

# Camp's Distribution

## *"Our" Aesthetic Category*

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### **Aesthetic Categories: An Introduction**

Aesthetic categories are, in their definition, social: to describe something as belonging to an aesthetic category ("this is really cute") is also to offer it up propositionally to others ("don't you agree?"). Every aesthetic category helps mediate a hypothetical sociality in which people come together to evaluate a thing by trying to understand what it is a species of. This is how an aesthetic world can be the ground of a political world, when people's patterns of judgment form communities that do not have to reduce to the hardened and bordered spaces of official identity like demographic groups; such is the importance of tracking the emergence of sociality from aesthetic categories. Nonetheless, that is not the work I undertake here. Rather, I am interested in the possibility of sociality within an aesthetic category: not just a category that could, like all categories, mediate sociality, but one that is instead about the mediation of society itself; not a category whose uptake could lay out lines of difference, but one that describes differences preexisting it. Such a category would provide powerful leverage for thinking about social difference within aesthetics itself and for tracking the social knowledge that objects already harbor in their form. Unlike a Bourdieuan analysis of the sociology of taste, we would be talking about an aesthetic that models the very social structures in which it participates. In this essay, I argue the category best suited for this task—a thoroughly sociological aesthetic category—is camp.

What is at stake in the category of camp is an internal differentiation of the collective subject that makes the aesthetic judgment identifying it. If all aesthetic categories propose a holding in common with others, then

what is interesting about camp is its pluralization of common sense; by referencing a fragmented and dispersed social world—a world that contains multiple worlds divided by race, class, nation, and sexuality—camp finally holds in common the fact that we cannot be in common. To put this in relation to the pathbreaking work of Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*, to which I return at more length below, camp is the aesthetic category that interrogates and internally differentiates the *our*.<sup>1</sup>

Consider, as one preliminary example, that object that would be camp's mascot if it had one: the plastic pink flamingo originally designed as a lawn ornament in 1957. The object is an agglomeration of oppositions it holds together rather than sublating into something else: it is meant to bring the wild to the manicured lawns of the suburbs but is itself artificial; it was invented in Massachusetts but summons Florida; it cites the eccentricity of the rich and the economy of the working class alike. The plastic flamingo refers to a multiplicity of regions, classes, and populations; what makes it camp is not just its brightness (real flamingos are bright, too) or cheap use (the garden gnome has a similar function and materiality without the same associations with camp) but, rather, the irreducibility of its social plurality to any one position. That is what made the object aesthetically attractive to John Waters, whose 1972 *Pink Flamingos* is a classic in the camp canon. In his film, the notorious Divine competes with a couple, the Marbles, for the title of the Filthiest Person Alive, and in a climactic scene they coincidentally invade each other's residences at the same time and perform a series of parallel actions. While Divine and her son lick all of the Marbles' furniture, the Marbles set fire to their trailer and watch as the blaze is "licking . . . everything it touches"; and while the scene at the Marbles' residence ends with their manservant being literally castrated, the scene at Divine's ends with a shot of the plastic pink flamingos outside her trailer melting in the heat. Because the logic of the film's parallelism invites us to read the melting flamingos as a type of castration, we are also invited to consider the pink flamingo—and all its incoherency in social referents—as key to the "filthiness" of Divine and, by extension, to the film's definition of camp. Like the pink flamingo, what facilitates Divine's camp is the ability to draw upon and coordinate cultural phenomena that cut across divisions—pastoral/industrial, high/low, south/north, rural/urban—without eliminating them. Within the object and within her performance is constellated and refracted a wider social world.

The plastic pink flamingo does not just provide a figuration of camp, however; it also suggests the life (some would say afterlife) of camp in the late twentieth century. Waters himself has protested how the object has been taken up in the mainstream as a popular way of expressing disdain for the "tacky" taste of the working classes.<sup>2</sup> If the object has therefore gone, in a sense, from camp to kitsch, it is because the copresence of social

multiplicity within the object has been reduced to one of its parts. At the same time, and more plainly, the popularization of the flamingo tracks the movement of camp from a subcultural aesthetic—the queer and punk world in which John Waters and Divine trafficked—to a hegemonic or at least mainstream one. Such a transition has collected a vexed intellectual debate among camp critics in recent decades: whereas most reject Susan Sontag’s ostensible “degaying” of camp in her canonical 1964 “Notes,”<sup>3</sup> many commentators have still noted camp’s appropriation by a nongay audience, facilitated not only through its uptake by pop<sup>4</sup> but also through its disavowal by newer generations of gay men.<sup>5</sup> These commentators also worry that if camp was meant to be a queer practice for managing ambivalent attachments to a toxic straight culture, then the more camp is identified with straight culture, the more, in fact, camp ceases to be.<sup>6</sup> The popularization and appropriation of camp have not always been cause for concern, however. Moe Meyer, in her introduction to her influential 1993 collection of essays on the practice, thought appropriation was a way for queer culture to infect and disrupt a straight mainstream.<sup>7</sup> More recently, David Halperin has recommended the virtue of camp to be precisely its radical tendency toward universalization and its openness to a sort of stranger intimacy that accommodates people regardless of subject position; for Halperin, the logic of camp is to accrete an expanding community.<sup>8</sup>

My argument in this essay cuts across both pessimistic and optimistic appraisals of camp by moving beyond how it is cast, in these accounts, as either personal (a management of ambivalent attachments to an oppressive order) or political (critique of the order or community building outside it). I argue that camp is properly understood as primarily a descriptive and sociological, rather than psychologically personal or practically political, aesthetic. Camp simultaneously fragments and collects, indexing a social space at the same time that it reconstructs and therefore distorts it; it is an aesthetic that is a concatenation of distributed experiences, a conjunction of otherwise disjunct parts. The apparent artificiality of the camp subject—her disavowal of attachments and denaturalization of suffering—is to be owed to the transsubjective array of objects that converges upon her, with camp understood not as a subjective technique of negative critique but as a positive grouping of a taxonomized sociality that is always excessive of any subject position. If camp itself declines social critique, it is not, then, because it does not understand the social world, but because it understands it too well and furthermore offers its taxonomies as an objective take—that is, a take irreducible to a subject—on that world. Because camp describes a world that happens to be deeply unequal, it often furnishes materials for political intervention, but this is an effect rather than a motivation of the aesthetic; at base, what camp is trying to do is simply slow down the world long enough to chart its contours.

In the final section of this essay, I suggest that such an understanding of camp provides an explanation for its popularity in the contemporary mainstream: camp may have been originally practiced by subcultures, but it has always been about a larger culture—a plural *our* culture—and it is camp’s work of mapping the parts of a wider social world that makes it appealing to more and more members of that world. In turn, camp also oversees the bringing together of social contexts as global society begins to reflect on its internal differentiations. This is why, as I argue here, post-colonial materials become particularly important for camp, for if camp charts a social world now understood as global, it must extend the focus on class and intra-American regions in earlier works like *Pink Flamingos*. The demographic differences that matter to the world today are increasingly national and migratory in addition to classed and raced, and these differences viscerally and literally matter to camp, because they produce the materials camp plays with. But to get to that argument, I start by returning to Ngai’s work on aesthetic categories to thicken my understanding of camp as a social rather than psychological or political practice. I argue the aesthetic category of camp cites a particular moment in economic production, the moment of social distribution, which under late capitalism means an increasing fragmentation of social groups. I then train this understanding of camp on novels, including Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, which paradigmatically gives us what I call a hallucinatory fiction that bloats narrative to displace the idea of individual psychology, preferring instead to map a social space that is large, patchy, and belongs to no one in particular. Next I explore camp in a diversity of other media—especially music videos—and show how camp becomes *our* aesthetic category by exaggerating the multiplicity of the first person plural.

