

Introduction

Camp Sites tracks the career of the ironic social style that both shaped the liberal consensus in Cold War America and furnished a prime target for those who sought to dismantle that consensus in the era of the New Social Movements. The book's governing antithesis seems to rehearse a familiar grudge match: in this corner, an establishment liberalism; in that corner, an activism arising in and through the New Left. However, the differences between the conformist Fifties and the dissident Sixties are much less substantive than we have been encouraged to assume. Heeding the curiously central role that a vision of closeted homosexuality played in the cultural politics of the postwar United States, I lay out the shift from a representation of queer sexuality as the abject other of mainstream liberal culture to an image of queer sexuality as the statist enemy of the counterculture and the New Left. I demonstrate that the New Left's critique of establishment liberalism drew with surprising frequency on Cold War culture's wide repertoire of homophobic suppositions. By focusing on the New Left insistence that institutions be normatively authentic, that they live up to their professed missions, I also show why the New Social Movements had such difficulty with the queers whom they could neither quite welcome nor quite expel from their midst. The equation radicals forged between authenticity and a meaningful life rendered gay culture's uncommitted and artificial persons beyond redemption, even if such figures would serve a role in defining countercultural commitment by their negative example.

That Sixties radicals coveted authenticity and denounced artifice is hardly news. Yet attending to camp will allow us to chart the rise and fall of liberalism's ironic style by other means. This book explores the parallel between camp's strategies of improvisation and the various postwar university disciplines that together fostered what I call an "epistemology of make-believe." "One of the most effective and fruitful ways to develop scenarios and aid the imagination,"

the Cold War nuclear strategist Herman Kahn writes in *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (1962), “is by an artificial role-playing type of exercise.”¹ Kahn belonged to a cohort of systems analysts who understood the games they devised as a matter of life and death and had no qualms about submitting themselves as players in the simulated environments they concocted. This vogue for self-experimentation bears more than passing resemblance to what Susan Sontag calls “the theatricalization of experience embodied in the camp sensibility.”² From B. F. Skinner’s behaviorism to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical account of social life to the New Critics’ disdain for literalist reading, midcentury academic disciplines placed the theatrical, the synthetic, the artificial, and the constructed at the heart of their research programs.

As Kahn’s example vividly shows, the appreciation for contrived experience accompanied the rise of a novel conception of politics in Cold War America. This era not only gave voice to the notion that politics existed outside the parameters of official government institutions but also fostered the assumption that politics was something one was more or less always performing. For reasons detailed in the first chapter, this duet of assumptions was strongly anchored in the postwar university, whose personnel spent a good deal of time reflecting on the politicization of their institution—indeed, reflecting in general on the contingency of that institution. In the broad institutional support it granted to a flexible take on reality, postwar school culture gravitated toward the account of knowledge that John Dewey, the twentieth century’s foremost pragmatist as well as its most prominent educational theorist, dubbed “instrumentalism.” It is through his presiding example that we can see how closely the pragmatic educational mandate in postwar society followed on the heels of the esteem accorded to what I call the “syllabus of experience.” Under Dewey’s auspices, educators pursued a curricular revision whose goal was both to elevate experience as a category of interpretation and to sever experience from claims to self-evidence.

“Instrumental logic,” as Lawrence Frank maintained in a 1950 gloss on Dewey’s thought, consisted in elucidating what Frank called the “circular processes which produce personalities who in turn maintain the culture.”³ The college’s role in the research and development of such “circular,” context-dependent subjectivity rendered it an inevitable target for the New Social Movements. The student Left’s favorite allegation was that the university, through its insistence on rote performances whose substance and meaning everyone was taught to disbelieve, tutored its clientele in the lessons of an inauthentic life. To speak of

the Fifties as a “consensus culture” is to recognize what was really a consensus of make-believe, less in the sense that such consensus was imaginary than in the sense that make-believe was something whose value diverse thinkers could all agree on. In the postwar ideal of social order, persons were compelled by no regulatory agency more onerous than their agreement to behave as if an institution had a constraining effect on their actions that no one honored except in the breach.

