In 1979, Karl Keller, a distinguished critic of American literature, and I conceived of a collection of essays on camp. We believed that the topic was an important one for understanding gay literature and culture and a subject it would be fun to write about. Karl's persuasive powers as well as his physical energy were enormous, and he convinced a number of scholars to write for the volume. But despite many letters to publishers, only one, Urizen Press, showed any interest. Urizen was a small, avant-garde house, known for its editions of George Bataille and studies on such topics as excrement. Karl visited its offices and reported, "They want to do for us what they did for shit." But, alas, in the final editorial analysis, camp did not hold, at least in their eyes, the same allure. They dropped the book. Karl wrote one essay, "Walt Whitman Camping" (included here), and then we turned our attention to other projects. A few years later he died, an early fatality of AIDS.

The idea, however, would not go away, and Karl's death made realizing the project a sentimental obligation. I bided my time, and then, in 1989, I tried once more to interest a publisher. This time the reception was very different. Almost immediately, sympathetic editors at the University of Massachusetts Press took on the project. And that was not all. An energetic editor from another press half-jokingly tried to lure me away when the work was nearly completed. One of the more interesting aspects of this book, and the issue I would like to address at the outset, is accounting for this change in reception: Why in the interval of merely a dozen years did the idea of a collection of essays on camp go from being a notion that aroused no interest to one that seemed to have takers at every turn?
One reason for resistance to a discussion of camp was the problem of defining it. "To talk about Camp," Susan Sontag wrote, "is . . . to betray it." Charles Ludlam, the master of camp theater, wrote, "I don’t think camp can be defined." Christopher Isherwood’s novel *The World in the Evening* contains perhaps the earliest discussion of the subject. To Stephen, the bisexual protagonist of the novel, Charles, a gay doctor and advocate of Quaker Camp, "admit[s] it’s terribly hard to define. You have to meditate on it and feel it intuitively, like Lao-tse’s Tao." Yet Charles insists, "Once you’ve done that, you’ll find yourself wanting to use the word whenever you discuss aesthetics or philosophy or almost anything. I never can understand how critics managed to do without it."

Through Charles, Isherwood divides camp into two categories: Low and High Camp. Low Camp is "a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich." Isherwood is uninterested in Low Camp, and his rejection indicates not a little of his uneasiness with effeminacy and vulgarity. Isherwood’s concerns are with High Camp: "High Camp is the whole emotional basis of the ballet, for example, and of course of baroque art. You see, true High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."

Bruce Rodgers spends two densely packed, highly contradictory pages discussing camp in his dictionary of gay slang. Camp, he tells us, pokes "a jocular finger at one’s own frustrations and guffaws at the struggles of other pathetics, homosexuals or famous, influential people." But then he tells us, "A cripple is not camp unless he has a mordant sense of humor." Susan Sontag is a bit more helpful. She claims that camp "is a certain form of aestheticism," which elevates objects "not in terms of Beauty, but in terms of degree of artifice, of stylization." Scott Long tells us that "camp is a conscious response to a culture in which kitsch is ubiquitous. Camp is essentially an attitude toward kitsch." But such generalizations have been as problematic as they have been helpful, and most of the authors in the book have supposed that readers will recognize camp when they see it without its being defined. Indeed Ludlam insists that the normal strategy of listing campy things such as Tiffany lamps, narrative ballets, and spaghetti westerns is a wholly mistaken enterprise. Such lists, according to Ludlam, "[nail camp] to the wall and [make] it very literal . . . . The value of camp, the ability to perceive things in this unique way, is that it turns values upside down."

Still I would like to point out the areas where there is some agreement. First, everyone agrees that camp is a style (whether of objects or of the way objects are perceived is debated) that favors "exaggeration," "artifice," and "extremity." Second, camp exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture. Third, the person who can recognize camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp is a person outside the cultural mainstream. Fourth, camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire. I should note that all of Isherwood’s examples of camp—Flaubert, Rembrantd, El Greco, and Dostoevski—were basically heterosexual. Isherwood’s omission of gay artists of camp may be taken—as should so much of *The World in the Evening*—as a very dry example of High Camp.

Yet each of these points of general agreement raises highly contested issues: whether camp inheres in objects or in the subject perceiving them; whether camp is opposed to mass culture or is a way of making it acceptable; whether camping is elitist or egalitarian behavior, a privileged position or a means of coping with powerlessness; whether it’s a celebration of eroticism or a way of emptying sexuality of desire.