### Camp and Distribution

Sianne Ngai’s *Our Aesthetic Categories* is a powerful work of corresponding taxonomies. She starts with three aesthetic categories (the zany, the cute, and the interesting) and matches each to one of three moments of political economy (production, consumption, and circulation). Ngai argues the zany, the cute, and the interesting “are our most pervasive and significant categories” because “they are about the increasingly intertwined ways in which late capitalist subjects labor, communicate, and consume”: they each reference distinct moments in and “diverging responses” to an economic sensorium that, following David Harvey, she identifies as a “single process of modernization,” laying out “new conditions of production (machine, factory, urbanization), circulation (new systems of transport and communication), and consumption (rise of mass markets and advertising)” (15). But in matching the parts of two taxonomies—the aesthetic and the eco-

**Table 1. Taxonomic mappings of Ngai's aesthetic categories**

Domain	Category		
	Zany	Cute	Interesting
Economic process (p. 1)	Production (labor)	Consumption	Circulation (communication)
Representation practice (pp. 2–3)	Comedy	Romance	Realism
Human and social competence (p. 13)	Affect and emotion	Intimacy and care	Language and communication
Triggered social formation (p. 238)	Global multitude	Private or domestic sphere	Mass-mediated public sphere
Ambivalent feelings (p. 19)	Fun / unfun	Tenderness / aggression	Interest / boredom
Freudian analog (p. 27)	Hysteria	Phobia	Obsession

Page numbers refer to Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.

nomic—Ngai's book is most powerful for inviting yet more taxonomies to glue themselves on, such as representational practices, social formations, and Freudian analogs. Like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's classic study in *Epistemology of the Closet* on how the gay/straight binary subtends a further set of dyads that nearly exhaust the epistemological field of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ngai's aesthetic categories collect and constellate elements from otherwise disjunct domains, finally mediating between the economic and its superstructural epiphenomena (table 1).

Ngai's aesthetic categories thus become master groupings of wide-ranging economic and cultural experience. At the same time, the logic of her groupings is not always consistent. For instance, hysteria, phobia, and obsession are, at least for Sigmund Freud, three different ways of managing an ego's confrontation with an idea that is incompatible with its understanding of itself; each of these "neurotic defenses" directs energy away from the idea into something else. Freud's taxonomy is thus one of species to a common genus, whereas economic moments form a taxonomy of part to process. Furthermore, in the essay "The Neuro-psychoses of Defense," which Ngai seems to take as her source for the tripartite scheme she maps onto, Freud identifies a fourth defense that, rather than redirecting energy away from an idea, simply ignores the idea altogether; Freud calls this "hallucinatory confusion."<sup>9</sup> But this fourth term does not find a place in Ngai's groupings, and to push it into an existing one (perhaps zany could be a candidate) would require a violation of the structural premises fundamental to Freud's taxonomy. Again, whereas Ngai builds a taxonomy from relations of parts to whole, Freud builds a taxonomy of relations from species to genus.

I raise this issue in part because I have something to say about hallucination in the following section but, more important, because it brings into relief a basic structural absence in Ngai's otherwise formidable scheme: in political economy, there are not three economic moments but four. Thus, Karl Marx, for his part, talked not only about production, circulation, and consumption but also about distribution. These four moments Marx had inherited from the classical political economics of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who thought distribution was even the most important of the moments. On this point Marx disagreed, preferring production as the proper object of political economy, but only after he first put production into dialectical relation with each of the other moments.<sup>10</sup> As he clarified in the third volume of *Capital*, the point of imbricating production with distribution in particular was to put a prohibition on narrating their sequential separation in such a way that a moment could be said to come before or after another. Distribution both follows production in the sense that products are distributed among a social populace and precedes production in the sense that people are distributed to classes according to which their kind of labor is delegated, but this only means that distribution is actually a part of the moment of production itself, conditioning its possibility and contextualizing its materiality. In turn, "the historical character of the[] relations of distribution is the historical character of the relations of production, and they simply express one side of these."<sup>11</sup> In particular, distribution figures the social aspect of production and the management of populations involved in it. It is in distribution that the organization of a society, understood as the delegation and arrangement of its working populace, finds expression within the productive cycle.

Marx's original understanding of economic process, and especially his attention to distribution as a demographic moment of it, recommends a fourth aesthetic category to supplement Ngai's three. As part of the late modernization that has transformed production, circulation, and consumption and therefore activated the relevancy and generalization of the zany, the interesting, and the cute, distribution, too, has been transformed in the twentieth century through the present, especially when understood, following Marx, not only as the apportioning of wealth but also as the prior and ongoing organization of a laboring populace, that is, as a moment both after and before production narrowly understood. Late capitalism has witnessed, foremost among the transitions of distribution, a growing gap between classes through an increasingly unequal distribution of global capital, both in the hierarchies of first and third worlds and then, internal to worlds, in the hierarchies of class, especially with wealth's concentration in a disproportionate minority.<sup>12</sup> Although post-Marxist concepts like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "multitude" have tended to imagine the accumulation of a democratic collectivity

through the expansion of common conditions of labor, this increasing class gap instead attests to how the homogenization of certain conditions of late capitalism in fact produce heterogeneity. For Hardt and Negri, the sociality of the multitude is mediated by the ascendancy of immaterial labor—concerned with cultural, affective, and informational production—which they argue has become “hegemonic in qualitative terms,” meaning today all labor and society “have to informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective.”<sup>13</sup> But alongside the universalizing of immaterial labor, late capitalism also sees the persistence of “archaic” modes of production alongside new ones, recommending a fragmented distribution of labor not easily collapsed into a common project of antagonism. Indeed, what Hardt and Negri see as the essential form of the multitude, the network, not only collects difference but produces it; network theorists have long observed that the logic of networks is not a flattened horizon of democracy but the continued maintenance of hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> Networks, too, develop their own exclusive clusters or cliques, which both preponder and section off social difference.<sup>15</sup>

This is to say that the two features of contemporary distribution—a distribution of labor into networks and a distribution of wealth into disjoint groups—are mutually constitutive within the same moment. Immaterial labor not only produces affect but also increasingly allocates its subjects to discontinuous spaces extracted from any notion of a public. More specifically, in addition to the “cruel optimism” that Jodi Dean has tracked in blogging culture—where people eagerly consume their own freely offered production and plug into imaginary relations of reciprocity that actually evacuate them from, rather than ground, the scene of political community—new media forms of production distribute affective vulnerability in the form of differential access to public forums.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the more subjects are plugged into the fantasy of publicness that immaterial labor affords, the more they are separated across an affective gap already realized in the widening difference of class; an unequal distribution of publicness and an unequal distribution of wealth converge on the projects of fragmentation and exaggerated social difference.

The aesthetic category best suited to index this disjunction characteristic of distribution under late capitalism is camp. It is not only that camp has always figured the management of difference, whether, for Andrew Ross, by enacting the uncanny persistence of archaic modes of production into an updated cultural imaginary or, for Jack Babuscio, by coinciding a whole range of stark contrasts—old/young, male/female, spirit/flesh, sacred/profane, high/low—into an identity.<sup>17</sup> Camp is more than an encounter with difference; its positivist surface vision is an aesthetic category that oversees the rise of such representational practices as collage, collecting into one place elements from a range of contexts,

thereby citing the prior differentiation of contexts from which camp achieves its effect. Although camp's citational practice has often been called parody—following Judith Butler's understanding of performance as exposing the artificiality at base in all ostensibly natural performativity, especially the performativity of gender<sup>18</sup>—it is more often a materialist gathering of worlds into one space than an epistemological exposure, all the while retaining an understanding of its plural precedents. Camp is the aesthetic category of a cultural system that has exaggerated the very contrasts it mines in the distribution of people and objects to increasingly separated groups.

