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"This is how we play destroy": Deconstruction and the construction of a cyborg future in Poppy's *Am I a Girl?*

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“THIS IS HOW WE PLAY DESTROY”: DECONSTRUCTION
AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CYBORG FUTURE
IN POPPY’S *AM I A GIRL?*

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Stevie “Eve” Sanchez
University of Northern Iowa
December 2020

ABSTRACT

Internet sensation and pop music star Poppy's 2018 sophomore album *Am I a Girl?* stands out in an increasingly oversaturated pop landscape, thanks to evocative imagery, cleverly ambiguous lyrics, and daring genre crossovers that challenge conventions of contemporary pop music. Despite the album's titular question, Poppy is not interested in being defined—instead, she seeks to transcend definition and exist in the space of questioning. On the album, Poppy explores concepts like gender, class, and consciousness in a way that pushes the boundaries of pop, deconstructing her genre, while also deconstructing the issues she sings about—and offering a vision for a future that can be constructed from the ashes of her deconstruction. Poppy accomplishes this, in part, thanks to a rich mythology that she has pushed alongside her music career, through a variety of YouTube videos and a striking internet presence. This mythology is perpetuated by a narrative that is woven throughout *Am I a Girl?*: Poppy is a robot that gains sentience and, in the process, becomes something more.

Deconstruction as a literary theory also evades definition. Jacques Derrida, known as the father of deconstruction, refused to explicitly define deconstruction, and even denied that deconstruction could be properly labeled at all. As he famously wrote, “Deconstruction is neither a theory nor a philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method. It is not even a discourse, nor an act, nor a practice. It is what happens, what is happening today in what is called society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth” (Derrida 85). Based on this understanding of deconstruction, it could be argued that a deconstructive text is defined by its own refusal to be defined, while

demanding to question and be questioned. In my thesis, I argue that Poppy's album is a deconstructive effort because of the various, often conflicting, messages her songs send—the songs are at once celebrations of consumerism and gender identity, and also admonishments of capitalism, individualism, and identity politics.

Poppy's deconstruction and her cyborg mythology come together to create a vision for a new understanding of the issues she deconstructs throughout the record, a new understanding of ourselves. Central to this understanding is Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Ontology," a feminist, posthumanist framework that seeks to break the binaries contemporary American society was built upon—from the male/female gender binary to binaries central to our understanding of humanity, including animal/machine. Haraway describes her ontology as "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (292). Like Derrida's deconstruction, "There is no drive in cyborgs to produce total theory, but there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction" (316).

Throughout *Am I a Girl?* Poppy takes pleasure in deconstruction—often to violent extremes—but this deconstruction leaves not just destruction in its wake, but the potential for the binary-breaking cyborg ontology that Haraway champions. In this text, I use queer and feminist theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, alongside deconstruction and post-humanism, to analyze the multiple meanings present in several of the songs from *Am I a Girl?*, explore how they support Haraway's vision of a cyborg future—and the real-world implications the album presents for academia and beyond.

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Entitled: "THIS IS HOW WE PLAY DESTROY": DECONSTRUCTION AND THE
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“THIS IS HOW WE PLAY DESTROY”

Internet sensation and pop music star Poppy’s 2018 sophomore album *Am I a Girl?* stands out in an increasingly oversaturated pop landscape, thanks to evocative imagery, cleverly ambiguous lyrics, and daring genre crossovers that challenge conventions of contemporary pop music. Despite the album’s titular question, Poppy is not interested in being defined—instead, she seeks to transcend definition and exist in the space of questioning. When Ariana Grande, the biggest pop star of the moment, is singing bold phrases, like “You’ll believe god is a woman,” Poppy’s album—with lyrics that ask the listener, “Am I a girl? What does that even mean?” as she sings on the title track—stands out not for the bold statements she makes (though there are several statement-making moments throughout the album, which I will explore in detail later), but for the questions her songs raise, explicitly and implicitly.

On the album, Poppy explores concepts like gender, class, and consciousness in a way that pushes the boundaries of pop, deconstructing her genre, while also deconstructing the issues she sings about—and offering a vision for a future that can be constructed from the ashes of her deconstruction. She accomplishes this, in part, thanks to a rich mythology that Poppy has pushed alongside her music career, through a variety of YouTube videos and a striking internet presence. This mythology is perpetuated by a narrative that is woven throughout *Am I a Girl?*: Poppy is a robot that gains sentience and, in the process, becomes something more. This narrative has multiple real-world implications, which I will explore in this text.

Deconstruction as a literary theory also evades definition. Jacques Derrida, known as the father of deconstruction, refused to explicitly define deconstruction, and even denied that deconstruction could be properly labeled at all. As he famously wrote, “Deconstruction is neither a theory nor a philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method. It is not even a discourse, nor an act, nor a practice. It is what happens, what is happening today in what is called society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth” (Derrida 85). Some scholars argue that it is the very fact that deconstruction eludes definition that makes deconstruction what it is. In the first chapter of *Deconstructions: A User’s Guide*, Nicholas Royle writes, “This is why the question ‘what is deconstruction?’ is itself evidence of a serious naivety, for deconstruction is, above all perhaps, a questioning of the ‘is’, a concern with what remains to be thought, with what cannot be thought within the present” (7). Based on this understanding of deconstruction, it could be argued that a deconstructive text is defined by its own refusal to be defined, while demanding to question and be questioned.

Despite its quest to discover what “is,” deconstruction is not a search for a final, fixed meaning. Rather, deconstruction is, above all, an “abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a fixed subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin” (Sarup 53); it is “a reading of the text, which shows that the text is not a discrete whole, but has more than one interpretation, and very often many conflicting interpretations” (Loscialpo 2). Similarly, Poppy’s album is a deconstructive effort because of the various, often conflicting, messages her songs send—the songs are at once celebrations of consumerism

and gender identity, and also admonishments of capitalism, individualism, and identity politics.

Poppy's deconstruction and her cyborg mythology come together to create a vision for a new understanding of the issues she deconstructs throughout the record, a new understanding of ourselves. Central to this understanding is Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Ontology," a feminist, posthumanist framework that seeks to break the binaries contemporary American society was built upon—from the male/female gender binary to binaries central to our understanding of humanity, including animal/machine. Haraway describes her ontology as "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (292). Like Derrida's deconstruction, "There is no drive in cyborgs to produce total theory, but there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction" (316).

Throughout *Am I a Girl?* Poppy takes pleasure in deconstruction—often to violent extremes—but this deconstruction leaves not just destruction in its wake, but the potential for the binary-breaking cyborg ontology that Haraway champions. In this text, I will use queer and feminist theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, alongside deconstruction and post-humanism, to analyze the multiple meanings present in several of the songs from *Am I a Girl?*, explore how they support Haraway's vision of a cyborg future—and the real-world implications the album presents for academia and beyond.

Before I can begin my close reading of *Am I a Girl?*, I must provide some background information on Poppy's previous work, which in itself is rooted in deconstructive critiques of contemporary society, and helps make the case for *Am I a*

Girl?—an album that has been (I would argue) incorrectly labeled as an earnest exploration, even celebration of, gender identity—as a work that actually serves to deconstruct the concept of identity, even as it celebrates the trappings of gender and life in contemporary American society.

CHAPTER I:

“I’M POPPY”—AN INTRODUCTION

Poppy is not just a typical YouTuber and she is not just a traditional pop music artist, either. Poppy is a character, and her music career has been a performance art project of sorts. While Poppy (and Moriah Pereira, the artist who portrays Poppy) always set out to make music,¹ Poppy’s trajectory didn’t start out like most other pop stars. Poppy’s fame (and the “Poppy” character itself) began with a string of viral videos—including her YouTube channel’s first upload, an 80-second video featuring Poppy eating cotton candy, and most notably, a ten-minute long clip of the performer repeating the phrase, “I’m Poppy.” Though the latter video launched Poppy into online notoriety, it was dismissed by many as a cheap attempt to gain attention—even present superfans like Otto Pinkus, the man who would go on to run several online fan communities about Poppy, initially dismissed the star’s act as nothing more than a “gimmick.”² Indeed, to a casual viewer, Poppy’s YouTube presence can seem like standard art student nonsense, her music typical teen pop fare.³ Over the years, as Poppy’s videos became increasingly eerie and ambiguous, it has become clear that she is trying to comment on internet and celebrity culture, not simply trying to become an icon within those cultures. This isn’t easily apparent when taking her work at face value.

On the surface, much of Poppy’s early music appears to be in the same vein of artists like Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift. Songs like “Everybody Wants to be Poppy” (Poppy’s first official single) and “Computer Boy” (a love song to her computer, which was featured on her debut album *Poppy.Computer*) seem like disposable saccharine

bubblegum pop created for a tween audience, like the early work of Gomez and Swift. Even some of Poppy's more obvious attempts at subversion—like her surreal, absurdist YouTube clips—can be dismissed as shallow attempts at notoriety. While her YouTube content has always contained various levels of creepiness and shock value (an early video that's since been deleted was titled “How to Load a Gun” and was exactly what you'd expect), it's nothing outside the realm of what a typical YouTube star would post in attempt to gain viral fame. Many young, famous YouTubers are posting increasingly shocking and disturbing content in competition for clicks in an oversaturated attention economy—look no further than YouTube star Logan Paul's controversial “Japanese suicide forest” video for proof.⁴ Though Poppy's own videos have featured their share of gruesome imagery and references (including two videos where she bleeds from her nose and mouth), Poppy's aim is to provide critical commentary, not just to get people to click on her videos.

While cultural studies long ago made the case for the serious study of pop music, most of the popular music that's been studied has featured more “serious” themes, including overt religious and political references.⁵ Madonna, whose work has been influenced by feminist ideals and steeped in religious imagery since her start, is one of the earliest examples.⁶ More recently, Lady Gaga,⁷ whose work is noticeably influenced by camp and pop art, and Beyoncé's recent efforts, with explicit explorations of black womanhood,⁸ have been the subject of countless internet think-pieces and scholarly articles alike. However, music that doesn't feature these themes is often studied from a more disparaging perspective; academic work analyzing the early, tween-targeted work

of young singers like Gomez and Swift, for instance, often criticizes these artists' music for perpetuating gender stereotypes and the sexualization of young girls.⁹ While it would be easy to dismiss much of Poppy's work as part of the latter category, her work walks the line between disposable bubblegum fluff and satirical, self-aware Gaga-esque "ArtPop" in a way that suggests there may be more to explore even in the "meaningless" pop music her work is meant to critique, but also makes her efforts rise above the likes of Gomez and Swift.

This is what makes Poppy different from the average YouTuber and pop star. When *Am I a Girl?* was released, all of her work—from her YouTube videos, to her music, to her social media feeds, to her interviews—was part of a larger project that adds an additional layer of meaning to her pop stardom. In a truly deconstructive fashion, the question of whether Poppy is trying to gain legitimate fame or critique the concept of fame is a key part of her mission. In the words of a Sundance attendee, commenting on Poppy's virtual reality film that was screened at the film festival, "It's like Andy Warhol for 2018."¹⁰ Like Warhol, Poppy's work is heavily influenced by celebrities, popular culture, and capitalism. Rather than present an entirely subversive vision that's separate from the concepts Poppy critiques, Poppy instead personifies the values of our current culture to an extreme so that the viewer will ask their own questions and draw their own conclusions. In the words of Samuel Adams Green, late art curator and friend of Warhol, "Warhol accepts rather than questions our popular habits and heroes. By accepting their inevitability, they are easier to deal with than if they are opposed" (Lucie-Smith 152).

This is the position Poppy takes, becoming the epitome of internet and celebrity culture not (just) to become a celebrated icon of these cultures, but to challenge them.

Often, Poppy's work can seem like a celebration of the subjects her work centers on: fashion, beauty, the internet, celebrities. Much like Gaga before her, Poppy uses satire and camp—taking elements and assumptions of mainstream society to the extreme to illustrate how absurd they are and make the viewer question them¹¹—to reveal other layers of meaning. Whether or not Poppy does this effectively, whether or not camp is an effective tool for subversion at all, are questions beyond the scope of this paper (and the latter has already been discussed at length in a variety of contexts¹²), but understanding how Poppy utilizes camp and satire helps make the mission of the Poppy project clear. Poppy's work is more concerned with providing cultural commentary than achieving cultural relevance.

What started as strange but innocuous clips of a young girl eating candy and repeating her name, turned into David Lynch-inspired vignettes featuring creepy, ambient background music and irreverent, sometimes disturbing, monologues. Unfortunately, the satirical elements of Poppy's work are part of the reason why many people seem to miss the points she's making. Poppy is not just trying to create addictively entertaining internet content and music; she's trying to critique American culture's obsession with money, fame, vanity, and overconsumption. Of course, in order to make her subversive voice heard, she has to participate somewhat in the very culture she's trying to challenge—in our digital age, you can't get a large group of people to delete their Facebook accounts, as Poppy urges in one video,¹³ without expressing your view on a digital social media

platform (in Poppy's case, YouTube). Rather than try to negotiate her vision with the obligations of online fame, Poppy builds her vision around the expectations of our culture, fully embodying these expectations in a way that makes the dissonance between her critical perspective and her enthusiastic embrace of popular culture even more meaningful. More than being an over-the-top parody of pop culture, Poppy has built a unique mythology around her persona that makes her critiques come through clearly, even as she embraces the trappings of celebrity.

As salient as the commentary within her mythology is, for those unfamiliar with Poppy's story or unwilling to see themselves in it, her points can be easy to miss. Though some of her later videos were a little more heavy-handed, there's a subtlety and ambiguity to much of her work that can make the aims of her efforts hard to pin down. It's easy to see how someone can watch a video like "Poppy's Donut Friends"—where Poppy counts donuts and takes a bite out of a pastry that spells out her name—and miss the eerie ambient music in the background, and mistake it as cheesy, overly-cheerful children's content. Much of Poppy's music, like the song "Bleach Blonde Baby," where the star sings about being born with platinum blonde hair, perfect porcelain skin, and a mani-pedi, could be mistaken for the latest track from Disney's latest Hannah Montana wannabe or Jojo Siwa-esque children's act.

Then again, maybe that's part of her point? The video "Tide Commercial" is a perfect example of how and why Poppy's messages can become muddled—while also serving as evidence that Poppy may *want* viewers to be confused. In the thirty-second clip, Poppy exclaims, "My life is so much better when I use Tide!" and kisses a box of

the name-brand detergent. The only commentary in this video is the camp sensibility that's expressed in Poppy's exaggerated love of a household cleaning product, so it's easy to see how someone could mistake this as a legitimate (if humorously over-the-top) commercial. It may well have been—especially considering a similar video about shoes, which featured a shoebox from the brand Steve Madden, came out alongside a publicized partnership with the popular footwear label¹⁴—but Poppy's overzealous delivery was no doubt intended to be tongue-in-cheek. Arguably, the ambiguity of a formal corporate sponsorship is part of the commentary—would Poppy's enthusiasm for detergent be acceptable if she were getting paid to promote a detergent brand? Or would that make it even more ironic, even more ridiculous? Would it be ironic and artful for an anti-consumerist artist to take on a brand deal, or is that just hypocrisy? Exploring these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but it's important to note that Poppy is trying to raise these big-picture questions about celebrity and society.

I'm not certain, exactly, what point Poppy is trying to make by raising these questions; I'm not sure she's trying to make a point either way. Poppy's motivation seems to be to make us ask these questions in the first place; to illustrate the absurd ridiculousness of modern life in a thought-provoking way. These questions are more relevant than ever; five years after this video was originally uploaded, “sponsored content” on YouTube (and the rest of the internet) is commonplace,¹⁵ and much of this content is disturbingly similar to Poppy's ironic expression—without the irony, which is the ultimate irony.

