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UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY
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Cyborgs, Dolls and Passing Narratives: Trans-femininity in Popular Music

by

Troia, Quinn J.

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Cyborgs, Dolls, and Passing Narratives: Trans-Femininity in Popular Music

Abstract:

The Cyborg is a figure that has been used by feminist scholars as a metaphor for feminist issues and transgender identity because the embodiment of both transgender people and cyborgs challenges binary understandings of male/femaleness and human/nonhumanness respectively. This comparison has also suggested the potential of reading cyborgs as passing figures who attempt to perform normative social identities; however, scholarship analyzing Cyborg figures has not explored this in ways that are specific to trans-feminine people. By combining contributions from the theory of gender performativity and research on transgender linguistic practices and identity construction, I perform a visual and textual analysis of the music of three trans-feminine artists: Kim Petras, Chase Icon, and Arca. These artist's bodies of work, I argue, are united by an engagement with self-representative cyborg figures that can be analyzed to present a spectrum of normative to nonnormative models of trans-feminine identity. Their respective engagement with these Cyborg figures diverges from "stealth" or invisibility as the predominant models of trans-feminine embodiment, and instead marks a shift towards more self-constructed and expansive possibilities for transgender identity.

Keywords: cyborg, transgender, trans-feminine, passing

Introduction:

Since its introduction in Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, the Cyborg metaphor has served as a valuable feminist tool for analyzing the narratives surrounding gender, technology, and embodiment. However, many of the works this field of inquiry are based around

engage predominantly with a more essentialist understanding of gender dynamics that is not necessarily trans-aware. In contemporary American society, transgender people have become an increasingly popular scapegoat for conservative politicians and are subject to dehumanizing language that paints us as a social contagion and monstrous threat. At the same time, discussions of femininity or femaleness are still often limited by a discussion of primarily cisgender women's experiences, treating the experiences of trans-feminine people as an exception or addition to the "default" female experience. For example, in Bergen's (2016) writing on the incorporation of disembodied cybernetic assistants like Siri, these aids are described in terms of being "female" interchangeably with the term "woman," although the term "cisgender" does not appear in the text. Many of the other authors I read and cite in this paper have done fantastic work at analyzing the social construction of gender and femininity, however I think there is room to explore trans-feminine experiences specifically, as like the Cyborg figure herself, we do not have a stable naturalistic origin story to appeal to.

Throughout this paper, I use the terminology trans-feminine because it references an affinity to femininity and trans identity and is inclusive of nonbinary trans identities, like my own, although I would argue that the distinction between binary and nonbinary trans identities is largely itself a product of social discourses. This term is used by people who were assigned male at birth; however, it encompasses a fuller range of identities than just transgender women and I would like to emphasize it as a self-selected term and the experiences described are of course not universally experienced and are context specific.

How I am interpreting the term Cyborg in this paper is "a figure that combines elements of human/nonhuman embodiment, especially some combination of organic and technological elements." I am most concerned with the idea of the cyborg as a metaphor for the gendered,

specifically trans-feminine, body, rather than just the more commonly associated cyborgs of science fiction writing, although these figures do appear in this essay. The Cyborg is a figure around which binaries break down and the limits of who or what is seen as human can be explored, which I think makes it an excellent metaphor and lens to apply to trans studies, especially around the experiences and art of trans-feminine people. This paper applies this lens of construction to contemporary music that has been made by trans-feminine individuals to analyze the diverse narratives of identity construction, self-presentation, and normativity contained within them.

I should say that my own identity as a trans-feminine person has been molded by my academic endeavors. In many ways, I owe my comfort in myself to other trans and feminist scholars who have provided me with the conceptual space to form a sense of self that is my own. Over the last year my desire to start Hormone Replacement Therapy led me to developing an increased interest in theories of gendered embodiment and normativity to help decide what path my own life would take. As I began to search for a way to conceptualize living in a more physically nonbinary body, I also became curious about why I felt such affinity with other trans-feminine people because I grew up with a very limited understanding of what trans identity was. As a feminist scholar concerned with the social construction and history of gender, the “born in the wrong body” narrative never resonated fully with me, and it was my involvement in online trans spaces that exposed me to the idea of a more self-directed experience of gender.

Monstrous feminine figures, including witches, angels, and cybernetic creatures, populated the media shared by my trans-fem social media communities as aspirational embodiments of femininity. Many of the people sharing imagery related to feminine monstrosity also expressed experiences of sexism, ableism, and transphobia and a sense of empowerment that

came from reclaiming these figures as self-representative. This project is an attempt to read the stories told by other trans-fem people in art that invokes some of this imagery to expand analysis around the Cyborg metaphor to include contemporary trans-fem existence and consider the different strategies we employ to survive in world that sees us as other. With all of this in mind, the guiding research question this paper explores is: How do trans-feminine musicians engage with Cyborg figures to subvert, conform to, or challenge traditional models of trans-feminine identity and embodiment?