It is interesting, in this light, to consider the scene in which so many of camp's stage performers got their start: the gay bathhouse of the late 1960s and 1970s. Theorists of cruising, including Leo Bersani and Tim Dean, have taught us to consider the bathhouse as a scene in which personality, and the social hierarchies like class that personalities index, is suspended: literally, in stripping bodies of the clothes that could mark occupation or status outside the baths, and figuratively, in orienting psyches away from the ego and onto a community of bodies (Bersani) or onto the radical otherness of one's desired tricks (Dean).<sup>19</sup> It is in this scene of blank chests and blank social types—a space that convenes a diversity of social groups who may have otherwise never shown up together—that stars like Bette Midler perfected their craft, their audience an informal collection of seminude queers.<sup>20</sup> In this space in which social difference had been literally stripped away, camp performers figuratively recreated it, mapping the differences inherent in the group through a medley of styles referencing them.

The diverse mosaic of class and race resources for camp was completely on display in Midler's 1972 debut album, *The Divine Miss M* (named after a personality Midler created for the Continental Baths crowd in New York). The album is composed largely of covers of songs drawn from too many different social and regional contexts to form a coherent whole: from the black R&B of Bobby Freeman's "Do You Want to Dance," through the Southern girl-pop of "Chapel of Love" originally made famous by the Dixie Cups, and up to the rockabilly "Delta Dawn" and the jump blues of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." The experience of listening to the album is occasionally one of emotional whiplash—immediately following the snappy rendition of "Chapel of Love" is an understated cover of "Superstar" that suggests the marriage has already disintegrated ("Don't you remember, you told me you loved me baby?"), just as "Daytime Hustler" condescends to "Am I Blue?"—and this is what still gives the album a campy feel: the revealed inauthenticity of any emotion when put in relief by a contrasting one. But underlying this sentimental cycle is a social cycle that surveys an American field of cultural circulation and the differ-



ent communities identified as producers or consumers in it. Here, camp is a shifting of social context, a movement across social spaces through the styles that are allegories for them; what Midler finally performs is distribution.

Thus, at the same time that *camp* supplements Ngai's taxonomy by supplying a term for the fourth economic moment she overlooks, it also helps clarify what is at stake in her designation of the aesthetic categories as *ours*. By the first person plural, Ngai means to collect a universal aesthetic subject, though one that, unlike Kant's, she rigorously historicizes; the point for Ngai is that the contemporary conditions of lived capitalism subject a global populace to a common experience. But like Hardt and Negri's multitude, the description of this common aesthetic subject is as much aspirational as it is referential, seeking to imagine a spectatorship that has sufficient experience in common to constitute an interchangeable collective. However, the effect of the networked media described above is to see a common experience of technology supporting an uncommon differentiation of groups. Similarly, camp describes not a collective anchored in the experience of one of its parts but a collective experience that is the sum of its parts, foregrounding not a mode of labor that has become dominant but the plurality of modes afforded by the contemporary, which camp maps through juxtaposition.

This is the dynamic manifest in perhaps the campiest cultural form so far provided by the Internet: the animated GIF. The GIF file format was one of the first image formats in use on the World Wide Web, where it found popularity for its data compression. But this compression has always predisposed its images, across the history of the GIF, to be simpler; with only 256 colors to draw from, it has tended to lean more toward bright graphic logos—like the iconic four-color dancing banana—than to photographs. With increased bandwidth in the past decade, short, animated, photographic GIFs have become more popular, but the limited color palette of the format immediately renders images in a cheap sort of look that almost willfully declines the high-gloss corporate aesthetics on the Internet. This, combined with the content they most often take—brief and edited clips of television shows, music videos, or movies widely available on the Internet—is what makes GIFs so frequently camp. With free online tools to “make your own GIF,” almost anyone can now mine cultural artifacts and make absurd juxtapositions of contrasting media. The GIF has therefore become a technology of marshaling otherwise incommensurable products and the communities of taste to which they refer into one object and space by decontextualizing, splicing, recycling, and combining. Even when a GIF contains only one media source—say, a two-second loop of Taylor Swift's screaming—it is usually accompanied by a textual caption that highlights the differential positioning of its user and its origin;

rapidly disseminated across platforms like Tumblr, a single GIF comes to be juxtaposed with innumerable captions, usually referencing something individuals are doing in their daily lives, so that Taylor Swift is now the reaction shot for, say, someone dropping their ice cream. The GIF, which characterizes so much of Internet culture, is thus a mobile aesthetic of citing extreme class difference at the same time that it tames difference by positing a universal aesthetic (proposing that everyone thinks the GIF is funny). As camp, the GIF symbolizes how a common condition—the availability of Internet technology and even a democratization when it comes to the production of its media—references an uncommon or unequal society, because the image becomes the site for the meeting of radical difference even when difference is disavowed.

### The Camp Novel

The collective practices attributable to the aesthetic category of camp—their grouping of objects and the spaces from which they come into a single socially incoherent work—have in recent generations taken up special lodging in the genre of the novel, where camp administers an edge of ridiculousness in the works of an entire generation of writers who are committed, in subject matter, to proliferating the nodes of an expanding social network to juxtapose radically separated parts of a global totality. These novels aspire to a demographic ambition of bearing witness to all of the groups a global society could be said to include, and they find that one mode available for this ambition is camp collage, which knows how to traverse boundaries and contexts quickly, justifying itself along the way by the ferocity of its movement. Importantly, this movement is from the novel's drive to collect itself and not from some protagonist whose desires might be said more traditionally to ground the progress of a narrative; one effect of the camp novel's collage of fragmented parts, its surface aesthetics of suturing together a new whole, is to remove from the novel believable psychological anchors or, more precisely, to preempt psychology altogether. Camp's antisociality—a form of taxonomizing the social by means of artificializing the personal—is the primary logic of, for instance, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, whose distance from psychology attempts not to manage personal attachment to toxic social forms but to make impersonality out of a proliferation of forms.

The novel begins at a limit case of human intentionality. Archie Jones has parked his car in the northwest of London and made all the necessary preparations to suffocate himself inside. This “decided-upon suicide,” we are told, was a New Year's resolution (it is the first day of 1975) Archie reached upon flipping a coin.<sup>21</sup> But in the space between this decision and the indifference to the means arriving at it—handing

over agency to the outcome of a toss—Archie fails to present a psychology that could explain how one comes to be open to the option of death. The novel opens with a scene in which human action is attributed not to the workings of a character's desires or motives but to the determination of a symbol of value; an allegorical reading of the scene might describe the substitution and sublimation of human intentionality in the reified world of monetary exchange, although Archie himself seems to have intended the loss of intention, entertaining a masochistic fantasy that he can exempt himself from the burden of being a deciding human being.

But the fantasy of action without psychology belongs primarily to the narration, whose formal maneuvers preempt the appearance of deep psychology altogether. In its long concatenation of objective details (not just a car but a “Cavalier Musketeer Estate”; not just Archie but “Alfred Archibald Jones”) and in the eccentricity with which they are often provided or doubled (the scene is set not only “early in the morning” but also “at 0627 hours”), the narration continually crowds out Archie's subjectivity (3). Immediately after we are informed that this is an attempt at suicide, the narration shifts to describe the area and the impersonal objects that literally tower over the human drama—“squeezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other”—and to hypothesize the chain of people who will be affected should the suicide be successful: the policeman, the journalist, the next of kin. This move to an imagined posthumous sociality—as Archie's body circulates first as information among occupations designed to process it and then as property to be inherited—is a further depersonalization of Archie himself, removing us from the scene of his decision in order to track his distribution among variously separate producers. When some allowance is finally given to Archie's responsibility in the event—the coin may have determined *that* he die, but he at least had to decide *how*—we are simply told that he “wasn't the type to make elaborate plans . . . wasn't the type for anything fancy,” where Archie's submission to a type is again a depersonalization, as if his style of dying objectively followed from a taxonomic placement that could be known instead of from a textured psychology that remained somehow inaccessible or unconscious (4). It is as if Archie's interiority is already dead or deadened, pushed aside by an accumulation of objects and knowledges that exist apart from it.