This antifoundational temperament, in which the sole mandate was to feign an institutional loyalty that few were naïve enough to heed, revealed an uncomfortable resemblance between the liberal’s endorsement of collusive playacting and the less savory versions of such notions in the subculture of closeted queer life. The latter’s denizens were as adept as the professors in navigating institutions whose rules they pretended to observe as a pretext for electing roles outside those prescribed by those institutions. In the figure of the closet queen, the New Left had a ready-to-hand template with which to format its critique of the professoriat. Based on what appeared to be a shared attitude toward the provisional nature of institutional roles, the homosexual and the college professor came together frequently in the New Left imagination, and it was no strain on the radical mind to enroll the queer’s bad character as a way of holding the faculty in contempt. *Camp Sites* devotes much attention to the cunning dialectical vagaries of what David Johnson has called “the lavender scare,” the prolonged moment of homosexual panic that helped to cement, long after its Fifties heyday, an enduring equation between the closet and bureaucratic personhood.⁴ In renouncing the Cold War establishment, the New Left assimilated the inauthentic liberal to the effeminate perverts whose bad habits liberals had themselves treated as the abject foil to the academic style.

The term “liberalism” in this book refers to a conceptual framework whose modern origins are traceable to utilitarianism by way of John Stuart Mill, on the one hand, and American pragmatism by way of Dewey, on the other. I am the first to admit that this is a selective genealogy (particularly since it leaves America’s Lockean pedigree by the wayside), but it has the advantage of highlighting the fact that midcentury American liberals renovated their political theory by combining utilitarian consequentialism and pragmatist antifoundationalism into what Charles Taylor calls “procedural liberalism.”⁵ This is a mouthful of “isms,” a fact that renders slightly ironic the point I mean to draw from this combination, which is the tendency of such procedural liber-

alism to announce its bona fides by renouncing isms, a disavowal that postwar American intellectuals enshrined as the “end of ideology.” Propelled by the thermals of the utilitarian and pragmatist traditions, midcentury liberals imagined themselves carried above the fray of doctrinal belief. Moreover, they enhanced this self-image not only by massively widening the scope of what counted as orthodoxy but also by giving a certain intellectual heft to what the political theorist Robert McCloskey referred to as “the American preoccupation with process as contrasted with substance.”⁶ What I mean to stress is less the content of liberalism, or even its method, than the social style to which that lineage gives rise: a *personality* (to invoke a term of art favored among postwar intellectuals) for whom all positions are mere formalities, opportunities from which to choose when necessary to make what McCloskey calls “*ad hoc* adjustments to circumstances as they arise.”⁷

In defining politics as “adjustment,” McCloskey makes clear how much the postwar liberal establishment had come to tailor its thought to the pragmatist view of things, an outlook captured in William James’s assertion, in 1907, that “all our theories are *instrumental*, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality.”⁸ In the consolidation of midcentury liberalism, what comes to prominence is a political framework grounded on *stylistics*, a kind of political etiquette whose “manners are as various and flexible,” according to James, as those of pragmatism itself.⁹ And what recedes from view is a political framework grounded on *ethics*, on the appeal to what a democracy ought to be, what normative aims it should have, and what qualities might guarantee or advance those aims. The result, as Chapters 1 and 2 spell out in detail, is a shift from a liberalism founded on positive beliefs to a liberalism founded on a suspension of disbelief worthy of its Coleridgean forebear. These chapters describe how the penchant for constructing the proper epistemological relation to the knowable world as strategic make-believe not only lays claim to the social field in and around the university but also promotes a personality congenial to that setting: what Taylor calls the “buffered identity” of the “secular age,” a figure both “disengaged” and “disciplined” (indeed, whose self-discipline amounts to disengagement), a self whose relation to modernity is predicated on “minimal conformity” to the “code” of its prevailing institutions.¹⁰

While we are used to seeing the pre-Sixties moment in the grip of a by-now-clichéd conformism, we rarely observe the frequency with which Fifties thinkers understood this particular social ill as equipped with its own auto-

immune response, detectable in Taylor's provocative notion of "minimal conformity." "The implication," Taylor says of the early modern buffered identity in a gloss that applies in part to midcentury liberalism, "is that there is some global option possible to 'believe,' which is here being wisely and bravely refused, presumably involving unnecessary, gratuitous, unfounded beliefs, about things that the buffered identity happily considers external and ignorable."¹¹ Taylor is describing the modern cultural logic whereby "buffered" persons, so long as they pay what they understand as the barest of deference to institutional legitimacy (his example is church membership), can be pulled into an institution's orbit yet disencumbered of the obligation—or spared the indignity—of being, to use the postwar liberal's pejorative, "true believers." In fact, however, this is at best an approximation of the midcentury liberal situation. For the liberal personality on the rise after World War II was not only keenly suspicious of "unfounded beliefs" but also willing to give any belief the benefit of the doubt provided that it could be shown to have demonstrable utility. Taylor's buffered identity, inhabiting a world where lay and religious forces vie for dominance, makes a separate peace with faith in which the world is divided into real and "unnecessary" beliefs. Postwar liberals by contrast don't see any beliefs as necessary. But by the same token, neither do they see any beliefs as unnecessary. More accurately, because postwar liberals did not identify themselves with their beliefs, they imagined themselves as capable of donning and shedding beliefs as needed in order to work toward best outcomes.