Literature Review:

This literature review is structured into two parts that establish the theoretical framework this paper is built upon. The first section explores feminist writing around Cyborg figures and establishes a connection between interpretations of cyborgs and their potential to be read as metaphors for transgender people. The second section explores Transgender linguistic and identity modelling practices more closely to establish the relevance of looking towards these media depictions of cyborgs specifically.

One of the most important contributions to the literature around Cyborgs in feminist thought is Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), which introduces the Cyborg as, among other things, "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 1991) and considers its potential to create liberating narratives in the collapse of traditionally understood boundaries. The attention she pays to myth and cultural narrative has been well explored and expanded upon by other scholars including Nina Lykke and Tudor Balinisteanu. In chapter 1 of her book *Between monsters, goddesses and cyborgs: feminist confrontations with science, medicine and cyberspace* (1996), Lykke brings together feminist writings on Cyborgs and Greek and Roman earth Goddesses to argue that both sets of figures serve to challenge

scientific narratives that “cast the non-human in the role of a mere object and exploitable resource” (p. 24). She suggests that these figures may share a sort of kinship and there may be value in exploring their connections rather than maintaining a binary between the constructed and the natural. Balinisteanu takes this invitation further, analyzing the fictitious Borg Queen to examine how women are simultaneously distanced from and tied to the natural in scientific discourses.

The work of Lykke and Balinisteanu echoes Ortner’s (1972) analysis of the intermediate position women are placed between ideas of nature and culture to justify patriarchy and female subordination. Ortner discusses how the social situation of women leads to a feedback loop that cannot be disrupted without allowing women full participation in the creation of culture, although she does not necessarily argue against this culture-nature dialectic like later authors. Transgender culture also offers a challenge to Ortner’s assertion that “women cannot change their bodies” (1972, pg. 28), as advancements in medical science have allowed for our bodies to be increasingly modified in ways that were previously impossible. These explorations form a solid ground for analyzing the ways femininity is culturally constructed and often simultaneously idolized and trivialized through metaphorical feminine Cyborg figures.

The Cyborg metaphor has also been explored in relationship to passing narratives in science fiction writing, notably by Surkan in his piece “I wAnT TO BE A REAL BOY”: A.I. ROBOTS, CYBORGS, AnD mUTAnTS AS PASSInG FIGURES in SCIEnCE FICTIOn FILm” (2004). Surkan suggests that in science fiction films, cyborgs can be read as representing people whose bodies or identities do not fit within binary systems of categorization and they can be read as representations of transgender people because their bodies also defy the male/female binary. He defines passing as a process of “consciously performing” (Surkan, 2014, p. 12) a social

identity that differs from the one that might often otherwise be assumed of an individual and acknowledges that this requires social recognition by others to be validated as real. The idea of “realness” or “passing” in this context comes from the linguistic practices of predominantly Black queer subcultures (Valentine, 2007) and has historically been the goal of transgender embodiment for trans-feminine people in America. This has meant being seen as a “real” woman and achieving “stealth” (Valentine, 2007) where a person is not socially known to be or read as transgender and is instead assumed to be cisgender in most situations. An identity model within trans-fem subcultures that is related to this is that of the “doll” which plays with the construction of femininity more literally, while unlike the cyborg, the goal is explicitly one of folding into normative gender expectations.

Judith Butler’s groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990) is also foundational to understandings of gender performativity, suggesting that gender is something that is done and enacted socially through our behaviors. Rusty Barrett also provides further discussion of how language and identity interact in queer subcultures in his book *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: language, gender, and gay male subcultures* (2017), where he suggests understanding camp as a “language ideology” (p. 19) and identifies it as having the potential to subvert dominant assumptions of “style and self-presentation” (p. 23). Central to these theories is the idea that what is considered “normative” behavior for a particular gender category is context specific and constructed socially. This idea of identity having both an internal component and being constructed through social interactions that challenge or affirm it pairs well with the framework of “passing” because its focus is predominantly to reproduce normative performances and signs associated with a particular gender in order to be read as an authentic performer.

For analyzing transgender identity construction specifically, Reily and McGuire's 2022 article "Aesthetic Identity Development Among Trans Adolescents and Young Adults" provides a basis for understanding how trans youth form and present their identities through a variety of ways, and how that is often in consideration of what is deemed normative. There is an association between normativity and safety, and Reily and McGuire (2022) suggest that many trans young people are consciously negotiating this tension as they develop an authentic sense of gender identity and presentation.

Sonny Nordmarken's 2019 article "Queering Gendering: Trans Epistemologies and the Disruption and Production of Gender Accomplishment Practices" also considers how the linguistic practices of trans people can potentially disrupt normative scripts of gender and gender performance through their nonconformance to them. One example Nordmarken offers is the use of nonbinary gender pronouns like they/them/theirs or ze/zir/zirs that challenge the language through which gender is communicated by not indexing either a male or female gender identity. Much of my considerations on these ideas of narrative and identity modelling relate back to Sandy Stone's "The "Empire" Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1992), where she argues for a more expansive model of trans identity beyond the invisibilizing passing narratives common in the latter half of the 20th century. These works argue for an increased sense of agency in challenging normative expectations and performances of gender, becoming intentionally unreadable in an attempt to carve out new social space and possibilities for embodiment.

