101 Ibid., 608
102 Ibid., 609.
103 See Muñoz's essay in this volume (chapter 24).
104 Sontag, "Women, the Arts, and Politics of Culture," 40.
105 Ibid.
106 For a different interpretation of Sontag's morbidity, drawn from the "necrophilic economy" of camp's cultural recycling, see Ross, "Uses of Camp," 152. For Sontag's own explicit discussion of melancholy (Walter Benjamin's), see the title essay of Under the Sign of Saturn, 109–34. Sontag's ultimately losing battle with cancer lends an added poignancy to discussions of her morbidity. In an essay published after her death, Sontag's son David Rieff frankly discusses her pain and terror as she faced death, but he also records what he calls her "positive denial," her determination "to try to live no matter how terrible her suffering." Rieff, "Illness as More than Metaphor," The New York Times Magazine (December 4, 2005): section 6, 52–7, esp. pp. 54 and 55.
108 www.pgratland.ca.