The “Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World”
and Her “Baby Doll Lisp”
Grimes and the Disabling Logics of the Feminization and Infantilization of Lisping†

ABSTRACT Audible in speech and song, electro-pop singer Grimes’s so-called “baby doll” lisp generates endless buzz online, ranging from light-hearted adoration, to infantilization, to sexual fetish and even to ableist, misogynist anti-fandom. This article uses the reception of her lisp to build an intersectional theory of lisp ing across its medical and socio-cultural constructions, bridging work in disability studies, dysfluency studies, voice studies, and popular music studies in the process. I situate the slippage between adoring, infantilizing, fetishistic, and violent characterizations of Grimes’s lisp as reflective of the infantilization of “communicative disorders” in speech language pathology, and the dysfunction associated with feminine coded-speech patterns (e.g. vocal fry and up talk) in the popular imaginary. Lisping is profitably understood as an audible form of “liminal” difference relative to visible physical disabilities (St. Pierre), and to certain ableist, gendered, and racialized conceptions of normative vocality. Ultimately, in the English-speaking world, the lisp is symbolically-coded feminine while exceeding the norms of female vocality, thereby giving rise to a polarizing set of associations that work against female authority and, by extension in Grimes’s case, female musical authorship. Grimes’s reception thus offers a valuable case study for interrogating how misogynist fantasies regarding femininity are thought localized in the female voice, and the symbolic ties between disability and femininity.

KEYWORDS: vocality, lisping, disability, gender, sexuality, race, disability studies, dysfluency studies, voice studies

INTRODUCTION

AUDIE CORNISH: “I just wanted to follow up on something you said earlier—about your voice, and being vulnerable and just kind of ‘out there.’ In a way, do you feel like you have been both rewarded and penalized for your voice?”

GRIMES: “Yeah. I mean, I think my voice is very—it definitely bothers some people. Some people really like it. People hate my lisp. When I was in high school, I

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remember people would be, like, ‘ugh, I don’t want to talk to you. You have a lisp. It’s so annoying.’ But I don’t know. I like having a weird voice. All my favorite singers—you know, even if they’re not the best, but they have a voice that you can immediately recognize, I think that’s a really awesome trait.”

Audible in speech and song, Canadian electro-pop singer Grimes’s so-called “baby doll” lisp has generated endless buzz online: light-hearted adoration, infantilization, sexual fetish, and even ableist, misogynist anti-fandom. The slippage between these registers of her reception reflects larger anxieties surrounding the relationship between lisping, communicative normalcy, disability, and femininity in the popular imaginary. In this article, I use Grimes’s reception to build a new intersectional understanding of lisping through its medical and socio-cultural constructions and their resulting stigmas.

First, I explore how, in myriad ways, fans, critics, and detractors have perceived Grimes’s lisp to delineate the paradoxical associations that befall lisping more generally. Her lisp has been made the sonic emblem of her ostensibly cute, quirky, girlish persona, typically referenced through two popular feminine archetypes: the “manic pixie dream girl,” and the “baby doll.” Originating in Hollywood film, these tropes construct femininity via a hegemonic double-bind that equates markers of cuteness with endearment and sensuality, but also naiveté, subservience, incompetence, and other pejoratives. That reception of Grimes’s lisp, whether praise or derision, so easily maps on to this masculinist logic is indicative of the status of femininity and disability within normative speech.

Next, this article addresses the medical and socio-cultural complexities of lisping by drawing on speech language pathology, disability studies, dysfluency studies, and voice studies. I situate lisping within two interlocking discourses: the infantilization of so-called “communicative disorders” (or speech impediments) in speech language pathology, and the misconceptions associated with feminine coded-speech patterns (e.g. vocal fry and uptalk) in the popular imaginary. Extending the work of dysfluency studies scholar Joshua St. Pierre, I show that the lisp is an envoiced, audible form of liminal difference relative to more visible physical disabilities, and to certain ableist, gendered, and racialized conceptions of vocal normativity. In popular culture, the lisp is both symbolically coded feminine and also, paradoxically, dysfunctional relative to the norms of female vocality. This gives rise to a polarizing set of associations that work against female vocal authority, authorship and production expertise in Grimes’s case. Putting these elements together, in a holistic conception of voice, aligns with Katherine Meizel’s definition of a vocality that:

goes beyond qualities like timbre and practice, and encourages us to consider everything that is being vocalized—sounded and heard as vocal—and offers a way to talk about a voice beyond simply the words it imparts or its color or production techniques. Instead it encapsulates the entire experience of the speaker or singer and of the listener, all of the physiological, psychoacoustic, and socio-political dynamics that impact our perception of ourselves and each other.”

To understand the lisp in these terms, we must distinguish lisping from stuttering, too, building on work in dysfluency studies, an emerging sub-branch of disability studies that attends to the ways in which the voice has been subject to the same stigmatizing scripts as the body. Stuttering has dominated discourse on communicative disabilities in speech language pathology, dysfluency studies, and discussion of vocal disability in music scholarship, with little sustained analysis of lisping in any of these three contexts. \(^3\) This is due, I argue, to the lisp’s ambiguous social status relative to the stutter, which more readily disrupts so-called normative speech. Lisping does not impinge on communicative normalcy to the same degree and, insofar as it is associated with a passive, diminutive femininity, often seems to reflect favorably on the female speaker. Grimes’s reception offers a rich case study of how misogynist fantasies and anxieties regarding femininity become localized in female vocal production, and for further understanding the symbolic ties between femininity and disability.

INTRODUCING GRIMES

Electro-pop Grimes, singer, performer, and producer Claire Boucher, better known by her stage name Grimes, started in the Montréal electronic music scene, releasing Geidi Primes (2009) and Halfaxa (2010) with the city’s independent label, Arbutus Records. She then signed with staple British independent label 4AD for Visions (2011), remaining with them through her latest album, Art Angels (2015). \(^4\) Her music is a non-conformist pastiche she calls “avant-pop,” or “future pop” rooted in DIY principles that she explains began with “finding tapes in the garbage, and finding a tape copier in the garbage, and copying the tapes by hand.”\(^5\) Using the pop ballad as her foundation, she combines disparate, often obscure genres, including synth-pop, lo-fi, ambient, baroque pop, K-pop, witch house, punk, ambient, and R&B to create music she says aims to be “extremely gratifying; music that seeks to hit the pleasure centre.”\(^6\) Synthesizers and drum machines serve as the backdrop for her vocals, which she loops and layers, creating interlocking motifs, and dense textures drenched in reverb. These production effects can blur her already ambiguous lyrics, particularly when the principal melody resides in her highest


Holmes  |  The “Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World” and Her “Baby Doll Lisp” 133
register. That production expertise is clearest in her self-produced *Art Angels*, born of her long struggle to pry creative control of her music from male producers: “The thing that I hate about the music industry is all of a sudden it’s like, ‘Grimes is a female musician’ and ‘Grimes has a girly voice.’ It’s like, yeah, but I’m a producer and I spend all day looking at fucking graphs and EQs and doing really technical work.”

