

Cyborgs in the Studio: Transhuman Vocal Approaches in Gender Nonconforming Recording

Artists

by

Frances Pinkham

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Thesis Committee:

Zachary Wallmark, Chair

Lori Kruckenberg, Member

Drew Nobile, Member

University of Oregon

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Frances Pinkham

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This project explores the means by which trans and gender nonconforming (GNC) artists use technological manipulations to vocal performance to signify their gender experience. The introduction and literature review (Chapter 1) situates the discussion in the disciplines of voice studies, embodied cognition, and post- and transhumanism. Chapter 2 examines three songs by genderfluid artist Dorian Electra (they/them): “Career Boy,” “Adam and Steve,” and “Ram It Down,” arguing that timbral shifts accomplished via post-production modification provide a means of “dragging” genderfluidity. Chapter 3 examines three songs by transfeminine artist Cleo McKenzie (she/her) aka TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE: “MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD,” “i’m two years on hormones and i’m still sad i want a refund,” and “mirrorsong*.” I situate the analysis of these works in discussions of glitch art as politics and explore notions of embodiment of glitched sounds. Chapter 4 examines two songs by cisgender artist Merrill Garbus (she/her), “Now as Then” and “Colonizer,” which use the post-production techniques of spatial positioning, layering, and reverb to critique white femininity. I close with a brief epilogue in which I propose a model for viewing transness through the lens of transhumanism.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Frances Pinkham

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX
University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, Cincinnati, OH

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, Musicology, 2024, University of Oregon
Master of Music, Horn Performance, 2016, Southern Methodist University
Bachelor of Music, Horn Performance, 2010, University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Queer Theory
Music Cognition

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Adjunct Professor of Horn, Wright State University, 2021-22
Second Horn, Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, 2017-22

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Roy and Sue Johnson Award in Honor of Dr. Herbert Turrentine for excellence in the area of music history, Southern Methodist University, 2016
Meadows Artistic Award, Southern Methodist University, 2014-2016
Kemp Memorial Horn Scholarship, University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, 2010-2014

PUBLICATIONS:

“Effects on Temporal Perception of Repetitive Vocalization in a Group Setting,” poster presentation at the 2015 International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition.

“*Mudang, Hwarang, and Han*: Tracing Decolonial Expression in eddy kwon’s *UMMA-YA*,” panelist presentation at the 2023 American Musicological Society Conference.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1990: two women stand on a cloudy, windswept beach in New York. One has close-cropped hair, large earrings, and a yellow swimsuit. She smiles and explains, “In ’84, I’ve had a nose reconstructed job, I’ve had my cheekbones risen, I’ve had a chin implant, and breast implants.”

Her friend encourages her, “Yes, tell them like it is!”

“The most important factor in my life that has been completed recently is that I’ve had a transsexualism operation. That means I’ve had a sex change. I’m no longer a man. I am a woman. I feel great.”

Her friend lights a cigarette. “She has to rub it in.”

“I am very happy, and I feel like the part of my life that was a secret is now closed. I can close the closet door, there are no more skeletons in there. And I’m as free as the wind that is blowing out on this beach.” She breaks into giddy laughter and twirls away toward the ocean. Her friend turns and looks conspiratorially into the camera.

“Except that voice is still there.”

The two proceed to break into a comedic falsetto, “*I am what I am, I am my own natural creation.*”¹

This scene from Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* is brief yet deeply significant. Like many of the individuals featured in the film, these two trans women

¹ *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston (1990; Toronto, Off-White Productions), film.

were members of the storied New York drag scene, specifically the House Xtravaganza. Of particular concern to many in this culture was the concept of *realness*, or ability to pass as a cisgender person outside of the walls of the drag house. In the context of the competition, participants are silent, relying on makeup, sartorial presentation, and physical mannerisms to communicate the markers of their desired gender presentation. Any minor slippage in these potent signifiers compromises their realness, which is reflected in their competition scores.

For Brooke and Carmen Xtravaganza, featured in the scene described above, realness entailed a curated wardrobe (denim mini-shorts, bikini tops, and earrings) and surgical modifications (facial reconstruction, breast implants, and sex reassignment surgery). In spite of these modifiers, however, one gatekeeper remains to their seamless integration into society as women:

“That voice is still there.”

Gendered modifications to one’s visual presentation are often readily accessible. A change of wardrobe, an application of makeup, or a haircut can quickly signify one’s gender in a legible way. For those with the access and ability, there are a wealth of options for cosmetic surgeries which are pursued by cisgender and transgender individuals alike. The scene above, however, demonstrates the precarity of the visual presentation in gender signification. All of the efforts to project one’s interiority can be undone in a single utterance.

What tools do trans individuals have to aurally signify their interiority? For transmasculine individuals, testosterone therapy may lower the fundamental frequency (F0) of the voice, contributing to a timbre which is more legibly masculine. Transfeminine individuals, however, do not experience similar effects from estrogen therapy. Vocal feminization surgery, such as glottoplasty and laryngoplasty are available, but carry the risk of permanent damage to

the vocal mechanism, and furthermore may produce only temporary results. Only about 1% of transfeminine individuals pursue this surgery.² Speech therapists offer gender-affirming care for individuals seeking to project a masculine, feminine, or androgynous voice, but there are limitations to the amount of pitch and timbre modification that can be achieved with these therapies, especially by individuals whose voices are on the more extreme ends of the vocal spectrum.³

Given these challenges and limitations, the recording studio becomes fertile ground for aural signification of interiority. This intervention serves the purpose of articulating one's self-concept more dramatically, artistically, and seamlessly than many of the physical interventions available to gender nonconforming (GNC) individuals.⁴ The aim of this project is to examine the ways that GNC artists use vocal processing technology to signify their experience of gender. I explore the work of three artists in depth: Dorian Electra, TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE, and Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards. My analysis of their work emphasizes the use of timbre, prosody, and mixing effects as tools to telegraph a specific gender experience. I have selected artists who write and produce their work and demonstrate a tendency toward autobiographical songwriting. The songs I have selected feature lyrical content addressing gender and/or queerness specifically.

The following literature review begins with an overview of the voice as an object of sound studies and embodied cognition. I then proceed to examine the ways the voice is gendered

² "Voice Feminization Surgery," Cleveland Clinic, April 1, 2024, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/procedures/voice-feminization-surgery>.

³ Karine Schwarz et al., "Speech therapy for transgender women: an updated systematic review and meta-analysis," *Systematic Reviews* 12, no. 128 (2023): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-023-02267-5>.

⁴ The designation of gender nonconforming in this paper is an umbrella term for a multitude of identities lying outside of the gender binary. These are including, but not limited to, non-binary, genderfluid, transgender, and agender identities. Although GNC is most often applied in queer settings, it can also apply to cisgender individuals who do not conform to normative gender presentations (see Merrill Garbus, Chapter 4). It is not my intention to totalize or homogenize these identities, but to provide an exploration of vocalities outside of cisnormative modes of performance and listening.

in speech and musical contexts, followed by a series of short musical case studies of works by Joan Jett, Prince, Laurie Anderson, and Cher that illustrate some gendered vocal approaches. The latter two case studies feature voices that have been perceptibly modified by technology through Vocoder and Auto-Tune. Given the significance of technological mediation as a means of signifying gender in these contexts, the analyses in this thesis are situated in the broader discipline of posthuman and transhuman studies. In these spaces, artists blur the line not only between binary concepts of gender but between human and machine. We are challenged to interrogate what constitutes humanity as a discrete entity, and whether we are always already cyborgs, as described by philosopher Donna Haraway. An overview of post- and transhuman studies will close this introductory chapter.

Concerning the Voice

Imagine you have discovered a new podcast. After a few episodes, you feel a connection with the host, and in time you would recognize their voice anywhere: the topography of their cadence, their idiosyncrasies of phrasing, the way their consonants land. If somewhat unclear, you most likely have a general vision of what they look like: your mind sculpts an image to pair with the voice. Do they have a strong jawline? Do they wear glasses? Are they white? Are they in a smart blazer or an ironic t-shirt? Eventually, you become curious enough to look them up. How does their image stack up to your imagination?

Numerous articles muse on this phenomenon, particularly with NPR hosts. Given the homogeneity of the public radio broadcasting style, the diversity of hosts' appearances often comes as a surprise to listeners. "Do You Know What Your Favorite NPR Hosts Actually Look

Like?” asks a BuzzFeed quiz.⁵ “Every self-respecting snoot in America knows the exact timbre of Carl Kasell’s voice, but could you pick him out of a lineup?” quips Vanity Fair.⁶

Vocal music heightens these questions, bringing in further layers of cultural conditioning. Black musicians phrase like this. Female voices sound like that. Gay artists adopt a particular timbre. The question of the sexed voice is often the most quickly answered in the mind. Most cultures acknowledge a correlation between voice types and sexual dimorphism: female voices have a higher fundamental frequency range than male voices. Androgynous voices invite a listener to pay closer attention as the mind attempts to categorize the voice. The world of recorded sound is replete with these questions of expectation. Nina Sun Eidsheim calls this the *acousmatic question*: “Who is speaking?” In the absence of visual cues, we surmise what philosopher Adriana Cavarero deems the “elementary givens of existence: uniqueness, relationality, sexual difference, and age.”⁷ In cases where these elementary givens are not immediately clear, the listener may experience a category crisis. Conversely, in cases where one’s voice belies the elementary givens of their existence, for instance, their gender identity, this can be a source of dysphoria.

Philosophers of the voice often speak to its erotic nature due to the intimacy of physical information that is telegraphed to the listener via the fleshly context of production. Perhaps the most iconic text addressing the erotic voice is Roland Barthes’s essay “The Grain of the Voice.” Here Barthes eschews the fixation on adjectives to describe the voice, arguing instead for a concept of sound as action and embodiment, as subject rather than predicate. He proposes the

⁵ Tanner Greenring, “Do You Know What Your Favorite NPR Hosts Actually Look Like?” BuzzFeed News, November 13, 2014.

⁶ Bill Bradley, “The Faces of NPR,” *Vanity Fair*, November 9, 2010.
<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/photos/2010/12/npr-slide-show-201012>.

⁷ Adriana Cavarero, “Multiple Voices (2005),” in *The Sound Studies Reader* ed. Jonathan Sterne, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 525.

term *grain* to denote the unique qualities of a voice which are produced by the body of the singer. The voice in this framework is itself a signifier, distinct from the language it carries. It supplies empathetic embodiment in the listener, bringing awareness to the actions of the body via the lungs, teeth, lips, throat, and other physical mechanisms involved in the generation of the voice.⁸

This emphasis on embodiment is borne out in studies that demonstrate empathetic embodiment of vocalized sound through the mirror neuron system. Perceiving an action, in this case, hearing a vocalization, stimulates the neural systems would be used to perform that action. This covert mimesis is a crucial part of cognitive development broadly and music perception specifically, as argued by Arnie Cox in his mimetic hypothesis. Overt behavioral imitations observed in children persist as covert behavioral imitations across the lifespan. Evidence of this comes from studies of mirror neuron activation in the supplementary motor area (SMA) while viewing a particular action and is similarly present with aural stimuli. As “embodied bodies” (per Cox’s conception), we are constantly engaging with our world through the empathetic questions, “what is it like to do that?” and “what is it like to be that?”⁹ Kate Heidemann echoes this notion in her four-part embodied comprehension model, in which listeners perceive a voice with embodied perception via (1) vibration of vocal folds, (2) positioning of the mouth and throat, (3) breath support and muscular engagement, and (4) sympathetic vibrations which occur in the listener, namely in the nasal passages, front of the face (mask) chest, and head.¹⁰

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

⁹ Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition: Listening, Moving, Feeling, and Thinking*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 3.

¹⁰ Kate Heidemann, “A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song,” *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (March 2016), 4, <https://doi.org/10.30535/mt.22.1.2>.

The production and perception of sound, however, are not unidirectional. As a speaker/singer produces sound, they perceive and modulate their own vocalizations according to cultural conventions, consciously or unconsciously striving to adhere to social expectations. In this way, the performer becomes another listener. This recursive relationship is explored in Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound*. In this work, Eidsheim shifts the focus from the producer of sound to the perceiver. Without denying the impact of anatomical features and hormones on vocal timbre, Eidsheim argues that speech patterns and timbres are largely entrained: "Vocal tissue, mass, musculature, and ligaments renew and are entrained in the same way as the rest of our bodies."¹¹ She thus constructs a listener-speaker model reflecting a feedback loop of production and perception that is shaped by cultural norms and expectations. It is through this entrainment, Eidsheim argues, that voices come to sound raced and gendered. Evidence of this can be found in the gendered perception of children's voices. Eidsheim notes that while "there are no statistically significant physiological differences" between male and female prepubescent voices, they are still perceived as gendered due to differences in "word choice, intonation, speed, rhythm, prosody, level of nuance, and so on."¹²

Zachary Wallmark proposes a framework to describe the recursive process of performance and perception, with the performer-as-listener experiencing their voice and modulating their performance accordingly. Wallmark's paradigm of Action, Sound, Perception, Experience, Concept, and Sign, or ASPECS, reflects the responsive relationship between performer and receiver. A performer's action generates sound which is then perceived by the listener (and the performer-as-listener) almost instantaneously (in the order of 100–200

¹¹ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 220.

milliseconds) and assigned a positive, negative, or neutral valence (in one second or less).¹³ It is then sorted within categories of experience, conceptualized, and perceived as a signifier. I propose an application of ASPECS to gendered performance: since gender is culturally situated, both cisgender and GNC individuals modulate their vocal performance to conform to a particular concept of gender. For example, a transgender woman may soften and pitch her voice upwards to conform to Western cultural notions of femininity. Conversely, transmasculine individuals may pitch their voice down and flatten their prosody to signify a masculine self-concept. In a musical context, this may entail pitching a voice upward or downward using recording technology. This signification can be accomplished physically or mechanically, and often includes a combination of both.

This brings us to the primary aim of this thesis, which is to examine the ways GNC musicians modulate their voices both physically and with external technology to signify their interior concept of gender. In a recorded musical performance, individuals can craft their projected identities with intention and specificity. Two axioms rooted in queer and gender studies inform the following exploration:

*1. Gender is prosthesis.*¹⁴ Individuals construct their gender presentation both consciously and unconsciously via external tools. This can be as overt as the use of makeup and hairstyles or as subtle as adopting enculturated vocal patterns. Modification of the voice through training, medical intervention, or digital means is just one more example of this prosthesis.

¹³ Zachary Wallmark, *Nothing but Noise: Timbre and Musical Meaning at the Edge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁴ This framing is indebted to Paul B. Preciado and Legacy Russell.

2. *Gender is a process*. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”¹⁵ The same is true of all gender expressions. Each is culturally constructed and gains meaning through interaction and cultural context. The gender expressions explored here are no exception. The goal of this project is to capture the means by which trans and GNC individuals signify their identities as they exist in this historical moment, that is to say in the United States during the first quarter of the 21st century. It is not meant to be a definitive cross-cultural statement on what constitutes a feminine, genderfluid, or androgynous voice.

Gendering the Voice

When we refer to a masculine or feminine voice, what characteristics are implied? At first blush, the simplest answer seems to be the pitch of the voice. On average, adult female-bodied voices sound in the frequency range of 165 to 255 Hz and adult male-bodied voices are in the range of 85 to 155 Hz.¹⁶ Gendered vocal characteristics are not confined to register, however, and many pop songs occupy a similar vocal range, regardless of gender. While male and female vocal frequencies may overlap, they can be distinguished by timbre, prosody, and word choice. Femininity is often associated with a dramatic prosodic contour and uptalk: pitching upward toward the end of a sentence as if asking a question. Vocal fry is observed in both male and female speakers, but when employed by female speakers it is variously associated with sexuality, masculine authority, and vapidness, among other social signifiers.¹⁷ By contrast, male voices are

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf, 2011).

¹⁶ Stephanie Watson, “The Unheard Female Voice,” *The ASHA Leader* 24, no. 2 (February 2019): 44–53. <https://doi.org/10.1044/leader.FTR1.24022019.44>.

¹⁷ Zachary Wallmark, “Analyzing Vocables in Rap: A Case Study of Megan Thee Stallion,” *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 2 (June 2022). <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.28.2.10>

associated with flat prosody, declamatory speech, and emphasis through loudness rather than pitch modification.¹⁸ While male and female speakers employ all of the techniques listed above, they bear cultural associations with masculinity and femininity which serve to telegraph gender in social settings.

Historical examples of vocal descriptions illuminate the ways that sex, gender, and sexuality are linked through the voice. Anne Carson traces this phenomenon in *Glass, Irony, and God*. Texts dating from ancient Greece designate high-pitched voices to women and effeminate homosexual men, both of which were considered irrational and dangerous.¹⁹ By contrast, the lesbian Gertrude Stein’s “hearty” voice and her “laugh like a beefsteak” were disparaged as unfeminine and implicitly considered a product of her unruly body and sexuality.²⁰ Jen Manion details the lives of 18th-century individuals assigned female at birth who passed as men in England and colonial America in her historical work *Female Husbands: A Trans History*. Upon revelation of their assigned sex at birth, these individuals were described in newspapers as “female husbands,” indicating a conundrum around sex, gender, and social roles.²¹ The volume is replete with examples of the voice as evidence of their gender transgression, with descriptions of “shrillness” and “weak[ness]” as factors that betrayed their femininity.²² Conversely, when community members expressed surprise at these unmaskings, their description of the subjects’ voices as “coarse” served as evidence of masculinity.

Today, speech-language pathologists coach transgender individuals on ways to masculinize or feminize their voices, with or without surgical and hormonal intervention.

¹⁸ Mayo Clinic Staff, “Gender affirming (transgender) voice therapy and surgery,” Mayo Clinic, March 23, 2024. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/transgender-voice-therapy-and-surgery/about/pac-20470545>.

¹⁹ Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions Books, 1995), 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹ Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

²² *Ibid.*, 125, 132.

YouTube offers a wealth of videos coaching individuals on various physical exercises to manipulate the vocal mechanism as well as prosodic techniques to sound more legibly gendered. Training the voice is a crucial element of transition for many individuals. Voice-related gender dysphoria can negatively impact one's safety and overall quality of life.²³

Throughout this thesis, legibly gendered approaches to vocality are understood to telegraph a corresponding gendered presentation to the listener. This perception is, of course, contingent on the listener's enculturation and lived experience. Given the socially constructed nature of masculine, feminine, and androgynous performance, the performer, the listener, and the performer-as-listener experience gender signification in the context of their social environs. In the case of the artists explored here, the gendered vocal expressions are read in the context of twenty-first-century American culture. It is assumed that legibly gendered vocal performance will be read as such by the listener.

Antecedents: Vocal Androgyny in the Music of the 1980s and '90s

The GNC artists examined in the body chapters of this project are not without antecedents. Here again, the recording studio offers fertile ground for gender signification. In the modern popular music realm, aspects of prosody, effortfulness, and embodiment of vocalization are variously gendered. Consider the shouting and growling of the rock, punk, and metal genres commonly associated with masculinity and the breathy, intimate, or melisma-laden hallmarks of the pop diva.

²³ Richard Adler, et al., "Gender Affirming Voice and Communication," *American Speech-Language-Hearing Association*. Accessed May 8, 2024. <https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/professional-issues/gender-affirming-voice-and-communication/>.

With these vocal signification processes in mind, let us turn now to some musical examples from previous decades in which artists transgress the boundaries of gender norms with their voices to cultivate an androgynous performance. The examples considered below will bear increasingly perceptible markers of technological mediation. Joan Jett's approach to cultivating vocal androgyny is almost entirely physical, while Prince combines physical and technological approaches. The works of Laurie Anderson and Cher contain the most technological mediation, approaching a transhumanist sensibility to vocal performance by blurring the boundary between human and machine. As we enter the realm of post- and transhumanism, I will close this introduction with a brief overview of these discourses.