The problems of defining camp and how it works have only grown deeper in the decades since *The World in the Evening*. Yet camp is hardly the only concept that scholars find difficult to define: *nature, romanticism, the renaissance* have proved equally slippery terms. So it was not the issue of locating camp’s definition alone that caused it to be an unwelcome topic in the late seventies and an attractive one in the late eighties. The reasons for the change in attitude, I believe, must be found elsewhere.

One reason, no doubt, is the change in the academy toward works of cultural criticism in general and of gay literature in particular. In the late seventies, few presses were willing to commit their resources to such questionable enterprises, and camp was questionable in several respects: gay literature had not achieved even the measure of academic respectability it enjoys today; books on gay cultural questions had produced no track record for sales; and the discipline (not to mention courses) in which such works would be important was still in its infancy. With no discernible readers, no reliable sales, and no attractive cache—as the equation of camp with excrement made clear—a book on homosexual style was not the sort of thing to which publishers, always a careful lot, were willing to commit their meager resources.

By the early nineties, all this had changed: conferences on gay and lesbian studies circulate among the Ivy League campuses, attracting thousands of scholars; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Douglas Crimp, Jonathan Dollimore, and Judith Butler are academic stars; and courses on gay and lesbian subjects have become, if not commonplace, at least unsurprising additions to the curricula of many campuses. In the marketplace of ideas, lesbian and gay studies has
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established itself, perhaps not yet as a trusted firm, but surely as one of the liveliest and most fashionable boutiques.

Such changes alone would have been enough, I suppose, to alter the prospects of Camp Grounds, but I think there were more interesting changes going on in gay studies itself. In 1978, at just about the time Karl Keller and I were circulating our proposal, Edmund White wrote in the ground-breaking manual The Joy of Gay Sex that camping was a “form of gay humor that seems to be dying out…. It may well have been the by-product of oppression, secrecy and self-hatred, and now that gays are more self-accepting and somewhat less condemned by straight society they may have less of a need to camp.”8 In “The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality,” an essay White wrote for the influential volume The State of the Language, White develops this notion at greater length:

In the past a regular feature of gay male speech was the production of such sentences as: “Oh, her! She’d do anything to catch a husband. . . .” in which the “she” is Bob or Jim. This routine gender substitution is rapidly dying out, and many gay men under twenty-five fail to practice it or even to understand it. This linguistic game has been attacked for two reasons: first, because it supposedly perpetuates female role playing among some gay men; and second, because it is regarded in some quarters as hostile to women. Since one man generally calls another “she” in an (at least mildly) insulting context, the inference is that the underlying attitude must be sexist: to be a woman is to be inferior.

Following the same line, a large segment of the lesbian and gay male population frowns on drag queens, who are seen as mocking women, all the more so because they get themselves up in the most retardataire female guises (show girls, prostitutes, sex kittens, Hollywood starlets).9

As Marty Roth argues in his essay, such pronoun substitutions are an essential part of the grammar of gay language and an important part of camp. From the very beginning transvestism and drag were the epitome of Low Camp. Indeed, if the word camp is drawn from the French camper, to pose, to strike an attitude, then the drag performance is the essential act of the camp.10

Low Camp as exemplified by the drag queen has always played a strange and ambiguous role both in the homosexual perception of homosexuality and in the heterosexual perception of homosexuality. As I discuss in my chapter, “Strategic Camp,” among the first reports in English of a homosexual subculture is the anonymous Secret History of the London Clubs, a chapter of which is devoted to the Mollies Club, in which half the members are cross-dressed and carry on in the campiest manner. The narrator’s response to this behavior is amused disdain. No “real” man will allow himself to express fear of another man dressed in women’s clothing. For most heterosexuals, the drag artist is the least threatening and most visible part of gay subculture, and consequently the first element of gay social practice that straight people are willing to confront, probably because they can feel superior to it. It is not surprising then that Esther Newton’s study of drag queens, Mother Camp, would be among the first academic books outside of psychology to deal with aspects of gay life. The subject could titillate without threatening the delicate sensibilities of academics. Of course, it is and remains a first-class work, and its central chapter on camp is reprinted here. But because the transvestite aspects of camp fit into heterosexual stereotypes of gay behavior, many gay activists and thinkers rejected camp and transvestism as politically retrograde.