Grimes's signature vocal style is central to her aesthetic. Nasality, an extraordinary head voice, and whistle-tone that then contrast her chest voice (e.g. in the song “Crystal Ball”), and a virtuosic range of extended vocal techniques—whines, shrieks, shrill laughs, giggles, gibberish, melismas, ornamentation—bolster her eccentricity. Certain vocal components echo Japanese idol pop (J-pop) and the commodified vocal practices associated with girlhood there, as outlined by Sarah Keith and Diane Hughes. Grimes self-consciously cultivates these links, with frequent sartorial references to Japanese popular culture. Such cultural appropriation notwithstanding, Grimes's vocal prowess and production expertise work politically against the deeply ingrained masculine bias of indie and electronic music, and the paternalism governing composition, recording, and post-production. Grimes's unified authorship rebuffs the female performer/male producer archetype (Figure 1).

Grimes musical eclecticism finds a visual analogue in her idiosyncratic fashion style, album art, and music videos. This playful juxtaposition of a punky, goth defiance with a dreamy, girlish frivolity is what critic Kelefa Sanneh described as “an elaboration of goth, gutter punk, high fashion, and Japanese culture” (Figures 2 and 3). Grimes strategically uses fashion to reference the idealized cuteness and girlhood in Japanese popular culture (*Kawaii* and *Burikko*), while simultaneously celebrating the lethal power of her favorite Japanime heroines (e.g. Sailor Moon and Zelda), as in her music videos for “Genesis” (2012) and “Venus Fly” (2015). In addition, Grimes’s “necromantic charm” is evident in

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7. Grime's vocal prowess, particularly her virtuosic whistle-tone, has often been compared to that of iconic pop/R&B diva Mariah Carey. And indeed, Grimes has long cited Carey as a major inspiration and influence. See Sanneh, “Pop for Misfits,” *The New Yorker*. 


her penchant for donning plastic fangs, fake blood, hospital masks, chainmail, weapons, and “occultish homemade tattoos,” as observed by one writer. Her hand-drawn album covers mix exotic, grotesque, otherworldly symbols, and Asian lettering. (A sustained discussion of Grimes’s appropriation of Japanese and Korean popular culture is warranted, though beyond the scope of this article, and further complicated by the singer’s substantial fan base in Japan, the longstanding proliferation of Japanime within different Western markets, and its aesthetic and commercial influence on Western popular culture.)

If Grimes’s “iconography,” as she calls it, complements her aural aesthetic, her interviews and performances are also designed to subvert expectations. When fashion designer Stella McCartney suggested to Grimes in an interview for Teen Vogue that she was not “conventional” relative to mainstream beauty standards, Grimes proceeded to talk about her armpit and facial hair, her desire to be seen without make-up, and her deliberate attempts to “look like trash twenty percent of the time.” Grimes’s manner is self-effacing but self-assured: frequent references to her “introverted” disposition even as she spouts ideas in rapid succession. Pop scholars have


long seen such mannerisms as part of indie musicians’ differentiation from mainstream popular culture." Still, Grimes adopts these tactics to both unsettle the heteronormative masculinity

of indie musical authorship and cannily embrace mainstream pop culture, defying generic allegiance to indie in the process (Figures 2 and 3).

Positioning herself as an unlikely diva who makes “pop for misfits,” Grimes cultivates a persuasive continuity across all dimensions of her aesthetic. She has said of her artistic persona:

Grimes is ultimately a pop project . . . I engineered a pop star, if that makes sense . . . I directed all the videos, and did all the album art, and wrote all the songs, and produced all the songs. I created a company, a brand, which is Grimes, which is my life . . . [T]here’s a degree of putting stuff on for Grimes.

Grimes is a feminine alter-ego through which Boucher realizes her boldest creative ambitions, what she has ultimately described as a type of “branding” and “fantasy.” Her fan base worships her whimsical feminine persona, transgressive ethos, and eccentric musical style: Grimes has been heralded by critics and fans as the “avant-pop pixie,” a “day-glo punk elf,” the “elfin queen of the hipsters,” the “glitch pixie,” the “quintessential manic pixie dream girl of the synth-pop world,” and “Rainbow Brite.”

**THE “MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL OF THE SYNTH-POP WORLD” AND HER “BABY DOLL LISP”**

Grimes’s lisp serves as a sonic consolidation of the cutey, quirky, girlish dimensions of her iconography. Its presumed naturalness lends authenticity to the engineered, performative dimensions of her persona. Grimes’s lisp does not influence the flow or intelligibility of her speech, but it is audible when she speaks and when she sings, and it sometimes obscures her lyrics, particularly when she treats her vocals with heavy reverb. Indeed, lisping persists in singing, unlike stuttering which almost always ceases, thereby creating an incongruity between speech and song. The involuntary continuity of Grimes’s lisp intensifies attention to her vocal difference.

Thus the integrity of Grimes’s vocality unsettles any straightforward equation of technological vocal processing with disembodiment, artificiality, and inauthenticity relative to the presumption of fidelity, embodiment, naturalness, and authenticity in acoustic voices. That is a distinction that scholars of voice, such as Norie Neumark, have long problematized: “a focus on electronic mediation can risk masking other always/

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17. Grimes in Ibid.
already present mediations, such as the way the voice is mediated culturally... culture colors the voice, contours its performative capacities, and leaves deep imprints on its character—it mediates the voice.” Neumark notes that certain recording and post-production techniques can intensify impressions of interiority, intimacy, and/or fidelity associated with any original, “unmediated” vocal performance. A marked vocal difference like Grimes’s lisp supersedes these debates if listeners perceive disability as the ultimate audible marker of authenticity. In certain genres of popular music, singers with audible vocal damage are revered for their distinct voices; some cultivate vocal damage to garner increased appeal; to Laurie Stras, damage is “linked with concepts of authority, authenticity, and integrity.”