Physical Approaches to Androgyny: Joan Jett and the Black Hearts' "Androgynous"

Joan Jett's 2006 cover of the 1981 Replacements song "Androgynous" is emblematic of some of the physical means by which female singers perform masculinity vocally. The song's lyrical content celebrates androgynous gender performance, casting it as both a "revolution" and an "evolution."²⁴ A 2009 live performance of this song showcases Jett's use of various vocal qualities associated with masculinity.²⁵ She introduces the song by dedicating it to "those of us that like to straddle and blur the lines a little bit."²⁶ These words are delivered in a low vocal fry, which is associated with masculinity and sexuality when employed by women.²⁷ She also uses vocal fry and growling at various points in the sung portion of the performance, particularly on the word "mad" at 1:37.²⁸ Jett's prosody is generally flat in both her speech and singing (the

²⁴ Joan Jett and the Black Hearts, "Androgynous," by Paul Westerberg, recorded 2006, Blackheart, track 7 on *Sinner*, CD.

²⁵ Jettigre1, "Joan Jett – Androgynous (LIVE)," December 3, 2009, video, 3:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gTB2235M1E>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Wallmark, "Analyzing Vocables."

²⁸ Jettigre1.

entire range of the song is within a single octave and primarily situated in a low tessitura).

Additionally, Jett's male backup vocalists harmonize with her at a higher pitch than she reaches in her vocal line. The comparatively low range, flat prosody, and use of vocal fry and growling combine in this performance to signify a celebration of androgynous gender presentation.

It is important to note that the subjects of this song are not described as trans or nonbinary. In fact, the lyrics specifically note that the female subject is "happy the way she looks / she's happy with her gender."²⁹ Thus, this song is not necessarily reflective of a trans experience but demonstrates ways in which women can modify their dress and voice to perform androgyny.

Physical and Mechanical Approaches to Androgyny: Prince's "Kiss" and the "Camille" Voice

Perhaps one of the most iconic androgynous artists of the late 20th century, Prince's performances evoked erotic desire in fans across the gender spectrum. Embracing the fluidity of his presentation, Prince begins his song "I Would Die 4 U" (1984) with the lyrics, "I'm not a woman / I'm not a man / I am something that you'll never understand."³⁰ This flexibility and ambiguity is reflected in his vocal performance of "Kiss" (1986), which oscillates between masculine and feminine stylings. The bulk of the song is delivered in a breathy falsetto, which is embellished with whines and screams, all associated with feminine sensuality. Susan McClary's 2000 analysis of this song points to the intentionally restrained quality of the falsetto voice here; combined with the slow harmonic motion of the blues progression that underpins it, "Kiss"

²⁹ Ibid. In the live performance, Jett gestures at her crotch at this point, signifying a conflation of sex and gender which is increasingly problematized in queer scholarship and community.

³⁰ Prince, "I Would Die 4 U," by Prince Rogers Nelson, recorded 1984, Warner Bros., track 7 on *Purple Rain*.

revels in tension, denial, teasing, and prioritizing extension of erotic energy over release.³¹

Toward the conclusion of the song, however, the voice makes a rapid descent through an expansive register, cascading from a screamed A5 to a resonant chest voice A3. Additionally, the song is punctuated with the occasional “yeah” in a markedly lower register. This expansive range, in concert with the various non-speech sounds such as screams, whines, and kissing sounds, cultivate a sensual, androgynous aesthetic. The music video for “Kiss” underscores this eroticism and gender play by subverting expected gendered physical roles. While a woman plays guitar (a traditionally masculine role in the world of rock), Prince dances sensually in revealing clothing (usually the purview of women). McClary argues that Prince subverts masculine expectations of the voice and body and offers in their place “the experience of gender and sexuality as performance—always mutable, always open to invention.”³²

Although higher vocal registers are generally associated with femininity, falsetto in itself is not inherently feminine. Nina Eidsheim argues that the distinct timbre of the falsetto register sets it apart from the male singer’s “natural” voice, placing it in “timbral scare quotes.”³³ Falsetto thus creates distance between the masculine body and the feminine register via a timbral shift. Throughout his oeuvre, Prince does not limit high register performance to falsetto. In addition to his physical manipulations of the voice to cultivate variously gendered associations, Prince employs studio technology to craft a female alter-ego named Camille, accomplished through the “chipmunk” effect of speeding up the vocal track, thereby raising the pitch. The Camille voice occurs multiple times in the 1987 album *Sign O’ the Times*: on the song “U Got the Look” in the form of a whispered intro setting the stage for a song about heterosexual courtship, and on “If I

³¹ Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 153–57.

³² Ibid., 157.

³³ Eidsheim, *Race*, 108.

Was Your Girlfriend,” which assumes a feminine perspective.³⁴ Prince had recorded an entire album under this feminine persona, which was released posthumously. This action is not without timbral consequence, however; the voice is somewhat uncanny and chipmunk-like, sounding more like a low voice altered by helium than a naturally higher voice. Perhaps there was some desire to place timbral scare quotes around this performance of femininity, as well.

It may be tempting for modern listeners to ascribe a nonbinary identity to Prince, especially given the lyrics from “I Would Die 4 U” quoted above. We cannot with any certainty, however, project this identification onto the artist. He continues to be celebrated as a paragon of androgynous style, skillfully challenging the binaries of both race and gender in his visual presentation. As biographers Hawkins and Niblock describe:

Prince’s self-fashioning with femininity, in relation to his performance and sometimes even his voice, can be interpreted as providing and drawing on a pleasurable array of feminine identifications. His visual references to female performers provide a site of identification that problematizes reductive binary oppositions between male and female in circulation at that time in popular culture.... Prince’s brand of dandy-ness serves to destabilize his corporeal reality within the diegetic space which problematizes any gendered look.³⁵

Regardless of his self-concept, unknowable to us, Prince demonstrates an approach to a male femininity/androgyny and signifies this with his voice. His Camille persona also serves as an early example of crafting a gendered voice using studio technology.

Real-Time Technological Mediation: Laurie Anderson’s “O Superman”

If Prince and Joan Jett trouble the constructed binaries of what constitutes the masculine and feminine voice, Laurie Anderson troubles the very boundary of what it means to be human. Her

³⁴ Prince, *Sign O’ the Times*, Paisley Park, 1987.

³⁵ Stan Hawkins and Sarah Niblock, *Prince: The Making of a Pop Music Phenomenon* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 52–53.

iconic piece “O Superman” (1981) features the use of a Vocoder, which modifies the voice in real time. In this case, Anderson’s voice is doubled at lower pitches, producing an uncanny timbre that straddles the boundary of male/female and human/machine. When Anderson shifts to a feminine character, the voice of a mother on an answering machine, she adds more dramatic prosodic contour and uptalk, both associated with femininity. In the accompanying video, Anderson wears a sharply angled suit and her characteristic short, spiky hair. She uses angular, stereotypically masculine gestures, flexing her arms while keeping her lower body perfectly still.

A sense of dissolution of the physical body permeates the work both visually and sonically. Susan McClary offers a nuanced analysis of Anderson’s embodied performances in *Feminine Endings*, suggesting that Anderson’s androgynous presentation and rigid physical movements indicate a desire to be separated from the masculinist designation of the female body as an object of display.³⁶ Beyond this move toward androgyny and refusal, Anderson projects a disintegration of the body altogether. Her shadow moves independently from her body, and at 2:32–2:53 her silhouette dissolves into a shape that begins as vaguely humanoid and gradually becomes abstract (Fig. 1.1).

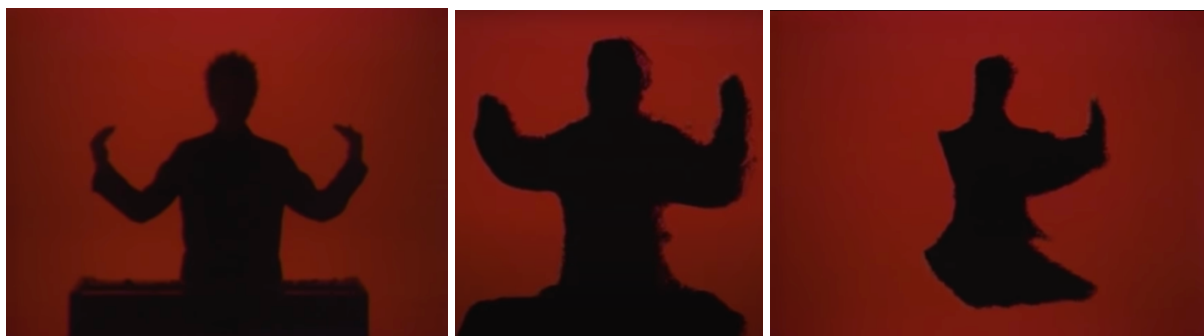


Figure 1.1 – Gradual abstraction of the body in Laurie Anderson’s “O Superman”³⁷

³⁶ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 138.

³⁷ Laurie Anderson, “Laurie Anderson – O Superman [Official Music Video],” Nonesuch Records, May 20, 2016, video, 8:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkfp2H8tOE>

This abstraction is mirrored in the vocal production as Anderson's voice melds with the Vocoder sound. Additionally, the "ha" syllable which underpins the song becomes less perceptibly human as it is repeated ad infinitum. It shifts from a human vocalization to an instrumental ostinato, further troubling the delineation between human and technology.

Lyrically, the piece reflects Cold War anxiety about looming planes and bombs and the replacement of maternal comforts with mechanical arms. In a 2022 interview, Anderson distills the subject of the piece: "This is a song about how, basically, technology cannot save you."³⁸ She resists, however, the wholesale demonization of technology, given its importance in her artistic approach. In another interview, Anderson observes, "I think many people have missed an important fact: those songs themselves ["Big Science" and "O Superman"] are made up of digital bits. My work is expressed through technology—a lot of it depends on 15 million watts of power."³⁹ Anderson's use of the Vocoder, a device originally devised for military purposes, reflects both the permeation of military might in daily life and the transgressive potential to repurpose tools of violence for artistic ends. "O Superman" and other Vocoder-based projects remind us that technology itself is neutral and gains meaning through use.

Post-Production Technological Mediation: Cher's "Believe"

While the Vocoder modifies the voice in real time, various post-production methods can also be applied to vocal tracks to generate novel timbres. A popular example of post-production vocal manipulation is the now pervasive Auto-Tune, a digital audio workstation plug-in that modifies pitches to fit them into predetermined slots. Initially conceived as a subtle correction tool, the

³⁸ Anderson Cooper, "How Laurie Anderson created 'O Superman,'" 60 Minutes, April 4, 2022, video, 2:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX4MdK16j7L>.

³⁹ Adam Block, "Laurie Anderson in Her Own Voice," *Mother Jones* 10 (August/September 1985): 44.

producers of Cher's 1998 hit single "Believe" took the effect to its extreme, producing a unique sound which became known as the "Cher Effect."⁴⁰ When applied to the vocal line in this manner, Auto-Tune removes any subtle bending or portamento between pitches, generating perceptible breaks between the notes. The result is a sonic hybrid between vocal and mechanical production that transcends the boundaries of gender altogether.

Cher is no stranger to vocal androgyny. In a 1978 televised special, she staged a twelve-minute rendition of *West Side Story* in which she performed the role of every character. Oscillating in her vocal and sartorial presentation, Cher moves seamlessly from masculine to feminine in this impressive display of vocal prowess that transcends gender norms.⁴¹ At times, she performs as multiple characters at once through the use of green screen technology, allowing her to transcend what is physically possible in a live performance. Preceding "Believe" by twenty years, this performance indicates a fascination with utilizing technology to exceed the limitations of the body for artistic ends. The lyrical content of "Believe," which addresses breaking through boundaries and overcoming obstacles, is underscored by the new sonic possibilities available with this application of Auto-Tune. The post-production space thus becomes a site of generative timbre construction, allowing artists to transcend the limits of the physical body.

In the examples above, Joan Jett and Prince manipulate their vocal production via physical means to signify femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. They treat their bodies as instruments by manipulating air speed, pitch, resonating chambers, and other physical aspects of

⁴⁰ Sue Sillitoe, "Recording Cher's 'Believe,'" *Sound on Sound*, February 1999, <https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/recording-cher-believe>.

⁴¹ Woman in Revolt, "One Woman Show – Cher – West Side Story," Facebook, video, 12:45, July 5, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=824554997927555>. (This is the only complete video available online. Several shorter selections are available on YouTube.)

sonic production. Laurie Anderson and Cher take a different approach, seeking to transcend, dissolve, and augment the body through technological means. The novel timbres they generate through real time and post-production modifications exceed traditional gender presentations and trouble the very boundary of what constitutes a human voice. It is this ethos of transcending the body that situates this thesis in the broader philosophical strands of post- and transhumanism.

Posthumanism, Transhumanism, and the Boundaries of Embodied Cognition

The philosophical branches of posthumanism and transhumanism share overlapping discourses but are ultimately distinct disciplines. Posthumanism denotes writings which decenter the human by interrogating boundaries between human/animal, human/environment, and human/machine. Scholars in this discipline ask the fundamental question of what constitutes a human and how this notion is conceived. Transhumanism denotes an exploration of the next evolutionary step for humans as our relationship with technology leads to a singularity: a fusion of human and machine so complete that it renders us unrecognizable.

Throughout this project, the discourse of transhumanism informs our understanding of a cyborgian relationship with technology when it comes to gender expression. For the artists examined here, technological manipulation of the voice serves an important tool for gender expression. The posthumanist writings of Haraway and Wynter demonstrate the political nature of the word “human” in itself as raced, gendered, and subjective. They call us to see ourselves as always-already cyborg, whether in our identity or in our relationship with tools. This may trouble our understanding of humanity as a discrete, bounded concept circumscribed by the body, both in our relationship to technology and our relationship with one another, as mimetic

engagement with the recorded voice (discussed in more detail below) invites the listener not only to empathize with the singer but to physically embody their vocalizations.

Posthuman theorist Sylvia Wynter traces the various “descriptive statements” designating humanness, problematizing the overrepresentation of Western philosophical answers to this question. Per Wynter, the throughline of the descriptive statements of humanity throughout Western history has included the following concepts: theocentric (human as distinct from Christian deity), rational/political (human as possessing capacity for reason), biocentric (human as a product of evolution), and economic (human as neoliberal subject).⁴² Each of these concepts of humanity have justified the subjugation of colonized and racialized subjects, and have been subsequently overrepresented as objective truth among various global cosmologies. For example, colonizing countries using a theocentric concept of humanity argued that land occupied by non-Christian subjects was considered *terra nullius* and subject to seizure by Christian nations.⁴³ The biocentric descriptive statement fueled Social Darwinism and cast Afrodescendant peoples as “dysselected” by evolution.⁴⁴ Thus, Wynter argues for posthumanism as a response to Western concepts of humanity, critiquing the very notion of how we conceive of the human.

Posthuman philosopher Donna Haraway interrogates the boundaries between human and machine in her landmark 1985 text, “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Though we may view our bodies as discrete entities, Haraway troubles this conventional wisdom by pointing to the increasing embeddedness of technology in our lives. She allays the anxiety around the supposed inhumanity of the cyborg (a portmanteau for cybernetic organism) by advocating for a certain “pleasure in

⁴² Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

the confusion of boundaries” between human and machine.⁴⁵ Haraway celebrates the “both/and” nature of the cyborg, combatting notions of dualism between human and machine and purity of the organism. She extends this conversation to discussions of identity categories, noting the inextricability of gender, race, and class, especially in an increasingly globalized society.⁴⁶ By conceiving of the identity “woman” as inherently cyborgian, she also seeks to dispel the notion of women as more connected to nature and averse to technology. In other texts, Haraway questions the divisions between human and animal and our designation of scientific findings as objective fact, noting the impact of political, economic, and social theories on the ways these findings are interpreted.⁴⁷ Throughout her oeuvre, Haraway troubles the boundaries we use to delimit humanness, highlighting their porosity.

Transhumanist Andrew Pilsch has theorized what he believes to be the coming synthesis of human and machine. Pilsch conceives of this shift as the move from human as tool user to human as “tool imbiber,” thereby creating a new “technological body.”⁴⁸ What distinguishes human feats from transhuman potentiality in this conception is largely the capacity for veridical engagement: the ability to imagine a human body performing a particular act. When human engagement with technology renders our actions unrecognizable to human capacities for movement, cognitive ability, or longevity, we enter the transhuman realm. Cox’s mimetic hypothesis, described above, ultimately interfaces with notions of veridical engagement, as we

⁴⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” *Socialist Review* 80 (1985), PDF page 7.

⁴⁶ Zoë Sofoulis, “Cyberquake: Haraway’s Manifesto,” in *Prefiguring Cyberculture: An Intellectual History*, ed. Darren Tofts (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), 85.

⁴⁷ See Haraway’s works *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) and “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1999).

⁴⁸ Andrew Pilsch, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 8.

embody to the best of our abilities what it is like to “do that” or “be that” through mimetic engagement.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel explores the limitations of our capacity for this type of embodied engagement in his 1974 essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” Here, Nagel argues that our particular human embodiment limits our ability to understand what it is to inhabit a non-human form (a bat, in this exploration). All the same, “the distance between oneself and other persons and other species can fall anywhere on a continuum.... The imagination is remarkably flexible.”⁴⁹ While one cannot fully conceive of what it is to exist as something other than human, we can use the imagination to form a “rough or partial” understanding. This is particularly true in our engagement with the human voice. When hearing a singer whose voice is unmediated or imperceptibly mediated by technology, we can imagine a human body performing that action. Perceptible technological mediation such as the sound of Cher’s hard Auto-Tuned voice, however, challenge our mimetic engagement. We can roughly and partially imagine what it might be like to make such a sound, but it is ultimately impossible for us to embody.

Cox notes, however, that mimetic motor action such as subvocalization (minute activations of the vocal mechanism while imagining or perceiving a sound) occurs upon perception of both vocal and instrumental sounds.⁵⁰ This activation is indicative of our capacity to mimetically engage with non-human timbres, even those that exist at the limits of our capacity for embodied cognition. Although we may not be able to imagine what it is to be, or even play, a flute, we can experience empathetic engagement with its sound via subvocalization. Just so, although we may not be able to know what it is to *produce* the sound of an Auto-Tuned, glitched,

⁴⁹ Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–450.

⁵⁰ Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition*, 28–29.

or noise-filtered voice, we imagine what it *might* be like to do so. I argue that despite our inability to completely embody these sounds, we still experience mimetic engagement with them; it is their existence at the edges of our capacity for this engagement that makes them so striking. The embodiment we experience upon hearing these heavily manipulated voices challenges our understanding of the limits of the body and highlights our cyborgian potential for embodied engagement with technology. This also challenges the identities we project onto the body and accept as biological fact, producing empathetic resonance with a variety of timbres at varying levels of gendered embodiment and human ability. For the purposes of this project, I will refer to the sound of mediated voices that challenge the limits of veridical engagement as *transhuman timbres*.

Critiques of Trans- and Posthumanism

The discourse of transhumanism is often accused of functioning as a neo-religion, given its salvific language with regards to technology and its promises of eternal life. Pilsch summarizes the biological aims of transhumanism as “hack[ing] the human biocomputer to extend life, enhance welfare, and enhance the human condition.”⁵¹ Problematically, this aspiration privileges human life over all others, with little discussion of the resources necessary to maintain this purported immortality, let alone its impacts on non-human life. Even human life is not universally valued, however. The production of technology that makes this evolution possible relies on subjugated and undervalued human labor. In spite of the liberatory feminist potential of cyborg theory, Haraway notes that the production of modern technology is “a matter of immense

⁵¹ Pilsch, *Transhumanism*, 1.

pain in Detroit and Singapore,” where critical elements of these machines are produced by a disproportionately impoverished and female labor force.⁵² Put more sardonically by another author, “Ooowww look at us girllies we’re all digital divas whether we’re slaving away in a chip factory or whether we’re suffering from [repetitive] strain injury or carpal tunnel syndrome.”⁵³

Nor is the supposedly utopian virtual world free of systemic racism and sexism. Image recognition schemas dehumanize and essentialize non-white individuals when they are recognized at all.⁵⁴ Search engine and social media algorithms privilege racial stereotypes and disproportionately censor images of Black female bodies.⁵⁵ Voice recognition software privileges an American English accent (distinct from African American Vernacular English), producing a mechanized version of what Eidsheim calls “accented listening.”⁵⁶ The technologies associated with enabling transhuman potential are not neutral; they have the capacity to reproduce systems of oppression in the virtual space.