Yet, as White points out, not all feminists, even in what “queer” theorists regard as the dark days of gay liberation, were hostile to the political implications of camp. White found that “at its best camp is a rebellious, dada and anarchic force in gay life.”11 Kate Millet in Sexual Politics wrote:

as she minces along a street in the Village, the storm of outrage an insouciant queen in drag may call down is due to the fact that she is both masculine and feminine at once—or male, but feminine. She has made gender identity more than frighteningly easy to lose, she has questioned its reality at a time when it has attained the status of a moral absolute and a social imperative. She has defied it and actually suggested its negation. She has dared obloquy, and in doing so has challenged more than the taboo on homosexuality, she has uncovered what the source of this contempt implies—the fact that sex role is sex rank.12

But it was not merely intellectuals and theoreticians who argued for the political importance of camp as a subversive strategy; certain gay activists also saw the radical possibilities of their performance. Writing in 1974 in Gay Sunshine, a journal that Matias Viegner associates with “assimilationist” gays,” Christopher Longe describes “Genderfuck and Its Delights” in terms that parallel Kate Millet: “It is my choice to not be a man, and it is my choice to be beautiful. I am not a female impersonator; I don’t want to mock women. I want to criticize and to poke fun at the roles of women and of men too. I want to try and show how not-normal I can be. I want to ridicule and destroy the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identification.”13 In short, at the time that Karl Keller and I first began to arrange for a book on camp, when many gays and feminists were attacking the subject, such voices as Kate Millet, Christopher Longe, and Edmund White were even then arguing that camp could have a powerful, radical role to play in cultural politics.

Camp also suffered among intellectuals from its early successes. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” not only attempts to be the last word, it also almost became the last one on the subject. Even Sontag wished to bury the subject, as
her comments in subsequent articles made clear. In “The Salmagundi Interview” she informs us that she decided “to write ‘Notes on Camp’ instead of ‘Notes on Death’” because she’s “dawdled in the cultural graveyard, enjoying what camp taste could effect in the way of ironic resurrection.” In the end, however, she found that “Camp’s extremely sentimental relation to beauty is no help to women.”

Marcie Frank’s essay in this volume shows deeper and less flippant reasons for Sontag’s rejection of camp.

Sontag’s approach proved to be a dead end for other thinkers. One reason Sontag’s approach proved so unproductive is that she was never genuinely interested in camp in itself, but only in how she might expropriate camp for her own cultural purposes, to create, as she says in “Against Interpretation,” “an erotics of art.” Her insistence on emptying camp of content derived from her belief that “the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.” When camp could not be so easily emptied, it was tossed away as yet one more “hindrance” or “nuisance.”

Her hauteur is reflected in the way she stigmatizes camp, not as an expression of homosexuality, but as a creation of snobbbery. She writes in “Notes on Camp”:

The history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste . . . who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste . . . Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.

I suppose it does little to point out the inconsistencies in even this short passage: Why would aristocratic snobs wish to be integrated in the democratic mass? In what sense could promoting the aesthetic ever integrate one into society? Is the interior decorator to become Everyman? But given Sontag’s analysis, one can easily see why camp would become politically suspect for the post-Stonewall gay activists. In claiming their civil rights—something quite different from social integration—activists relied on the moral indignation of those gays who were excluded. Activists did not wish to neutralize moral outrage. Nor did those trying to win gay civil rights wish to cloak themselves as “aristocrats of taste.” The Gay Liberation Front as well as the Gay Activists Alliance presented homosexuals as an oppressed minority needing housing and employment protection, as indeed they were. The drag queens who began the Stonewall riots did not promote themselves as aristocrats; they were often homeless, usually lower-class men who had seen police sweeps systematically remove what little protection they enjoyed.

Although in 1964, five years before the Stonewall Riots when “Notes on Camp” was first published, Sontag might understandably believe “homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense,” we now can see how such a comment made her analysis a dead end. First, she assumes that gays want “integration,” and second, that camp was a strategy for such integration. While it is true that the Mattachine Society and other homophile groups sought what might be called “integration,” these groups were not bastions of camp. In fact, they maintained the same high moral tone that Sontag attributes to Jewish groups. Moreover, by ascribing a political end to camp, Sontag contradicts her earlier assertion that “it goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized, or at least apolitical.” But perhaps whether camp is political or not is unimportant since, for Sontag, it is inscribed by failure. Camp is “failed seriousness,” organized by “a disparity between intention and result,” something “good because it’s awful.”