Grimes’s lisp is susceptible to the same type of reception. Feminizing descriptions of her lisp mirror descriptions of her body. Indeed, the comments sections of Grimes’s music videos on YouTube are filled with such affectionate seeming remarks as, “Her lisp is the cutest thing!” and “Why are lisp so sweet and golden?” Popular American comedian Brandon Wardell once jokingly tweeted, “I love how u can hear grimes lisp in every song this is why she’s my wife.” The lisp’s centrality was evident in the reception of Art Angels. Some critics praised the album for breaking “into the more mainstream pop and electronic genres without losing the soft lisp and dreamily layered soundscapes”; others wondered whether she had “lost her lisp,” or even complained that “the singer’s trademark baby doll lisp... ha[s] been replaced by purer vocals” as a deliberate post-production strategy. In combination with her high-pitched vocals, her lisp defines what New York Times fashion writer Laura Holson called her “ethereal, baby-doll sound.”

Often, such innocuous seeming adoration verges on fetishization. The Twittersphere is filled with commentary ranging from, “Grimes’ lisp is so damn sexy,” and “I never thought a lisp would be hot, until I saw Grimes. #whatababe,” to more overt objectification such as


22. Walz and James, “The Remarketing of Disability in Pop”; and McKay, “Vox Crippos.”


“if i could be any sound, i would be grimes’ lisp,” and “i sexually identify as grimes’ lisp.” one notably bizarre lisp-based fantasy read, “wouldn’t mind soaking in a bath tub full of grimes’ lisp.” in a piece with the memorable title, “top 8 artists who need speech therapy,” published by the celebrated online music magazine noisy, writer xavier aaronson proffered an equally sexual take on grimes’ lisp when he wrote that:

[grimes] the blipity-bloop pop siren of today, straight up slaughters the letter “s.” not just in interviews, but in song too. instead of buckling under the rumble of her “speech impediment” — which i prefer to call a “pizzazz of the mouth” — she belts it out. in her song “oblivion,” her dewy lisp is awesomely undisguised and sprinkled 23 times throughout the track. yeah . . . i counted. it’s so charmingly imperfect that it’s all i can focus on, like an adorable pet peeve.

aaronson’s need to quantify how many times grimes lisps on a single track recalls how time counted how often donna summer ostensibly simulated orgasm in her 1975 “love to love you baby,” calling it “a marathon of 22 orgasms.” aaronson goes on to call grimes and her fellow lispers musicians “who rock crowds and hump our cardboards with a spurt of their scuffed-up speech.” this further underscores the degree to which grimes’ lisp, a symbol of her feminine persona, is sexually objectified as a result.

the sexualization of grimes’ lisp can be further understood by unpacking the persistent allusion to her having a “manic pixie dream girl” persona, with its feminization of cuteness. the mpdg, as it is often referred to by film critics, is among the most recognizable and widely discussed female stock characters in contemporary films in the west. a staple of many romantic comedies, the mpdg is celebrated for her impossibly girlish looks, happy-go-lucky disposition, naive optimism, and quirky neuroses; as claire solomon notes, the mpdg is “lightly pathological, largely mythic, the character is the latest version of the eternal feminine.” like the femme-fant,” the mpdg constructs femininity as infantile, subservient, passive, and naive relative to masculine authority, as

33. the femme-fant rose to prominence during the surrealist movement, owing to the reception of lewis carroll’s alice’s adventures in wonderland (1865), and the 1891 novel la femme-enfant by catulle mendès, as well the influence of freudian psychoanalysis. among the most celebrated portrayals of the femme-fant is vladimir
discussed by Nathan Rabin when he first coined the term in a review of Kirsten Dunst’s character in *Elizabethtown* (2005):

[The Manic Pixie Dream Girl] is that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature who exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing-proposition. Audiences either want to marry her instantly . . . or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against them and their immediate family.\(^{34}\)

The MPDG’s identifiable misogynist underpinnings have left it an exhausted anti-feminist cliché: in the MPDG construct, the infantilization of femininity is bound to its sexualization. As an aural token of her cute status, Grimes’s lisp is susceptible to these same masculinist logics.

The MPDG’s association with a style of hipsterism known as “Twee” puts a finer point on the slippage between the infantilization and sexualization of Grimes’s voice. Wary of adulthood, Twee is defined by an aesthetic preoccupation with all things cute, precious, awkward, and quirky, according to critic Marc Spitz. As an aesthetic movement and lifestyle, Twee prizes gentleness, tenderness, shyness, and awkwardness, as expressed through a notably affected demeanor, and inclination toward “the cultivation of a passion project,” through “the utter dispensing with ‘cool’ as it’s conventionally known, often in favor of a kind of fetishization of the nerd, the geek, the dork, the virgin.”\(^{35}\) In light of Twee’s idealization of childhood, it is no coincidence that *lisping* is literally at the etymological root of the word “twee.” While the word is taken to mean quaint, precious, affected, and sentimental, “it is derived from the sound of a small child attempting to say the word *sweet,*” a fact accompanying most dictionary entries along with the corresponding caveat that the word is “chiefly derogatory.”\(^{36}\) While gender receives little sustained focus in Spitz’s work, Twee’s feminization of cute and infantilization of female sexuality is evident in its embrace of the MPDG as an archetypal virgin fetish.\(^{37}\) One of the most widely cited MPDGs is actress Zooey Deschanel’s character “Jess” in the sitcom *New Girl.* The giggling girl next door, Jess exhibits “an interest in sex but a wariness and shyness when it comes to the deed” (to borrow Spitz’s words) that only endears her to her entourage of male neighbors.\(^{38}\) And indeed, Spitz calls Deschanel’s real-world persona “the self-styled Queen of Twee.” MPDG and Twee thus illustrate the symbolic links between infantilization

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37. Ibid., 11. Spitz acknowledges that the MPDG is also an overwhelmingly white, racialized double-standard vis-à-vis black feminist blogger Tami Winfrey Harris’s original essay, “Who is the Black Zooey Deschanel?” See Spitz, 300–301.

38. Ibid., 12.
and sexualization in popular masculinist constructions of femininity. Other memorable epithets that pervade Grimes's reception—“elfin queen of the hipsters,” “blippity-blop siren of pop,” “day-glo punk elf,” “rainbow brite,” etc.—center on the very same phantasmic constructions of femininity.