All the same, Legacy Russell highlights the liberatory potential of transcending the physical body in the virtual realm. As a young, queer, Black woman, Russell experienced multiple intersectional marginalizations. Cultivating online personae allowed Russell to live in a world apart from her daily embodied experience. While experiences that take place outside of Internet communications are often described with the shorthand “irl”—in real life—Russell resists this designation, using the term “AFK”—away from keyboard—instead. Identities crafted

⁵² Haraway, “Cyborg,” 13.

⁵³ Sofoulis, “Cyberquake,” 100.

⁵⁴ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2020), 27.

⁵⁵ Nosheen Iqbal, “Instagram ‘censorship’ of black model’s photo reignites claims of race bias,” *The Guardian*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/aug/09/instagrams-censorship-of-black-models-photo-shoot-reignites-claims-of-race-bias-nyome-nicholas-williams>

⁵⁶ Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Rewriting Algorithms for Just Recognition: From Digital Aural Redlining to Accent Activism,” in *Thinking with an Accent*, ed. Pooja Rangan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 134–150.

in the virtual space, she argues, are no less real than those that take place offline. Anonymous chatrooms allowed Russell to explore facets of her identity denied by the world AFK.⁵⁷

I was a young body: Black, female-identifying, femme, queer. There was no pressing pause, no reprieve; the world around me never let me forget these identifiers. Yet online I could be whatever I wanted. And so my twelve-year-old self became sixteen, became twenty, became seventy. I aged. I died. Through this storytelling and shapeshifting, I was resurrected. I claimed my range.⁵⁸

This description begs the question of what constitutes authenticity and identity—two deeply fraught terms whose definitions are rife with racialized, gendered, and otherwise enculturated implications that ultimately exceed the scope of this project. The central question framed by Russell’s statement is whether the body is the final word on our identity. Can we truly embody any lived experience we want online? Are these adopted identities just as real as our own embodied experiences AFK? Instances of “digital blackface,” in which non-Black individuals imitate Black vernacular or pose as Black individuals online, are problematized as tone-deaf appropriation at best and nefarious manipulation at worst.⁵⁹ In the case of those with racialized or otherwise marginalized identities, however, online spaces offer opportunities to transcend the oppressive societal conditions that limit one’s capacity for self-expression AFK.

In the case of the artists explored in this thesis, vocal modulation technology allows trans and GNC individuals to reflect a gender experience that they feel resonates deeply with their identity but is limited by their embodied state. These manipulated voices allow individuals to project a selfhood that is in fact *more* aligned with their interiority than their bodies may allow outside the context of the recording studio. This is reflected in the feelings of euphoria that

⁵⁷ Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁹ Consider white supremacist organization “The Daily Stormer” encouraging adherents to pose as Black individuals online in order to sow distrust within the Black community.

individuals describe upon hearing their voices in a timbre that is aligned with their gender identity based on cultural parameters. Chapter 3 explores this in depth with artist TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE, and chapter 5 addresses the use of gendered vocal filters on social media as a means of gender signification. Thus, in these instances, I argue that technologically manipulated voices are no less authentic to one's identity than the unmediated voice. The recording studio allows for multiple self-presentations to unfold, all of which are contained within the artist.

Summary of Chapters

The first body chapter of this project focuses on the work of Dorian Electra (they/them), a genderfluid numetal/hyperpop artist. I examine their tracks “Career Boy,” “Man to Man,” and “Adam and Steve,” from their 2019 debut album *Flamboyant*. I argue that Electra's vocal approach embodies the concept of “polygendrous abundance” as articulated by Nadine Hubbs.⁶⁰ Their physical and technological approaches to the voice signify the mutability of their gender experience, effectively using the voice to “drag” genderfluidity. The arguments for this chapter come primarily from timbre and prosody analysis, as well as Electra's own description of their vocal approach from a 2019 Reddit AMA.⁶¹ Additionally, I craft a reception history through YouTube comments on the corresponding music videos for these songs.

⁶⁰ Nadine Hubbs, “Vaquero World: Queer Mexicanidad, Trans Performance, and the Undoing of Nation,” in *Decentering the Nation. Music, Mexicanidad, and Globalization*, ed. Jesús Ramos-Kittrell (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2020), 77–98.

⁶¹ The Reddit AMA – “Ask me anything” – is an interview format in which Reddit users can pose questions to public figures including celebrities and politicians. The interviewees respond via comment replies.

In Chapter 3, I examine three songs by Cleo McKenzie (she/her), aka TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE, a transfeminine glitchcore/hyperpop artist. Drawing from her 2020 mixtape *FEMININITY.EXE* and 2022 debut album *i guess i'm a woman now...* the songs “MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD,” “i’m two years on hormones and i’m still sad i want a refund,” and “mirrorsong*” form a three-part conceptual arc united by shared musical material. Each song features dramatically different vocal approaches to articulate the experiences of gender dysphoria and transitioning via hormone therapy. I pay special attention to production techniques used to alter the timbre of the voice. This chapter is buttressed by an interview with McKenzie that explores her production techniques and personal experiences in transition. The analysis of these tracks is placed in the context of glitch theory as articulated by the manifestos of Rosa Menkman and Legacy Russell, as well as the taxonomy of approaches to glitch art as described by Michael Betancourt.

Chapter 4 explores how experimental pop artist Merrill Garbus (she/her) uses physical and technological approaches in her recordings to critically examine her experience of white femininity. Given the inextricability of race and gender as societal constructs, Garbus’s music provides a compelling example of self-reflection for these intersecting experiences. I pay particular attention to her physical approaches to singing in addition to her use of layering, reverberation, and spatial positioning of the voice as a means of displaying the weaponized cultural power of white femininity.

Appendix A includes the complete lyrics for each of the case studies explored in this thesis. Appendix B contains hyperlinks to sound files and video examples as indicated throughout the text.

CHAPTER II

DORIAN ELECTRA AND POLYGENDROUS ABUNDANCE

While binary gender presentations—both visual and vocal—have received abundant attention in cultural, gender, and sound studies, discussions of nonbinary presentations are comparatively nascent. The designation “nonbinary” reflects a multitude of gender experiences outside of the binary male/female division. Genderfluidity, a specific category of nonbinary identity, connotes a gender experience that is not confined to a particular area of the gender spectrum, but oscillates enough to resist stable categorization. Genderfluid pop artist Dorian Electra (they/them) describes their gender as constantly fluctuating, at times changing “from minute to minute.”⁶² Given this variability, what does it mean to have a genderfluid voice? Electra’s artistic output offers a possible paradigm for artistically expressing genderfluidity, employing both physical and technological means to signify an interiority that is often in flux.

Electra often embodies a drag king aesthetic in their visual presentation, sporting a painted-on pencil-thin mustache, slicked back hair, and dramatic masculine facial contouring. They both celebrate and satirize a variety of masculine tropes, dressing in turn as an armor-clad knight, a flamboyant matador, a bruised, shirtless boxer, and a basement-dwelling gamer complete with fedora, trench coat, and two-liter Mountain Dew bottle. This aesthetic invites a comparison to Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performative drag. Butler’s iconic text *Gender Trouble* casts gender as a socially constructed category that generates behavior, as opposed to shared behaviors constructing gender. She argues that gender is “*a corporeal style*, an

⁶² Dorian Electra, “Hello this is Dorian Electra please AMA...” Reddit, 2019. Accessed May 23, 2024. https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/cvrl2s/hello_this_is_dorian_electra_please_ama/

‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and ‘performative.’”⁶³ It is also “the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of presence and absence on the body’s surface ... a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absences.”⁶⁴ Thus, gender performance is as much about absence as it is presence, at least in a binary context. As a genderfluid person, however, Electra defies the exclusion and absence of any gender presentation, embodying an “all of the above” aesthetic in both their vocal and visual presentations. They sport angel wings and bikini tops, mustaches and muscle suits, and their voice, as I will explore below, is equally expansive. In this way, Electra exemplifies Nadine Hubbs’s concept of “polygendrous abundance.”

In her essay, “Vaquero World: Queer Mexicanidad, Trans Performance, and the Undoing of Nation,” Nadine Hubbs explores expressions of gender and sexuality in Mexican American *reuniones vaqueras*. These celebrations of queerness and cowboy culture in the Mexican diaspora feature multifaceted competitions ranging from fashion shows and musical performances to mechanical bull-riding. This collective diasporic experience constructs a community that Hubbs calls “Vaquero World.”⁶⁵ Here Hubbs draws upon Susan Stryker’s distinction between analog and digital notions of gender, with “analog” describing a gender concept which aligns with prescribed physical characteristics, while digital gender is more ephemeral and divorced from bioessentialism: “Back in the analog era ... a person’s social and psychological gender was commonly assumed to point to that person’s biological sex in the exact same way: Gender was considered a representation of a physical sex. But a digital image or

⁶³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 177. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁵ Nadine Hubbs, “Vaquero World,” 78.

sound is something else entirely.... It might in fact be a complete fabrication built up pixel by pixel or bit by bit.”⁶⁶ In this case, fabrication does not connote artifice but creativity.

Hubbs also makes note of presentations in defiance of queer stereotypes that still exist in a binary construct, namely the lesbian propensity to adhere to masculine or feminine characteristics. Butch lesbians are commonly associated with a more masculine aesthetic, opting to wear men’s clothing, bind or minimize their chests, and eschew feminine accoutrements. In *Vaquero World*, however, Hubbs notices several instances of “butch cleavage,” showcasing traditionally feminine attributes (in this case, décolletage) while maintaining an otherwise masculine aesthetic. It is this presentation that inspires Hubbs to coin the term *polygendrous abundance*, which “visibly thwarts essentialist gender binaries ... combining multiple markers of masculinity with bodily curves that have long been feminized.”⁶⁷ The “all of the above” ethos of butch cleavage and other forms of polygendrous abundance defy gender binarisms and present new possibilities for more fluid expressions of gender.

Electra is hyperconscious of their artistic performance of their genderfluidity; they deliberately modulate their voice both physically and with technology to signify the “minute to minute” shifts in their interiority. In a 2019 Reddit AMA, multiple fans asked Electra about their vocal presentation and approach to modulating their voice. While technological mediation is present, much of Electra’s performance stems from physical manipulation. When one fan asked about Electra’s “natural voice,” they responded:

a lot of the weirdness you hear is created by my own voice in the vocal performance (as well as digital production) – I honestly have no idea what my “natural voice” would even mean or sound like?!⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Susan Stryker, quoted in Hubbs, “*Vaquero World*,” 80.

⁶⁷ Hubbs, “*Vaquero World*,” 90.

⁶⁸ Electra, “Hello.”

This response is reminiscent of Victoria Malawey’s discussion of the “fiction of the natural” in the context of the recorded voice.⁶⁹ Malawey proposes a wet/dry continuum of recorded vocal sound, with “wetness” denoting voices that bear more perceptible technological mediation. All the same, Malawey notes that “all recorded sounds—no matter how seemingly dry—are indeed technologically mediated” by microphones, amplifiers, and audio interfaces, not to mention playback devices.⁷⁰ Electra’s response highlights the dubiousness of this binary between natural and unnatural voices and the pivotal roles that both physical performance and studio production play in their vocal approach.

Below are three case studies from Electra’s output: two songs from their debut album *Flamboyant* (2019) and one from their sophomore album *My Agenda* (2020). In each song, Electra demonstrates an ethos of polygendrous abundance in both their visual and vocal stylings. At times, Electra employs approaches that are legibly masculine or feminine, while in other moments their presentation is more ambiguously gendered. Their fluidity is noted and celebrated in comments on their videos, reflecting the voice as a tool for expressing a shared gender experience. Links to sound files paired with associated spectrograms can be found in Appendix B.

“Career Boy”

Propelled by a dreamy ‘80s synth line, “Career Boy” satirizes a modern pillar of masculinity: the career-driven office worker. The music video for this song, directed by Charlotte Rutherford, features Electra alone in an office tower, “working overtime” in suspenders and a necktie while

⁶⁹ Victoria Malawey, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word: Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 127–129.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

consuming copious amounts of black coffee. The relationship between the subject and his job becomes increasingly sexualized as the song progresses, reflecting a dominant-submissive archetype. Electra takes a literary approach to their lyrics, referring to the bridge of a song as its “thesis.”⁷¹ In the case of “Career Boy,” the bridge makes the subject’s masochistic relationship with work explicit. This moment in the video features Electra chained to two overstuffed file cabinets, self-flagellating and punching a stapler into their own hand while sporting a choker made of paperclips. In clipped, orgasmic bursts they sing:

I’m addicted to the work, I –
I love the way it hurts, I –
The suits and pencil skirts
I get what I need ‘cause I’m greedy for it
‘Cause I’m addicted to the pressure
Yeah, but the burden is a pleasure
Come on, hit me with your ledger
Close to the edge, face down on the desk, I’m –
Career boy⁷²

“Career Boy” embodies a sense of playful emasculation, casting the toxic masculinity of the corporate world as latent submissive desire. Their vocal production signifies this relationship by juxtaposing a masculine vocal approach with a more stereotypically feminine one. This is especially evident in the chorus, with the words “mind” and “time” delivered with an open throat and forced down larynx to produce a more resonant, lower pitch. Electra punctuates these moments with the word “yeah,” in a whiny, sexualized feminine voice with a pronounced glottal stop at the front of the word. This juxtaposition signifies an emasculated submission on the part of the titular career boy.

Electra clearly applies distinct physical approaches to achieve this contrast, but the sonic effects seem to be aided by some form of technological mediation that amplifies the distinction.

⁷¹ Electra, “Hello.”

⁷² Dorian Electra, “Career Boy,” track 2 on *Flamboyant*, Dorian Electra, 2019.

The vocal line bears the hallmarks of formant shifting throughout, a post-production technique that alters timbre by modifying the harmonics of a sound without altering its pitch. The timbre of Electra’s voice seems to morph and shift throughout “Career Boy,” with moments of dramatic juxtaposition such as the transition from “time” to “yeah” (see 0:52-0:55, as graphed in Figure 2.1). This production technique heightens the physical effects Electra employs, crafting a transhuman timbre through vocal fluidity and instability that exceeds the capacity of the unmediated voice.

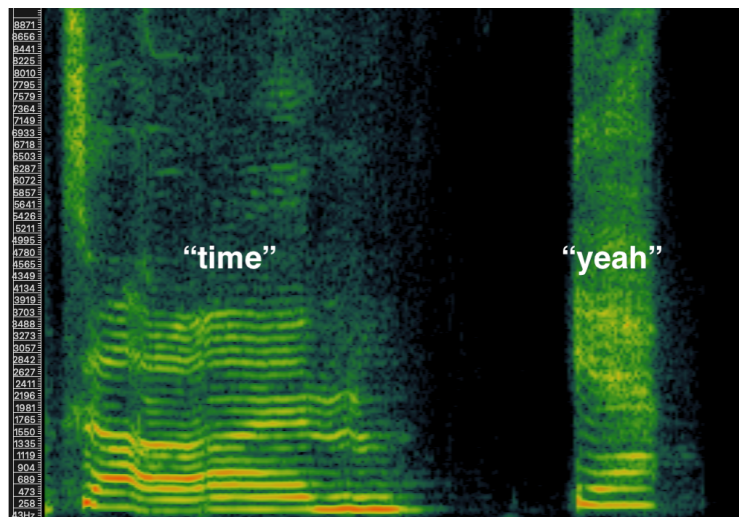


Figure 2.1. Spectrogram of the isolated voice in “Career Boy,” 0:52–0:55

A spectral analysis of this juxtaposition (Figure 2.1) elucidates the timbral differences between these two words. “Time” features a density of harmonic energy in the second through fourth partials, and a high degree of harmonic regularity, indicating a rich, clear sound. “Yeah,” however, is more diffuse, indicating a breathy quality. This high degree of contrast underscores the dramatic shift from the masculine to the feminine. One commenter on the YouTube video for “Career Boy” indicates that Electra’s feminine voice triggers an unexpected feeling of attraction:

“I’m just a straight guy, the moment I heard the first ‘yeah’ my heart melted completely and I thought this is the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.”⁷³ Thus, it is the affected femininity of the voice that gives this viewer permission to be attracted to Electra, signifying femininity in spite of their androgynous presentation.

YouTube viewers frequently make note of Electra’s timbral contrast in their comments: “The vocals are constantly shifting between high-pitches [sic] feminine to a lower masculine tone. Das genius.”⁷⁴ Others express an affinity with Electra’s presentation: “as one transasc/nonbinary musician to another, you make me feel so much more confident in my voice. thank you for being the role model that allowed me to shriek and sing however the fuck I want.”⁷⁵ Identification, attraction, and appreciation for vocal fluidity are common themes in the audience reception of Electra’s videos. The combination of their visual and vocal presentation in this work resonates with genderqueer viewers and listeners, providing representation of an oft-overlooked gender identity. Electra demonstrates the power of vocal timbre in signifying the masculine and the feminine, and crafts new ways to perform fluidity between the two.

“Adam and Steve”

In this track, Electra takes on the homophobic aphorism, “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” Electra utilizes Christian imagery throughout the video including the Garden of Eden, a priest poring over scripture, and an attempted exorcism which culminates in Electra sprouting wings and ascending to heaven where they are flanked by queer and trans pole dancers

⁷³ jonathansmallboy1635, comment on Dorian Electra, “Dorian Electra – Career Boy (Official Video),” directed by Charlotte Rutherford, June 1, 2018, video, 3:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDDukLyXY-M>.

⁷⁴ Artistluke4, comment on “Career Boy (Official Video).”

⁷⁵ MandyKessler, comment on “Career Boy (Official Video).”

Miles Woods and Daphne Von Rey.⁷⁶ The lyrics to “Adam and Steve” include biblical references to the Christian creation story as related in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning, there was the Word / In nothing but darkness, God made the world.”⁷⁷ Throughout the video, Electra employs a variety of vocal timbres, some of which are described in their Reddit AMA as follows:

I definitely have a few weird go-to voices like the Gregorian monk chant, whiny emo, super formant-shifting/vocal fry-y thing, and then like my strained puberty falsetto boy voice, and then like my very occasional britney spears on testosterone moments. but yeah i have def felt self conscious about it ESPECIALLY because of how related voice is to gender expression and often not wanting to sound ‘too feminine’ by default.⁷⁸

A close listen to “Adam and Steve” reveals several moments in which Electra applies these vocal paradigms.

For the first fifteen seconds of the song, Electra embodies the “Gregorian monk chant” paradigm, featuring a somber melody and a dark, open voice achieved by dropping the larynx and expanding the pharynx, as well as heavy use of reverb.⁷⁹ Across the ensuing line, “the four-letter word, L-O-V-E meant nothing to me,” Electra’s voice slides seamlessly upward (likely via post-production formant shifting) to a brighter, more palatal sound, emblematic of a bright pop vocal style. The formant shift occurs in “word,” and is evident in a spectrogram as the harmonic energy shifts upward, indicating a timbral shift (Figure 2.2). Through mimetic motor engagement and subvocalization, the listener embodies a shift from a more resonant, open vocal approach to the brighter, more palatal approach to follow. While this shift is imitable through physical means, post-production manipulation aids the timbral shift and makes the fluidity more seamless.

