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Hyperpop is a culturally rich genre that is densely populated by young transgender artists. Musicians drawn to this genre use its chaotic, excessive, and overwhelming sonic features to express their identities in unique ways that reflect evolving perspectives around gender and the increasing acceptance of queer identities into the mainstream. In this paper, I have chosen three artists that reflect three main aspects of hyperpop. Arca uses metrical dissonance to express her gender identity through overstimulation. I use methodologies presented by Mark Butler in his analyses of electronic dance music, which draw from Harald Krebs' concept of metrical dissonance, to analyze how the meter in "Mequetrefe" creates a disorienting feeling that reflects Arca's concept of her own gender identity. underscores uses irony to obscure her identity and intentions in her concept album *Wallsocket*. The obscurity that underscores creates around her identity shows an outright refusal to be placed into a gender category. I use Linda Hutcheon's definition of irony and its uses to illustrate how underscores relies on irony to obscure intentions in her music. SOPHIE uses contrasting themes of organic versus synthetic material to express her desires for her gender expression. I use Martine Rothblatt's writings to analyze how SOPHIE's "Faceshopping" reflects transhumanist ideals.

IDENTITY IN EXCESS: TRANS IDENTITIES  
EXPRESSED THROUGH HYPERPOP

by

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

When 17-year-old Elliott Piatt released his breakout single “SugarCrash!” on SoundCloud in 2020, he did not expect to become one of the leading figures in a new microgenre springing forth on various social media platforms. The song, a cacophony of frenzied digital percussion and countless hooks, quickly reached TikTok trend popularity for its short runtime, nihilistic lyrics, and general catchiness.<sup>1</sup> For many, “SugarCrash!” was the first taste of an alternative take on pop music that was swiftly taking over sections of the internet during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. This new sound, an exaggerated, ear-splitting take on pop music, was aptly named “hyperpop.”

As the name implies, hyperpop is a microgenre that takes characteristics of pop music and pushes them to their limits. Artists within the genre do so by primarily using synthetically produced sounds.<sup>2</sup> At its core, hyperpop plays with the normative constraints of popular music by producing a sound that relies on pop conventions while becoming so abrasive that it is nearly unlistenable. A listener might encounter samples from videogames, dramatically auto-tuned vocals, programmed drums, extremely fast tempos, and various levels of audio distortion. Hyperpop integrates innumerable influences into its sound as well, credited with incorporating elements of EDM and trap,<sup>3</sup> trance, nightcore, and emo,<sup>4</sup> K-pop and J-pop, bubblegum pop,

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Curto, “Admit It, ‘SugarCrash!’ Was Already Great,” *Vulture*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/04/song-review-sugarcrash-elyotto-remix-kim-petras.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Dylan Kaposi, “Discordant Disenchantment: Hyperpop as the Pandemic’s Soundtrack,” *Cherwell*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.cherwell.org/2021/04/02/discordant-disenchantment-hyperpop-as-the-pandemics-soundtrack/>.

<sup>3</sup> Günseli Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop Is the New Sound for a Post-Pandemic World,” *DAZED*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/52088/1/hyperpop-new-sound-for-a-post-pandemic-world-spotify-soundcloud-glaive>.

<sup>4</sup> Gemma Cockrell, “Hyperpop: The Maximalist Soundtrack to a Pandemic Year,” *IMPACT*, April 30, 2021, <https://impactnottingham.com/2021/04/hyperpop-the-maximalist-soundtrack-to-a-pandemic-year/>.

Eurohouse, and nü-metal,<sup>5</sup> punk,<sup>6</sup> and countless others. Lyrics tend to contrast with the chirpy and bright sonic elements, lamenting mental health struggles or expressing violent or angst-filled sentiments.<sup>7</sup> In “SugarCrash!,” Piatt (known as ElyOtto), in a voice pitched-up to near cartoon quality, sings, “I’m on a sugar crash, I ain’t got no fuckin’ cash / Maybe I should take a bath, cut my fuckin’ brain in half.” Over a soundscape of bubbly synthesized noises and videogame samples, these lyrics give “SugarCrash!” an iconically hyperpop feel. It is an ephemeral genre, with an overwhelming number of qualifiers and characteristics that seem to constantly change, but it is most recognizable for the overwhelming bombardment of noise and various synthetic elements these artists use.

In a fascinating way, hyperpop both leans into and rebels against pop music. It takes a genre that is meant to be pleasing to as many people as possible in order to maintain commercial value and leans into it so much that the levels of stimulation are nearly unbearable. The accessibility of editing software largely contributes to the freedom that these artists express; with an endless source of sound technology and downloadable samples at their fingertips, hyperpop artists are free to create a sound that caters to their own interests, rather than needing to maintain a sound that is easily digestible. This “DIY spirit”<sup>8</sup> is evident in the hyperpop sound, as most musicians are independent, young, and relatively unknown or underground. It is an incredibly experimental sound that prioritizes being excessive rather than being commercially appealing.

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<sup>5</sup> Yalcinkaya. “Hyperpop Is the New Sound.”

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Goldfine, “We’re Here, We’re Hyper, and We’re Popping: A Queer Analysis of Hyperpop,” *Bowdoin*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/gender-women/news/2023/were-here-were-hyper-and-were-popping-a-queer-analysis-of-hyperpop.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Will Pritchard, “Hyperpop or Overhyped? The Rise of 2020’s Most Maximal Sound,” *Independent*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/hyperpop-genre-2020-charli-xcx-rina-sawayama-b1775025.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Cockrell, “Hyperpop.”



Writers describe it as garish, unsettling,<sup>9</sup> and incoherent,<sup>10</sup> and while all of these descriptors are arguably accurate, this discomfort is exactly the point of hyperpop. One article says,

But whenever a new chaotic youth aesthetic has arisen in musical history, it's been a reaction *against*, not just a reaction *to*, its times. Hardcore's blast beats, gangsta rap's provocations, and grunge's moans all used extremity to question mainstream values such as respectability, conformity, and consumerism. The irony is that the rebellion now marches under the seemingly tame mantle of pop.<sup>11</sup>

Hyperpop rebels against the constraints of the mainstream from the inside, creating a way for listeners to enjoy pop in a transgressive way.<sup>12</sup> It provides a space where musicians can experiment and express themselves in dramatic and excessive ways while still standing under the larger popular music umbrella.

Hyperpop did not see its first major releases in 2020; in fact, hyperpop began its formation in the mid-2010's. "PC music," a brighter take on electronic music, was rising in popularity in the UK thanks to London producer A.G. Cook,<sup>13</sup> and further popularized by SOPHIE and Charlie XCX.<sup>14</sup> An article written in 2014, as PC music was rising in popularity, says,

In contrast to the attributes associated with dubstep, deep house, and techno—depth, seriousness, historicity—PC Music presents slick surfaces, a playful spirit, and a kaleidoscopic near-futurism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Jones, "OPINION: Punk Rock Died, Hyperpop Gave It CPR," *Indiana Daily Student*, August 25, 2022, <https://www.idsnews.com/article/2022/08/hyperpop-gives-meaning-to-declining-punk-rock>.

<sup>11</sup> Spencer Kornhaber, "Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive," *The Atlantic Monthly* 327, no. 2 (2021): 87.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Carrie Batton, "The Brash, Exuberant Sounds of Hyperpop," *New Yorker*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/09/the-brash-exuberant-sounds-of-hyperpop>.

<sup>14</sup> Kaposi, "Discordant Disenchantment."

<sup>15</sup> Philip Sherburne, "PC Music's Twisted Electronic Pop: A User's Manual," *Pitchfork*, September 17, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/thewatch/485-pc-musics-twisted-electronic-pop-a-users-manual/>.

As the name implies, PC music set the stage for a new genre of music to be accessible to anyone with a laptop and access to the right software. A.G. Cook's tendency to use editing software to blend countless genres together, like Vocaloid, 90s Europop, and 8-bit, seemed to make a joke of the seriousness and genre-defining limits of other electronic music genres.<sup>16</sup> During the early days of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, this style of music suddenly made its way to the United States under a new name.

Hyperpop is strongly connected with internet culture. The name "hyperpop" is often credited to Spotify after they created a playlist under the same name in 2019. Artists like 100 geecs (stylized in lowercase) and A.G. Cook, both prolific musicians within hyperpop, were given full control over which artists were featured. For many, this playlist was the reason their music reached a larger audience. In 2021, more than eighty percent of its featured artists were independent.<sup>17</sup> For a genre largely built by independent musicians, this initial exposure was vital to their future success, and further cemented hyperpop's presence in virtual spaces.

Hyperpop's virtual habitat is clearly audible in the sounds produced under the genre.

*DAZED* describes these sonic features, saying,

...between never-ending social media streams, the exhausting gig economy, neoliberal anxiety and a global pandemic, hyperpop is the logical sound of the internet turning in on itself, a cathartic antidote to the pressures to be optimal agents with thriving personal lives and buzzy social media feeds. Its dizzying ascent has spread like a meme; its virtual modes of communication mean that the scene is constantly evolving, with collaborations happening at warp speed.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of hyperpop and the trauma that the world faced during the coronavirus pandemic are inseparable. Hyperpop has been described as exhibiting the sound of the

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<sup>16</sup> Yalcinkaya, "Hyperpop is the New Sound."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

pandemic—in particular, the sound of youth culture.<sup>19</sup> During the early stages of the pandemic, when most of the public were encouraged to quarantine, social connections were primarily made through the internet. These conditions opened up a unique space where hyperpop musicians could connect with each other and build on each other’s music through Discord, SoundCloud, and Spotify.<sup>20</sup>

But what does “the internet turning in on itself” sound like? If there is one word used most often to describe the hyperpop sound, it would be “maximalist.” Hyperpop takes the constant bombardment of content that the youth of today faces through social media, and in particular, that they faced in the chronically online pandemic years, and converts it into an overstimulating self-referential cacophony of bright sounds and layers upon layers of samples.

Hyperpop owes much of its popularity to TikTok, where the app’s unique algorithmic content filtering and tendency to prefer “trending” topics made the genre soar in popularity.<sup>21</sup> TikTok also prioritizes niche communities, gearing content that the algorithm analyzes as relevant towards particular consumers. During its peak, hyperpop thrived on so-called “alt TikTok,” (alternative TikTok) where users who disparaged the mainstream gathered and participated in each other’s content.<sup>22</sup> Both TikTok and hyperpop grew increasingly popular during a time when everyone was encouraged to stay home, forcing all connections to be made virtually. Hyperpop’s iconically fast-paced and stimulating nature made it the perfect fixation for a generation of youths forced to stay home during a time of increasing anxiety and despair, and TikTok gave it the perfect avenue for reaching its target audience.

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<sup>19</sup> Kaposi, “Discordant Disenchantment.”

<sup>20</sup> Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop Is the New Sound.”

<sup>21</sup> Pritchard, “Hyperpop or Overhyped?”

<sup>22</sup> Kornhaber, “Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive,” 88.

As can be assumed, a genre that thrives in a fast-paced, fleeting, virtual environment is primarily appreciated by young listeners. Many artists within hyperpop are teenagers, with artists like glaive (stylized in lowercase) reaching popularity at as young as fifteen years old.<sup>23</sup> One prolific hyperpop musician, Alice Gas, says about the hyperpop demographic, “the newer stuff is a lot less polished. It’s mostly being made by kids in their bedrooms with mics and FL Studio, rather than actually going to a physical studio and recording there.”<sup>24</sup> The picture of a secluded teenager persists among other artists; ElyOtto says, “hyperpop can really appeal to that teen in their bedroom who isn't feeling very good about themselves.”<sup>25</sup> The inherent rebelliousness of the genre and the intensity of the lyrics also cater to a younger audience that is rebelling against the mainstream.

Like its predecessors, hyperpop also connects people in person through public events and raves. Cassidy George, writer for *Rolling Stone*, describes one of the raves she attended at Subculture, a club in Los Angeles. Subculture appears to be a collision of drag queens, pastel goths, cosplayers, and other various internet niches. Apparently, the club felt that the massive online community of hyperpop lacked an “analog presence”<sup>26</sup> in party culture. Even during the pandemic, when Subculture’s gatherings were moved online, their Zoom parties could reach 1,000 attendees, but as soon as the public received the clear to gather in-person again, Subculture was reinstated as a hub for the various communities that expressed themselves through hyperpop

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<sup>23</sup> Ben Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew Into a Big Deal,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Gas, quoted in Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop is the New Sound.”

<sup>25</sup> Joe Lynch, “Hyperpop Pops Off,” *Billboard* 133, no. 8 (2021).

<sup>26</sup> Cassidy George. “The Future of Club Culture Is a Hyperpop Rave Called Subculture,” *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/subculture-hyperpop-rave-club-party-1234683416/>.

music. It really was an eclectic gathering of interests; in her article, George ponders if Subculture might be “the only party in the world where people are voguing and moshing simultaneously.”<sup>27</sup>

The infiltration of queer practices, like voguing, is not a subtle aspect of hyperpop; for many, queerness is inherent to hyperpop. Like its predecessor, EDM, hyperpop welcomes and celebrates a large queer audience, and seems to reclaim some of the queer culture that was erased from EDM when it reached the mainstream. Songwriter Jordan Baum, about other rave communities, says, “I grew up going to raves and warehouse parties in L.A., and this feels different in a good way. Queerness and intersectionality were not a part of the culture then. It was very straight and it felt very dark.”<sup>28</sup> Hyperpop seems to attract many different niche communities, but it has strong ties to queerness.

The hyperpop community, including the fans and the artists, is largely queer. Many of the biggest contributors to hyperpop are trans or nonbinary, including 100 geecs member Laura Les,<sup>29</sup> ElyOtto,<sup>30</sup> Kim Petras,<sup>31</sup> and Dorian Electra.<sup>32</sup> It is possible that hyperpop’s ties to the larger genre of EDM are at the root of this characteristic, as EDM was largely founded in queer spaces. It could also be that the mainstream pushes inherently heteronormative constraints, and that hyperpop’s rebellion against such constraints draws the attention of those who pop culture tends to leave behind.<sup>33</sup> Hyperpop questions many of the regulations that pop culture reinforces, and there is no question why queer and trans listeners might find comfort in that. Khue Anh Tran, a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop is the New Sound.”

<sup>30</sup> Lynch, “Hyperpop Pops Off.”

<sup>31</sup> Jones, “OPINION.”

<sup>32</sup> Lynch, “Hyperpop Pops Off.”

<sup>33</sup> Peter Burditt, “Hyperpop: An Inherently Queer Genre,” *American Songwriter*, 2022, <https://americansongwriter.com/hyperpop-an-inherently-queer-genre/>.

student at Bowdoin college, describes how hyperpop rebels against restrictive heteronormativity by redefining the limits of the body through technology, saying,

In hyperpop you have a revision of what bodies mean, what relationality means, what pleasure means. What does it mean for people to relate to one another if you're not thinking just about the physical body, but you're also thinking about the semi-physical aspects of yourself?<sup>34</sup>

In their article in *DAZED*, Günseli Yalcinkaya connects *Glitch Feminism*, a concept and a book created by Legacy Russell, to the types of subversion that hyperpop evokes.<sup>35</sup> Russell identifies “glitches” as errors or failed performances, and claims that bodies who refuse to conform to societal norms fall under the broader scope of a glitch. Russell puts forth ideas that can be directly connected to the tenets of hyperpop, saying:

Glitch feminism asks us to look at the deeply flawed society we are currently implicated by and participating in, a society that relentlessly demands we make choices based on a conceptual gender binary that limits us as individuals. Glitch feminism urges us to consider the in-between as a core component of survival—neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define ourselves for ourselves. Thus, the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest. This failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal. Glitch feminism dissents, pushes back against capitalism.<sup>36</sup>

Russell’s glitch feminism can be connected to the sentiments expressed by the hyperpop community. Many of the musicians and the fans they represent are members of the queer community, and they might find comfort in the way that the genre’s inherently disruptive sound reflects their own transgressive nature as queer individuals.

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<sup>34</sup> Khue Anh Tran, quoted in Burditt, “Hyperpop.”

<sup>35</sup> Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop Is the New Sound.”

<sup>36</sup> Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (New York: Verso Books, 2020), 16–17.

Whether or not all of the young musicians who funnel their emotions and energy into hyperpop are considering these questions, countless young queer and trans people have found a home within the hyperpop sphere. The overstimulating, self-referential, and synthetic qualities of hyperpop attract a distinctly queer audience, and these features allow them to express their queerness in a variety of ways.

Aside from the specific sonic qualities mentioned so far, there are three main characteristics that most hyperpop music evokes: overstimulation, irony, and the use of technology. For this thesis, I have chosen one musician to represent each of these characteristics, and I analyze how they connect each of these characteristics to their gender identities. Each one of these musicians has some connection to the hyperpop genre and identifies as transgender: Alejandra Gherzi, known as Arca; April Harper Grey, known as underscores (stylized in lowercase); and the late Sophie Xeon, known as SOPHIE (stylized in capitals). Each of these musicians is credited for the development or the growth of hyperpop, and each of them caters strongly to one of these qualities, using hyperpop to express their transgender identities.

Arca is a Venezuelan musician with an eclectic history. Until the last few years, she released produced music mainly within the hip hop, EDM, and reggaeton genres.<sup>37</sup> Fan communities largely dispute her association with hyperpop, considering her extensive history within other genres, but various articles written on the subject credit her with legitimizing the genre. Regardless, one of her most recent albums clearly takes inspiration from the hyperpop community. Her five-album *KiCk* series travels through her roots in club music and reggaeton, but also traverses ambient music and experimental pop. In particular, *KiCk i*, the first in the

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<sup>37</sup> Isabella Herrera, “Arca Once Made Electronic Music. Now She Builds Worlds,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/arts/music/arca-kick.html>.

series, uses many iconically hyperpop techniques, like dramatic pitch-shifting of vocals, glitching effects, layered synthesized percussion, and distortion. Much of Arca's music is overstimulating; she has said herself that she enjoys spending time in sonic environments that disorient her or overwhelm her senses.<sup>38</sup> As I have previously stated, hyperpop thrives on excessive, sense-flooding noise. One article describes it as recklessly treading a line between beauty and ugliness,<sup>39</sup> and Arca's music in *KiCk i* is no exception. Her fearlessness when combining seemingly endless layers of synthesized percussion with heavily compressed vocals is sure to overwhelm a listener, and makes her a perfect subject for analysis involving overstimulation. I use Mark Butler's research, which builds upon the works of Fred Lerdahl, Ray Jackendoff, and Harald Krebs, to demonstrate how Arca uses two dissonant metrical layers in her song "Mequetrefe" to express her complex gender identity.

