Beginning with the appearance of her first singles and music videos over a decade ago, Madonna has been a more consistent subject of public debate than virtually any other entertainer in history. She has graced countless magazine covers, ranging from Vanity Fair and Rolling Stone to Fortune and the National Review, and has become a fixture in national newspaper editorials and gossip columns. She has appeared on many talk shows, including a memorable 1990 appearance on ABC's Nightline with Forrest Sawyer and two notorious appearances on David Letterman's late-night show. She has been the subject of a TV movie-of-the-week and a feature length documentary, Truth or Dare (which was in turn the object of one-hour-long cable TV parody by Julie Brown and another half-hour parody on the TV show Blossom). In addition to numerous biographies and picture books of Madonna, and her own book Sex, there is a Madonna comic book, a book of women's dreams about Madonna, even an "I Hate Madonna" handbook. Madonna is as ubiquitous in academic discourse as she is in the popular media. Already the subject of numerous academic essays in the mid-1980s, three collections of essays published in 1989—one devoted exclusively to Madonna's book Sex—cemented the institutionalization of a major subdivision of American media studies into Madonna studies. As Steven Anderson already noted in 1989, the glut of debates revolving around Madonna run the gamut of concerns about the nature of contemporary society itself:

The tidal wave of Madonna's renown has swept over adulators and detractors. Once a flesh-and-blood superstar, she's now a metaphoric unto herself. Not that she doesn't have feelings, desires, or stomach gas, but she's achieved such ineffable "being-ness" that old controversies—is she Pop incarnate? Glamorized Fuckdoll?—are largely irrelevant. The only aspect left to consider is Madonna's resonance in the minds of the public, for whom—like it or not—she's become a repository for all our ideas about fame, money, sex, feminism, pop culture, even death.
Anderson suggests that “old controversies” about Madonna are dead; but her “resonance” in the public sphere, while serving as a “repository” for ideas about other matters, still manifests itself in reprises of these very controversies. For instance, making a joke about the prevalence of opinions about Madonna in all strata of society, jewelry thieves in Quentin Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs argue if “Like A Virgin” is about “big dick” or female desire. Hal Hartley’s Simple Men, similarly, features generally lachrymose characters engaged in an extended discussion of whether Madonna’s self-exploitation is exploitative. And, in academia, feminists query whether Madonna represents parody or pastiche, a healthy break from essentialism or a rejection of traditional feminist concerns. A hall-of-mirrors effect occurs in the construction of Madonna’s star text: media attention fuels academic discourse, which in turn fuels media discourse, and ultimately all becomes a part of “Madonna.” Rather than ask “Can pop culture be critical of society?” or “What is the meaning of feminism today?” cultural critics ask “Is Madonna a glamorized fuckdoll or the queen of parodic critique? Pop incarnate or an artist/provocateur?”

If Madonna serves as the repository for our ideas about “fame, money, sex, feminism, pop culture, even death,” those ideas are filtered primarily through academic and media discussions about the political effectiveness of gender parody and the manipulation of negative stereotypes. The “controversies” Madonna generates echo, in short, controversies about the value and appeal of camp. Thus, a February 1993 item in the New Yorker announces, “Camp is dead, thanks to Madonna.” The article, a brief review of a drag show, proclaims that “gender tripping can’t be subversive anymore” because Madonna “has opened all the closets, turning deviance into a theme park.” On the one hand, the article signals the prominence and accessibility of the discourse of camp in the eighties and early nineties—related to the mainstreaming of the spectacle of drag culture symbolized by, among other things, the much hyped “secret” of The Crying Game, the popularity of video “queen” RuPaul, Paris Is Burning, and The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, as well as Madonna’s use of drag and voguing in her videos and tours. On the other hand, by hanging such a quick assessment of the condition of camp on the signifier “Madonna,” the article also underscores that Madonna’s status in the public mind has come to be that of unique author of gender bending, parody, and female masquerade.

Madonna, clearly, did not invent feminist camp nor has she effected any major changes in the production of feminist camp. The open secret of the Madonna phenomenon is that, in large part, it and she are astonishingly uninteresting and unoriginal. As Russell Baker cogently assesses, “Madonna isn’t the cultural elite. . . . She’s just Mae West for yuppies.” She engages in forms of female masquerade and gender parody similar to those of West in the 1930s, who was herself imitating nineteenth-century burlesque and female impersonation. Like West, she foregrounds her identifications with both African American and gay male culture. Her play with drag and gender bending can be traced to lesbian idols Dietrich and Garbo. Her “Boy Toy” and “Material Girl” personae revitalize the knowing masquerade of countless gold diggers from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s. Yet no analysis of feminist camp would be complete without an acknowledgment of Madonna’s role in bringing camp to the forefront in a transnational consumer society. While aiming to inscribe Madonna in an ongoing tradition of feminist camp, I suggest that Madonna’s difference from previous instances of feminist camp, including West, has to do with the changing meaning of camp from the 1960s to the present. As Baker suggests, Madonna is not just Mae West but Mae West for yuppies. If the stuff of camp has not changed significantly since West, what has changed is the context in which camp is produced, how it is consumed, and who consumes it.

Camp has undergone two important changes since the 1960s to become a more overt, more public sensibility, and a mainstream fashion. The first is the “outing” and “heterosexualization” of camp, its virtual equation with first pop and then postmodernism, coincident with the publication of Sontag’s essay. The second is a more recent shift to overtly politicized camp and radical drag, dating back to gay camp’s changed status following Stonewall and the 1970s gay liberation movement, and its revitalization in the 1980s with the onset of AIDS and “queer” politics.