Another example of Poppy's irony is the video titled "And This Pile of Money," where Poppy proudly displays several bands of bills while ominous synths buzz in the background. This video itself is less ambiguous than "Tide commercial"—the heavy, downbeat synths make the critical tone of the clip obvious—but when compared to Poppy's song "Money," which was released about a year later, it becomes clear that Poppy is intentionally playing with tensions, contradictions, and irony rather than simply succumbing to hypocrisy. Moreover, it's even easier to understand how people can misread her message in her music, because her irony becomes even more subtle when it's buried behind dance beats.

On the song "Money," the minor-scale score of "And This Pile of Money" is swapped out for upbeat synths and cheerful "bum-bum-bum" backing vocals. The lyrics speak to the real struggle the performer behind Poppy went through when she left home at age 15 to pursue a career in music. But the song's main lyrical refrain—"If money can't buy happiness then why is it so fabulous?"—is less earnest. At face value, the song does, indeed, sound like a celebration of consumerism, just as "And This Pile of Money" could be seen as a celebration of individual wealth. Perhaps, on its own, it is. When listened to in the context of the rest of Poppy's work—especially her satirical YouTube videos—the song becomes just one element of the Poppy project and the possibility arises that Poppy isn't creating weird YouTube videos to bring attention to her run-of-the-mill pop music; she's using run-of-the-mill pop music to draw people into her anti-pop, anti-capitalist message. As with "Tide commercial," the raising of questions seems

to be a key point of that mission. After all, Poppy isn't singing "Money is fabulous," she's doing the deconstructive act of asking "why?"

If this were any other artist, that would seem like quite the reach, but the irony and satire present in Poppy's YouTube videos is only part of her artistry. Elements of deconstruction are indeed present in many of her YouTube clips—which suggests that it isn't such a stretch to assume that Poppy is weaving these threads into her music, as well. Admittedly, irony and satire are less present in "Money"—and like the camp in "Tide Commercial," the "why" in Money's lyrics is the only deconstructive element at play in this particular song. The deconstructive elements easily found in many of her YouTube clips make it clear that the posing the value of money as a question was no accident, because raising questions is a key part of Poppy's work.

Repetition is one way Poppy raises questions, and is an overall important part of her repertoire—after all, her claim to fame was a ten-minute video of the same two words repeated hundreds of times ("I'm Poppy. *I'm* Poppy. I'm *Poppy*."). To be fair, repetition is present in much modern pop music, and Poppy's songs are no exception, but in her YouTube videos, she uses repetition in a much more meaningful—and, I would argue, deconstructive—manner. Several videos feature Poppy repeating everyday phrases until they sound bleak or even ominous, or until their very meaning is called into question—which is, without a doubt, an act of deconstruction.

Take, for instance, videos like "I Love My Fans" and "Hey YouTube," which feature Poppy cheerfully repeating phrases typically used by YouTube stars and mainstream celebrities. These phrases, when spoken by other artists, in the expected

context, come off as sincere statements or, at the very least, the appropriate statement to make in a given situation. How else would a vlogger open up their latest video other than with a cheerful, “Hey guys!” If a celebrity was asked what she thinks of her overzealous fans in an interview, for example, she would likely be ridiculed if she responded any other way than with the obligatory, “I love my fans!” These phrases are just things celebrities say; usually these statements are taken at face value, without a second thought. With her repetition of these phrases in these videos, Poppy forces the viewer to consider what these phrases actually mean and what purpose they serve—first, in the context of the video, then, by the time the video is done, in the context of everyday life. In response to Poppy’s repetition, the viewer is moved to ask, as Poppy does in “Money”: “*Why?*” This question likely would lead the engaged viewer to ask other questions: *Why is she saying that over and over? Is she trying to make some kind of statement? What is she really trying to say? What are people really saying when they usually say that? Why have I been watching these random videos for two hours? Why haven’t I ever asked myself that before?*

Admittedly, this is an idea of what my own internal monologue was like when I first started watching Poppy’s videos—but I am not alone. Poppy’s YouTube channel has not only amassed a consistently large viewership. Though she keeps her subscriber count private, at the height of her channel’s activity, her surrealist vignettes regularly amassed more than half a million views, and her most popular videos garnered as much as 25 million views. Many of her fans are even more engaged. Several online communities, including the previously mentioned forums created by Pinkus, boast sizeable user bases,

and those users discuss and dissect every element of Poppy's work—everything from the fictional mythology of the Poppy character, to real-life conspiracy theories that claim Pereira was being manipulated by former collaborator Titanic Sinclair (who directed her YouTube videos and produced much of her music).¹⁶ While it's not entirely clear which theories are true—Poppy's satirical performance art blurs the lines between truth and conspiracy, like when Poppy and Sinclair responded to claims that Poppy was a cult leader by releasing a t-shirt with "I AM NOT IN A CULT LED BY POPPY" emblazoned on it¹⁷—or which questions Poppy might want viewers to ask, it is clear that Poppy wants us to ask questions, and she uses her mythology and her fans' conspiracy theories to invite these questions.

There are many theories surrounding Poppy's origins and creative process, and she weaves these into the narrative of her music and videos. One of these theories comes from Poppy herself, and was created when she first debuted online: Poppy is not human. While the most popular conspiracies suggest that Poppy is a robot or hologram, some stay more grounded in reality and assert that Poppy—or rather, that the actress behind Poppy—is being controlled by music industry bigwigs (whom are usually purported to be members of the infamous Illuminati, a secret society that supposedly controls all major mainstream media outlets), and the robot/android persona is used as a cover-up. Poppy herself encourages these theories, filling her visuals with Illuminati and occult symbolism, and making references in her videos and interviews to a mysterious "They," who control everything she does. Whether "They" simply refers simply to pop-star Poppy's real-life bosses—record executives, stylists, publicists, and the like—or to

something more ominous—like a computer programmer who controls robot-Poppy’s programming or all-powerful handlers from a secret society—isn’t clear. Whoever “They” may be, the role of “They” in Poppy mythology is the same and actually serves to illustrate an important part of Poppy’s critique—in our hyperconnected consumerist culture, we are all being programmed.¹⁸

This point relies on the sci-fi Poppy mythology as much as it does on her embrace of current cultural styles and trends. Poppy’s YouTube presence not only encourages conspiracy theories, but raises questions about celebrity worship, internet culture, consumerism, and gender. In her videos, Poppy is hyper-stylized and hyper-feminine, wearing couture yet on-trend ensembles that, in their conspicuous constructedness, raise questions about the origin and meaning of fashion and cultural trends alike. At the beginning of her career, Poppy’s image was heavily influenced by the childish, brightly colored, pastel aesthetics of Japanese kawaii culture. She often wore demure, delicate, high-femme outfits. Her high-pitched, soft-spoken voice is at once robotic and childlike. While her style likely appeals to the tween demographic, her youthfully feminine fashion sense also plays into the sexualization of young girls—especially considering that a large portion of her fans are heterosexual men.¹⁹ In an article about Poppy from the *Michigan Daily*, Ben Vassar connected Poppy’s aesthetics and the questions she raises to the larger issue of the gendering of robots as subservient females: “It directly follows Japanese anime’s fetishization of youth and large-breasted, slim waisted women. It also reinforces gender roles not just in the workplace, but also in the very way we expect people to talk and behave according to their respective gender. ...

Considering these things, Poppy seems to be asking us, ‘Am I the girl you want?’” (Vassar). If this is indeed the question Poppy is asking, regardless of the answer, it inevitably raises the question of “why?” any further exploration of these questions reveals more about the viewer and their society than it does about Poppy or her mythology.

If Poppy didn’t look, dress and act (relatively) like a typical (albeit extravagantly dressed) young woman, it would be easy to dismiss Poppy’s mythology as pure entertainment. Despite claims that she’s a robot, Poppy is actually more like most young girls today—she’s concerned with fashion and Instagram likes and internet memes. This is what makes her mythology morph from mere entertainment to salient cultural commentary. In rooting her personality in current cultural trends, and presenting herself as an uncanny-valley cyborg fembot (rather than a chrome-bodied android), Poppy’s story becomes not just an interesting narrative about an isolated fictional character, but a mirror for our own (especially online) behaviors. As Allison P. Davis wrote in her profile on Poppy for *New York Magazine*:

Poppy is oversimplifying why we internet: We like the doge, because the doge does funny things. We like to get likes because we like to be liked, etc. As adult humans, we shouldn’t be so fascinated with something as dumb as a doge—and yet, in 2018, we are. And so perhaps what fills people watching Poppy with a sense of dread-lite is the discomfort we still have with the medium. The way it makes us all simulacra of ourselves. The recognition that we all have a little Poppy to us now.

Indeed, what is so fascinating about Poppy isn't that the mythology surrounding her is particularly entertaining or original; it's that her mythology hits close to home. With the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and internet outrage and near-monopolies like Amazon and Google, we, too, are being controlled by "They." Because we live so much of our lives online now, and "They" are interacting with us more and more through digital mediums, we are, in some ways, becoming androids ourselves. We are being programmed with every sensationalized news report we read, every tweet we share, and every other piece of information we mindlessly scroll past throughout our day.

With this in mind, the questions Poppy poses in her videos are even more provocative, not just because of gendered implications of her persona. In the context of our fast-paced, image-focused, Instagram generation, Poppy's videos ask viewers to interrogate their actions. In portraying a highly stylized fembot persona that mirrors the culture and fashion trends of young adults today (which themselves mirror sexualized male ideals of beauty), Poppy raises questions not just regarding her humanity, but our own. As a writer for the *Boston Globe* observed: "watching Poppy perform her synthetic performance of humanity (and realizing you've been consuming and processing her videos for over an hour) is unsettling enough to make you wonder if you might actually be the robot—and if Poppy might actually be an artist" (Brodeur). This, it seems, is the entire point—Poppy doesn't want you to watch her videos; she *knows* you will, and so she tries to use her videos to get people to stop mindlessly staring at their phones and start asking questions.

Yet, she expresses these things in a way that makes watching irresistible; she develops a mythology that becomes more interesting than the real-life conspiracies her videos make reference to. Is it Poppy's fault, for making such irresistibly addicting content, that we're not concerned with the issues she's raising? At what point is it our responsibility for continuing to watch? Is Poppy doing her part to challenge our culture of mindless content consumption by making bizarre, thought-provoking videos? Or is she reinforcing it by adding to the noise?

Perhaps it's up to us to decide. Will we keep watching, because we decide the internet is an innocent diversion? Or will we find something more productive to do with our time, because we come to realize through Poppy how much time we've been wasting? It's open to interpretation, and yet, the blame seems to be placed squarely on the viewer. Perhaps this is what she means when Poppy says she's from the internet²⁰—she may or may not be a robot, but she wasn't made in a vacuum. She was created by us, and she's just giving us what we want, and will do so until we decide we don't want it anymore.

However you interpret her message, it is clear that Poppy *has* a message. Though I believe her message comes through to various degrees in all her music, until *Am I a Girl?*, her message came through most clearly in her YouTube videos, despite the (sometimes intentional) confusion caused by some of her more subtle videos. With *Am I a Girl?*, Poppy combined her cultural commentary with quality pop productions, wrapping her message and mythology up in a glossy pop package, rather than continuing to split up her online and pop personas. The album is more direct in its messaging—

making explicit references to the destructive decadence of late capitalism and the pain caused by rigid gender norms—but is still subtle, ironic, and artful. Because of this, despite the more straightforward approach to some songs, Poppy’s message is, unfortunately, still muddled and misread. That’s what makes *Am I a Girl?* such an exciting work to view through a critical lens.

While elements of deconstruction have always been present in Poppy’s work, *Am I a Girl?* takes things to another level. As with her YouTube videos, Poppy uses her album to raise interesting questions and interrogate the listener as much as they might be interrogating her. The album is called *Am I a Girl?* but—just like the implications and accusations that come to mind when Poppy asks us, “What *exactly* is it that you’re doing?”²¹, and similar to Derrida’s long-winded non-definition of deconstruction—that is not all Poppy is asking us; that is not nearly all that she *is*.

In *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Madan Sarup described deconstruction as, “a method of reading a text so closely that the author’s conceptual distinctions on which the text relies are shown to fail on account of the inconsistent and paradoxical use made of these very concepts within the text as a whole. In other words, the text is seen to fail by its own criteria; the standards or definitions which the text sets up are used reflexively to unsettle and shatter the original distinctions” (34-5). This is the definition of deconstruction that is most relevant to my reading of Poppy’s *Am I a Girl?* and I will apply this idea, as well as a number of other critical lenses, to the album in the next section. In the final section of this paper, I will use

my analysis of the album to deconstruct traditional definitions of a “text” and explore the implications of this for literary scholarship, academia, and contemporary life.

CHAPTER II:

“WORKING EVERY ANGLE”—

A CLOSE READING OF POPPY’S *AM I A GIRL?*

As I’ve already discussed, despite containing many of the same trappings of traditional pop productions, all of Poppy’s work contains unique elements and ideas, and this album is no different. While there’s been no in-depth academic analyses centered on Poppy’s music or mythology, numerous music blogs and magazines have analyzed the mythos of the Poppy project,²² and Poppy’s work has considerable potential for critical interpretation. *Am I a Girl?* is of particular note, with its exploration of contemporary issues like capitalism and gender identity. One review praised the title track of *Am I a Girl?* as “a proud anthem for all genderqueer and non-binary people in the world” (Crittenton), but the song and the album contain layers of meaning that provide an interpretation of gender that is much more nuanced than a mere celebration of gender identity. In fact, I would argue, the album is actually an effort to deconstruct—and, thus, challenge—traditional understandings of gender and identity as a whole—and may even challenge concepts as bold and broad as time and consciousness. Admittedly, these are bold claims to make, especially in reference to what is, for the most part, a traditional pop album. However, considering the rich mythology behind the Poppy project, discussed in the previous section, Poppy’s music is able to be understood from a different perspective.

Poppy’s android-girl persona complicates the album’s exploration of gender—in Poppy’s universe, her asking, “Am I a girl?” is a question less about an identity or social role than it is about humanity. Central to this reading of the album is Donna Haraway’s

essay “A Cyborg Manifesto.” In her essay, Haraway describes a cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (291) and “a creature in a post-gender world” (292). Haraway’s characterization of the cyborg has a number of implications for my reading of Poppy’s work, but that is only one of the many layers of meaning that help to deconstruct the concepts Poppy explores on “Am I a Girl?” Much like the YouTube videos from her earlier days, on *Am I a Girl?*, Poppy explores concepts like technology, capitalism, class, and gender.

While part of the appeal of Poppy’s work is this ability to weave various interpretations into danceable pop tracks—and I will be doing a deconstructive reading of the songs on this album to reveal some of these interpretations—I want to be clear that what I am doing with my reading of *Am I a Girl?* is not (just) a deconstruction of Poppy’s work. Rather, I am making a case for Poppy’s album as a deconstruction of the concepts she’s singing about. Like Poppy uses technology to critique technology, I will use deconstruction to illustrate how her album is deconstructive; not use deconstruction to deconstruct the album as an end in itself. To use Sarup’s interpretation of deconstruction, I am not asserting that Poppy’s logic fails to accurately portray her gender identity or illustrate her points; I’m trying to illustrate how Poppy’s songs point out how capitalism and gender fail, by their own logic, as social concepts. After all, if Poppy were, indeed, a robot, she would be programmed based on the logic of the world she was developed in—her logic is not her own. Not only does Poppy’s mythology complicate face-value

interpretations of her songs, but it also sets the stage for Poppy's album as a deconstructive effort.