In this respect, it is worth emphasizing that the most pronounced feature of the liberal personality whose social style I extrapolate in the following pages is its stringent antiessentialism, its disinclination to sacrifice the versatility of an ecumenical mind-set for the consolation to be had by identifying with a movement or orthodoxy whose promise of certitude ultimately delivers the self into bondage. In the essay "How to Anchor Liberalism" (1948), Dewey produces an argument that somewhat contradicts his title, since the essay's goal is to assert the need to avoid all anchors on the assumption that they are merely traps in disguise. Foremost among these fallacious groundings is "individualism," or the claim that an individual is separable from his or her context and attachable to a particular identity, however exalted or sacrosanct—for "nothing can be gained," Dewey concludes, "by inserting the words 'moral' or, worse yet, 'spiritual' before *individual*."¹² This is not to say that Dewey failed to appreciate the value of such terms. But the emphasis was on their tactical advantage rather

than their ability to reveal a truth about personhood. What is “required,” Dewey maintains, “is less talk about the individual and much more study of specific social conditions.”¹³

Dewey’s “concatenism,” as Sidney Ratner noted in a 1950 essay, was inseparable from his “contextualism.”¹⁴ If persons were the sum of their circumstances, the latter included for Dewey the indicatively modern social arrangement that theorists from Bourdieu to Giddens call “reflexivity.” Like most fortifications in the world of strong institutions, the institution of autocritique is more or less compulsory, disciplining moderns into endless reappraisals of the “social conditions” in which they are inscribed. Reflexivity forces us to be participant-observers of our own modernity. Downplaying such coerciveness, Dewey was notoriously optimistic about the link between self-criticism and self-determination. As Sheldon Wolin notes, Dewey believed that helping persons find the means “to revise their own experiences” was the goal of “political education,” which “was not a separate undertaking distinguishable from education proper.”¹⁵

To be sure, the recursive skepticism that extended from Dewey’s instrumentalism into postwar liberal circles met with a fair share of skepticism itself. Leo Strauss, whose views on liberalism’s nihilistic tendencies furnish a keystone in the edifice of modern conservatism, argued that the academic liberal’s disdain for “values,” which he treated as “nothing but objects of desire,” revealed not a salutary repudiation of fanaticism but an indecent mania in its own right. “A man for whom every stimulus is a value or who cannot help giving in to every desire” is, according to Strauss, “a defective man.”¹⁶ He doesn’t have values so much as perversions. Long before Strauss summoned the specter of liberal decadence at the end of the 1960s, liberalism’s defenders were exercised by the ease with which their opponents laid tracks between their centrist politics and the louche outer boroughs of deviance. In his 1953 article “Some Present-Day Critics of Liberalism,” F. W. Coker observed the willingness of the titular detractors to cast their critique in the language of degeneracy, a tendency that derived from the charge that liberals had no “strong moral convictions.” The impulse to link liberals to corruption was indeed one to which even Coker himself surrenders when he notes that “tolerance,” liberalism’s great standard, “may degenerate into indifference and irresponsibility.”¹⁷ And though it would be anachronistic to claim that liberal “tolerance” extended in the early Cold War decades to what Alfred Gross called the “strangers in our midst,” the title of

his 1962 book on homosexuality, it is less of a stretch to suggest that the lack of recognition accorded to the homosexual by the Cold War liberal was at least partly a function of the uncomfortable resemblance, faintly hinted at in essays like Coker's, between the liberal and the homosexual on various fronts.