And then, suddenly, Archie's suicide is prevented, but again human intention or responsibility for the obstruction is hard to place. Implicating the event in chaos theory's famous example of a “tiger moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa,” we are simply told “somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live” (4). But this loose collection of a somebody and a decision only returns to the desubjectivization of action in which Archie's suicide was originally framed, alluding

to an intentional person without providing a description of her. Instead, the narration takes a section break to describe the professional habits and mottos of Mo Hussein-Ishmael, in whose Halal butchery's loading zone Archie has parked his car. Mo is trying to get rid of the pigeons that congregate and shit around his shop ("The shit is *not* the shit," is his mantra; "the *pigeon* is the shit" [4]), and he thinks the best way to do so is to take a butcher knife to them: "It was cricket, basically—the Englishman's game adapted by the immigrant, and six was the most pigeons you could get at one swipe" (5). Amid his swinging knife and the vulgar orders to his kitchen staff ("Get-your-fat-Ganesh-Hindu-backside-up-there-Elephant-Boy-and-bring-some-of-that-mashed-pigeon-stuff-with-you" [5]), Mo nonetheless feels "very Zen . . . very goodwill-to-all-men" (5). The sharp juxtaposition of Mo's violent actions and words with his inner tranquility seems, like Archie's coin toss, to empty out his interiority, as if to recommend it ingenuine because incongruous with his behavior. Mo turns himself instead into a spectacle, not only in concretizing immigrant stereotypes but also by giving his body over to the humorous atmosphere that increasingly pervades the scene as it becomes progressively "all covered in shit" (5). Just as the event of Archie's coin toss obscured whatever suffering may have motivated it by depersonalizing his actions, Mo's unprofessional butchering alludes to but ironizes displaced difficulties: his labor, his status as an immigrant, and his acceptance in the community ("One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman, or child on the Broadway would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four parts vinegar to clean up the crap that falls on the world" [5]). The literally scatological compounding of the scene turns insides into outsides, rendering Mo, as was done with Archie, as surface and projecting what might otherwise be described as human pain onto ridiculous objects.

Archie's suicide is prevented when Mo notices the car, sends his son to inspect, and then pulls down Archie's window, not to stop the suicide *per se* but to inform Archie, "We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first" (6). Mo echoes Archie's earlier concern about being out of place and provides an idiom of distribution to thicken it: Archie, white, is in a place distributed to a different ethnicity, and the reference to a license suggests the role of governmental administration in the continued segregation of metropolitan space. But most important, the fact of attempted suicide fails to register as really anything other than cause for a joke. At the same time that Mo again confirms stereotype (in his hypervigilance to bureaucracy) and critiques social system (in his jab at the ethnic distribution of space), he wraps up political and personal seriousness with exaggeration. Instead of

providing a sentimental scene of redemption for the empathetic encounter of strangers, Archie's suicide becomes part of the spectacle of "shit." Their social interaction is immediate and visceral, with recourse neither to shared identities or beliefs nor to feelings, desires, or motives. Mo's infective humor—making more and more of the scene farcical—is radically inhuman, preventing a death but without any reference to the value of human life.

Archie's decision to stop with the suffocation is, accordingly, attributed not to human agency but again to something more abstract. His story is first of all generic: "He had a kind of epiphany"; and then, instead of choosing life over death, "Life had said Yes to Archie Jones" (6). It would be frivolous of the narration to explain why the sudden change of intention, when it had declined to explain why Archie wanted death in the first place. Instead, the narration embellishes its claim: "Not simply an 'OK' or 'You-might-as-well-carry-on-since-you've-started,' but a resounding affirmative. Life wanted Archie. She had jealously grabbed him from the jaws of death, back to her bosom" (6). The narration's lingering on its simple claim about how events changed takes on a certain anxiety as it elongates, its continued modifications desperately seeking to hold up the nonhumanity of the change being rendered; the exaggerated narration of an abstraction keeps Archie's psychology and its attendant human needs and qualities at bay by expanding the space of superficial and metaphoric description until it finally becomes human instead, as a woman with a bosom. As long as the narration can relish in this ironic melodrama, it will not have to attend to Archie himself; and when it does attend to Archie, it will continue to feel out for more and more characters, like Mo, who can provide relief from attending too long or too deeply. Thus, already in this first chapter, Archie will go on from his attempted suicide to stumble into a New Year's party at a commune, which provides more materials for a scatological vision ("detritus of every variety—animal, mineral, vegetable—lined the floor" [17]) and for farcical sociality ("two black guys, a topless Chinese girl, and a white woman wearing a toga were sitting around on wooden kitchen chairs, playing rummy" [18]). There, Archie is again "transformed; and not due to any particular effort on his part, but by means of the entirely random, adventitious collision of one person with another" (19): he meets Clara Bowden, and "six weeks later they were married" (21). The quickness of intimacies of this chapter ("Archie could not remember a time in his life when he had not known Clive and Leo, Wan-Si and Petronia, intimately," although they will never be mentioned again [18]), like the frequency of epiphanies, is easy enough when premised not on the affective work of attachment but on the physical coincidence of bodies and when characters begin to look less like the complex confluence of desires and experiences and more like ornamenta-

tion. Whereas Alex Woloch has tracked in the nineteenth-century novel the play of flattening minor characters to round out protagonists, Smith's twenty-first-century novel proliferates characters to keep everyone flattened; major characters may take up more space in the novel but remain essentially minoritized in their psychological incompleteness.<sup>22</sup>

*White Teeth* unfolds as so many moves of exaggeration and fragmentation; what begins with cutting from a focus on Archie right as he is about to kill himself or cutting from the scene with Mo right as they might have had a moment of emotional exchange becomes a general tendency in the novel, breaking off sections right as a character might have become too close or too deeply accessible. The narration embellishes characters to externalize them, and it compounds characters, shifting continents and decades, to crowd them out, submitting them to a sociality that is corporeal more than psychological, a fact of bodies entering the same space more than of emotional attachments and enduring intimacies. Just as the fattening of sentences with details and sidebar information objectivizes the conditions and feelings of its characters, the shifting of scenes or decades or point of view is *White Teeth's* structural strategy of managing a system in which no character gets too intimate, lost instead in a narrative that sprawls through persons, scenes, and the histories they collect. Thus, each of the novel's sections ends with a moment where something more about interiority might have been on offer, and the following section's shift of decade or country preempts the confessional mode. At the end of the first section, Alsana "stops to check with Clara if she could speak her mind further without causing offense or unnecessary pain," but Clara's eyes are closed and the section closes, too (69). At the end of the second section, Samad argues that a man will be driven to murder if his family is "threatened, his beliefs attacked, his way of life destroyed, his whole world coming to an end," but genericizing the claim with "a man is a man is a man," the placement of this anger is displaced, and the chapter closes so as not to dwell (216–17). And the final section of the novel is similarly preceded by a transnational embrace between Irie and her grandmother Hortense that, almost ashamed of its own sentimentality, is quickly obscured by Hortense's melodramatic tears: "I live dis century wid all its troubles and vexations. And tanks to you, Lord, I'm gwan a feel a rumble at both ends" (339). In each case, at the height of an emotion's progress, the novel shifts its focus to limit its expression or the divulgence of an interiority that could claim it. The novel compounds and interconnects plot as if to deprivilege character or the psychological grounds of a sociality it describes. It is in this way, too, that the novel manages the ambivalent feelings of attachment and withdrawal, continually leading us close to characters in order to retreat from them, just as, too, the ambiva-

lence of paranoia and reparation appears by both embedding characters in damaging systems and repairing them by failing to provide within the characters a recognizable psychology that damage could claim.