Throughout these different threads of feminist inquiry, attention to how femininity is constructed and represented culturally through depictions of construction, perfection, and inhumanness provides ample ground for reading the art of trans-feminine people, which can

address a gap in the literature and consider a more diverse range of trans narratives. Much of the scholarship I read treated the experiences of cisgender women as synonymous with femininity and as a trans-feminine scholar, I felt that there was still room to explore feminine gender identity as it is created and performed by those who may not fit under existing frameworks. Paired especially with the framework of transmisogyny (Serano, 2021), I argue that there is potential for analyzing self-representative Cyborg figures produced by trans-feminine people for underlying narratives of gender identity formation and presentation.

Methodology:

Using the Cyborg metaphor and history of trans scholarship on identity formation as my primary framework, I conducted a visual and textual analysis of the music and visual art of three contemporary trans-feminine musicians: Arca, Chase Icon, and Kim Petras. I argue their work represents a spectrum of engagement with cyborgs, “the dolls,” and this idea of passing. These three women are some of the most prominent trans artists in the American media landscape, and their respective work provides different models of trans-feminine identity while still engaging, implicitly or explicitly, with dominant ideas about gender and embodiment. As research conducted by Reily and McGuire (2022) and Nordmarken (2019) suggests, media and our peers can serve as a powerful influence on the identity formation of other transgender people, which makes studying existing narratives important from a feminist perspective.

Kim Petras is a German musician who has recently risen to new heights in the American popular music consciousness and is arguably the most visible transgender woman in the pop music space. Her work and self-presentation represent the more normative end of this spectrum of trans-feminine identity, with visual aesthetics that are a mix of the hyper-feminine and camp. Her identity is a central part of her public persona and image, something Petras deliberately

connects to her music, which is itself abundant with the performative and symbolic associations of affluent white femininity. This includes frequent references to luxury fashion houses, cocaine use, and a glamorous, if unattainable, lifestyle of partying and leisure.

The primary cyborg figure I chose to analyze from Petras' discography comes from the visualizer for her song "Coconuts" (Petras, 2021), which features a cartoonish Petras with coconuts covering her breasts in nod to the euphemistic naming of the track. What makes this a Cyborg, I think, is that it is a digital self-representation that presents a body combining human and non-human elements, namely Petras' body and literal coconuts, which while also being organic matter, are certainly not human. The Cyborg figure has been used in the past to destabilize the associations between the female body and nature, and here the mixture of elements that would normally exist in nature, or outside the body, frames the body in a way that creates a hybrid figure. This makes it a cyborg as it presents a body that disrupts this human/nonhuman binary, and I argue this makes it readable as a metaphor for trans-feminine embodiment. Petras' discography also features other references to monster figures that scholars like Lykke (1996) have suggested can be read similarly to their more cybernetic kin, in a pair of independently released Halloween records.

Chase Icon is a musician and internet personality who initially rose to prominence through her vocal impersonations of Lady Gaga in the late 2010s and has recently begun releasing music through her own label. Icon identifies as a transgender woman and her lyrics and visuals frequently center own body, sexuality, and references to broader American transgender culture. She represents more of a middle point between Petras' normative and Arca's nonnormative modelling of identity, as she very explicitly acknowledges the active construction and presentation of trans-feminine identity and embodiment in her work. As will be discussed in

more depth later, Icon's voice and linguistic choices are paired with imagery related to cosmetic and gender affirming surgeries, as well as 3D models of Icon's physical body, that diverge from "stealth" narratives that would necessitate their exclusion.

It is one of these images featuring a collection of 3D models that appears as the cover and visualizer for her single "I'm Perfect" (Icon, 2021), that I argue can be interpreted as a cyborg figure. The artwork incorporates digital representations of Icon's real body; however, these figures are not entirely human and are accompanied by scaffolding, suggesting their literal construction. The cyborg is also a figure that is inherently a construct, and these digital images being modelled off a real physical body and then altered blurs the boundary between reality and fiction. Interpreted as cyborg figures, they are closer to some of the cyborg/goddess figures imagined by Balinisteanu, and I argue that how they were created challenges the physical/digital binary and allows them to be read as trans-feminine cyborgs.

Arca is a composer, producer, and recording artist who has been actively releasing music since the mid 2010s. Her work frequently discusses her identity as a nonbinary transgender woman, themes of duality and transformation, and nonhuman figures including cyborgs, aliens, and monsters. Her work is an interesting subject of analysis for this paper because unlike the previous artists discussed, Arca's body of work contains several explicit cyborg figures that match more traditional understandings of sci-fi cyborgs. This provides an opportunity to explore more nonbinary and nonconforming models of transgender embodiment and identity in contrast to the more normative models present in Petras' and Icon's work respectively.

