

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’”¹

Morbidity was my first choice.
Susan Sontag, “Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture”²

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, essentially 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.”³ 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.⁴

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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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 “truthing” 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.⁷

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 like 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.⁸

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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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 "a pre- or proto-political phenomenon,"¹² at odds with the then-emergent politics of Gay Liberation.¹³

Other commentators have been less hesitant. Like Newton, Michael Bronski understands camp to be 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."¹⁴ In Bronski's estimation, these joined capacities – life-saving and world-making – make camp "not only political, but progressive."¹⁵ The title of Moe Meyer's edited volume states its claims 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.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ In pointing out how the repackaging of "Camp" into "camp" has blunted the former's critical edge, Meyer is in good company.¹⁸

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."¹⁹ 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."²⁰

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."²¹ 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."²² 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.²³ 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.'"²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.

II

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.²⁶ "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."²⁷ 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, "correct" and "incorrect" versions of feminism, and, ultimately, Sontag's own vexed relation to feminism.²⁸

The word "camp" does not appear in the version of "Fascinating Fascism" published in *The New York Review of Books*. For an explicit discussion of this *other* bad object,²⁹ we must turn instead to the longer, authoritative version of "Fascinating Fascism," which was not published until 1980, in a volume of Sontag's collected essays, *Under the Sign of Saturn*.³⁰ In the main, the differences between the two published versions are minor matters of wording – with one exception. The passage in which Sontag spins out links among Riefenstahl's rehabilitation, the ethical dangers of both historical amnesia and uncritical connoisseurship, and the sensibility of camp does not appear in the version published in *The New York Review of Books*. This extraordinary passage is worth quoting at length from *Under the Sign of Saturn*:

Riefenstahl's current de-Nazification and vindication as indomitable priestess of the beautiful – as a filmmaker and, now, as a photographer [in *The Last of the Nuba*] – do not augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst. Riefenstahl is hardly the usual sort of aesthete or anthropological romantic. The force of her work being 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, when people claim to be drawn to Riefenstahl's images for their beauty of composition. Without a historical perspective, such connoisseurship prepares the way for a curiously absentminded acceptance of propaganda for all sorts of destructive feelings – feelings whose implications people are refusing to take seriously . . . And so people hedge their bets – admiring this kind of art, for its undoubted beauty, and patronizing it, for its sanctimonious promotion of the beautiful. Backing up the solemn choosy formalist appreciations lies a larger reserve of appreciation, the *sensibility of camp*, which is *unfettered by the scruples of high seriousness*: and the modern sensibility relies on continuing trade-offs between the formalist approach and camp taste.

Art which evokes the themes of fascist aesthetic is popular now, and for most people it is probably no more than a variant of camp.³¹

Camp, in this formulation, is proto-fascist. In love with beauty for beauty's sake, camp is a structure of feeling to be sure, but it is an empty shell: emptied of history, politics, and ethics. This beautiful emptiness is what makes it so capable of becoming an antiseptic container. "Unfettered by the scruples of high seriousness,"³² camp offers a "sniggering" alibi to those who prefer not to grapple with uncomfortable truths.³³

We seem, at first glance, to have traveled a long way from the "disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical" camp we encountered in "Notes on 'Camp.'" Nor do the alarm bells Sontag rings about camp in "Fascinating Fascism" square with the qualified appreciation she offers, in the *Salmagundi* interview, for camp's ironic send-up of sexual difference. How are we to make sense of these three different moral and political evaluations of camp? Part of the answer lies in the fact that "Fascinating Fascism" *already* represents a change of heart, as Sontag backs away from the provocative formalist defense she had offered of Riefenstahl's films in the 1965 essay "On Style."³⁴

Sontag's own explanation for these differences has to do with the urgencies of the changed cultural moment. Asked by her *Salmagundi* interviewer to explain the hardened line "Fascinating Fascism" takes against Riefenstahl, Sontag gives a two-pronged answer. On the one hand, she still prizes the autonomy of the aesthetic "as indispensable nourishment to intelligence."³⁵ On the other, "a decade-long residence in the 1960s, with its inexorable conversion of moral and political radicalisms into 'style,' has convinced [Sontag] of the perils of over-generalizing the aesthetic view of the world."³⁶ That Sontag's initial "Notes on 'Camp'" was part of the very process of over-generalizing – or "diffusion" – she here criticizes entirely escapes her notice.³⁷

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 sanitized 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."