It is in this way that Smith's novel is hallucinatory, in the Freudian sense I described above of detaching from both idea and affect instead of only severing the link between them.<sup>23</sup> The campiness of the novel's introductory scene—which we easily forget is about suicide, mental illness, and the exploitation of migrants—not only moves around the affect attached to serious topics but also leaves behind the topic itself by detaching from rounded human figures altogether. Like the bathhouses of Bette Midler's time, the social space of this novel is one attuned more to bodies than to psychologies. Indeed, the logic of the novel is to unfold and hallucinate a disjunct distribution of bodies precisely to preempt the human psychology that otherwise could have anchored the affects of tragedy it declines. But *White Teeth* also tracks the development of what bodies matter in today's distribution; whereas the camp of John Waters and Bette Midler cited a plurality of race and class positions, as well as American regions, Smith's camp also requires immigrant and postcolonial bodies to fully flesh out the imagined conditions of global distribution today. As the aesthetic category of distribution, camp tells us how a society is segregated into parts; here, we see a global society segregated into immigrant communities that are associated with but do not reduce to class.

When Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warned us, in her 1992 call for transnational literacy, not to reduce the plural agency inherent in planetary cultural production to a “liberal multiculturalism [that] is determined by the demands of contemporary transnational capitalisms,” she pointed to the ways in which a contemporary regime of globalizing economics incites the production and processing of literatures allegorical for their nations so that “the Anglo [can] relate[] benevolently to everything, ‘knowing about other cultures’ in a relativist glow.”<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, *White Teeth* and novels like it (which I survey at the end of this section) seem a part of this liberal multicultural project, bearing witness to other national voices they proceed to caricature in order to be consumed by Western elites. It matters that Archie's best friend in the novel, and the character whose family tree populates most of the novel's various plot lines, is Bangladeshi, because in the essay from which I quote, Spivak also reminds us that Bangladesh's unique postcolonial history (with a double decolonization from first Britain and second West Pakistan) caused “the country [to fall] into the clutches of the transnational global economy” in ways that, inconsistent with other postcolonial nations, have resuscitated the patriarchal family as the unit of development work; *White Teeth*, too, directs us to patriarchy to process the foreign.<sup>25</sup> What could be read as

the novel's complicity in a global capitalist order, however, I read more basically as camp's description of distribution within that order. The liberal multiculturalism of the novel's form—its jumping from demographic group to demographic group, using chapter breaks to get close, but not too close, to any particular social setting—is also a descriptive presentation of transnational distribution, laying out the mixed migratory and racially marked bodies that contribute to the flow of capital even as they do not receive its benefits in equal measure. The novel mines myriad cultural contexts while declining to make anyone within those contexts a full human being; it is camp because it borrows without paying back, presenting a social configuration without doling out psychological returns.

"It's just like on TV!" begins the coda and final chapter of *White Teeth*, converging its connected plot lines in the scene of a press conference (431). Archie's friend Samad—whom he met in the final days of World War II and endeared for life by capturing and claiming to kill a Nazi doctor—has had identical twins in London, Magid and Millat, in his arranged marriage ("Samad had caught children like a disease" [105]). Ashamed he has failed to maintain adherence to his Muslim faith and respect for his Bangladeshi roots (he tried to trade vices with God, but "his God was not *like* that charming white-bearded bungler of the Anglican, Methodist, or Catholic Churches" [117]), he has sent Magid to be raised in Bangladesh from the age of ten, only to see him become an atheist and scientist; Millat, still in London and increasingly alienated by the English treatment of their religion, has joined an extremist group called Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN) ("they are aware they have an acronym problem" [250]). In the course of one fateful night, they have separately slept with the only child of Archie and Clara, the smart and self-consciously big Irie (222), who thought she "deserved" love but becomes pregnant instead (381–82). The event that brings them all together again is the exhibition of FutureMouse, a project claiming to have controlled cancer in mice that was created by geneticist Marcus Chalfen, who along with his wife and horticulturist Joyce ("they're such *nice* people—*intellectuals*" [111]) has liberally housed and believed themselves to have nurtured Magid, Millat, and Irie at various times in their childhoods, perhaps at the expense of their own child, Joshua ("the Cyrano de Bergerac of taking insults" [247]), who has joined a militant animal rights group acronymed FATE. Magid has become Marcus's research assistant, but both FATE's Joshua and KEVIN's Millat, along with Irie's grandmother (Clara's mother) Hortense, a Jehovah's Witness ("large, albeit eccentric, company" [27]), are opposed to FutureMouse on principled grounds and have come either to protest or (in the case of Millat) to kill Marcus.

Formally, the chapter is a condensed version of the structure of the



novel entire, and its TV analog would be channel surfing: cut up into nine sections over only twice as many pages, the chapter pops around to survey its characters. But the televisual emphasis on what can be seen maintains the novel's larger preoccupation with surface over interior and with action over psychology; the scene of a press conference, too, frames the articulation of public expressions that may or may not align with beliefs, feelings, and motives held alone to oneself. The greatest leverage a TV idiom gets for the narration, however, is its emphasis on demographics, which paces out the final page of the novel, a rapid summary of end games for the various plot lines, by suggesting which scenes would want to be viewed by which viewers, including "young professional women aged eighteen to thirty two" and "the criminal class and the elderly" (448). What comes to matter is not the end games themselves but this charting of lines of difference, or the different ways in which a society could be divided. In this channel surfing of end games, *White Teeth* not only foregrounds a plural aesthetic spectatorship but also maps how the plot lines it has collected, first as a means of breaking from the hegemony of individual psychologies, now map onto the plural parts of a contemporary social world. The camp impulse to expand and collect finally becomes taxonomy, reflecting upon the places from which parts have come in order to reanticipate the social space that it has mined. As taxonomy, camp maps the distributed places of labor and society, from whose cumulative conjunction it derives its exaggerated effect.

Smith's climactic borrowing of the channel-surfing trope also points to the prominence of camp in contemporary televisual media. In television itself, camp has found mainstream expression (albeit on cable) in shows such as the Amy Sedaris and Stephen Colbert project *Strangers with Candy* (1999–2000), which also produced a film prequel in 2005. Perhaps the campiest show in recent years, however, was made by two white guys: Adult Swim's *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* (2007–10), whose eleven-minute episodes often feature deadpan parodies of public access television, infomercials, and other media oddities. The show's intentionally awkward, low-budget sketches mediate a rapid sampling of social spaces as their frequent use of green screen takes us across a range of settings. In the pilot episode, for instance, the sketches include the opening credits of a sunset-hued period romance in German with the subtitles to the voiceover incorrectly translated into English ("Ein Libespaar" becomes "How to make love without touching"); a beachside Hacky Sack competition staged as a *Street Fighter* face-off whose faux-Japanese look recalls the reedited game show *Most Extreme Elimination Challenge* then running on Spike TV (originally marketed as the first television channel "for men"); "the only married news team in the tricounty era," who, including Tim in androgynous drag, wear retro-patterned shirts and vests; and a commercial for

“B’Owl,” a half-bat, half-owl doll originally marketed to girls bored of their Barbies but now offering “B’Owl for Boys” and other variations that make the toy perfect for anyone. By sampling different communities—from European romantic to Japanese masculinist—the sketches as a whole compose a show that collects a wide social world while also, by dividing the world into discrete sketches, indexing the segregation of that world, as if listing its distinct, separated parts. The show is campy visually in its nod to trash amateurism a la John Waters, but it is camp more fundamentally because of its plural presentation of social distribution. Like *White Teeth*, it also shows the importance of transnational lines of difference in reticulating the field of cultural materials camp collects and deploys; camp has expanded its field of cultural materials because distribution now imagines a global society that is divided at the same time it is held in common, or a society that has in common only the fact of expanded technologies of segregation.