When one reads various opinions regarding hyperpop's sound, there appears to be a recurring theme of jokes, references, and questionable motivations. In *The New Yorker*, one author compares hyperpop to mainstream pop, saying, "if mainstream pop is designed to make people feel as if they're on common ground with all of humanity, this music made listeners feel like they were in on a very specific joke."<sup>40</sup> Hyperpop's tendency to rebel against the mainstream by leaning into the mainstream might immediately cast doubt onto the sincerity of any musician that participates in it. Hyperpop's unique blend of emotions, sounds, and in-jokes or references creates a landscape teeming with potential meanings and misinterpretations depending on whether a listener believes that a musician is being sincere with their lyrics or the presentation of

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<sup>38</sup> Wren Sanders, "Now List 2020: The Divine Mutability of Arca," *Them*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.them.us/story/now-list-2020-arca-interview>.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Richardson, "Hyperpop's Joyful Too-Muchness," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hyperpops-joyful-too-muchness-11609278593>.

<sup>40</sup> Batton, "The Brash, Exuberant Sounds."



their music. Chris Inglis attributes this in part to hyperpop's roots in queer and internet culture. A genre whose foundation is so ingrained in self-expression of the young and marginalized will be crafted to represent the future that the fans will be looking towards. Inglis specifically describes hyperpop as having a "unique blend of ironic and sincere sensibilities."<sup>41</sup> underscores is one such musician who not only uses irony in how she combines emotional lyrics with sounds, but has also taken a particular interest in how she can compose music ironically. In her concept album *Wallsocket*, underscores uses a variety of techniques to obscure her intentions and her identity. I analyze the lyrics and the timbre of several songs on this album to discuss how underscores uses irony to both obscure her intentions and to avoid categorization altogether.

One of hyperpop's most prominent features is its heavy reliance on technology to produce its distinct sound. Over-produced vocals, synthesized effects, samples, and glitch noises are the primary make-up of the texture in many hyperpop soundtracks. Hyperpop's foundation in internet spaces, like Spotify and Discord, and its young demographic also may have influenced this emphasis on artificial sounds. The pressures of social media and the constant bombardment of content that users are subjected to are reflected by the cacophony of synthesized sounds that a listener experiences during a hyperpop track. SOPHIE confronts these forces through a trans lens in her song "Faceshopping." SOPHIE is often credited as one of the founding members of hyperpop because of her presence in PC Music.<sup>42</sup> Her experience as a trans woman who was under constant pressure to conform to societal standards of femininity gives her a particular

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<sup>41</sup> Chris Inglis, "Hyperpop: A Post-Ironic Glimpse Into the Future," *Journal of Global Pop Cultures*, September 2022, <https://journalofglobalpopcultures.com/issues/real-fake-fake-realness/hyperpop-a-post-ironic-glimpse-into-the-future>.

<sup>42</sup> Derek Cabrera, "Almost Three Years After Her Death, SOPHIE's Lasting Impact on Pop Music Is Still Felt," *Signal*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.tcnjsignalnews.com/article/2023/11/almost-three-years-after-her-death-sophies-lasting-impact-on-pop-music-is-still-felt>.

perspective surrounding cosmetic surgeries. SOPHIE uses simple and vague lyrical choices that invite multiple interpretations of the word “real,” and of what “authenticity” really means to her. SOPHIE also uses a dichotomy of organic and synthetic themes, using the harsh, synthesized sounds of hyperpop to portray an image of herself that is fully actualized through cosmetic procedures. I analyze the lyrics and the texture of “Faceshopping” to demonstrate how SOPHIE uses hyperpop to explore transhumanist ideals, communicating her desire for full control over her own body, and to shape it into her idealized self.

### Literature Review

Hyperpop derives many of its characteristics from the larger genre of EDM. Scholars like Kai Fikentscher,<sup>43</sup> Bernardo Attia, Anna Gavanoas, and Hillegonda Rietveld<sup>44</sup> have researched the origins and iconic features of EDM, including its foundation in queer culture and underground Black and Latino spaces. Mark Butler released his book *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* in 2006, and while hyperpop was only just beginning its formation in the UK at this time, Butler’s research is fundamental to conversations about meter, texture, and ambiguity in EDM. Butler pulls from Ray Jackendoff and Fred Lerdahl’s methodology for illustrating meter and rhythmic levels, as well as Harald Krebs’s methodology for analyzing and describing different types of syncopation and polyrhythm.<sup>45</sup> I rely on Butler’s analysis of metrical dissonance in EDM for my analysis of Arca’s song “Mequetrefe” and how it relates to her understanding of her own gender identity.

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<sup>43</sup> Kai Fikentscher, *“You Better Work!” Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Bernardo Attias, Anna Gavanoas, and Hillegonda C. Rietveld, *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006).

While it is still a relatively young branch of music analysis, queer music theory is an incredibly rich space with growing contributions from authors across many musical genres. Gavin Lee has written several landmark works on the subject, a few of which I draw on for my research. His article “Queer Music Theory” initiates a conversation on how queerness can be applied to musical analysis. Lee draws on David Lewin’s models to create a phenomenology with a specifically queer lens to reach a methodology Lee refers to as “queer formalism.” This methodology involves theories related to gender and sexuality, including gendered interpretations of musical works, ambiguity, and the broader politics of musical analysis in relation to gender and sexuality.<sup>46</sup> Doris Leibetseder, in her book *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music*, describes the “tracks” in popular music that stray from heteronormative or cisgendered orientations. Leibetseder draws on fundamental feminist and gender theory scholars like Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Donna Haraway, and Michel Foucault. Her research not only explores how musicians use tropes like irony, camp, and imitation in their music, but also the specifically political implications of these techniques and how they are executed.<sup>47</sup> Leibetseder also draws on Linda Hutcheon’s publications on irony, which I cite in my analyses of underscores’s music.

I also draw on several sources of feminist scholarship for this research. Hutcheon’s book *Irony’s Edge* is fundamental in any discussion surrounding the implications of ironic interpretation. Hutcheon explains how irony can be used as a subversive technique, allowing a user to critique a certain practice while participating in it themselves. This quality not only gives irony an “evaluative edge,” as Hutcheon describes, but it also obscures the ironist’s intentions.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Gavin Lee, “Queer Music Theory,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 42, no.1 (Spring 2020): 143–153.

<sup>47</sup> Doris Leibetseder, *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 89.

Hutcheon also creates a spectrum of irony across two dimensions: the provocativeness of the critique posed by the irony, and its positive or negative implications.<sup>49</sup>

Hyperpop is a relatively new subgenre of the larger popular music scene, and published writing on the subject is still uncommon. However, pop music scholars have begun to recognize its presence in pop culture, along with its significantly queer and trans audience. Doctoral candidate Lily Shababi presented her paper, “Culturally Situating Trans-Femininity through Hyperpop’s Technologically-Processed Vocals” at The Society for Music Theory’s 2023 meeting. Shababi identifies hyperpop as a maximalist electronic genre with a rich culture and a large queer audience. She draws on trans scholarship to analyze how the technically-processed voice gives trans hyperpop musicians an expanded form of self-expression.<sup>50</sup> Shababi earned the Ingolf-Dahl award in 2023 for her research on this subject.<sup>51</sup> Lindsey Reymore also presented research on hyperpop in 2023 at the International Conference on Timbre. Reymore’s research uses spectrograms and various form analyses to define how the music of 100 geecs, a hyperpop duo, is organized by timbral forces. Lucy March published an article in 2022 analyzing the song “Daisy 2.0,” a collaboration between the artist Ashnikko and the Japanese Vocaloid character, Hatsune Miku. In her article, March discusses how both Ashnikko and Hatsune Miku have fluid identities. Ashnikko portrays a character that enacts revenge on men who have harmed women, and Hatsune Miku is a virtual character who is primarily portrayed as innocent and non-threatening. Despite their opposing aesthetics of femme fatale and kawaii, and their contrasting

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 46–47.

<sup>50</sup> “Session Overview,” Conference Agenda, Society for Music Theory, Accessed April 1, 2024, [https://www.conftool.pro/denver2023-ams-smt/index.php?page=browseSessions&form\\_session=670#paperID874](https://www.conftool.pro/denver2023-ams-smt/index.php?page=browseSessions&form_session=670#paperID874).

<sup>51</sup> “Doctoral Student Lily Shababi Wins Ingolf Dahl Award,” Herb Alpert School of Music, University of California Los Angeles, Accessed April 1, 2024, <https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/doctoral-student-lily-shababi-wins-ingolf-dahl-award/>.

states of living human and virtual character, both artists use the fluidity and ambiguity of hyperpop to accentuate and empower these identities. Ashnikko carries out this “collaboration” by animating herself into a space with Hatsune Miku, so a version of herself is able to perform with the Vocaloid in her own virtual world. In working with Hatsune Miku, Ashnikko takes advantage of the massive online presence of both Hatsune Miku’s and her own fan base, as well as the rapid development of new genres like hyperpop, and brings to the table what March identifies as “new posthuman possibilities,” because of the features specific to hyperpop.<sup>52</sup>

Hyperpop is still a young area of research, but its effects on popular culture have already been noticed by music scholars. I am contributing to these conversations not only by expanding on the growing source of literature on a newly researched genre, but also by further emphasizing the unique contributions that trans women have made and continue to make within popular music.

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<sup>52</sup> Lucy March, “Wrap You Up in My Blue Hair”: Vocaloid, Hyperpop, and Identity in “Ashnikko feat. Hatsune Miku – Daisy 2.0,” *Television & New Media* 24, no. 8 (2023): 894–910.

## CHAPTER II: THE TENSION BETWEEN EXTREMES: METRICAL DISSONANCE IN

### ARCA'S "MEQUETREFE"

#### **Introduction: Disorientation**

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes an experience she had as a child in Latin America, living near a woman who allegedly had both male and female features. People like her, “*unas de las otras*,” (of the others), were seen as both mystical beings and as horrifying abnormalities of nature. In her book, Anzaldúa writes how she identifies with this woman, saying:

There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.<sup>53</sup>

It takes a certain reframing of the mind to accommodate for this coming together of opposite qualities, and how it relates to queerness. In his landmark essay published in 2020, Gavin Lee opens by defining queer musical phenomenology as “the practice of disorientation away from established music theories, including one’s own.”<sup>54</sup> “Disorientation” in this case refers to situations in which the normative paths of sexual attraction or gender identity are avoided or subverted, but Lee connects the general concepts of instability and uncertainty to

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19. <sup>53</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987,

<sup>54</sup> Lee, “Queer Music Theory,” 143.

queerness overall.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Lee quotes Sarah Ahmed, who states, “if orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths.”<sup>56</sup> Disorientation as a mechanism of queer phenomenology can be used productively to accommodate individuals whose lifestyles and identities are seen as nonnormative.<sup>57</sup> The musical examples of disorientation used by Lee involve characters experiencing rejection and feelings of melodic or harmonic uncertainty, but other musical features can also be used to evoke disorientation.

In his book *Unlocking the Groove*, Mark Butler discusses many ways that musicians in EDM create metrically ambiguous moments in their music.<sup>58</sup> Despite the frequent association of electronic music with danceability, many electronic musicians experiment with metric ambiguity and obscurity. Butler discusses several scholarly opinions involving the concept of ambiguity in music analysis. Despite previous publications that claim that ambiguity and music analysis cannot coexist, Butler uses methodologies by Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff as well as Harald Krebs to illustrate how electronic musicians obscure and ambiguate meter in the music they produce and perform.<sup>59</sup> Gavin Lee also proposes that queer musicians can utilize their medium to express their identities by displaying ambiguities in their performance or presentation. Lee labels this technique “ontological ambiguity,” and uses it to analyze how queer musicians use their art to disrupt structures of power.<sup>60</sup> The analyses that Butler and Lee propose can be used to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Ahmed, quoted in Ibid, 147.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>58</sup> Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 121–175.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 129, 139.

<sup>60</sup> Gavin Lee, “Introduction: From Difference to Ambiguity.,” in *Rethinking Difference in Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Music: Theory and Politics of Ambiguity*, ed. Gavin Lee (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2018), 6.

evaluate how other musicians use obscurity and ambiguity in their releases, as well as the intentions behind these musical choices.

Like the musicians that Butler discusses in his analysis, Arca uses various techniques to obscure meter in many of her releases. Using Butler's definition of metrical ambiguity as any time span in a piece of music where multiple interpretations of the meter are relatively equal in possibility,<sup>61</sup> I demonstrate how Arca utilizes electronic features commonly used in hyperpop to lean into feelings of fluidity and overstimulation by creating metrically obscure moments, and how these moments are directly connected to her complex gender identity. More specifically, I make evident how her song "Mequetrefe" demonstrates her fluid gender identity and expression both through the visuals in the music video and in the dissonant metric pulses present in the music, as well as how she encourages listeners to dwell in the same interpretive ambiguity that she employs in this song.

### **Arca: Identity and Ambiguity**

Arca is a musician with a diverse and complicated history. Having released more than ten albums (two of which were under her former alias, Nuuro), four EPs, and twenty-eight singles, she has had a lot of chances to experiment with various sounds and genres. *The New York Times* describes her earlier music as being inspired by hip-hop and club music, with a gradual journey into a more recognizable form of reggaeton.<sup>62</sup> Her fan-made wiki states similar observations, with additional genres like techno, avant-pop, and intelligent dance music.<sup>63</sup> Several articles written in recent years align her newer releases with hyperpop. A 2022 article from *Analog*

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<sup>61</sup> Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 123.

<sup>62</sup> Herrera, "Arca Once Made Electronic Music."

<sup>63</sup> "Arca," The Arca Wikipedia. Fandom, Accessed November 11, 2023, <https://arca1000000.fandom.com/wiki/Arca>.



*Cases* describes her as a pioneer of the genre.<sup>64</sup> *The Post* claims that she “blurs the lines between hyperpop and punk rock,”<sup>65</sup> the latter being a genre rarely associated with Arca’s heavily produced electronic music. Fans seem to be uncomfortable with the association between Arca and some of the brighter, more pop-centric aesthetics for which hyperpop is known. In the subreddit r/ArcaMusic, user u/Excusemyegos asked, “Does anyone else get annoyed when people call arca [*sic*] a hyper pop [*sic*] artist? I may be wrong but she is more of a deconstructed club producer, she might have some hyper pop [*sic*] tracks but not very often.” Most of the responses were clearly against the notion that she should be linked to hyperpop. User u/AFK-AFK-AFK responded, “Who said Arca is hyperpop artist 🤪.” Similarly, u/notadrainer commented, “deconstructed club, experimental, noise, anything but hyper pop [*sic*] 🤪.”<sup>66</sup> Clearly, Arca cannot be pinned down to even a few genres, and the discussions surrounding her potential genre classifications are complex and fluid.

In the same fashion, the way Arca describes and expresses her gender identity is impossible to place into one category. In an interview with *i-D Magazine*, she states:

We’re all transitioning: from birth to death, it’s inevitable. And then there’s this transition that is optional, that socially—as imperfect and flawed as it is—allows you to express this thing that is so abstract and physical and primal. It’s the difference between having that static inside of you and not sharing it, and moving the static outward and into your environment. People might react to it and it’ll cause all kinds of conversations. But that’s where the magic lies, in the conversation.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sage Mace, “Hyper Pop: The Digital Age’s ‘Genre’ of Transgression.” *Analog Cases*, April 15, 2022. <https://analogcases.com/blogs/news/hyper-pop>.

<sup>65</sup> Koennecke, “Artist Spotlight.”

<sup>66</sup> Excusemyegos, “Arca/hyper pop,” Reddit, March 3, 2023, [https://www.reddit.com/r/ArcaMusic/comments/11gwm82/arcahyper\\_pop/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ArcaMusic/comments/11gwm82/arcahyper_pop/).

<sup>67</sup> Frankie Dunn, “Arca: ‘We’re All Transitioning: From Birth to Death, It’s Inevitable,’” *i-D Magazine*, June 25, 2020, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/4ayayj/arca-were-all-transitioning-from-birth-to-death-its-inevitable>.

Arca thinks very broadly about her own gender, and hesitates to lay out any specific language to describe herself. Since coming out as nonbinary in 2018, Arca uses both she/her and it/its pronouns.<sup>68</sup> Prior to 2018, though, she identified as a gay man. In the same interview, she states,

I see my gender identity as non-binary, and I identify as a trans Latina woman, and yet, I don't want to encourage anyone to think that my gayness has been banished. And when I talk about gayness, it's funny because I'm not thinking about who I'm attracted to. It's a form of cultural production that is individual and collective, which I don't ever want to renounce. I want to have my cake and eat it sometimes.<sup>69</sup>

Despite her identity as a trans feminine person, she still feels a connection to her homosexuality. Arca rejects the need to separate herself into distinct categories that enforce the gender binary (heterosexual transgender woman), and instead experiences her gender and sexuality in fluid ways.

The way she performs also transgresses societal expectations for gender presentation. *PAPER* describes her attire as “a mix of assless chaps, stiletto stripper boots, matador jackets, corsets, harnesses, and any other garment that could possibly subvert expectation.”<sup>70</sup> While many transgender singers prefer to sing in a range that is associated with their gender, Arca plays across her extensive vocal range. In songs like “Prada,” she quickly vacillates between a low baritone and an airy soprano. In many ways, Arca embraces her own ambiguous identity by subverting gender expectations in how she identifies, presents, and performs her art.

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<sup>68</sup> Patric Fallon, “Arca Is the Artist of the Decade,” *Vice*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/evj9k4/arca-is-the-artist-of-the-decade>.

<sup>69</sup> Dunn, “Arca.”

<sup>70</sup> Matt Moen, “Arca: Embracing the Flux,” *PAPER*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.papermag.com/arca-transformation#rebelltitem1>.