Arguably, Grimes cultivates the aesthetic sensibilities associated with the MPDG and Twee, whether musically through her DIY values (dispensation with what is conventionally “cool”), sartorially through her youthful, imaginative flair, or in self-presentation through her avowedly awkward demeanor and confession that she is “not good at being sexual.” Grimes’s lisp, however, differs from these other facets of her image because it is assumed involuntary and natural, free from the usual posturing, branding, and performative dimensions of pop stardom, or the self-differentiation tactics characteristic of the indie sensibility. As an authentic marker of difference, it gives her MPDG status and feminine persona credibility in ways that these other seemingly mediated dimensions of her persona cannot.

Grimes has stridently objected to the simultaneously infantilizing and sexualizing logics at work in the manic pixie dream girl and similar masculinist labels. In 2013, she penned a feminist manifesto on her popular Tumblr site, Actuallygrimes, that went viral, detailing her experiences with sexism in the music industry. This began with her image. She wrote, “I don’t want to be infantilized because I refuse to be sexualized,” and “I’m tired of being referred to as ‘cute,’ as a ‘waif,’ etc., even when the author, fan, friend, family member etc. is being positive.” According to the singer, such masculinist constructions often lead to mistrust surrounding her authority as a producer, despite her credentials. For instance, in response to her critics’ tendency to attribute the success of Visions to its supposedly “lo-fi” “amateurish” sensibilities, she explained, “I don’t want to succeed on the basis of cute naivety, or endearing failure or charming lack of knowledge. I want to succeed because I’m good.”

Grimes’s stance is further evident on Art Angels, where her lyrics and visual iconography violently denounce in no uncertain terms the cultural tokens of male sexual power, such as in the songs and music videos for “Kill V. Maim” and “Venus Fly,” the latter of which threatens a male voyeur with explicit violence. In “Butterfly,” the final track on Art Angels, she sings of the transformation of an apprehensive girl who questions whether she should “take his sh*t? maybe not,” into a self-assured woman, symbolized through the “butterfly whose wings span the world.” In light of the singer’s objections to the MPDG-like epithets, “Butterfly” ends with the lyric “if you’re looking for a dream girl, I’ll never be your dream girl,” repeated over and over until the album’s close.

Grimes’s reservations about the pejorative undertones of MPDG-type designations also stem from the “all-or-nothing-proposition” that Rabin explains is the central affective dynamic of the MPDG. That is, that “audiences either want to marry her [the MPDG] instantly (e.g. Brandon Wardell’s Tweet “I love how u can hear grimes lisp in every song this is why she’s my wife”), or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against them [the MPDGs] and their immediate family.”

This paradox resonates with the polarizing logic that Sianne Ngai argues is at the heart of our postmodernist preoccupation with the aesthetic category “cute.” She claims that “cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness,

evoking tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes a desire to belittle or diminish them further . . . cute things evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them." 41 (Indeed, even Rabin and Spitz succumb to the masculinist logic that befalls cuteness when they describe the MPDG as simultaneously charming, but also shallow, irritating, etc.) Ultimately, the implicit feminization of cute alongside its misogynist associations thus have dire consequences for women labelled as such.

The "baby doll" label sometimes attributed to Grimes’s lisp (and her voice more generally) centers on the very same double-bind Ngai describes, where the tenderness and eroticism associated with cute can slip into belittlement and violence. A staple in the American popular imaginary, the baby doll archetype is an overtly masculinist fantasy that centers on an hyperbolic performance of the femme-enfant through specific fashion devices (e.g. nightly, pigtails, soother, etc.), body language, behavioral cues (e.g. thumb sucking), and, to my mind, vocal gestures associated with girlhood in its infantile stages. (In this phantasmic construction of femininity, the baby doll ultimately figures as a toy, a plaything, a prop, a passive object constructed for male control and consumption, where female sexual desire is defined through its subservience to male paternalism, domination, and coercion.) While tracing the origins of the so-called “baby doll” vocal designation is beyond the scope of this article (and indeed, there is a dearth of scholarship on this phenomenon), I wish to highlight two popular instances of the baby doll voice that are instructive for our purposes. The first is Carroll Baker’s portrayal of the fictional character “Baby Doll” in Elia Kazan and Tennessee Williams’s 1956 eponymous film. An impossibly innocent, naive, beautiful, delicate, thumb-sucking, blonde-haired 19-year-old virgin, Baby Doll serves as the film’s central object of sexual desire. In the ears of her male admirers, her simultaneous child-like innocence and sexual allure is deeply tied to her voice—its quiet, breathy quality, its dulcet, cooing tones, and unassured delivery. The joint infantilization and sexualization of Baby Doll has violent narrative consequences: she spends much of the film resisting the notably coercive sexual advances of the predatory Mr. Vacarro (Eli Wallach), otherwise known as “the stranger,” a designation that only intensifies the phantasmic power imbalance in the film’s masculinist portrayal of female sexual desire. Similarly, Marilyn Monroe was consistently praised for her “baby doll” voice as it perfectly reflected her undeniable sex appeal. Her breathy, and sexually charged rendition of “Happy Birthday, Mister President” for John F. Kennedy Junior is among the most widely cited examples of the so-called “baby voice,” and continues to inspire both sexual praise and contempt. 42 More generally, so called “baby voices”—or, what one writer for the LA Times called the “baby voice syndrome”—work to similarly underscore feminine credibility and sensuality, while simultaneously inspiring cultural contempt for and mistrust in female authority, and even violent derision. 43

In light of the susceptibility of the female voice to these demeaning masculinist logics, it is no surprise that Grimes’s lisp is the target of violent misogynist disavowal in certain male-dominated internet subcultures. Users on the anonymous controversial image-board site 4chan deploy an alternate spelling of the singer’s name—“Grimeth”—to mock her lisp with disparaging remarks like “Grimeth tuckth” (Grimes sucks) and “beht grimeth thong right here” (best Grimes song right here). A search of “Grimeth” on 4chan’s/mu/board—a board devoted to the discussion of music—yields countless sexually violent elaborations on the alternate spelling, with umpteen nefarious fan fantasy posts about “Grimeth,” her “tittieth” (titties), and her “puthy” (pussy) wholly unworthy of direct quotation. The lisp-themed commentary also features numerous posts ridiculing the singer’s public brand of feminism and her tendency to express contempt for her distinctly sexist anti-fandom. A post from October 2017 styled in the manner of an epitaph even parodies the singer’s widely cited 2012 feminist manifesto:

At this point I have a requestth for my fanth. If any of you in any way are delusional misogynithtth emblematic of the kind of bullshit that everyone woman in thith industry faces daily, pleaseth do one favor for me—leave me the f*ck alone! Don’t come to my thowth and don’t buy my recordsth. Grimeth (1988-2015).