The first predominantly heterosexual pop and/or postmodern style of camp applies to Madonna’s career as a whole—in her extraordinary self-marketing, her changing images, and her retro-cinephilia. The second, more explicitly homosexual and political style of camp inheres primarily in Madonna’s explicit references to gay subcultures, especially drag and voguing, in conjunction with her stated identification with gay men, her flirtation with lesbianism, and her AIDS charity work. In this chapter, I examine these two trajectories of camp through Madonna’s star text. My aim is less to provide a history of Madonna’s career than to use her as a lens through which to view post-1960s camp. In particular, I explore the debate about Madonna as a debate about camp, so as to determine what this debate tells us about the status of camp today.
Cashing in on Camp: Camp, Pop, and Postmodernism

The publication of Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” in 1964 disseminated camp to the general populace, attracting attention in such mainstream publications as Time. Despite Sontag’s identification of camp as a primarily gay male practice, the publicity surrounding “Notes on ‘Camp’” gave the camp sensibility currency for heterosexuals, initiating what Paul Rudnick and Kurt Anderson call the “world of heterosexual camp, Camp Lite.” According to Rudnick and Anderson, “The most serious woman in America gave her imprimatur to a jolly, perverse sensibility that was, back then and in the main, homosexual and male”: “Sontag’s essay was like a thrilling, open-ended mother’s excuse note to a whole generation of gifted children: To Whom It May Concern: Johnny has my permission to enjoy TV and Jacqueline Susann books.”

In defining, if only loosely, the camp sensibility, Sontag must certainly be credited with publicizing the term among heterosexuals. In addition, by legitimating camp as a serious object of study, Sontag opened the way for 1970s gay intellectuals—including Richard Dyer, Andrew Britton, and Jack Babuscio—to engage the topic of camp, often in contention with her characterization.

Sontag’s influence, however, cannot be separated from the context in which her essay appeared: namely, pop art. As Andrew Ross points out, pop differs markedly from camp, because camp is the “in” taste of a minority elite, while pop “was supposed to declare that our cultural currency had value, and that this value could be communicated in a simple language.” Nevertheless, pop problematized the question of taste itself, rejecting an elitist past based on cultural acts of judgment and the notion that objects had intrinsic aesthetic value. Pop, in this sense, created a context for the mainstreaming of camp taste—justifying the democratic spirit of camp, its collapsing of high-low boundaries, while opening the sensibility up to a majority audience. In a curious twist, camp taste became the dominant code. Rather than a covert, cult sensibility, camp became a commercialized taste—and a taste for commercialism—a determinedly unguilty pleasure.

Pop, in its broadest sense, was also the context in which notions of the postmodern took shape. Outside its architectural context, the term “postmodern” is by and large a slippery and unstable signifier, defined, as Anne Friedberg notes, largely through its overusage. The term serves, on the one hand, as a kind of historical marker, isolating contemporary society’s explosion of technologies, mass-media fragmentation and globalization, and accelerated information access. On the other hand, the sweeping connotations of the term include discourses of style in various media, as well as theories about the period and its cultural objects. While it is tempting to abandon the term “postmodern” altogether, given its semiotic instability, the various values attached to notions of postmodernity need to be acknowledged and accounted for as part of the cultural current that shapes the discourse around contemporary notions of camp, parody, kitsch—and Madonna.

Andreas Huyssen notes the link between Robert Venturi’s influential Learning from Las Vegas (“one of the most telling documents of the break of postmodernism with the modernist dogma”) and the 1960s pop sensibility: “Time and again the authors use pop art’s break with the austere canon of high modernist painting and pop’s uncritical espousal of the commercial vernacular of consumer culture as an inspiration for their work. What Madison Avenue was for Andy Warhol, what the comics and the Western were for Leslie Fiedler, the landscape of Las Vegas was for Venturi and his group.” Venturi’s celebration of Las Vegas style furthered the new camp sensibility’s emphasis on the ironic, “thus pushing architecture off on its own snickery detour.”

Ironic, but no longer parodic, camp came to be equated with postmodern pastiche, which Fredric Jameson has famously labeled “blank parody.” If the mainstreaming of camp taste represents a revolution of sorts, that revolution has, in large part, been televised and televisual. Much of the public discourse on drag, voguing, and transvestites, as well as other “gay” topics, has since the 1970s taken place on the daytime talk shows hosted by Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, and others. At the same time, a form of camp cinephilia, dedicated to film trivia, the showcasing of “Bad Movies We Love” and classical Hollywood cinema, formerly the stuff of revival movie houses and midnight movies, became a frequent feature on locally syndicated stations across the United States and then on cable TV stations like TNT. Television exposed new generations of audiences to Berkeley musicals, historical camp figures like West, and cult figures like Maria Montez, thus providing an additional context for the rise of camp coextensive with Sontag’s writing.

More than just serving as a medium for the “outing” of pre- and post-1960s camp, however, television has itself seemingly become the definitive reference point for the Camp Lite sensibility. The “irony epidemic,” as Rudnick and Anderson describe it, filters its jokey baby-boomer ambivalence through insider references to television shows and characters from the 1950s forward as much as, if not more than, through its recycling of retro objects and fashions. This ironic sensibility, which eulogizes a fantasy of the baby boomers’ American innocence through nostalgia, has its own television station in the cable network Nickelodeon. Nickelodeon’s Nick at Nite programming, similar in spirit to midnight movies and the camp fetishiza-
Madonna, especially in her Boy Toy and Material Girl incarnations, seemed the epitome of the newly defined camp style, embodying cross-cultural, consumer culture, like pop, and updating it through new media forms. The ultimate postmodern video star, Madonna appeared throughout the 1980s, challenging the preconceived notions of celebrity and mass media. Her striking, sometimes controversial, and often provocative images and videos reflected the excesses and contradictions of contemporary culture, combining high and low, art and commerce, to create a new form of popular culture.