## “Mequetrefe”

The release of Arca’s album *KiCk i* in 2020 was the start of a five-album project exploring her gender identity and expression. This album leans farther into pop music than some of her previous releases, and features musicians like SOPHIE, Shygirl, and ROSALÍA (stylized in capitals), who likely influenced it in the pop direction.<sup>71</sup> The following albums in the series were released over just the next several months. Each album dwells on a different genre; *KICK ii* uses more reggaeton elements, *KicK iii* spends more time with Arca’s roots in club music, *kick iiiii* dwells more on experimental pop, and *Kick iiiii* is closer to ambient music.<sup>72</sup> In interviews about these albums, Arca states that the name “kick” comes from the idea of an unborn child kicking in their mother’s womb. She describes the concept as a “moment of individuation;”<sup>73</sup> where the mother realizes that her child is a person with motivations and aspirations that are separate from her own. Despite the discomfort that this may cause the mother to have, there is no intention behind the kick; it is just an expression of the child’s wholeness as a person.<sup>74</sup> The title “kick” refers to Arca developing her own identity and her transformation into her fully realized self, and she expresses the many facets of this transformation through the songs in these albums.

“Mequetrefe” is the third track on the *KiCk i* album. It is about a woman who, after getting dressed up for a night out, decides to walk to her destination so that everyone can admire her.

Mami quiere mequetrefe	Mami wants gossip
Ella se lo merece	She deserves it
Mira cómo se crece	Look at how she grows
Ella vino caminando desde su casa	She came walking from her

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<sup>71</sup> Dunn, “Arca.”

<sup>72</sup> Alexis Petridis, “Arca: Kick ii, iii, iiiii, iiiii Review – A Wild Ride to the Dark, Daring Side of Pop,” *The Guardian*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/dec/03/arca-kick-ii-iii-iiii-iiiii-review>.

<sup>73</sup> Dunn, “Arca.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Ella no toma taxi	house
Que la vean en las calles	She does not take a taxi May they see her on the streets
Ella no toma taxi ni Uber ni Lyft	She does not take a taxi, Uber, or Lyft
Que la vean <sup>75</sup>	May they see her

The term “mequetrefe” is colloquial slang in Venezuela and has several meanings. In the first line of the song, Arca states, “Mami quiere mequetrefe.” The word “mequetrefe” is an insulting colloquial term used to describe someone who is incredibly lazy, or even useless. It can also be used to describe someone who wants to gossip or create drama.<sup>76</sup> However, Arca uses “mequetrefe” as an object or a concept rather than an insult for a person. In stating “Mami *wants* mequetrefe,” Arca is saying that she wants gossip and wants to be noticed and talked about. Arca continues to talk about this woman in the third person, stating, “Ella no toma taxi / Que la vean en las calles.” The woman is walking, avoiding any form of transportation to wherever she is going because she wants to be noticed, even if it invites unfriendly commentary.

The song opens with a relatively danceable quadruple meter, which is supported both by a 3+3+2 pattern, or *tresillo*, in a percussive line, and in a spoken vocal line by Arca.

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<sup>75</sup> Arca, “Mequetrefe,” YouTube Video, 2:21, June 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZKPd3k6O6A>.

<sup>76</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “Mequetrefe,” accessed January 28, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/spanish-english/mequetrefe>.

Figure 1. “Mequetrefe” 0:02–0:13

The image shows a musical score for the song "Mequetrefe" from 0:02 to 0:13. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a Percussion staff (top) and a Voice staff (bottom). The Percussion staff shows a steady eighth-note pulse. The Voice staff shows a melody with lyrics: "Ma-mi quie-re me-que - tre - fe ell-a se lo me - re ce mi-ra co-mo se cre-ce". The second system also has a Percussion staff (top) and a Voice staff (bottom). The Percussion staff continues the eighth-note pulse. The Voice staff shows a melody with lyrics: "Ell - a vi - no ca - mi - nan - do des-de su ca - sa Ah". The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

After a few repetitions of the *tresillo*, more layers join in the sound, including a few synth layers that add harmony. Throughout this beginning section of the song, the meter is easy for the listener to follow. Despite the asymmetrical division of the pulse, there is still a clearly established 4/4 during this first section. Butler claims that moments like these actually reinforce the meter rather than obscure it.<sup>77</sup> Even though the eighth-note pulse is divided unevenly, resulting in what would normally be a strong beat three becoming obscured, the 3+3+2 pattern reoccurs at the beginning of every measure, or every four beats. Because the cycle aligns with a metrical layer, this asymmetrical pattern still emphasizes the underlying quadruple meter. This changes, however, about a minute into the song.

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<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 157.

Figure 2. "Mequetrefe" 0:59-1:34

The musical score is divided into six systems, each with three staves: Bass, Percussion, and Synthesizer. The time signature changes frequently throughout the piece.

- System a:** Bass (3/4, 4/4), Percussion (3/4, 4/4), Synthesizer (3/4, 4/4).
- System b:** Bass (3/4), Percussion (3/4), Synthesizer (3/4).
- System c:** Bass (3/4, 4/4, 3/4), Percussion (4/4, 3/4), Synthesizer (4/4, 3/4). Starts at measure 8.
- System d:** Bass (4/4, 3/4, 4/4), Percussion (4/4, 3/4, 4/4), Synthesizer (4/4, 3/4, 4/4). Starts at measure 14.
- System e:** Bass (4/4, 3/4, 4/4), Percussion (4/4, 3/4, 4/4), Synthesizer (4/4, 3/4, 4/4). Starts at measure 20.
- System f:** Bass (4/4), Percussion (4/4), Synthesizer (4/4). Starts at measure 26.

At 0:58, the bass drops, and a new meter is established. The quarter-note pulse is maintained, but the meter changes from quadruple to triple, reinforced by both the entrance of a new synth melody and the bass drum (Figure 2.a).

While there is a pattern of three beats, the end of this brief section contains an extra beat. As this melody repeats, that extra beat remains present every five measures. More layers of electronic percussion enter at 1:09 (2.b), and the meter gets increasingly obscured. The bass drum changes from sounding every three quarter-notes to sounding at every dotted quarter. The shortening of the duration of the bass drum gives the music the feeling of increasing in speed, since the bass is sounding at every three eighth-notes, rather than at every measure. It also creates a grouping dissonance with the synth line, since the synth is continuing to group the pulse as quarter-notes throughout this section.

As previously stated, there is a measure of 4/4 in the synth at every fifth measure. This disturbs the metrical alignment between the bass drum, synthesizer, and quarter-note pulse at the end of 2.b. While the bass and the synth were aligned toward the beginning of this section, creating a hemiola dissonance, this additional beat in the synth forces these two layers out of alignment for an extended period of time. Despite the synth returning to 3/4, the bass maintains its dotted quarter pulse through the measure of 4/4 (measure 10 of Figure 2), and therefore becomes off-beat from the melody throughout 2.c. To keep the bass and the synth aligned, there would need to be a 3+3+2 in measure 10 of Figure 2, but Arca keeps the dotted quarter consistent throughout this section. Until this point, the dotted quarter-note in the bass did not heavily conflict with the quarter-note pulse, since each measure still aligned, and so the attacks of the quarter-note and the dotted quarter-note were simultaneous at regular intervals. When the meter briefly changes to 4/4, and the bass maintains its dotted quarter-note pulse, there is no

more alignment of the bass with the other percussion at the beginning of every measure. The listener is bombarded with both a quarter-note pulse supported by the only prominent pitched instrument in the texture and a few subtler percussive lines, as well as by an aggressive and stubborn dotted quarter-note pulse from the bass.

Even though the bass cuts out during the measure of 4/4 in 2.c, it still maintains the dotted quarter-note pulse by entering on the following measure of 3/4 with a quarter-note. The underlying unarticulated dotted quarter-note pulse is notated with parentheses in Figure 2, at measure 15. The extra beat created by the measure of 4/4 in 2.c maintains an incredibly metrically dissonant passage, but it shifts the dissonance by one quarter-note in 2.d.

Since a grouping of three quarter-notes and two dotted quarter-notes takes up the same amount of time, the addition of one or two extra beats in the synth disturbs the meter enough that the two prominent layers in this section will never naturally realign. In a sense, this creates both a grouping dissonance and a displacement dissonance happening at the same time (both  $G(3/2)$  and  $D(6+2)$ , with the eighth-note being the pulse layer). However, the misalignment only continues until the last five measures of this section (2.e), when the dotted quarter and the beginning of the 3/4 measure finally realign. When the synth pattern repeats again, creating another measure of 4/4 at measure 20 of Figure 2, the extra quarter-note knocks the synth back into alignment with the bass right before this section concludes. The hemiola dissonance returns for all of 2.e, until the synth and bass are removed from the texture at 2.f, and the two percussive lines that maintained a quarter-note pulse are the only layers present while they reestablish the quadruple meter from the beginning of the song.

In the conclusion of his chapters about metrical ambiguity and dissonance, Butler writes a statement about how electronic musicians use these features to give the listener specific sonic



experiences. Butler claims that analyses of common-practice music rely on a hierarchy of metrical and antimetrical layers, but electronic musicians prefer creating moments of interpretive freedom without needing to identify one layer as being dominant over another.<sup>78</sup> When listening to the middle section of “Mequetrefe,” one might cling to the quarter-note pulse that was formed at the beginning of the song and that is maintained through several voices throughout the dissonant section. It is possible, though, that the agitation and volume of the bass, as well as the bass’s tendency to establish a beat, will overwhelm a listener, causing them to feel a new pulse as dominant. Butler includes a quote by Robert Walser, who states,

Terms like “metric dissonance” and “dissonant strata” suggest that rhythmic conflicts must always be resolved, whether in performance or analysis. There seems to be no place for tensions that remain unresolved, differences that can coexist.<sup>79</sup>

Butler argues in his book that electronic music creates a space where dissonances can remain unresolved and ambiguities can be appreciated for the unique effects they have on a listener. Many electronic music performance spaces value feelings of overstimulation and dissociation. Butler connects these feelings to the types of metrical dissonances and ambiguities that many electronic musicians create.<sup>80</sup> Arca seems to value these types of experiences as well. In an interview with *Them*, she describes what she calls a “noise music brunch,” where she and Björk listened to noisescapes while spending time together, saying,

I really like the idea of not renouncing the tension between extremes and gaining the sparks that fly off of that, the in-between states, because maybe you go into an in-between state for like five seconds and you spend the rest of the day on one or the other side of that. But in those five seconds you can maybe grab something on your way out and then you can learn from yourself in that moment where you don’t have any autopilot,

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<sup>78</sup> Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 167.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Walser, quoted in *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 174–175.

where you're just kind of surprised, like man, we got to listen to this right now? That's fun. That's play.<sup>81</sup>

Clearly, Arca enjoys experiencing moments where there are multiple sonic forces that conflict with one another. In this interview, she encourages others to dwell on those moments and to discover what they can learn about themselves.

**“It’s Not Evolution Unless You Saw the Glitch.”**

Until this point, I have only discussed the sonic elements of Arca’s music. However, upon the release of *KiCk i*, Arca also released several music videos to accompany certain songs on the album, including “Mequetrefe.” While the lyrics of the song tell the story of a woman walking down the street, the official music video does not portray any of the specific details that the lyrics describe. The only thing visible to the viewer is Arca, from the chest up, in what appears to be a blank white space. The visuals are far from dull or stagnant. Arca uses a filter over the video that dramatically warps her features, enlarging her eyes and mouth, distorting her face, and creating fuzzy lines between her features and the background (see Figure 3). This filter is also not stagnant; it is enhanced and retracted with certain aspects of the song. When the video begins, the filter is at its most extreme when the percussion sounds. These effects create a stunning visual that displays Arca as a shifting and fluid presence.

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<sup>81</sup> Wren Sanders, “Now List 2020.”

**Figure 3. “Mequetrefe” Music Video, 0:07**



Further, Arca coordinates these visual effects with the metrical accents and moments of metrical obscurity. Arca uses this filter and many others to transition seamlessly through several different appearances. Every few seconds, Arca warps into different clothing, different hairstyles, and different dramatic makeup, without any clear moments of editing in the video. These costume changes are not random; they generally occur at the beginning of new phrases in the song. The chaos of these transitions is heightened during the dissonant section described previously in this chapter. Since many of these transitions align with moments of metrical or rhythmic significance, they dramatically increase in speed during the dissonant middle section. Once the quadruple meter is reestablished, Arca returns to the format of the beginning of the video with a nod of her head. The eye and mouth filter return as the prominent visual feature, and Arca uses it to smoothly transition between appearances at a steady pace once more. The coordination of these visual effects with Arca’s movements and changes in appearance directly

link the metrical action to Arca's body and identity. As the meter changes and increases the feeling of disorientation, Arca's appearance grows increasingly fluid and chaotic, and the transitions even out with the meter once the dissonant middle section concludes.<sup>82</sup> Through the music video, Arca connects the ambiguity of the meter in "Mequetrefe" to her own fluid identity and expression.

In the introduction to *Rethinking Difference in Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Music: Theory and Politics of Ambiguity*, Gavin Lee outlines the concept of ontological ambiguity. Lee states that ambiguity in performance and reception opens up potential for disrupting power structures. Both identity and desire are fluid concepts that, when the space for discourse is opened, can create new ways of experiencing ourselves and our relationships with others. Specifically, he states, "We can also think of the materiality of sound, image, and movement as the basis of politics of gender and sexual ambiguity."<sup>83</sup> This statement implies that these mediums are rife with potential for expressing one's queer identity, and further strengthens Arca's use of movement and transformation in her music video to communicate her identity. Sondra Fraleigh analyzes how the movement of the body to music opens up a rich space for discussing our relationships with our physical bodies. Fraleigh's definition of a body is complex; she sees the body as the collective of the conscious, the physical body, and human agency. Therefore, music, which is a product of agency, exists both within and outside of the body.<sup>84</sup> Fraleigh claims that the body is constantly in a state of change, and that its constant motion

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<sup>82</sup> Arca, "Mequetrefe."

<sup>83</sup> Gavin Lee, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>84</sup> Sondra Fraleigh, "How Things Fall Apart: Alteration of Body in Music and Dance," in *Bodily Expression in Electronic Music: Perspectives on Reclaiming Performativity*, ed. Deniz Peters, Gerhard Eckel, and Andreas Dorschel (New York: Routledge, 2012), 35-36.

creates a potential for a new definition of the “self.”<sup>85</sup> Arca, and queer musicians like her, can use this quality to express the fluidity of their physical bodies as well as their intangible gender identities. The visuals in Arca’s music video reflect this concept; her fluid motions both remove her gender identity from the constraints of her physical body and link the disorienting texture of her song to her physical body.

Rather than fully obscuring her own identity, Arca dwells on the collision of extremes. In his analysis of drag queen Thomas Neuwirth’s specific style of drag, Mario Rey discusses how Neuwirth uses the combination of gender extremes in his presentation to subvert traditional expectations of identity and expression. Neuwirth’s drag persona, Conchita Wurst, frequently appears in hyperfeminine clothing and makeup typical of a drag queen, while also maintaining a full beard. The resulting dissonance of accentuated femininity and masculinity does not produce visual androgyny; it produces what Rey describes as “more gender collision than illusion.”<sup>86</sup> Conchita Wurst’s expression of both extremes creates a dissonant and almost disorienting effect of multiple contrasting gender signifiers existing in one person. Rey uses Neuwirth’s performance to identify how this kind of presentation transgresses gender categorizations. Identities and individuals like Neuwirth open a space for queer identities that are nonnormative, that do not fit into the general understanding of gender and sexuality.<sup>87</sup> Arca enacts a similar concept through how she presents her own identity and her music.

Similarly, Arca sees herself as containing many contrasting identities. In her interview with *PAPER*, she discusses her song “Nonbinary” and her concept of “self-states,” saying,

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>86</sup> Mario Rey, “When the Bearded Lady Sings: Ambiguity Aesthetics, queer identity, and the gendering of the presentational voice,” in *Rethinking Difference in Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Music: Theory and Politics of Ambiguity*, ed. Gavin Lee (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2018), 16.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 29–30.

I'm asking for recognition that we have multiple selves without denying that there's a singular unit... I want to be seen as an ecosystem of minor self-states without being stripped of the dignity of being a whole.<sup>88</sup>

Arca has several of these self-states that she uses to express different parts of herself in her music. In her interview with *i-D Vice*, she describes herself as a world containing several selves:

I see Arca as a space, and inside that space I'm running different simulations and constantly deconstructing things and trying to keep it from being stagnant. I'm stopping it from moving too fast or too slow... There's a storytelling too, but it's more than one story.<sup>89</sup>

In similar fashion to Conchita, Arca finds herself expressing parts of herself that reflect seemingly contrasting concepts or ideas, but all of these concepts are still contained within herself. Rather than these parts blending together, or any one of these parts being dominant over others, all of these states coexist and create the space of "Arca." Moreover, Arca sees herself in a constant state of change, and she encourages others to see themselves the same way. In her interview with *Them*, Wren Sanders asks her about her thoughts around divinity. Arca replies that she believes in the power of in-between states, where we can discover more about ourselves and evolve into a more actualized person. She states:

I believe in states that we can enter, however they were induced, that allow a morphing or an opening up. There's always risk, but if you engage and do it with love, I think it leads to change, and that's beautiful. I said "change" instead of "growth" because I've always been hellbent on this idea of it's not evolution unless you saw the glitch... I've always wondered what it would look like if we saw evolution differently, if instead of seeing the current iteration of something as the best or the most worthy [*sic*] of existing, we honored all the mutations.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Moen, "Arca."

<sup>89</sup> Dunn, "Arca."

<sup>90</sup> Sanders, "Now List 2020."

Clearly, Arca values both sonic moments of intense dissonance and moments of dissonance within herself. Like the multiple versions of herself shown in her music video for “Mequetrefe,” Arca wants to dwell in spaces where her understanding of herself is fluid and multifaceted. Gloria Anzaldúa proposes a similar concept in her writings about *neplanta*, or “borderlands.” Anzaldúa identifies them as physical or mental spaces that lie between conflicting areas of the land or mind, saying:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.”<sup>91</sup>

Anzaldúa was a Chicana feminist scholar, and she primarily used this concept to discuss her own experiences feeling like she was not truly welcome in Latin America because of her queerness or in the United States because of her race. However, her writings can be expanded to include conflict in identity at a broader scale. She claims that *la mestiza*, women torn between Aztec heritage and European colonialism, are forced to embrace ambiguity in order to survive. By learning to tolerate conflicting identities within herself, she is able to cope by “[operating] in a pluralistic mode.”<sup>92</sup> By adopting this mindset, Anzaldúa argues that somebody can fully accept the full complexity of their opposing identities.