Dewey's "contextualism," for example, bears a notable likeness to camp's own framing devices: "Camp is character," Philip Core announces, "limited to context."¹⁸ Just as its contextualism confirms postwar liberalism as a resolutely empiricist undertaking, so camp might likewise be understood as an essay in radical empiricism because camp followers are in the position of never fully accepting as certain the evidence in front of them. Camp might be seen as the evil twin of the pragmatist stance that saturated academic life in the mid-twentieth century, for camp takes pragmatism's slogan, "whatever works," and turns it inside out. Camp's slogan might be "whatever doesn't work." Whereas pragmatism is frequently charged with preferring a certain smoothness (often taken for lack of friction) in the transformation of ideas into action, camp's great vice is its devotion to those things that get stuck in place or cannot circulate efficiently or with ease of use, objects that camp mocks but refuses to surrender. Camp's perverse logic seems analogous to the postwar liberal's account of belief: beliefs are what you publicly pretend to have while privately admitting their emptiness. Belief is a formal structure purified of content. For camp, however, there is no hollowing out of content. It is a mistake to regard camp as a "formalist" aesthetic. Because camp revels in the gap between form and content, it is wholly invested in the obstinacy of content. As a result, camp goes only so far along the path the Cold War liberal breaks. It remains wed to content in an era when the inclination is to distance oneself from content. But camp also rejects the content that matters to Sixties radicals in their revolt against the pragmatists of the American technocracy. For even as it fetishizes content, camp refuses to recognize any content as authentic.

If its pleasures depend on the irreducible disconnect between how a thing appears and what it is supposed to mean, this is no doubt because the gay people who have cultivated camp have paid inordinate attention to the way their existence simulates a real identity without being wholly delivered over to certitude. The provisionality that formed an aspirational cornerstone of postwar liberalism was for the postwar homosexual simply a fact of life. "However 'natural' his inversion may seem to him," Robert Masters writes in *The Homosexual Revolution* (1962), "no homosexual can avoid being haunted by the possibility that his

condition is the result of a chemical imbalance, a glandular abnormality, or of arrested emotional development resulting from environmental factors.”¹⁹ And the gay studies pioneer Harold Beaver has noted that the “conceptual schema of homosexuality can never be *proved*.”²⁰ For Masters, spouting the common wisdom of his era, the homosexual’s “feeling of natural-ness” is really “based . . . on the negative belief (or hope) that science is not going to be able to do anything to prevent or ‘cure’ sexual inversion” (226). It is not an empirical judgment, then, but a *resistance* to empirical evidence that convinces the homosexual of his nature. Deprived of the liberal’s skepticism, the homosexual makes do with wishful thinking.

Such constant questioning of homosexuality—unchanging essence or modifiable condition?—confirms the view prevalent in Masters’s book and throughout the culture in which it appeared that the “vacillation between reality and unreality is an almost universal characteristic of American homosexuals” (63). I have noted that a certain suspension between belief and disbelief, which locates the self in the gray area of *making believe*, was crucial to the larger paradigm shift in higher education and liberal discourse during the postwar period. The task of affirming this subjunctive mood among liberals rested in no small measure on misrecognizing the link between procedural liberalism and the camp mode by disavowing the latter’s ability to keep the space of make-believe in focus or to keep its highly fungible categories stable or discrete. Despite their formidable irony, or so Masters concludes, homosexuals are continually slipping into fantasy. Unequipped with the respect for “process” that redeemed the liberal’s disrespect for “substance,” the homosexual’s antifoundationalism was merely a flight of fancy.

In the liberal mind, camp followers became so hopelessly beholden to surfaces that they were incapable of taking advantage of the opportunistic gap between appearance and depth, the gap in which *realpolitik* unfolded. The noteworthy thing about what Masters calls the “problem of perspective” within “the homophile movement” (62), however, was how widely shared his account of the queer’s perspectival limitations was among members of that movement itself. Thus, in *The Homosexual in America*, the 1951 book regarded as the inaugural text of the postwar “homophile movement,” Donald Webster Cory describes the “camp” contingent in a gay bar who “can more aptly be compared to actors, seeking to imitate, yet not at all believing that they are play-acting.” These figures not only suffer from a “problem of perspective” but also infect everyone

around them with the same condition: “After a few hours with groups of this sort, there is hardly a homosexual unable to say *Joan for Joe, Roberta for Robert*, although with some trepidation . . . perhaps even mocking himself: ‘She’s nice,’ referring to a male entertainer.”²¹

The self-aware “mocking” Cory describes among the camp followers would appear to undermine the characterization of the barflies as beholden to their performances as though they were not playacting. Cory, we might say, does not diagnose so much as enact the “problem of perspective” that Masters understands as endemic to the homosexual’s plight. What is at issue in reactions like those of Masters and Cory to the ostensible delusions of the queen is not the status of the camp follower’s attitude toward reality but precisely the status of the polarized gender system whose binary oppositions the camp mode insistently slackens. It is important to be clear on this point, since it routinely gets lost in the critical discussion of camp from Sontag onward. The problem is not that the gay man aims to pass for a woman but that he strives for a state of suspended animation in which he passes as neither a man nor a woman. According to Cory, just as the campy queen’s swish is “not quite like the movements of either men or women” (123), so it is the swish himself, as Masters notes, “with his falsetto voice and limp wrist, bleached hair, and carefully plucked eyebrows . . . who comes to mind when the average citizen thinks of ‘fairies,’ or ‘faggots’ or ‘queers’” (160).