[At this point I have a request for my fans. If any of you in any way are delusional misogynists emblematic of the kind of bullshit that every woman in this industry faces daily, please do one favor for me—leave me the fuck alone! Don’t come to my shows and don’t buy my records. Grimes (1988-2015)]

4chan participants compete for the most absurdist and original elaborations on the alternate spelling on a near daily basis, bashing the singer by reducing her to her lisp, an aural emblem of a feminine naïveté onto which users project sexual fetish and hatred. No wonder, then, that in the same feminist manifesto wherein Grimes sought to counteract the infantilizing dimensions of her reception, she also expressed her disgust with being “molested at shows or on the street by people who perceive me as an object that exists for their personal satisfaction” and with “creeps on message boards discussing whether or not they’d like to ‘fuck’ me,” no doubt a reference to the manner of violent commentary on image boards like 4chan (emphasis mine). In these instances, Grimes’s voice is the aperture through which her sexuality is imagined, appropriated, and violated.

45 Ibid.
Whether understood as a beguiling vocal flourish worthy of worship or an insufferable vocal tick inspiring misogynist anti-fandom, Grimes’s lisp engenders a polarizing reception that infantilizes and sexualizes her voice and body to varying degrees. That critics, fans, and trolls use Grimes’s lisp to justify adoration, sexual objectification, and vituperative, violent verbal assault is indicative of a larger set of gendered and ableist anxieties governing the whole of female vocality.

**LISPING: AN INTERSECTIONAL PHENOMENON**

Historically, research of so-called speech disorders, often called “speech impediments,” was limited to speech science, that is, empirical clinical linguistic study concerned with all manner of disruptions to “normal” speech including stuttering, lisp, and mutism, as well as aphasia (i.e. language loss), cluttering (an overly rapid speech impinging on comprehension), and speech delays resulting from conditions such as hearing loss, Autism, Tourette’s syndrome, brain injury, oropharyngeal cancer, and dyslexia. As a medical phenomenon, disordered speech exists along a spectrum of disorders with varying symptoms, degrees, and causes. As the applied discipline of speech science, speech language pathology (also known as speech therapy) has long offered therapeutic interventions for correcting broken, unclear, and/or lost speech with the aim of equipping the speaker with fluid, unmarked, “normal” speech. Ultimately, the inherent diversity and sonic non-compliance of so-called “disordered” speech violates the presumed singularity of “normal” speech within the medical paradigm, as well as in Western metaphysical discourse on voice and subjecthood.

Recently, however, scholars working in the emerging field of dysfluency studies have used disability theory to problematize the medical construction of disordered speech—in speech language pathology specifically and society more broadly. Dysfluency studies, as a branch of disability studies, attends to the historical inattention to voice within disability studies. As Susan Burch and Alison Kafer explain, “Disability rights movements and disability studies have been slow to recognize the ways in which hearing and speaking confer privilege.”

The ocularcentric bias of disability theory that frames disabilities as either physically “visible” or “invisible” does not account for the sonic dimensions of disability represented by disordered speech (or in music, as Blake Howe has shown). Dysfluency studies situates normative voice and the stigmas associated with disordered speech as an extension of able-bodiedness: disordered speech rests on the joint expectation of communicative normalcy and passive hearing, where “understanding [of speech] accordingly falls upon the active speaker, not the passive hearer.”

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as St. Pierre contends. Here, “the societal expectation to talk normal bears directly on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.” Ultimately, the pathologization of disordered speech as abnormal, shameful, and in need of correction mirrors the cultural representation of disability: “norms of speech, after all, can be no less powerful and punitive than those that regulate the body,” claims Christopher Eagle.

Recent work in dysfluency studies has primarily addressed stuttering, to the exclusion of lisping, due both to the severe stigma associated with stuttering, and stuttering’s predominance in speech language pathology. Stutterers face intense social prejudice and moral scrutiny for failing to master normative speech. The longstanding misattribution of stuttering to either neurological disability or general anxiety brings a host of secondary assumptions, rejecting the possibility that stuttering is an involuntary phenomenon and perpetuating the expectation that stuttering can be remedied through overcoming anxiety, a doubly stigmatizing formulation. (This polarizing approach is at odds with the current multi-factorial paradigm of speech language pathology, which acknowledges the possibility of numerous causes, including genetic/inheritance, gender predisposition, linguistic breakdown, environmental, and learning theories, etc.) Because the stutter is an envoiced, audible phenomenon, the stutterer is neither clearly able-bodied nor disabled relative to the physical basis of disability’s social construction and its familiar oculocentric logics (i.e. visible vs. invisible disability). And yet, able-bodiedness ultimately encompasses normative speech; a stutter is therefore what St. Pierre terms a “liminal disability” because, while a stutter is not immediately physically debilitating, stutterers “unlike many other disabled people, are often expected to perform on the same terms as the able-bodied.”


55. The language of overcoming implicit in such misconceptions about stuttering aligns with the language of overcoming disability more broadly. To be sure, stuttering can indeed result from an anxiety disorder, just as its causes can be neurological (e.g. Autism, Asperger’s, ADHD, Down syndrome, etc.), though these are but two of the many variable and complex causes of stutters more generally. See Lisa Iverson and Ronald M. R apee, “Social Anxiety Disorder and Stuttering: Current Status and Future Directions,” Journal of Fluency Disorders 10 (June 2014): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2013.08.003.