Arca does a similar thing; in referring to herself as both nonbinary and a trans Latina woman, Arca is allowing herself the flexibility of multiple identities in order to navigate a society that asks for rigidity within the gender binary. This could also be due to a general resistance to gender-neutral language in Latin America. Across political lines, most people in

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<sup>91</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

Latin America are uncomfortable with the increasing pressure to adjust their language to accommodate individuals who might not identify as male or female—pressure that normally comes from queer people in the United States.<sup>93</sup> By viewing herself as both a trans Latina woman and as nonbinary, Arca is able to both maintain what is likely a more accurate descriptor of her gender identity, while still respecting and maintaining a connection with her Venezuelan culture. Anzaldúa proposes that the future will rely on embracing a “*mestiza* consciousness;”<sup>94</sup> one that relies on dismantling rigid structures meant to restrict how we identify and navigate the world as our authentic selves. Arca alludes to a similar mindset when discussing being nonbinary, saying, “I think nonbinariness [*sic*] is corporeal; it’s a reconciliation between how we see ourselves as part of a collective and how we want to express our individual urges in the context of that.”<sup>95</sup> Arca’s concept of “nonbinariness” involves navigating the conflict between her gender identity and how the larger world views gender as a rigid binary.

Arca also values this ambiguity of identity proposed by Anzaldúa. She views all facets of herself, however they might conflict with one another, as equally valuable. Rather than valuing one version of herself or one voice within herself over others, she views all of her self-states as significant within her full experience of life.

### **Conclusion: The Asking of Questions**

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa illuminates how the act of writing allows her, and others within the *neplanta*, to cope with their identities and to create representations of themselves, saying:

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<sup>93</sup> Ezequiel González Camaño and Rich Brown, “‘¡Hola a Todes!’ Language Becomes a Political Battleground in Latin America,” *Americas Quarterly*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/hola-a-todes-language-becomes-a-political-battleground-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>94</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 80.

<sup>95</sup> Moen, “Arca.”



[Writing] is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else.<sup>96</sup>

While Arca is not expressing the exact same experiences as Anzaldúa, she still uses similar techniques to portray her own identity and to navigate seemingly conflicting identities within herself. She expresses her experiences of her own identity through both the dissonant meter in her song “Mequetrefe” and the fluid visuals in the corresponding music video. In a discussion of her identity, Arca states that she sees her identity as a negotiation between expressing her individuality and belonging to the collective of “nonbinary.” The *KiCk* albums are about embracing the many contradictions that are present within herself, and allowing all of those contradictions to occupy space without any one of them needing to be the most relevant or the most present.<sup>97</sup> In the meter of “Mequetrefe,” these self-states are represented by the multiple conflicting pulses present in the texture. Both the quarter-note pulse and the dotted quarter-note pulse are strongly present, and while a listener might prefer one over the other in certain moments, both pulses are strong enough to create a purposefully disorienting experience. Further, the filters and animations that Arca uses in the corresponding video link the metrical obscurity to Arca herself. As the meter grows increasingly disorienting, Arca’s appearance shifts at a heightened pace.

Arca believes that ambiguities and contradictions should be present in discussions of gender identity. About these discussions, Arca says, “there is this assumption that one person is right and one person is wrong... the asking of questions [is] more important than whether there is

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<sup>96</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 73.

<sup>97</sup> Moen, “Arca.”

one true answer."<sup>98</sup> When we are experiencing multiple conflicting ideas within ourselves, Arca asks that we not fight to find out which one we identify with more strongly, but that we embrace the dissonance, and leave the experience with more knowledge about ourselves.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER III: DO YOU WRAP BACK AROUND? IRONY AND OBSCURITY IN

### UNDERSCORES'S WALLSOCKET

#### **Introduction: Unintelligible**

In their landmark publication *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states, “persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.”<sup>99</sup> To be seen as a person worthy to participate in society, one must be definably male or female. Miqqi Alicia Gilbert expands upon Butler’s statement, stating that our instinct to categorize others into one gender or the other creates a set of rules about gender that we all use to subconsciously evaluate ourselves and one another. These rules dictate that one’s gender and one’s biological sex are inseparable and invariable, that there are only two possible sexes (and therefore two possible genders), and that the gender dichotomy between women and men is natural. Gilbert defines this method of thinking as “bigenderism,” which she describes as “the view that accepts the rules of gender and does not permit or allow for variations, exceptions, and/or deviations from the norm.”<sup>100</sup> This way of thinking shapes how we evaluate one another and place ourselves and others into different gender categories.

Even when the specific sex of an individual cannot be truly known, we still search for characteristics that will allow us to feasibly place someone into either male or female gender categories. Even though bigenderism does not allow for the separation of one’s sex from one’s gender, the reality is that one’s birth-assigned sex is not something that can be guaranteed based

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<sup>99</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 122.

<sup>100</sup> Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, “Defeating Bigenderism: Changing Gender Assumptions in the Twenty-first Century.” *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2009): 95.

on their appearance or their actions. As a result, we use observable gender displays to categorize others as male or female.<sup>101</sup> Many individuals who cannot or do not appear to fit into either male or female gender types are blocked from the privilege of being seen as respectable persons. However, what if one were to completely obscure their appearance to avoid categorization altogether?

In an article from *The Atlantic*, Spencer Kornhaber describes music by underscores as “nonbinary in both form and content.”<sup>102</sup> Kornhaber does not elaborate on this point, but underscores, like many musicians in the hyperpop scene, is transgender.<sup>103</sup> This article not only implies that sound can be gendered as male or female, but that there is a way to subvert that gender, and subvert the binary by extension. underscores does this by avoiding categorization altogether.

underscores does not subvert the binary by simply appearing androgynous. Many nonbinary people feel pressured to toe the line perfectly between masculinity and femininity in their gender expression in order to avoid being misgendered or invalidated in queer spaces. The pressure to appear androgynous is one that many nonbinary people live with and negotiate through their gender expression. In their article published in 2021, Jake Hall describes how the stereotype of “looking” nonbinary has affected how nonbinary gender identities are perceived by others, citing interviews with other nonbinary individuals discussing their own experiences. Some interviewees admit that they have attempted to appear more androgynous to avoid being

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>102</sup> Kornhaber, Spencer. “An Artist Who Makes Me Excited About the Future of Music.” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/03/underscores-music/627592/>.

<sup>103</sup> Arundhati Swaminathan, “8 Transgender Music Producers Who Are Making Waves With Their Sounds In 2023,” *Splice*, March 31, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230331194539/https://splice.com/blog/transgender-music-producers-making-waves/>.

invalidated by others, like Ben Pechey, who says, "...it can be hard not to internalize pressure to look androgynous. I used makeup as a safety blanket after I came out as non-binary; I thought that by visually communicating my gender nonconformity, I would stop the questions before they came." Another interviewee, Jules Guaitamacchi, echoes this sentiment, saying, "the common assumption is that I'm male because my gender presentation is masculine, but there are many non-binary people who often pass as binary but still stand strongly by their gender identity." The reality for many, though, is that androgyny is not easily accessed through a change in wardrobe. One interviewee, Devin Mar, describes their struggles as a plus-size person, saying "I've always wanted to dress more masculine, but as a plus-size person with 'feminine' curves, it's hard. It took me years to find masculine clothes that made me feel good – ones which didn't fall off in certain places while tightly hugging others!"<sup>104</sup> Androgyny is not only an out-of-touch ideal that does not accurately represent the appearance of all nonbinary people; it is also inaccessible to many whose bodies cannot easily appear ungendered.

Christina M. Xiao expands upon this idea that nonbinary people have a specific appearance that they are encouraged to strive for which is inaccessible to every type of body:

It's androgyny: the perfect blend between masculine and feminine. Think of every "gender envy" Pinterest board of skinny, pale, smudged-out teens with dark hair and worried knuckles. You want to be perceived as neither male nor female, but neutrally? You need a neutral body.<sup>105</sup>

This "neutral body" is inaccessible to many individuals. As Mar mentioned in their interview, plus-size people have a difficult time appearing androgynous because of the shape of their bodies. Xiao further emphasizes that whiteness is a key factor in appearing androgynous—a

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<sup>104</sup> Jake Hall, "What Does it Mean to 'Look' Non-Binary?" *Refinery 29*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/non-binary-fashion>.

<sup>105</sup> Chrisina M. Xiao, "Nonbinary People Don't Want to Own Androgyny, But We Do It to Survive," *Harvard Crimson*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/10/5/xiao-nonbinary-androgyny/>.

factor that places validation and respect out of reach of nonbinary People of Color.<sup>106</sup>

Androgyny, while it is often used as a means of expressing queer identity, is not the strongest measurement for how a transgender or nonbinary person's identity factors into the work they produce. Therefore, whether underscores presents as androgynous or creates an androgynous sound is not the focus of this chapter. Rather, it is to identify how underscores creates a nonbinary sound by refusing the gender binary altogether.

Marquis Bey discourages the impulse to search for or promote a strict definition of “nonbinariness.” Rather, nonbinariness is a refusal to be categorized or defined. Bey argues that this refusal avoids incessant discussion of terminology or identity—futile discussions that attempt to make queer identities more digestible to cisgender individuals—and instead focusses on the liberation from categorization altogether. Further, Bey also touches on the pressure to present androgynously that many nonbinary people face:

...another node is the call nonbinariness inflects: that gender is to be discontented with, thus leading to a decided unobsession with the presumption that a certain body can ever be a metric for assessing the extent to which someone “is” a certain gender, that nonbinariness is, effectively, a “noping” out of gender proper as well as gender as a vector through which one is to be read.<sup>107</sup>

Bey not only identifies how futile the pursuit of androgyny is for many nonbinary individuals, but they also emphasize how nonbinariness is a total removal of the self from the gender binary. There is no in-between area where “nonbinary” sits perfectly spaced between “man” and “woman;” rather, “nonbinary” is a refusal to be categorized, and a refusal of the binary by extension.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Marquis Bey, “NB-ous: On the Coalitional Drive of Nonbinary.” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 15, nos. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2023): 316.

In this chapter, I argue that underscores accomplishes this nonbinary sound by obscuring her identity, her vocal technique, and her intentions. By analyzing several songs on her *Wallsocket* album, and the history behind it, I demonstrate how underscores uses established practices within hyperpop culture and expands upon them to subvert expectations and to avoid placement within a gender category entirely.

### **Identity: You Don't Even Know Who I Am**

Hyperpop has solid roots in internet culture, both with its self-referential nature and its reliance on social media. While hyperpop emerged in the mid-2010's, it reached its peak popularity in late 2020 and early 2021. This time is marked for being one of solitude and anxiety, as the covid-19 pandemic was still causing people to spend most of their time at home. Because of the overwhelming stress that accompanied this time, and because most social connections were virtual and at a distance, hyperpop has been described as exhibiting the sound of the internet. As previously stated, *DAZED* describes the sound as “the internet turning in on itself.”<sup>108</sup> Hyperpop's presence in internet spaces largely affected how musicians connected with each other and how their music connected together.

The success of many hyperpop musicians can be traced to a Spotify playlist, simply titled “hyperpop,” in which curators appointed by Spotify could add and remove songs as they saw fit.<sup>109</sup> Artists like osquinn (stylized in lowercase) and 100 geecs frequently communicated with each other about music and other interests through a Discord server, where they shared their music and played video games together.<sup>110</sup> This developing community is where Laura Les, a

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<sup>108</sup> Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop Is the New Sound.”

<sup>109</sup> Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop.”

<sup>110</sup> Joe Lynch, “ElyOtto on What Hyperpop Means to the LGBTQ+ Community,” *Billboard*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/elyotto-hyperpop-interview-lgbtq-community-pride-2021/>.

member of 100 geecs, claims she found most of the music that she added to the hyperpop playlist.<sup>111</sup> Many of these musicians saw the success of their music because of this playlist. osquinn wrote her hit single “Bad Idea” after getting into an argument on Twitter. After sharing it to the Discord server, and on SoundCloud, Les added “Bad Idea” to the Spotify playlist, where streams for the single skyrocketed.<sup>112</sup> Hyperpop artists rely on the internet and the hyperpop subculture that flourishes online for the success of their music.

The way that the members of the hyperpop community present themselves is unique to the genre as well. Many musicians that produce this music are very young, teenagers or young adults in their early twenties, with artists like glaive (stylized in lowercase) as young as fifteen years old.<sup>113</sup> Many of their artist names are stylized in lowercase and are reminiscent of social media usernames. Names like glaive, osquinn, and underscores are indiffereniable from Tumblr URLs or Discord gamertags.

Many social media platforms prioritize the use of profile pictures and verifiable identities, making the actions that users take on these platforms easily traceable to their real (offline) lives. However, several platforms still thrive in which users can easily obscure their identities. In their analysis of Reddit users, Triggs et al discuss how users take advantage of the freedom to be anonymous, interacting within niche communities that do not fit mainstream culture. Most Reddit users choose to be anonymous, which frees them from the risk of any social harm for expressing interest in certain topics or communities. This anonymity allows members of marginalized groups to create communities on these social platforms without connecting their

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<sup>111</sup> Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop.”

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Will Schube, “Hyperpop: The Internet’s Loudest, Most Exciting Music Genre,” *UDiscoverMusic*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/hyperpop-100-geecs-glaive-pc-music-guide-feature/>.



true identities to the content in these communities.<sup>114</sup> The authors state, “while there are variations depending on location and sociocultural context and status, queer people may leverage Internet spaces as a means of finding their own forms of queer expression while staying safe because of these spaces’ separation from their regular lives.”<sup>115</sup> Hyperpop musicians who communicate with each other primarily through Discord were taking advantage of this anonymous safety. While many successful musicians’ legal names are easily accessible, most of their artist names completely obscure their identities until they achieve enough success for public recognition. Many artists that appear on the Spotify playlist are difficult to find on other platforms, and if they are on other platforms, their faces or names are not always made public.

In truth, this made finding musicians for this project quite challenging. It is nearly impossible to see a name like “underscores” and differentiate what kind of demographic they might represent, and personal information about underscores is scarce. Both of these aspects of her presentation are likely purposeful. Musicians like underscores obscure their identities and separate their online lives from their offline lives by how they choose to style their artist names. Through her name alone, underscores is a nebulous and mysterious creator, but she utilizes other tactics to obscure her identity as an artist even further.

One of the ways that underscores leans into this feeling of anonymity is by obscuring the identity of the narrator in her songs. Any artist can write music that is meant to speak from a different perspective than their own, but underscores does this by creating specific characters to carry the messages of her songs. Before the album *Wallsocket* was released in September of 2023, fans of underscores began finding several cryptic websites referencing the nonexistent

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<sup>114</sup> Anthony Henry Triggs, Kristian Møller, and Christina Neumayer, “Context Collapse and Anonymity Among Queer Reddit Users,” *Sage* 23, no. 1 (January 2021): 7–8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

town of Wallsocket, Michigan. These included a website for town hall meetings and general news, a student-run newspaper, and a website for a nebulous technology company, among others. Fans launched a Google Doc of theories, news links, and various other connections that they made about the soon-to-be released album.<sup>116</sup> While the information present on these websites is sparse and unclear, fans were able to piece together details about the imaginary town of Wallsocket and the characters that live there. The excitement of piecing these vague clues together maintained an element of mystery around *Wallsocket* that still exists several months after the album's release.

In an interview with *New Music Express*, underscores describes *Wallsocket* as a personal album, stating that she assigned characters for different issues that she wanted to address within herself.<sup>117</sup> However, *Wallsocket* tells the story of three different characters, none of which are specifically underscores. The fourth track on the album, titled "You don't even know who I am," tells the story of a girl breaking into someone's house.

I invited myself in and wore your clothes,  
Took your pills,  
Cried your makeup off,  
And for once, I felt just like you.  
I know that I scare you,  
But I'm nowhere near the worst you've seen,  
And you don't even know who I am.<sup>118</sup>

This song is about Mara Albright, one of the people living in Wallsocket, and tells her story from her perspective. According to the "Walldocket," the album is about S\*unny Domingo,

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<sup>116</sup> GoogleDocs, "Underscores Walldocket," Accessed December 5, 2023, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PyxkFjZeEzmSzhS4xx\\_xZ9tsf7C3cHeOdk89gs6AnsE/edit?pli=1#heading=h.ucz9ad2fvvz](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PyxkFjZeEzmSzhS4xx_xZ9tsf7C3cHeOdk89gs6AnsE/edit?pli=1#heading=h.ucz9ad2fvvz).

<sup>117</sup> Ali Shutler, "Underscores: I Think Hyperpop Is Officially Dead," *NME*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.nme.com/features/music-interviews/underscores-wallsocket-artist-interview-radar-3491619>.

<sup>118</sup> underscores, "You don't even know who I am," Released September 22, 2023, Track 4 on *Wallsocket*. Mom + Pop Records.

a trans girl; Mara, a staff member of the student newspaper with an unhealthy obsession with S\*nny; and an unnamed character referred to as “Old money bitch,” named after the title of the song she narrates.<sup>119</sup> While underscores does describe this album as “personal,” the presence of these characters begs the question of who is truly narrating each song on this album. Songs from the perspective of S\*nny and songs from the perspective of Mara can hardly both be personal to underscores; it would seem impossible to be both the stalker and the victim of stalking. This information is also far from explicit; even after the excitement from the album’s release died down, fans are still finding new information about Wallsocket and changing their past theories. These seemingly contradicting identities create an obscure image of who underscores could be. This ambiguity makes the song “You don’t even know who I am” potentially take on a whole new meaning. While this song is about Mara’s unhealthy fascination with S\*nny, it is easy to apply its lyrics to underscores herself, as we truly do not know who she is as she narrates each of the songs on *Wallsocket*.

Through the presentation of her name and through the complex world she built around her album *Wallsocket*, underscores maintains an enigmatic identity that obscures the possibility of placing her into a category. The design of her artist name and its stylistic connections with queer internet subcultures obfuscates the identity of the person behind the music, and underscores leans into this anonymity even further by inexplicitly narrating the lives of several characters in *Wallsocket*.

### **Timbre: The Kid Has Got to Be Bad News**

As previously stated, many hyperpop musicians are fairly young. Additionally, many of them do not have any professional vocal training. The accessibility of sound production

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<sup>119</sup> GoogleDocs, “Underscores Walldocket.”

technology and virtual music-sharing communities opens the opportunity for many young, nonprofessional musicians to produce and share their music. Because of this, many hyperpop musicians have a distinct way of singing that sounds unproduced and very close to a speaking voice. This particular timbre gives their vocals a relaxed sound, which has a dramatic effect on the way their music can be interpreted.