III

In an essay consisting of 58 notes or theses, an essay dedicated to Oscar Wilde and punctuated with epigrams from Wilde, "Notes on 'Camp'" never mentions – never mind *analyzes* – the "peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality" until notes 50 through 53. It is a two-handed acknowledgment, with Sontag giving and taking back at once: "Nevertheless, even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste."³⁸ 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 us 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 goad 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" and concludes: "I need the identity [writer] as a weapon, to match the weapon society has against me." Later in the same entry, she writes, starkly, "Being queer makes me feel more vulnerable."⁴³ Although ostensibly written for herself, Sontag's journals invite and anticipate the prying eyes of others: "One of the (main) social functions of a journal or a diary *is* precisely to be read furtively by other people, the people (like parents and lovers) about whom one has been cruelly honest only in the journal."⁴⁴ Sontag knew what she was talking about in this December 31, 1958 passage; that very day, she had read her then-lover's "curt, unfair, uncharitable" diary entries about her.⁴⁵

Despite the rumors that have long floated around Sontag, queer scholarship on camp has tended to preserve her glass closet. The denunciation of Sontag for her "phobic de-homosexualization of Camp" is a routine feature of much of the queer

scholarship on camp; nonetheless, Sontag's own interested – dare I say, “peculiar” – relation to homosexuality, homosexual camp taste, and the closet is never named as such. Having raised this spectre myself, now what? On the one hand, I am expressly not interested in reducing “Notes on ‘Camp’” to Sontag's biography. On the other, the rhetorical evasions performed by Sontag do tell us much about how the closet works, its losses, rewards, betrayals, and buoyant possibilities, too. Camp was – and is? – one such buoyant, often bitchy response to the closet. The closet was camp's condition of emergence and articulation prior to Stonewall; but, it was not its limit point. When Sontag de-gays camp, she denies a precious form of queer resilience, imagination, and, I want to urge, “moral seriousness” in the face of vulnerability.

This denial has homophobic effects to be sure, but it seems to me that Sontag's own relation to camp is in no simple way homophobic. To my mind, Sontag's de-homosexualization of camp is neither a matter of simple homophobia (whatever that is) nor the closet (whether imagined as internalized homophobia, necessary self-protection, or canny careerism). Rather, ambivalence is the structuring condition of Sontag's “Notes on ‘Camp’” and, indeed, of her relationship to camp more broadly. In the *Salmagundi* interview we get a strong sense of the *feminist* content of this ambivalence. In this, Sontag was hardly the only feminist, then or now, straight or queer, to express reservations about gay male camp's “woman question.” What may be unusual in the context of mid-1970s feminism is Sontag's continued appreciation of camp, despite her reservations, despite, even, the offense she says gay male camp sometimes gave her. However, this explanation – feminist ambivalence – does not go all the way toward explaining the “sharp conflict in [Sontag's] own sensibility,” which she seeks to write herself out of by writing about camp in the 1964 essay. What is this “sharp conflict”? I want to suggest that there are in fact a series of conflicts that get layered on top of each other in “Notes on ‘Camp.’”

First and foremost is the division between the moral and the aesthetic. If there is a through-line in Sontag's diverse body of work, it is her interest in how aesthetic and moral ideas come together and fall apart. This is the problem that preoccupied her throughout her long public career, and it is an image of herself that she also carefully cultivated. Nearly every obituary of Sontag began by repeating her self-description as a “besotted aesthete” and “obsessed moralist.”⁴⁶ The starkly different feeling qualities – “besotted” versus “obsessed” – of Sontag's dual commitments take the form of a forced choice in “Notes on ‘Camp’”: between homosexual aesthetics and irony on the one hand and Jewish moral seriousness on the other. This bifurcation erases the dialectical tension she elsewhere seeks to maintain between the moral and the aesthetic. 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.⁴⁷ When Sontag turns, at the essay's near-end, to discuss camp's “peculiar relation” to homosexuality, her promised expla-

nation takes the form of a curious swerve. In notes 51 and 52 – the dead center of her four-note sweep of homosexual camp – she introduces an analogy between Jews and homosexuals:

The peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it's not true that Camp taste *is* homosexual taste, there is no doubt peculiar overlap and affinity. Not all liberals are Jews, but Jews have shown a peculiar affinity for liberal and reformist causes. So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste. But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of Camp. (The analogy is not frivolously chosen. Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture. Creative, that is, in the truest sense: they are creators of sensibilities. The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.)⁴⁸

The adjective “peculiar” appears three times in one paragraph, in each instance to mark a form of relationality: “the peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality,” “a peculiar affinity and overlap” between Camp taste and homosexual taste, and, finally, Jews’ “peculiar affinity for liberal and reformist causes.”⁴⁹ What does this pile-up of the peculiar accomplish?