Joyce Millman aptly describes Madonna as a "video generation" Barbie, updates the model, making her "more of an object." According to Millman, "Madonna's complex transformation through her costume and accessories—Boy Toy Madonna, Material Girl Madonna, Thin Madonna, Barbie—are all part of a self-commodified commodity for whom pastiche becomes a marketing strategy."

The essay appears in the context of sexual liberation, "for which camp played a crucial role in the redefinition of masculinity and femininity." Ross sees camp as a "resistant practice," challenging traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Camp is not simply a matter of finding the fun in the absurd or the ridiculous, but rather a way of reimagining the world and our place in it, defamiliarizing the commonplace and making the ordinary seem extraordinary. This essay is a celebration of camp, its power to subvert, its ability to transform, and its role in the ongoing struggle for cultural change.
the effect of camp on mainstream popular taste in the eroticized spectacle of performance rock. Madonna has sometimes been compared to performance rock stars, especially David Bowie, because of her shifting images and play with gender roles. Gender bending in performance rock was, however, primarily a masculine privilege. The “redefinition” of sex and gender roles in performance and glam rock was the province of a host of male aesthetes—David Bowie, the New York Dolls, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and others. In addition, the gender bending in performance rock, linked in many of the performers’ star texts to suggestions of bi- and homosexuality, related more closely to drag and female impersonation than to pop or postmodernism.

While exposing camp style to a heterosexual audience, performance rock differed in spirit from the new camp, disclaiming the vulgar consumerism and antielitist judgments of pop. Lisa Lewis notes an ideological division between rock and pop music similar to that between high culture and popular culture: “Rock discourse forged a hierarchy within popular music by creating a structure of value against which ‘pop’ music could be devalued. Rock was made to stand as a higher form . . . as the representative of art and artfulness.” While pop music and pop art are not identical, both embrace consumerism and are positioned as the low other to a “high” culture discourse. Performance rock defined itself in opposition to pop-music discourse and stood instead as the representative of artfulness in popular music. Madonna, in contrast, clearly embodies pop-music discourse: “Image and representation . . . are Madonna’s playground. She revels in self-promotion, in the creation of an image or images, in being a personality, a celebrity. She accepts artifice as an integral feature of music production and promotion and is comfortable with textual production.” Although Andy Warhol influenced Bowie and Reed, his true heir is Madonna. She captures the full force of Warhol’s ironic redefinition of fame and celebrity and his creation of the “superstar” (who becomes one once named).

Male performance-rock artists inhabit a quasi-romantic persona (Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane), their changing images reflecting different voices. Madonna, in contrast, creates different images, the meaning of which exists at the level of style. She does not inhabit personas so much as represent them ironically: “I’m just being ironic . . . . That’s the joke of it all. It’s a luring device, like the whole boy-toy thing. It’s playing into people’s idea of what’s humiliating to women.” In embracing pop discourse, rather than rock, and a postmodern malleability, rather than a romantic star persona, Madonna’s eroticized images expose image as artifice and play on the negative connotations attached to images of women.

Some of the controversy Madonna generates has to do with her pop reproduction of the lowest forms of aesthetic culture, her commercialism, and the presumably formulaic and trivial pop music she produces. It is, however, largely because she plays on “people’s idea of what’s humiliating to women” that Madonna has become a controversial figure in academic and popular discourse. Madonna enters the cultural scene following both the 1970s Women’s Liberation movement and the 1980s institutionalization of academic feminism and provokes debates about not just postmodernism but “postfeminism” as well.

The status of and need for feminism in the early 1980s especially was extremely foggy. The label “postfeminist” suggested a belief, in the media and especially among younger women, that there was no longer any need for feminist politics, and, subsequently, suggested a feeling among 1970s feminists that activist feminism was losing ground. The debate about postfeminism encompassed many areas—the viability of women’s music, for instance, as well as a questioning of certain “feminist orthodoxies around the body and self-presentation: the injunction against feminine adornment and its oppressive signifiers—makeup, high heels, skirts, long hair and so on,” which, for postfeminists, seemed “oppressive and trapping in itself.” As a female superstar, Madonna challenged a lot of the established positions of academic and activist feminism and functioned on both sides of the “postfeminist” debate as a touchstone for the rearticulation of a host of feminist issues including pornography, fashion, makeup, and sex.