The cyborg figures I analyzed from Arca's work come from the visualizer for her *Kick* quintet of records, which initially was released as the music video for her songs "Prada" (Arca, 2021, track 2) and "Rakata" (Arca, 2021, track 3) which appear on *Kick ii*. The 3D models

contained in this video were modelled directly off Arca's real body and face and they depict Arca as an array of cybernetic hybrids, challenging the organic/synthetic and human/nonhuman binaries respectively. These figures read visually the closest to understandings of the cyborg as a combination of human and technological features and are the primary visual element accompanying the music, as static shots of each model are used as the album covers for *Kick ii* through *Kick iiiii*. Like the other cyborg figures referenced in this paper, the element of modelling off the real physical body and visage of the artist suggests a self-representative intention that opens both them and the music they accompany to being read as transgender.

As part of the research process, I surveyed the respective discographies of each artist, paying attention to themes of identity construction, femininity, and its relationship to normative models of gender presentation. Specific songs, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, were selected based on their relationship to these themes and their relationship to the visual cyborg figures. Songs which feature the artists as a primary songwriter were also prioritized as subjects of analysis for personal narratives because of their more direct involvement in the substance of the lyrical content. The music referenced can be accessed easily through different subscription streaming services and in limited uploads on YouTube. Lyrical content was cross-referenced with official third-party sites when available, although some tracks discussed are purely instrumental. Visuals were also accessed primarily through YouTube videos uploaded to the artists' official pages, as well as the accompanying album covers on streaming services when available.

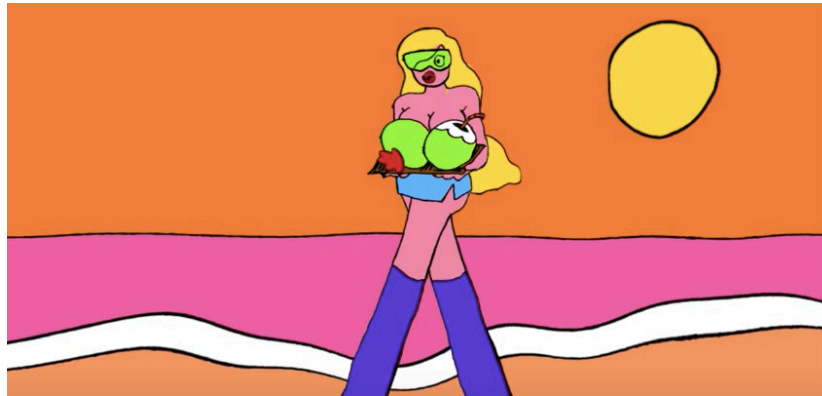
Results:

Kim Petras:

One of the more interesting self-representations in Petras' work comes from the visualizer for her song "Coconuts" (Petras, 2021), shown below, which features a cartoonish Petras with coconuts covering her breasts in nod to the euphemistic naming of the track.

Figure 1

Screen Capture from "Coconuts" Lyric Video



Note. Petras, K., 3 Dec 2021, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcgEXwjAlmo&ab_channel=KimPetrasVEVO)

As the song plays, the coconuts bounce and move in rhythm with her body and are constantly described using the possessive adjective "my" reinforcing the connection between the human and nonhuman visual elements, making it unclear where the body starts and stops as her actual breasts are obscured. Transgender women are frequently subject to questioning of the artificiality of their bodies (source) and based on Petras' engagement with camp and performative femininity, this contradictory image can be read as celebratory of her body. The song is full of lyrics that make comparisons between Petras' breasts and a variety of fruits, including "Strawberry, mango, lime" (Petras, 2021) and it produces this saccharine and over the top tone. When read as camp, her exaggerated performance of femininity and overt sexuality may be intended to challenge social norms that simultaneously objectify and deny the reality of the trans-

feminine body. Social norms around modesty typically dictate the covering of women's breasts, so to center them in the image suggests some form of challenge to that norm. This is not to suggest that this cannot be read more as straightforward objectification, however I think Petras' engagement with camp and queer aesthetics points to a more subversive motive.

Another song that is valuable for reading Petras' work for themes of identity discovery and as explicitly transgender is the title track of her first Halloween themed record, "Turn Off the Light" (Petras, 2018, track 4). *Turn Off the Light* (Petras, 2018) is the first of two projects from Petras that invoke monstrous imagery and associations between queerness and horror that may find themselves in kinship with the cyborg. For the song itself, the most interesting lyrics come from Elvira, a queer horror icon in her own right who is featured on the track singing "Only in the darkness will you find your true self / Howl at the moon to awaken the spell / One cannot judge what the eye cannot see / Outside the realm of humanity / Embrace your fear, don't dare to run / Only then will you be what you're meant to become" (Petras, 2018, track 4). Here we see themes of transformation and becoming, potentially becoming something more than human, that resonate with the posthuman call of the cyborg figure. Elvira and Petras emphasize the embrace of internal identity over outward appearance or what is considered "normal" in a way that allows it to be read as a metaphor for queer/transgender identity. Here they subvert the idea that queerness is something to be fixed within oneself, instead its acceptance leads to self-empowerment even if that means accepting its more monstrous associations.