Am I a Girl? is a true *album*, in the sense that there seems to be an overarching narrative that reveals itself when the tracks are listened to in order—a narrative that outlines the story of Poppy's mythology. Divided into three parts, the album begins with dance-pop songs about fashion and attitude, which seem to represent Poppy's confidence in her identity, whether that is as a girl or as an unaware robot. After a short interlude, which is made up of Poppy robotically repeating the phrase "I'm Poppy" over the menacingly mechanical sounds of industrial machinery, several darker-tinged dance tracks paint a bleaker portrait of Poppy's situation. The songs in this portion feature apocalyptic themes and touch on issues like climate change and even historical moments like the French revolution. A final instrumental interlude, this time featuring robotic gurgles over rising synths, precedes the final three songs. Each of these songs includes significant elements of rock and metal music, as well as some of the darkest lyrics of the album. In the context of the album's narrative, these songs signal a significant transformation in Poppy's experience and identity—and demand a new understanding of the themes in the previous songs.

Over the course of the album, Poppy, as a narrator, transforms from a confident, bubbly pop star persona to a distressed, anxious individual questioning their identity, grappling with the conflicting desires of harmony and destruction, among a backdrop of climate catastrophe and the fall of capitalism. While the album's references to social issues, like gender identity and climate change, are timely, they're not the most

significant part of the album. At the heart of the album's narrative, at the heart of the Poppy project, is a challenging of binaries—work/leisure, pleasure/pain, man/woman and, of course, human/machine. This comes to a head in the album's third act—and it's what makes the album less of a celebration of gender identity and more of a deconstruction of gender, and the social systems that enable it.

In this section, I will analyze several individual songs on the album, and the narrative of the album as a whole, to illustrate how Poppy plays with the tensions of these binaries to deconstruct the ideas she seems to be celebrating. I stop short of doing a track-by-track analysis and will instead analyze the songs based on three groupings of themes that the album explores—gender identity and gender performance, class and capitalism, and humanity and metaphysics. Though I'll review the tracks in a different order than they appear on the album, since the narrative thread of the album is a significant part of my reading, I will still contextualize these songs based on their place in the album's tracklist and narrative.

2.1: Gender Identity and Gender Performance

As the title of the album suggests, Poppy's *Am I a Girl?* is partially an exploration of gender, and the songs on the album reflect a number of theoretical perspectives regarding gender. Most notably, Poppy explores how gender is performative, arbitrarily binary, and constituted in tandem with a number of other social systems and power structures. The first part of the album seems to celebrate gender identity and ego, with several songs about fashion that feature typical dance/pop production, though with some subtly satirical lyrics. By the end of the album, the binary ideas that created the album's

earlier celebration of gender clash against explicit takedowns of traditional gender norms, and shocking sonic influences, creating a lyrical and sonic deconstruction of the album's previous perspectives. I'll explore a number of different songs from all three parts of the album, in this section.

Poppy's exploration of gender roles begins and is rooted in fashion, with the songs in the album's first section exploring Poppy's relationship with fashion. This reveals some interesting ideas about gender. Specifically, Poppy explores the concept of choice, agency, and personal empowerment in the realm of fashion on the second track of the album, "Fashion After All." Though at first listen, the song seems to celebrate traditional ideas of fashion and, thus, gender, it's actually a tribute to Poppy's own subversive choices under dominant ideology. "Fashion After All" begins with a verse that asserts Poppy's confidence in her style and identity. "I'm working every angle ... my hair and makeup make you envious," she sings on the opening lines. These confident statements continue throughout the pre-chorus, where Poppy brags that she can, "Do what I want, say what I want ... talk how I want, walk how I want, get what I want, wear what I want," before breaking out into the chorus, which consists of one repeated line—"It's fashion, after all." This apparently simple statement is actually loaded with layers of historical context and meaning, especially considering the nods to queer culture Poppy makes throughout the song.

The subject of fashion on its own is rooted in the history of gay culture. In Richard Dyer's words, "Surviving as a queer meant mastering appearances, knowing how to manipulate clothes, mannerisms and lifestyle so as to be able to pass for straight and

also to signal that we weren't" (*Queers* 63). Historically, LGBTQ people have used fashion as not only as a tool for survival but a tool for self-expression and community building. As Aaron Lecklider observed in his analysis of the Pet Shop Boys' song "Shopping," shopping "might have been considered peripheral or ephemeral in the straight world" and even perceived as "a shallow or vain pursuit" (130-1) but has special meaning to the gay community. It's "a radical political act where identity was reinforced, reinscribed, and rearranged" (Lecklider 131). These are the aspects of fashion Poppy seems to be celebrating on "Fashion After All" and the other fashion pop songs from this section of the album. "Fashion After All" also contains additional nods to queer culture that support and further contextualize this reading.

In the first verse of the song, where Poppy brags about her fashion sense, she also sings, "My wrists are terror-wrists," a play on the word "terrorists." This line caused confusion among some reviewers, who saw it as a cheap pun ("how can wrists be 'terrorists,' exactly?" wondered Wasylak in their review for alternative music e-magazine *Vanyaland*). This line could be read as a rare explicit reference to the gay subtext that's present in many of Poppy's songs. "Limp wrists" is a derogatory term referring to the femininity of many gay men, which this line could be referring to. Considering the previously mentioned queer perspectives on fashion, this nod to gay culture helps situate Poppy's exploration of fashion within the historical and cultural contexts of gender and sexuality.

From this perspective, "limp wrists"—which is to say feminine mannerisms and interests—could be seen as "terror-wrists" in that they require constant vigilance in order

to assure they are communicating the messages one may want to send about one's identity. It's emotional labor that can, indeed, feel at times terrorizing, but can also be an empowering tool of agency and self-awareness. As Schoefield and Schmidt observe, "This postmodernist idea of multiple identities allows individuals the control to show others only what they want them to see" (319). This has implications for fashion, as well as gender and sexuality.

By being especially mindful of their mannerisms and style of dress, LGBTQ people not only developed a special cultural relationship with fashion but provide a useful example of Judith Butler's ideas about gender. Using fashion and certain mannerisms to signal different ideas about their sexual identities reveals how gender is performative and compulsory. As Butler writes, "gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions" (*Imitation* 314-5). With "Fashion After All," Poppy simultaneously celebrates subversive fashion as a "transgressive pleasure," while revealing it, like gender, as being "compulsory performance." Far from being a simple celebration of fashion, from this view, "Fashion After All" is actually an exploration of the idea of subjectivity. On the surface, the song celebrates Poppy for her fashion sense, but given the song's perspective of fashion as a tool of identity construction, what Poppy is actually celebrating is the way fashion allows not the expression of her identity, but the very creation of it.

When Poppy sings “It’s fashion, after all,” she’s not dismissing fashion as a meaningless endeavor; she’s dismissing the rigid gender norms that have influenced mainstream fashion norms, choosing instead to celebrate fashion for its subversive potential of creation. This concept has its roots in camp culture, which Dyer defines as “a ‘contrary’ use of what the dominant culture provides” (“Disco” 415). This is the attitude Poppy sings about in “Fashion After All”—the agency not only to “do what I want” and “wear what I want” but to do what one wants *with* what one wears—to *become* something through what one wears. Camp is, of course, about more than just fashion. Fashion is an especially salient example because of how it intersects with gender and sexuality. While the camp undertones of “Fashion After All,” and fashion overall, have particular significance for queer people, the concept of fashion as a way of constructing identity is a concept that effects everyone in contemporary society.

As Kaiser et al. write in “Fashion, Postmodernity and Personal Appearance,” “Fashion is ambivalent—for when we dress, we wear inscribed upon our bodies the often obscure relationship of art, personal psychology and the social order” (165). That’s to say, fashion isn’t *just* “fashion, after all.” Far from being devoid of meaning, fashion is the creative use of meanings from multiple cultural sources. It is itself a form of meaning-making. Kaiser et al. compare fashion to Levi Strauss’ concept of bricolage, writing, “Through an active manipulation of symbols, individuals can strive to construct an identity that enables them to organize a personal sense of existence and to invest it with meaning” (173). Yet, fashion isn’t only a meaningful tool for personal empowerment. From this queer, postmodern perspective, fashion—and “Fashion After All”—has

implications for our understandings of gender as a social system, not just understandings of individual identities. The camp sensibilities present in “Fashion After All” help illustrate this. Camp has roots in gay culture and, more specifically, drag culture, which many theorists have explored not only for how it illustrates the performativity of gender, but for its subversive potential.²³

Camp and drag both challenge the idea of a naturalized identity, an idea which has implications for our understanding of gender and is at the heart of “Fashion After All.” As Butler observes, “Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (*Imitation* 313). So when Poppy sings “it’s fashion, after all,” she is not dismissing fashion as a frivolous endeavor, nor is she just dismissing the rigid rules of the dominant culture. Instead, Poppy is dismissing the idea that the identities and ideas we express through fashion are natural or innate. Poppy suggests that these identities are, in Butler’s words, “a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core” but remain simply “a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body” (*Imitation* 317)—in other words, “it’s fashion, after all.” To be clear, this dismissal of identities constructed via fashion is not meant to dismiss the significance of fashion, nor the personal significance or validity of individual gender identities. Rather, this adds additional depth to our understanding of fashion, gender, and identity:

Appearance and fashion offer tangible means for examining the dynamics of form and content across the contexts of self-understanding, social situations, and

cultural categories. Thus postmodernity offers advanced-capitalist forms of commodification, on the one hand, and creative opportunities for consumers to personalize and reconstruct the meanings of social objects, on the other. (Kaiser et al., 169)

This track, and this entire section of the album, illustrate fashion as both commodification and meaning-making, and is deconstructive in this way. In celebrating fashion while subtly acknowledging the issue involved with it, including the influence of capitalism and restrictive gender norms, Poppy is asking us to question the entire system while she invites us to participate in it. This postmodern ambivalence is, I would say, a deconstructive stance. Poppy expands on this exploration of identity performance, while also revealing even more of the darker undertones hidden beneath the album's pop sheen—and beneath dominant gender norms—in the second part of the album.

“Girls in Bikinis,” a track from the album's middle section, pushes Poppy's social commentary further, incorporating ideas about female objectification into her deconstruction of gender. Despite containing danceable beats and melodies, most of the songs in this second section contain somewhat darker imagery or sounds, but “Girls in Bikinis” is a funky, bouncy, upbeat, and irreverent ode to swimwear. It's also, strangely, one of the album's most daring and experimental forays into gender deconstruction, representing a turning point in the album's narrative.

The chorus of the song features Poppy chanting “Girls in bikinis, girls in bikinis,” and describes seeing these girls “on roller skates, in outer space” and “in platform heels, in new hot wheels.” The chorus is hilariously reminiscent of the parody song “Boobs in

California” from the Netflix show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, a song which hyperbolically portrays the objectification of women found in popular music by men. The show lampoons this by having the song performed by a gay male character, which leads to an effect similar to what happens when one listens to “Girls in Bikinis.” While it’s unclear if Poppy (the artist) is attracted to women, and Poppy (the character) could be assumed to be an asexual android—a characterization that lends itself to more subversive readings of the song—whether Poppy (the artist or character) is attracted to the women she’s singing about is irrelevant. I’ve already explored how Poppy’s hyper-stylized fembot appearance makes certain implications about sexuality (Vassar), but here Poppy’s robot persona complicates the characterization of Poppy as a sexualized pop star. Hearing a female (presenting) performer sing about women in such a typically male fashion is at once chilling, hilarious, and deconstructive in itself. Coming from the perspective of the Poppy character especially, in the context of her mythology, the song is about more than physical attraction. “Girls in Bikinis” sounds like robot Poppy observing female humans to learn how to behave. This positioning of Poppy as the subject not only challenges traditional gender expectations but also helps set up the song’s deconstructive stance.

In her feminist review of psychoanalysis, Natalie Kate Kamber observed, “in the trajectory of the girl’s Oedipal complex, femininity is realized as the desire to be the object of masculine desire itself” (4). That is key to understanding what Poppy is illustrating with “Girls in Bikinis”. As Poppy, the character, observes the “girls” who look like her, she sees underdressed, likely sexualized, images of femininity. In the song’s verses, she sings not about the girls, but about the fabric on their bodies—

“bandeau, crop top, boyshorts, red thong,” as she sings in the first verse. Thus, Poppy learns that being a girl is dependent on what one wears; and that, as a girl, what one wears should be desirable to another’s gaze. As the song goes on, the bikinis Poppy describes become more risqué, until she’s describing the women’s bodies—“Nylon, spandex ... polyester, pinstripe ... polka-dot, see-through ... A cup, B cup ... don’t cover up.” This is in direct contrast to the opening lines of the song—“They say take it off, I say leave it on.” What begins as a fetishization of feminine swimwear becomes run-of-the-mill objectification of the female body which, together, illustrate once again the role clothing plays in gender performance, while also positioning feminine gender roles as a role of being a sexualized object rather than a subject with agency.

“Girls in Bikinis” also subverts the usual circumstances that surround the objectification of women. Since Poppy herself is a female artist, this adds an interesting perspective to the objectifying lyrics. This mirrors the album’s narrative in the context of Poppy lore—as Poppy the android gains sentience, Poppy the female artist gains agency. Rather than Poppy being an android observing these girls to mimic their behavior, on the contrary, Poppy is positioning herself as different from the other girls. In “Girls in Bikinis,” Poppy is the observer--the subject, not the object—which subverts traditional expectations of femininity in patriarchal society. Of course, by focusing her gaze on female bodies, Poppy is still participating in the objectification of female bodies. Poppy does her part to challenge this social norm, too. In the song’s bridge, she sings, “I wanna see boys in bikinis, too.” Thus, not only is Poppy placing herself in the role of the

observer of women, but she's also placing men in the subjugated position of the object, completely subverting traditional gender expectations.

So begins Poppy's foray into understanding—and thus deconstructing—gender. As Virginia Goldner observed, “When we ask who is looking and who is being seen, who is being named and who is doing the naming, when we query the epistemological politics of classification, diagnosis, and identity politics more generally ... we are working at the site where minds meet discourse, an intersection critical to the understanding not only of trans but of gender more generally” (159-60). This is the work Poppy does with “Girls in Bikinis.” The song is less a celebration of objectification, female or otherwise, and more an exploration of the roles of subject and object, and the act of gazing itself, in patriarchal society. As Rosi Braidotti writes: “Our era has turned visualization into the ultimate form of control. This marks not only the final stage in the commodification of the scopic, but also the triumph of vision over all the other senses” (204). Like “Fashion After All,” “Girls in Bikinis” celebrates the position of power and agency Poppy takes on the track. Unlike “Fashion After All,” however, it's not a straightforward celebration of that power—it's an unpacking of it.

“Girls in Bikinis” is less about celebrating Poppy as a female with agency in patriarchal society, and more about exposing the male gaze that subjugates women under patriarchy, by placing Poppy in the role of patriarchal observer of female bodies. Even the gender-flipped line about boys in bikinis, an otherwise throwaway lyric, adds additional context. The line is less about Poppy finding boys who wear bikinis aesthetically pleasing, and more about the fact that Poppy's desires, as the subject

observing the object, are centered at the cost of the objectified humans' agency. Poppy is not just a passive observer of objects—like the male gaze in patriarchy, her gaze dictates how the objectified subjects are perceived and, thus, plays an active role in constructing the norms of her universe. Under late capitalist heteropatriarchy, the male gaze influences gender norms and how people who violate gender norms are treated; the same is true for Poppy's universe, although in Poppy's world, boys in bikinis are admired rather than exiled.