In discussing the negative female stereotypes contained in Madonna’s image, feminist critics echo the post-Stonewall debate about the politics of camp for gay men: they ask whether Madonna fuels or dismantles those stereotypes, whether she represents a retrograde and anti-feminist image of oppression, or embodies a new vision of powerful and independent femininity. Most of the negative criticism of Madonna relates to her sexuality and gender—her image as a kind of female grotesque and as the antithesis of feminism and feminist identity politics. In a survey of “Madonna-haters,” Madonna is called antifeminist and a backward step for women; further, she is likened to a social disease, a narcissist, a succubus, a vampire, and—linking her sexuality and her commercialism—a prostitute. The I Hate Madonna Handbook also compares her to a prostitute and features a quiz: “Feminist or Slut?” Some feminists consider Madonna’s postmodernism a liability for feminism insofar as her changing images challenge the unified concept of “woman.” However, contrary to Camille Paglia’s assertion that she alone recognizes Madonna’s permutations as the “future of feminism,” many femi-
nists dismiss the charge that postmodern style is apolitical and empty of content and have considered Madonna's use of borrowed styles to be parodic and critical. For example, discussing Madonna's changing images, and particularly her retro-cinephilia, Ramona Curry argues that Madonna "functions not as mere imitation or pastiche, but as a parody of female star images, indeed of the concept of stardom altogether." Curry notes that the repetition of this parody may seem ultimately to be pastiche, but "what adheres to Madonna's cumulative image from her varied and multiple performances is her status as a kind of meta-masquerade." The turning point in feminist attitudes toward Madonna and the beginning of her acceptance by an adult female audience, along with her established popularity among teenage "wanna-be" fans, seems to have been the video for "Material Girl" (dir. Lambert, 1985). Here, Madonna imitates Marilyn Monroe's "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" number from Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (dir. Hawks, 1953). In a video-within-the-video, Madonna performs "Material Girl" dressed in a pink sleeveless gown that is an exact replica of Monroe's dress. The song simultaneously celebrates and parodies the gold digger's self-commodification as a form of 1980s crass materialism: "The boy with the cold, hard cash is always Mr. Right / Cause we are living in a material world, and I am a material girl."

Because this video invokes a famous text, and especially a famous sex symbol, "Material Girl" could be taken as simple nostalgia or pastiche. The video, however, reproduces elements of the Monroe image (blondness, sexuality, gold digging) and simultaneously recasts that image in a potentially critical manner. First, the framing narrative suggests that "Madonna" is not really the material girl of the song, differentiating her from the Monroe character. Greg Seigworth cites the video's "self-conscious disjunction of the singer and the song as ironic commentary on the then-predominant image of Madonna as Boy Toy" and asserts that "Madonna was trying to intervene in and influence the shape her own emerging mythology would take." Second, both Madonna's witty performance and the song's pointed lyrics attribute to the Monroe character a knowingness and degree of control absent from most nostalgic treatments of Monroe, which generally remember her as a witless sex object and/or tragic victim. Thus, the video creates a dialectical constellation of Monroe-Madonna, revealing a stronger and more savvy Monroe in the image of Madonna.

Many feminists embrace Madonna not only because her multiple masquerades challenge essentialist notions of identity, but also because, throughout her various incarnations, Madonna asserts her own power and indepen-
in I Dream of Madonna). In the film, Rosanna Arquette's bored suburban housewife functions as an obsessive "wanna-be" in relation to Madonna's thinly veiled self-portrait, Susan. Arquette's Roberta voyeuristically tracks Susan's romantic life via newspaper classifieds, spies on and follows her through the city, wears her clothes, and carries a photo of her—even into the bathtub. Roberta's identification with Susan is literalized in the portion of the film when her amnesia causes her to "become" Susan. Ultimately, through her identification with Susan, Roberta gets the courage to become her own person, leaving behind her unsatisfactory marriage, bland suburban life, and unhip clothing. The only narrative film that has succeeded because of, and not despite, Madonna, Definitely Seeing Susan not only targeted a more mature audience for Madonna but determined, in large part, the way in which that audience would respond to her.

Critics argue that many gay men and lesbians, similarly, identify with Madonna's power and independence. Michael Musto observes, "Her pride, flamboyance, and glamour reach out to gay guys as much as her refusal to be victimized strikes a chord in lesbians." If gay male identification with female stars had been, as Ross claims, "first and foremost, an identification with women as emotional subjects in a world in which men 'acted' and women 'felt,'" Madonna, for Musto, offers a more equitable model. He continues: "It's not the divisive old Judy story, with guys weeping along with the diva as she longs to go over the rainbow and track down the man that got away, while women cringe." A diva of a different sort, gay men, lesbians, and straight women can take equal pleasure in Madonna and identify with her as a figure of desire and power. In this sense, she offers camp pleasure without the guilt of affirming negative stereotypes.

The perception of Madonna's power and independence relates not only to her outspoken sexuality but also to her use of politically controversial imagery in her textual productions. Lisa Henderson ties Madonna's popularity among gays and lesbians to her status as a political figure: "The heart of Madonna's appeal to lesbian and gay audiences... include(s) her willingness to act as a political figure as well as a popular one and to recognize that such fraught domains as sex, religion, and family are indeed, political constructions, especially for lesbian and gay people." Madonna both parodies sexual stereotypes and blasts the patriarchal institutions that construct those stereotypes. In videos, songs, commercials, and public-service announcements, she has taken on such embattled territories as the Catholic church, the family, abortion, condoms, big business (Pepsi), and the American flag. She has, moreover, made public statements about the censorship battles in the United States and abroad and become a symbol of that struggle due to her banned Pepsi commercial, banned video for "Justify My Love," and threatened boycotts and closings of her live concert tour in Rome and Toronto.