Given that “to behave effeminately is to *camp*,” as Cory defines it, and that “the person who is effeminate is called a *camp*” (112), it is important to supplement our notion of the queer’s provisional or subjunctive attitude with an easily forgotten datum: for the duration of the history of homosexuality, the queer stands between reality and unreality as between gender essences. This truism about homosexual “intermediacy” is worth foregrounding because it helps illuminate the bright line between the liberal style of strategic make-believe and the camp sensibility to which it bears comparison. If the liberal has to reckon with the fact that many people believe things he doesn’t credit except in the midst of a procedural process, the camp homosexual must confront a far more stubborn faith-based community. Though some people might be convinced that “freedom,” as Dewey’s disciple Milton Konvitz asserted, “does not inhere in persons,” apparently no one can be made to believe that gender doesn’t.²²

Then, too, it is the immemorial linkage between effeminacy and camp that points to the other clear line of demarcation between the liberal and the fairy. The midcentury liberal defended his position between foundational values and

utilitarian considerations as the fulcrum of a renovated masculinity, a manhood that combined “tough-minded” pragmatism with a sensitivity to nuance and a distance from all isms. But even if the homophile movement “declared that the only *ism* in which it had any interest was Americanism” (68), according to Masters, its members were no more capable of producing the liberal’s agnosticism than of reproducing his gender *bona fides* as other than a shabby imitation. While the campy queen may be an abomination, “the horror of an individual,” as Cory puts it, “who can never be what he was not made to be” (130), the straitlaced gay man who passes for normal is just fooling himself: “Anyone with both feet planted firmly on the ground of the larger American reality would know,” Masters concludes, that homosexuality “by its very nature is extreme and radical” (62).

The alignment of camp with the liberal style of opportunistic make-believe, then, appears undone by the fact that homosexuals finally succumb to what postwar liberals defined as the most intractable issue facing their culture: an overweening faith in an identity that, to make matters worse, no one in “the larger American reality” was willing to grant them as “real.” This is what leads Alfred Gross to argue that “the most successfully adjusted homosexual is the best hypocrite . . . he can possibly be,” someone in thrall to the “hope that the actor will play his part so well that, sooner or later, actor and role become one.”²³ As Cory and Gross demonstrate, a striking feature of the “homophile” discourse of the pre-Stonewall age is that its participants shared with their straight-world counterparts a dread of the unreality that spread out from the ground zero of the camp follower’s social orbit.

Gross’s book provides an object lesson in how such dread operates. This defrocked Anglican priest-turned-social worker among New York’s gay men rushes headlong into the realm of enchantment in a claim about the alleged “unreality” of the gay demimonde itself. “It is a strange world—the homosexual’s,” Gross writes.

At its portals sit the three weird sisters, brewing their devilish draught of fears. Those who enter must quaff a cup of the witches’ potion. And it is a strong brew indeed. Some say it tastes like nectar; others call it strong poison. Nor can anyone tell when it will take effect. Some may go through life without ever having to pay for their drink; others may suffer a tragic experience within minutes after passing through the doors. (138)

Given that he “looks askance” (132) at “the most exhibitionistic of ‘fairies’” (131), who “bring disgrace on every homosexual” (132), Gross does not help his case much by inventing a narrative of gay life that depends on fairy tales themselves. Yet even as such ironies are the very stuff of camp appreciation, it is the latter that for Gross does the most damage to the homophile cause precisely because the camp follower wallows in—rather than rectifies—the dissonance he embraces. What makes the fairy’s self-display appalling is that, fully knowing it is an act, he nonetheless insists on carrying it off as though it were otherwise. In the hands of the camp follower, the liberal’s strategic make-believe becomes a form of bad faith.