The listing of disjunction is made literal at the end of the B’Owl commercial with text scrolling the different categories for which the toy makes a perfect gift: “Gentlemen, Women, Dads, Strangers, Neighbors, Pep-Pep & Nanna, Tweens, Pen Pals, Teenagers, Lovers, Just Folks, Carolers, Pets & Rats, Funerals, Almost Anyone!, Boats, Basements, Catamarans, Coves, Auto Trunks, Den or Office, Special Rooms, Boats, Gifts.” In the heteronormative imaginary of the show, *Gentlemen* and *Women* might have exhausted the totality of society, but the extension of the list speaks to its understanding of a multiplicity of different categories of people composing this totality. It is an exercise in marking the ways in which a society can be divided, concluding with not even categories of people but spaces in which they might show up; the list moves from demographic distribution to spatial distribution. Of course, it is always dangerous to read a joke too closely, but it is precisely because the actual content of the list is inessential to the joke that it seems to present more reflexive or instinctive understandings incarnated in the show as a whole. Indeed, the joke-list names what the show formally does: surveying a social world divided into its parts to display the segregated distribution within it. The opening credits, too, present a rapid series of seemingly estranged images: an old telephone/fax machine, a hot dog, two cats French-kissing, and then the heads of Tim and Eric themselves, which are disintegrated as their ears, eyes, noses, and glasses fly off, exploding into nothingness. There is a way in which this short sequence of images, which introduces us to each episode of the show, is a miniaturization of the formula of camp as I have been describing it so far: an array of seemingly unrelated items, which must belong to wildly separated spaces—the office, the ballpark, the living room—finally lands upon individuals who must be literally defaced and depersonalized to receive and figure such social excess.

Such a formula is on display not only in *White Teeth* but also in a range of other novels contemporary with it. The climactic—as well as ultimate and ambiguous—moment of Sergio De La Pava’s *The Naked Singularity* (surely a camp title, managing to bring out the sexuality of a concept from the physics of general relativity) sees its protagonist, the public defender Casi, reencounter a man who earlier had been the sole guard of a large sum of drug-deal cash Casi and his colleague had, Robin Hood-like, sought to steal. It is not from negligence the man—who is called The Whale or, alternatively, in Spanish, La Bellena—was the only one “entrusted with providing security for all the money”: he is massive and brutal and, as Casi puts it, “I didn’t know they made humans that big.”<sup>26</sup> Casi takes the logic of the sentence further by refusing to grant humanity to the man, calling him “it” and relishing in his animality; at the end of the novel, as he approaches The Whale again, “the beast continued to grow before me until even the slightest detail of its face could be discerned. The eyes didn’t line up, the chin seemed almost serrated, and the teeth were more like fangs.”<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, magnification of the face makes it more faceless, as if the “details” cannot compensate for the sheer bigness of it; the face gets blown up and lost in its own size. Then there is this camp sentence:

At that instant in Time, from that location in Space, I heard the beginnings of a menacing noise off to the margins of where we stood, like the score of cosmic locomotives loosed and gathering in the distance, a low rumble that swelled with the passing seconds but otherwise remained the same, and the sky managed to darken with the sun brighter than ever; I saw the horizons rise as if to merge directly above us while the ground beneath our feet began to sink; jagged swaths of earth along with the structures and people atop were disappearing concentrically as if into a drain and countless humans whistled by making sounds that were either pleas for mercy or yelps of celebration; I saw events and deeds displaced from their proper setting and from notions like past or future and I stared, through regret, at all the ill I’d wrought.<sup>28</sup>

The sentence does syntactically what the image of The Whale as magnified and therefore erased did immediately before: Casi becomes extended across Time and Space and so interweaved into its stuff—concrete and abstract alike—that the *I* that insists on reanchoring each wave of observation after a semicolon cannot help but be left behind by them. Indeed, the clause that begins with “jagged swaths” temporarily—and, because alone in its subjecthood, perhaps accidentally—forfeits Casi into the earth that abounds him, absorbing his agency. But the reappearance of the final *I* does ultimately suggest that the “countless humans” of the earth come back into the subjectivity that observes it. In the vital back-and-forth of

the sentence's ambivalence, there is a distribution of subjectivity into a world and a collection of the world into a subject. Or, as camp, a subject becomes defaced because it becomes the whole world and all its parts in one place.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in the climactic scene of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), a Sansei who has been conducting traffic from a Los Angeles overpass like a symphony witnesses the convergence of national differences as the Tropic of Cancer is brought from Mexico to California, bringing with it the collected stuff of divergent family and cultural traditions. The scene is like the end of *Naked Singularity* because the weight of a socially differentiated world falls upon one man, who is in turn distorted (his name is Angel, suggesting already a perversion of the human). Kandice Chuh has called attention to the "interplay between the familiar and the foreign" in Yamashita's work, which I would read here as a dynamic circuit that converges multiple particularities into a single space without conflating them or reducing them to a whole.<sup>30</sup> Chuh is, I think, calling attention to the taxonomic force in Yamashita's novels—a taxonomy I read as endemic to camp—and it is therefore not surprising that she also reads Yamashita as deeply interested in the "distribution of resources and channeling of raw materials by both state and commercial forces"; the camp space of Yamashita's novels maps the cascade of differences that this distribution entails.<sup>31</sup>

Chuh has called on us to embrace the subjectlessness of Asian American literature—the need for raced subject positions to be interpretively improvised because they never precede performative declaration—by treating the subject as an epistemological object: a site for the production of social knowledge rather than the expression of subjectivity.<sup>32</sup> For Chuh, this subjectlessness paves the way to social critique, but what I have said about camp so far does not necessarily commit it to this path: to describe the world as unequal is not yet to take up the task of revealing how and why and to what ends it is so. Indeed, when Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously advocated that we move beyond some of our paranoid reflexes to critique and instead develop what she called reparative ways of attending to what objects open up and make habitable in an otherwise toxic world, it was camp, and camp alone, she looked to for practical inspiration.<sup>33</sup> Recent work in this tradition has developed weak theory, surface reading, and descriptive methods to follow the lead of objects instead of approaching them with totalizing structures manufactured in advance, and the last of these rhymes with what I have been calling camp's description of the social world.<sup>34</sup> But it is important that camp is itself an object rather than a method; it is a description of the world that makes itself available for both paranoid and reparative readings, just as it gives us both sides of social binaries. This is because camp both dissects the

world like a paranoid and rebuilds the world obliquely like a repairer: its art is in presenting the world without representing it. Sometimes, camp is the critical production of surfaces (John Waters, for instance, and Zadie Smith); other times, it is surface in need of critique (*Tim and Eric*, for example, does not strike me as being born from a particularly critical consciousness). So, too, can camp be put to different purposes: sometimes it is a diagnosis of society, sometimes a subversion of order, and sometimes a map to the future. In every case, the descriptive aspect of camp does not reduce to one critical pole, or stand outside them, but instead marks the transit between them, and what survives its distortion of the world is the palpable facticity of parts, or the fact of the world's partitioning.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, the camp subject produces knowledge without evaluating it, giving us materials—showing us what differences matter in the world—without instructions on what to do with them. After all, in aesthetics, judgment falls to the spectator.