Queer as You Wanna-be: Camp and Identity Politics

Madonna's self-presentation and reception among gays and lesbians as a political figure links her to the second tendency of post-1960s camp I mentioned earlier—its shift to overtly politicized camp and "queer" politics. This trajectory springs directly from and closely resembles pre-1960s gay camp. It differs, however, from earlier "traditional" gay camp in crucial ways because the historical meaning of camp changes for gays after Stonewall. As I noted in the introduction, for many gay intellectuals after Stonewall, camp was initially viewed largely as an embarrassment affirming the dominant culture's negative perception of the gay community. Even theorists like Richard Dyer who valorized camp did so largely from a historical perspective, arguing that camp had functioned as a kind of dress rehearsal for liberation politics and "coming out," but not claiming that it should substitute for politics after Stonewall.

At the same time, though, flamboyant drag and cross-dressing began to be used in the 1970s in Gay Pride parades to signify being "out" in a visible public ritual. By taking on the dominant culture's negative perception of gay men as "queens," the use of camp style in public—much like the use of the slogan "We're Here, We're Queer, Get Used to It"—could assert gay pride, identity, community, and history. If pop camp exposes one side of camp—recognizing the camp subculture's consumerism and desire for access to the dominant culture—queer camp emphasizes the other side—camp's ability to signal difference and alienation from the dominant. Here, rather than make public camp's parasitic relation to the dominant culture, queer camp recodes the subculture's own history to reconcile itself as adversarial.

In the 1980s, camp became a key strategy in gay activist politics aimed at asserting gay rights, and not simply gay pride. Gay activists, in the wake of the AIDS crisis, work to improve AIDS awareness among homosexual and heterosexual communities; to demand more government funding for research and treatment centers, faster FDA approval for drugs, better access to experimental drugs, and nonprejudicial insurance coverage policies; and to combat the increasing problem of gay bashing and hate crimes spawned by AIDS paranoia. With particular attention to the latter, the gay activist group Queer Nation has adopted what Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman de-
scribe as a "camp counterpolitics" in which Queer Nation engages in a "kind of guerrilla warfare." Queer Nation embodies a mobile sense of querness. According to Berlant and Freeman, it shifts "between a utopian politics of identity, difference, dispersion, and specificity and a pluralist agenda, in the liberal sense, that imagines a 'gorgeous mosaic' of difference without a model of conflict." Staging public events, like Queer Nights Out in bars and parades in shopping malls, Queer Nation claims safe spaces and adopts camp strategies to create visible public spectacles: "Its tactics are to cross borders, to occupy spaces, and to mime the privileges of nationality—in short, to simulate 'the national' with a camp inflection."

Queer Nation's use of camp strategies, as well as the prominence of drag in Gay Pride parades and other overt manifestations linked to gay identity politics, have redefined and revitalized camp within the gay community. The new queer camp style takes on the signs and practices of camp without the pathos, adopting camp not as a mark of oppression but as an index of pride, signaling a refusal to accept oppression anymore.

Andrew Ross rightly claims that for most academics and sex radicals Madonna functions "like what environmentalists call a charismatic mega-fauna: a highly visible, and lovable, species, like the whale or the spotted owl, in whose sympathetic name entire ecosystems can be protected and safeguarded through public patronage." In large part, Madonna's status as a political figure depends upon her willing identification as a "queer" supporter. She has consistently aligned herself in public with gay culture and politics. Madonna had a gay following early on partly because she made African American–style dance music after the demise of disco. In numerous interviews, she states her identification with gay men, self-identifying as a "fag hag" and describing gay men as "just a f—k of a lot more sensitive than most of the straight men I know. They're more fun to be around. They're freer. I also feel that they're persecuted and I can relate to that."

Interviews and biographies refer constantly to Madonna's relationship with her gay dance teacher, Christopher Flynn, who was both mentor and close friend and who introduced Madonna to the world of gay discos in Michigan. Madonna is also one of the earliest well-known celebrities who performed in AIDS benefits; and she included safer-sex instructions and a condom in the packaging for her album Like a Prayer.

Moreover, in Madonna's gender bending, she identifies herself with a wide range of sex and gender roles, expanding the range of erotic representation and identification. In masculine suit, grabbing her crotch for "Express Yourself" (dir. Fincher, 1989), she imitates Michael Jackson's already androgynous (and parodic?) interpretation of phallic masculinity. In "Justify My Love" (dir. Mondino, 1990), she occupies multiple sexual subject positions, leaving open whether we are to read them as lesbian, straight, and/or bisexual. Beyond videos, Madonna invites us to be confused about her "real-life" sexual identity, in joking about and refusing to clarify the nature of her "friendship" with Sandra Bernhard on Late Night with David Letterman, or in offering us Sex, her book of fantasies, presumably her own, which features pictures of Madonna with lesbian skinheads, posing in gay and lesbian clubs.

Madonna takes advantage of the pop or postmodern mainstreaming of camp to introduce elements of queer politics into popular culture. John Leland argues that "in exchange for her genuine affection, [Madonna has] raided gay subculture's closet for the best of her ideas." Although each of Madonna's videos contain some element of gender parody, and her career as a whole can be read as meta-masquerade, the video for "Vogue" (dir. Fincher, 1990), in particular, articulates a relationship between gay subcultures, Hollywood stars, and feminist camp. The video mainstreams the subcultural gay practice of voguing in which African American and Latino gays combine quasi-breakdance movements with impersonations of specific female stars, as well as generic male and female types (e.g., the executive, the schoolgirl). The song and video obscure voguing's racial and homosexual specificity while opening the practice out to a larger audience. The video shows the men in suits, not drag, and the lyrics exclaim, "It doesn't matter if you're black or white, if you're a boy or a girl." While mainstreaming this practice, however, the video makes sex and gender roles ambiguous enough that its affiliation, and Madonna's, with a gay subculture cannot be ignored or erased.