For Gross and other homophiles, in other words, the camp follower is like Dewey’s ideal liberal, both immersed in circumstances and aware of their limits. But unlike the liberal, the camp follower does not treat those limits as subject to change through the solvent power of education. He treats them only to a fatalistic derision. If Gross thus condemns the “escape into fantasy” among some homosexuals as a shameless “irresponsibility” for which all are then held accountable (149), he does so because homosexuality is indelibly tattooed with the sign of overattachment. Here is William S. Burroughs describing a dream in a 1954 letter to Allen Ginsberg in which “a fatuous fairy . . . pounces on every word with obscene double entendre. Beneath this camp, I can feel incredible evil.” Unlike Susan Sontag, who sees camp as “a tender feeling” (292), Burroughs treats the “fatuous fairy” “like some loathsome insect [that] was clinging to my body.”²⁴ Burroughs sees camp as threatening an unwelcome attachment to effeminacy rather than affording what Sontag calls a “necessary detachment” (285), a refusal of “extreme states of feeling” (287).

Given her preference for camp as noninvolvement, Sontag, not surprisingly, also seeks to neutralize camp of its most rebarbative feature, its swish factor, by substituting the rather sanitized word “androgynous” for camp’s much more contentious gender trouble (279). This neutralization accompanies the equally pronounced effort in “Notes on Camp” to make the camp mode “a way of looking at things” rather than a kind of performance (277). Yet if the goal of legitimizing camp obliges Sontag to demote its rankest element, an aggressively sissified presentation verging on exhibitionism, it remains unclear whether the mode so legitimated can continue to be called “camp.” However much one might like to define it as “a certain sensibility,” Richard Dyer notes in “It’s Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going” (1977), it cannot be denied that “camping” just

is “mincing and screaming” (C, 110). By raising this issue, I am not particularly interested in the charge that Sontag defends a view of camp as, to use her word, “depoliticized” (277). I am, however, interested in the many post-Stonewall commentators who have felt the need to derive a politics from camp based on what they take to be its dominant feature: a manifestation of sensibility (progressive) or an attention-grabbing performance (reactionary). Burroughs’s “fatuous fairy” prefigures the *bête noire* faced by the gay liberationist aiming to disunite gay identity and camp self-presentation. For camp has long functioned as a wedge issue within gay liberation precisely because many liberationists have sought to promote their “sensibility” (their taste in object choice) over a self-presentation (effeminate men, masculine women) from which their “way of looking at things” is insistently presumed to stand apart.

In “The Cinema of Camp” (1978), Jack Babuscio thus sees camp as a means to “promote solidarity and a greater sense of identification within our community” because it infuses “the gay sensibility” with “a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression” (C, 118). Compare Babuscio’s version of camp as consciousness raising to the retrograde version that Andrew Britton describes in “For Interpretation: Notes against Camp” (1979): “Camp strives to give an objective presence to an imaginary construction of bourgeois psychology” (C, 138). For Britton, camp not only reeks of “complicity” with the larger culture’s efforts to keep “the ways of being gay” “extraordinarily limited” but also (and more damningly) amounts to “little more than being ‘one of the boys’ by pink lime-light” (C, 142). Camp in Britton’s view is not a sensibility. It is a form of acting out. Yet while Britton writes his polemic in opposition to Babuscio, his charge that camp is “mere play” is not really far removed from Babuscio’s effort to recuperate a “subversive” (C, 128) camp from its “often exaggerated” performances (122), since those theatrics bespeak an excess that tips, for Babuscio and Britton both, into meaninglessness.

Despite the critique often leveled at Sontag, then, even gay activists who have looked to camp for its political utility tend to favor her “attenuated” camp of apperception (277), which has the virtue of parsing normative culture’s incongruities, over the “exaggerated” camp of performance, which “runs the risk,” Babuscio argues, “of being considered not serious at all” (C, 128). Procedural liberalism has often been vulnerable to the charge that it is just an *act* so not a valid politics. Because it is continually mindful of what Sontag calls “the

metaphor of life as theater" (280), camp has likewise been accused of denying political change on terms that resonate with those leveled at liberalism, especially from the Left and especially during the 1960s. Both postwar liberalism and postwar camp are distillations of the antagonist at which radicals took aim: a culture of command performances in which we are all unwittingly taking nonstop direction from a steady stream of unseen auteurs.