The universe Poppy builds through the album's narrative comes to a turning point in "Girls in Bikinis." More than being an allegory for the male gaze, the song's positioning of Poppy as a subject with agency also represents a shift in the Poppy narrative. While her agency in the realm of fashion was celebrated in the album's first part, the second half of the album represents an awareness and mastering of her agency in other realms, which could represent Poppy's shift from a fembot lacking agency, to a form of AI gaining sentience and control of their existence. This narrative could itself be seen as an allegory for women's liberation, and the theme of self-determination and strategic use of the signs and signifieds of the dominant culture that Poppy sings about in songs like "Fashion After All" also has parallels with the experience of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and especially transgender people.

Goldner explored the experience of trans people seeking gender-affirming medical treatment, observing that doing so "requires a mastery of what Foucault (1978) has called a 'reverse discourse,' the process by which the object of the gaze becomes the subject who talks back" (164). On "Girls in Bikinis," Poppy not only unpacks power

dynamics of patriarchy, but helps shape her own narrative by placing herself in the position of “the subject who talks back” from her previous role of the object—and this narrative mirrors the experience of people who are marginalized under capitalist heteropatriarchy. This all comes together in a way that complicates surface readings of these songs as celebrations of identity and patriarchal power and, thus, furthers Poppy’s deconstruction of gender.

Another song from the second section of the album, “Chic Chick,” helps illustrate Poppy’s perspective on power. This is one of the more straightforward self-empowerment anthems on the record, with lyrics that find Poppy bragging about being a “classic, classy...foxy, fancy ... lady minding my business . . . running my business.” But with lyrics that play with gender in interesting ways, the song actually turns out to be another key point in the album’s deconstruction of gender. Despite being called “chic chick” (“chick” being a slang term for women), and Poppy referring to herself as a “lady” in the song, the lyrics also find Poppy saying things like, “I feel like a king” and, in one of the album’s more explicit moments, “I’m a chic chick ... if you don’t like it, suck my dick.” While this could be seen as a cheap pun made for shock value, this line actually brings to mind another well-known, if outdated, idea about gender.

The Freudian concept of penis envy has been widely criticized by feminists²⁴, but some feminists have interpreted the concept from perspectives that support feminist ideas of gender. Most notably, Simone de Beauvoir said of penis envy, “it is not the lack of the penis that causes this complex, but rather the total situation; if the little girl feels penis envy it is only as the symbol of privileges enjoyed by boys” (43). Similar to how Poppy

celebrates the privileged position of the observer while criticizing female objectification in “Girls in Bikinis,” and celebrates having the agency to subvert dominant cultural norms in “Fashion After All,” with “Chic Chick,” Poppy isn’t just using the crude phrase as an insult (as is its popular mainstream usage), nor is she supporting the phrase’s hegemonic patriarchal idea of dominance as power. Instead, the line is yet another attempt by Poppy to align herself with positions of power and call current constructions of power into question. This mirrors much of Haraway’s work. As Braidotti writes: “Haraway’s feminist cyborg project aims at dislodging the Oedipal narratives from their culturally hegemonic positions and thus diminishing their power over the construction of identity” (201). Similarly, the appropriation of hegemonic ideas of power and agency Poppy participates in on “Chic Chick” (and throughout the album) isn’t just about elevating Poppy’s individual status, but about calling those norms into question.

The “if you don’t like it…” line is crude and derogatory, and reinforces patriarchal ideas of dominance, but the line isn’t condoning its usual usage. Since the line is sung by a female artist, and especially within the context of the rest of the song and album, the line is not only a way of putting Poppy in a position of power, but it also invites more questions about Poppy’s gender and gender as a concept. Taken literally, the line certainly raises implications about Poppy’s gender. While I don’t feel it’s necessary or appropriate to explore these implications in-depth here, there’s no doubt that these implications are an important part of the song’s place in the album. Since many mainstream understandings of gender still equate gender with the biological sex one is

assigned at birth, the line not only raises questions about Poppy's biological sex and experience of gender, but calls these understandings of gender and sex into question.

This is made more apparent in the context of how Poppy plays with gender throughout the song. As previously mentioned, she sings in the song that she feels "like a king"—but she also commands the listener to "bow to your matriarch." Poppy feels like a king and uses all the language of patriarchal power to assert her own dominance, but her dominance is not hegemonic, even as it involves her taking on male ideas of power. In the opening verse of the song, Poppy describes herself as "offensive ... aggressive" and asserts, "I'm my own bodyguard." Poppy may be taking on certain roles associated with male dominance but, as a woman, her taking on of these roles is subversive in how it challenges the expectations for her as a woman. While Poppy's embrace of patriarchal ideas of power may support the idea that these are only legitimate forms of power, which is hegemonic, her ability to take them on as a woman also challenges traditional gender expectations. Of course, this interpretation still relies on a man/woman binary, but in a way that reveals the binary's limitations.

Within the narrative of the album, Poppy's simultaneous embrace and subversion of gender expectations brings up, once again, the question of the album's title—*Am I a Girl?* At this point, it becomes clear that the answer to the question is not about Poppy's objective gender or her own understanding of her identity, but it's a question about the definition of "girl" as a gender category. If Poppy is a girl but feels like a king, does that make her a boy? Or does that simply illustrate that girls can have traditionally male qualities? Both of these options subvert dominant ideas of gender in some way.

According to traditional gender roles, if Poppy is a girl, she should feel like a queen, not a king; and she should embrace the norms of femininity, not take on masculine roles and qualities. Interestingly, “Chic Chick” challenges both of those ideas. The title suggests that the song would be a celebration of Poppy’s fashion sense—“chic” being a word used to describe fashionable women—but it turns out to be a celebration of Poppy’s power. While she does brag about being “classy” and “foxy,” the song is more about Poppy’s refusal to be only that.

This celebration of Poppy’s power and agency in subverting gender norms has dominated most of this discussion thus far. Indeed, the first part of the album is largely about celebrating Poppy’s subversive expression. On the second half of the album, Poppy illustrates the struggle that comes along with being a subversive subject living under patriarchy, even making the case for concealing the things she celebrates in the album’s first part. Yet, even this negative example reinforces the ideas about gender that have guided this discussion.

“Hard Feelings,” a song from the album’s second part, is a mid-tempo ballad that expresses longing for love—a fairly typical theme for a pop or rock song. However, there’s a subtle gay subtext to this track that provides new layers of meaning, and, as usual, Poppy’s android persona and the related lore add additional layers that serve to deconstruct not only the song’s subject but gender, emotions, and the nature of humanity. With some of the album’s most explicit references to Poppy’s android existence, this track helps take Poppy’s postmodern deconstructions of the human experience to new levels. Additionally, themes of unrequited love, sublimated desire, and the resulting

alienation make this song a salient expression of gay desire in heterosexist culture, as much as it is an interesting expansion on the Poppy narrative.

“Why do I have porcelain skin / With wires and electrics within?” Poppy sings in the opening lines of the track—a clear reference to her humanoid persona. “Am I a replica of someone that you loved ... someone flesh and blood,” she asks in the bridge to the chorus. Finally, the chorus culminates with an existential inquiry that drives the song’s—and, I might argue, the entire album’s—concept: “You’ve got my circuitry bleeding / Am I a man or machine? / If I can never love, why do I have hard feelings?”

These lyrics obviously have interpretations relevant to the Poppy mythology. Poppy is beginning to gain awareness that she is not like the humans she looks like—“Why am I so different?” Poppy muses on the track. While the immediate assumption is that Poppy is indeed a robot or a cyborg who’s at least half machine, the more interesting interpretation is also the most ordinary. The song isn’t just about a robot gaining self-awareness and the capacity to feel human emotions, which itself is an interesting and ambitious narrative for a pop song, but it could also be read from the perspective of a human who has repressed their emotions to the point where they *feel* like a robot—until their “circuitry” starts to bleed, and they realize they are, indeed, human and capable of feeling difficult emotions—“hard feelings”—like longing and pain.

While this might be a more down-to-earth interpretation than any interpretation incorporating Poppy’s cyborg lore, “Hard Feelings” is not quite a universal heartbreak ballad. As the narrator of the song—whether they are a robot, a human or something in between—is realizing their capacity to feel “hard feelings,” they also longingly, painfully

admit that “I can never love.” This raises the question—what exactly are “hard feelings”? And how can one be capable of experiencing “hard feelings”—like heartbreak, perhaps, or sadness—but not feelings like love? This, too, perhaps raises the classic question—what is love?

The answer to these questions lies in the careful wording of the lyrics—“If I can never love, why do I have hard feelings?” In the context of the song, the narrator is obviously capable of feeling some emotions—the titular “hard feelings”—yet is incapable of experiencing love. This suggests, perhaps, that love is not an emotion, something some psychologists would agree with. Psychologist Paul Ekman has said that love involves, “long-term commitments, intense attachments to a specific other person” and is not “itself an emotion,” but rather makes one “more susceptible to experiencing a variety of emotions.” In this case, the “hard feelings” Poppy sings about may be things like sadness and loneliness, which she feels due to her inability to experience the human commitment that is love—perhaps because she is a cyborg that’s not capable of truly connecting with humans, perhaps because she’s a human being who has built up emotional walls. In either case, this helps explain what love is and why Poppy can’t experience it, despite being capable of experiencing emotions.

On the other hand, some psychologists have challenged Ekman’s work and have argued to categorize love as a basic emotion.²⁵ Yet even if love is an emotion, Poppy could perhaps still be unable to experience the *commitment* of love with a human, despite experiencing the *emotion* of love towards humans—indeed, her sadness and loneliness may stem from the fact that she experiences love but is incapable of sharing it with a

human. As a cyborg android robot who can't physically or emotionally connect with humans, she experiences the ultimate form of unrequited love—a love that is physically impossible.

This leads to the more intriguing real-life interpretation of this reading of “Hard Feelings” as a queercoded ode to the impossible love that is same-sex romantic love. This interpretation is revealed not only through Poppy’s slightly confusing use of masculine nouns, but in other lines throughout the song. For example, the final lines of each verse contain the lyric, “What crimes will you make me commit?” In the Poppy canon, this is seen as a reference to Poppy’s real-life legal struggles with another singer, who previously worked with collaborator Sinclair and claimed he stole her ideas for his work with Poppy.²⁶ As true as that may be, this line could also be read as a reference to same-sex desire.

Homosexuality is still criminalized in more than 70 countries around the world,²⁷ and gay rights are still being challenged in the United States today. The line need not be so literal—“crime” could simply refer to something that’s deemed deviant by mainstream society, which certainly applies to homosexuality. Despite the fact that gay couples have the legal right to marry in the United States, this right is often challenged; things like employment and housing discrimination were, until this year, not regulated at the federal level; and individuals and businesses in many regions still discriminate against LGBTQ people. In many ways, same-sex love is still a “crime.” Those who feel love or desire for someone of the same sex may not feel like they can express that love openly—they can

never love, but they experience the “hard feelings” of unrequited love and unfulfilled desire. Once again, Poppy’s narrative has parallels to the experiences of LGBT people.

The robotic imagery, like mentions of “wires and electrics” within, are especially salient in this interpretation. It brings Dyer’s previously-mentioned reflection on “passing” to mind—LGBTQ people who don’t feel safe being “out” may spend a lot of time and energy monitoring their “clothes, mannerisms and lifestyle so as to be able to pass for straight” (*Queers* 63). They may limit how they engage with their desire and feelings of love to the point where they may become out of touch with all their emotions, much like an android who looks human but can’t experience emotion. Read from this angle, the lyrics of this song become much more meaningful. Imagining the chorus’ main refrain—“Am I a man or machine? / If I can never love, why do I have hard feelings?”—coming from the perspective of a closeted gay man or lesbian woman gives the line new resonance.

This reading of the song also mirrors Butler’s ideas of gender and imitation. Under heteropatriarchy, mainstream ideas of gender include implications about sexuality. Heterosexuality is the default, so LGBT people are not only violating expectations regarding sexuality, but violating expectations surrounding their gender. Further, not only is heterosexuality seen as more natural, but homosexuality is often viewed as an imitation of heterosexuality. In Butler’s words, “Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that ‘being’ a lesbian is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmic plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail” (*Imitation* 312).

When Poppy sings “Am I a replica of someone that you loved?” this is what she could be referring to.

Whether she’s an android incapable of love because she’s not fully human, or a human struggling to feel that their desire is valid, “Hard Feelings” not only expresses the pain of these struggles, but an awareness of where that pain comes from, an awareness of expectations that aren’t aligned with one’s internal experience. Not only could this be seen as a consciousness-raising brought on by the type of unpacking Butler participates in, but it also has implications for Poppy’s mythology. This awareness suggests that android Poppy is becoming self-aware—of not only her own constructed nature, but of the constructedness of that which she is a “replica of.”

In Butler’s view, homosexuality is not just a copy of heterosexuality—she goes as far as to argue that the suppressing of homosexuality that is inherent in mainstream constructions of heterosexuality could make a case for homosexuality as the original:

. . . in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality . . . if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin. Heterosexuality here presupposes homosexuality. And if the homosexual as copy precedes the heterosexual as origin, then it seems only fair to concede that the copy comes before the origin, and that homosexuality is thus the origin, and heterosexuality the copy. (*Imitation* 313)

Yet Butler doesn't assert that homosexuality is the original. Instead, she uses this interpretation to reveal the constructed nature of these identities: ". . . simple inversions are not really possible. For it is only as a copy that homosexuality can be argued to precede heterosexuality as the origin. In other words, the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term" (*Imitation* 313). Butler is less concerned with uncovering the true nature of sexual and gender identities, and more interested in exposing their constructedness and co-constitutive nature.

Similarly, "Hard Feelings" is less about Poppy's search for answers about her origins and identity, and more about a need to express the pain of loss associated with losing a sense of a natural identity, which would allow for human connection. As a robot who is unable to experience requited love, but feels the difficult emotions of desire and longing, Poppy experiences a loss of that shared experience. Of course, the desire—the "hard feelings"—she *is* able to feel suggests that she may indeed be capable of experiencing love—yet even this suggests the loss of a naturalized identity, as it reveals her previous understanding that she "can never love" to be a falsehood and, thus, her previous understanding of herself to be a construct. This makes "Hard Feelings" less a song about longing for love, and more about the existential anguish of having no naturalized origin to return to.

This reflects Butler's ideas of identity construction. Building on Freud's idea of incorporation, Butler says gender identity—and identity as a whole—is actually a result of loss:

In Freud's view, which I continue to find useful, incorporation—a kind of psychic miming—is a response to, and a refusal of, loss. Gender as the site of such psychic mimesis is thus constituted by the variously gendered Others who have been loved and lost, where the loss is suspended through a melancholic and imaginary incorporation (and preservation) of those Others into the psyche.

In my view, the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation (grammar fails us here, for the 'it' only becomes differentiated through that separation), a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some 'Other.' That 'Other' installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of that 'self' to achieve self-identity; it is as if it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self's possibility. (*Imitation* 316-17)

While "Hard Feelings" seems to be a song about heartbreak and romantic longing, and my queer interpretation of that reading adds additional depth to that narrative, in the context of the album, Poppy's mythology and her exploration of gender on *Am I a Girl?*, the song becomes more about existential longing. This has implications for Poppy's android persona—which in turn has implications for contemporary ideas of humanity.

A key element of Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is the lack of origin that mirrors Butler's discussions of identity as a result of loss: "the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense—a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space" (292). This idea comes up in other songs on the album, which I will discuss later. Here, it helps illustrate how "Hard Feelings" is more than a heartbreak ballad. As Haraway writes, ". . . there are also great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self. It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities" (310-11). The existential anguish of Poppy's unrequited love in "Hard Feelings" exposes the humanizing cracks in her android identity and, thus, the constructed nature of identity—which signal the possibility for the construction of something new, which Poppy expands on in the album's last section.