For Sontag, camp’s ultimate effect is a kind of amelioration, a form of consolation for the man of taste who would otherwise be missing satisfying objects of appreciation and contemplation. As she says, camp “makes the man of good taste cheerful when before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion.” Given the bomic function Sontag allows for camp, its appeal, unsurprisingly, was short lived.

I originally hoped to include “Notes on Camp” in this volume as an important document in the history of the discourse on camp. At first, I was disturbed when Ms. Sontag refused absolutely to allow her essay to be reprinted. Now, I see its absence as positive. The current discussion has left it far behind, and none of the essays in the volume do not feel the obligation to make even a nod in its direction because they owe nothing to the work.

However, the tensions in Sontag’s essay are repeated in the history of essays on camp. Writers will argue either for the disruptive potential of camp or for its ability to be coopted by and integrated with oppressive forces. Perhaps no two writers stand more opposed than Andrew Ross and Scott Long. Long’s essay is filled with the dark and difficult insights that camp can provide the postmodern spectator. Ross is disturbed by how easily camp can grease the grinding gears of late capitalism’s consumerist machinery.

It took AIDS and poststructuralist theory to make camp intellectually and politically respectable again, even as those who turn to camp reject the very notion of intellectual and political respectability. As Carole-Anne Tyler has tartly noted: “Not so long ago camp languished, theorized as a shameful sign of an unrecognized self-hating, and even woman-hating, homosexual by gay, feminist and lesbian critics alike. Now camp has been rehabilitated with a vengeance: not only feminist, but even macho masculinity is read as camp and,
therefore radical.” In part because the intellectual and political climate of the nineties looks favorably upon the camp, academic publishers have now reversed their attitude toward *Camp Grounds*. Perhaps in twenty years (or even a dozen), this book will be regarded as an example of the intellectual and political fashions at the end of the twentieth century, quaint and benighted academicizing typical of its age. I don’t wish to reject the timeliness of the book. I see it, to use the present jargon, as a useful “intervention in the academic discourse.” But I do wish to point out that camp’s roots are deeper and, for me at least, the questions about camp are ones that need to be asked repeatedly: How does one speak to a double audience? How does one dramatize one’s sexual role and in so doing simultaneously make it apparent and call it into question? How can one deal with oppression without duplicating the very terms of the oppressor? How can the oppressed speak? How does one make room for difference in a system that no longer merely marginalizes minorities, but now, because of its drive for totalization, recolonizes those who would move to the margins? In short, camp raises the issues of any minority culture.

Yet it should be quite clear that I am uncomfortable striking the conventional pose of an editor introducing readers to a collection. Typically, the editor is at pains to defend the selection against critics. But these essays on camp don’t need to be defended, so much as defended against. For the very nature of the critical exercise is to fix the subject, stabilize it, and somehow arrest its fall into the abyss of infinite ironic regress, and that is why no one in this volume has adopted a sustained campy tone while addressing the subject of camp. Kevin Kopelson’s essay directly addresses this uneasiness. But it is the very sincerity of the critical enterprise that defeats all our attempts to do the subject justice. Several of these articles break typical academic decorum by cracking jokes or employing obviously overelaborate syntax. Patricia Juliana Smith, Pamela Robertson, Matias Viegener as well as Kevin Kopelson have tried to rise to the level of camp. Scott Long even invites us to imagine him “wearing a gold lamé cocktail dress, black pumps with three-inch stiletto heels, a raven wing, and a beaded cloche.” These essayists follow Susan Sontag who numbered her paragraphs as though her text were some German philosophic tract. Yet even she never achieved the proper level of campiness necessary to launch a successful alternative mode that would be consistent with her subject. Camp has its revenge on those who would make it a respectable subject of academic discourse. I read Kevin Kopelson’s nervous and seemingly frivolous essay as an example of the anxiety that camp (as well as gay studies) has on those who would comment about it, an essay that enacts the very skittish superfluousness that is its subject. Sometimes I see myself in a horror picture shot by John Waters. I play an outraged parent who discovers his favorite son

in drag. As I scrub the mascara and foundation from his face, my own face gets splattered with makeup. When I get to the last layer of foundation, the boy suddenly and mysteriously vaporizes. The camera turns for a reaction shot and reveals the truth—I have become Divine. In fact, as I think about this scenario, I wonder if it hasn’t already been shot, for isn’t this the essence of Jean Cocteau’s camp classic *Orpheus*?