What Sedgwick liked about camp is how it brings into one place objects from an array of social spaces that may have nothing in common, thereby cross-sectioning a society; she called this camp's "disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture."<sup>36</sup> What the novels described in this section suggest is camp's increasing inclination to make juxtapositions of more and different kinds; its subjectlessness, following Chuh, increasingly produces transnational and immigrant knowledge in particular, because it understands the social itself as a distribution not only of class positions but also of migration statuses and nations of origin.<sup>37</sup> The camp subject, as a site on which social differences positively converge and are referenced at the same time they are assembled into collage, indexes what groupings come together to form something like a society even as they cannot be conflated or collapsed. Camp is the aesthetic category of distribution because it presents condensed taxonomies of a social world excessive of any one subjectivity; it is a strategy of relieving minoritized subjects of the burden of social belonging by making the subject a site for the description of society itself.

### **(Music) Video Killed the Camp Star**

Camp frequently induces a taxonomic mode of inquiry, whether in Christopher Isherwood's early distinction between high and low camp,<sup>38</sup> in Sontag's elaboration of naive and deliberate camp,<sup>39</sup> or, more recently, in Bruce LaBruce's compelling breakdown of twenty-first-century camp, with additional categories including bad gay (think Perez Hilton), good straight (Woody Allen), bad straight (Stanley Tucci), reactionary (Tyler Perry), liberal (Dr. Ruth), and conservative (Sarah Palin).<sup>40</sup> What products from *White Teeth* to *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* fore-

ground, however, is the practice of taxonomy internal to camp itself, where the collection and placement of parts from a fragmented social sphere are precisely the technique of preempting the burden of individual psychological pain that camp from the perspective of its production has always claimed as its end. Camp, as the aesthetic category of contemporary distribution, administers representational practices of collage that substitute taxonomy for analysis, mapping social space without laying down individual anchors, hallucinating a management of contradictory attachments and detachments through a lateral placement of their separate parts.

It is this taxonomic force that is consistently on display in perhaps the most reliably fecund genre for camp production today: the music video. In the video for Fergie's 2016 single "M.I.L.F. \$," for instance, a synthetic, brightly colored neighborhood of mothers provides a camp *mélange* of social styles (for instance, a gold stroller is equipped with hydraulics, bringing the lowrider to the scene of infancy). More prolifically, the contemporary queen of the camp music video in America has to be Nicki Minaj.<sup>41</sup> What makes her music videos—as well as the music itself—camp is, as in other examples of camp, their index of distribution, or their rapid referencing of parts of a larger social world. Thus, the "boy" addressed in Minaj's most popular single to date, "Super Bass," lyrically collects too many attributes to belong to one person. Just as the song dedicates itself first to "the boys with the booming system" but later to "the boys in the polos," members of both categories continually undergo revision: "He real, he might got a deal" (suggesting legal activity) or "he might sell coke"; "you're like pelican fly" (meaning severely stoned) or maybe it's just that "you're so shy." By the time we get to the opening line of the bridge—"I need you in my life for me to stay"—we are prepared not to take its sentiment seriously because there could be no single "you" intended as the subject of address; the song flirts with but ultimately declines the tropism toward true love otherwise pervasive in pop. The music video for the song embellishes this artificiality further, turning markers of luxury named by the lyrics into bubblegum pink props: a windowless plastic airplane, a pool with pink water, champagne glasses filled with bubblegum syrup. Shot in a studio with a green screen (like *Tim and Eric*), the video literally takes place nowhere—the background is usually a solid block of neon or else, occasionally, clouds—but this denial of site specificity in turn facilitates the song's taking place everywhere. Just as the "boy" of the song is a placeholder for multiple possible social types—someone who drives around in a car or someone who is always in the air, a mogul or a coke dealer, a guy with a fitted cap or a guy with a tie—the visual space of the video is also a fantasy space that collects from, rather than reduces to, the various social spaces it cites. What makes Minaj campy, especially compared with other rap artists who often sub-

scribe to a singular formula of class achievement in Patrón and Cadillacs (as Drake raps in a song of hers featuring him, “[It’s] hard to make a song ’bout somethin’ other than the money”), is her lack of commitment to one vision of the good life, which in turn invites into her curated social space a multiplicity of other spaces. Here, the inauthenticity of camp—its lack of commitment to any given system of signs—is also its social promiscuity.

Lack of commitment is one way of characterizing perhaps the most popular producer of camp worldwide, the South Korean pop musician Psy. To date, he is best known for the vastly influential video for his 2012 “Gangnam Style,” which is a brightly colored and brilliantly campy look at class in South Korea. Gangnam, a posh district in Seoul only fifteen square miles in size but with 7 percent of the nation’s GDP, embodies much of South Korea’s image of itself as a rapidly developing capitalist country, and Psy’s character in the music video tries to manifest its style in a series of attempts to impress women. But each manifestation ends up being a fantasy: he thinks he dances at the beach, but it ends up being a children’s playground; he thinks he is at a nightclub, but it ends up being a bus; and instead of walking down a red carpet with confetti raining down, he is strutting across a parking lot with trash blowing in his face. Perhaps the unreality of his fantasies would be more tragic if the video were not so colorful, and perhaps the outrageousness of its scenes too easily ameliorates its implicit critique of materialism, but at base, “Gangnam Style” is a map of the increasing class division in South Korea that makes possible the radical disjunction of places like a public bus and a private party in the first place. In collecting social incommensurability, Psy’s character, like other camp subjects, also becomes incoherent; the refrain of the song, “*oppa* Gangnam style,” literally means “he’s Gangnam style,” but *oppa* is specifically a word the Korean language provides for women to describe their older brothers or similar relations; thus even the character’s apprehension and advertisement of himself as a rich gentleman takes him into a feminine position. The collage of identification was repeated in Psy’s next single, “Gentleman”—the debut of which brought more than 50,000 fans to pack the Seoul World Cup Stadium on 13 April 2013, while a further 150,000 live streamed online—whose refrain was not “I’m a mother-fucking gentleman” but “I’m a mother, father, gentleman.” In both music videos, what positively emerges from its negative critique of elite masculinity is thus an array of subject positions and the social spaces to which they refer, from the nightclub to the public bus. That does not mean the camp subjects of the videos suspend critique, but they produce descriptive and taxonomic knowledge that is in excess of any one critique, and they leave to their spectators the task of what to do with the expanded worldview. As in the novels described above, camp is textbook rather than polemic.

Psy's music videos—which offer South Korean society up as a microcosm of a global distribution of publicness and wealth and which, in rapidly jumping the gaps between segregated spaces, deliver a farcical subject—join the projects discussed in the previous section, including *White Teeth* and portions of *Tim and Eric*, in offering up Asian places and genres to mediate a camp aesthetic. As the aesthetic category of distribution, camp's affinity with these materials suggests the contemporary importance of Asian media and peoples in global circuits of production and consumption; in contrast to the camp of, say, John Waters, it is no longer possible today to imagine capitalist distribution—and therefore camp, which is its index—without Asian and especially postcolonial references, dividing a world along lines of nation and race just as Nicki Minaj's music videos continue to show how racial division remains central to the distribution of wealth within the United States. In these camp artifacts, not just the fact of division but also the ways in which lines are drawn to so divide are continually rehearsed and figured. Camp crystallizes a dialectic between globalization and heterogeneity, laminating the market and the local by simultaneously appropriating and recommending specificity.