As previously mentioned, "Am I a Girl?"—the album's title track and the opening of the album's final section—has been celebrated as an anthem for gender identity. Though the song certainly has relevance to those who experience gender dysphoria, as the lyrics describe someone who is struggling with gendered expectations—"Don't evaluate me as woman or man / It's keeping me awake," she sings in the song's pre-chorus—the song is less about celebrating gender identity and more about questioning gender norms in a way that mirrors both Butler's and Haraway's work.

Despite opening the song with an assertion of her gender identity—"I want to be a girl" is the first line of the song—in "Am I a Girl?" Poppy never lands on an answer and instead, as the title suggests, finds herself in an endless questioning. This is not a tortured questioning simply about Poppy's self-identification; this questioning is not a means to an end—for Poppy, the questioning is the end. A close reading—and consideration of Poppy's postmodern mythology—reveals this. Just as Poppy's previously discussed YouTube videos feature Poppy performing social trends and celebrating internet culture in a manner meant to reveal the absurdity of these things, in "Am I a Girl?" Poppy applies literal interpretations of gender norms to herself to reveal not her own identity, but the limitations of gender as a concept. It recalls Sarup's gender of deconstruction—Poppy's use of gender norms in an "inconsistent and paradoxical" way serves to show how these concepts "fail by its own criteria" (34). Poppy challenges the gender binary and identity politics by embracing them.

It makes sense that Poppy references the transgender experience, because many interpretations of transgender ideology reflect this same concept. In Goldner's words: "Trans 'undoes' gender in one sense, but, at the same time, it moves its subjects more deeply into it. Its paradoxical density disrupts the hegemony of gender as a pure opposition, creating a welcome category crisis in the highly simplified gender taxonomy of 'either/or' by offering 'neither/nor' and 'both/and' alternatives.'" (165). Similarly, Poppy's own questioning of her gender identity serves to challenge gender as a concept by exposing existing understandings of gender to be limiting.

The opening lines of the song seem to support the idea of binary gender, and privilege feminine gender norms specifically—“I want to be a girl / In all the normal ways / Pose for a photograph / Put on my pretty face.” However, the lines that follow complicate some of the ideas in these lines in a way that challenges Poppy’s simple assertion that, “I want to be a girl.” She sings in the second half of the first verse, “Thank God I’m not a boy / I’d always have to pay / Pretend that I was strong / And never got afraid.” In Poppy’s own words, she wants to be a girl—which suggests she is not a girl—but she is not a boy, which of course raises the question—what is she?

In order to answer this question, and reveal the deconstructive subtext of the song, it’s important to pay attention to the words Poppy chooses to describe her ideas of gender. First of all, and most significantly, in the first statement—“I want to be a girl in all the normal ways”—the words *want* and *normal* are significant. “Want” suggests that Poppy *isn’t* a girl, but longs to be one, which has a number of implications; “normal” suggests that Poppy isn’t necessarily longing for the experience of girlhood/womanhood as much as she is longing for the experience of normalcy. Together, this could suggest that she is either a girl who doesn’t fit into feminine gender norms—like being concerned with fashion and makeup, as she references in the song—or a boy who doesn’t fit into the expectations of masculinity and longs to express himself in a traditionally feminine way. Of course, Poppy’s mythology offers another interpretation—these lines represent android Poppy, who appears to be a “normal” girl, but doesn’t fit in with human girls. Though, I think the gender identity (or humanity) of the narrator of this song isn’t as important as what their struggle says about gender identity as a concept.

Not only do the lyrics of “Am I a Girl?” seem more concerned with normalcy than any specific gender expectations—which itself brings to mind Butler’s discussions of identity as naturalized performance—the song, like previously-discussed tracks, seems more concerned with the act of questioning rather than coming to any specific outcome or answer—which has even broader implications. This is suggested in these early lines as well, once again through Poppy’s careful world choice. Poppy associates the “normal ways” of femininity to be artificial and performative—*posing* for photographs suggests calculating self-presentation, while makeup involves using products to alter one’s natural appearance. Similarly, she defines boyhood—maleness—not as *being* strong and brave, but *pretending* to be unafraid and strong—a “*panicked* imitation,” in Butler’s words (*Imitation* 314).

While in the context of the song, the narrator doesn’t seem to be aware of what these lines suggest, in the context of the album and Poppy’s artistry as a whole, Poppy, the artist, seems to be aware of the implications she is making with these statements. After all, the entire first half of the album deals with fashion as identity performance. Here, Poppy (the artist) shows how gender is performative, as well. Despite telling the story of someone struggling with gender identity, the carefully worded lyrics suggest that the cause of the struggle is not the narrator’s personal identity, but rather gender categories that are limiting and based on arbitrary norms. Yet, focusing on a story of one person’s individual struggles with gender helps to deconstruct this binary.

Even as the narrator longs for the normalcy of a binary gender identity, their internal struggle illustrates the issues inherent in binary understandings of gender—and,

thus, makes the case for changing our understanding of gender. According to Goldner, this is true of trans identities in real life as well, since “a trans identity pushes against the received wisdom of normative gender categories so that novel iterations of masculinity and femininity can be included in humanity’s registry” (164). In this view, transness becomes less about affirming one’s individual gender identity, and more about challenging the concept of gender as a natural binary. Similarly, “Am I a Girl?” seeks to deconstruct the gender binary by depicting the struggles binary understandings of gender can lead to.

It’s not just through subtle word choice, as in the first verse. In the song’s chorus, after asking, “Am I a girl? / Am I a boy?” Poppy poses the most daring—yet simplest—question on the album—“What does that even mean?” Thus, Poppy’s questioning of gender is not simply a questioning of her gender identity—it’s a questioning of gender norms, of gender and identity as concepts. From this view, the song’s titular inquiry—“Am I a Girl?”—seems less like a tortured question Poppy is asking herself, and more like an implicating question aimed at the listener. It’s similar to the implicating questions asked in Poppy’s previously discussed YouTube videos, and it mirrors Vassar’s observation that “Poppy seems to be asking us, ‘Am I the girl you want?’” With “Am I a Girl?” Poppy is asking the listener what they believe about gender, and both answers point to the limitations of binary gender norms.

If Poppy is, indeed, a girl, her hyperfeminine appearance would serve to reinforce traditional notions of gender, in all their confusing limitations; if Poppy is a boy (or something else), this suggests that labels like “feminine” and “masculine” are

illegitimate. Together, this means that, whether Poppy is perceived as a gender-conforming female or gender-nonconforming male, the norms of both binary gender categories fail to accurately convey her personal experience, and thus, gender fails by its own standards.

In addition to being deconstructive, this is a decidedly queer perspective, as “queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Jagose 3). This queer destabilizing of traditional understandings of gender is the work Poppy does with “Am I a Girl?” and it is deconstructive in how it challenges even subversive gender identities. As Brown and Mandell write in their analysis of identity politics, “queer theory calls into question the value of defining any identity at all” (7). Similar to how Poppy’s questioning of gender is an end itself, rather than a means to an end, queerness is an end in itself, in how it’s a constant questioning of the very concept of identity, rather than promoting any particular identity. Much like deconstruction challenges the idea of a fixed center, queerness, and the queer, binary-challenging perspective Poppy embraces on “Am I a Girl?”, challenge the idea of a fixed identity.

In this section, I analyzed how Poppy explores the performativity of identity, arbitrary binaries, and dominant cultural norms throughout *Am I a Girl?* This questioning of identity not only reveals the fragility of gender categories, but how movements that seek to empower those with marginalized gender identities can reinforce the oppression of the most marginalized. As Haraway writes, “painful fragmentation among feminists

(not to mention among women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of woman elusive, an excuse for the matrix of women's dominations of each other" (296). Butler has argued this, as well, writing that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (308). "Am I a Girl?" is less about Poppy's gender and more about exposing gender as a tool of capitalist heteropatriarchy's "regulatory regime."

This examination of gender as a hegemonic tool of capitalist heteropatriarchy is directly explored in a number of songs from the album. By exploring the tensions present within these areas, Poppy reveals at once the liberating and oppressive realities of life under late capitalist heteropatriarchy. She tackles some of these social structures more directly in other songs on the album. In the following section, I'll analyze songs from *Am I a Girl?* for how they take Poppy's deconstruction of gender into an intersectional analysis of class and capitalism.

2.2: Class and Capitalism

As discussed in the first chapter, critiques of consumerism have been central to Poppy's work since her early YouTube videos and single releases. *Am I a Girl?* contains several songs that encapsulate Poppy's ambivalent approach to consumerism. I explored some of these songs in the context of gender in the previous section, but here, I'd like to reveal yet another layer of meaning that complicates some of those interpretations. Specifically, I'll explore how class and capitalism, and Poppy's critiques of our consumerist culture, are present in these songs. Poppy's critiques of these issues often

mirror and intersect with her critiques of gender. Together, these consistent deconstructions of various social structures raise larger questions that help set the stage for her final deconstruction in the album's third act

“Iconic” is another of the album's self-empowerment anthems, with lyrics about finding confidence and success through fashion. The song specifically speaks to women's experiences with beauty norms, but the song also has a gay sensibility and a subtle critique of how capitalism intersects with gender norms. Like “Fashion After All” and other songs explored in the first section of this chapter, on the surface, this seems to be a song about celebrating fashion as a source of empowerment. But a closer reading reveals the song's subtext, which complicates this straightforward interpretation.

In the opening line of the chorus, Poppy sings, “You don't have to be flawless / Put on a little polish,” which seems to encourage listeners with low self-esteem to find the confidence to improve themselves despite their imperfections—an overall empowering message. This message also reveals the labor involved with appearance management and how appearance intersects with the expectations of capitalism. This interpretation is especially relevant when considering the rest of the chorus, where Poppy sings, “From the bedroom to the office / You gotta be iconic.” These lines reflect the real-life impact beauty standards have on women. In an analysis of contemporary cosmetic surgery trends, Christine Rosen reviewed a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research that found “plain people earn less than people of average looks, who earn less than the good-looking” (23). Rosen summed up the findings with the troubling observation that “in certain settings such as the corporate boardroom or Capitol Hill,

cosmetic surgery is beginning to be considered a career necessity” (29). While Poppy isn’t explicitly singing about cosmetic surgery, the focus on appearance management is the same and the commentary is just as salient—in Poppy’s own words, “if you really, really, want it ... from the bedroom, to the office, you gotta be iconic.”

The repeated line “You gotta be iconic” reads simultaneously as a motivational phrase and as a reminder of the work required of people to succeed under late capitalism. Because Poppy is not *just* singing about how empowering fashion can be, especially for LGBT people and others who may be labeled as “a weirdo” or “a freak” (as she sings on the track) for their style of dress, she’s also singing about the pressure many people feel to conform to (increasingly strict) standards of dress. For Poppy, “You gotta be iconic” means *both* “you’re free to be your flamboyant self and your uniqueness is what will lead to your success” *as well as* “you have to conform to unrealistic and unsustainable ideas of beauty in order to succeed in this world”—you *have to* be iconic. And, of course, in Poppy’s postmodernist fashion, the positive interpretation is most apparent.

On the surface, the lyrics indeed read as empowering—lines like “You feel ready for anything / Your heels are keeping you on your toes” and “Take it to the limit and then push it” certainly sound motivating, especially against the song’s glittering dance beat. There’s a subtle sense of dread lying beneath some of the lyrics that recalls Haraway’s view of gender and, specifically, the feminization of labor as a part of a cybernetic system. Particularly, when Poppy sings, “Don’t let them ever see you sweat,” she reveals how subjects living under late capitalism must conceal, in Kasier’s et al. words, the “simultaneous and contradictory emotions” we have about our circumstances, as well as

the effort we put into doing that. This is with good reason—as previously mentioned, under late capitalism, our appearance makes a significant impact on how we’re perceived and, thus, what opportunities are made available to us. These lines from “Iconic,” and Kaiser’s et al. article, reveal an interesting fact about appearance management—appearance is not *just* how you look, it’s the assumptions that are made based on how you look—including assumptions about how hard you’re trying.

As Deborah L. Rhode observed in “Appearance as a Feminist Issue,” “even as the culture expects women to conform, they often face ridicule for their efforts ... but neither should women ‘let themselves go,’ nor look as if they were trying too hard not to. Beauty must seem natural—even, or especially, when it can only be accomplished through considerable unnatural effort” (704). This adds an interesting layer of context to Poppy’s song, and to the idea of beauty as a whole. Poppy’s song—like our patriarchal culture—simultaneously celebrates physical beauty, while chastising anyone who prioritizes putting effort into their appearance.

In this way, “Iconic” is not merely a celebration of beauty nor a critique of society, it is a deconstruction of society’s views of beauty. By celebrating *everything* beauty is—an empowering tool of self-expression *and* a societal requirement to conceal our unsavory natural state—Poppy encourages us to question why and what exactly we are celebrating. Exploring this question inevitably reveals the role we all play in maintaining the oppressive sides of beauty. Whether one uses beauty as a tool for personal empowerment, calls someone “a weirdo” or “a freak” for not subscribing to their idea of beauty, or judges others for celebrating what they view as a tool of oppression (as

some feminists do), we are all buying into the notion that how someone looks—how we look—says something about who we are.

In actuality, beauty is a little bit of *all* these perspectives, and whatever perspective we take—even if we challenge the idea of beauty as something worth striving for—we are still influenced by the other perspectives, as well. As Rhode writes, “Choices are never wholly ‘free’ or solely ‘personal.’ Cultural practices inevitably shape individuals’ preferences, and their individual responses in turn help sustain or alter those practices” (708). This is certainly a deconstructive notion—ideals of beauty are mutually constitutive—and it illustrates not just the bleak realities that belie Poppy’s celebration of fashion, but also the hopeful undercurrent of that cynical perspective. Even subversive and empowering perspectives on beauty are influenced by dominant ideals, but that doesn’t mean we’re trapped within this system, it means we’re playing a role in changing it. In this way, it seems the truly empowering aspect of beauty is not beauty in itself—which is what the dominant culture privileges—but the ability to choose what we do with the ideals enforced upon us.

This idea was first explored by Poppy in “Fashion After All,” but here Poppy suggests where the dominant norms and pressure to conform might come from. She gives a more direct answer on the album’s opening track. “In a Minute” is at once a celebration of capitalist amusements and a condemnation of capitalism as a tool of oppression. This ambivalent, ambiguous perspective is seen throughout Poppy’s work and throughout the album. Though the track’s cynical spirit isn’t immediately apparent, that subtle, yet

digging, critique is a key part of Poppy's deconstructive style. As the opening track, "In a Minute" sets the tone of the rest of the album.

With lyrics about putting on makeup, getting manicures, and making money, this song is easy to dismiss as a mindless pop song. The song, and its themes, actually play a key role in setting up the album's narrative, Poppy's mythology, and the satirical tone of the record. On a close listen, it's apparent that the irony and social commentary that are present in Poppy's YouTube videos are present in this song as well. You don't even have to listen *that* closely, you just have to pay attention to the lyrics—the opening lines of the song (which are also the first lines of the chorus) are, "I'll make up my face in a minute / I'll reform this state in a minute." With the second line alone, Poppy is subverting the expectations of a typical pop record. While the line could be understood as Poppy referring to transforming the state of her appearance, it also suggests political reform. The tension between mindless consumption and political action is a key element of Poppy's deconstruction, and it's illustrated perfectly through a close reading of this song.