⁷⁶ Dorian Electra, “Dorian Electra – Adam & Steve (Official Video),” directed by Dorian Electra and Weston Allen, October 31, 2019, video, 3:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mViZtUHqDg8>.

⁷⁷ Dorian Electra, “Adam and Steve,” track 10 on *Flamboyant*, Dorian Electra, 2019, AIFF audio file.

⁷⁸ Electra, “Hello.”

⁷⁹ Heidemann, “System,” 7.

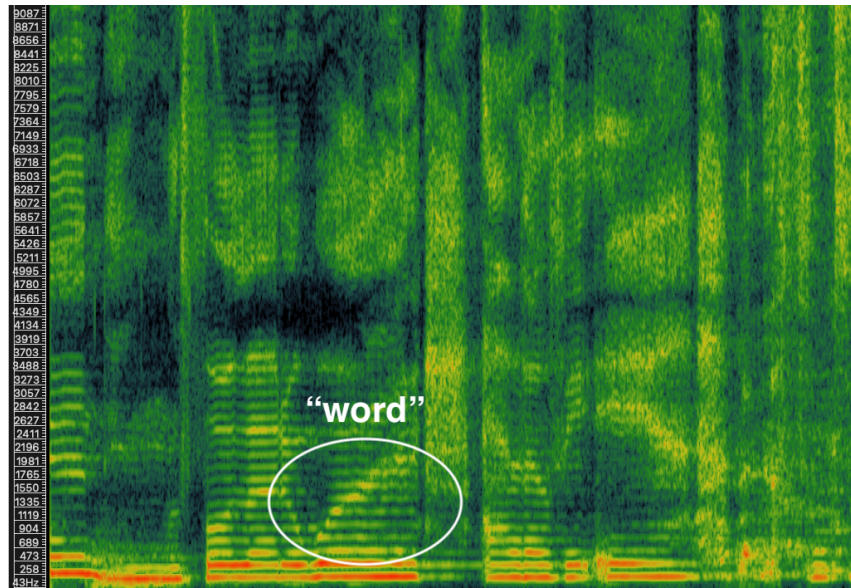


Figure 2.2. Formant shifting in “Adam and Steve,” 0:16-0:17

Following this moment, Electra shifts to a breathier delivery akin to falsetto before slipping back to the Gregorian chant style. When they defiantly declare “God made me,” they shift to a shout that is nearly devoid of pitch, which may embody their self-described “strained puberty falsetto boy voice.”⁸⁰ These five shifts occur in just thirty seconds (see Table 2.1). The lyric, “God made me” is repeated numerous times throughout the song, with various vocal approaches applied to the phrase. A particularly complex moment of vocal layering occurs following the bridge, in which the lyric is delivered in a heavily Auto-Tuned voice, the Gregorian monk chant voice, the strained puberty falsetto boy voice, and a breathy feminine pop voice (2:16 – 2:45). The multitude of presentations in this section seems to declare, “God made me in all of my complexity, fluidity, and multiplicity of presentations.”

As in “Career Boy,” while much of the vocal approach is physical, post-production techniques help smooth and exaggerate these timbral shifts in both recorded and live

⁸⁰ Electra, “Hello.”

performances. In a 2019 live performance of “Adam and Steve” at the Village Underground in London, Electra moves deftly between these vocal approaches, supported by a backing track that provides harmonic and timbral support.⁸¹ This synthesis of physical and technological approaches to the voice reflects a cyborg ethos, a symbiotic relationship between the organic and the mechanical in alignment with Haraway’s “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries.”⁸²

Per Cox’s mimetic hypothesis, the listener experiences empathetic engagement with these voices, embodying the open throat of the Gregorian monk paradigm and the tension and effort of the strained puberty falsetto boy voice through subvocalization. Thus, Electra not only conveys their own sense of fluidity through these vocal modulations but takes the listener along with them through these various presentations. In the particularly perceptible moments of technological mediation, such as “word” addressed above, the shift from coded masculine to coded feminine timbres is so distinct that it invites a striking embodiment in the listener, offering a deep and artistic insight into the experience of genderfluidity. Electra accomplishes a transhuman timbre by heightening vocal shifts through the use of technological mediation. In doing so, they telegraph an ephemeral, shifting gender experience that stubbornly resists stable categorization. This allows listeners who do not identify with this gender experience to momentarily embody this presentation, and resonates deeply with genderfluid listeners, as evidenced by comments from GNC listeners on “Career Boy” discussed above.

⁸¹ Dorian Electra, “Dorian Electra – Adam and Steve live Village Underground,” spandaumole, video, 2:19, performed November 19, 2019, uploaded November 21, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7p3FMPfVA8>

⁸² Haraway, “Cyborg,” 7.

Table 2.1. Electra’s Vocal Paradigms in “Adam and Steve” 0:00-0:30

Section	Timestamp	Lyrics	Vocal Paradigm
Verse 1	0:00 – 0:16	In the beginning, there was the Word, in nothing but darkness, God made the world. In the beginning, there were just two, made from the dust like all of us. In the beginning, the four-letter word,	Gregorian monk chant
	0:16 – 0:19	“L-O-V-E” meant nothing to me	pronounced formant-shifting and vocal fry
	0:20 – 0:26	But made in his image, we were born, two of a kind, the beginning of time	Gregorian monk chant
Chorus (beginning)	0:27 – 0:30	And God made me	strained puberty falsetto boy voice

Of Electra’s videos, “Adam and Steve” elicits a particularly emotional response from commenters. The religious imagery and content of the song paired with the assertion that queer and GNC individuals are divinely created strikes an emotional chord in those with trauma from religious upbringings, exemplified by the three comments below:

I grew up deeply religious and it gives me chills and makes me almost cry every time I hear this song. I have struggled for so long to accept myself as gay and this encapsulates my pain. this is true art.

I grew up believing God/Jesus would hate me for being queer...I never thought Christianity and queerness could be together...If only I could show this to younger me, who believed God hated me for who I was. But God made me, and He loves me

As an LGBT woman raised Catholic, who went to Catholic school during my young formative years, I still struggle with the feelings of shame and ‘wrongness’ about my sexuality...I still ask myself if God would love me...I really felt on the verge of tears watching this video. This was beautiful, poignant, and artistic.⁸³

While the emotional resonance of Electra’s videos is evident in other comment sections, the invocation of spirituality adds depth to this video and elicits particularly vulnerable responses from listeners. Electra’s proud and defiant assertion of their queerness, underscored by their vocal approach, provides a space of healing, catharsis, and representation for those with spiritual trauma.

“Ram It Down”

Electra’s sophomore album *My Agenda* (2020) explores homophobia and sexism in society, portraying caricatures of the stereotypical masculinist gamer culture and the Alex Joneses of the world who believe that a secret cabal is poisoning the water system and “turning the freaking frogs gay.”⁸⁴ Electra deliberately plays into these fears on some tracks, including the titular song (“My agenda / My freaky gender / Out here flexin’ in my rainbow suspenders ... We’re out here turning the frogs homosexual”). The penultimate song on the album, “Ram It Down,” is a response to those who encourage the queer community to conform to heteronormative society and keep their identities a secret (“Love who you want, but just don’t ram it down my throat”).⁸⁵ Electra’s response is defiant. They meet societal shaming with the most bombastic song imaginable.

⁸³ thatnerdyblondeboy8702, susceptiblegalaxy, and reallynewusername, comments on “Adam & Steve (Official Video).”

⁸⁴ Alex Jones, “Alex Jones ‘Turning the Freaking Frogs Gay,’” Terrance Giles, video, 1:10, February 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePLkAm8i2s>.

⁸⁵ Additionally, *Ram It Down* is the title of a 1988 Judas Priest album. Heavy metal’s hypermasculine associations are particularly salient here.

While “Ram It Down” features Electra’s characteristic vocal fluidity, the song also features a parade of genre signifiers, including a Baroque keyboard style, a crisp pop delivery, screaming death metal, and techno dance beats. Vocal techniques range from a deep, open masculine voice with pronounced consonants to shout-singing and paralinguistic sounds such as gasps, choking, and giggles. Electra’s vocals are punctuated by featured artists Lil Texas and Lil Mariko, who supply highly masculine and feminine voices to the track, respectively. Table 2.2 below elucidates the song’s rapid fluctuations between genres and vocal styles.

One of the hallmarks of the (loosely defined) hyperpop genre under which Electra is typically categorized is the rapid transition between genre signifiers within or between songs. Hyperpop musicians tend to demonstrate prowess in performing multiple genres, signifying a skepticism of rigid musical boundaries. Electra leans into this tendency in “Ram It Down,” shifting mercilessly between both genres and vocal styles. The longest consistent pairing of genre and vocal approach occurs in the first verse and lasts only fifteen seconds. Otherwise, the vocals tend to shift every few seconds, with genre markers remaining stable for a maximum of 32 seconds in the first chorus.

Electra’s response to the homophobic appeal to “Keep ... your secret behind closed doors” is a defiant display of both gender and genre fluidity (creating “genre trouble,” if you will). By embracing multiple styles, they perform a shameless act of refusal. YouTube commenters call “Ram It Down” a “GENDERLESS BANGER,” remarking on the “powerful homoeroticism” and their own “gender envy” of Electra’s style, which is especially androgynous in this video.⁸⁶ One commenter sympathizes with recipients of this type of homophobia: “As a

⁸⁶ alixschard, SinBsCat, and wahwah2597, comments on Dorian Electra, “Ram It Down (Official Music Video),” Dorian Electra, May 14, 2021, video, 2:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxkhwJCoq84>.

Texas queer, hate when people say this shit bless you for these songs.”⁸⁷ In “Ram It Down,” Electra’s resistance to performing stable categories of gender and genre epitomize an ethos of resistance to any parameters of confinement.

In their multitude of feminine, masculine, and androgynous presentations, Electra reflects a polygendrous abundance that defies categorization. Due to the critical and/or satirical nature of some of their lyrics, it could be tempting to ascribe an anti-masculine sensibility to their work. Electra’s performance, however, is often caricature but not mean-spirited mockery. They project genuine euphoria in their masculine presentations, describing them as “liberating and fun.”⁸⁸ Even their most critical presentation of the gamer stereotype is flamboyant and playful. In each of these performances, Electra whole-heartedly embraces the masculine costume while maintaining a sense of humor and a critical eye. Similarly, their vocal approach highlights the pure performativity of gender, leaning into tropes of the vocal masculine (dark, open timbre, crisp consonants) and feminine (bright, palatal timbre, whines, giggles) without claiming either as a given truth.

Table 2.2. Genre Chaos in “Ram It Down”

Section	Timestamp	Genre	Vocal style
Intro	0:00 – 0:05	Baroque keyboard	--
	0:06 – 0:08	Rock	--
Verse 1	0:09 – 0:24	Pop with harpsichord punctuation	Bright pop vocals
Pre-chorus	0:25 – 0:30	Death metal	Screaming
Chorus	0:31 – 0:41	Techno	Dark, open vocals
	0:42 – 0:44		Shout singing
	0:44 – 0:47		Dark, open vocals
	0:48 – 0:50		Shout singing

⁸⁷ cybermammal, comment on “Ram It Down (Official Music Video).”

⁸⁸ Matt Moen, “Dorian Electra Squares Up in ‘Man to Man,’” *Paper*, December 12, 2018. <https://www.papermag.com/dorian-electra-man-to-man-2623136865.html#rebelltitem26>.

	0:51 – 0:55		Dark, open vocals
	0:55 – 0:56		Gasping, choking
	0:57 – 1:03		Dark, open vocals
Verse 1	1:03 – 1:16	Pop with harpsichord punctuation	Heavily distorted, almost unintelligible vocals
	1:17 – 1:19		Panting
Pre-chorus	1:20 – 1:24	Death metal	Screaming
Chorus	1:25 – 1:30	Techno	Dark, open vocals
	1:31 – 1:33		Shout singing
	1:33 – 1:36		Dark, open vocals
	1:36 – 1:39		Shout singing
	1:39 – 1:43		Dark, open vocals
	1:44 – 1:45		Gasping, choking
	1:46 – 1:50		Dark, open vocals
	1:51 – 1:52		Shout singing
Interlude	1:53 – 1:58	Baroque keyboard	--
	1:58 – 2:00	Rock	--
Outro	2:01 – 2:03	Techno	Dark laughter
	2:04 – 2:05		Masculine shout (Lil Tex)
	2:05 – 2:09		Feminine spoken in Japanese (Lil Mariko) ⁸⁹
	2:09 – 2:10		Distorted, noisy vocals
	2:10 – 2:19	Noise	Screaming
	2:20 – 2:22		Feminine spoken and giggling (Lil Mariko)
	2:23 – 2:32		Screaming

Conclusion: Dragging Genderfluidity

If, as Butler argues, gender is performative, how does one drag genderfluidity? Electra demonstrates that the flexibility of the voice makes it a powerful signifier of the genderfluid experience. While visual gender presentation is readily apparent, it is not as immediately mutable

⁸⁹ Western culture broadly, and specifically hyperpop, frequently code the Japanese female voice and manga style visuals as expressions of hyperfemininity. This is evident in “Ram It Down,” as well as in the work of TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE, discussed in Chapter 3. This is a topic worthy of further exploration and critique that is outside the scope of this project.

as the voice. (It takes a long time to get into and out of full drag!) Electra embodies this fluidity in their physical approach to the voice, but the effects are exaggerated and the transitions smoothed in post-production through various timbral manipulation techniques. Their live performances, while demonstrating their vocal flexibility, are augmented by backing tracks to support transitions between vocal approaches. Thus, technological mediation serves as another means of gender performance, facilitating a sonic portrayal of polygendrous abundance.

Fan reactions reflect the importance of artistic representation of the genderfluid experience. Throughout Electra's Reddit AMA and in the comment sections of their YouTube videos, listeners repeatedly express gratitude and feelings of validation through Electra's presentation. The fluidity of Electra's vocal timbre is a common topic in many of these reactions. This fluid approach to singing has implications for vocal coaches, speech therapists, and musical producers, who can become familiar with means of amplifying genderfluid expression through the voice. For those who are trans or GNC, vocal training is often one part of gender-affirming care and may be an important supplement for those who do not have access to hormone replacement therapy due to health concerns, personal preference, or legal barriers. Polygendrous vocal approaches via physical and technological means or a synthesis thereof may help craft a euphoric and socially legible presentation of genderfluidity. The transhuman timbre of Electra's vocal shifts, whether seamless or jarring, exemplifies new avenues for artistic gender performance.

CHAPTER III

GLITCH AS DYSPHORIA IN THE MUSIC OF TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE

Since launching her career in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic with “nothing but an old laptop and a gender identity crisis,” trans artist Cleo McKenzie creates music in the famously fluid genre of hyperpop and glitch punk. Her sound has been described as “pure chip tune madness” and “a chainsaw made of candy.”⁹⁰ The 2022 release of her first full-length album garnered attention from several independent online publications and zines including Cat Scratch Magazine, Idle Class Magazine, Prelude Press, and Music Mondays.

McKenzie’s bandcamp bio simply reads, “so girly it hurts” and her visual stylings feature cartoon depictions of femininity reminiscent of manga.⁹¹ Her music, like many other artists in the hyperpop genre, is heavily processed and employs aesthetics of early 2000s Internet culture. In her first mixtape, she turns to programming language to describe gender, titling the collection *FEMININITY.EXE*. McKenzie released the mixtape within three weeks of realizing her gender identity, using the project as a means of processing this revelation. In the trans community, such realizations are often referred to as “egg cracking,” thus leading to the name TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE, in reference to the popular egg-shaped electronic gaming device of the late 1990s.

FEMININITY.EXE reflects the deep internal turmoil of a gender awakening (as an eighteen-year-old living in the isolation of COVID lockdowns in rural Arkansas) but maintains a sense of humor. Her first full-length album released in early 2023 is titled *i guess i’m a woman*

⁹⁰ Cleo McKenzie, “TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE,” accessed December 3, 2023.
<https://tamagotchimassacre.online/>

⁹¹ Cleo McKenzie, “TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE.” bandcamp, accessed December 3, 2023,
<https://tamagotchimassacre.bandcamp.com/?label=2768672774&tab=artists>

now... reflecting McKenzie's continuing transition through hormone replacement therapy and wrestling with the meaning of femininity. Her lyrics highlight some of the darker aspects of the trans experience, including gender dysphoria, body dysmorphia, fear of failing to pass, and a complicated relationship with femininity. Throughout her oeuvre, McKenzie uses a variety of sonic distortions including bit depth reduction, noise, formant shifting, pitching the voice up, and placing unexpected breaks or skips in the vocal track. These highly produced moments employ a *glitch* aesthetic. As a self-described glitchcore musician, this aesthetic is central to McKenzie's artistic output.

What follows is a discussion of glitch aesthetics and their transgressive potential. I explore the ways that glitch aesthetics are employed sonically via a discussion of Michael Betancourt's paradigm of glitch approaches and propose a framework for the ways we embody sonic glitch effects through mimetic engagement. Following this, I provide an analysis of three songs by TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE, with particular attention to the voice and the ways glitch aesthetics and vocal processing are employed throughout. I will also include commentary from McKenzie, which was gathered from an interview on April 10th, 2024, regarding her musical approaches, personal experience, and artistic philosophy.

Glitch Art as Politics

The word "glitch" has a few possible etymological origins, including the German word *glitschen* – to slip, or the Yiddish word *gletshn* – to slide or slip.⁹² Some technophiles say it is an acronym for "gremlins lurking in the computer hardware."⁹³ The glitch occurs when the machine behaves

⁹² Russell, *Glitch Feminism* 28.

⁹³ Andy Boothman, "What is a Glitch? And why do they happen?" Dresscode, November 7, 2023, <https://www.dresscodeshirts.co.uk/blogs/news/what-is-a-glitch>.

in an unexpected way in spite of proper programming. Contrast this with “the bug” – a correctible programming error that connotes human fault. A variety of factors can lead to glitches. External causes may include electrical surges overloading the system, magnetic interference, or damage to hardware. Glitches can also occur when signals travel too quickly or through an incorrect channel, reflecting a potential incompatibility between software and hardware.⁹⁴

The glitch as an exploitable feature of technological systems has gained particular traction in the videogaming community. Players can use glitches in gaming software to their advantage, accessing bonus levels designed by game developers, bypassing obstacles, acquiring additional items, or otherwise altering gameplay. Whole communities have developed around the “speed run” – an attempt to beat a game as quickly as possible, often by employing glitches. Glitch has become a verb in this community; YouTube titles of videos showcasing glitching include:

“I GLITCHED My SPEED To WIN ALL RACES on Roblox”

“I Glitched on Battle Bus and LEFT The Map!”

“I Glitched My Horse To Run 60,000 Blocks/Hour”

“I Glitched my Way into a LOCKED World? (Plants vs Zombies 2)”

When faces are featured in the preview images for glitching videos, they often express surprise, excitement, or shock. The glitch introduces the unexpected to an otherwise predictable world and allows users to triumph over the program language by forging an alliance with the gremlins lurking in the computer hardware. The glitch, then, can be consciously deployed as a reassertion of agency, a thumbing of one’s nose at authority.

⁹⁴ Alex Pieschl, “Glitches: A Kind of History,” *The Arcade Review*, December 8, 2014.