In a 1957 essay that analyzes the postwar liberal's "Machiavellian" style, Andrew Hacker observes that "the new men . . . are admired only for the duration of the popular appeal which they evoke for their personal performances."²⁵ Such "pragmatic" figures begin with a keen sense of their precarious existence in the public sphere: "The new men are not anything as individuals. All they possess are their wits."²⁶ Who could be more sympathetic to the anxiety occasioned by such a crowd-sourced existence than the campy barflies who are only as good as their last jokes? Though its *politics of performance* aligns liberalism with camp, my point is not that camp is liberalism in drag but that camp makes it hard to infer from it a politics because it discomfits our vexatious political presumption (inherited from Sixties radicals, who took it over from establishment liberals) that attitudes *are* politics. Since camp is often seen as nothing *but* an attitude, one that revels in its own inefficacy, it appears to run counter to the effort to tie political change to consciousness raising, the radical's preferred form of activism. Camp, like poetry in Auden's infamous phrase, "makes nothing happen."²⁷ But this is less because the camp follower is in need of a consciousness upgrade than because attitudes in themselves can never count for the sort of political interventions we like to think they furnish.

Then, too, to say that camp does not quite support a political agenda is not to say that it does not serve *any* tactical use. Part of this book's goal is to make interpretive hay of the slightly paradoxical fact that camp, a style that exults in its own pointlessness, draws a number of acolytes to its cause well beyond the ranks of the gay men who form its obvious demographic. That cause is by and large a mode of distinction that, as Bourdieu points out, is hard to separate from snobbism. (When Sontag defines camp as "how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture" [288], she means to say that camp is not a demotic sensibility.) While it may not be accurate to say that camp's reference group is amorphous, it is nonetheless undeniable that the sensibility that attaches to camp is never precisely embodied in gay male identity, although it routinely comes to rest there. For this reason, writers like Patricia Highsmith, Sontag, and Mary McCarthy can "take

on” the camp sensibility, either by surrogating camp archness (in Highsmith’s case), displacing its gay stakeholders (in Sontag’s), or outmaneuvering them in the game of bitchy putdowns (in McCarthy’s). For all these figures, the embrace of a camp slyness served a biographically demonstrable need for deflection in their public self-fashioning: Highsmith was an expatriate queer woman who sought a higher brow level than her readers or critics were willing to give her; Sontag was lesbian in orientation though not in print; and McCarthy enjoyed a promiscuous sex life worthy of the most well-traveled gay man even as she presented herself as a booster of monogamy. All these figures stood to benefit from camp’s policy of cognitive dissonance.

The point of highlighting camp’s mobility in these terms, or among such incongruous camp followers, is not to detach it from its empirical context—which it would be a mistake in any event to reduce to gay male identity—but rather to suggest that the context that matters most is the alibi-ridden, impression-managed social space of a pre-Stonewall world that absorbs not only gay men but all comers in the logic of a closet culture. We might say that the continual derogation of camp as a gay male prerogative itself signals a strategic detachment on the part of those who exploit camp’s wily and worldly logic while disowning its unsavory (sentimental, trivial, or effeminate) associations. Given that camp functions as something between a privileged form of perceptiveness and an offensive showiness, it encourages a social strategy the goal of which is always to outwit everyone else. And no one appeared easier to best in the game of ironic one-upmanship than the gay man whose social failings were just barely sheltered from exposure by his own camp subterfuges. But to grasp why such a strategy should have made its way into the period’s most lively writing requires us to take note of the premium the culture placed on knowingness prior to the advent of the New Left.

Chapter 1 of *Camp Sites* charts the advent of the novel civic character modeled in and by the postwar university. I argue that school culture’s advocacy of a healthy respect for counterfactuals permeated off-campus society to reshape liberal subjectivity in the era of the national security state. The chapter spells out the rise of pretense as a currency the college tendered to the nation for use in the Cold War project of civil defense and then turns to the surprising intersections among military analysts, social scientists, and humanists with regard to the epistemology of make-believe. I conclude with a reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* that situates the novel in the context of the campus intel-

lectual's preference for both strategic irony and experiential knowledge. I argue that, in his extended critique of the academic style, Ellison resorts to a theme that proved recurrently appealing as the Cold War consensus gave way to the New Left Sixties: the casting of the postwar academic as a pervert.

Chapter 2 examines the contestation of academic authority by looking at novelists who rewrite the university's hegemony as a fantasy of self-aggrandizement. I analyze the midcentury college as the site of an innovative utopian experiment in which selfhood becomes a subject fit for perpetual examination and revision. I then consider the threat to both realism and democratic process that off-campus intellectuals locate in postwar school culture in general and the humanities in particular. The chapter examines two canonical campus novels whose authors charge the rise of experiential reading and instrumentalist pedagogy with crimes ranging from perjury (Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* [1951]) to pedophilia (Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* [1962]).