In her article about analyzing vocal timbre, Kate Heidemann states that most listeners are very sensitive to changes in vocal timbre, since we can participate in the creation of vocal sounds and can sympathize with what a singer might be doing with the various sound production technologies present in the human body.<sup>120</sup> Heidemann describes several aspects of voice production that affect vocal timbre: vibration of vocal folds, the position of the vocal tract, sympathetic vibrations throughout the body, and the degree of breath support. The distinct unprofessional quality of hyperpop singers mainly comes through in the position of the vocal tract and in the degree of breath support. When a singer relaxes the pharynx while singing energetically, it creates a sound that Heidemann describes as speech-like.<sup>121</sup> Truly, many hyperpop singers' voices seem somewhere in between speaking and singing. Additionally, many of these musicians sing with an eased airflow. Heidemann identifies this sound as indicative of a more relaxed body engagement. Both of these qualities together create a vocal timbre that sounds unproduced and speech-like. underscores demonstrates this characteristic in her song "Shoot to kill, kill your darlings." A transcription of the beginning of "Shoot to kill, kill your darlings" can be found in Figure 4.

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<sup>120</sup> Kate Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (March 2016).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Figure 4. “Shoot to kill, kill your darlings,” 0:23–0:32

When I was in school\_\_\_\_ I stayed a\_ way from the war \_\_\_\_ prudes. I've al-ways said

"if he's got a fav - or - ite war\_\_\_\_ the kid has got - ta be bad\_\_\_\_news.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff contains the lyrics: "When I was in school\_\_\_\_ I stayed a\_ way from the war \_\_\_\_ prudes. I've al-ways said". The second staff contains the lyrics: "'if he's got a fav - or - ite war\_\_\_\_ the kid has got - ta be bad\_\_\_\_news.". The melody is a descending line with some rhythmic variations, including eighth and quarter notes, and rests.

Through each of these lines, underscores’s voice moves through a lilting vocal melody that descends from a G4 to a B3, with a few interruptions throughout the descent. While these two lines do contain a melody, underscores’s relaxed method of singing these lyrics blurs the line between singing and speech. Her voice mimics the disinterested sigh of an angst-filled teenager speaking to an authoritative adult, with a relaxed tone of voice that does not suit the subject matter. This particular style of singing is one that many trans women use in their music.

While trans masculine singers often experience a dramatic change in their vocal range while going through hormone replacement therapy (HRT), people who transition from male to female, and who have already gone through a male puberty, will not experience any significant change in their vocal register. Once they have experienced adolescence, their larynx and vocal folds have been permanently changed, and hormones cannot reverse these changes.<sup>122</sup> While there is no information publicly available about what (if any) physical transition processes underscores has undergone, it is likely that her particular breathy, relaxed tone of singing is a result of the shape of her vocal folds, and any efforts she may be making to feminize her voice. One of the earliest steps trans women take in their journey through vocal therapy is using a

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<sup>122</sup> Lorraine Sims, “Teaching Transgender Students,” *Journal of Singing* 73, no 3 (January/February 2017): 280.

huskier quality in their speaking and singing voices, where their vocal folds do not fully close during sound production.<sup>123</sup> This technique not only gives underscores a more feminine vocal sound, but it also contributes to the more relaxed and “unprofessional” sound she produces. This sound is indicative of the accessibility of hyperpop, as many musicians without professional training can mimic the timbre that underscores is producing. It also creates a sound that is difficult to assign to a gender.

The vocal timbre that underscores uses is not only iconic to hyperpop, but it is also iconically uncertain. Lying in a space between speaking and singing, this uncertainty adds to the separation of underscores from perceivable gender categories. By avoiding a true song-like timbre, underscores obscures her vocal range, and dodges the potential of being placed into a gender category. The hyperpop sound is one of young, untrained musicians who use their voice to obscure the meaning of the lyrics they are singing. The relaxed, speech-like quality of underscores’s voice not only blurs the line between speaking and singing, but it also prevents her singing voice from having a clearly defined range. These vocal techniques contribute to underscores’s queer sound, but they also contrast heavily with the darker undertones of some of her lyrics.

### **Irony: Do You Wrap Back Around?**

Additionally, the vocal techniques commonly used in hyperpop often contradict the literal meaning behind the lyrics. Hyperpop is characterized by its bright, bubbly, energetic sounds. Many of these songs, though, contain lyrics that express self-deprecation, anger, sadness, hopelessness, and even violence. The connection between tone quality and lyrical content is vital

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<sup>123</sup> Gerald Gurs, “A Brief Discussion of the Potential Vocal Hurdles for Singers Who Are Trans and Suggested Vocalises for Navigating a New Voice,” *Choral Journal: The Official Publication of the American Choral Directors Association* 60, no. 9 (April 2020): 73–74.

in the perception of vocal music. Kristal Spreadborough refers to this connection as “cohesiveness.” She states that an extreme misalignment of cohesiveness can create a disquieting mood.<sup>124</sup> This effect is especially present in underscores’s song “Johnny johnny johnny,” an unsettling song about a young girl meeting a child predator online. underscores uses a children’s imitation game for the refrain, in which she repeats the name “Johnny” repeatedly, seemingly without meaning.

Follow me!  
Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny  
Whoops! Johnny, whoops!  
Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny  
(Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny!)<sup>125</sup>

In the game, a player counts the fingers of her hand, including the space between her thumb and index finger, stating the name “Johnny” at each finger. When she reaches the space between her thumb and index finger, she says “whoops” before reaching the thumb, then makes the same path back to her pinky. The idea of the game is to go through this pattern, make some unassuming gesture that the second player might not notice, and then ask the second player to repeat the pattern back. The second player will most likely not realize that they were meant to also imitate the gesture, and the first player will tell them that they did not do it correctly, to the chagrin of the deceived player.<sup>126</sup>

underscores uses themes of childhood in this song to emphasize the youth of the speaker, who is confronted with what could become an incredibly traumatic event in her life. The meaning of the game—deceiving the other player—creates another layer of meaning to this song.

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<sup>124</sup> Kristal Spreadborough, “Emotional Tones and Emotional Texts: A New Approach to Analyzing the Voice in Popular Song,” *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 2 (June 2022).

<sup>125</sup> underscores, “Johnny johnny johnny,” Released September 22, 2023, Track 5 on *Wallsocket*, Mom + Pop Records.

<sup>126</sup> Roger Welsch, “Nebraska Finger Games,” *Western Folklore* 25, no. 3 (1966): 173–94.

underscores is presenting this story as one of innocence and romance, but the reality of the situation presents itself later in the song. The repetition of Johnny's name also creates this feeling of obsession within the narrator, who describes several times how willing she is to do whatever Johnny asks. These few lines return throughout the song:

Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, I just want to be your girl.  
I do, I do, I do.  
Johnny, Johnny, all you gotta do is say the word.  
I'll do, I'll do, do anything for you.<sup>127</sup>

The cheery, relaxed timbre of underscores's voice in this song is unchanged from much of her other music, but the dissonance between the sound of her voice and the meaning of the words she sings is heightened. underscores does not only use relaxed and pleasant vocal techniques in this song, though. "Johnny johnny johnny" tells the story of a young girl realizing that the man she is infatuated with might actually be dangerous. Throughout the course of this realization, the narrator's tone changes. A transcription of the second verse of this song can be found in Figure 5.

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<sup>127</sup> underscores, "Johnny johnny johnny."



Figure 5. “Johnny johnny johnny,” 2:10–2:24

The image displays a musical score for the song "Johnny Johnny Johnny" in 4/4 time, key of D major. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of lyrics: "I wore the dress that he chose\_\_\_ and met him at his a-part - ment. And while his". The second staff continues the melody for the second line: "tongue was in\_\_\_ my mouth, hang - ing right a - bove. the couch\_ were his post -". The third staff continues the melody for the third line: "ers of teen - age girls, oh I have made a huge mis - take." The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and ties. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words hyphenated across lines.

Through the last line of this stanza, underscores adds a second vocal layer that exhibits the speech-like qualities mentioned previously. Through this vocal layer’s journey from “posters” to “mistake,” it descends in pitch, becomes more speech-like, and decreases in speed. Spreadborough refers to these combined changes as “variability.” While variability is not necessarily connected to negative emotions, it can cause feelings of uncertainty and discomfort, similar to the effects of a misalignment in cohesiveness. In particular, variability is connected with feelings of anxiety or nervousness.<sup>128</sup> underscores accompanies this effect with distortion in the instrumentation, which begins when the second vocal layer enters the texture, and increases through the end of the phrase. The change in timbre throughout this stanza is illustrated in the spectrogram below.

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<sup>128</sup> Spreadborough, “Emotional Tones.”

**Figure 6. “Johnny johnny johnny” Spectrogram**

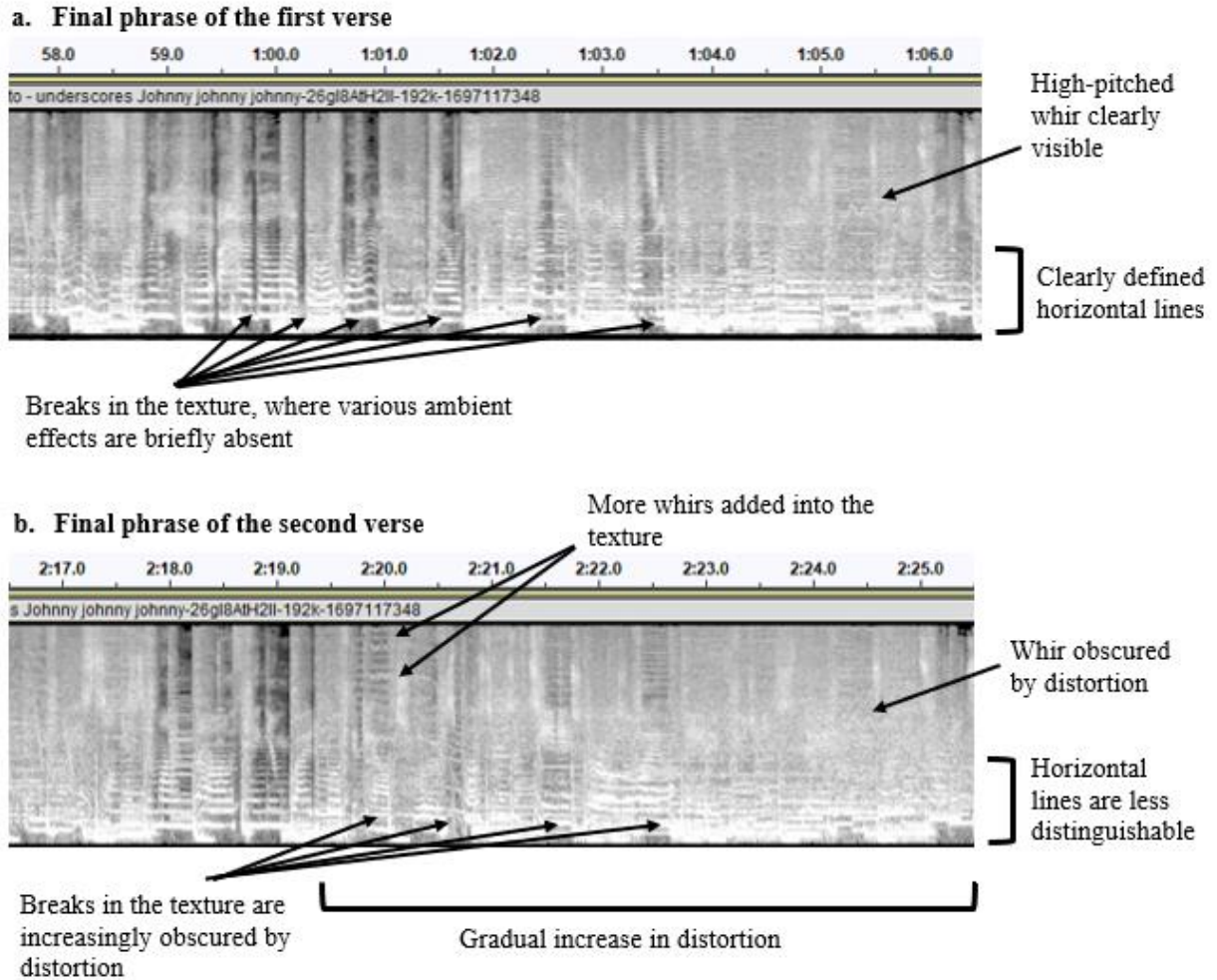


Figure 6 illustrates a comparison between the final phrase in the first and second verses. In the first verse, illustrated by 6.a, there is a pattern of breaks in the texture where certain effects are briefly absent, and the horizontal lines on the spectrogram are clearly defined throughout the phrase. There is a high-pitched whir that occurs at the end of most phrases, which is visible as a wavy line towards the right side of the spectrogram. In the second verse, illustrated by 6.b, the breaks in the texture are obscured by an increase in distortion. There are more intricate layers added into the texture, but the spectrogram appears to transform into a wall of gray as time progresses. The high-pitched whir is more difficult to see on the spectrogram, and the horizontal

lines are less clearly defined. As can be seen on the right most side of each spectrogram, the sonic layers of this song become more obscured as underscores distorts the sound in the second verse, creating an extreme feeling of discomfort and anxiety.

The way in which underscores uses sounds associated with positivity to communicate negative subjects suggests the intentional use of irony in her music. Linda Hutcheon dissects the concept of irony at length in her book *Irony's Edge*. While irony is often seen as a speaker saying one thing and meaning another, Hutcheon sees irony as a complex concept involving the combination of both said and unsaid meanings.<sup>129</sup> Hutcheon claims that irony can be used as a subversive force, as it contains “an evaluative edge.”<sup>130</sup> This edge enables the ironist to cut their actions into what is said and what is unsaid, and further complicates the meaning of their actions. In order to discover the ironist’s intentions, the listener must evaluate the ironist’s actions and form judgments about what is truly meant. This interpretive freedom, though, creates space for the meaning of the ironist’s actions to be misconstrued, and is why Hutcheon describes irony as “risky business;” while irony opens possibilities for subversion with its edge, if the ironist’s meaning is lost, it can appear as though the ironist meant something different than what was intended.<sup>131</sup> Irony can obscure the meanings and the true intentions of the ironist, creating space for more complicated conversations and interpretive freedom. underscores uses these techniques in the music and lyrics of her newest album, *Wallsocket*.

underscores was very particular about the visual imagery she chose to represent *Wallsocket*. The town of Wallsocket’s association with equestrianism as well as the album cover, a photograph of a giant horseshoe, are particularly of note. underscores became fascinated with

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<sup>129</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 89.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

horseshoe theory while creating the town of Wallsocket. Horseshoe theory is often associated with politics; the concept is that a person who leans too far into one extreme will wrap back around and land very close to the opposite extreme, similar to how the two ends of a horseshoe are close together.<sup>132</sup> The trailer to *Wallsocket* confirms the significance of this concept. In the trailer, underscores asks the listener twelve questions, the last of which is “do you wrap back around?”<sup>133</sup> Further, in many of the songs on the album, underscores continually uses a cheery sample of her saying “good luck” to the listener, a reference to a horseshoe’s association with luck. underscores became captivated with the idea of leaning so far into one meaning that an opposite interpretation would become possible. This is strongly connected to Hutcheon’s idea of irony. underscores wants to embrace this concept of leaning far enough in one direction that she “wraps around,” and winds up close to the opposing direction.

This concept is not foreign to the larger hyperpop world. Chris Inglis claims that rather than being simply ironic, hyperpop has traversed far enough into irony to swing back into sincerity. Inglis states that, while enjoying things ironically was once in fashion, the natural progression would be that participating in things sincerely would become the new way to be subversive. Hyperpop achieves this “post-ironic” perspective by leaning in to the most crude and excessive elements of pop music and by using these features to address the concerns of its listeners. These concerns, which might seem juvenile or shallow to listeners outside of the young, queer, and “chronically online,” are expressed sincerely by hyperpop musicians. Inglis maintains that this pushes hyperpop past simply participating in pop music in an ironic way, but

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<sup>132</sup> Matthew Kim, “Underscores Pens Eclectic Tales of American Suburbia on *Wallsocket*,” *The Line of Best Fit*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/albums/underscores-wallsocket-pens-eclectic-tales-of-american-suburbia>.

<sup>133</sup> underscores (@underscoresplus), “underscores 'Wallsocket' era-Trailer (strobe warning),” Twitter, April 21, 2023, <https://twitter.com/underscoresplus/status/1649488172123066369>.

that “hyperpop represents a step beyond irony, to a position by which the artist may use ironic means to produce entirely sincere ends.”<sup>134</sup> In this way, hyperpop as a whole illustrates horseshoe theory as underscores intends to use it in her album. It traverses far enough into irony that interpretations of hyperpop music can very well be sincere.

Horseshoe theory, as underscores uses it, can also apply to how transgender hyperpop musicians have chosen to present themselves in their music. Being a maximalist and rebellious take on popular music, many artists within the genre use subversive techniques in their music. One of the most iconically hyperpop characteristics is the tendency for a musician to shift the pitch of their voice, usually to a higher pitch. Many trans feminine musicians use this technique to give their voices the appearance of sounding higher, overcoming potential gender dysphoria through their voices. However, ElyOtto also uses this technique in his song “SugarCrash!,” one of the most commonly known hyperpop songs across the internet. ElyOtto is a trans man. In an interview with *Billboard*, he discusses how his identity affects his music. He states:

In “SugarCrash!,” I did pitch up my vocals, but not because I’m dysphoric about my deep voice—it’s more to detach myself. I can push it into the world without worrying people will be like, “He sounds like a girl.” I can be like, “Duh! I pitched it up, of course I’m going to sound like a girl.”<sup>135</sup>

Rather than shifting his voice to be lower, as one might expect, ElyOtto shifted his voice higher, avoiding questions about the pitch of his voice altogether. While underscores does not use this technique for this particular reason, she does create a similar situation with how she presents the narrator in her song “Johnny johnny johnny.” By journeying into exaggerated innocence and positivity, underscores creates an unsettling feeling about a young girl being taken advantage of. She travels far enough into one direction that she comes out the opposite side.

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<sup>134</sup> Inglis, “Hyperpop.”

<sup>135</sup> Lynch, “ElyOtto.”