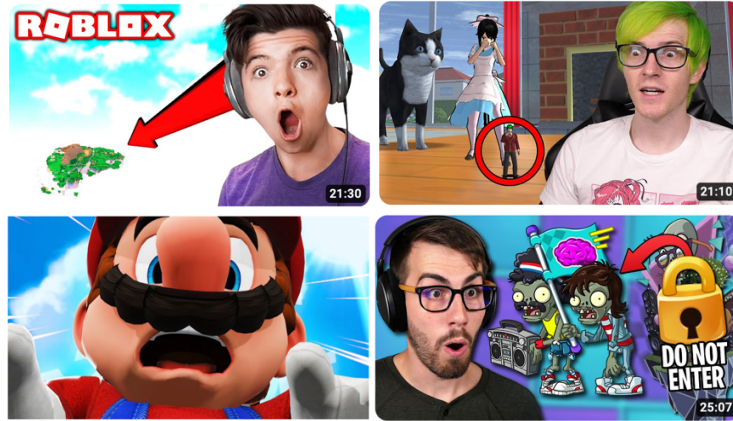


Figure 3.1. Examples of preview images for glitching videos⁹⁵

Glitch artists take these accidents of the machine and channel them into intentional creations. Early visual applications of glitch art featured deliberate “misuse” of consumer products through physical interventions. Fluxus artist Nam Jun Paik’s *Magnet TV* (1965), for example, utilizes the disturbance of a magnet on the electrical activity of a television set to generate shimmering blue wisps of light on screen. The process for Jamie Faye Fenton’s *Digital TV Dinner* (1979) involved pounding on the Bally Astrocade gaming system with one’s fists while pressing the reset button and changing cartridges.

Glitch art has gained a devoted following. The first official symposium of glitch art took place in Oslo in 2002 and has since become an annual event in various locations around the globe. While some glitch approaches serve purely aesthetic purposes, others have taken a more political turn. Rosa Menkman’s *Glitch Studies Manifesto*, featured at several gatherings of glitch artists in 2009-10, outlined the politically subversive nature of glitch art, particularly in its

⁹⁵ Image previews from the following YouTube videos:

Top Left: PrestonGamez, “I GLITCHED OUT OF THIS ROBLOX WORLD with MY LITTLE BROTHER!” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=EFwJ0p-ytCQ>.

Top Right: Bijuu Mike, “I Glitched Sakura School Simulator and became and [sic] ant,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Mz0Wn-MYOPU>.

Bottom Right: MattShea, “I Glitched my Way into a LOCKED World? (Plants vs Zombies 2),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byCA2nfGfA>.

Bottom Left: Failboat, “I Glitched Mario,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52_kz_Y8_Q.

repurposing of consumer goods. By violating the intended uses of machines, glitching highlights the ways that capitalism and consumerism are antithetical to creativity. Menkman declares this anti-consumerist stance in railing against the move toward increasingly lossless streams of data: “The user has to realize that improving is nothing more than a proprietary protocol, a deluded consumer myth about progression towards a holy grail of perfection.”⁹⁶

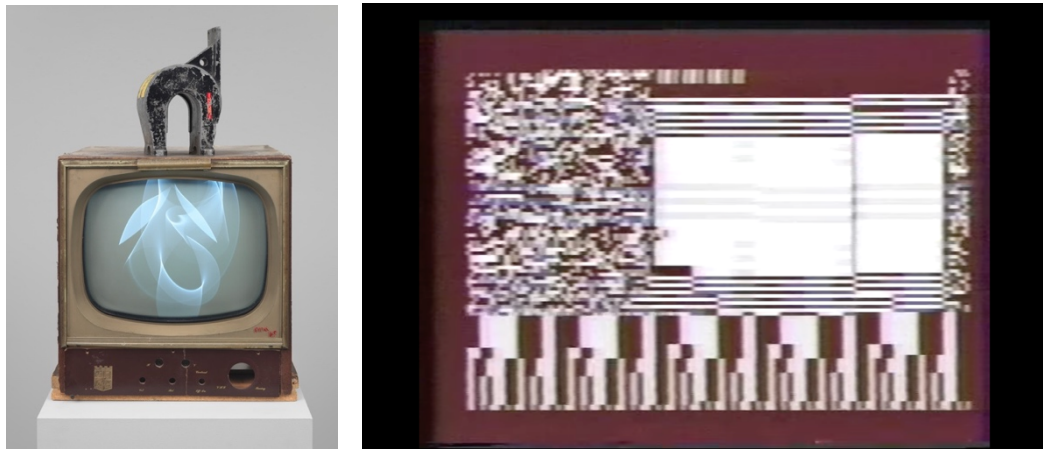


Figure 3.2. Left: Nam June Paik, *Magnet TV* (1965)⁹⁷, right: Jamie Faye Fenton *Digital TV Dinner* (1979)⁹⁸

Other theorists view the glitch through queer and feminist lenses. Andrew Brooks extends the idea of the sonic glitch as rebellion, drawing on queer theory in his article “Glitch/Failure: Constructing a Queer Politics of Listening.” Brooks argues that queerness functions as a glitch in cis- and heteronormative systems, challenging constructed boundaries between masculinity and femininity and slowing the (re)productive systems of capitalism. Just

⁹⁶ Rosa Menkman, “A Glitch Studies Manifesto,” 2009, 2.

⁹⁷ Nam June Paik, *Magnet TV*, 1965, sculpture, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
<https://whitney.org/collection/works/6139>

⁹⁸ Jamie Faye Fenton, “Digital TV Dinner,” October 8, 2009, video, 2:41,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ad9zdlaRvdM>.

so, when musicians employ the sounds of “clicks, cuts, stutters, skips, pops, crackles, splinterings, and spikes,” they embody a sonic failure, which Brooks compares to Jack Halberstam’s 2011 work, *The Queer Art of Failure*.⁹⁹ In Halberstam’s framework, queerness represents failure insofar as it resists conformity to heteronormative systems. In celebrations of loss, forgetfulness, passivity, naïveté, and other conditions that society generally rejects, Halberstam reframes failure as a generative, rebellious space.¹⁰⁰ Glitch parallels this in its jamming of machinic systems, thereby interrupting their productive capabilities. Glitch artists celebrate this failure by reimagining the priorities of the machine: creativity trumps consumption; stoppage trumps efficiency.

Legacy Russell examines the glitch through a queer Black feminist lens in her 2020 work *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Like Haraway, she challenges the concept of gender as circumscribed by the body, arguing for the existence of multiple interlocking selves. Trans and nonbinary individuals, she argues, function as glitches to cisnormative systems, prompting “the violent socio-cultural machine to hiccup, sigh, shudder, buffer.”¹⁰¹ She frames the glitch as a refusal to perform in relentless consumerist systems, noting that we apply glitch as a framework to describe various stoppages from frozen screens to engine failures. Glitch is “a mode of nonperformance... a ‘nope’ in its own right, expertly executed by machine.”¹⁰²

Musicians similarly employ these glitch art aesthetics of experimentation, flexibility, and refusal. The sonic palette of modern glitchcore music has antecedents in Luigi Russolo’s 1913 *L’arte de Rumori* and other Futurist music, which celebrated the use of noise and modern

⁹⁹ Andrew Brooks, “Glitch/Failure: Constructing a Queer Politics of Listening,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 25 (2015), 39.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰¹ Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 18.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 29.

technology as musical tools. Avant-garde artists of the 1960s continued the expansion of sonic palettes through the use of tape loops and newly designed electronic instruments, including Robert Moog's revolutionary synthesizer. Wendy Carlos, who advised Moog in the creation of the synthesizer, popularized the tool as a musical instrument in her famous *Switched-on Bach* (1968) and went on to design numerous replications of instrumental sounds.¹⁰³

In later decades, glitch artists began experimenting with reappropriating existing electronics to generate new sonic uses. Circuit bending, first explored by Reed Ghazala in the late 1960s, involves modifying the circuit boards of electronic devices, often amplifiers or cheap musical toys, to achieve new sonic potentialities.¹⁰⁴ Circuit benders often install knobs and switches to add additional control over the new functions of the device.¹⁰⁵ Chiptune music creators utilize audio hardware from 1980s computers and gaming consoles, reprogramming them to perform original compositions, which are marked by “soaring flutelike melodies, buzzing square wave bass, rapid arpeggios, and noisy gated percussion,” all within the confines of the sonic palette of a 1980s microchip.¹⁰⁶

Hallmarks of modern glitch punk and glitchcore music include highly processed vocals, synthetic instruments, distortion, and skips. These sonic signatures can be accomplished through physical, mechanical means, or imitated using a DAW. The varying sonic approaches of glitchcore and its antecedents are united by a thread of experimentalism, repurposing electronics in unexpected ways, and embracing the failures and refusals of machines.

¹⁰³ Judith Rosen and Alan Shockley, “Carlos, Wendy,” *Grove Music Online*, November 24, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Garnet Hertz, *Art + DIY Electronics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2023), 119.

¹⁰⁵ See 2017 YouTube video “An Intro to Circuit Bending” by user Switch & Lever for a demonstration of basic circuit bending techniques on a miniature toy keyboard (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJfTdD_5XyE).

¹⁰⁶ Kevin Driscoll and Joshua Diaz, “Endless loop: a brief history of chiptunes,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 2 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.096>.

Glitch Art Approaches and Embodied Listening

Glitch artist and theorist Michael Betancourt divides glitch art approaches into five broad categories which are summarized below. Each originated as the “unexpected and aberrant behaviors of machinic systems proceeding autonomously,” but have since been selectively deployed by glitch artists for artistic purposes.¹⁰⁷ Musical artists have employed various approaches to glitch through each of these categories via interactions with the physical and data-driven aspects of sound.

Michael Betancourt’s Sources for Material Function

1. Data Manipulation – Transformation/corruption of the data constituting a digital file
 - Causes: weather interference, loss of data in file compression, transient errors in code, software mismatch
 - Effects: cascading failure, distorted motion, drop-outs in video feeds
2. Misalignment – Mismatch of data and software
 - Causes: incorrectly decompressing a compressed file, reading one type of data through a mismatched application (e.g., reading an audio file as video or vice versa)
 - Effects: transformation of data, semantically incorrect movements/sounds
3. Hardware Failure – Degradation or damage to the device reading the data
 - Causes: damage to hardware through water, weather, cracks, dust, impact; deliberate manipulation of hardware through circuit bending, e.g.
 - Effects: Interruption of continuity, distortion, overlapping images/sounds
4. Misregistration – Degradation of a physical storage medium for data
 - Causes: dirt, scratches, smudges, cracks
 - Effects: noise, interruption, distortion
5. Distortion – Problems with presentation media such as screens or speakers
 - Causes: magnetic or electrical interference, warping of speaker frames or cones
 - Effects: color/sound distortion, static, noise

Betancourt also provides a helpful graphic depicting distinctions between hardware and software glitches, as well as the extent of damage to the source file.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

THE SOURCES FOR MATERIAL FUNCTION

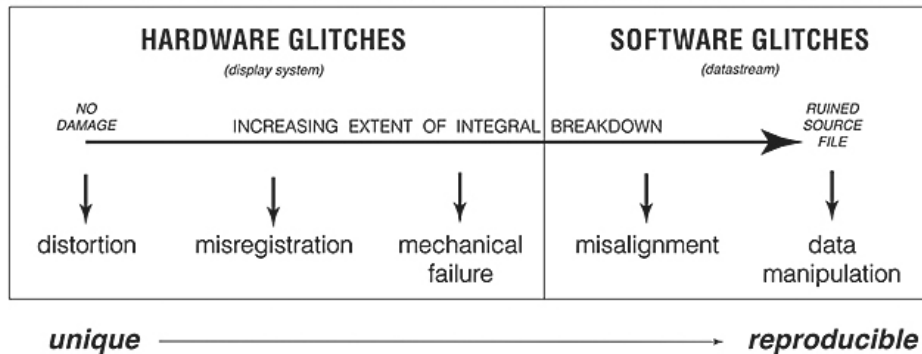


Figure 3.3. Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice*¹⁰⁸

What might constitute an “analog” vocal glitch? Radio broadcasters have borrowed the term to describe mistakes in diction.¹⁰⁹ In true posthuman fashion, we can draw parallels between the glitches of software, hardware, and signal chain processing and interruptions of the body’s physical processes through means which are variously internal, external, voluntary, and involuntary. I conceive of these parallels as follows:

Embodied Parallels of the Sonic Glitch

1. External signal distortion
 - Causes: physical obstruction to vocal sound, e.g., voice underwater¹¹⁰
 - Effects: inaudible, muffled, or distorted voice
2. Involuntary physical
 - Causes: choking, coughing, bubble in throat, hiccups, apraxia, aphonia
 - Effects: interruption or distortion of sound, limited or lack of ability to produce sounds
3. Voluntary physical
 - Causes: vocal fry, overuse, growling, voice break, repetition

¹⁰⁸ Michael Betancourt, “Glitch Art in Theory and Practice,” *Cinegraphic*, May 20, 2016. <https://www.cinegraphic.net/article.php?story=20160520143014412>.

¹⁰⁹ Boothman, “What is a Glitch?”

¹¹⁰ See Nina Eidsheim’s “Music and Material Dependency” from *Sensing Sound*.

- Effects: changes to vocal timbre, damage to voice, controlled application (e.g., yodeling)
4. Incoming signal chain error
 - Causes: phonological awareness difficulties, Wernicke's aphasia, auditory agnosia, semantic satiation, mismatch of received image and expected sound
 - Effects: delayed or inhibited processing, mismatch negativity, category crisis, loss of meaning
 5. Outgoing signal chain error
 - Causes: stuttering, tripping over words, diction mistake, Broca's aphasia, mismatch of self-concept and voice
 - Effects: Loss of meaning, confusion, dysphoria

Musicians may apply Betancourt's glitch art approaches to imitate analog vocal glitches, or vice versa. For example, digital distortion of a vocal line may sound similar to a growl or scream, or a stuttering/repetition of a phoneme may imitate a hardware failure or misregistration in a mechanical audio medium.

Although the transhuman timbral palette of glitchcore tests the limits of our ability to embody sounds (see Nagel and Cox in Chapter 1), these sonic parallels give evidence that mimetic motor imagery is still present, even in the most technologically mediated vocal lines. I believe veridical engagement with glitchcore is possible.

TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE employs glitched approaches to the voice in deeply affecting ways to express her journey through gender dysphoria, transition, and self-acceptance. Her songs "MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD," "i'm two years on hormones and i'm still sad i want a refund," and "mirrorsong*" form a three-part arc through *FEMININITY.EXE* and *i guess i'm a woman now...* The songs share musical parallels which unite them as a conceptual arc, while the voice acts as a distinguishing factor between them to reflect various self-concepts.

“MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD”

The third track on her debut mixtape *FEMININITY.EXE*, “MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD” is a vulnerable exploration of gender dysphoria.¹¹¹ The lyrics (included in Appendix A and Table 3.1) feature the internal monologue of an individual who feels a sharp dissonance between their self-concept and their reflection. The speaker inhabits a body that fails to meet the societally constructed standards of femininity: petite physical form (with the appropriate feminine curves) and immaculate makeup (with the requisite natural beauty). For the speaker, these failures are not only aesthetic shortcomings, but failures to be a woman altogether (“what makes you think that you’re a lady?”). Tension exists within this frame, however. The later verses express a skepticism of gender as a concept (“Maybe it’s all fake”) and a persistence of self-care in the midst of self-loathing (the speaker mentions speaking to a therapist). These multifarious experiences underscore a tension between one’s own experience of gender and the perception of the outside world. While the speaker may feel “so girly it hurts,” it is the act of externalized perception (the mirror, the societal gaze) that causes dysphoria. McKenzie’s applications of the glitch aesthetic and pitch shifting to this track highlight particularly affective moments to signify the experience of dysphoria.

Per Betancourt’s paradigm, McKenzie employs the glitch effects of Misalignment, Misregistration, and Distortion. Symbolically, these approaches to a glitch aesthetic can be read as various aspects of gender dysphoria. Misalignment, indicating an incompatibility between hardware and software, can be reinterpreted as a dissonance between self-concept and physical

¹¹¹ “MFW” is shorthand for “my face when,” indicating a reaction to a particular situation. The emoticons that follow are associated with early 2000s scene culture, depicting a cat-like smile (:3), a playful tongue out (:P) and a laughing face with squinted eyes (xD). Thus, McKenzie is referring to her reaction to seeing her reflection. These expressions juxtaposed with McKenzie’s vulnerable lyrics underscore a complex relationship with self-concept and dysphoria.

form. Misregistration, indicating damage to the data storage medium, again seats the glitch within the body, reflected through the expressed desire for gender-affirming surgery in the third verse. While these two approaches to glitch lean into the pathologized aspects of the trans experience, distortion seats the glitch in the act of projection. The data is not corrupt, nor is the body, only the way it is projected outward. Distortion is the “fault” of the amplification medium. Another way of conceptualizing this timbral product is through the use of Wallmark’s “blockage schema” — a model that examines the impact of obstruction on timbre. Blockage occurs when the effort required to produce a sound is impeded by a physical force, such as the limit of the body’s abilities or a voluntary blockage tool such as a mute.¹¹² In the context of Cox’s mimetic hypothesis, the sound of blockage connotes effort, stoppage, and obstruction. Throughout “MIRRORZ,” McKenzie’s voice exhibits timbral signs that mimic blockage through distortion and forced cessation of sound. Interpreted metaphorically, this blockage signifies the barrier between McKenzie’s interior identity and her desired exterior presentation, or between her self-perception and the perception of cisnormative society. A complete timeline of the pairings of events and sonic qualities for “MFW MIRRORZ” can be found in Table 3.1. I will highlight a few specific moments here that are particularly emblematic of McKenzie’s use of glitch to signify dysphoria.

Table 3.1. Analysis of “MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P XD”

Section	Time Stamp	Event/Lyric	Sonic Qualities
Intro	0:00	Two short, stuttering pulses of distorted sound	Similar to CD skip or other auditory interference, mimicking hardware failure or misregistration

¹¹² Wallmark, *Noise*, 64–67.

	0:02	Meter established – electric guitar; noise layer fades in	Distorted tone in guitar line
	0:19	Keyboard, drums, ambient background noise continues	Distorted tone in instrumentals
	0:36	Silence	Sonic envelope of instrumental line is extremely clipped; silence is sudden
Verse 1	0:37	“Oh fuck you / you’re 6’2” and so fucking ugly baby / you must be crazy”	Sonic envelope of vocal line is extremely clipped (see Fig. 3.3), some consonants have a slightly stuttered beginning, esp. on “crazy”
	0:52	“If you think that you’ll pass / no tits no ass / what makes you think that you’re a lady? / I’m sorry baby”	Voice sounds pitched up and very bright, esp. on “no tits no ass”
	1:10	Instrumental interlude (similar to 0:19)	Noise layer is more present in the mix
	1:27	“Maybe it’s all fake / Maybe that’s self-hate / Emailed my therapist it won’t get clearer / Put my lip gloss on, something still feels wrong / Holy shit I fucking hate that mirror”	Voice sounds distant, pitched up, overbalanced by instrumentals
Verse 2	1:44	“Your makeup’s shit, you should just quit / Pretend to be a fucking...”	Vocals suddenly much more present in the mix
	1:52	“guy again”	Vocal and instrumental line suddenly dramatically dampened
	1:56	“Don’t you cry again”	Vocal and instrumental lines slowly become clearer
	2:01	Distorted bass hit followed by silence	
Verse 3	2:02	“You’re so confused, no one wants you / A tranny bitch who wants her dick removed / You’re gross and boring too” + Distorted drum and bass hits	Two vocal lines: one pitched up and melodic, another screaming and distorted, panning rapidly between left and right
Outro	2:16	Drums, keyboard reenter	Vocals dampened to the point of near unintelligibility

		“Maybe it’s all fake / Maybe that’s self-hate / Emailed my therapist it won’t get clearer / Put my lip gloss on, something still feels wrong / Holy shit I fucking hate that mirror”	
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The first second of “MFW MIRRORZ” features two clipped punctuations of noisy, static-like sound. On first listen, this sound imitates a CD skipping, placing this glitch effect in Betancourt’s Misregistration category. The halting motion of this moment imitates an interruption of motion, a sonic “double take,” mimicking the sensation of seeing a reflection which does not match one’s self-concept. McKenzie applies this halting sensation to the voice, as well. Notice the hard-clipped sonic envelopes present in the vocal line as demonstrated in Figure 3.3. The voice does not decay naturally but is sharply cut off. This embodied parallel of this sudden interruption of sound may mimic an involuntary physical stoppage of the voice via a glottal stop or other forced cessation of vocalization. The unnatural sharpness of this stoppage is so pronounced that it mimics the sound of choking or struggling to keep one’s head above water, embodying a struggle to express oneself via physical or metaphorical blockages.