The last song to discuss from Petras is an instrumental track titled "TRANSylvania" (Petras, 2018, track 3) which contains one of the few instances of the word Trans/Transgender across Petras' discography. As discussed with "Coconuts" (Petras, 2021), much of her work winks at or alludes to her identity as a transgender woman through engagement with language

and tropes associated with queerness and her campy aesthetics. This presents her often as more of a “passing figure,” leaving the details of her inner identity or reality more as subtext than the focal point of her art. Her work centers ideas of personal empowerment, often referencing iconic female pop culture figures, for example in “Coconuts” she lists Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen in comparison to herself or rather her breasts or “twins” (Petras, 2021). The models of femininity she describes are more aligned with normative assumptions about women’s beauty, and are frequently cisgender, white, able-bodied, affluent, and blonde. This is in line with more traditional models of trans-feminine identity as discussed by Stone (1992), that emphasize personal attainment of female embodiment over collective redefining of gender and sexual norms.

Subtext is at the core of reading Petras’ art for themes of transgender identity, however when viewing her art in the context of her public persona, these connections become clearer. To a person who does not keep up with Petras’ personal social media pages where she is more vocal about being trans and advocating for trans rights, this part of her identity might be missed. However, as this section argues, she demonstrates what might be described as a camp sensibility due to how she invokes signs and meanings that have more negative assumptions in dominant culture, like darkness, monstrosity, and nudity that can be interpreted through queer culture to invoke positive or inverse meanings. These themes are open to interpretation and dependent, like Barret (2016) suggests of other forms of camp, on the viewers’ own knowledge of queer/transgender culture to be read and seen as potentially subversive, which does limit the potential of Petras’ art to fully challenge the status quo. However, as should be considered throughout this paper, the ability of any of these media narratives to undo systemic inequalities

for trans-feminine people is inherently limited, and Petras still marks a divergence from norms of concealment or denial of trans identity.

Chase Icon:

Between the work of Petras and Arca, whose lyrics and visuals either engage directly with cybernetic or more organic figures, lies the music of Chase Icon. The songs and images discussed in this section provide a bit of a transition point, and function as the most explicitly related to trans-feminine identity when read literally or through the figures contained within.

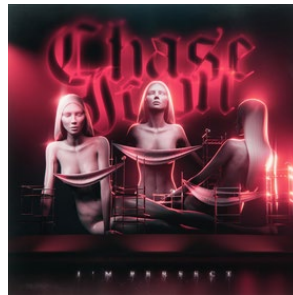
Throughout Icon's discography, she invokes comparisons to herself and a doll, which can be read as reference to the use of the term "doll" or "the dolls", and in-group term used to refer to trans-feminine people. One instance where this occurs is in the song "Nemesis" where she describes herself as a "plastic doll you cannot clock" (Icon, 2021), which also references the in-group term "clock" or "clocking" (Valentine, 2007). The meaning of "clock" usually means to identify a person as transgender despite their presentation as cisgender, and this utterance suggests that Icon's performance of normative femininity could not be subject to similar scrutiny. She also sings "Lipstick, slip dress / Making it look effortless" (Icon, 2021), describing clothing and tools associated with femininity as part of this presentation, however the use of the word "effortless" points to this being a conscious performance. This song presents Icon as a "passing figure" (Surkan, 2004) in contrast to the non-passing, presumably transgender addressee of the song, with Icon being able to be perform femininity "in the right way" which also asserts her higher social status.

This recurring theme of success with hierarchies of femininity continues with the song "I'm Perfect" (Icon, 2021), which was initially released as a single whose cover features cyborg figures modelled off Icon's real-life appearance. The visual consists of three statuesque models

of Icon's body framed by scaffolding as a nod to their, and potentially Icon's, literal construction.

Figure 2:

Cover Art from single "I'm Perfect."



Note. Fame Hooker Records, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w23z-COfXI&ab_channel=ChaseIcon-Topic)

These digital figures, I argue, can also be read as cyborgs due to the accompanying lyrical content that is related directly to narratives of femininity and Icon's relationship to normativity. As is typical to the competitive nature of Icon's persona, she sings "it's not my fault that I'm the standard" (Icon, 2021), which is preceded by lyrics that list being blonde, having large breasts, having long legs, and wearing makeup as these "standards." There is a potentially subversive or camp interpretation of the track in the verses "There's no such thing as perfection," however it is arguably undercut by the following "I'm the exception" (Icon, 2021). Interestingly, these digital figures do not work to challenge normative understandings of beauty or challenge the male/female binary, instead they assert individual success in following these scripts.