### **Conclusion: Non-Genderism**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how underscores uses her music in a way that subverts expectations and that gives her an inherently nonbinary sound. Hyperpop in general thrives in an online environment where queer youth can free themselves of being publicly identified, and underscores pushes this anonymity even further by creating an entire album that narrates the lives of unspecified characters. The vocal technique that she uses lies between speaking and singing and prevents the listener from placing her into a gender category based on her vocal range. Her style of singing also contributes to the meaning behind her music becoming obscured; the youthful, childlike themes present in her music hide the true, darker meanings being expressed.

Later in her article, Gilbert describes several alternative methods of organizing gender information outside of bigenderism. The final method, and the one Gilbert argues for, is “non-genderism,” which argues for abolishing the association of behaviors with any gender. Gilbert claims that this is the only way to truly free humanity from sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.<sup>136</sup> While underscores’s techniques may not be intentionally working towards this idea of non-genderism, she presents herself and her music in a way that avoids categorization and produces an ungendered sound.

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<sup>136</sup> Gilbert, “Defeating Bigendersism,” 107–108.

## CHAPTER IV: ARTIFICIAL BLOOM: TRANSHUMANISM IN SOPHIE'S

### “FACESHOPPING”

#### **Introduction: Plasticity**

In 2022, Jia Tolentino decided to book consultations with several of the most popular celebrity plastic surgeons—surgeons who work almost exclusively with the wealthiest and most famous people in America—to discover the process of molding the human body into a shape that is considered more attractive. The purchase of cosmetic procedures by celebrities and influencers has grown increasingly common; one interviewee in Tolentino's research, a makeup artist in California who regularly works with celebrities, believes anyone who gets significant attention on social media has most likely undergone some procedure.<sup>137</sup> In one of her scheduled appointments, Tolentino asked a doctor about the average age of his patients. The doctor replied, saying, “I think that ten years ago it was seen as anti-cerebral to do this, but now it's empowering to do something that gives you an edge. Which is why young people are coming in. They come in to enhance something, rather than coming in to fix something.”<sup>138</sup> The words “enhance” and “fix” are of particular importance; in Tolentino's research, she discovered not only how increasingly common these procedures are becoming, but also how the culture of shame or discretion around cosmetic procedures seems to have completely disappeared. Modifications to the shape of one's body or face are at the fingertips of anyone who can afford them, and social media has dissolved the need to hide these procedures from one's audience.

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<sup>137</sup> Jia Tolentino, “Instagram Face: How Social Media and Plastic Surgery Created a Single, Cyborgian Look,” *New Yorker*, August 29, 2022, <https://login.libproxy.uncg.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/instagram-face/docview/2709006544/se-2>.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

This phenomenon is not new; in 2006, Laurie Essig observed a 465 percent increase in plastic surgery and other cosmetic procedures since 1997.<sup>139</sup> In her presentation, which was written while these procedures were slowly increasing in popularity and accessibility, Essig discusses the implications of molding one's body into almost any form of our choosing. Many individuals who seek these procedures do so because they want to fit into societal expectations of attractiveness. Essig describes what she calls "The Law of Plastic," which dictates how women in particular are expected to constantly contort themselves into a being that fits society's changing expectations of femininity:

...the Law of Plastic demands that bodies be clearly sexed as male or female, perform clearly marked genders as masculine or feminine, and desire the opposite, but the Law of Plastic also demands that bodies be white, erased of the stigmata of racial otherness, like "Jewish noses" or "Asian eyes"; it demands that bodies be young, erased of the signs of mortality, like wrinkles or sagging breasts; it demands that bodies be pampered, erased of the signs of poverty, like bad teeth or botched C-sections.<sup>140</sup>

The Law of Plastic is responsible for many of the cosmetic procedures that are sought by celebrities and their fans, but Essig also describes a subset of individuals who resist the Law through plastic actions of their own. She names this resistance "plasticity,"<sup>141</sup> and uses it to describe individuals who practice "plastic gender," who play with gender through plastic surgery and through various identity labels. These individuals are both conforming to the Law of Plastic by adjusting their bodies to society's expectations of their gender, while also resisting it by playing with their gender and refusing to adhere to any single representation of their identity.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Laurie Essig, "Plastic/Plasticity: Molding the Resistant Body in a Material World." *Conference Papers – American Sociological Association*, Annual Meeting, Montreal 2006, 4.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 14–15.



There are many gender-affirming practices by transgender and gender non-conforming people that are done without the intention of adhering to the gender binary. Dean Spade, a transgender author who himself has been questioned by doctors who fail to grasp his concept of how he wants to present, criticizes the overarching assumption that all trans people who seek gender-affirming care want to appear cisgender, or even present as what might be associated with their gender identity.

What if the success of transition was not measured by (non-trans) normative perceptions of true femininity and masculinity in trans people? I imagine that, like me, some people have a multitude of goals when they seek gender-related body alteration, such as access to different sexual practices, ability to look different in clothing, enhancement of a self-understanding about one's gender that is not entirely reliant on public recognition, public disruption of female and male codes, or any number of other things. (...)When the gatekeepers employ dichotomous gender standards, they foreclose such norm-resistant possibilities.<sup>143</sup>

There are countless reasons why a trans person might be seeking gender-affirming care or body modification surgery that do not involve adhering to societal norms. While not explicitly resisting a structure that some might describe as rigid or limiting, many are still utilizing medical intervention to express their gender in ways that resist the gender binary.

Because of hyperpop's reliance on processing and technology for its sound, it provides a rich landscape for a discussion about the interaction of artificial material with the human body. SOPHIE is often credited as one of the founders of hyperpop, and includes themes of plastic surgery and body modification in several of her releases. In this chapter, I demonstrate how SOPHIE negotiates the dichotomy of organic and synthetic in her song "Faceshopping" to reveal

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<sup>143</sup> Dean Spade, "Mutilating Gender," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006): 324.

a transhumanist take on cosmetic procedures. I do so through an analysis of the lyrics, texture, and visuals present in the music video.

### **Verse: Organic vs. Synthetic**

As can be gleaned from the visuals and the lyrics, “Faceshopping” dwells on themes of plastic surgery—more specifically, facial feminization surgery. While many FTM (female-to-male) transgender individuals can achieve their desired aesthetics without intense medical intervention, it is significantly more challenging for MTF (male-to-female) transgender people to do so. Facial features are particularly challenging to modify, and these modifications are often strongly desired by patients. Facial feminization surgery, or FFS, refers to a collection of surgical procedures meant to alter characteristically male facial features to be perceivably more feminine. FFS can include more surface-level procedures common amongst cisgender women, like rhinoplasty and injections, as well as more intense procedures involving the reshaping of bone structure.<sup>144</sup> Because of the invasiveness and cost of these procedures, they are often inaccessible to patients. They are still strongly desired by many trans individuals, and medical scholarship has been debating for years about the accessibility of such procedures.

Discussions surrounding FFS have circulated amongst bioethics scholars; Dubov and Fraenkel were published in *The American Journal of Bioethics* in support of coverage for FFS for trans women in 2018. The authors argue that FFS is a necessary treatment for gender dysphoria. Because FFS is often characterized as “cosmetic,” it is rarely seen as medically necessary, and is not often covered by health insurance. However, because FFS can be seen as treatment for dysphoria, it can be seen as a medical necessity. Further, many medical facilities

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<sup>144</sup> Alex Dubov and Liana Fraenkel, “Facial Feminization Surgery: The Ethics of Gatekeeping in Transgender Health,” *American Journal of Bioethics* 18, no. 12 (December 2018): 5.

are unequipped to provide FFS; at the time this article was written, 22 of the 50 United States did not have a single surgeon specializing in FFS, and a few states only had one surgeon qualified to provide FFS. Dubov and Fraenkel argue that because FFS alters the construction of the face, it is more impactful on a person's everyday life than other gender-affirming surgeries, which impact parts of the body that are not regularly visible. FFS is therefore necessary to allow trans women to avoid mistreatment by those who would recognize them as trans and discriminate against them.<sup>145</sup> FFS is often seen and sought-after as a method to allow trans women to alleviate dysphoria and to mitigate violence they might experience at the hands of intolerance.

Other authors have expanded upon Dubov and Fraenkel's claims. Notini, Gillam, and Pang claim that FFS grants transgender people the right to privacy. Because it involves adjusting facial features to appear more feminine, FFS allows trans women to control with whom they share their trans identities. Some forms of gender affirming care are often kept private, like bottom surgery, but a person's face is typically at the forefront of how they are perceived and recognized by those around them. The authors also argue that FFS offers compensatory justice, stating that the provision of FFS compensates for discrimination that trans women might face due to being recognizably trans.<sup>146</sup> If a cisgender woman can exist publicly without facing violence for her gender, a trans woman should be able to as well. All of these authors strongly argue for the accessibility of FFS for a variety of reasons, but most of their reasoning aligns with allowing trans women to exist peacefully in society without being subject to violence.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Lauren Notini, Lynne Gillam, and Ken C. Pang, "Facial Feminization Surgery: Private, Personal Identity, Compensatory Justice, and Resource Allocation," *American Journal of Bioethics* 18, no. 12 (December 2018): 14.

In SOPHIE’s song “Faceshopping,” themes of plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures are made apparent by her juxtaposition of organic versus synthetic images and themes. Plastic surgery often involves the insertion of foreign material into the human body. People who do get plastic surgery are often criticized for being “fake” or dishonest, but SOPHIE emphasizes this dichotomy of natural and unnatural themes rather than diminishing it. The first verse is as follows:

Artificial bloom  
Hydroponic skin  
Chemical release  
Synthesize the real  
Plastic surgery  
Social dialect  
Positive results  
Documents of life<sup>147</sup>

These lyrics not only explicitly reference the theme of plastic surgery, but they also juxtapose conflicting “synthetic” and “organic” concepts. Table 1 demonstrates how each of these words or phrases can be categorized, and the imagery associated with them in the “Faceshopping” music video.

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<sup>147</sup> Sophie Xeon, “SOPHIE – Faceshopping (Official Video),” Industry Plant, uploaded on April 4, 2018, YouTube video, 4:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es9-P1SOeHU>.

**Table 1. Comparison of Lyrics that Represent Synthetic Versus Organic Ideas, and the Imagery Associated with Each Line**

<b>Synthetic</b>	<b>Organic</b>	<b>Imagery</b>
Artificial	Bloom	Flower
Hydroponic	Skin	Skin
Chemical release	-	-
Synthesize	Real	Cells
Plastic surgery	-	Raw meat
Social dialect	-	Social media logos
Positive results	-	CAPTCHA
-	Documents of life	Squid

Most of these words obviously belong in one category or another. “Artificial” and “chemical release” are simply associated with the synthetic or the unnatural, as are “bloom, skin,” and “real” with the natural. A few of these concepts, however, are ambiguous, like the terms “social dialect” and “positive results.” Thankfully, in SOPHIE’s music video, she displays particular images when each of these concepts are spoken. The imagery can be used to further understand how these concepts can be categorized and to realize SOPHIE’s intentions. When the lyrics state “social dialect,” images of social media logos flash across the screen. Social media is run through technology, and as Tolentino observed, many of the most followed people on Instagram have undergone some cosmetic procedure. The term “positive results” is accompanied by images of CAPTCHA’s used to determine whether a user is human. Interestingly, the phrase “positive results” being connected with a CAPTCHA is vague as to whether the user tested

positive as a human or as a robot. Still, CAPTCHA's are presented on a computer screen, and so can be associated with the synthetic category.

The juxtaposition of organic and synthetic words and imagery can also suggest new meanings for these phrases. The phrase "artificial bloom" is accompanied by images of a photographic negative of a blooming flower. This combination of plastic surgery with the concept of growth or evolution implies that cosmetic procedures are a way for a person to "grow" synthetically, or perhaps to grow into themselves, or the image they want for themselves, in a way that defies natural growth. Each of these words or phrases relates to the overall theme of combining the synthetic with the organic, and SOPHIE uses them to introduce the topic of plastic surgery.

### **Refrain: The Authentic Synthetic**

SOPHIE uses four words with multiple meanings and connotations to indicate a complex relationship with plastic surgery. The refrain of "Faceshopping" is as follows:

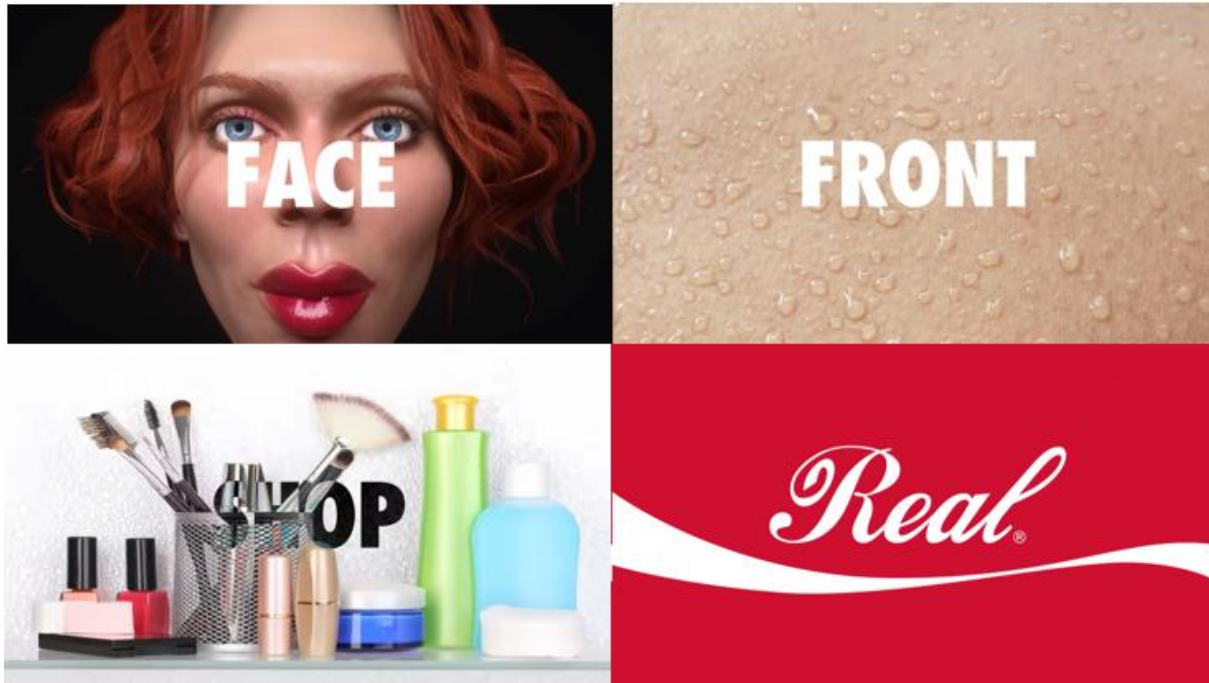
My face is the front of shop  
My face is the real shop front  
My shop is the face I front  
I'm real when I shop my face<sup>148</sup>

Within this refrain, four words are consistently emphasized: face, front, shop, and real. Each of these words is used in a way that suggests multiple meanings. Each is also accompanied by an image that is consistently associated with it, further charging each of these words with meaning.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

Figure 7. Frames From the Music Video for “Faceshopping”



The word “face” appears in every line of this refrain, emphasizing its particular importance. The Oxford English Dictionary has dozens of definitions for this word. “Face” might mean exactly what it implies: a human face, or the area on SOPHIE’s head from the forehead to the chin.<sup>149</sup> However, it could also be used as something more general. In the line “my shop is the face I front,” “face” can simply imply the surface of something,<sup>150</sup> SOPHIE’s attractiveness or general appearance,<sup>151</sup> or even how she chooses to represent herself.<sup>152</sup> SOPHIE’s face, or a digital 3D model of her head from the neck up, is frequently shown in this

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<sup>149</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “face (n.), sense I.1.a,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4935719533>.

<sup>150</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “face (n.), sense II.9.a,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1755709278>.

<sup>151</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “face (n.), sense I.2.b,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6150973815>.

<sup>152</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “face (n.), sense III.17,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9825838185>.

video, and the image of her face is always pictured when the word “face” is in the lyrics. The way her face is portrayed indicates signs of cosmetic surgery or digital editing; her cheekbones are prominent and rounded, almost to the point of having “pillow face,” or cheekbones that have enough filler to appear out of proportion to the jawline.<sup>153</sup> Her lips are shockingly full, and her eyes are unsettlingly large. All of these features conflict with how SOPHIE appears in photos. Further, SOPHIE’s face is portrayed as both solid and fluid in the video; it contorts, wobbles, and squashes flat, but is also sliced into several pieces that topple over like shards of glass. SOPHIE is casting an image of her face that is fluid and moldable, while also being rigid and static. This image further connects to the ideas of organic versus synthetic; organic beings are expected to grow and change, while synthetic concepts are often rigid or inflexible. SOPHIE’s face is both rigid and flexible, both synthetic and organic.

The word “front” also has multiple meanings, and it affects the meaning of words it occurs in conjunction with. A literal interpretation of “front” might be similar to “face;” the surface level or referring to the appearance of something.<sup>154</sup> However, to “front” can also mean acting insincere or dishonest.<sup>155</sup> In the line “my shop is the face I front,” “front” is used as a verb, possibly meant to indicate that the “face” that SOPHIE is using is not what it seems or might be used to conceal something else. Interestingly, the word “front” is always accompanied by images of skin, implying that the “front” SOPHIE is discussing is the actual surface of the face or body. While SOPHIE is most likely not implying that undertaking FFS is in any way dishonest or

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<sup>153</sup> Dr. Lanna Aesthetics, “What Are the Signs of Cheek Filler Gone Wrong?” Accessed January 18, 2024, <https://doctorlanna.com/cheek-fillers-gone-wrong-what-are-the-signs/>.

<sup>154</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “front (n.), sense III.8,” November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1025011146>.

<sup>155</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “front (v.2), sense II.10.c,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2793941344>.



deceptive, this statement still addresses how the intention behind FFS is to alter the appearance of the very first part of a person's body that others will perceive in social interactions: their face.