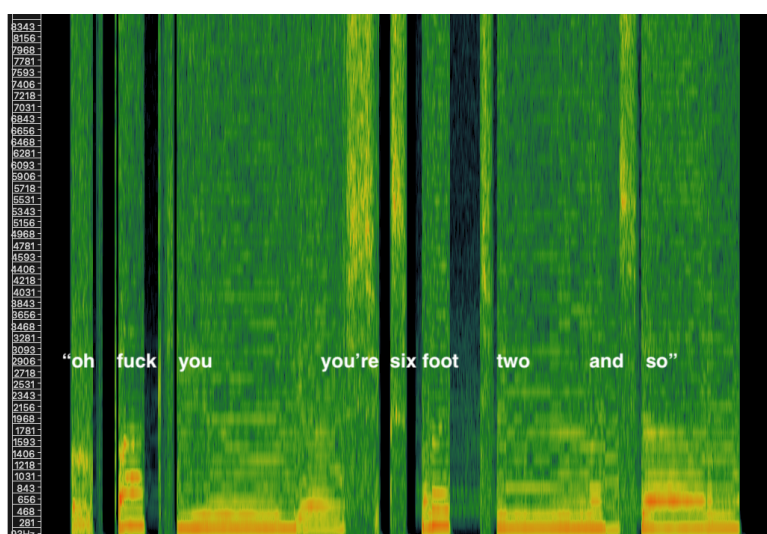


Figure 3.4. Dramatic stoppage of sound, “MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD,” 0:35-0:41

Despite these feelings of dysphoria expressed in this verse, McKenzie intimates sonically that trying to live as a man again would be more distressing:

Your makeup's shit
You should just quit,
pretend to be a fucking guy again.
Don't you cry again.

Upon singing “guy again,” the voice is dramatically dampened via a low pass filter. This creates a sensation of distance and dampening through barriers, again embodying the impact of blockage or external signal distortion. In this case, this muffled sound signifies the blockage between McKenzie’s interior experience and exterior presentation when performing a gender that is not authentic to her sense of self. The muffled quality of the sound in this moment connotes feelings of isolation and estrangement.

McKenzie employs heavy distortion (another of Betancourt’s paradigms) throughout the track, rendering the instrumental and vocal lines incredibly noisy. Perhaps the noisiest moment in the track occurs at 2:02, at which point McKenzie’s sung line is doubled by a screaming voice in the background, underscored by distorted bass hits. The lyrics here reflect the peak of self-loathing in the song, and the distorted sonic palette contributes to this deeply affective moment. From an embodied cognition perspective, the listener’s mimetic motor response to this sound recruits sensations of effort, pain, and physical exertion. The synthetic application of distortion in the DAW, however, takes a familiar sensation of effort and heightens it to an impossible extreme, generating a transhuman timbre of exertion beyond the body’s ultimate limit.¹¹³ Thus, through empathetic engagement with the technologically mediated voice, we are able to embody an imagined sensation that exceeds our own performance abilities.

¹¹³ See Wallmark’s “ultimate limit” schema: *Nothing but Noise*, 67.

McKenzie also alters the sound of her voice in this track through pitch shifting. While early drafts of “MIRRORZ” featured an unaltered voice, she ultimately decided to shift the vocal pitch upward. In describing the process of producing the track, McKenzie notes:

The whole track is pitched up because I finished the song, and it was like in my natural register, and it was way slower and very droning, and then I listened to it over and over again and I just hated my voice in it. It was so low, and I got so dysphoric about it. But at this point I was in the mastering stage, and the idea of re-recording vocals for it was truly a nightmare, because recording vocals is very difficult for me. And so, I was like “okay, we’re pitching this up by four semitones!” And that’s the song. So it was very much ... putting a band-aid on this dysphoria, right?¹¹⁴

In discussing early experiments with altering the pitch of her voice, McKenzie underscores the euphoric potential of hearing a voice which is in alignment with one’s gender identity. Unaware of the latent dysphoria around her voice, McKenzie expressed surprise at the affirmation she felt upon first hearing her voice in a higher pitch.

I think before you realize you’re trans, the dysphoria is there, and you don’t know it’s dysphoria. It’s Plato’s allegory of the cave. This thing that you’ve lived with your entire life, that’s the shadow on the wall. You can’t imagine anything else. I think for me personally, that first formant shifting was like “whoa, there’s stuff outside this cave!” Less so, “I feel terrible about my voice, let me fix it” and more like, “I feel better about myself, why is that?”¹¹⁵

In Malawey’s survey of timbre studies, musical noise indicates semiotic interpretations of distortion as diverse as exertion, danger, domination, and malevolence.¹¹⁶ Wallmark adds madness to this list¹¹⁷, and Attali theorizes noise as that which troubles systems of power.¹¹⁸ McKenzie synthesizes these aesthetics in this particularly noisy verse, and simultaneously

¹¹⁴ Cleo McKenzie, Zoom interview with Frances Pinkham, April 10, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Malawey, *Blaze of Light*, 135.

¹¹⁷ Zachary Wallmark, “The Sound of Evil: Timbre, Body, and Sacred Violence in Death Metal,” in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, eds. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹⁸ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

introduces a new paradigm to this list. Here glitch and distortion become signifiers of the pain and disorientation of dysphoria. The processing of her voice combined with unpredictable skips and silences unsettles the listener, telegraphing her interior experience that engenders an empathetic response.

“i’m two years on hormones and i’m still sad i want a refund”

The sonic palette of “MFW MIRRORZ” plays to McKenzie’s early musical experiences as a teenager in the hardcore punk scene in rural Arkansas. When she began working on *FEMININITY.EXE*, her intention was to create a punk album, employing what she describes as the masculinist, anti-pop aesthetic of hardcore punk. McKenzie says of her youth, “It felt like pop music wasn’t accessible to me, because I was like, ‘a man’ you know, and it was like ‘too feminine.’”¹¹⁹ While early versions of “MIRRORZ” were written in a softer, acoustic ballad style, McKenzie scrapped the softer drafts in favor of the noisy, distorted sonic palette of punk. In the first track on her full-length album *i guess i’m a woman now...*, McKenzie returns to the softer sonic palette she had initially used on “MIRRORZ.”

“I’m two years on hormones and i’m still sad i want a refund” reflects McKenzie’s evolving relationship with her voice as she progresses through her physical transition.¹²⁰ At the time of recording, McKenzie described her relationship with the process of transitioning as something akin to reaching new levels in a videogame. After two years on hormones, however, she still expresses dissatisfaction: “At some point, it was like I beat all the levels that there were to beat, and then I unlocked all the achievements, and I still didn’t feel like I won. I still felt

¹¹⁹ McKenzie, interview.

¹²⁰ The melody of this song is similar to “Wicked Little Town” from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, possibly a reflection of McKenzie’s experience growing up in a conservative rural area.

terrible, and I still hated myself.”¹²¹ The lyrics in “hormones” reflect this feeling of stagnant dysphoria leading to self-isolation and self-harm. Later tracks on the album address struggling with an eating disorder (“clean plate club”) and fantasies of physical mutilation (“morbid obsession”).

At this stage in her transition, the narrator embraces a cartoonish version of femininity as a means of coping with this persistent dysphoria. This is reflected in a vocal line that is pitched upwards, Auto-Tuned, and dramatically formant shifted, producing a sound McKenzie describes as “so uncannily high and femme that it feels like some weird little alien” and “splattered ... in pink.”¹²² In spite of the cartoonish chipmunk voice, an underlying sadness permeates the track. In some moments, the vocal line seems to falter and quiver, as in the section from 1:35–1:53, which contains some of the most emotive lyrics:

When I look into her eyes,
I see his dying wish come true.
But through all this pink,
I still can’t seem to stave off all the blue

The words “dying wish” and “blue” feature pitch correction and distortion, highlighting the earnest pathos of this verse.

While nowhere near as noisy as “MIRRORZ,” “hormones” retains some level of distortion in its grainy, low fidelity sonic palette. Here, the muffled sound and occasional echoes signify feelings of estrangement and isolation. The use of acoustic guitar in place of the crunchy, distorted electric guitar of “MIRRORZ” cultivates a more subdued feeling. The final minute of the song features a sampled monologue by trans actress Hunter Shafer in the role of Jules from the show *Euphoria*. The final words of the monolog, “I feel like femininity conquered me,” are

¹²¹ McKenzie, interview.

¹²² Ibid.

clipped and distorted, returning to the dysphoric glitch aesthetic of “MIRRORZ.” Underneath the cartoonish exterior, feelings of isolation and dysphoria persist as the narrator depicts a toxic relationship with femininity and its unrelenting demands on presentation.

Table 3.2. Analysis of “i’m two years on hormones and i’m still sad i want a refund”

Time	Event/Lyric	Sonic Qualities
0:00	Gradual fade in of open 5 th on synth	
0:11	Crescendo of synth line and entrance of unintelligible vocals, bubbling sound	Vocals born out of electronic rumble, chopped and pitched up, panning right and left unpredictably
0:23	Sudden drop of instrumental/vocal line, gentle popping sound enters like a spinning record	
0:30	Gentle acoustic guitar establishes chord progression and meter	Low fidelity sound, some sonic distortion
0:46	“Can’t go outside, can’t love myself / Can’t even seem to love somebody else / Dissolve in total disconnection / It’s been two years / Your life’s plateaued / Somewhere along the way your progress slowed / Stall out at a busy...”	Chipmunk vocals pitched up and formant shifted with reverb; both guitar and vocals have a soft, low fidelity sound Same melody as “MIRRORZ”
1:14	“intersection”	Last syllable echoes
1:17	“If I check off enough boxes maybe / I’ll finally win / Paralyzed by the thought of losing / Self-abusing / I don’t know if it’ll end”	Guitar sound fidelity suddenly much higher, reduced noise; vocals remain consistent
1:35	“When I look into her eyes / I see his dying wish come true / But through all this pink I still can’t seem to stave off all the blue”	Added distortion, pitch correction, wobbling quality on “wish come true” and “blue”
1:53	Synth enters, acoustic guitar continues	Grace notes in synth line mimic breaks in processed vocal line
2:29	(spoken) “So, I was having this conversation with my friend. We were talking about how...”	Soft open 5 th on synth returns; low fidelity spoken line sampled from Hunter Schafer’s character on <i>Euphoria</i>
2:35	“I feel like my entire life, I’ve been trying to conquer femininity.”	Gradual entrance of noise, erratic sci-fi bleep bleeps
2:41	“And somewhere along the way...”	Bleep bleeps become more erratic and rapid, increased distortion, noise, feedback sound
2:53	“I feel like femininity conquered me”	Background noise drops out, spoken line very distorted and noisy; “me” is clipped before the word is finished

“mirrorsong*”

The closing track on *i guess i'm a woman now...*, “mirrorsong*” begins similarly to “hormones,” with a sustained open fifth and bubbling, sci-fi sound effects. The voice that enters, however, is the most raw and unaffected of all in this three-part arc. Early drafts of “mirrorsong*” were dramatically different from the finished product:

For that first half of the song, we had a whole different lush string instrumentation, and we had formant shifted vocals there too, and it was this whole big kind of melodramatic thing, but it didn't feel right...we just brought in an iPhone recording demo for that first half. This very raw, very stripped back, completely unaffected, besides some slight distortion and filtering and stuff. Just sitting with the song with no bells and whistles for at least that first half, and then kind of opening it up and having this really melodramatic second half breakdown.¹²³

The return to a less technologically processed voice in “mirrorsong*” reflects a gradual move toward self-acceptance, which is underscored by the more encouraging lyrics. “Don't you cry again,” a lyrical callback to “MIRRORZ,” takes on a different tone here, shifting from self-bullying to self-soothing. “mirrorsong*” eschews the obsession with surface-level, cartoon femininity and embraces the truth of one's interior knowledge of the self.

The second half of the song introduces new melodic material to the three-part arc. McKenzie enters again with vocals which feature some manipulation via formant shifting and pitch correction but are nowhere near as modified as those on “hormones” or as distorted as “MIRRORZ.” The “weird little alien” voice acts as a backup singer in this section; while the unrealistic expectations of cartoon femininity persist, McKenzie begins to harmonize with this inner voice. The two find common ground in a tongue-in-cheek moment in which the two voices sing in unison: “Womanhood is pain.”

¹²³ “mirrorsong*” TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE feat. messyroom*

Table 3.3. Analysis of “mirrorsong*”

Time	Event/Lyric	Sonic Qualities
0:00	Sci-fi bleep-bloops, oscillating fifths followed by rapid pitch ascent and skipping sound	
0:23	“It’ll be all right / It’ll be okay / You can start to slowly like yourself again. / Dissolve into your own reflection. It’ll be all right / It’s gonna be okay / Your outward appearance doesn’t matter anyway / If you don’t live to see the day. And I love you / And I see you staring back at me now / Got so used to the feeling of your breath down my neck / Even when you weren’t around. I can’t help but crack a smile / I don’t care if I look plain dumb / At the thought of you slowly disappearing underneath my tongue / doo doo doo... / Don’t you cry again”	Acoustic guitar and voice both recorded with a cell phone mic. No formant shifting or pitch alteration applied, only a light distortion filter adding to the low fidelity aesthetic. Occasional panning of sound between left and right Same melody and chord progression as “hormones,” along with a lyrical callback to “MIRRORZ” – “don’t you cry again”
2:01	Synth open fifth	Same sonority as opening of “hormones”
2:04	“Killing time, future’s...” new melody, acoustic guitar	Guitar sound much clearer, voice seems to be processed with pitch correction but is otherwise less processed than in “hormones”
2:08	“coming for me (coming for me)”	Echo of lyric in heavily formant shifted voice
2:12	“Let the past just pass away (pass away)”	Echo of lyric in heavily formant shifted voice
2:23	“It’s all right, I just know it will be (no, it’s okay)”	Background voice heavily formant shifted
2:33	“Anyway, whoa / Blood pumped full of estradiol (full of estradiol) / Who cares if you’re six feet tall? (if you’re six feet tall) / Stick another needle in the vein, yeah”	Bass enters, drum set, ballad style
2:54	“Drinking bright pink ethanol / Love the hurt...”	
3:00	“cause after all / Womanhood is pain”	Background formant shifted voice and main voice connect
3:10	“doo doo doo...”	Background voice drops out, bass and drums drop out, only voice and guitar

3:22	“Don’t you cry again / doo doo doo... / Don’t you cry again”	Second “cry” has a short break in the vocalization
3:47	Drone fades out	

Conclusion: Re-embodiment of the Glitch

In the case studies above, we see a three-part arc with a journey that is articulated through clear shifts in vocal production approach. In the initial “egg cracking” phase, noise and distortion signify the narrator’s dysphoria. This dysphoria persists even in transition, shifting to a cartoonish depiction of femininity that is telegraphed by an equally cartoonish chipmunk voice. Finally, more minimally processed voices signify a burgeoning self-acceptance. McKenzie, who adds that the TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE project is almost entirely autobiographical, states that early experimentation with formant and pitch shifting served as a “band-aid on dysphoria,” followed by an unhealthy obsession with physical appearance, namely a desire to be perceived as a cisgender woman. McKenzie’s decision to return to the melodic and harmonic material of “MIRRORZ” reflects a desire to re-engage with her dysphoria and meditate on her emotional journey through transition: “I’m reimagining that in this kind of softer sonic landscape, and then talking about letting go and being like, ‘it’ll be okay.’ This is basically a two-part album of [*i guess i’m a woman now...*] and [*FEMININITY.EXE*].” She lovingly teases her eighteen-year-old self: “It’s me looking back on that first album and being like ‘Girl, come on!’ You know?”

Throughout this process, McKenzie resists the trope of equating the heavily processed voice with a lack of authenticity. The resolution in “mirrorsong*” is not signified by an entirely acoustic recording; an element of vocal manipulation remains in the form of pitch correction and minor timbral manipulation. In this way, McKenzie does not intimate that the key to self-

acceptance is to eschew any and all performance of gender via technological mediation. Indeed, this final verse embraces the use of hormones (“stick another needle in the veins... blood pumped full of estradiol”) while resisting societal pressures to perform femininity within a cisnormative frame (“your outward appearance doesn’t matter anyway... who cares if you’re six feet tall?”) The less affected opening verse indicates a sense of comfort within one’s body outside of gendered performance, while embracing tools of affirmation through hormones and the technologically mediated voice. Manipulation of the voice may not be pushed to the same cartoonish extent as “hormones,” but it is present, nonetheless.

In the broader scope of artistic methods, McKenzie’s approach to vocal production in these three cases is emblematic of the affective potential of glitch and distortion in a sonic landscape. These approaches, while associated with technological intervention, are still deeply embodied in the listener. Cox’s work indicates that our perception of sound is fundamentally mimetic, recruiting our mirror neuron system to facilitate unconscious embodiment. Thus, sonic glitches have embodied analogs: we feel static and skips in our bodies, however abstractly. A suddenly truncated vocalization engenders a halting sensation of stoppage. Heavy distortion activates the ragged feelings of vocal fry and overuse. Technological mediation, however, heightens these sensations and allows us to embody experiences beyond what our bodies are capable of producing. Furthermore, Betancourt argues that glitch aesthetics combat the disembodiment of so-called lossless artistic media. Just as brushstrokes on a painting or graininess on a film recenter the production medium (and therefore the laborer who interfaced with it), sonic glitches and other manipulations remind us of the physical and technical aspects of music production.

McKenzie embraces the political potential of glitch, using noisy distortion and blockage as sonic metaphors for grating against cisnormative societal expectations. In the spirit of Michael Brooks's argument for glitch as a queering of sound, McKenzie's dramatic modifications to the voice halt and unsettle the listener's expectations for vocal production. Her use of pitch and formant shifting to stretch the sonic markers of conventional femininity to absurd heights, prompting the listener to interrogate their own notions of what constitutes a "female" voice. Glitch as a metaphor for machinic refusal parallels the trans refusal to conform to cisnormative standards. Rather than simply manipulating her voice to conform to these sonic expectations, McKenzie uses glitched sounds to signify both dysphoria and a critical technological performance of femininity. These transhuman timbres challenge and expand the boundaries of both our veridical engagement and our concept of the gendered voice.

CHAPTER IV

MERRILL GARBUS'S CRITIQUE OF WHITE FEMININITY

While Electra and McKenzie are public about their gender identities, lead singer of Tune-Yards Merrill Garbus is less forthcoming. In a 2015 interview with the *Dallas Morning News*, Garbus states, “I don’t feel like the most feminine woman ever and I often identify with male characteristics and feel, you know, like queer often speaks to me more than just straight, heterosexual woman speaks to me.”¹²⁴ She describes gender as “an afterthought.”¹²⁵ In a 2018 article by Autostraddle, however, Garbus is listed as a “trans lesbian.”¹²⁶ Arts and culture website Talkhouse uses they/them pronouns in Garbus’s biography,¹²⁷ and other sources avoid pronouns altogether.¹²⁸ It seems legibility and identity-based labels are not a priority for Garbus. Her presentation is androgynous, often sporting a natural mustache and a plethora of variously gendered hair and wardrobe styles. Thus, although Garbus is not explicitly trans in her own words, she seems to prefer a genderqueer aesthetic, openly referring to herself as queer with regards to her gender and sexuality. In its most expansive application, the designation of GNC refers to cisgender individuals who do not conform to gender norms. Merrill Garbus is one such

¹²⁴ Tracy Ricciardi, “Indie band Tune-Yards doesn’t align with genre, gender stereotypes – and they’re proud of it,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 7, 2015, <https://www.dallasnews.com/arts-entertainment/music/2015/04/07/indie-band-tune-yards-doesn-t-align-with-genre-gender-stereotypes-and-theyre-proud-of-it/>

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Abeni Jones, “Your New Favorite Music by Queer and Trans Artists Out This Month,” Autostraddle, February 1, 2018, <https://www.autostraddle.com/new-music-by-queer-and-trans-artists-to-check-out-this-month-409120/>

¹²⁷ “Bio,” Talkhouse, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.talkhouse.com/artist/merrill-garbus/>

¹²⁸ “Merrill Garbus,” New Amsterdam Records, 2019, accessed December 3, 2023. <https://www.newamrecords.com/composers/merrill-garbus>

individual. Although she applies the term “woman” to herself and uses she/her pronouns, she does so with a healthy dose of skepticism around these labels.