Though not “frivolously chosen” (a choosing that would epitomize “Camp taste”), Sontag's analogy is yet a paradox of disavowed likeness: not all Jews are like this (liberal); not all homosexuals are like that (camp). Ultimately, the analogy between Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual camp pronounces a wishful *dis*-identification, disjoining not just camp taste from moral seriousness, but Jewishness from camp and Jews from homosexuals. However, this attempt to distance Jewishness from homosexuals is, I suggest, an implicit recognition that the two identity positions are too proximate and, moreover, that their proximity is figurable in relation to camp – figurable, even, as the “essence” of camp. For camp, as Sontag herself admits, is a practice that produces identification, collapses opposition, and reduces distance.

If Sontag de-gays – and, as I am arguing, de-Jews camp – white gay male writers have generally tended to identify it as the preserve of gay men, presumptively white. When women figure in this gay male world, they do so as the larger-than-life figures camp cathects, often through acts of female impersonation in which gay men pay loving (though this is a love that stings) tribute to a pantheon of divas from Marlene to Judy, Bette, Barbra, and Liza (first name only required). However, this way of viewing camp's queerness enacts another and, I would argue, related distinction, between gay male camp and lesbian political seriousness.⁵⁰

Arguably, the separation Sontag enforces between “Jewish moral seriousness” and “homosexual aestheticism and irony” makes possible her later shocking linkage of camp to fascist aesthetics in “Fascinating Fascism.” Recall that one of the accusations Sontag brings against camp in that later essay is that it is “unfettered by the scruples of high seriousness.” There are echoes here of Sontag's earlier description of camp, in “Notes on ‘Camp,’” as “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience,”⁵¹ “The whole point of Camp,” she continues, “is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous

about the serious.”⁵² Evidently, this complex relation to the serious does not include a more complex relation to *moral* seriousness. Where “Fascinating Fascism” presents camp as in need of moral correction, “Notes on ‘Camp’” describes it as “a solvent of morality.”⁵³ However, in neither instance does Sontag understand camp as an ethical response in its own right.

V

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

VI

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. “Sniff[ing] 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-semiter), 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 performatives 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-semitic 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 Chanel show of 1992, in which they transformed Jewish foodstuffs into designer dinners – a box of matzos becoming a Chanel matzah meal – and converted ritual objects into high fashion statements. Their Chanel Hanukkah menorah, for example, was fashioned from a gold Chanel bag, with different colored lipsticks standing in for the candlesticks of the traditional menorah.⁶⁹ And it is Sandra Bernhard’s rhapsody to designer products in her one-woman show turned film *Without You, I’m Nothing*.⁷⁰ Enacting the JAP stereotype as a stereotype, she explodes the closet that contains name brand only. Bernhard also makes mischief with models of assimilation, slyly sending up the suburbs, destination for acculturating Jews, and wryly testifying to Christmas envy. In one memorable scene in the film, Bernhard dreams of a white Christmas and imagines herself as a blonde, volleyball-playing hottie named Babe – a shiksa without rival. “Spike it, Babe!” she exerts herself, driving hard into the liberal fantasy of the same.

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-semitic 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.”⁷¹ This is a calculated and also ambivalent embrace of the despised love object that is oneself or one’s “own.”⁷² 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-deprecating 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.⁷³

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.⁷⁴ 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.”⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

Camp helps to socialize individual conflict, by providing it with a shared community of interpretation.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ 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.”⁷⁹ At the same time, neither “zanimess” 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 “itself,” 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.⁸⁰ 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 Kazakstani “news” correspondent Borat singing “Throw the Jew Down the Well” at a Tucson bar. Contrastingly, it is the wry pinch of Melissa Shiff’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.⁸¹ “Let my people go-go,” Hadassah Gross commands.

VIII

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).⁸² 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 discomfiting performance that exists at the razor’s edge of camp. For many queers, family is an overburdened site of longing and loss, and Kiki’s family stories – however fantastical – yet capture something of this ambivalence. As Shane Vogel points out, a Kiki and Herb “performance is both a comic and a disarmingly recognizable spectacle.”⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ It may not always be “pretty,” but Kiki and Herb show us that feeling “safe” or playing “nice” is not the precondition for ethical engagement.