"Vogue" uses gay subcultural references in conjunction with postmodern pastiche and retro-cinephilia to create a queer camp effect. Although the men do not cross-dress, Madonna does. Each time she appears with the male dancers, she wears a dark masculine suit. Her use of drag mixes gender signs—she wears an enormous cone-bra with a man's suit, for instance—and underscores her status as a female female impersonator when she appears singly in various glamorous female guises in other sections of the video. She reappropriates female images from the male dancers, who vogue but do not dress in drag, and yet maintains voguing's sense of parody and fun. Because no single image-identity seems to be her own, and because she exaggerates and heightens the pose—wearing a ridiculous Veronica Lake wig and reflecting that image in a mirror, for example—she flaunts the masquerade as masquerade.
Madonna’s poses in “Vogue” could be taken as simply nostalgic, since the black-and-white glamour photography refers directly and indirectly to well-known Hollywood stars and famous photographs of them. But the song ironizes these star images, even while paying homage to them. After repetitions of the phrase “beauty’s where you find it,” Madonna raps a catalogue of select Hollywood stars (“ladies with an attitude, fellows that were in the mood”) who have overlapping gay camp, straight camp, and nostalgic associations: “Greta Garbo and Monroe. / Dietrich and DiMaggio. / Marlon Brando, Jimmy Dean. / On the cover of a magazine. / Grace Kelly, Harlow, Jean. / Picture of a beauty queen. / Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire. / Ginger Rogers. Dance on air. / They had style, they had grace. / Rita Hayworth gave good face. / Lauren, Katharine, Lana, too. / Bette Davis, we love you.” The monotone rap flattens out the differences between these stars and their different camp and nostalgic attributes and emptied them of content (in a manner similar to Warhol’s portraits of celebrities). Rather than emphasize Monroe’s tragic connotations, Hepburn’s androgyny, or Astaire’s talent, Madonna confines them all and the pleasure we take in them (“we love you”) to the reduced categories of beauty, style, grace, and “attitude.” Instead of the mournful aura of nostalgia, or the complexities of a star matrix, they, like Warhol’s “superstars,” are invested with the status of brand-names for a way of being, giving good face, which is easily accessible to all of us: “Strike a pose, there’s nothing to it.” The lyrics let us imagine that we too can strike the pose, while they emphasize that these star images represent nothing but a pose. “Vogue” suggests that women and gay men alike can gain access to their desires by recognizing and manipulating the illusion, seeing through the mask and giving good face.

Of course, for many critics, Madonna’s politics are empty of content. The I Hate Madonna Handbook claims that Madonna’s politics are “as phony as her hair color.” Similarly, in parodying Truth or Dare, both Julie Brown and Blossom suggest that Madonna’s sexual politics are just fuel for more publicity. Making fun of Madonna’s politics, Julie Brown’s Medusa: Dare to Be Truthful parodies “Vogue” in a song called “Vogue.” After deliberately exposing her “muffin” to delighted cops who have threatened to arrest her, Medusa sings, “I’m not thinking nothing. / C’mon get vague, / Let your body move without thinking. / C’mon get vague, / Let your IQ drop while you hop.” Instead of Madonna’s catalogue of cult stars, Medusa raps a list of has-beens and mediocre talents (“Brooke Shields / Dawber, Pam / Personality of Spam”). Brown sums up their appeal, and, by implication, Madonna’s: “Ladies with no point of view. / Fellas who don’t have a clue. / If they’re stars, then you can do it. / Just be vague, there’s nothing to it.” For Brown, and others, Madonna is not so much a political spokesperson as a narcissist who mouths a “vague” politics to mask a mediocre talent—a claim Madonna obliquely supports in Truth or Dare when she tells her backup singers that she knows she is not the most talented singer or dancer, but rather is interested in “pushing people’s buttons.”

Many critics recognize that Madonna does indeed “push people’s buttons” but still find her politics “vague.” In particular, many see Madonna’s appropriation of gay, racial, and ethnic subcultural practices as an appropriation of style rather than a substantive politics. Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti argue, for example, that Madonna’s “escape to the polymorphous perversity of an idealized universally available dance floor” in “Vogue” subsumes the gay/Other under the myth of equality.4 Like those feminists who criticize Madonna’s postmodernism for challenging feminism’s unified concept of “woman,” for Becquer and Gatti, Madonna’s pluralist queerness, as opposed to gay or feminist identity politics, translates multiculturalism’s “gorgeous mosaic” into an unattainable fantasy. In ignoring real difference (“it doesn’t matter”), Madonna’s “Vogue” denies real antagonisms and real struggles.

More than just a cranky assessment of one video, the opinion put forth by Becquer and Gatti provides a useful point of entry into a whole series of questions about the politics of, not just Madonna, but of contemporary queer camp. These questions, perhaps unanswerable, have to do with the relationship between camp, popular culture, postmodernism, commodification, and politics. How, for example, does camp today negotiate difference? If camp is rooted in a culture of oppression and struggle, is it possible to articulate anything but a power hierarchy through camp? And, once mainstreamed, does camp, even explicitly gay camp, simply become a means for heterosexual performers and spectators to go slumming? To begin to address these questions, or at least to understand what is at stake in them, requires a reconsideration of Madonna’s star text, especially of the issue of power as it relates to camp.