The connection between Icon's work and trans culture can also be seen more literally in the track "SRS" (Icon, 2021), getting its name from Sex-Reassignment Surgery, which is a procedure that some transgender people choose to pursue. The song begins with Icon vocally impersonating singer Lady Gaga, saying "Why the hell am I gonna do a press release / About

whether or not I have a penis?” (Icon, 2021), which calls back to rumors that have circulated about both musicians’ genitalia. In the context of a track titled “SRS,” this can be interpreted as commentary on media speculation about the bodies of transgender people, a question Icon then immediately answers in the first verse. She describes her vagina as “custom made,” acknowledging the role of surgery and medical technologies in the state of her embodiment. This track also frequently frames her body as desirable due to its custom or constructed nature, which challenges the idea of trans-feminine bodies as undesirable and does not place their value in their proximity to “naturalness.”

When viewed in isolation, Icon’s work can be read largely as competitive with other women, and I do not want to discount the “not-like other girls” type of misogyny this work can reproduce. However, Julia Serano’s (2021) discussion of the term “Transmisogyny” may offer alternative readings, especially when paired with the cyborg figures in Icon’s work. Serano (2021) discusses how one element of transmisogyny is the way that trans women are depicted in media alongside “feminine accoutrement” (868) which is meant to emphasize the artificiality of their gender presentation and devalue it. Like the cyborg figure, Icon does not appeal to a singular or natural origin story, instead she centers the unique aspects of her experience and body as a transgender person in ways that place value on what might be perceived as fake or unvaluable under the lens of transmisogyny. Icon’s music can be read as attempting to challenge transmisogynistic ideologies that privilege “naturalness” by reclaiming the subject position of “artificial” or “constructed” through her uncompromising confidence and use of cyborg imagery.

Respectability is generally not something Icon’s music aspires to reproduce, with frequent uses of pejorative terms like “cunt,” “pussy,” and “bitch,” which appear in the three tracks discussed above. These terms appear as both self-descriptors and descriptors of others,

often asserting Icon's higher status and closeness to hegemonic ideals of femininity, and distancing others from them. While the usages of these terms, along with previously discussed ones like "clock," may have different meanings within queer subcultures, Icon is not presenting a model of trans-femininity that comes from community with other trans people. This identity is constructed in response to dominant social norms and expected performances and lauds Icon's success at conforming to them despite having a body and identity that are often read as inherently nonnormative. This aspirational model of femininity is best summarized by the recurrent "doll" figure in Icon's work, something perfect to be seen and valued for its beauty and intentional construction. To Icon, being one of the dolls seems to mean having a sexually desirable and normatively feminine body, and to gain power from a perfected performance of female gender identity.

Arca Section:

One song that serves as a helpful jumping off point for themes of identity construction and monstrous figures across Arca's work is "Alien Inside," which is the eighth track on the record *Kick iii* (Arca, 2021) and features the most English-language songs and narrativizes her personal journey of self-discovery. She introduces the metaphor of the "alien inside" (Arca, 2021, track 8) which can be likened to the self-recognition of a transgender gender identity and the potentially alienating experience of gender dysphoria. This experience is described as "The first death / The last birth" (Arca, 2021, track 8) where the previous relationship to the self or one's assigned gender identity is cast off and a new one is adopted, which is reminiscent of the linguistic practice of describing a transgender person's non-chosen name as a "deadname" (source?). The idea of a first death also suggests that transition may be a continuous process of defining and redefining the self, both internally and to others. Arca also describes her identity as

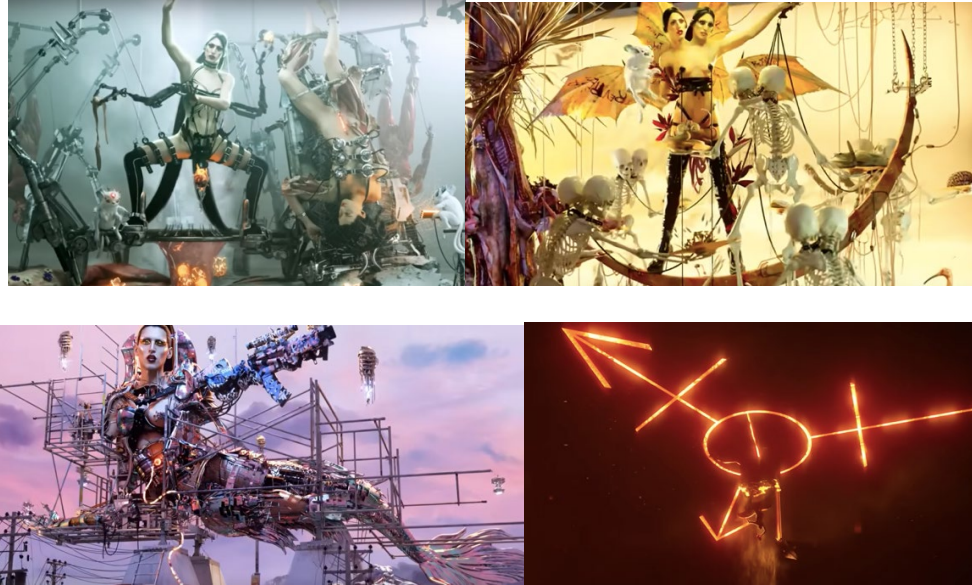
“A mutant faith” and “a chance construct” (2021, track 8) acknowledging the ways that transgender identity can be subject to social construction and norms outside of what may be deemed natural.