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.⁸⁵ 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 terrorizes her audience in equal measure, Hadassah offers a gentler, even, a “redemptive,” touch.⁸⁶ 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 Storahelling, a New York City-based organization that offers “a radical fusion of storytelling, Torah, traditional ritual theater and contemporary performance art.”⁸⁷ Hadassah is not exactly “traditional,” but her – and Bau-Lavie’s – religious sincerity makes it hard to take offense.⁸⁸

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 distanced, 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.*”⁸⁹ 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

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moral seriousness and homosexual aesthetics and irony. This is Jewish camp, to be sure; it is also camp sincerity.

IX

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*.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ This keeping faith is more than a mere recitation of the past; it represents as well its re-imagining 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.”⁹² 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.⁹³ 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 so doing, Román says, it refuses to “acknowledge the finality of death – the death of the artist, of the avant-garde, of queer culture.”⁹⁴

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.”⁹⁵ 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.”⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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.

X

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.”⁹⁹ 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,



Figure 9.1 Albert J. Winn, “Summer Joins the Past,” girls’ cabin, abandoned Jewish summer camp, Pocono Mountains, PA, 2002.



Figure 9.2 Albert J. Winn, “Summer Joins the Past,” cabin interior, deserted Jewish summer camp, southern California, 1997.

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.¹⁰⁰ For Winn, a gay Jewish man living with AIDS, the abandoned landscapes of his youth at once summon the “vibrancy

of a lost world”¹⁰¹ 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.”¹⁰² 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 Muñoz’s conception of queer hope.¹⁰³ 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.”¹⁰⁴ 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.”¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷



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.¹⁰⁸ 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)."

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

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990 [1966]): 275–92, at p. 288.
- 2 Susan Sontag, "Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture: An Interview with Susan Sontag," *Salmagundi* 31/32 (1975–6): 29–48, at p. 40.
- 3 For an analysis of the peculiarly American – and Christian – dynamics of sexual regulation in the name of "morality," see Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). For various perspectives on the cultural dynamics driving the impeachment of President Clinton, see Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan, eds., *Our Monica Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
- 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 Revealer* (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.

- 10 Nor have queers been the only ones to criticize this conception of style as apolitical. An interest in the politics of style is a hallmark of cultural studies in both its British and American incarnations, but is particularly associated with the former. See especially Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976); and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). For a recent – and queer – return to the question of "subculture" and the politics of style, see Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
- 11 Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, with a new preface (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979): 105. Newton attributes the quoted phrase to both Kenneth Burke and Charles Keil.
- 12 Newton, *Mother Camp*, 111, n. 21.
- 13 Newton, *Mother Camp*, xii. See Andrew Ross's gloss on Newton in "Uses of Camp," chapter 5 of *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989): 159. In more recent writing, Newton seems to have revised her earlier evaluation of camp, naming "drag queen-centered camp" and "egalitarian anarchism" as the "two major themes of gay male sensibility and political action" in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000): 65; emphasis mine.
- 14 Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984): 42. This passage is also cited in Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 9.
- 15 Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 43.
- 16 Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994): 10, 11; emphasis added.
- 17 Meyer, "Introduction," 21, n. 2.
- 18 See, for example Ross, "Uses of Camp" and Sasha Torres, "The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the *Batman* Television Series," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, eds. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996): 238–55.
- 19 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 128.
- 20 Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989): 20; emphasis in original.
- 21 Sontag, "Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture," 40. My thanks to Carol Ockman for directing me to this interview, which has received very little critical attention. A rare exception is Ross, "Uses of Camp," 152, 161.
- 22 Sontag, "Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture," 40.
- 23 On these points see also Ross, "Uses of Camp," and Torres, "The Caped Crusader of Camp."
- 24 Sontag, "Women, the Arts, and the Politics of Culture," 41.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 26 Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism" *The New York Review of Books* 22:1 (February 6, 1975): 23–30. When Sontag's two *Salmagundi* interviewers, Robert Boyers and Maxine Bernstein, refer to "Fascinating Fascism," they are referring to the abridged version published in *The New York Review of Books* (NYR).
- 27 Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 25. This passage also occurs in the longer version published in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Picador, 2002 [1980]): 84. Further references to this essay are taken from this longer version.