57. St. Pierre, “The Construction of the Disabled Speaker,” 3. I would add that many invisibly disabled people are likewise expected to perform on the same terms as the able-bodied, such as those who suffer from chronic pain.
Lisping reflects even more ambiguously on disability than stuttering: interrogating its medical and social constructions, and associated stigmas newly reflects on the complexities of normative speech in relationship to disability and gender. From a clinical standpoint, lisping does not result in a so-called language breakdown and delay of the expected flow of speech as with stuttering. Rather, a lisp is considered a “misarticulation” of select sibilants (i.e. speech sounds): in most instances, [s] and [z] sounds are pronounced like “th,” audibly marking the voice of the speaker. The causes of these so-called misarticulations are often functional in that they result from misplacement of the tongue in relation to different interior features of the mouth, including the soft palate, the nasal cavity, the teeth, and/or hard palate, or some combination thereof. The sounds of lisps will vary according to the precise misplacement of the tongue and are thus named according to the anatomy of the oral cavity (e.g. lateral lisp; nasal lisp; palatal lisp, etc.). Misarticulations can also result from organic pathology, that is, biological abnormalities of the mouth and or/nasal cavity (e.g. cleft lip and palate). In the clinical paradigm, while certain types of lisps are considered a normal part of certain stages of early childhood speech development, if a lisp persists beyond what is known as “the age of speech normalization,” parents are encouraged to promptly seek professional diagnosis and treatment for their child.

Further contributing to the social ambiguity of lisping is that the degree to which it registers as a so-called deviation from normal speech patterns varies immeasurably from one listener to the next, and across socio-linguistic contexts (unlike stuttering, which is typically perceived as “abnormal” across a variety of linguistic milieus). Lisps can be natural or cultivated, marked or unmarked, desirable or undesirable, etc. The term “lisp” serves as a sort of catch-all for elongated sibilants and fricative vocal sounds in excess of normalized speech, even when they may not technically satisfy the clinical definition of lisping. For instance, Standard Castilian Spanish uses a prominent voiceless dental fricative—a sound equivalent to the “th” in “thing”—whereas Latin American variants of Spanish do.


This biological vs. social dualism undergirding clinical constructions of lisping mirrors the distinction between “organic” and “pathological” stutters.

Holmes | The “Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World” and Her “Baby Doll Lisp” | 147
not.  In contexts where the lisp is marked and involuntary, by contrast, it can be profitably understood as a type of “minor bodily stigma” eliciting a form of “metashame,” particularly if it is involuntary, in that it “is not quite a disability or a disorder and therefore may not demand the same concessions and accommodations that other more debilitating conditions might,” as Sarah Lockenvitz persuasively argues. The lisper might feel “shame over feeling ashamed” when a lisp is presumed minor and trivial, compared with more “drastic, salient disabilities.” While lisping is invariably different from stuttering—physiologically, sonically, and socially—it still belongs to a spectrum of envoiced liminal difference, to extend St. Pierre’s original definition.

In the English-speaking world, the lisp is a complex cultural phenomenon where misconceptions about age, cognitive development, ability, authority, sexuality, race, and gender collide. The association of lisps (and stutters) with childhood speech development, and the resulting persistent characterization of lisps as infantile, juvenile, immature, or babyish dates back at least to the joint inception of speech clinics and science phonetics in the early twentieth century (c. 1912). In his 1912 book, Stuttering and Lisping, Edward Wheeler Scripture, renowned American physician, psychologist, and founding director of the Vanderbilt Speech Clinic at the Columbia Medical Center, wrote of the status of lisping in relation to childhood speech development:

It would be difficult to find a group of people more neglected by medicine and pedagogy than that of stutterers and lisps. The stuttering children that encumber the schools are a source of merriment to their comrades, a torment to themselves, and an irritating distraction to the teacher. As they grow older, the stutterers suffer tortures and setbacks that only dauntlessness or desperation enable them to survive. The lisps that are so numerous in certain schools are a needless retardation to the classes . . . . The treatment of these defects thus stands upon an entirely new basis; namely, that of a carefully developed science of normal and pathological speech.

Scripture’s harsh pronouncements are relevant nearly a century later, and underlie current assumptions about lisping related to certain naturalized age-appropriate speech patterns. His commentary is also reflective of the marginal status of disordered speech alongside other disabilities, both within disability studies and in society more broadly. As Lockenvitz observes, the longstanding cultural infantilization of lisping is nowhere clearer than in the depiction of several prominent lisping animated characters in American cinema “as juvenile, foolish, silly, idiotic, and careless, and yet, at the same time, somewhat endearing and lovable,” including Tigger from Winnie the Pooh, and Sylvester the Cat and Daffy Duck from Looney Tunes. Finally,

61. This is known colloquially in the English-speaking world as the “Spanish lisp” and is one of Castilian Spanish’s most distinctive features. See Clare Mar-Molinero, The Spanish-speaking World: A Practical Introduction to Social-linguistic Issues (New York: Routledge, 1997).
65. Ibid, 1.
also significant for our purposes is Scripture’s pejorative characterization of lispers as a “needless retardation” to the classes, given that, as previously mentioned, the cause of speech dysfluencies is often misattributed to cognitive delay, an ableist misconception that intensifies if the dysfluency persists into adulthood.

A less obvious component of the longstanding infantilization of lisping within the popular imagination, however, is the extent to which lisping is implicitly gendered. Lockenvitz’s ethno- graphy reveals that “femininity” is among the most common attributes associated with lisps, alongside youth, endearment (what she calls, “endearing qualities”), lack of capability, passivity, and submission. To extend her analysis, I want to make the case that it is no coincidence that these are all qualities typically ascribed to stereotypical constructions of femininity: that is, taken as a whole they stand in for a certain limiting view of femininity as distinctly passive and pleasing, though sometimes irritating, incapable, and infantile, relative to masculinity.

The symbolic link between lisping and femininity is evident in the popular reception of what is known colloquially as the “gay [male] voice” prevalent among certain English-speaking male homosexuals. What is often popularly referred to as the “gay lisp” or the “gay accent” is characterized by a hyper-articulation of [s] and [z] (i.e. the “lisp”), and other distinctive vocal affects including up-talk. Indeed, a 2011 piece in the Economist, “Gay Accents: Gay Pitch, Vowels ... and Lisp?” defines the so-called “gay voice” as centering on register, pitch variability, increased vowel shift (e.g. the pronunciation of “bid” shifting towards “bed,” as in the so-called “California vowel shift”), and lisping.66 The author’s emphasis on the femininity of the gay male voice, and the place of the simulated “lisp” therein, is highly instructive for our purposes, as are the connections the author draws between the gay lisp and speech patterns “among younger American women”:

Gays do not replace the s-sound with a th-sound. But the gay accent does tend to “s-fronting.” [s] is normally pronounced with the tongue at the alveolar ridge behind the teeth. But if you gradually move your tongue forward towards the th-sound, stopping halfway, your tongue will be behind your teeth, and the pitch will get higher. This fronted [s] is more common among younger American women and gay men than it is among straight men, and it is a staple of gay-voice stereotypes.67

66. A “vowel shift” is a change in the pronunciation of vowel sounds within a given language, with variability typically occurring along regional lines. See Wilt Wolfram and Ben Ward, eds., American Voices: How Dialects Differ from Coast to Coast (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).