On the surface, "In a Minute" is a personal empowerment anthem about making money and rewarding yourself for hard work by getting your nails done—the last two lines of the chorus are, "Cash my check, got paid, yeah, I did it / I haven't done my nails in a minute." After singing the chorus twice in the opening portion of the song, Poppy launches into the first verse, which begins with the twice-repeated line, "I am busy and important." This line could be seen as a self-celebratory statement, or even a taunt aimed at the listener. Altogether, the chorus and the first verse of the song paint a picture of Poppy as an empowered woman. She is so busy, she hasn't had time to do her nails; she's

so important, she could reform the state if she wanted to. As the previous section illustrated, there is often more to Poppy's work than what's on the surface. Indeed, these lyrics can be read as tongue-in-cheek and satirical. When analyzed from a critical lens, they actually make reference to radical ideologies that don't totally align with the glossy pop sheen of the song's instrumental.

Though at first listen, the song seems to be about Poppy celebrating the work she's done and bragging about her power and influence, it also paints a bleak picture of modern life in late capitalism, especially in the context of the expectations for women under capitalist heteropatriarchy. The first verse of the song ends with Poppy reflecting, "I used to be free-wheeling / Now I've got work to do." What seemed to be a taunt to the listener just a few lines earlier now seems like the exasperated resignation of an exploited member of the proletariat. This interpretation is given even more credence when analyzing the chorus from another lens.

As usual, ambiguity is an important part of understanding Poppy's message, and the meaning of this track is complicated largely due to multiple interpretations of the phrase "in a minute." On one hand, Poppy could be saying she's so powerful and important that she can do a number of things, from minor to large-scale, in a short amount of time. In this case, the final line of the chorus suggests she hasn't done her nails because she's spent that time doing these more important things—or perhaps because she's risen to a level of privilege that allows her to reject expectations that less privileged women have no choice but to obey. On the other hand, she could be saying that she's putting off routine tasks, like her everyday makeup routine, and longer-term goals, like

fighting for social justice, because focusing on those things has kept her from being able to take time to treat herself to a manicure. In both cases, it's interesting that she equates things like makeup and manicures to social reform. Even the lyrics about doing her makeup and getting her nails done have layers of social commentary.

Like previously discussed tracks, "In a Minute" seems to invite the listener to view Poppy as an empowered woman, working in the world and treating herself to fun and glamorous pastimes. Underneath that surface-level celebration is an awareness of the work that's required of women to maintain standards of femininity—especially for "busy and important" business women who sometimes have higher standards placed on their appearance due to workplace dress codes. This understanding makes the equivalences Poppy makes in the chorus all the more interesting. In mentioning makeup, manicures, social justice and production ("cash my check, got paid, yeah, I did it") in the same breath, Poppy isn't just saying she's equally capable of doing all these various things, she is acknowledging that all of them are work. When Poppy sings "I haven't done my nails in a minute," it implies that she's putting off the other tasks she's mentioned to finally take time to do her nails. Even this time to herself is a form of work and plays a role in maintaining the very system that monopolizes her personal time, and she knows this. As Haraway writes:

Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and

off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (304)

With “In a Minute,” Poppy is providing the soundtrack to this feminization of labor—revealing work and leisure to both be a part of a cybernetic system created to reinforce late capitalist standards of labor.

In this way, the entire chorus is an ambiguous exploration of the concepts of work and leisure. Adorno and Horkheimer write, “Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again” (2). From this interpretation, Poppy is singing about beauty and self-care as elements of life under late capitalism, not just as realities of the system but as things that reinforce it. There are lyrics that suggest other forms of Marxist thought throughout the song. In the second half of the first verse, Poppy asks, “Are you feeling like I’m feeling?” which could be seen as an expression of alienation. This line comes after the opening, “I am busy and important...” and just before Poppy admits that she “used to be free wheeling.”

Together, these lines suggest that Poppy used to be carefree, but now that she’s become “important,” she’s so busy she not only doesn’t have time to do her nails, but doesn’t know how other working people feel. Not only is she alienated in the traditional Marxist sense—being disconnected from the product of her labor—but she’s alienated from her fellow workers. This also provides the first glimpse into the cracks of Poppy’s android persona. Considered alongside the song’s comment on female gender

expectations, it's also Poppy's first comment on the objectification of women. As Haraway observes:

Labour is the humanizing activity that makes man; labour is an ontological category permitting the knowledge of a subject, and so the knowledge of subjugation and alienation... However, a woman is not simply alienated from her product, but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject, since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation. To be constituted by another's desire is not the same thing as to be alienated in the violent separation of the labourer from his product. (298)

This interpretation of the closing lines of the first verse recontextualize the opening line and make it sound more like an unfulfilled worker trying to convince themselves of their value, as their job leads them to feel exhausted and alienated, and the expectations of their gender turn them into an object for another's consumption.

This is especially true if the line is seen as coming from someone who *doesn't* hold a lot of systematic power under late capitalism—the working-class person must convince themselves they are an important member of the upper crust in order for their work to feel worth the effort. Yet, when viewed as coming from someone who *is* “important” by capitalist standards, another interesting interpretation is revealed—instead of being about an exploited worker trying to convince themselves they have more power and agency than they actually do, it becomes a story of a woman whose power and influence is unfulfilling and results in her objectification, at the sacrifice of her leisure time. Whether this sacrifice is due to the fact that she's unable to participate in the leisure

activity of getting a manicure, or because even her leisure time plays a role in maintaining her privileged economic status, the message is still the same—Poppy is too “busy and important” to feel a true sense of leisure or connection.

Not only does “In a Minute” reveal the labor involved with maintaining a feminine appearance, but the mechanical way she sings about her experiences reveals another radical idea about gender. Not only does her equation of appearance maintenance, work, and social reform suggest that they are all forms of labor, it also suggests that they are all simply a series of repeated actions with no intrinsic meaning or purpose. This, of course, calls to mind Butler’s interpretation of gender as performance: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble*, 45). This mirrors Haraway’s “high-tech view of the body as a biotic component of cybernetic communications system” and “utility-maximizing machine” (306), which itself connects to the android adventure Poppy embarks on with “In a Minute.”

Whether it’s due to compulsory gender performance or the increasingly draconian expectations of labor under late capitalism, with “In a Minute,” Poppy not only positions herself as a cyborg subject, but reveals how this strict set of expectations “makes us all simulacra of ourselves” (Davis). In Haraway’s words, “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (294). “In a Minute” is just one example of how Poppy explores these ideas on the album. These questions and tensions are explored

in various ways throughout the album. Most relevant to the present discussion of class is a song from the album's middle section, "Aristocrat."

"Aristocrat" expands on the album's previous explorations of fashion as a tool of identity construction and meaning-making. Where songs like "Iconic" and "In a Minute" explore the tensions between fashion as a set of restrictive norms and as a liberatory tool of self-expression, "Aristocrat" delves more deeply into the implications of fashion and appearance in the context of class. The song tells the story of an uninvited guest from the lower class who sneaks into a high-class party. This song has an interesting and meta place in Poppy lore, as the song is based on the purportedly real-life story of the *real* Poppy (as opposed to the singer's android persona) sneaking into a Hollywood party before she was famous.²⁸ The song tells a fictionalized version of Poppy's experience in the context of real historic events, which add even more cultural context and reveal the next layer in the album's narrative.

The party the narrator of "Aristocrat" attends takes place "in the palace of Versailles, before the fall," a reference to the French revolution. The song also serves to further deconstruct the concepts of identity performance explored in the first section. On the track, Poppy sings that the high class guests of the party "never figured out that I got here from the ghetto" because, as she sings in the chorus, "I dance like an aristocrat." Poppy, a member of the lower class, quite literally *performs* in a manner that allows her to gain acceptance in a privileged space. Of course, this "dance" doesn't just refer to the baroque dances Poppy may have performed at the party in the song's narrative (in the

song's bridge, she name-drops three baroque dances—courante, bourrée, and allemande), but to the “dance” of identity performance.

Psychologist Kenneth Gergen has argued that social norms like “knowledge, reason, emotion and morality” are socially constructed via relationships (“Social Construction” 109), and that “playing by the rules of a given community is enormously important to sustaining these relationships” (“Social Construction” 110). According to Gergen, individual actions “are not thereby possessions of individuals. They are constituents of the relational dance” (“Identity Politics” 10). In the context of “Aristocrat,” that is to say—it doesn't matter as much whether or not Poppy is actually a member of the upper class. Instead, what matters—to Poppy, as the narrator of “Aristocrat,” as well as to anyone else trying to make their way up the socioeconomic ladder—is that they perform the right moves in this “relational dance.”

“Aristocrat” is not just an ode to passing as a higher socioeconomic class—it furthers the album's deconstructive mission not only by illustrating the performative nature of identity as it pertains to class, but by, in all its implications, calling into question the role social systems play in shaping our daily lives. As Gergen writes, “the realities, rationalities and values created within any social enclave have socio-political ramifications . . . Those who fail to share the local realities and values are thus viewed as misled, ignorant, immoral, and possibly evil” (“Social Construction” 112). This further illustrates how Poppy's participation in the social enclave of the aristocracy—and the listener's similar escape into a sonic world divorced from the “local realities” of their current moment—serve to reinforce ideals that maintain her subordinate socioeconomic

position. In Gergen's words, "to accept the paradigm . . . is deeply injurious to those people classified as inferior by its standards" ("Social Construction" 112). Poppy is only able to mingle with the upper crust so long as she can keep up her "dance," and every move she makes only reinforces the fact that Poppy—sans her aristocratic costume—doesn't belong at the party.

The party, of course, does not just refer to the literal party, nor the social group who attends; rather, the extravagant party represents the privilege that allows for such excess—privilege the people outside the palace (people more like Poppy, perhaps more like the listener) don't have. And so "Aristocrat" is not a celebration of the party and its attendees, nor an expression of envy of the privilege they have, neither a complete condemnation of complicity. Like "In a Minute" and "Iconic" played with tensions of restriction and self-expression in the realm of fashion, and "Chic Chick" celebrated Poppy's ability to take on patriarchal positions of power without celebrating their hegemonic aspects, "Aristocrat" is at once a resigned acceptance of the social norms working class people have to adhere to in order to move up the socioeconomic ladder, as well as a critique of those norms. It's a consciousness-raising moment, as Poppy begins to realize how her participation in these spaces reinforces her own oppression—it's a more direct acknowledgement of her role in the "regulatory regime" of identity; an understanding of herself as a cog in a cybernetic system.

This is significant context not only to appreciate this song, but to understand the narrative of the album. As a tale of the destruction caused by capitalism, this song represents an important turning point in the album. No longer is Poppy singing about

fashion and decadence over dance beats, she's starting to explicitly reference the darker sides of decadence, against increasingly ominous soundscapes.

While the songs in this section explore the album's darker themes more directly, the songs are still dance-floor ready ("Time Is Up" was produced by celebrity DJ Diplo) and at times playful. Poppy is still playing with the ambiguities she introduced in the first section, but the contrast is slightly starker. This could represent the cracks starting to show—cracks in Poppy's android persona (as she begins referencing her real life in her music), in cyborg-Poppy's functioning as she begins gaining self-awareness (as she did in "Hard Feelings"), as well as the cracks in the fantasy of endless extravagance under late capitalism.

"Aristocrat" reveals all this and more, while also acting as the last stand of the decadent bourgeois attitude Poppy showcased in the first half of the album. Produced by superstar producer Fernando Garibay (known for his work with Lady Gaga), "Aristocrat" is a danceable pop track reminiscent of Ace of Bass and Madonna. With the lyrical references to the French revolution, the cracks in Poppy's shiny exterior reveal a layer of darkness. It's summed up perfectly by a lyric from the second verse, in which Poppy describes attending this party alongside "Marie" (a reference to Marie Antoinette, the last queen of France before the revolution) "dressed head to toe in diamonds / with an orchestra to drown out all the violence." This line reveals the party to be not a celebration of indulgence, but an escape from the increasing levels of inequality and discontent. The partygoers aren't oblivious—they are actively doing all they can to drown out the sounds of violence outside, violence caused by their lavish lifestyle.

This interpretation challenges Poppy's own work, as a pop star producing seemingly mindless pop tracks during tumultuous political times—the year *Am I a Girl?* was released, the United States faced multiple government shutdowns, mass shootings, deportations and separations of immigrant families, and an increasing political divide.²⁹ This itself is a deconstructive notion, in how it complicates both the listener's relationship to the album, as well as Poppy's own participation in creating (somewhat) escapist musical fare during times of political unrest. Both the listener and Poppy are implicated in amplifying the orchestra that drowns out the violence that exists outside Poppy's sonic palace.

While earlier songs subtly hinted at this with lyrics that reference the darker side of Poppy's personal success within these systems, with "Aristocrat," the celebratory tone that comprised songs like "Fashion After All" is gone. "Aristocrat" takes place at a party, and yet it's a sign that the party is over. No longer can Poppy celebrate her individual success; she must acknowledge the violence being perpetuated by her existence within these spaces. This is, in Haraway's words, a "liminal transformation" (313) that marks Poppy's shift from a controlled android, a mindless cog in the machine, to a cyborg subject aware of their circumstance. While previous songs hinted at the destructive undercurrent of the systems she found her power within, Poppy ultimately swept those under the rug, hid them behind her dance beats; kept her discontent encased in her shiny exterior.

"Aristocrat" signals Poppy's realization not that the destruction and violence is coming to a head—but that they have, all along, been a part of these spaces she longed to

succeed within. It's a kind of loss of innocence in this way, which is something Haraway explores in her analysis of cyborg ontology: "This is not just literary deconstruction, but liminal transformation. Every story that begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness imagines the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation; that is, war, tempered by imaginary respite in the bosom of the Other" (313). Whereas Poppy sought this "imaginary respite" in the beginning of the album, with "Aristocrat," the illusion of respite is slowly being shattered.

Yet the tone of the song is not necessarily pessimistic. In the bridge of the song, Poppy chants, "Out of the fire," suggesting a rise from the ashes of the coming revolution. In losing her innocence, in shattering the illusion of security offered by these privileged spaces, Poppy discovers the power of her marginalized identity, which had been lost to the "dance" of socioeconomic growth. As Haraway writes:

With no available original dream of a common language or original symbiosis promising protection from hostile 'masculine' separation, but written into the play of a text that has no finally privileged reading or salvation history, to recognize 'oneself' as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identification, vanguard parties, purity and mothering. Stripped of identity, the bastard race teaches about the power of the margins... (312)

Haraway notes that "cyborg writing must not be about the Fall" (311). Despite situating the narrative of "Aristocrat" in a time "before the fall," Poppy's narrative is not necessarily about a fall from innocence; it's an acknowledgement that such innocence

was an illusion. While this is, indeed, a fall of sorts, it still reflects Haraway's description of cyborg writing: "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (311). Thus far, *Am I a Girl?* has been about the seizing of tools—including fashion and the cultural norms of the upper class. It's not a simple celebration of the world, it's a testament to Poppy's ability to survive within it. This has additional implications for Poppy's music and its deconstructions, which I will discuss in the following section.

2.3: Humanity and Metaphysics

In the previous sections, I've explored Poppy's music for the ideas it expresses about gender, and how gender intersects with capitalism. In this section, I will unpack some deeper questions about humanity that Poppy raises on *Am I a Girl?* Though these ideas are broader and more ambitious, they build upon the album's previous ideas, including Butler and Haraway's ideas about identity.

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the first song from the album's middle section, "Time Is Up." This dance track takes on a number of contemporary issues—including artificial intelligence and climate change—in a way that's more metaphysical than moralizing. Though it appears in the middle of the album, the song's narrative goes back to the beginning, telling Poppy's origin story in the first person—"In the factory / In the sterile place where they made me / I woke up alone," she sings in the opening lines. What's interesting about this origin story is that it's almost the *lack* of an origin story. While we get the information that Poppy was created in a lab, that type of synthetic

genesis precludes any history beyond that. As Sarup writes, with deconstruction, “there is an abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a fixed subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin” (53). This also mirrors Haraway’s idea of cyborgs as having “no origin story in the Western sense” (292). So Poppy’s origin being an almost *lack* of origin, alongside the album’s other explorations of gender and identity, together suggest that Poppy is not a singular subject—human or otherwise—and is instead an icon of deconstruction, a cybernetic subject.