Despite this skepticism, Garbus acknowledges the impact of her socialization as a woman, particularly in concert her whiteness. In the 2018 Tune-Yards album *I can feel you creep into my private life*, Garbus explores the ramifications of this socialization and its accompanying privilege. The album is deeply introspective, mining the depths of Garbus’s self-interrogation, personal fears, and grappling with racism in her artistic and personal life. Garbus’s vocals are not as distorted or otherwise timbrally modified as Electra or McKenzie, she uses the post-production technologies of sound spatialization, layering, and reverberation heavily in her productions. “Now as Then” and “Colonizer” from *private life* showcase the ways Garbus harnesses these techniques to critique whiteness and white womanhood.

Femininity and Whiteness

It is important to note that the gender binary as addressed thus far in this project has been constructed around Eurocentric characteristics and enforced globally through European colonial hegemony. Numerous cultures have historically recognized gender identities that exist outside of a binary.¹²⁹ The Western concept of femininity, however, has historically been constructed around whiteness. Black female bodies have long been pathologized and treated as curiosities by white society. Consider the case of Saartje Baartman (deemed the “Hottentot Venus”) whose body was treated as a curiosity for display throughout Europe during the Victorian era and frequently portrayed in gross caricature. Nineteenth-century anatomists W.H. Flower and James

¹²⁹ To learn more about global gender diversity, see this interactive map and accompanying article: “A Map of Gender-Diverse Cultures.” https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/

Murie described women in the Cape of Good Hope as having “remarkable development of the labia minora ... sufficiently well marked to distinguish these parts from those of any *ordinary varieties* of the human species.”¹³⁰ Body compositions associated with people of color were similarly pathologized beginning in the 18th century, namely the presence of “big bellies” associated with individuals of African descent.¹³¹ Black bodies, and especially Black female bodies, have been considered to have an excess of secondary sex characteristics in comparison to white female bodies, leading to their hypersexualization in white society.¹³²

Despite this “excessive” femaleness, however, enslaved Black women were expected to perform the same labor as their male counterparts, a degradation of which they were keenly aware. Bell hooks notes that the eighteenth-century “Cult of True Womanhood,” which cast women as delicate creatures in need of protection and support by their husbands, did not escape the awareness of enslaved Black women, who then “bitterly resented that they were not considered ‘women’ by the dominant culture.”¹³³ Both physically and culturally, Black women’s bodies have been pathologized and excluded from femininity.

Merrill Garbus and Whiteness

Much of Garbus’s early music is indebted to sonic influences from Mali, South Africa, Haiti, and American hip-hop.¹³⁴ Part of her early visual aesthetic included wearing face paint, a practice for

¹³⁰ W.H. Flower and James Murie, quoted in Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (October 1994): 252. Emphasis mine.

¹³¹ Sabrina Strings, “How the Use of BMI Fetishizes White Embodiment and Racializes Fat Phobia,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 7 (July 2023): 535.

¹³² Somerville, “Scientific,” 252.

¹³³ Bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 49.

¹³⁴ Mary Louise Kelly and Monika Evstatieva, “Tune-Yards ‘Private Life’ Is A Public Self-Examination,” *NPR*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/18/578433496/tune-yards-private-life-is-a-public-self-examination>

which she was heavily critiqued, given its pairing with the band's African-inspired rhythms. By the time of *private life*, Garbus abandoned the practice. In a 2018 interview, she said she had “a lot to answer for when it comes to cultural appropriation,” and that she was “growing up publicly” through this evolution.¹³⁵ Garbus is very open about her personal introspection around antiracism. While her initial concept of antiracist work involved attempting to understand and empathize with the Black experience, *private life* places a spotlight on whiteness: how it is constructed, what privileges it holds, and the way it functions in the world:

What whiteness does is it's kind of a vacuum of culture...because it isn't real. Cultures that are now described as white were put there for a very political reason, and for economic reasons. I'm just beginning to explore, as a white person, how disconnected I am from the cultures that I come from, and where this idea of whiteness comes from.¹³⁶

The tracks I analyze below center these aspects of whiteness, namely the tendency to colonize and appropriate other cultures while absolving oneself of wrongdoing and claiming innocence. Garbus is particularly critical of the way white femininity contributes to these patterns.

“Now as Then”

Garbus cites “Now as Then” as one of her most vulnerable works on the album. The lyrics perform a dialogue between two aspects of the self. The first persona assumes innocence and claims to be an exception to damaging patterns of white privilege (“I’m exceptional / I’m an exception... Tell me I’m special / They might look like me, but they don’t know”) while simultaneously consuming and appropriating other cultures (“That’s for me, that’s also for me / Man I wanna take you home”). The second persona is more self-critical, offering a warning:

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

“Don’t trust me / That I won’t take all the money and run.” These two personae, the innocent and the self-critical, receive distinct vocal treatment in post-production through the elements of sound spatialization reverberation, and layering.

Based on postproduction mixing, panning, and filtering effects, listeners perceive recorded sounds as occurring in different locations in relation to themselves. Producers can pan a sound left or right, for example, and may confer a sense of distance from the listener. These effects place the vocal line in various *proxemic zones* as conceptualized by Allan Moore. Various levels of timbral clarity and perceived effort to project the vocal line place the voice in the “intimate, personal, social, and public” zones, according to increasing perceived distance from the listener.¹³⁷ The intimate zone, for example, features clearly audible breaths, mouth sounds, and other vocal elements that are only perceptible from a close distance. Through technological mediation, these sounds have the potential to achieve spatial positioning that is not replicable in a live performance (for example, rapid panning of a sound from left to right), thus rendering recorded and live performances distinct and adopting a transhuman aesthetic.

The first verse of “Now as Then” uses sonic spatialization and proxemic zones to signify white privilege. The innocent persona features a speechlike delivery, declaring itself exceptional. Each line occupies a distinct space, shifting back and forth in perceived distance from the listener based on the amount of timbral clarity present in the voice in the first three lines. It then pans rapidly from right to left on “That’s for me, that’s also for me.” For most of these lines, the listener hears the voice in great detail. This forwardness places the voice in the intimate zone, which in this case feels invasive, presumptuous, and needy (“Tell me I’m special”). The feeling of being surrounded by a single voice is disconcerting. This can be read as a comment on the

¹³⁷ Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012), 186–88.

pervasiveness of white entitlement globally and its tendency to perform as a “vacuum of culture” per Garbus’s conception. In a track-by-track analysis of the album for *All Songs Considered*, Garbus critiques this tendency in white artists:

With all the compassion in my heart, I just want to say to white people sampling others’ music: what you’re engaging in is colonialism. Name it for what it is. Especially given the power dynamic today, with greater restrictions on entering the U.S. There’s so much less access for musicians of color to say, “Hey, glad you like it! Now I get to make money touring in your country.”¹³⁸

The sonic omnipresence of the innocent voice thus serves as a metaphor for colonialism, entitlement, and appropriation.

Layering also contributes to the song’s affective aims. This post-production technique involves layering iterations of the singer’s voice atop one another through multiple recorded tracks or duplication and manipulation of a single vocal track. Philip Brophy says of this technique, “The voice becomes all that it cannot be in order to engineer choruses of mirrored selves,” allowing the artist to “escape from staking [their] humanity over and above the music that transforms [them.]”¹³⁹ This transhuman approach to the voice allows the artist to perform the impossible for affective ends. In the case of “Now as Then,” vocal layering highlights feelings of self-reflection, self-criticism, and an inner monologue.

The first instance of layering occurs in the pre-chorus, in which Garbus warns the listener: “Don’t trust me [single voice] / That I won’t take all the money and run [layered, at least four voices].” The first half of this line marks a dramatic affective shift in the song; up to this point, the voice has been largely speechlike and intimate. Here, Garbus shifts into a sustained

¹³⁸ Ann Powers, “Tune-Yards’ Merrill Garbus Pierces Her Own Privilege,” *All Songs Considered*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2018/01/19/578822264/tune-yards-merrill-garbus-pierces-her-own-privilege#>. (NPR really loved this album.)

¹³⁹ Philip Brophy, “Vocalizing the Posthuman,” in *V0ICE: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, eds. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2010), 363, 366.

portamento as she switches from her innocent persona to her self-critical side. In terms of proxemic zones, this moment takes us from the intimate to the public, as Garbus increases her dynamic, increases the perceived distance from the listener, and sings with a seemingly large chorus. The layering on the second half of the line embodies Brophy's notion of the "mirrored selves" as Garbus looks into her own reflection and sees a tendency to profit from appropriation. She comments on this introspective realization:

Something that I am really trying to come to grips with is that I'm actually not to be trusted as a white woman by many people in this society, and that drives me to earn that trust.... But this is a case where I felt, it's almost like a warning: I will tend to forget that I'm white. I will tend to forget that I live in white supremacy. I'll tend to forget that I have all these privileges. And I need to turn the other direction and face the reality of who I am in this society.¹⁴⁰

A later instance of layering occurs in the chorus as a choir of doubled vocals provides a backdrop to Garbus's main vocal line: "Now as then, then as now." The meaning of this line can be interpreted several ways: as a continuity of societal racism or as a personal critique of one's own tendency to commit harm even after a period of self-reflection. In the first chorus, these layered voices sing the same text as the main vocal line. In the following chorus (beginning at 2:44), the text changes to "What if I don't feel it?" Given their backgrounded position in the mix, this moment gives the impression of an inner monologue expressing a fear of ignorance, with the group of voices functioning as a sort of Greek chorus commenting on the emotional content of the song. This text becomes less obscured in the outro, shifting to an outward expression of uncertainty rather than a private introspection.

Lastly, the application of reverb (or lack thereof) underscores various affective moments in the song. Reverberation can be generated through physical positioning or post-production

¹⁴⁰ Kelly, "Tune-Yards."

means. Recording artists can achieve this effect by placing the microphone further from the singer, using a reverberant recording space, analog reverb techniques (plate or spring reverb), or through digital signal processing in post-production. In a musical setting, reverb can signify a multitude of affects including grandeur, distance, emotional emptiness, nostalgia, and meditative practices.¹⁴¹ Conversely, a lack of reverb can signify intimacy, privacy, and realism.¹⁴² In the case of “Now as Then,” the verses are mostly dry and lacking in reverb, contributing to the feeling of intimacy and invasiveness of the innocent persona. The climax of the song marks a dramatic change to this sonic texture.

As mentioned above, the pre-chorus and chorus are demarcated by a sustained, portamento voice that verges on wailing. Leading into the second chorus, Garbus ascends to the top of her range and sings, “I don’t wanna be a woman / If it means not being human.” The word “human” is sung with dramatic, ethereal reverb. This spatial effect gives the impression that Garbus is screaming into a vast, reverberant space. Here Garbus shifts the proxemic zone of the voice firmly from the intimate to the public as she expresses her deepest fears and frustrations. I read this lyric as a comment on the conflation of femininity and whiteness. If “woman” is constructed upon white colonialist notions, Garbus argues that it is antithetical to true humanity. Thus far, we have troubled the boundaries of what constitutes the human based on our relationship with technology. Here, Garbus embraces Sylvia Wynter’s posthuman distinction of the Western concept of Man (or in this case, Woman) from other ontologies of humanness. In this climactic moment, Garbus expresses a deep wish to reject femininity as it is constructed within a white supremacist frame.

¹⁴¹ Malawey, *Blaze of Light* 138–39; Michael Veal, “Starship Africa,” in *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 196–219.

¹⁴² Malawey, *Blaze of Light*, 139.

“Colonizer”

The darkest and most self-critical track on *private life* is titled “Colonizer.” In this piece, Garbus elaborates lyrically on the insidious power of the “white woman’s voice.”

I use my white woman’s voice to interpret my travels with African men
I turn on my white woman’s voice to
Contextualize acts of my white women friends
I cry my white woman tears carving
Grooves in my cheeks to display what I meant
I smell the blood in my voice
I smell the blood in my voice
Especially the blood in my voice
Especially the blood in my voice¹⁴³

Here Garbus explores the urge to tokenize minorities, the tendency to defend racist acts, the use of tears as a form of manipulation, and white feminine complicity in the atrocities of European colonialism. These qualities are distilled into a single element: the voice. As in the previous song, “Colonizer” features elements of spatiality, layering, and reverb to underscore the song’s lyrical themes.

When Garbus refers to the “white woman’s voice,” she addresses the way the white voice is privileged in society. In the absence of visual stimulus, a voice that is perceived to be white wields particular social and economic power: over the phone, white voices are more likely to obtain housing and employment opportunities.¹⁴⁴ The satirical 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* addresses this phenomenon, as the Black protagonist finds professional success in his telemarketing career when he subverts the acousmatic question by tapping into a “white voice.” Nina Eidsheim notes that in the case of the raced voice, “a timbre performed by one person is

¹⁴³ Tune-Yards, “Colonizer,” track 6 on *I can feel you creep into my private life*, 4AD, 2018, AIFF audio file.

¹⁴⁴ Eidsheim, *Race*, 173.

understood as essence ... while the same timbre performed by another person is understood as an imitation.”¹⁴⁵ The performance of a white voice, then, is at once something to be cultivated for personal safety and security yet is simultaneously considered disingenuous when adopted by nonwhite people. Thus, the racialized voice is learned, practiced, and strategically employed, with the white voice reflecting a dominant culture that is at once expected of and inaccessible to minoritized people.

To embody the notion of the “white woman’s voice,” Garbus employs a range of physical and studio production-based techniques. She describes her concept of this voice as “soft,” “sweet,” and “classical sounding,” which is especially uncanny when paired with the song’s disturbing lyrics.¹⁴⁶ Her voice is breathy and intimate; words often take a moment to emerge from unvoiced air. In terms of sonic spatialization, Garbus’s voice is positioned extremely close to the listener, conveying an unsettling intimacy. The sweetness of the voice expresses a sense of innocence and ignorance in the first verse (“I use my white woman’s voice to tell stories”), with an increased awareness of complicity by the end of the second verse (“I smell the blood in my voice”).

One of the most striking moments in the song comes in the form of a Bosnian lament performed by Moira Smiley. The raw affective power of Smiley’s performance, with sobbing vocal breaks and expressive, wordless pitch bending, expresses the horrors of Western colonial history. The high degree of reverb and backgrounding in the mix makes Smiley’s voice sound distant in comparison to Garbus, which is particularly jarring since Smiley sings at top volume while Garbus is practically whispering. The spatialization of these two voices places the voice of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴⁶ Jeannie Greeley, “Vocal Dynamics with Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards (Berklee Intervals),” Berklee College of Music, May 1, 2020, video, 3:58. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqhnGPNnWRk>

the colonial horrors at a distance, while the white woman's voice is unaffected. At times, the lament voice is layered, but rather than moving in tandem, the voices overlap in time and emanate from different sonic locations. From 2:34-2:58, the lament voice is unnaturally chopped, and heavy reverb and panning in this section contributes to a sense that the voice is emanating from multiple locations in relation to the listener. The overall impact of these production techniques is a sense of overwhelming horror coming from all sides in a large acoustic space.

Garbus's vocals are also doubled on the titular word, "colonizer." Here her soft and demure "white woman's voice" is matched with a deeper and darker voice, signifying the deceptive masculinist power behind this softness. White iterations of feminism are often critiqued for their failure to account for the experiences of women of color, emphasizing instead the pursuit of equality with white men as the ultimate goal of the movement, rather than seeking to dismantle structures of white masculine power. The effective application of layering in this unsettling moment signifies a sinister aspect of white femininity and its complicity in colonial structures.

Conclusion: Positionality of Sound and Self

Through the deft use of various aspects of sound engineering and post-production techniques, Garbus generates a sonic critique of white femininity. While her voice is not as timbrally modified as the explorations of the previous chapters, these techniques embody transhuman potentiality as the post-production effects deployed on *private life* facilitate an artistic product that exceeds what is possible to perform without technological mediation. Through vocal layering and spatial construction, Garbus crafts an acoustic space that dramatizes white privilege.

The intimate proximity of her voice and breathy, soft delivery comments on notions of what constitutes femininity as constructed by white culture, while heavy application of reverb conjures feelings of desperation and horror.

Garbus's skepticism toward rigid boundaries of gendered behavior, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, may help facilitate some objective distance in her introspective exploration of white femininity. She perceives this legacy as something that she *has* rather than something that she *is*. By acknowledging the white woman's voice as something that she "uses" and "turns on" rather than as an innate quality, she aligns her work with the notion of the racialized voice as conceived by Eidsheim, highlighting the ways the white voice is culturally constructed and can be deployed at will. Although Garbus may not adopt conventional notions of femininity as part of her identity and presentation, she acknowledges the privilege she holds because of this socialization and societal perception. *Private life* provides a powerful sonic meditation on this experience.

CHAPTER V:
EPILOGUE: TRANSNESS AND TRANSHUMANISM

In a political field whose limit and horizon is reproductive futurism, queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance, by figuring sexuality's implication in the senseless pulsions of that drive.

— Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*¹⁴⁷

As my friend Julian puts it, only half winkingly: “God blessed me by making me transsexual for the same reason God made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine, so that humanity might share in the act of creation.”

— Daniel Mallory Lavery, *Something that May Shock and Discredit You*¹⁴⁸

If, as Adriana Cavarero argues, the human voice does not deceive, then what is truth? Is it the body as given? Are the “elementary givens of existence” reflective of our ultimate truths?¹⁴⁹ Transness argues otherwise. Etymologically, *trans*- implies movement, growth, change, crossing, exceeding, and outgrowing. Trans is *becoming*. Queer theorist Clare Sears conceives of “trans” as a verb that embodies the process of moving through the world in ways that do not align with prescribed gender norms.¹⁵⁰ Transing says we are more than our fleshly contexts as given at birth and as socialized within a culture that privileges cisness as the norm.

In artistic, social, and cultural contexts, transing demonstrates an expansive imagination of what is possible. GNC individuals challenge the established boundaries of the gender binary,

¹⁴⁷ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 27.

¹⁴⁸ Daniel Mallory Lavery, *Something that May Shock and Discredit You* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹⁵⁰ Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

and in the case of the artists explored here, the very ontological boundaries of humanity. Artists can embrace a “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” between the human and the machine and remind us that our technology is no more than an expression, extension, and reflection of ourselves. Technology has the potential to help us manifest our imaginations and interiorities. It helps Cher perform in four places at once and Dorian Electra slip seamlessly through iterations of masculine, feminine, and androgynous selves. It allows Cleo McKenzie to have the therapeutic experience of hearing a voice that aligns with socially legible femininity and subsequently explore the extremes of this presentation to critique it. Even in the case of artists like Merrill Garbus who do not necessarily identify as trans, the power to manipulate the voice facilitates critical reflection on the intersectional conditions of race and gender.

I propose a new companion to transhumanism: TRANS-humanism. If transhumanism denotes the human in singularity with the machine, TRANS-humanism is the human in multiplicity via the machine, using technology creatively to refract the multitudinous facets of one’s interiority. Technology is not restricted to electronic equipment in this context: it can include various combinations of tool use and tool imbibement, from hormone replacement therapy to drag makeup to vocoders. Transhumanism is conceived as a present and future step in human evolution; TRANS-humanism entails becoming a fuller expression of oneself beyond the body as given.