The person who has done the most to revise the academic standing of camp and to suggest its politically subversive potential is Judith Butler, whose writing has a bewitching way of fusing Hegel and Peter Pan. Jonathan Dollimore has done a fine job of showing Butler’s indebtedness to earlier thinkers,20 and it strikes me that Butler’s success is derived at least in part from celebrating camp in a language as leadenly academic and as far from the site of camp as she could find. It is the “high seriousness” with which she invests camp’s frivolity that has made her espousal so welcome in a profession that has yet to shed its Arnoldian manner.

In a passage that in a very short time has become one of the touchstones of gay and lesbian theory, Butler argues:

The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of “the original,” . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original. Even if heterosexist constructs circulate as the available sites of power/discourse from which to do gender at all, the question remains: What possibilities of recirculation exist? Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?21

For Butler, as for Christopher Long, Edmund White, and Kate Millet—who are to a great extent the children of Oscar Wilde—the hyperbolic, parodic, anarchic, redundant style of camp is the very way to bring heterosexist attitudes of “originality,” “naturalism,” and “normality” to their knees. For Butler nothing succeeds in subverting the straight like excess. She postulates some Ricardo-like law of the cultural imagination: recognition grows arithmetically, while signifiers can grow geometrically. Push up the supply side, and the gender system will collapse by its own weight. Or as she puts it at the end of *Gender Trouble*:

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological
societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence." The playful excess of camp can resonate only against the already fluttering strains of extensive superfluity.

Kevin Kopelson's analysis of transgressive sexual behavior in W. S. Gilbert's *Patience* points to the failure that performative gender can have as a political act. It is by acting the aesthetic that some of the dragoons meet heterosexual success. Playing Wilde does not open their eyes to the gender system that informs their prejudices. Nor has gay pornography or academic optics necessarily opened up the range of behavior. If anything, Kopelson shows how the anxiety of performance can make gender rules more rigid, more in need of policing, more difficult to transgress. Similarly, David Román shows how camp in contemporary gay theater is used as an anxious way to avoid—and therefore to mark—the subject of AIDS by presenting nostalgic images of a pre-AIDS gay life.

I think the essays in the book show that camp—as well as other related stylistic strategies—are useful in a number of ways and at a number of points in the cultural political battles around gender, but they also point out its limitations. In a pre-Stonewall world, camp functioned as an argot that provided an oppressed group some measure of coherence, solidarity, and humor, and it allowed gay men and women to talk to one another within the hearing range of heterosexuals who might be hostile to them. Gregory Woods shows how camp in Proust allows Proust to participate in transgressive behavior the novel argues against and to subvert the ostensible moral message. Marty Roth's analysis of *The Bad and the Beautiful* shows the double conversation that camp allows, a conversation carried on in silence beneath the movie's glossy surface.

The various silences that Roth identifies are essential to camp because they are so obvious, so pregnant, so ostentatiously policed. In *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, Ludlam plays a similar theme. As in *Rebecca*, Ludlam does not allow us to hear about Irma. The silence is underscored by rising organ chords. Sontag tells us that "camp sees everything in quotation marks." Roth speaks not about silence, but about "silence."

In pre-Stonewall days camp provided on occasion a way to parry the homophobic attacks. During the sixties, Don Holliday wrote a series of soft pornographic novels including *The Man from C.A.M.P.* C.A.M.P. is "an international, underground organization dedicated to the advancement and protection of homosexuals," and its star agent Jackie Holmes—no doubt named for the porn star John Holmes—always gets his man, one way or the other. C.A.M.P. field agents are controlled by a top secret central office named High Camp. Jackie's home and office are reached through a false wall at the back of a public toilet, which is under perpetual but inept surveillance by the Los An-
geles vice squad. Like James Bond who is always struggling with CHAOS, Jackie is on twenty-four-hour alert against the agents of B.U.T.C.H. For Don Holliday and his readers of the mid-sixties, camp would save them any time of the day or night.