This theme of identity discovery is continued in the track “Lost Woman Found” (Arca, 2021, track 11), which also references the figures of the alien and mutant. She references a more communal or socially constructed understanding of transgender identity when she sings “You can’t find out on your own / What it means to be mutant / What it means to recognize the alien inside” (Arca, 2021, track 11) which reflects Reily and McGuire’s (2022) suggestion that trans people look to other’s in their community and cultural messaging when forming their own internal sense of identity and outward presentation. This sense of kinship with monstrous figures can be read as a metaphor for kinship with other transgender people, or in Arca’s words, fellow “mutants” due to her previous usage of the phrase “a mutant faith” (Arca, 2021, track 8) in reference to an inner sense of transgender identity. Notably, Arca also refers to her fans as “the mutants” (Arca, 2021), and so this kinship can also be understood as between her and her audience, being bonded over shared experiences of isolation or dehumanization.

Perhaps most illustrative of Arca’s engagement with the Cyborg metaphor is in the video accompanying the release of the singles “Prada” and “Rakata” which were released as part of the record *Kick ii* (Arca, 2021). The video notably cycles through the three-dimensional digital environments that compose the album covers of *Kick ii* through *Kick iiiii*, giving a complete view of what are otherwise static images that accompany their respective recordings and reveals the complexity of their staging, and are shown below.

Figure 3:

A series of shots from the video “Prada/Rakata”, depicting Arca in a variety of cybernetic forms



Note. XL, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL-tvd8jeBc&ab_channel=Arca

The digital representations of Arca as an array of cybernetic hybrids are modelled off of her physical body, always in the process of being assembled and disassembled, never fully human or nonhuman, organic or synthetic, simultaneously unreal yet based on something real. This cyborg imagery is also accompanied by a combined male-female symbol, representing Arca's identity as a transgender person and making a more explicit visual connection between the cybernetic figures and the narratives of gender they represent.

“Prada” (Arca, 2021, track 2) also features unique manipulations of Arca's voice, pitching it up and down to represent both masculine and feminine identities in conversation, and contradiction, with each other. As the track progresses, the cyborg figures representing Arca also shift, beginning as more organic in appearance and becoming increasingly cybernetic and inhuman over the song's duration. The imagery shown is very visceral, grotesque, at times uncomfortable to watch and markedly monstrous. Arca is depicted as what can be likened to Balinisteanu's (2007) *Cyborg-Goddess*, towering over her subjects as they actively power and create her, a being composed of both organic and synthetic tissues. There are also figures of her

that seem mostly human; however, they are also 3D models or “dolls” that are warped and manipulated in uncanny and physically impossible ways. To say there is a lot going on in this video is perhaps an understatement, but the key visual elements of the body being created or constructed sticks out as a recurring visual motif.

What becomes clear through the visual and lyrical content of Arca’s work is the centrality of these representations of her body as explicitly trans-feminine and modified by technology. These self-representative cybernetic and chimeric figures go beyond Surkan’s (2004) idea of cyborgs/transgender people as “passing figures,” I would argue, because they do not present the body as solely male or female. By likening her identity as a trans woman to being a mutant, a cyborg, a witch, or other monstrous and nonhuman feminine figures, it appears that Arca is not invested in reproducing normative ideals of feminine appearance or beauty. Instead, Arca’s work can be read as perhaps even “posttranssexual,” as Sandy Stone (1992) coined, since it embraces this more nonbinary and nonconformist vision of trans-feminine embodiment. Her self-representation as nonhuman can also be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim those feelings of alienation and incompleteness she described in “Alien Inside” (Arca, 2021, track 8) and “Lost Woman Found” (Arca, 2021, track 11). Instead of choosing a passing narrative and making her identity as trans less socially readable, Arca’s music instead celebrates trans kinship and models of embodiment that are self-directed.

Discussion:

After analyzing the work of these three artists with attention to how their engagement with these various digital figures subverted, conformed to, or challenged traditional models of trans-feminine identity and embodiment, it became clear that they represent a range of engagement rather than a consistent narrative. A few major themes do occur across these bodies

of work, including trans-feminine embodiment being achieved using technology and science, trans-femininity as both an internally and socially constructed identity, and a shift away from “stealth” narratives.