Told through the lens of Poppy’s humanoid persona, the narrative of “Time Is Up” raises what is arguably the central question of the album: the question that belies all of Poppy’s explorations of gender—what is a human, and what will be made of us when we are gone? In addition to the opening verse describing Poppy’s genesis, the chorus and overall theme of the song—that technology and artificial intelligence will outlast humans and what we understand to be nature—serve to expand upon this existential question. On the chorus, Poppy sings, “I don’t need air to breathe when you kill the bees / And every riverbed is dry as a bone / I will still survive when the plants have died / And the atmosphere is just a big hole / Baby, your time is up.” In the context of Poppy’s universe, and in Poppy’s own words, this is a fairly straightforward narrative “about AI taking over” (“Verified”). Given the mythology of Poppy herself being some form of robot, Poppy is partially singing about herself outliving the listener. In an interview about the song, with lyric interpretation website Genius, Poppy herself said, “When the humans are dead, I will still survive” (“Verified”).

Despite the song's focus on a robot apocalypse, "Time Is Up," is at its heart, a song about death—more specifically, about outlasting death. Of course, the dominant interpretation is that AI will outlive humans, but that's not the only way to interpret the song. Similar to readings of previous songs, the less obvious, more human, interpretation is the more interesting one, even when situated within Poppy's sci-fi lore. As I previously discussed, this entire middle section of the album is devoted to exposing the cracks in Poppy's android persona. While, on the surface, this song makes explicit reference to Poppy's synthetic construction in a sterile factory, what's interesting is that Poppy never explicitly refers to herself as a robot nor distinguishes herself from humans. In fact, she even expresses uncertainty at her situation, singing, "Have I been wiped again? ... It's a mystery . . . Is this my home?"

The only thing Poppy *is* certain about is the fact that she will survive the destruction of the planet—in the song itself, she does not attribute this to the fact that she is AI. It is heavily suggested—through the references to the factory she was created in, her growing "memory" and being "wiped." Just as the glossy pop sheen of the songs in the first part of the album disguised darker undertones, the heavy references to technology in "Time Is Up" conceal a more human interpretation. In fact, I would argue, that the references in this song, the opening to the middle section telling the story of Poppy gaining sentience, are intentionally heavy-handed so that it might reveal the constructed nature of this narrative³⁰—and of mainstream narratives about humanity.

In this section of the album, the cracks in Poppy's identity as a robot started to show. "Time Is Up" opens the section with an attempt to assert her robot identity, with

Poppy bragging about her ability to outlive humans as an android robot. When you look through the cracks, past the monochrome exterior of Poppy's mythology, you see a human grappling with their own mortality; and catch a glimpse of the resilient human spirit, the "psychic excess" that exists inside a cyborg subject—which may very well outlive the planet's destruction.

While Poppy's android persona is thrilling in itself, it's most intriguing when analyzed for what it reveals about the human experience. This mirrors Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto." Neither Poppy nor Haraway's work is just about literal half-human half-machine robots, but about the blurring of lines and deconstructing of binaries and the implications this has for humanity. As Haraway writes, "Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally-designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines" (293-4). With "Time Is Up," Poppy is doing her part to blur the lines between organism and machine, mind and body, and natural and artificial. Rather than telling a genesis story meant to be taken at face value for the sake of developing Poppy lore, "Time Is Up"—and the rest of the album, and the Poppy project as a whole—uses a high-concept science fiction narrative to tell a story that is deeply human, while also being the type of "cyborg writing" Haraway discusses.

"Time Is Up" is a clever revealing of Poppy's true nature, exposing her humanity through the narrative of her android genesis. Her transcendence of the material circumstances of the human condition *is* a metaphysical human experience—and this perspective mirrors Poppy's questioning of identity and is proof of her deconstructive

leanings. In fact, viewed from this metaphysical lens, “Time Is Up” reveals the existential exploration that’s hidden in the album’s questioning of gender identity. As Raymond L.

M. Lee writes:

Being a person means maintaining a particular identity, but not necessarily one bounded only by physical characteristics. These characteristics may only provide a putative identification of personhood, but are not the central source of that identification. Thus, physical breakdown at death would only suggest the unraveling of the physical components of personhood. If personhood is more than the sum of its physical parts, then physical death cannot be equivalent to the termination of being. (86)

This mirrors Butler’s analysis of the subjectivity in the realm of gender, specifically, her idea that “there is no performer prior to the performed” (*Imitation* 315). As she writes:

The denial of the priority of the subject . . . is not the denial of the subject; in fact, the refusal to conflate the subject with the psyche marks the psychic as that which exceeds the domain of the conscious subject. This psychic excess is precisely what is being systematically denied by the notion of a volitional ‘subject’ who elects at will which gender and/or sexuality to be at any given time and place.” (*Imitation* 315)

These interpretations mirror posthumanist perspectives. In addition to Haraway’s cyborg with no origin story, Braidotti’s nomadic subject also has a lack of naturalized identity:

In nomadic thought, a radically immanent intensive body is an assemblage of forces, or flows, intensities and passions that solidify in space, and consolidate in

time, within the singular configuration commonly known as an ‘individual’ self. This intensive and dynamic entity does not coincide with the enumeration of inner rationalist laws, nor is it merely the unfolding of genetic data and information. It is rather a portion of forces that is stable enough to sustain and to undergo constant, though non-destructive, fluxes of transformation. (201)

From this perspective, “Time Is Up” is not a song about the rise of AI or the apocalypse—it’s a song about the afterlife; about the “psychic excess,” the “personhood” that remains after physical death. When Poppy sings “Baby, your time is up,” she’s speaking to humans not as a robot who has gained sentience, but as a cyborg subject who understands life to be more than the current tragic circumstance of impending climate catastrophe.

This understanding is at odds with a world that sees death and the destruction of earth as an end; for Poppy, it is just the beginning. This questioning of the nature of life, death and humanity is inherently deconstructive in how it challenges traditional understandings of these concepts. It also reflects Haraway’s ideas of the cyborg subject: “In the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history.” (297-8). “Time Is Up” is not just the soundtrack to a robot apocalypse, it signals the start of something new.

This rapturous reading is also reflected in the song’s refrain. Once again, the simple phrases in Poppy’s lyrics are utilized in a way that exposes their multiple meanings. While the phrase “Time Is Up,” in the context of the robot apocalypse

narrative, suggests that humans' time on earth is reaching its end, when interpreting "Time Is Up" as a questioning of the nature of life and death, "time" itself becomes an unnecessary—even illogical—concept. The narrator of "Time Is Up" sees signs of destruction in the world they live in but is confident they will survive. Something that could survive when "the atmosphere is just a big hole," as Poppy sings on the track, would challenge all our current understandings of life and death and time. So in addition to time being up for the lesser beings—whether they be fellow humans, or mere humans—in "Time Is Up," Poppy is also asserting that "baby, your [concept of] time is up":

In postmodernism, it is the spatialization of time that leads to a kind of space/time compression, for which there is no clear sense of boundaries to demarcate the movement of time. This does not imply that time has been obliterated, but that we seem to live in an 'eternal present' marked by ephemerality, speed, and volatility. There is an exaggerated sense of mobility, in which being here and there has more to do with the lack of a center than with the clock ticking away. (Lee 187)

Deconstruction, of course, is itself about the lack of a fixed center; Haraway's concept of the cyborg subject heralds an existence without origin. "Time Is Up"—with its origin story that lacks a true history, and an assertion of a future that exists beyond current understandings of time, space, life and death—does the work of ensuring Poppy's story has no beginning or end and—thus—no center; but an eternal presence that will "survive when the plants have died and the atmosphere is just a big hole."

Just as the fashion pop songs in the first section of the album had darker undertones, “Time Is Up” is not (just) a depressing song about the demise of humans in the face of climate change; it is an ode to the souls that will survive. It’s the light at the end of the tunnel; and the horrifying, yet hopeful, awareness that things getting worse means they are getting better. This perspective challenges the binaries of dark/light and life/death, and it’s what makes *Am I a Girl?* a deconstructive effort, a cyborg text—and it’s taken to its extreme in the final section of the album.

“Play Destroy” is the second song of the album’s final section, following the title track. The song acts as the album’s mission statement in many ways, with lyrics that reflect Poppy’s desire for destruction, and a sonic composition that violates all expectations and conventions of genre. Together, these features not only serve to deconstruct the things Poppy sings about in this song, but further complicate the album’s earlier tracks, as well. “Play Destroy” tackles many of the themes explored throughout the album—most notably gender and capitalism—in a more direct manner than in the album’s earlier sections, but she still plays with the tension of binaries, as well—even incorporating sonic tensions, with instrumentation that swerves violently from screeching heavy metal guitars to sugary pop beats.

The song’s binary-breaking expedition is apparent from its earliest moments, and it signals Poppy’s new perspective. Opening with a playful giggle before building up to a distorted heavy metal guitar riff, it becomes immediately clear that the last half of the album will reframe the sugar-coated messaging of the album’s first half. After a brief guitar solo, the chorus of the song begins: “This is how we play destroy / Gonna cut your

face and break your favorite toy / Drop a match in the gas tank / Blow up your neighbor's pool / Oh boy, I love to play destroy." Despite containing such violent and destructive lyrics, this portion of the song is sung in a childish, singsong melody over acoustic pop guitars. This contrast between form and content already subverts genre expectations and serves to reframe the straightforward pop moments from earlier in the album. No longer is Poppy weaving dark undertones throughout danceable pop productions; now, the dark imagery is on the surface, despite the pop sheen that still shines on the song's darkest parts.

Even the track's more straightforwardly dark moments help to reinforce the dark undertones of previous tracks, while playing a role in deconstructing the binaries they explored. In the second chorus, Poppy makes reference to the gender binary, going as far as to call it manipulation and indoctrination, while also calling for the destruction of major corporations: "This is how we play, this is how we play destroy / Manipulate the girls, indoctrinate the boys / Burn down the local Wal-Mart, Monsanto, Raytheon / Oh, boy, I love to play destroy." In the context of the album's narrative, this could be interpreted as Poppy's realization of the horrors of the world. Side by side, these lines also suggest, like "In a Minute" and "Iconic", that destructive gender norms and giant corporations are connected.

Throughout the album, Poppy goes from celebrating her success within capitalist heteropatriarchy ("Fashion After All," "Iconic," "Chic Chick," "In a Minute"), to questioning the structures she participates in ("Aristocrat"), as well as her own identity and origin ("Hard Feelings," "Time Is Up," "Am I a Girl?"). In this final section of the

album, she has finally accepted the reality of her circumstance. After her initial consciousness-raising moment in “Aristocrat,” Poppy now calls for the destruction of the systems she once participated in and seemed to celebrate. Like “Aristocrat,” this reflects Poppy’s final acknowledgement of her lack of (not loss of) innocence, of her cyborg existence. In Haraway’s words:

Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. (319)

“Play Destroy” makes clear that Poppy’s irony and ambiguity are not steps on a path towards clarity; rather, her endless exploration of these tensions is the end. She is, in Haraway’s words, “a man in space” (292), a cyborg subject.

While I previously argued for more human interpretations of Poppy songs, Poppy’s humanity is not a stable state. Rather, her humanity and her awareness of it challenge her android persona; her robot mythology challenges her human identity. Thus, the narrative of *Am I a Girl?* leads not to a final answer to the question of Poppy’s identity, it reveals that there is no answer. There is simply “an endless play of signifiers” (Sarup 44), to use the language of deconstruction, or, in Haraway’s words, “an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction” (316). With “Play Destroy” and *Am I a Girl?* Poppy is playing with these boundaries and signifiers, destroying them, deconstructing them and reconstructing them again and again to

illustrate how we all participate in this deconstruction and reconstruction; how we all “play destroy.” Thus, the destruction Poppy sings about is not just about the destruction of revolution, nor about the destruction caused by corrupt institutions, it’s also about destroying the idea that there is any innocence to return to.

This idea is further illustrated and expanded upon in the album’s final track, “X.” This song reflects the eternal nature of the “play of signifiers.” “X” is yet another song that blends heavy metal influences with sunshine pop, but the darker overtones of the song are more overt. The song opens with a heavy metal guitar stab, followed by Poppy’s high-pitched voice cheekily cooing, “Oooh, heavy!” The guitar crescendos before fading into a lighthearted sunshine pop instrumental, featuring tambourines and acoustic guitars, over which Poppy sweetly sings, “I wanna love everyone / Empty every bullet out of every gun / Please take me back to where we began.” The chorus immediately follows with more shocking electric guitar riffs and Poppy chanting, “Get me, get me bloody, please, get me bloody.” This is a notable shift from the structure of “Play Destroy.” Where “Play Destroy” contrasted form and content within each verse, pairing violent lyrics with singsong melodies, “X” matches form and content within each part of the song—the violent lyrics are paired with noisy guitars and the song’s sweeter lyrics are accompanied by upbeat instrumentals—yet these parts of the songs contrast starkly with each other.³¹

This is Poppy’s ultimate sonic deconstruction and a true embrace of her lack of innocence. By refusing to follow the listener’s expectations, Poppy pushes us to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Not only does “X” ask the listener to become

comfortable with the blurring of genre lines, but given how Poppy plays with the tensions of binaries throughout the album, “X” is about becoming comfortable without other unresolved binaries. According to Haraway, this is what makes a cyborg text:

. . . a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. (295)

With “X” and *Am I a Girl?* as a whole, Poppy is showing us the world “from both perspectives at once”—the light and the dark—and she celebrates and condemns them both—all while refusing to resolve the resulting tensions and contradictions.

This theme is a key part of deconstruction, as well. Sarup summarized Derrida’s understanding of language as “an endless play of signifiers” (44). Though this “play” is perpetual, it’s not necessarily pointless. As Gergen writes: “constructionism harbors enormous implicative potential for our cultural forms of life. In the exploration of this potential, constructionist inquiry moves from a symbiotic to a productive posture—from deconstruction to reconstruction” (“Identity Politics” 6-7). From this view, “X,” and *Am I a Girl?*, aren’t just celebrations of destruction. Just as her celebrations of hegemonic social structures served to challenge them, Poppy’s drive for destruction also signals a drive to create something new.

Even as she sings about a longing to return “back to where we began,” that beginning is not the harmonious unity that the song’s sunshine pop instrumental suggests.

Rather, the beginning Poppy longs to go back to is the moment of creation—the creation that comes from chaos. Haraway says that “cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (312). Through the “noise” of the distorted heavy metal guitars, and the stark contrast of pop and rock that makes up songs like “X” and “Play Destroy”—as well as the contrast between dark lyrical themes and bubbly pop dance beats that made up the songs on the earlier parts of the album—Poppy creates a number of “illegitimate fusions.”