As I have suggested, the issue of power is key to Madonna’s star text and fan identification with her. Madonna’s cultural clout and the controversies she generates are deeply rooted in perceptions of her as powerful. As Lynne Layton notes, “Madonna’s art and its reception by critics and fans reflect and shape some of our culture’s anxieties about identity and power inequalities. Madonna disturbs the status quo not only because she is an outspoken, sexy woman, but because she has a lot of social and economic power.” Layton suggests that the critics’ focus on gender relations in Madonna’s textual productions functions to obscure a focus on power relations. For Layton,
"Madonna presents the perplexing case of someone who accepts the concept of a natural hierarchy of power but attacks the version of the concept that excludes women, gays, and minorities." By this account, Madonna’s gender bending simply reverses the structure of patriarchal power relations. The female takes the gaze from the male, the weepy diva becomes dominatrix. Gender relations are still predicated on a master-slave model, but now the slaves subjugate the master. Madonna’s power may well enable her to function as an important symbol of interventionist politics, but if we understand that power is privilege and that Madonna speaks from a privileged position—related to her economic power, whiteness, and influence—we need to consider what, if any, access we and others have to the kind of mobile and flexible subjectivity inherent to Madonna’s project.

Madonna masks the actual powerlessness of subcultural groups through her performance of agency and power. To adapt Kaja Silverman’s reading of what Foucault calls “discursive fellowships,” Madonna compensates for a lack of agency by pretending to occupy the positions of both speaking and spoken subject: "Discourse always requires a speaking position (a position from which power-knowledge is exercised) and a spoken subject (a position brought into existence through the exercise of power-knowledge)." According to Silverman, the male subject is capable of occupying both positions. The female subject, by contrast, is “automatically excluded from all current discursive fellowships except those like feminism, which have grown up in opposition to the dominant symbolic order.” When Madonna argues, in her interview with Forrest Sawyer, that the video for “Express Yourself” (dir. Fincher, 1989) does not exploit women because she chained herself to the bed, she asserts her ability to control current stereotypical, pornographic, and hierarchical discourses, thus obscuring the fact that she is spoken by those discourses and incapable of speaking them. Silverman allows for the possibility of the “unusual” woman who gains admittance to a discursive fellowship. However, even if we take Madonna to be an “unusual” woman, the exception to the rule, her “unique” deviation from the female norm merely confirms the larger rule of exclusion.

David Tetzlaff astutely captures the ideological effect of Madonna’s privileged position as an “unusual” woman: "The discourses engaged by Chameleon Madonna have no claim on her. How could she be free for her ultimate self-actualization if she were bound to the historically rooted struggles of the subaltern groups who populate her videos? . . . She has won for herself an unlimited ticket for subcultural tourism—she can visit any locale she likes, but she doesn’t have to live there.” Here, Tetzlaff suggests that Madonna does not reverse power relations so much as ignore and, therefore, mask them. Madonna’s masquerade lacks the pathos of oppression—taking camp pleasure in dismantling stereotypes without camp’s guilty self-recognition in stereotypes. It is not, however, the case that these stereotypes have been rendered defunct. Rather, Madonna’s individual economic and social power removes her from the conditions and struggles of subaltern groups so that her appropriation of these subcultures and stereotypes, no matter how well intentioned, can never be more than a form of subcultural tourism at the level of style. As Douglas Crimp and Michael Warner assert, “She can be as queer as she wants to, but only because we know she’s not.”

At worst, Madonna’s own focus on power and independence leads her to adopt a patronizing attitude toward all those less powerful than herself, causing bell hooks to compare her to a modern-day plantation mistress. Hooks notes how, after choosing a cast of characters from marginalized groups (white gays, straight and gay non-whites) for her “Blonde Ambition” tour, Madonna, in Truth or Dare, publicly describes them as “emotional cripples.” John Champagne, similarly, observes that Sex reinstates middle-class privilege because it expresses the same revulsion toward sexuality that it claims to contest—presenting portraits of sexual freaks, instead of highlighting the sensuality of the images. Champagne notes how the photographs emphasize Madonna’s separation from the sexual activity taking place around her. The book features, for instance, images that create a sharp contrast between Madonna’s blond glamour and the dark-haired, pierced, and tattooed lesbian skinheads or between her whiteness and African Americans Naomi Campbell and Big Daddy Kane. Further, Madonna is pictured as the lone female and lone sexual subject at the Gaiety Theater; Madonna is at the center of virtually every image, foregrounded, and mugging for the camera.

This condescension becomes, at times, positively sinister when Madonna simply fails to recognize her privileged position with respect to different groups and different individuals. It becomes increasingly difficult to attribute to Madonna a genuinely progressive or coalitional politics for instance, when, she ignores the hairdresser who has been drugged and raped in Truth or Dare, seeing in the young woman’s ordeal only a reflection of her own greatness (assuming by some strange logic that the woman was attacked because she was with the tour), or when she claims in Sex that abused women “must be digging it” and that women are not degraded in pornography because the models choose to pose (as if her decision to make Sex mirrors the average porn model’s options). These moments, in Kate Tentler’s words, “are the glitches that make a feminist cringe, the ruptures in my faith. Can her life, her songs, her videos really stand in as the visuals for my feminist politics?”

The point here is not to rake Madonna over the coals for failing to live up
to my political ideals or to ask of her that she be a role model. Instead, I take Madonna to be representative of the limitations of camp as she is of its potential. While we can see a difference between pre-1960s and post-1960s camp, between Mae West and Madonna, it would be a mistake to view the history of camp as a laotarian narrative. Rather than assume a linear history of camp's fall from authenticity, we need to examine pre- and post-1960s camp in a constellation, to read Mae West through Madonna and vice versa. In this way, we can see the dormant affinity between West and Madonna, and, in their similarity, locate the utopian promise in Madonna and the dystopian aspects of West. Madonna and West are both "usual" women struggling to situate themselves in a discursive fellowship to which they have no access, while at the same time, they offer a view of how a female subject might be imagined as speaking and not merely as spoken.