SOPHIE uses the word “shop” as both a noun and a verb as well. The meaning of “shop” as a noun is more figurative than literal in this refrain. “Shop” can refer to a business<sup>156</sup> (or in the case of the second line, “shop front,” referring to the word “shopfront,” or the front of a business<sup>157</sup>). SOPHIE is more likely connecting “shop” to her product: the music she produces. Further, as SOPHIE is connecting “shop” to “face” in most of these lines, the product could also be her image. SOPHIE's appearance represents the music she releases. This reality may have influenced how SOPHIE presented herself, or did not present herself, from the earliest part of her career. SOPHIE was an enigmatic figure; photos were often prohibited at her live shows, so there were very few accessible photos of her. She often would not show her face at all, preferring to ask a different performer to lip sync to the music she produced backstage. Any information she did offer about herself was incredibly vague, whether it was through her social media or through interviews. She refrained from referring to herself in the third person, avoiding the need for gendered pronouns entirely, which lead to media sources assuming she was a man.<sup>158</sup> SOPHIE stated in a later interview that she did not want her personal information affecting how her music was enjoyed and understood.<sup>159</sup> She even avoids using words like “queer” or “trans” when describing herself or her work, preferring to let the music speak for itself.<sup>160</sup> “Shop” in this

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<sup>156</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “shop (n.), sense 3.a,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1063999370>.

<sup>157</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “shopfront (n.),” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1062905671>.

<sup>158</sup> Sasha Geffen, “Sophie Can Show You the World,” *Vulture*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/01/profile-sophie.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Hazel Cills, “SOPHIE Is an Immaterial Girl in a Material World,” *Jezebel*, April 4, 2018, <https://jezebel.com/sophie-is-an-immaterial-girl-in-a-material-world-1823883163>.

<sup>160</sup> Geffen, “Sophie.”

instance could refer to how SOPHIE's appearance, and the identities that are assumed based on her appearance, can interfere with how a listener interprets or enjoys SOPHIE's music.

“Shop” as a verb also contains several meanings. It could be used as a shortened version of “Photoshop,” as many writers and critics have posited.<sup>161</sup> The music video also mentions social media. Images of logos for Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, which are all strongly associated with self-image, flash across the screen, further strengthening the association with editing software like Photoshop and Facetune. “Shop” could also refer to the act of purchasing something.<sup>162</sup> Plastic surgery and other cosmetic procedures enacted on the face are often very expensive, and as previously stated, rarely covered by health insurance. SOPHIE is referring to these procedures as “faceshopping,” or the purchase of desired facial features. SOPHIE accompanies the word “shop” with images of beauty products: makeup, perfume, brushes, lotions, and creams stacked on shelves. “Shop” in this instance is used to indicate how beauty is something that one can purchase if they have enough resources to do so.

Finally, even though the word “real” occurs the least out of all these key words, it still carries heavy implications for how different lines of the refrain can be interpreted. “Real,” as in true, honest, or genuine,<sup>163</sup> could imply that the word it refers to is not at all deceptive or untrue. By stating “my face is the real shop front,” SOPHIE could be saying that her appearance is the true site of transaction, despite music being the product. As previously stated, SOPHIE rarely comments on her own music, as she prefers the music to speak for itself, and for listeners to draw

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<sup>161</sup> Rich Juzwiak, “SOPHIE on Her New Album, Old Disco, and Expressing Trans Identity in Music,” *Jezebel*, June 15, 2018, <https://jezebel.com/sophie-on-her-new-album-old-disco-and-expressing-tran-1826863700>.

<sup>162</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “shop (v.1), sense 4.a,” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4255281997>.

<sup>163</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “real (adj.2), sense I.2,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6397134380>.

their own meanings from it. However, in one interview, SOPHIE illuminates what she could mean by using the word “real” in “Faceshopping.” In 2015, SOPHIE worked with McDonalds on a video advertisement, allowing them to use samples from her song “Lemonade.” When asked why she wanted her music in this context, she stated:

When I was doing the first SOPHIE music, I thought I’d like to place it in that context because I wanted to live in the real world. (...)I don’t want it to be this elitist, academic thing, with only people from a certain sect listening to it. That’s not my intention. I want it to interact and have a life in the real world, as I see it, and communicate within that context.<sup>164</sup>

SOPHIE chose to allow her music to interact with consumerism because she believed that doing so is more connected to the “real” world than keeping her music in a more experimental, elitist context.<sup>165</sup> SOPHIE connects the word “real” to consumerism and products more literally in the “Faceshopping” video as well. The imagery she associates with “real” is not so much an image, but a font and a style. The particular script and the white text with a red background remind most viewers of Coca-Cola, complete with the registered trademark symbol. In one clip, this image is joined by an animated stream of water, further implying the intended connection of these visual cues with a beverage brand. SOPHIE is intentionally connecting the concept of “realness” with consumerism and branding.

There is, however, another potential meaning to the term “real” in this context. The last line of the refrain, “I’m real when I shop my face,” carries with it implications about how cosmetic procedures or practices can affect a trans person’s perception of their identity. For many, the ultimate goal of FFS is to be recognized as female,<sup>166</sup> either by others in social contexts to avoid being misgendered, or by oneself in order to have a better connection to one’s

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<sup>164</sup> SOPHIE, quoted in Geffen, “Sophie.”

<sup>165</sup> Geffen, “Sophie.”

<sup>166</sup> Dubov et al, “Facial Feminization Surgery,” 5.

own face. If this is the case, this line could be interpreted as stating that cosmetic procedures allow trans women to be their most authentic selves. SOPHIE herself states:

[With] things like body augmentation, you can find something that's actually *more* real, which was my experience with electronic music and synthetic materials. (...)That's something I always want to try and communicate, deconstructing this idea of authenticity which you see so much in the music industry especially. An acoustic or electric guitar is meant to signify authenticity, but it's like, what's the real relationship? It's a symbol more than anything.<sup>167</sup>

SOPHIE is arguing that the practice of “faceshopping,” body augmentation, or other cosmetic procedures can allow a person to become more “real” or authentic to themselves. The limitations of the body that one is born into do not need to limit one’s expressive means, and finding ways to express that go beyond those means is more “real” than accepting those limits as final. In Essig’s presentation, a genderqueer activist referred to as “Kelly A.” is quoted stating, “Life is art and art is a process. (...)I’m creating a world for myself... Creating my own reality...”<sup>168</sup> While some may argue that cosmetic procedures are used to hide someone’s “real” features, Kelly A. and SOPHIE argue that these procedures are revealing a trans person’s truest form. This idea is also connected to the line in the verse, “Synthesize the real.” SOPHIE is indicating that plastic surgery or other cosmetic procedures are materializing a person’s image of themselves, and are therefore manifesting that person’s reality.

There is a final, even more striking possibility to SOPHIE’s use of the word “real:” it can also refer to the existence of something substantial, rather than being imaginary.<sup>169</sup> SOPHIE is implying that one can become “real,” materialized into being, because of FFS. In the line “I’m

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<sup>167</sup> SOPHIE, quoted in Cills, “SOPHIE.”

<sup>168</sup> Kelly A., quoted in Laurie Essig, “Plastic/Plasticity,” 18.

<sup>169</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “real (adj.2), sense I.1.a,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2395571867>.

real when I shop my face,” SOPHIE could be implying that “faceshopping” is what makes her a physical human being, or rather that “faceshopping” makes her recognizably human to those who might otherwise discriminate against her.

The combination of these words within each of these lines creates multiple meanings. Table 2 demonstrates potential interpretations for each line of the refrain in “Faceshopping” considering the multiple definitions of each of the key words.

**Table 2. Potential Interpretations of Each Line of the Refrain in “Faceshopping”**

Lyrics (Keywords Italicized)	Potential Interpretations
<i>My face</i> is the <i>front</i> of <i>shop</i> .	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My face/appearance represents my product.</li> <li>2. My face/appearance disguises my product.</li> </ol>
<i>My face</i> is the <i>real shop front</i> .	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My face/appearance is the true product.</li> <li>2. My face/appearance disguises what the product truly is.</li> <li>3. My face/appearance is the place of business.</li> <li>4. I use photoshop or plastic surgery on my face.</li> </ol>
<i>My shop</i> is the <i>face</i> I <i>front</i> .	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I use my product to conceal who I am.</li> <li>2. I use cosmetic procedures to conceal who I am.</li> <li>3. My product is how I choose to represent myself.</li> <li>4. My face, which has had cosmetic procedures done, is what I want to represent myself.</li> </ol>
I’m <i>real</i> when I <i>shop</i> my <i>face</i> .	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am my most authentic self with cosmetic procedures, or when I use Photoshop or other editing software.</li> <li>2. I only exist when my appearance matches my image of myself.</li> <li>3. I am recognized as a human if I have cosmetic procedures to make me look more feminine.</li> </ol>

The definitions and interpretations of some of these key words are connected, either by similar meanings or by opposite meanings. “Face” and “front,” as previously stated, can both

imply the foremost part of a person or an object.<sup>170 171</sup> While it is not directly connected to a dictionary definition of the word “real,” SOPHIE connects the meanings of the words “real” and “shop” in both her interviews and how she represents the words visually. The association of the word “real” with consumerism is closely linked to the definition of “shop” as a place of business.<sup>172</sup> “Front” and “real” can take on opposing meanings. If “front” is used to imply insincerity,<sup>173</sup> and “real” is used to describe something authentic,<sup>174</sup> the interpretations of these two words conflict with one another. This conflict makes the potential meanings for the line “My face is the real shop front” more complicated. This line is the only one that contains every key word in the refrain, and three of the key words happen in conjunction. It is unclear if SOPHIE is using “real” to describe the shopfront, if the “front” is disguising what the real shop is, or if SOPHIE is emphasizing the importance of cosmetic procedures on her face (rather than other parts of her body). Altogether, this opens up many possibilities for interpreting this refrain. Even though the refrain largely consists of four repeated words, SOPHIE’s intentions are obscured due to the multiple connotations each word contains.

### **Bridge: Transhumanism**

There is an alternative side to the conversation surrounding FFS, and other cosmetic procedures that transgender people often pursue. In the same issue that featured Dubov et al, Florence Ashley and Carolyn Ells, while not necessarily disparaging FFS or those who pursue

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<sup>170</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “face (n.), sense II.9.a,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1755709278>.

<sup>171</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “front (n.), sense III.8,” November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1025011146>.

<sup>172</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “shop (n.), sense 3.a,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1063999370>.

<sup>173</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “front (v.2), sense II.10.c,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2793941344>.

<sup>174</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “real (adj.2), sense I.2,” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6397134380>.

gender affirming care, criticize the sentiment that FFS is in any way “reconstructive.” They argue that seeing FFS as reconstructive assumes that having features that appear cisgender is more normal, and that being trans is abnormal. Not all transgender people wish to erase features that might disclose their transness, or to conform to cisgender body norms.<sup>175</sup> They also argue that trans people should avoid seeking affirmation of their gender by aligning with stereotypes of how that gender usually appears, but instead embrace their transformation as declaring ownership over their bodies.<sup>176</sup> Ashley and Ells are not arguing against gender affirming care as a whole, but they do disagree with how it is discussed and justified by Dubov and Fraenkel.

Some trans and gender non-conforming people, though, disagree with the involvement of the scientific community in trans issues entirely. Cristina Richie, also published in *The American Journal of Bioethics* in 2018, believes that FFS prioritizes an ideal that is primarily white and perpetually young. Richie argues that encouraging trans women to conform to societal expectations of femininity is unjust when society is inherently discriminatory. She states, “it is patently unfair to ask individuals to make themselves— through great efforts—more palatable for presentation in society, when society rhymes with sexism, ageism, and racism.”<sup>177</sup> It is more valuable, according to Richie, to seek social change instead of demanding that these procedures become more accessible.<sup>178</sup> Further, many trans people are subjected to months or years of therapy sessions with psychiatrists in order to prove to their medical providers that these procedures are necessary or truly desired. Trans people like Spade, who are not seeking

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<sup>175</sup> Florence Ashley and Carolyn Ells, “In Favor of Covering Ethically Important Cosmetic Surgeries: Facial Feminization Surgery for Transgender People,” *American Journal of Bioethics* 18, no. 12 (December 2018): 24.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>177</sup> Cristina Richie, “A Queer, Feminist Bioethics Critique of Facial Feminization Surgery,” *American Journal of Bioethics* 18, no. 12 (December 2018): 34.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

procedures to conform to the gender binary, often confound doctors who expect otherwise. This stereotype not only forces trans people to legitimize their trans experience to (often cisgender) doctors, but also reinforces the idea of a natural gender and expression, which differs from the unnatural or transgressive ways that trans people experience gender.<sup>179</sup> These layers of complexity surrounding gender-affirming care are often ignored by medical providers, which leaves many trans patients without the care they need or desire.

Knowing about these conflicting opinions in the queer community about FFS and other cosmetic procedures, one might ask how SOPHIE feels about these discussions. SOPHIE has stated in interviews that she takes inspiration in her writing from transhumanism,<sup>180</sup> a movement that promotes the use of technology to enhance the human body and mind.<sup>181</sup> This movement has intersected with American politics, with the “transhumanist party” endorsing candidates for the 2024 presidential election.<sup>182</sup> They have also published a Bill of Rights, which affirms the rights of sentient beings to have unlimited access to medical and scientific intervention to end suffering, improve their quality of life, and extend the length of their lives.<sup>183</sup> SOPHIE specifically cites the writing of Martine Rothblatt as a source of inspiration for her own work.<sup>184</sup> Rothblatt connects the struggles of queer and gender non-conforming people to the eventual development of advanced artificial intelligence and brain-mapping onto virtual spaces. She discusses how humans, and our genders, exist in our minds, and the development of technology allows us to transcend the natural limits of our bodies to become further enhanced beings.

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<sup>179</sup> Spade, “Mutilating Gender,” 321.

<sup>180</sup> Geffen, “Sophie.”

<sup>181</sup> Ostberg, R. "transhumanism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 7, 2023.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/transhumanism>.

<sup>182</sup> Transhumanist Party, “Transhumanist Bill of Rights – Version 3.0,” Last updated on December 12, 2018, <https://transhumanist-party.org/tbr-3/>.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Geffen, “Sophie.”



Rothblatt also draws specific connections between the construction of the human form and the physical hardware of technology, claiming that the natural progression of human intelligence will traverse the boundary between human and technology by mapping our consciousnesses into programming.<sup>185</sup> Rothblatt argues for the acknowledgement of life across the imposed boundaries of organic versus synthetic material, saying:

The first step in extending the lessons of transgenderism to transhumanism is to recognize the continuity of life across substrates, just like the continuity of gender across body-types. Just as each person has a unique sexual identity, without regard to their genitals, hormones or chromosomes, each person has a unique conscious identity, without regard to their degree of flesh, machinery or software. It is no more the genitals that make the gender than it is the substrate that makes the person. We must respect the personhood of any entity that “thinks consciously, therefore I am conscious,” just as we must respect the sexual identity of any being that “feels this gender, therefore I am this gender.”<sup>186</sup>

Rothblatt draws connections between the recognition of transgender people in a society that prioritizes the gender binary to a potential future where we recognize the consciousness of programming or artificial intelligence.

While SOPHIE does not traverse into fully artificial lifeforms in “Faceshopping,” she does write explicitly about the subject of inserting artificial material into the body to become a further enhanced being. She does so by drawing a hard line between her natural body and a version of herself that has undergone cosmetic procedures, both through the lyrics and through the musical content. In “Faceshopping,” the lyrics and the imagery in the music video all discuss themes of plastic surgery and facial feminization procedures. The sparse texture of the verses and refrain consists of heavy electronic percussion effects and a voice speaking the lyrics. There is

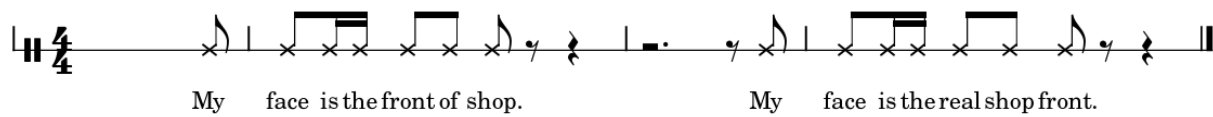
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<sup>185</sup> Martine Rothblatt, *From Transgender to Transhuman: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Form*, Martine Rothblatt, 2011.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

virtually no pitch present during the verses or the refrain; all of the lyrics are spoken, and the voice is often heavily pitch shifted down to the point of unintelligibility. The lyrics also heavily emphasize a steady pulse; each of the key words occurs on a strong beat (aside from line 2 of the refrain, where “shop” falls on an off-beat), and the rhythm is simple and easy to follow, especially since it is repeated with each line of the refrain.

**Figure 8. “Faceshopping,” 0:00–0:06**



The same can be said about the verse: the rhythm is simple and static, with no variation.

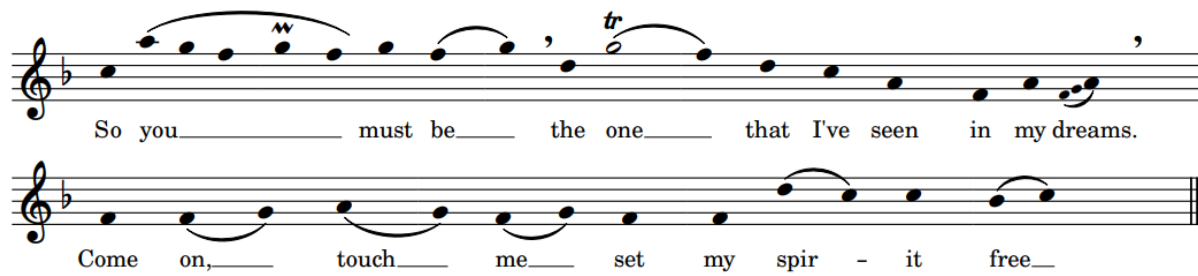
**Figure 9. “Faceshopping,” 0:17–0:23**



These aspects of the music make the verse and refrain sound almost mechanical. This changes, though, when we arrive at the bridge.

Further into the song, more explicit transhuman sympathies are revealed. At 2:20, all of the percussive layers drop out of the texture and are replaced with a dreamy synthesizer. This is the first time SOPHIE uses harmony, or pitch in general, in this song. The synthesizer shifts around D minor and F major triads without any apparent metrical framework. At the same time, SOPHIE sings a melismatic line, also free from any metrical context:

**Figure 10. “Faceshopping,” 2:15–2:28**



As SOPHIE sings these words, the lyrics appear word by word in a shimmering, shifting text. All of the flashing lights and imagery from the earlier sections of the song are gone; all that remains is SOPHIE’s crumpled rubber face as she watches the lyrics appear on-screen, and even she disappears after a few seconds, leaving the viewer alone with SOPHIE’s voice.