- 28 Adrienne Rich and Susan Sontag, "Feminism and Fascism: An Exchange," *The New York Review of Books* 22:4 (March 20, 1975): 31–2. For a helpful overview of the Sontag–Rich exchange, and of feminist debates over Riefenstahl's place in the 1970s women's film festival circuit, see B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998): 36–9.
- 29 My thanks to B. Ruby Rich (personal communication) for pushing me to think about Sontag's two "bad" objects – feminism and camp.
- 30 Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 73–105.
- 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.
- 32 Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 97.
- 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, so 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.
- 40 D. A. Miller, "Sontag's Urbanity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 213. Torres cites Miller's interpretation approvingly in her own treatment of camp ("The Caped Crusader of Camp," 247).
- 41 Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 275–6.
- 42 See Michael Bronski's discussion of what newspaper obituaries at the time of Sontag's death left studiously unsaid. Bronski, "Notes on 'Susan,'" *Bay Windows* (January 6, 2005), archived at: baywindows.com. See also Terry Castle, "Desperately Seeking Susan," *The London Review of Books* 27:6 (March 15, 2005). In this autobiographical account of her 10-year on-again off-again friendship with Sontag, Castle recounts Sontag's fascinated interest in celebrity lesbian gossip. Available at: www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n06/cast01_.html. For two recent queer takes on the value of gossip, see Henry Abelove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 43 Susan Sontag, "On Self: From the Notebooks and Diaries of Susan Sontag, 1958–67," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 10, 2006): 54.
- 44 Sontag, "On Self," 53; emphasis in original.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 A representative sampling from the huge on-line archive of Sontag obituaries: Steve Wasserman, "Author Susan Sontag Dies," *Los Angeles Times* (December 28, 2004), www.latimes.com/news/obituaries/la-122804sontag_lat,0,2512373.story?coll=la-home-headlines; Hillel Italie, "Susan Sontag, Author and Activist, Dies at 71," *The Seattle Times* (December 28, 2004), seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/books/2002132736_webobit-sontag28.html; David Teather and Sam Jones, "Susan Sontag Dies Aged 71" (December 29, 2004), *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1380450,00.html.
- 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 break with 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 confrères 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-Dressing Schlemiel 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, Michèle 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, 273–6. 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).
- For other perspectives in this debate, see Kate Davy, “Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994): 130–48; Pamela Robertson, “‘The Kinda Comedy That Imitates Me’: Mae West’s Identification with the Feminist Camp,” *Cinema Journal* 32:2 (Winter 1993): 57–72; and Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 119–41. Both Newton and Muñoz helpfully summarize debates “for” and “against” lesbian camp, even as they land in somewhat different places. For a discussion of an early lesbian and Jewish camp, see Carol Ockman, “Was She Magnificent? Sarah Bernhardt’s Reach,” in *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama*, eds. Carol Ockman and Kenneth Silver (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005): 23–73, esp. pp. 69–70, 196, n. 56.
- 51 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 287.
 - 52 *Ibid.*, 288.
 - 53 *Ibid.*, 290.
 - 54 Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 290.
 - 55 For an illuminating discussion of these dynamics in the context of Jewish secularism in the United States, see Laura Levitt, “Other Moderns, Other Jews: Revisiting Jewish Secularism in America,” in *Secularisms*, eds. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming [2008]).
 - 56 Cynthia Morrill, “Revamping the Gay Sensibility,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994): 116–17.
 - 57 Newton, “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen; *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, xi–xii.
 - 58 For a trenchant critique of the relations between neoliberalism and “homonormativity,” see Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003).
 - 59 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 288.
 - 60 *Ibid.*, 289.
 - 61 *Ibid.*
 - 62 Riv-Ellen Prell, “Why Jewish Princesses Don’t Sweat: Desire and Consumption in Postwar Jewish Culture,” in *People of the Body*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992): 329–59.
 - 63 Eric Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
 - 64 Janet R. Jakobsen, “Queers Are Like Jews, Aren’t They? Analogy and Alliance Politics,” in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, eds. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 64.
 - 65 Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Daniel Boyarin, *Unhe-
roic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging
Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Jay Geller, *Mitigating Circum-
cisions: Judentum and the Construction of Freud’s Corpus* (New York: Fordham University
Press, 2007); and Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish
Question*.
 - 66 Jay Geller, “Freud, Blüher, and the *Secessio Inversa: Männerbünde, Homosexuality,
and Freud’s Theory of Cultural Formation*,” in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*,
eds. Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, 90–120; Matti Bunzl, “Jews, Queers, and Other
Symptoms: Recent Work in Jewish Cultural Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and
Gay Studies* 6:2 (2000): 321–42. In the United States, the co-construction of race and
homosexuality, especially around degeneracy, generally centered on African Americans
rather than Jews. See Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Inven-
tion of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000)
and Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in
Modern Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999). However, this does
not mean that racialized associations among Jewishness, homosexuality, and degener-
acy were not made in the US case. See, for example, Paul B. Franklin, “Jew Boys, Queer
Boys: Rhetorics of Antisemitism and Homophobia in the Trial of Nathan ‘Babe’ Leopold
Jr. and Richard ‘Dickie’ Loeb,” in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, eds. Boyarin,
Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, 121–48.
 - 67 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Rout-
ledge, 1990).
 - 68 Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies
Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York:
Routledge, 1993): 312; emphasis in original.
 - 69 See Norman L. Kleeblatt’s discussion of this show, “‘Passing’ into Multiculturalism,” in
Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick,
NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996): 22–3.
 - 70 I have written at length about Bernhard’s queer performance of Jewishness in *Perform-
ance Anxieties*, 49–64.
 - 71 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 86. For a related
invocation of Bhabha on colonial mimicry, see Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 133.
 - 72 I borrow the term “ambivalent embrace” from Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The
Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
 - 73 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, vol. VIII of *The Stand-
ard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey
(London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74): 111–12.
 - 74 Newton, *Mother Camp*, 109.
 - 75 *Ibid.*, 111.
 - 76 *Ibid.*
 - 77 *Ibid.*, 37.
 - 78 See Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 13; and Amy Robinson, “It Takes One to Know
One,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Summer 1994): 715–36.
 - 79 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 281.
 - 80 For a discussion of discomfiting laughter and Holocaust memory, see Tania Olden-
hage, “‘Holocaust Laughter?: A German Response to *Punch Me in the Stomach*,” *Journal of
Religion and Film* 1:2 (October 1997). Available at: [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/holoca.us.
htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/holoca.us.htm).
 - 81 Video clips from Shiff’s project are available at: [www.melissashiff.com/works/passproj/
index.html](http://www.melissashiff.com/works/passproj/index.html). Much of Shiff’s work engages what she calls “Judeo-Kitsch.” “Passover
Projections” in particular recycles secular popular culture in the service of reactivating
engagement with Jewish stories and producing altered relationships to the contemporary
moment (personal communication with Shiff).
 - 82 The term “terror drag” comes from Shane Vogel’s discussion of Kiki and Herb and is
itself a repurposing of José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “terrorist drag.” See Vogel,
“Where Are We Now? Queer World Making and Cabaret Performance,” *GLQ: A Journal
of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6:1 (2000): 43; and Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 93–115.
 - 83 Vogel, “Where Are We Now?,” 41.