Each artists’ work had different ways of interacting with the use of technology as a path to ideal embodiment. Kim Petras’ work can be placed more as a naturalistic foil to the work of Icon and Arca, as she does not make explicit reference to technology or medicine as contributing to her embodiment or femininity. Instead, she leaves interpretations of her work as being about trans-femininity as subtext to be read by a reader who shares the same camp or queer sensibility, although she does reference items like makeup which can be interpreted as technologies. Icon and Arca do however explicitly describe the role of technology and medicine in the creation of the body, with Icon doing so in her lyrical content and Arca doing this largely through visuals. For Icon, the body is described yet obscured from vision, for Arca the body and its assembly or disassembly join with lyrical content to create a more complete text. The goals of this embodiment also differ between artists. Icon and Petras describe using technology or cosmetics to fit more with normative, hegemonic understandings of the female body, while Arca displays them being used to create a body that is more physically nonbinary. Interestingly, these bodies are all depicted through digital representations that blend human and nonhuman elements to present a single assembled trans-feminine body that does appeal to discourses of naturalness to be validated.

These bodies of work also represent trans-feminine identity as stemming from both an internal affinity or sense of identity and being an identity shaped through social interactions. In Icon’s work, her internal sense of identity as a transgender woman can be seen as validated through attainment of perfect feminine beauty and social recognition as a woman. For Petras and

Arca, an internal trans identity is compared to an acceptance of difference from what may be considered normative, maybe even seen as queer or monstrous. Petras' music and persona are still very tied to hegemonic ideals of femininity however her campiness lends it to readings as more intentional than simply reproducing dominant meaning and instead offering a queerer or "camp" gender presentation. Of the three, Petras is arguably the most successful and least connoted with solely being trans, which may be due to leaving her identity to subtext in her work. Arca presents a more radical vision of the social construction of trans identity, acknowledging dominant culture but suggesting an alternative where meaning is made through community with other queer and trans people.

The last major theme across the figures and songs analyzed was an overall shift away from "stealth" as the ideal model of trans-feminine embodiment. Petras' work is the closest to a "stealth" narrative in that it does not reference her being trans as explicitly, however song titles like "TRANSylvania" (Petras, 2018, track 3) and her actions as a public figure make clear that being openly transgender is how she wants to be read socially. She and Icon are still arguably interested in being read as "passing figures," with Icon's recurring "doll" and femininity being described as validated through their "perfection" and success at reproducing normative models of feminine embodiment. Arca's work represents a shift away from both "stealth" and "passing" narratives, as she actively encourages a kinship with monstrous figures and embraces the potential of transness to disrupt the male/female binary, and to be socially read as doing so. This distinction of passing as a social phenomenon is important to note because it is ultimately not a reflection of how a person sees themselves, rather it relates how a person is read regarding a performed social identity.

Conclusion:

Throughout this paper, my analysis of the art of three relevant trans-feminine individuals reveals a spectrum of engagement with cyborg figures and narratives about identity discovery and presentation. Each work in some way engages with transmisogynist narratives that paint trans women as artificial or less valuable through what appears to be reclamation or subversion of this paradigm. Instead, the active construction and presentation of their identities as trans-feminine people is centered and celebrated, in some cases even framed as divine or transcendent. For some of these artists, this is a more communal process, for others it is more individualistic and defined by personal success within existing hierarchies of beauty. However, in refutation of transmisogynist ideas that all trans-feminine people aspire to a particular and hyperfeminine gender presentation, this analysis shows a divergence and diversity of what trans-femininity means to different trans-fem people.

As media narratives, the work of these artists points to an expansion in the ways trans-feminine people express and present their gender identity, away from “stealth” and towards both “passing” and “non-passing” models. There is a limit to what an expansion of narrative can do, however I argue that the value is that these may provide new models or paths to embodiment and gender identity for other trans-feminine people that may be more desirable than the route of “stealth.” This is also not to devalue those who wish to pursue a less visibly transgender appearance or identity, but to celebrate the progression towards more expansive possibilities and futures. The economic success of individual trans women is not enough to accomplish this, however as popular media I think it marks a shift in broader social attitudes, or at least an important shift in inter-community discourses and what is shared outside of trans spaces.

This analysis is limited by its engagement primarily with the visuals and text of these artists work, future research could certainly involve digital ethnographies or other forms of

testing audience perceptions, to see how other people interact with this work. I also think as more transgender artists of color break into the realm of popular music, there will be a wider diversity of narratives present that will certainly challenge this analysis. For now, this analysis is placed in a point in time where transgender people are beginning to be more widely acknowledged as producers of, not just objects that are produced by, culture. Those closest to existing hierarchies of power, beauty, and wealth do still seem to be the ones who succeed the most within popular music. I hope this research can serve as a starting point for other scholars to examine the work of trans- feminine people that engages with self-representative cyborgs or other monster figures and can help create space for us to tell our own stories in ways that consider our unique perspectives.

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