Thus, the status of what is understood as lisping within gay identity formation, and the perceived effeminacy of homosexual men who exhibit this tendency reveals the depth of the associations between lisping and femininity, even when, as Stephan Pennington contends, “the men using this gay voice do so to signal non-normative manhood, but without ceding male privilege.”

The stigma that results from the simultaneous infantilization and feminization of lisping further reveals the function of gender within normative and non-normative conceptions of voice. This is once again evident in the popular reception of the gay male voice. While probing this correspondence is beyond the scope of Lockenvitz’s study, one of her self-identifying gay male interlocutors remarks that he automatically neutralizes what he identifies as the undesirable perceived effeminacy of his involuntary lisp through his overtly masculine physique—his height, weight, facial hair, and the depth of his voice, etc. His account points to the potentially derogatory function of femininity within the lisp’s popular construction insofar as it emasculates the (gay) male speaker, at least in the ears of a homophobic, misogynist listener. Indeed, the frequent ridicule of the gay male voice centers on what director of the celebrated documentary “Do I Sound Gay,” David Thorpe observes is a covert misogyny: “Because we do still live in a misogynist and sexist culture, people criticize men who are effeminate, whether or not they are gay . . . So women and men who express themselves like women both suffer from misogyny and sexism.”

This logic is notably acute in the reception of world heavyweight boxing champion Mike (Gerard) Tyson’s lisp, where it is exacerbated through racist, heteronormative constructions of black masculinity as hyper virile and inherently dangerous generally, and the cultural mythos of Tyson’s strength specifically. Critics, fans, and detractors alike have long fixated on the ostensible incongruity between the seeming daunting prestige of Tyson’s physique and power—as read through his “ferocious” style of sportsmanship, infamous run-ins with the law, and self-proclaimed status as the “baddest man on the planet”—and the delicate, impotent sound of his lisp by comparison. One writer for The Telegraph wrote of a 2013 interview with Tyson:

His voice comes as a shock, as it does every time you hear it. Far from the resonant baritone that his presence and stature lead you to expect, Tyson instead answers my questions in a high-pitched gabble, rendered sibilant by a slight lisp.

in The Toronto Star, 2 August 2015, accessed 2 May 2017, http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2015/08/02/ exposing-the-myth-of-the-gay-voice.html. In general, discourse on the gay male lisp centres on questions of code-switching (i.e. linguistic adjustments, in this case from “gay” to “straight” talk) and sociophonetics (i.e. the relationship between phonetics and social and/or regional identity formation).

68. Pennington, “Transgender Passing Guides,” 29.
By now, Tyson’s lisp, perhaps even more than Grimes’s, has been reduced to low-level pop culture entertainment fodder: it is ridiculed, feminized, infantilized, and made to reflect negatively on his intelligence, inspiring homemade compilation YouTube videos with such titles as “Mike Tyson’s Lisp on Steroids. LOL!” and “Shit Mike Tyson Says,” and countless memes with Tyson-isms like, “Now I’m Pith Off” (now I’m pissed off), “I’m thorny” (I’m sorry), and “You thound stupid” (you sound stupid) superimposed onto the boxer’s face.  

Stuttering, which is statistically more commonly diagnosed in men than in women, is subject to a corresponding covert misogyny through its gendering warranting our consideration. In contrast to lisping, stuttering is masculinized, but in derogatory, emasculating ways that link stuttering with certain highly stigmatized, polarizing extremes of male sexuality such as impotence, sexual repression, and even incriminating forms of sexual perversion like pedophilia.  

Side-by-side, then, the femininity, effeminacy, and emasculation ascribed to lisping and stuttering center on the same misogynist logic that constructs normative speech through masculinist ideals, for masculinist ends. And these stigmatizing associations ultimately underscore the disabling capacities of gender—specifically femininity—in conceptions of normative and non-normative speech. The popular perception of lisping as a marked, feminine-coded speech pattern follows the same social contract governing the whole of female vocality: that is, “that women and men who express themselves like women both suffer from misogyny and sexism,” as Thorpe explains. Female vocality comprises a set of gendered conventions and hegemonic double-binds that compound the already limiting terms and ableist logic of normative speech. The lisp is not unlike other marked female-coded vocal patterns that ostensibly undermine a woman’s authority, while signalling a demeaning, phantasmic kind of femininity.  

This tortuous logic is evident in recent widespread concern-trolling in the popular imaginary over the prevalence of “up-talk” (a rising, faux-interrogative lilt in the voice at the ends of declarative sentences) and glottal vocal-fry (a croaking, creaky sound produced by glottal closure in the lowest register of the voice) among younger speakers of English, particularly women. On the one hand, mannish detractors and advice columnists alike maintain that such vocal affectations bely a woman’s age, maturity level, intelligence, competence, and authority in the ears of the listener, and should be ruthlessly suppressed. For instance, in June 2014, Time Magazine ran a piece identifying vocal fry, up-talk, nasal tones, and breathy-whisper talking as the top speech habits that “hurt women’s future job prospects.” Naomi Wolf, author of The Beauty Myth (1990), similarly implored young women to “give up the vocal fry and reclaim your strong female


73. See Oliver Bloodstein, Stuttering: The Search for a Cause and Cure (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993); and Bloodstein and Nan Bernstein Ratner, A Handbook on Stuttering (Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2008).


voice” in a 2015 op-ed for The Guardian, noting furthermore that “what’s heartbreaking about the trend for destructive speech patterns is that yours is the most transformational generation—you’re disowning your power.”

And yet, female vocal authority is so narrowly defined that women are also susceptible to being judged unfeminine in their speech if they exhibit a more “masculine,” authoritative tone, Hilary Clinton serving as the prime example. Throughout Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign, critics bemoaned that her tendency to sound “loud, monotone, and shrill” came across as overly aggressive and angry, and was thus negatively impacting her overall likeability, warmth, and relatability.