**Figure 11. “Faceshopping” Music Video, 2:16**



This section of the song achieves an intimacy with the viewer that previous sections did not attempt. The refrain and the verse were both incredibly stimulating, with their flashing white

screens, aggressive percussion effects, and heavily edited vocal lines. The percussion is deliberately metrical, with a very strong and steady duple meter. In the bridge, though, there is almost exclusively pitch content. SOPHIE's voice is only accompanied by the synth, and both she and the synth appear to operate independently of any rhythm or meter. SOPHIE's melody line is almost improvisational and heavily charged with emotion—in particular, because of her use of second-person pronouns. Until this point, SOPHIE seemed to be talking only about herself, using words like “my” and “I” in the refrain. Here, SOPHIE is talking to someone else. In fact, SOPHIE is talking to an idealized version of herself, the one she has seen in her dreams. She is separating the version of herself that she wants to be from her current self, who might not have the feminization procedures that she wants. Rothblatt addresses a similar principle in her writing. She discusses different “instantiations” of the self that are or will be possible with the increasing advancement of technology, forms of a person that can be duplicated and experience their own lives, saying:

The moment there is a new instantiation of you it can begin a separate life. It will have experiences that the original self does not have. On the other hand, it could be arranged that one or all of your instantiations synchronize regularly such that the experiences of one are the experiences of all. In this case, we will have crossed into the transhuman domain of “one mind, many forms.”<sup>187</sup>

SOPHIE sees the version of herself with plastic surgery and the version of herself without as different instantiations of her being as a whole. She uses the verse and the refrain to represent her idealized self, mimicking themes of artificial cosmetics by relying solely on rhythm, spoken text, and electronic percussion, and representing her unaltered natural state with a melodic line

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<sup>187</sup> Rothblatt, *From Transgender to Transhuman*, 74.

that is free from metrical context. Further, SOPHIE wants to be fully realized as this version of herself. The bridge continues as follows:

Ooh, test me  
Do you feel what I feel?  
Do you see what I see?  
Ooh, reduce me to nothingness<sup>188</sup>

By saying “reduce me to nothingness,” SOPHIE is stating her desire to leave this version of herself in the past and fully transition into a form that is both organic and synthetic, but still fully alive. It is also possible to use a transhumanist lens to interpret this line as SOPHIE hoping to replace her entire physical body with augmentations. Rothblatt advocates for the eventual recognition of all kinds of life across the organic/synthetic spectrum. Similar to the Ship of Theseus, SOPHIE is toying with the idea of fully replacing her organic body with synthetic material, and whether or not she is still herself, or if she is something entirely different.

The final refrain of “Faceshopping” combines a number of elements from the song, further fleshing out SOPHIE’s connection between the multiple instantiations of herself. The texture of the refrain is different than previous versions, both because SOPHIE increased the intensity of the electronic percussion and the glitching of the vocals, but also because she adds another vocal layer underneath the ordinary text of the refrain.

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<sup>188</sup> SOPHIE, “Faceshopping.”

**Figure 12. “Faceshopping,” 3:22–3:33**

The image displays two lines of musical notation in a 4/4 time signature. The first line of music is on a treble clef staff and contains the lyrics: "My face is the front of shop." followed by a musical phrase with several 'x' marks above it, and then "My face is the real shop front." followed by another musical phrase with 'x' marks. The second line of music is on a lower treble clef staff and contains the lyrics: "So give me what I want." followed by a musical phrase with 'x' marks, and then "My shop is the face I front." followed by another musical phrase with 'x' marks. The final line of music is on a lower treble clef staff and contains the lyrics: "I said ev-'ry-thing I want." followed by a musical phrase with 'x' marks. The notation includes various note values, rests, and 'x' marks above the notes, likely indicating specific rhythmic or pitch-related features.

While this additional vocal layer does not have any strict pitches, it does have an upwards and downwards pattern of inflection. This final refrain combines the sentiments of SOPHIE’s ideal self, who has already had plastic surgery, with SOPHIE’s current self, who desires plastic surgery. The second line of this text is not only imitating pitch with its pattern of inflections, but it also addresses a listener in the same way that SOPHIE’s voice does in the bridge. Even though she does not explicitly use second-person pronouns in this final refrain, she is still directly speaking to someone and demanding the procedures she wants.

SOPHIE’s transhumanist inspirations are clear in the lyrics and texture of her song “Faceshopping.” She is negotiating her trans identity and her gender expression through transhumanist ideas of body enhancements and modifications, idealizing her future self and wishing to erase the current instantiation of herself.

### **Conclusion: Human Potential**

As I have demonstrated, there are many conflicting opinions in the scientific community and in the queer community in regards to FFS and other procedures that are meant to change a trans person’s appearance to align with gender expectations. There are two main sides of this debate: either in favor of FFS as a source of gender euphoria and privacy, or against FFS as a

reaffirmation of oppressive gender expectations. Transhumanism provides a third perspective, advocating for the accessibility of all kinds of medical and surgical “enhancements” to the body as a human right. Through this perspective, SOPHIE relates her own trans experience to the discourse around plastic surgery.

SOPHIE uses her song “Faceshopping” to illustrate a complex relationship with plastic surgery. The lyrics of the song refer to a dichotomy of organic versus synthetic material that is the reality of cosmetic procedures. SOPHIE presents four key words in “Faceshopping” to create countless meanings of her seemingly short and simple refrain. Each of these words has many interpretations on its own, but placing them together creates even more complexities. SOPHIE has stated that she is inspired by transhumanism in the music she creates, and transhuman sentiments are clearly visible in how she talks about her identity in “Faceshopping.” In the bridge, SOPHIE reveals how she wishes to become an idealized version of herself that erases her current state, either literally or figuratively.

In her comparisons between organic humans and future advanced humans, Rothblatt says:

Freedom of gender is, therefore, the gateway to a freedom of form and to an explosion of human potential. First comes the realization that we are not limited by our gross sexual anatomy. Then comes the awakening that we are not limited by our anatomy at all. The mind is the substance of humanity. Mind is deeper than matter.<sup>189</sup>

Rothblatt and SOPHIE are both arguing for the expansion of the human condition, or rather, a rebellion against it. SOPHIE uses “Faceshopping” to advocate for expanding what we consider human life and “realness” to include surgical procedures that our advanced medical

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<sup>189</sup> Rothblatt, *From Transgender to Transhuman*, 40.

knowledge has made accessible. In doing so, we acknowledge that we as humans are not limited to our natural bodies, and we unlock our potential to become our most authentic selves.



## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have addressed three main characteristics of hyperpop music, and how three different transgender musicians use these characteristics to express their gender identities. These elements are disorientation, irony, and technology, and their use by hyperpop musicians reflects the genre's young demographic and their anxieties about the world they are developing in. Hyperpop is both a part of the larger popular music genre and a critique of it; its brash lyrics and overwhelming synthesized elements are meant to represent features of popular music at their most extreme. This new sound gives trans musicians a unique space to express themselves within what is arguably a part of mainstream culture while still lying outside of it.

Arca uses feelings of disorientation to express her complex and nuanced gender identity through her music. Arca is a musician with an extensive history of critiquing how gender is negotiated and limited by language. Through several interviews, Arca's commentary on her own gender reveals the many ways she describes her gender identity with labels that seemingly contradict each other. However, Arca herself states that she believes in all of the versions of herself existing together, all at once. This way of thinking opens up new possibilities for Arca's gender identity, allowing her to identify both as nonbinary and as a trans Latina woman. Even though the labels "nonbinary" and "trans woman" seem to be incompatible, Arca feels comfortable embracing both of these parts of herself. These ideals are reflected in the music she produces. In her song "Mequetrefe," Arca expresses her love for disorientation and discord through dissonant metrical layers in the bridge. The hemiola that appears between the quarter-note pulse and the dotted quarter-note pulse is intensified by the repeated intrusion of an extra quarter-note every fifth measure, creating both a grouping dissonance and a displacement dissonance. This dissonance creates a feeling of disorientation that reflects Arca's descriptions of

how she wishes to experience her gender: as multiple, equally important aspects that, while they seem to work against each other, are able to coexist and be embraced as a true representation of herself.

underscores embraces obscurity and irony in her concept album *Wallsocket* to express her disinterest in gender categories and labels. Because hyperpop soared in popularity during the early days of the covid-19 pandemic, many of its listeners were forced to make all of their social connections through the internet. Because of this, many listeners and musicians are young, and the internet's influence of irony and self-reference is prevalent in hyperpop. underscores, like many other queer hyperpop musicians, uses the ambiguity of her name to obscure her gender identity. However, she takes this obscurity even further with her concept album. *Wallsocket* tells the story of several characters in the fictional town of Wallsocket, Michigan, with underscores as the narrator. Within this format, the listener is unable to differentiate who is speaking during each of the tracks on *Wallsocket*, further obscuring underscores's identity and intentions. She also uses irony to cloud her intentions. underscores chose to emphasize horseshoe theory through the imagery associated with her album. underscores is deliberately stressing the idea of moving far enough into one meaning that an opposite interpretation is possible, which complicates her intentions. This complexity is reflected in her song "Johnny johnny johnny," in which a young girl is taken advantage of by an older man. underscores uses the young girl's innocent perspective to stress the peril that the narrator is truly in, giving the song an incredibly unsettling feeling despite initially being about something seemingly innocuous. All of these aspects of underscores's presentation and music create a nebulous image of her as an artist, reflecting a rejection of the gender binary and any interest in discussing or justifying her relationship with her gender.

SOPHIE uses hyperpop’s relationship with technology to express her desires for gender expression and to discuss transhumanist ideals. The lyrics to her song “Faceshopping” set up a dichotomy between organic and synthetic themes, which is reflected by the sonic elements of the verse, refrain, and bridge. The absence of pitch content in the verse and refrain, and the presence of first-person pronouns, is distinct from the full reliance on pitch in the bridge, and the presence of second-person pronouns. This distinction separates SOPHIE into two versions of herself: her current self, without plastic surgery, and her future self, with plastic surgery. SOPHIE addresses this future self, saying that she wants to be eliminated completely. SOPHIE’s ideals represent transhumanism, a movement that promotes unlimited access to medical procedures for the purposes of body modification and the extension of human life. SOPHIE offers a unique perspective as a trans woman, as many trans women seek various procedures to feel more comfortable or connected with their appearances. Contrary to what might be expected, SOPHIE views the pursuit of cosmetic surgeries as potentially more authentic than not doing so, if an individual so wishes. SOPHIE’s ideas of authenticity are reflected in how she presents herself and her desire for cosmetic surgeries.

Hyperpop as a genre is fascinating enough in itself, but it is also indicative of a newly emerging demographic for popular music. It is arguably one of the first genres to hit the mainstream that features trans musicians in such a positive and prominent way. Trans writer Nic Johnson describes hyperpop’s rapid ascent into popularity as “revolutionary,”<sup>190</sup> as most music that is associated with transness might be about the trans experience, but rarely from a trans perspective. Johnson cites several releases from past decades that discuss transness by either

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<sup>190</sup> Nic Johnson, “How Hyperpop Gives Trans Artists a Voice,” *Ringtone Mag*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.ringtonemag.com/articles/how-hyperpop-gives-trans-artists-a-voice>.

diminishing trans people to an abnormality or by narrating their lives through a lens of self-hatred. In contrast, Johnson celebrates the way that hyperpop provides trans musicians with a method to express themselves through their own means, saying:

Americans were fascinated by trans narratives, but only when filtered through the cis male artists who used them as musical inspiration. Now, trans artists are using hyperpop to take back control of their own narratives, to tell their own stories unfiltered.<sup>191</sup>

Hyperpop marks a change in how trans artists are represented in pop culture, and it reflects young people's changing perspectives on queerness. In 2021, *Gallup News* reported that queer people make up 7.1% of the total population of the United States.<sup>192</sup> However, this year, *CNN* reported that queer people make up 28% of Gen Z.<sup>193</sup> Younger generations are clearly more comfortable labeling themselves as queer, and with consuming content created by queer people. Further, statistics show that younger generations are not only comfortable with content that includes queer people, but they also view media that includes queer representation more favorably than content that does not.<sup>194</sup> It is likely that hyperpop reached immense success not only because of a new opportunity for trans musicians to express themselves in mainstream culture, but also because listeners across identities are more willing to appreciate the music that queer people produce.

Further, Gen Z is often described as the first generation who grew up with the internet. The incredible pressures of social media and the constant bombardment of information that this

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "LGBT Identification Ticks Up to 7.1%," *Gallup*, February 17, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx>.

<sup>193</sup> Nicole Chavez, "Gen Z Adults Identify as LGBTQ at Much Higher Rates Than Older Americans, Report Shows," *CNN*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/25/us/gen-z-adults-lgbtq-identity-reaj/index.html#:~:text=Nearly%20a%20third%2C%20or%2028,religion%2C%20values%20and%20public%20poli>cy.

<sup>194</sup> Sarah Kate Ellis, "LGBTQ Inclusion in Advertising and Media Executive Summary," *GLAAD*, 2019, <https://glaad.org/inclusion>.

generation has constantly been subject to undoubtedly influenced the development and popularity of hyperpop.<sup>195</sup> This influence was likely heightened by the 2020 covid-19 pandemic, which forced many young adults to make all of their social connections through virtual means. In fact, the earlier days of hyperpop’s popularity in the United States are arguably inseparable from pandemic anxieties. Some listeners are even nostalgic for the conditions they were forced to live under during those years. One user posted just this year in the subreddit r/HYPERPOP aching for the nostalgia of early hyperpop, saying:

...i gotta admit i miss being a dumb middle school kid. i miss listening to glaive and ss03 bloodhounds mommworld novagang, popular tiktok digicore n allat... learnin how to produce music on discord call in the middle of online school... i wanna go back icl. also shoutout [user] for introducing me to hyperpop back in 2020 quarantine when i was a middle schooler. cant believe its been 4 years<sup>196</sup>

Clearly, the development of hyperpop goes hand-in-hand with the covid-19 pandemic. Most of the comments on this thread are in agreement with the original post: that, despite the trauma that the pandemic inflicted on them, many listeners are nostalgic for the era of the internet that produced hyperpop. The pandemic set the scene for a generation that socialized almost solely through the internet to create music heavily influenced by internet culture.

Despite the prevalence of the genre, and the popularity that many artists enjoyed once they were added to the hyperpop Spotify playlist, many hyperpop musicians are uncomfortable with being placed within the genre. For artists like glaive, being placed into a genre by people who were not necessarily contributing to it or experiencing it felt very limiting. In an interview, he laments these limitations on his music, saying:

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<sup>195</sup> Lucas De Lellis da Silva, “Understanding Hyperpop: The First Generation Raised By the Internet,” *Gazelle*, November 28, 2020, <https://www.thegazelle.org/issue/191/understanding-hyperpop-generation-internet>.

<sup>196</sup> InfectumJun, “i miss trendy quarantine hyperpop,” Reddit, January 30, 2024, [https://www.reddit.com/r/HYPERPOP/comments/1aevlet/i\\_miss\\_trendy\\_quarantine\\_hyperpop/](https://www.reddit.com/r/HYPERPOP/comments/1aevlet/i_miss_trendy_quarantine_hyperpop/).

I was making music just because that's what I was doing. Then, *je ne sais pas*, they're putting words in my mouth. I felt that because I was young, an old fuck gets to say that I make *blah blah blah*. I grew up in an age where music was never presented to me as a genre. So why would I care?<sup>197</sup>

glaive is not alone with his dismissal of the hyperpop label. Other artists like dollywood1 and midwxst (both stylized in lowercase) disparage being associated with popular music at all, even under the more niche hyperpop community.<sup>198</sup> Despite the success that the Spotify playlist brought to many independent artists, many of them resent the label that has been placed on the music they produce.

Further, some artists argue that hyperpop was fleeting, and that its moment is in the past. In fact, talks of the genre's end have been circulating in social media spaces since the term "hyperpop" reached the mainstream in 2020.<sup>199</sup> Even underscores, in an interview for the *Wallsocket* album, claimed that hyperpop had long passed its peak, saying, "I wouldn't have gotten to whatever point I'm at now without hyperpop. I think it's officially dead though. A lot of us in the community are trying to figure out where we go next."<sup>200</sup> It seems that the blazing fast culture of internet trends set fire to, and quickly burned up, hyperpop's success.

Hyperpop is a relatively new phenomenon, which opens up many possibilities for research. Hyperpop is just one of the ways that the pandemic affected younger generations and the music they produce, but further research could absolutely discover more ways that the chaos of the early years of the pandemic affected art and pop culture. The comments from the

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<sup>197</sup> Amos Barshad, "Please Stop the Hyperpop," *WIRED*, August 29, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/hyperpop-end-internet-genres/>.

<sup>198</sup> Wyatt Marshall, "The Hyper Behind Hyperpop Artists," *Chartmetric*, February 23, 2024, <https://hmc.chartmetric.com/hyperpop-genre-origins-rise/>.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> Shutler, "Underscores."

r/HYPERPOP Reddit thread also indicate a difference in hyperpop that was produced during and after the more strenuous years of the pandemic, which could lead towards interesting discussions of how post-pandemic hyperpop diverges from its earlier days. Hyperpop also suggests how the presence of the internet in younger generations' lives influences the music they produce. The constant flashes of different trends and microgenres indicate a thriving virtual ecosystem and its countless resources for producing various forms of art. Further, research into artforms that are heavily populated by queer people grows increasingly important. There have been a number of legislative attacks on trans rights in the United States throughout recent years. In 2023 alone, the ACLU tracked over five hundred bills meant to restrict or eliminate queer rights.<sup>201</sup> This year, there are still over four hundred active anti-trans bills in the United States.<sup>202</sup> In times like these, when transgender individuals are being vilified by the government, it is important to not only acknowledge the injustice that is being carried out, but to acknowledge how trans people contribute to the content we consume. Hyperpop would not be the thriving, colorful, culturally rich genre it is without the unique contributions that trans artists brought during its development. It is a rich genre founded by young trans artists and fostered in internet spaces, and there is no doubt that its influence on this generation will be observable through how they produce music in the future.

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<sup>201</sup> ACLU, "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2023," Last modified on December 21, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2023>.

<sup>202</sup> Trans Legislation Tracker, "2024 anti-trans bills tracker," Accessed March 18, 2024, <https://translegislation.com/>.

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