Chapter 3 begins by revisiting Berkeley's Free Speech Movement to show how the student Left traded in the subjunctive mood favored by its teachers for an indicative mood that sanctified overstatement. I argue that this shift in idiom derived from the New Left assumption that the "system" it targeted, from the school to the government, practiced forms of subterfuge and nondisclosure that were indistinct from the stratagems of the Cold War closet and its habitués. The chapter then considers how the New Left's politics of authenticity resulted in a strange cross-pollination between gay liberation and the counterculture. I show that just as gay liberationists formed their project in uneasy accord with the goals of New Left identity politics, so figures like Norman Mailer, E. L. Doctorow, and Huey Newton imagined a countercultural narrative that borrowed its basic plot from gay liberation: what I call "coming out straight."

Chapter 4 looks at midcentury culture's competing accounts of "performance," perhaps the most vexing term in the postwar critical lexicon. I contrast the dramaturgical view of society espoused by a diverse range of sociologists affiliated with symbolic interactionism (for whom the commitment to social life as stagecraft rendered authenticity moot) with the antitheatrical naturalism championed by teachers of Method acting (for whom the revolt against reactive performances rendered authenticity necessary). I then read Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) as a text caught up in the crosscurrents of these opposing views of performance. With his powers of mimicry and his keen awareness of how others see him, Highsmith's title character not only appears

tailor-made for a Method stage but also exemplifies the costs and benefits of the relentless impression management brought to light by midcentury sociology.

Chapter 5 assesses the impact of dramaturgical social theory on Sixties-era queer social scientists who, making use of the postwar sociology of deviance, reject the limiting presumptions of expressive authenticity. I read work by Laud Humphreys and Esther Newton alongside Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), a novel that channels its antiwar commitments through a critique of social-scientific impersonality. I then consider the omission of symbolic interactionism from the work of Judith Butler, whose account of gender and performativity feels as though it should be in dialogue with Erving Goffman. I suggest that the key to this silence lies in the incommensurateness of Goffman's and Butler's attitudes toward the political work that consciousness can do. The chapter ends with an analysis of what I call "mean camp," an aesthetic category whose fantasy of consciousness lowering plays havoc with the redistribution of sentience in the post-Sixties climate of deep ecology and other movements grounded in consciousness raising and its gestalt of transformation.

Chapter 6 takes up the problem of consciousness raising again by arguing that this emancipationist strategy is impossible to separate from the postwar commitment to meritocracy, which is inextricable from what business gurus call "high performance." The chapter begins by considering the "parafeminist" moment of the 1950s and early 1960s, when the expert discourse of frigidity, which distilled that national epidemic to a conflict between control and spontaneity, helped engineer an account of meritorious womanhood whose exemplary practitioners were Helen Gurley Brown and Jacqueline Susann. Then I address some touchstones of women's liberation: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973). I argue that far from condemning the asylum, Didion and Plath use it to renew certain promises of establishment liberalism. Finally, I explain how Jong's novel reveals a commitment to a new and improved meritocracy that values what I call "performance at a distance," in which the labors of the creative elite are detached from identities and organizations and become self-rewarding.

As these synopses indicate, *Camp Sites* covers a lot of ground between a fairly narrow pair of historical bookends (roughly 1945 to 1975). Its strong sense of inclusiveness has dictated what might appear to be a hermeneutic shell game; the book insistently shuffles diverse cultural players into idiosyncratic (though not unwarranted) contexts. Scrambling the cognitive map of a period

in order to extract its overriding “logic” is the standard move in New Historicist practice; and the book’s apparent embrace of a method now held in some disrepute may smack of recidivism. Neglecting to distinguish what goes on at the RAND Corporation from what transpires in English 101, combining unlikely figures without heeding the differences in their brow level, lavishing too much attention on too little of the past, *Camp Sites* might be accused of practicing what it preaches: it not only analyzes camp but also takes a camp view of things. Or perhaps its perceived loyalty to New Historicism is itself a species of camp insofar as its author strives, with the zeal of a show queen pining for Broadway’s golden age, to revive a methodological has-been that his outré devotions serve only to zombify. What hopefully spares the book from such conjectures, or at least their dismissive intent, is that *Camp Sites* aims for an extensive revision of what the camp view of things is.