Thus far, this project has primarily explored the means by which artists modify their voices through physical manipulation and post-production effects. TikTok has a swath of voice effects filters that alter the gendered presentation of the voice, and many users express experiencing gender euphoria through the use of these tools. The “Deep” and “Jessie” voice effects are especially popular for producing legibly masculine and feminine voices, respectively.

One transfeminine user applying a feminizing voice effect says, “If you ever see me doing a TikTok without this filter going forward, just assume I’m being held hostage because *god dang*.” The video description reads “it’s transphobic that I have to exist without this and the voice filter in real life tbh.”¹⁵¹

While these tools and the post-production effects explored above are useful in crafting one’s desired gender presentation and releasing it to the public as an edited product, what approaches exist to modify real-time production? Testosterone therapy is one approach to achieving this; social media is replete with videos of transmasculine individuals documenting their changing voice as their testosterone therapy progresses. As discussed in Chapter 1, however, estrogen therapy does not produce a corresponding effect for transfeminine individuals, and many trans people choose not to pursue hormone therapy for a variety of reasons. Real-time technological mediation may prove to be a useful tool in these instances. We are beginning to see more readily available opportunities to technologically modify the live voice. Cleo McKenzie modifies her vocal timbre in live performances using a TC-Helicon C1 Hardtune and Pitch Correction Pedal (Figure 5.1).¹⁵² The device includes a knob labeled “gender.”

Given our increasing opportunities for virtual interaction through video conferencing and livestream platforms (Zoom, Twitch, Instagram Live, etc.), real-time voice modification outside of the recording studio is not out of the realm of possibility. Live visual modification filters already exist on many of these platforms, allowing users to broadcast their desired personae to the world, whether in the form of a flattering facial filter or an impressive bookshelf as a backdrop. Legacy Russell problematizes the notion of the AFK world as inherently more “real”

¹⁵¹ @letsgolizbean, TikTok video, March 23, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@letsgolizbean/video/7213855160282582318?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7351565885032744491. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵² Cleo McKenzie, Interview.

than the online persona. A TRANS-humanist approach recasts the digital persona as merely another facet of our reality.



Figure 5.1. TC-Helicon Hardtune and Pitch Correction Pedal¹⁵³

Critiques and Caveats

The quest to present as legibly masculine, feminine, or androgynous can be critiqued as upholding cisnormative standards of gender. The prioritization of sonically passing as cis may have the unintended consequence of delegitimizing trans individuals who have neither the ability nor the desire to change their voices but still wish to be acknowledged in their professed gender identity. Indeed, there are GNC artists who proudly perform without modifying their voices: Lucia Lucas, Bobby Sanchez, and Big Freedia are notable examples of transfeminine individuals who have maintained voices that read as masculine in a cisnormative frame. Additionally, the trends of publicly documenting one's visual and vocal transition via hormone therapy have been critiqued as perpetuating medical self-surveillance, pathologizing transness, and reifying

¹⁵³ "TC-Helicon VoiceTone C1 Hardtune and Pitch Correction Pedal," Sweetwater, accessed May 9, 2024. <https://www.sweetwater.com/store/detail/VTC1--tc-helicon-voicetone-c>.

normative gender ideals.¹⁵⁴ While the desire to move through the world in a gender presentation that is legible within a cultural context is valid, it is worth critiquing the ways the tools used to accomplish this can perpetuate the very normative frameworks GNC individuals seek to challenge. The increasing availability of gendered facial and vocal filters may also generate pressure for individuals to perform in a particular way AFK.

With these important critiques in mind, I assert that the artists explored in this project deploy technology to explore vocal gender presentations that effectively challenge these norms. Electra's fluidity underscores the manipulability of the voice and the performativity of masculinity and femininity, while also generating timbres that exceed these boundaries altogether, what I call transhuman (or perhaps, TRANS-human) timbres. McKenzie's extreme manipulation of her voice in combination with a discussion of persistent dysphoria problematizes the direct association between a high-pitched voice and femininity. Garbus uses her vocal production to call our attention to the weaponization of white femininity. Just as notions of legibly gendered voices can perpetuate normative frames, they can also be employed with some level of distance and critical perspective.

In closing, I will share some personal reflections on the aims of this project. There is a trend in queer scholarship of conflating queerness with death and failure. This is a powerful and important rhetorical move that challenges the (re)productive capitalist agenda embedded in heteronormativity. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* recasts failure as a generative act that carves life paths outside of dominant social paradigms. For queer individuals who have felt like or been treated as failures for not marrying, reproducing, or performing in ways that are in alignment with societal norms, this is an empowering philosophical turn. Lee Edelman's *No*

¹⁵⁴ C. Ray Borck and Lisa Jean Moore, "This is My Voice on T: Synthetic Testosterone, DIY Surveillance, and Transnormative Masculinity," *Surveillance and Society* 17, no 5 (2019): 631–640.

Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive challenges the cultural obsession with the figurative Child who is “the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” and is deployed as a tool of “reproductive futurism” with the ultimate end of perpetuating censorship and heteronormativity.¹⁵⁵ In response, Edelman argues that queerness is synonymous with a cultural death drive as it challenges the reproductive familial unit as the primary organizing structure of communal relationships. Edelman qualifies this by acknowledging the existence of queer individuals who do marry and reproduce, and he does not reject the fight for the legal right for them to do so. He also notes that perceiving queerness as the death drive of the dominant social order leads to “the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally.”¹⁵⁶ All the same, this work treats death and the death drive largely as metaphorical or political concepts, with only passing acknowledgement of the very real threat to the lives of queer people that results from this conflation.

These philosophical stances are valid. (Re)productivity is not the sole purpose of humanity, and queerness has the power to challenge this dominant social paradigm. As I began writing this thesis, however, the queer community was coming together in collective grief over the violent attack and subsequent death of sixteen-year-old nonbinary child Nex Benedict. It was difficult for me to celebrate death, even as a radical metaphor, as synonymous with queerness in this context. I count myself among those who saw in the image of Nex a reflection of myself and my students. I have the distinct privilege of interacting with and teaching young queer and trans individuals daily. I would like to see their existences described in the same breath as vitality, freedom, and creativity. Perhaps this places me in the camp of those who spout “self-righteous bromides of liberal pluralism,” per Edelman’s description, but I firmly believe it is possible to

¹⁵⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

foreground queer life and queer joy in a way that does not mimic cis- and heteronormative societal structures, but creates something new, something TRANS-human.¹⁵⁷ The work of these GNC artists highlights the means by which queerness can exist as a generative force and challenge us to expand our concept of the human experience.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

APPENDIX A

COMPLETE LYRICS OF CASE STUDY SONGS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

“Androgynous”

Song by Paul Westerberg

Here comes Dick, he’s wearing a skirt
Here comes Jane, you know she’s sporting a chain
Same hair revolution, same build evolution
Tomorrow who’s gonna fuss

[CHORUS]

And they love each other so
Androgynous
Closer than you know, love each other so
Androgynous

Don’t get him wrong and don’t get him mad
He might be a father, but he sure ain’t a dad
And she don’t need advice that’ll center her
She’s happy with the way she looks, she’s happy with her gender

[CHORUS]

Mirror image, see no damage
See no evil at all
Kewpie dolls and urine stalls
Will be laughed at the way you’re laughed at now

Now, something meets boy, and something meets girl
They both look the same, they’re overjoyed in this world
Same hair revolution, unisex evolution
Tomorrow, who’s gonna fuss?
And tomorrow Dick is wearing pants, tomorrow Janie’s wearing a dress
Future outcasts and they don’t last
And today, the people dress the way that they please
The way they tried to do in the last centuries

[CHORUS]

“Kiss”

Song by Prince Rogers Nelson

You don't have to be beautiful
To turn me on
I just need your body, baby
From dusk 'til dawn
You don't need experience
To turn me out
You just leave it all up to me
I'm gonna show you what it's all about

[CHORUS]

You don't have to be rich
To be my girl
You don't have to be cool
To rule my world
Ain't no particular sign
I'm more compatible with
I just want your extra time and your
Kiss

Ah, oh-oh
You got to not talk dirty, baby
If you wanna impress me (ah)
You can't be too flirty, mama
I know how to undress me, yeah
I want to be your fantasy

Maybe you could be mine
You just leave it all up to me
We could have a good time, uh

[CHORUS]

Yes, oh-oh-oh-oh
Ah
I think I wanna dance
Uh
Ooh
Gotta, gotta, oh
Little girl Wendy's parade
Gotta, gotta, gotta
Women, not girls, rule my world
I said they rule my world
Act your age, mama (not your shoe size)
Not your shoe size
Maybe we could do the twirl
You don't have to watch Dynasty
To have an attitude, uh
You just leave it all up to me
My love will be your food
Yeah

[CHORUS]

“O Superman”

Song by Laurie Anderson

O Superman
O judge
O Mom and Dad
Mom and Dad
O Superman
O judge
O Mom and Dad
Mom and Dad

Hi, I'm not home right now
But if you want to leave a message
Just start talking at the sound of the tone

Hello, this is your mother
Are you there?
Are you coming home?
Hello, is anybody home?

Well, you don't know me, but I know you
And I've got a message to give to you
Here come the planes
So you better get ready, ready to go
You can come as you are, but pay as you go
Pay as you go

And I said, "Okay, who is this really?"
And the voice said
“This is the hand, the hand that takes

This is the hand, the hand that takes
This is the hand, the hand that takes”

Here come the planes
They're American planes
Made in America
Smoking or non-smoking?

And the voice said, “Neither snow nor rain
Nor gloom of night shall stay these couriers
From the swift completion of their appointed
rounds”

‘Cause when love is gone, there's always
justice
And when justice is gone, there's always
force
And when force is gone, there's always
Mom (hi Mom!)

So hold me, Mom, in your long arms
So hold me, Mom, in your long arms
In your automatic arms
Your electronic arms
In your arms
So hold me, Mom, in your long arms
Your petrochemical arms
Your military arms
In your electronic arms

“Believe”

Song by Brian Higgins, Steve Torch, and Paul Barry

After love, after love
After love, after love
After love, after love
After love, after love
After love, after love
After love, after love

No matter how hard I try
You keep pushing me aside
And I can't break through
There's no talking to you
It's so sad that you're leaving
It takes time to believe it
But after all is said and done
You're gonna be the lonely one, oh

[CHORUS]

Do you believe in life after love?
I can feel something inside me say
I really don't think you're strong enough, no
Do you believe in life after love?
I can feel something inside me say
I really don't think you're strong enough, no

What am I supposed to do?
Sit around and wait for you?
Well, I can't do that
And there's no turning back
I need time to move on
I need a love to feel strong
'Cause I've had time to think it through
And maybe I'm too good for you, oh

[CHORUS]

Well, I know that I'll get through this
'Cause I know that I am strong
And I don't need you anymore
I don't need you anymore
Oh, I don't need you anymore
No, I don't need you anymore

[CHORUS x2]

CHAPTER II: DORIAN ELECTRA AND POLYGENDROUS ABUNDANCE

“Career Boy”

Song by Dorian Electra and Will Vaughan

Career boy (career boy)
Working overtime (working overtime)
Career boy (I’m a career boy)
One thing on my mind (got one thing on my mind)

Cheap office coffee
Stays pumping through my veins (pumping through my veins now)
I work for the man, yeah
But you know I love the chains (I love the chains)

[PRE-CHORUS]

I can never fight the feeling, I stay up all night
Workin’ so hard after hours ‘til I see the sunlight
Stuck up in the office tower, you know it’s pure joy
And that’s my superpower, I’m a career boy

[CHORUS]

Career boy
You know they got me working overtime, yeah
Career boy
And you know I got that one track mind, oh-yeah

Even after I get what I want, I can see, baby-baby
That it’s lonely at the top, yeah
Career boy
Nothing is ever gonna make me stop

Business and pleasure
I like to mix the two (mix it up, mix it up)
Hangin’ in the break room
Mixin’ it with you

[PRE-CHORUS]

[CHORUS]

I’m addicted to the work, I
I love the way it hurts, I (uh)
The suits and pencil skirts
I get what I need ‘cause I’m greedy for it
‘Cause I’m addicted to the pressure
(addicted to the pressure)
Yeah, but the burden is a pleasure (burden is a pleasure)
Come on, hit me with your ledger
Close to the edge, face down on the desk,
I’m...

[CHORUS]

“Adam and Steve”

Song by Dorian Electra and Dylan Brady

In the beginning, there was the word
In nothing but darkness, God made the
world

In the beginning, there were just two
Made from the dust, like all of us
In the beginning, a four-letter word
L-O-V-E, meant nothing to me
But made in his image
We were born two of a kind, beginning of
time

[CHORUS]

And God made me
And he loves me, and he loves me
God made me and Adam and Steve
And he loves me, and he loves me
And God made me
And God made me
And he loves me, and he loves me
God made me, just like Adam and Steve
And he loves me, ‘cause God made me

And in the garden, they were both there
Smiling like children, without a care
And in the garden, up on the tree
They saw the fruit, for you and me
And in the garden, they took a bite
Ashamed of the truth, ashamed of the light
Cast into darkness

They would be damned for being a man
holding hands

[CHORUS]

They want to destroy me
They will all enjoy it
Say I’m an abomination, but I’m God’s
creation
They all want to crush me
Say I am so disgusting
Secretly, they love me
Just like him

And God made me
And he loves me, and he loves me
God made me and Adam and Steve
And he loves me, and he loves me
(God made me this way) God made me
And he loves me, and he loves me
(God made me gay)
And he loves me
‘Cause God made me (made me)

God made me and Adam and Steve
God made me, you’ve got to believe
God made me and Madam and Eve (Eve)
God made me, and he loves me

“Ram It Down”

Song by Dorian Electra, Christopher Greatti, Zachary Cervini, Michael Zarowny, and Katherine Zhang

D-D-Dorian Electra

Just keep it your secret behind closed doors
We don't want to see it, don't start a war
Keep it locked up tight, ah
Oh, what you do at night, ah
Just don't bring it out into the daylight

[PRE-CHORUS]

Ram it down

[CHORUS]

Hey, man, don't ram it down my throat
Can't take anymore
Hey, man, love who you want
But just don't ram it down my throat (hey)
Harder, farther, deeper
I can't breathe
Shove it, I love it
I want it
Please ram it down

Love wins a.k.a. sins, but hey, that's not my business
Just don't shove rainbows in my face
Even the Lucky Charms leprechaun wants to turn me gay

[PRE-CHORUS]

[CHORUS]

What up Tex?

Mariko

Ram it down

Ram it down, ram it down, ram it down
Ram it down, ram it down, ram it down
Ram it down, ram it down, ram it down
Ram it down, ram it down, ram it down
Be careful not to choke when I ram it down
Ram it down, ram it down, ram it down
Ram it down, ram it down, ram it down

CHAPTER III: GLITCH AS DYSPHORIA IN THE MUSIC OF TAMAGOTCHI MASSACRE

“MFW MIRRORZ :3 :P xD”

Song by Cleo McKenzie

Oh fuck you
You’re six foot two
And so fucking ugly baby
You must be crazy
If you think that you’ll pass
No tits no ass
What makes you think that you’re a lady
I’m sorry baby

Maybe it’s all fake
Maybe that’s self-hate
Emailed my therapist it won’t get clearer
Put my lip gloss on
Something still feels wrong
Holy shit I fucking hate that mirror

Your makeup’s shit
You should just quit
Pretend to be a fucking guy again
Oh don’t you cry again

You’re so confused
No one wants you
A tranny bitch who wants her dick removed
You’re gross and boring too

Maybe it’s all fake
Maybe that’s self-hate
Emailed my therapist it won’t get clearer
Put my lip gloss on
Something still feels wrong
Holy shit I fucking hate that mirror

“i’m two years on hormones and i’m still sad i want a refund”
Song by Cleo McKenzie

Can’t go outside
Can’t love myself
Can’t even seem to love somebody else
Dissolve in total disconnection

It’s been two years
Your life’s plateaued
Somewhere along the way your progress slowed
Stall out at a busy intersection

If I check off
Enough boxes maybe
I’ll finally win
Paralyzed by the thought of losing
Self-abusing
I don’t know if it’ll in end

When I look into her eyes
I see his dying wish come true
But through all of this pink I still can’t seem to stave off all the blue

“mirror song*”

Song by Cleo McKenzie and Juno Raphael

It'll be alright
It'll be okay
You can start to slowly like yourself again
Dissolve into your own reflection

It'll be alright
It's gonna be okay
Your outward appearance doesn't matter anyway
If you don't live to see the day

And I love you
And I see you staring back at me now
Got so used to the feeling of your breath down my neck
Even when you weren't around

I can't help but crack a smile
I don't care if I look plain dumb
At the thought of you slowly disappearing
Underneath my tongue
Don't you cry again

Killing time
Future's coming for me
Let the past just pass away (pass away)

It's alright
I just know it will be okay (no, it's okay)
Anyway

Blood pumped full of estradiol (full of estradiol)
Who cares if you're six feet tall (if you're six feet tall)
Stick another needle in the vein

Drinking bright pink ethanol
Love the hurt cause after all
Womanhood is pain

Don't you cry again
Don't you cry again

CHAPTER IV: MERRILL GARBUS'S CRITIQUE OF WHITE FEMININITY

"Now as Then"

Song by Merrill Garbus and Nathaniel Brenner

I am exceptional
I am an exception
I am the exception
That's for me, that's also for me
I am a contradiction
I'm fascinating
Not enough, too much
Tell me I'm special
They might look like me but they don't
know
Man, I wanna take you home
Oh, the relaxation I feel here
Oh, the relaxation I feel most everywhere
Except the places I don't go
Except the places I don't go

[PRE-CHORUS]
Oh, don't trust me
That I won't take all the money and run
Don't trust me
That I won't take all the money and run
Oh, I'm just a shell of myself
I might just take all the money and run
I don't wanna be a woman if it's permission
Like it's permission

[CHORUS]

Now as then
I know then as now, oh
Now as then
I know then as now, oh
I know I'm not to be trusted

She had this thing with her shoulders
Couldn't sleep on either side
Face-up to the ceiling, nowhere to hide
Oh, she has this thing with her shoulders
Can't sleep on either side
Face-up to the ceiling, nowhere to hide
Oh, she is speaking to me, speaking right to
me
They're all speaking right to me, speaking
my language
It's all in my language, a universal language,
and I am loved, I am loved
I am loved in every single tongue

[PRE-CHORUS]
[CHORUS]

Now, now, now, now, oh
Now, now, oh what if I don't feel it
Now, now, now, now
Now as then
Then as now

“Colonizer”

Song by Merrill Garbus and Nathaniel Brenner

I use my white woman’s voice to
tell stories of travels with African men
I use my white woman’s voice to
tell stories of travels with African men
I comb my white woman’s hair with a
comb made especially, generally for me
I use my white woman’s voice to tell stories, stories

Colonizer
Colonizer
Colonizer
Colonizer

I use my white woman’s voice to interpret my travels with African men
I turn on my white woman’s voice to
contextualize acts of my white women friends
I cry my white woman tears carving
grooves in my cheeks to display what I meant
I smell the blood in my voice
I smell the blood in my voice
Especially the blood in my voice
Especially the blood in my voice

I use my white woman’s voice to
tell stories of travels with African men
I use my white woman’s voice to
tell stories of travels with African men
I comb my white woman’s hair with a
comb made especially, generally for me
I smell the blood in my voice
Especially the blood in my voice
Especially the-

I can feel you creep into my private life

APPENDIX B

SOUND FILES

CHAPTER II

[Files](#) to pair with Figures 2.1 and 2.2.

CHAPTER III

[File](#) to pair with Figure 3.2

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