Psy thus provides a provocative capstone, although some would for the same reason say tombstone, to the trajectory of camp tracked in this essay. The videos taxonomize social difference and create artificial subjects to stand on top of the collected collage. But widely circulated and consumed—"Gangnam Style" remains the most viewed video on YouTube and "Gentleman" broke YouTube records for the most views in twenty-four hours—Psy's videos suggest an almost complete identification of camp with the popular culture it would be otherwise said to subvert, dramatize, or problematize. It is possible to hypothesize multiple flashpoints for this becoming mainstream of camp, like Bette Midler's move from bathhouses to the stage of Johnny Carson, or the Broadway and then Hollywood adaptations of John Waters's *Hairspray*. What I have been arguing in this essay, however, is how camp as an aesthetic category is fundamentally about a wider society than the subcultures or counter-publics in which it was first nurtured: it is an aesthetic trained toward sampling from and mapping a social totality irreducible to any subject position. It is not only that an existing public appropriates camp, or that camp grounds an emerging public that comes to exceed it, but also that camp describes a public in all its plurality through the concatenation of its separate parts. Camp is the properly social aesthetic category of late capitalism, a category of marshaling and collecting difference across growing gaps.



## Notes

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1. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Tucker, “Tacky History of the Pink Flamingo.”
3. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp.’” D. A. Miller complains of Sontag’s “phobic de-homosexualization of camp as the necessary condition for any intelligent discourse on the subject,” a degaying that allows Sontag to think, for a moment, that not gays but she may even have invented camp. Miller, “Sontag’s Urbanity,” 93. See also Vider, “‘Oh Hell, May.’”
4. Which, as Andrew Ross has argued, by legitimating an aesthetic premised on illegitimacy and vulgarizing a stylized position premised on aloofness, has destroyed both. Ross, “Uses of Camp.”
5. For whom camp may start to look like an archaic “emotional crutch of the pathetic old queen.” Harris, “Death of Camp,” 180.
6. For a 1995 roundup of recent eulogies for camp, see Flinn, “Deaths of Camp.”
7. Meyer, “Introduction,” 18.
8. In particular, a campy presentation of one’s pain as an object of ridicule “anticipate[s] and pre-empt[s] the devaluation of it by others,” thereby “repudiat[ing] the hierarchies of social worth according to which modern individuals are routinely classed.” In this “anti-social aesthetic” (“by ‘anti-social,’ I do not mean hostile to communal belonging,” Halperin clarifies, “but contrary to social norms”), camp lays “the foundation for a wider, more inclusive community.” Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, 186, 188, 189.
9. Freud, “Neuro-psychoses of Defense,” 58.
10. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 99.
11. Marx, *Capital*, 1023.
12. The already classic citation for empirical research on the growing division of classes is Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, chap. 8.
13. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 109.
14. See especially Galloway, *Protocol*, 2–27.
15. For a review of network literature on the way to an account of social structures, see Martin, *Social Structures*, 27–31. I am thankful to Matthias Staisch for pointing me to this reference.
16. Dean conceptualizes blogging and other Internet-mediated communication as a drive to repeat that captures communicators in networks of exploitation and control. See, e.g., Dean, *Blog Theory*, 31. For more on the Internet as a neoliberal “fantasy of global unity,” see also Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 46. “Cruel optimism” is from Lauren Berlant, who defines it as a relation “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”; here, the desire for publicness or democracy preempts its aims by being routed through circuits hostile to them. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.
17. Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” 21.
18. See, classically, Butler, *Gender Trouble*, chap. 3.
19. Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising”; Dean, “Cruising as a Way of Life.”
20. This is not to deny the classism of the bathhouses—the owners of the

Continental Baths at which Midler primarily performed, for instance, were outspoken about their class aspirations and marketed its space “for sophisticated males only”—but only to suggest that, in the *fantasy* of the bathhouse, its utopia was one of toweled naked bodies unmarked by the world beyond. See Winkler, “Stars of the Tubs!,” 50.

21. Smith, *White Teeth*, 3; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

22. Woloch, *One vs. the Many*, 29.

23. I substitute the term *hallucinatory* for the *hysterical realism* of which James Wood thinks *White Teeth* is paradigmatic, a novel that is a “perpetual motion machine” whose “excess of storytelling . . . shroud[s], in majesty, a lack. . . . That lack is the human.” Wood, *Irresponsible Self*, 178, 182. For Wood, nostalgic for the social realism of the nineteenth century, this is a bad thing. Smith has responded to Wood’s critique by saying it is hard to talk about feeling in a televised world, but still feeling can be wrested away to secure a balance between “brain and heart.” Smith, “This Is How It Feels to Me.”

24. Spivak, “Teaching for the Times,” 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 17.

26. De La Pava, *Naked Singularity*, 431, 512.

27. *Ibid.*, 678.

28. *Ibid.*

29. There are more obvious things to say about this sentence than that it is camp. For starters, the sentence is simply melodramatic. It is part of the hubris of Casi—and, I think, of De La Pava—that this man gets to be the center of the world, omniscient and even omniphysical. It is interesting to note that translating whale into Spanish forces the man to become not the *it* Casi calls him but a *she*: *La Bellena*; but that the most important female-gendered character in the entire novel is so gendered by accident is perhaps the best way of highlighting the novel’s overall feminine lack. Among other things, this is perhaps a disavowal of the dependency of a male writer on women’s support (for instance, originally rejected by hundreds of agents, *The Naked Singularity* only found a wider audience after De La Pava’s wife diligently took on the task of being its publicist). See Ruby, “Of Loopholes and Black Holes.”

30. See Chuh, “Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres,” 635.

31. Chuh, “Thick Time and Space,” 536.

32. Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 10, 147.

33. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” For her earlier and somewhat fuller account of camp, which she distinguishes from kitsch as involving “a gayer and more spacious angle of view,” see also Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 156.

34. See Stewart, “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World”; Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading”; and Love, “Close but Not Deep.” For a review of reparative reading’s uptake, see Wiegman, “Times We’re In.”

35. The place of fragmentation in camp—a violence done upon the world to make available new configurations—reminds us that, in Melanie Klein’s original understanding of reparation from which Sedgwick derives her terminology, reparation could never be hermetically sealed off as a purely positive project but was always in an ambivalent economy with a negative project of “splitting” an object into good and bad parts to make it more digestible. See Klein, “Love, Guilt, and Reparation.” For Klein, *reparation* was then meant to entail both senses the word might be seen to have in English: not only a restoration of an object but also a restitution paid on behalf of the part the ego has played in fantastically destroying the object. What cer-

tain accounts inspired by Sedgwick have sometimes failed to acknowledge, in their desire to be close to objects and to nourish the worlds objects help subtend, is this second part of the reparative formula, which sees the object under threat because of the ego's primary aggression toward it; for Klein, to repair is a guilty penance for having first attacked an object, and a reparative project that fantasizes its work as pure protection and restoration disavows the aggressive tendencies that first set the conditions for constructive labor. On this, see Stacey, "Wishing Away Ambivalence." Camp, on the other hand, acknowledges its aggressive fragmentation of the world; it creates a space on the premise of first splitting it.

36. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 149.

37. This archive of novels speaks to the degaying of camp from Sontag on, but it at least resists camp's whitewashing, attentive to the ways in which José Esteban Muñoz calls on us to see "how other minority communities might enact a camp discourse" (*Disidentifications*, 212).

38. Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 110.

39. Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 282.

40. LaBruce, "Notes on Camp/Anti-Camp."

41. On the campiness of Nicki Minaj's performances of herself—which revise not only the gay presumption of camp but also its whitewashing—see McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics."

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