In *Brideshead Revisited*, twenty Oxford students threaten Anthony Blanche with total immersion in a fountain. He hears them chanting his name while reading *Antic Hay* and answers them in a manner that I suppose is a fore-runner of psychoanalytic deconstructive criticism:

> "Dear sweet clodhoppers, if you knew anything of sexual psychology you would know that nothing could give me keener pleasure than to be manhandled by you meaty boys. It would be an ecstasy of the very naughtiest kind. So if any of you wish to be my partner in joy come and seize me. If on the other hand, you wish to satisfy some obscure and less easily classified libido and see me bathe, come with me quietly, dear louts, to the fountain." 

This is a highly effective use of camp to ward off physical abuse in a homophobic society, an early use of what I think of as “The Liberace Effect,” that is, to be so exaggerated an example of what you in fact are that people think you couldn’t possibly be it. But such effects work not by dismantling the gender system but by trading on its blindness. The Liberace Effect, by the way, is hardly foolproof strategy: Oscar Wilde’s deployment of it in his trials failed miserably. Patricia Juliana Smith’s account of the rock singer Dusty Springfield shows how camp provided some cultural space for Springfield to insulate herself from heterosexism and to communicate with her lesbian audience, but it did not provide enough space.

In the immediate post-Stonewall era, camp’s effectiveness was clearly equivocal. Andrew Ross has written about the conservative side of camp, and I would argue that its tendency to dissolve identity—a potential that William Lane Clark discusses at length—made it inimical to those trying to forge a gay and lesbian political movement based on sexual identity. Yet as I have pointed out, camp was an important marker around which a gay identity politics could coalesce. Jack Babuscio’s, Esther Newton’s, and Karl Keller’s essays all stem from a desire to forge an identity politics. In the immediate post-Stonewall years, no gay rights parade was complete without a bevy of drag queens blowing kisses to the crowd. The Castro clone might have appeared to be the emblem of an anticamp faction in gay life, but I never met a clone who did not admire Divine.

Now that the gay and lesbian political movement is off the ground and has already established a variety of institutional anchors, those in the theoretical vanguard are anticipating a time when the appeal of identity politics will no longer be needed to create political action, and a truly antihumanist, anti-identity, postenlightened, postmodern politics can take place, a time in Judith Butler’s phrase when we can “do gender” right. Camp, masquerade, and genderfuck may once again be useful political tools—but they will never be ends in themselves, for if all gender is merely style, then no style can ever be compelling in itself. At best camp can be a strategy to win room, freedom for different ways of conducting one’s life; at worst it can give the illusion of freedom when in fact it only repeats in a different key the old prescriptions. I cannot separate the value of camp from the locality or the historical stage in which it is deployed. To afford it too much power will in the end disappoint those who will use it as a strategy, but to afford it no power is to neglect an important force that has allowed some to survive and others to prevail.

Thus to discuss camp alone is to do a disservice to its provisional, destabilizing, transitional outrageousness. To appreciate camp fully, we must explore what camp can give way to, how it can lay the foundations for what Robert K. Martin calls *écriture gaie*. Not that camp will disappear as a useful strategy, but it will be accompanied by other styles by which sexuality may be inscribed and transcribed, other performative modes.

Consequently *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* is divided into three sections. The first section is general studies about camp. For the most part these are older essays, reprinted here from other sources. The second section relates camp and other sexual encoded styles to a number of specific works and figures: AIDS drama, Dusty Springfield, Ronald Firbank, Marcel Proust, Walt Whitman, and gayzines, among others. These are a mixture of old and new essays. This last section follows the general trend of recent queer criticism and looks at issues of stylistics and sexuality in general. These essays have all been written for this book. In the last section, camp is rarely mentioned, if at all, but it becomes the backdrop against which the entire play of homosexual stylistics is performed, in which gays and lesbians “do gender,” for no style is so highly charged by sexual politics, no manner so clearly a sexual political act as is camp. For the foreseeable future it will be the stylistic mode against which all other sexual styles will resonate or oppose themselves.

**Notes**

4. Ibid.
10. Rodgers suggests other origins for the term in Gay Talk, 40.
15. Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in Against Interpretation and Other Essays, 15.
17. Ibid., 279, 289, 288, 293 (Sontag's italics).
18. Ibid., 393.
22. Ibid., 147.
25. Ibid., 281.