These fusions are Poppy, as Haraway put it, “imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end” (292). This has many implications for gender and the other concepts Poppy explores throughout the album, and it mirrors Haraway’s cyborg ontology, as well as the work of other scholars and theorists. Most interesting are the connections between the chaotic, angry energy and binary-breaking imagery of “X,” and the transgender rage Susan Stryker describes in her analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In her piece, Stryker draws parallels between her experience as a queer transgender woman and the journey Dr. Frankenstein’s monster embarks on in Shelley’s novel. These experiences—of exile, of anger, of existing as an unnatural monstrosity—mirror the narrative of *Am I a Girl?* and especially of “X.” Stryker’s challenging of the idea of a “natural” state also supports Haraway’s idea of cyborg ontology: “. . .the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both” (240-1). Not only

does this further illustrate the parallels between Poppy's narrative and the transgender experience, this idea of nature being a "lie" mirrors Haraway's idea of the cyborg: "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (293). Together, this not only reveals the constructedness of gender, but it also reveals the violent alienation that comes along with existing outside of dominant social norms. In Stryker's words:

To encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself, is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural order. Confronting the implications of this constructedness can summon up all the violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness. My transsexual body literalizes this abstract violence.
(250)

The "abstract violence" of Stryker's "transsexual body" mirrors the violence in Poppy's lyrics. Specifically, "X" expresses the "violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process." Though Poppy plays with the tensions presented by a number of different binaries throughout the album, *Am I a Girl?*, as the title suggests, is ultimately about gender. "X" is the embodiment of the anger and chaos that results from being forced into one side of a binary system of gender.

This anger—"transgender rage," as she calls it—is at the heart of Stryker's piece: "Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival" (243). As I previously

discussed, this theme of “existing in external circumstances that work against my survival” is present in much of Poppy’s work. In “X,” Poppy expresses an anger that mirrors Stryker’s rage not only in affect, but in impact. The rage Stryker speaks of, the rage Poppy sings about in “X,” is not just a helpless anger at these external circumstances; it’s an enlivening anger that motivates the subject to create change. As Stryker writes: “In birthing my rage, / My rage has rebirthed me” (248). Similarly, Poppy’s anger, and the tensions that come to a head in “X,” lead not to senseless destruction, but to creation.

This theme of perpetual play within the chaos that exists between binaries is at the heart of both deconstruction and Haraway’s cyborg ontology. As Haraway writes:

Ambivalence towards the disrupted unities mediated by high-tech culture requires not sorting consciousness into categories of ‘clear-sighted critique grounding a solid political epistemology’ versus ‘manipulated false consciousness,’ but subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game. (309)

As the final track of the album, “X” makes clear that *Am I a Girl?* seeks not to provide answers to the album’s central question, nor to resolve the contradictions Poppy reveals through her ambiguous exploration of binaries. Yet this doesn’t mean Poppy’s resigned to the current state of the world; rather, her deconstruction of these binaries allows for a self-aware exploration of the “emerging pleasures” and potential for change that remains, even in the wake of the violent destruction of “X.” When Poppy sings “Take me back to the place where we began,” this could be seen as a call to replay the album from the

beginning, with this new awareness of Poppy's message, of gender, of society—of ourselves; to revisit our own (lack of) origin; to, in Stryker's words "discover the seams and sutures in yourself" (241).

CHAPTER III:

“BACK TO THE PLACE WHERE WE BEGAN”—A CONCLUSION?

The previous chapter illustrated how Poppy’s music plays with tensions, irony, and binaries, how the narrative of *Am I a Girl?* in particular reveals the instability of identity, the destructive, constructed nature of society—and the potential that instability creates. When we go, as Poppy calls us to in “X,” “back to the place where we began,” where does this lead us? Butler, Haraway, Stryker, and Derrida all deny the existence of a pure original state to return to; they all advocate for some form of continuous exploration of the trappings of identity, without claiming any identity is complete in itself. What does this mean for this interpretation of Poppy’s work? What does this mean for our understanding of ourselves, of the world?

In her piece, Stryker expressed a desire to challenge the conventions of academia by presenting her ideas in a way that embodied the concepts she explored:

My idea was to perform self-consciously a queer gender rather than simply talk about it, thus embodying and enacting the concept simultaneously under discussion. I wanted the formal structure of the work to express a transgender aesthetic by replicating our abrupt, often jarring transitions between genders—challenging generic classification with the forms of my words just as my transsexuality challenges the conventions of legitimate gender and my performance in the conference room challenged the boundaries of acceptable academic discourse. (237)

For Stryker, this challenging of academic conventions is about more than academia—it's about challenging the conventions of the dominant culture, of the institutions that created her rage by forcing her to exist within their rigid norms for so long. While I've done my best to maintain a traditional academic tone and follow the expectations of an academic thesis throughout this article, I originally envisioned this project to help challenge some of the conventions of academia. Like Stryker, I hoped to perform queerness, the same queerness that Poppy embodies on *Am I a Girl?* It's difficult to write about ideas that challenge convention in a format that requires one to follow convention. As such, in this concluding section, I feel moved to share some of my personal experiences, with Poppy's work, as well as some of the concepts I explored in this piece.

My desire to challenge convention is part of what inspired me to write about Poppy's work for my thesis. I came to graduate school to study English with little formal education in the area. My education in public relations and journalism helped me develop writing skills, but as a former high school drop out, I had little experience reading classic works of literature that many people expect students of English to be familiar with, if not enjoy. My biggest writing inspirations often came in the form of pop music, especially pop music like Poppy's, that took influences from other genres and used them to help push pop music to new levels.

When I came to graduate school, I was supported in my desire to seriously study pop music. I discovered theorists like John Fiske and Richard Dyer who touted the significance of popular culture. Yet, I also met some challenges. During my first semester, I struggled to catch up to students who already had a clear sense of what they

wanted to do with their degree, and who already had experience with classic literature and a masterful understanding of a number of literary theories. It all made me feel like I didn't belong in academia. Once I did finally start getting a handle on theory, certain theories I was being taught in my literature classes, like Marxism, which reveals how our current capitalist system is doomed to fail, were at odds with the values that were being instilled in me in my classes for business communication, which focused on professionalization and vocational training.

Some of my graduate seminars even included readings that explored how academia has historically been influenced by and helped perpetuate some of the social systems other classes gave me the language to critique.³² This had implications for my personal life, too, as my time in graduate school marked the early days of my transition to living life as a transgender woman. I've always been influenced by feminist ideas, but everything I was learning made me even more critical of the gender norms I, at the time, aspired to conform to and succeed within. This led to something of an existential crisis, as I struggled to find my place in academia, in the world. I, like Stryker, felt like supporting systems and ideas that were harmful to my survival was necessary to survive. I felt like my life was just about playing different roles—I had to dance like an academic, to paraphrase Poppy—in order to perpetuate the illusions that kept me trapped but kept me alive. I began to feel like a cog in a machine: like a robot.

Yet, there was potential for enrichment within these struggles. It was tempting, at first, to write off academia, my professors, myself as part of the problem. At times, I had fantasies of dropping out of school and becoming a political revolutionary, as if I had any

idea what that would entail. As I made my way through graduate school and got to know my professors, my field, the world in a new way, I came to understand just how complicated these issues are. The same professors who taught me about professionalization would make comments about the pressures administration put on them; would subtly and politely express disagreement with certain policies or political ideas. The more I learned, the more clearly I could see that these roles we have to play, these systems we simultaneously perpetuate and challenge, don't make us less human; the complicated experience of navigating them is what makes us human—or perhaps, something else.

It's no wonder I instantly connected with Poppy's work when I discovered it at the end of my first year of graduate school. Here was pop music with lyrics that playfully explored the illusions of the world while exposing their falsity. In academia, in business, it felt like I was being asked to play my part in maintaining the illusion without awareness. Yet, academia seemed insistent on giving me that awareness. While this led to a period of existential anguish, it also led to a type of ascension. Once I, like Poppy, accepted the reality of my circumstance, I not only was able to find success within the fields I chose to participate in, but my existential anguish began to lift when I realized that everyone else—whether they are aware of it or not—are simply doing their best to navigate the complicated systems humans have built over centuries. Throughout our lives, we all slowly but surely become more aware of this—and in doing so we ourselves become more akin to Haraway's cyborgs—human, yes, but something more.

This awareness creates the possibility of my field becoming something more, as well. Despite the ever-changing nature of English studies (including the numerous transformations outlined in McComiskey's book), many English programs in high schools and colleges still stick to a literary canon and still prioritize grammar over creative expression when it comes to writing. As a writer, I've always been less concerned about classic literature and grammar, preferring instead to focus on expressing emotional truths. In graduate school, this made me feel like an imposter as a writer. Now that I'm finishing my Master's program, I can't help but feel like this is the wave of the future.

Haraway, Butler and Stryker all discuss the failures of language from different perspectives. From Butler's view, identity labels created by language are at best "a politically efficacious phantasm" and at worst "instruments of regulatory regimes" (308). Stryker reflects on "the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure" (241). Haraway tackles language more directly, calling "The feminist dream of a common language ... a totalizing and imperialist one" (310). Much contemporary political discourse seems to be about finding the right language to describe the ever-changing human experience, finding the words to describe ourselves and bring harmony and shared understanding to the world. During my graduate studies, that's what I was seeking, as well.

Since then, I've come to find that as a writer, as a person, as a cyborg subject, I have little interest in this. There are debates within my field—and beyond—that provide

the promise of expanding the idea of a “text,” of changing our understanding of language, of identity, as more fluid constructs that change with the times. This is exciting but it is not my work, nor is it the work of cyborgs. In Haraway’s words, “Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (312). I am no longer interested in discovering a final answer about who I am, what writing is, what the world means. I am interested in creating—myself, my writing, my world—by rejecting the idea of a final answer. This is why I, like Poppy, am a cyborg, and this perspective holds much more potential for my writing, my field and the world than any of the definitive answers from various scholars I read in grad school.

Haraway says that “Cyborg imagery . . . means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts.” (316) This is, as I’ve illustrated in my analysis, what Poppy does throughout *Am I a Girl?* and it’s what I’ve learned to do in graduate school. I wanted to come out of my program with a clear sense of who I am as a professional, as a person. In some ways, I did. That clarity comes from understanding that I am no one thing—I am not just the cog in a machine, but that is one of the roles I play; I am human, but my humanity is not often visible or welcome within certain social structures. Yet, when I recognize all my parts, including the limitations of them, as both Haraway and Poppy encourage, I don’t become less human. Instead, my human

experience becomes more complex—richer; and the possibility of reconstruction that Haraway speaks of becomes not a distant longing, but a real possibility.

I think again of Davis' profile of Poppy, which said that Poppy's YouTube videos reveal how social media—the ultimate blurring of lines between human and technology—“makes us all simulacra of ourselves.” Haraway's assertion that, to cyborg subjects, “identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic” (295) seems apt here. Yet, when we become aware of this, as Poppy does in *Am I a Girl?*, we become self-aware: cyborgs—both man and machine and, somehow, more fully human. From this perspective, we might be able to build a future based not on violent destruction, or existential deconstruction alone—but on the construction of a future that celebrates these complexities, instead of demanding a return to utopian innocence that never existed.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Moriah Pereira, the artist behind Poppy, grew up in Nashville with a musician father before moving to Los Angeles at 15 to pursue a singing career. In LA, she met collaborator Titanic Sinclair, and that's when the Poppy character was born. (Brooke)

² Hunt's article from *The Guardian* described Pinkus' journey from Poppy critic to superfan.

³ In the same article, Pinkus is quoted describing the struggle he's faced trying to introduce friends to Poppy: "I have often tried introducing Poppy to normies," says Pinkus, using the internet's derisive term for people who know nothing of its ways and memes, "but they always just watch a video or two and dismiss her as a dumb pop star, or some hipster with high production values." (Hunt)

⁴ This controversial video featured the YouTube star visiting the Aokigahara forest, infamously known as "suicide forest," where he encountered and filmed a dead body hanging from a tree. See Lorenz for a description of the video and aftermath.

⁵ Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* is a study of mass culture in the UK and is seen as a foundational cultural studies text. John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* and *Reading the Popular* applied this type of analysis to American popular culture.

⁶ Fiske's chapter on Madonna in *Reading the Popular* is notable, as this book is often considered one of the earliest examples of contemporary cultural studies. This work is significant in that it positions Madonna's young female fans as thoughtful consumers of her music, rather than "culture dopes" who had been manipulated into buying her records. While this reading of pop music fans as intelligent consumers seems to conflict

with Poppy's critical view of consumer culture, it also makes the case for the serious study of music that's often dismissed as a purely manufactured capitalist enterprise, as Poppy's sometimes is.

⁷ Numerous essays and books focus solely on analyses of Gaga's work. Most notably, Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* has become something of a standard text for the study of pop music. Halberstam calls Gaga's unique blend of post-feminist camp its own form of contemporary feminism that has influenced pop culture in its own way—similar to points Fiske made about Madonna in *Reading the Popular*.

⁸ Beyoncé is one of the internet's favorite pop culture figures to analyze, and scholars have taken notice, as well—one professor even offered a class on Beyoncé and the numerous cultural and historical references found throughout her recent work *Lemonade* (Rascoe).

⁹ Griffith's study of female pop singer's work and its effect on young girls critiques the increased sexualization of tween-targeted music, while also exploring how societal messages cause shame in young women's expressions of their emotions and sexuality, which mirror those found in the pop music they consume.

¹⁰ This quote is from Davis' *New York* magazine article about the tension between Poppy's social commentary and quest for mainstream fame.

¹¹ Susan Sontag's "Notes On Camp" famously explored camp sensibility: "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (191). Richard Dyer's exploration of camp in "Culture of Queers" reveals the agency camp provides to subcultural queer communities.

¹² The debate of the subversive potential of camp in the realm of drag performances is one example where this debate takes place in interesting ways. Chatzipapatheodoridi defended drag's camp culture's subversive potential, while hooks criticized drag culture for perpetuating masculine ideas of gender and competition.

¹³ "Delete Your Facebook"

¹⁴ "What Are Shoes"

¹⁵ Studies have found that sponsored content is becoming increasingly common on YouTube—and is becoming more difficult to distinguish from non-commercial content (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki).

¹⁶ Since writing this piece, Poppy has cut ties with Sinclair, citing emotional abuse and manipulation. However, Poppy maintains that she had more creative control over her past work than some fan theories gave her credit for. (Lavin)

¹⁷ Visible in Sinclair's video of the same name. (Sinclair, "I am NOT in a cult led by Poppy.")

¹⁸ Poppy herself has said in an interview, "I think we're being programmed every time we look at our phones and we take in any kind of information they show us what they want us to consume and every time you touch your phone or go on the computer you're doing what they want" ("Verified").

¹⁹ This was mentioned in Pandell's profile on Poppy for "Wired"—and mentioned by Poppy's own manager. "We have this massive range of audience, from your 9-year-old little girl who loves Hello Kitty to a 35-year-old adult who watches Comedy Central religiously," he said in the article.

²⁰ As *Billboard* magazine observed, Poppy “typically speaks in the third person and says she's from the internet” (Bein).

²¹ “What Are You Doing?”

²² Pandell, Vassar, and Davis’ profiles all include a level of analysis of Poppy’s messaging.

²³ As previously mentioned, Chatzipapathodoridi and hooks both explore how drag’s camp sensibility reveals gender to be performative, and provides a space for both subversive and hegemonic expressions of gender.

²⁴ See Horney; Kamber; and de Beauvoir.

²⁵ See Shaver et al.

²⁶ i.e. Trendell.

²⁷ “72 countries where homosexuality is illegal,” 76crimes.com

²⁸ See “Poppy Talks.”

²⁹ See Bouchard.

³⁰ This again brings to mind Sontag’s ideas about camp, which is worth noting, though outside the scope of my reading of this song.

³¹ It is worth noting, however, that the line “empty every bullet out of every gun” from the song’s pop section could be read as a call for peace (removing the bullets from the guns before they can be shot), as well as a call for violence (emptying the bullets by shooting the guns). True to form, Poppy still plays with the ambiguity of language even as she aims for a more straightforward form.

³² McComiskey's *English Studies* includes several essays that analyze how dominant social structures have intervened with English Studies; Haake's article in particular discusses how capitalist expectations have turned English classrooms into an "academic pyramid scheme."