If Madonna represents the death of camp, it is not because camp itself has changed but because camp's context and mode of consumption have changed. Camp's always already parasitic relation to the dominant culture surfaces in post-1960s camp. At issue is a conflict in camp between a subculture's desire for access to the mainstream and that subculture's desire for a unique identity. In Madonna, these two sides of camp engage in a kind of internal warfare. The desire on the part of Madonna's advocates for her to articulate an identity politics through camp, to assert difference, conflicts with the desire for the mainstream, for equality and admittance to the dominant culture.

The difficulty posed by Madonna's status as an "usual" woman overlaps with the difficulty posed by the mainstreaming of camp: namely, the issue of appropriation. Discussing the fact that Sex does not seem queer enough because Madonna's queerness feels like appropriation, Crimp and Warner address the "inevitable ambivalence" of the term: "Appropriation is a weird term, though, because in a way you always win these battles by being appropriated. If you're going to conquer cultural turf and gain a certain amount of legitimacy, how else is it going to happen except through the appropriation of certain rhetorics by people who haven't hitherto been part of the minority culture?" The issue of appropriation lurks in virtually every analysis of, not just Madonna, but camp in general, usually obscuring the fact that camp itself operates largely through appropriating objects from dominant culture. Camp's advocates and opponents alike, myself included, are continuously beleaguered by the question, "Who does camp belong to?" Is camp strictly a gay male sensibility? Can lesbians camp? Is "straight" camp still camp? The question remains, however, whether the appropriation of camp connotes the erasure of identity or the acceptance of difference. To gain acceptance without loss of identity, we cling to the notion of a subculture while still yearning to be part of mainstream culture.

What is finally at stake here is the value of difference in identity politics. As Alexander Doty observes, "([W]e queers have become locked into ways of seeing ourselves in relation to mass culture that perpetuate our status as subcultural, parasitic, self-oppressive hangovers on: alienated, yet grabbing for crumbs or crusts and wishfully making this into a whole meal.)" Camp and queer alike can only be defined in opposition to the non-camp and non-queer. Queers cannot be overly interested in multiplying themselves or their camp sensibility because they require the other for their self-definition and for their self-conception as resistant or alternative. In searching for a "whole meal," self-defined queers face a quandary: How to demand simultaneously the right to maintain a unique identity and gain equal rights, justice, and access to power?

Doty's tentative solution to this problem would be to emphasize the porousness of culture, to redefine the dominant, and recognize the queerness in and of mass culture so that the notion that what is mass or popular is "straight" would become a "highly questionable given" in culture. This solution suggests that dominant culture cannot appropriate or subsume our difference because that difference already permeates the dominant—both through the dominant culture's appropriation of what is queer and through the queer and camp appropriation of objects from the dominant culture for queer or camp readings. Perhaps Doty is right, and the ultimate blandness of the Madonna phenomenon testifies to just this. However, to assert that queerness is everywhere still assumes necessarily that such a thing as non-queer exists: it merely reverses the power relation to assert that what is non-queer is less rather than more prevalent than what is queer.

We can just as easily reverse the direction of Doty's argument to emphasize the porousness of identity. We could argue, in other words, that the ultimate blandness of the Madonna phenomenon inhere in the ultimate blandness of queer difference instead of the ultimate complexity or queerness of dominant culture. If queerness has been posited as unique and other because dominant culture wants it that way, then perhaps the ultimate move of de-essentializing would be to say not that queers are just like "straights" or that "straight" culture is really queer, but that sex and gender identities are porous and that queer difference is largely a matter of self-conception. This solution, however, begs the question of the value of difference in queer self-conceptions: If difference has been reified by queer and non-queer culture
alike that is because we still cling to some belief that there are real differences and that some of these matter deeply.

In this perhaps unresolvable problematic, we are caught once again in the either/or “dominant versus resistant” model of cultural politics, replayed now on the field of identity politics. Just as before we faced a theoretical duality between ascribing an unqualified power to either texts or readers, with the subsequent reification of pleasure as wholly good or wholly bad, here we face a similar duality between mainstream culture and its subcultures, with the potential reification of difference. What is needed then is a means of reconceiving sex and gender identities in such a way as to maintain the difference we value in both our self-definition and our social roles without sliding into either vulgar essentialism or vulgar constructionism.

What makes the Madonna phenomenon interesting is, perhaps, its re-staging of this controversy in cultural criticism as a controversy in the area of identity politics. Madonna and her reception provide a caution about too easily conflating camp with progressive politics. Madonna’s reception, both positive and negative, suggests that camp can still be a political and critical force—perhaps even more so since becoming a more public sensibility—yet suggests that the pool of persons with access to those forces is still severely restricted. The mainstreaming of camp taste in contemporary culture may help articulate a queer subjectivity and coalitional politics, but it may also serve to obscure real difference and to reduce gay politics to a discourse of style. Perhaps, in the future, camp will be dead—if the conditions of oppression are gone and there is no longer any need for camp as a survival strategy. But, in the meantime, we need to scrutinize our camp icons, and our own camp readings and practices, to ensure that we do not naively substitute camp for politics.