- 84 Ibid., 43.
- 85 See Jay Michaelson's description in "Secrets of the Rebbetzin: Hadassah Gross's Penetrating Insights into Kabbalah, Love and Yearning," *The Forward* (May 14, 2004), archived at: www.forward.com/main/article.php?ref=michaelson20040512744.
- 86 Quoted in Joanne Palmer, "Storyteller Uses Alter Ego to Unmask His Vision of Holiday," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (February 28, 2005). Available at: hgross.tempdomainname.com/news.html.
- 87 www.storahtelling.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-Lavie'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 "ReJewvenations: The Futures of Jewish Studies," University of Toronto (October 31, 2005).
- 89 Newton, *Mother Camp*, 105; emphasis in original.
- 90 David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary US Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 91 Ibid., 172.
- 92 Ibid., 173–4.
- 93 Ibid., 171–2.
- 94 Ibid., 174.
- 95 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74): 249.
- 96 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74): 29.
- 97 Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 3–18; Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); David Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10:4 (2000): 667–700. See also Ann Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and the essays gathered in David Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), especially Douglas Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism," 188–202.
- 98 Eng and Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," 695.
- 99 Personal communication with Levitt.
- 100 Albert J. Winn, "Summer Joins the Past: Photographs of Deserted, Abandoned, and Vacant Jewish Summer Camps," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94:4 (Fall 2004): 603–14.
- 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.
- 107 My analysis of camp here connects to recent discussions in queer studies about temporality and the force of the past in the present, See, especially, Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31:4 (Autumn 2000): 727–44; Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Molly McGarry, "The Quick, the Dead, and the Yet Unborn: Untimely Sexualities and Secular Hauntings," in *Secularisms*, eds. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, forthcoming; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).
- 108 www.pgratland.ca.