76 Unequivocally, women of color feel the hegemonic, misogynist logic of these double binds more deeply than their white women counterparts. For instance, black women face additional levels of scrutiny as they contend with racist stereotypes that suppress and subjugate their bodies and voices, particularly the pervasive construction of black womanhood as intrinsically angry, loud, and assertive: “the angry black woman,” writes Boston Globe reporter Vanessa E. Jones is “tart-tongued or driven and no-nonsense, she is a stereotype that amuses some and offends others.” Ultimately, the politics of race, gender, class, and ability culminate in so-called “accent reduction” programs that have sought to suppress regional, racial, and class-bound speech patterns as part of nationwide (white) assimilationist discourse. Suffice it to say that communicative normalcy, of which female vocality is a part, is constructed, by and large, along white lines.


79 As Pennington observes, “All gender coded sounds, gestures, and words are habits inculcated by society from the time we are children . . . We not only overlay gender on people, but also overlay gender onto race, class, age, sexuality, region, and any number of social constructions.” Pennington, “Transgender Passing Guides,” 18. See also Jonathan Greenberg, “Singing Up Close: Voice, Language, and Race in American Popular Music, 1925-1935” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008).
Further complicating this unmeetable set of expectations is that vocal fry and up-talk can also guarantee feminine credibility for the speaker. For instance, speech scientist Ikuko Patricia Yuasa argues that “college-age Americans perceive female creaky voice as hesitant, non-aggressive, and informal but also educated, urban-oriented, and upwardly mobile,” and that certain female speakers even cultivate vocal fry to approximate the vocal gravitas of their male counterparts. Indeed, vocal fry and up-talk are prevalent among English-speaking heterosexual men, though seldom stigmatized to the same degree as when present in women or homosexual men. In other words, the cultural denigration of vocal fry and up-talk as pejorative, weak, non-authoritative, and dysfunctional relies overwhelmingly on their construction as speech patterns originating in the female speaker. (Interestingly, the use of vocal fry as a stylistic affective in numerous genres of live and recorded music unsettles many of these gendered biases.) Cultivating feminine-coded speech is also of value to many members of the transgender community. Transgender folks often seek to pass as female by adopting certain vocal gestures associated with femininity to garner credibility in the ears of the onlooker: mastering upward inflections, breathiness, elongated vowels, and other vocal patterns signalling “subservience” can be a source of liberation for many in that community, as Pennington observes. The current cultural policing of female-coded speech patterns as dysfunctional, of which lisping is a part, is characteristic of the hegemonic double bind that conditions and disciplines femininity through masculinist containment. Women like Grimes are expected and admired for performing certain highly arbitrary markers of feminine subservience through the voice, while simultaneously conforming to the masculinist terms of vocal authority—and to pull off this act without threatening masculinity itself is a precarious and intensely fraught balance.

CONCLUSION

By bringing discourse on lisping into conversation with that on vocal fry and up-talk, we can better understand how the masculinist constraints of female vocality intersect with ableism. While heavily stigmatized, vocal fry and up-talk are not pathologized to the same degree as lisping, or disabilities more broadly. Rather, in popular discourse they typically fall “somewhere between affectation and affliction, imposed by a combination of bad physical habits and social norms,” naturalized stylistic ticks that women can correct

83. Pennington, “Transgender Passing Guides.”
through conscious, disciplined attention to the voice, as Jordan Kisner observes. They are not diagnosed as speech impediments necessitating speech language pathology, as with lisping, which is typically thought organic and involuntary, and therefore harder to control. Nevertheless, all three vocal mannerisms are cast as feminine, even as they are policed out of female (and male) speech, an improbable imperative that only exacerbates the already extraordinary demands on female vocality. In all cases, the dysfunction is thought to originate in the voice of the speaker—no matter whether it is organic, involuntary, naturalized, cultivated, or voluntary—and decidedly not in the constraints of communicative normalcy: the burden of managing stigma, a familiar concept in disability studies, rests entirely on the female speaker, an inherently ableist formulation.

This article’s characterization of lisping also enriches existing constructions of disability across sensory realms. As a stigmatized form of aural difference, lisping complicates the customary ocularcentric construction of disability that positions disabilities as either visible or invisible. It is not enough to say that the lisp is simply an audible phenomenon, however, since, in Grimes’s case, it is not altogether invisible. Rather, her vocal difference is thought to correspond to certain visible markers of her feminine persona as reflective of her MDPG status—her small stature, girlish looks, awkward demeanor, etc. This continuity across visual and sonic cues bolsters the joint infantilization and feminization of her vocal difference, and ultimately, the elision of praise, sexual objectification, and masculinist derision in portrayals of her voice, body, and aesthetic.

My analysis of lisping as a liminal form of difference (compared with physical disabilities) reveals how femininity and disability are symbolically linked within a misogynist constellation of pejorative associations that construct femininity against an able-bodied masculine norm. This is a paternalist, ableist logic that extends to the construction of normative and non-normative voice. Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers, paraphrasing David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, claims that disability is “the master trope of human disqualification, not because disability theory is superior to race, class, or sex/gender theory, but because all oppressive systems function by reducing human variation to deviancy and inferiority defined on the mental and physical plane.” As a form of variation relative to the male standard, femininity and its manifold expressions are deviant, and automatically symbolically disabled. This is the insidious logic implicit in the seemingly harmless, sexually favorable designation of women as “cute,” “adorable,” “infantile,” or more specifically, in Grimes’s case, as a “manic pixie dream girl” with a “baby doll lisp.” Demeaning women through covert symbolic recourse to disability by way of infantilization is not simply misogynist, it also trivializes the lived experience of disability, and further reinforces its associated stigmas.

Yet, the question of how we are to read Grimes’s lisp remains. We need look no further than the singer’s own account of her voice, as she has sought to counteract the misogynist tone of her reception, of which her lisp is a permanent fixture. In interviews, Grimes does not shy away from addressing the widespread fixation on her lisp, both to neutralize its persistent sexualization, and to demystify its impact on her singing voice. One interviewer

84. Kisner, “Can a Woman’s Voice Ever Be Right?”
remarked that Grimes’s lyrics and vocal affectations were like “ciphers,” to which the singer replied: “I think it’s probably just called a speech impediment, I have a lisp. But I also just try to obscure a bit because while meaning is important, it’s more about performance for me, vocally. The lyrics are really personal, so it’s good when people can’t hear them.”

Similarly, after publicly clarifying for a fan on Twitter the words to a certain lyric in her song “Kill V. Maim” from her 2015 album Art Angels, Grimes reassured the embarrassed fan in a Tweet: “haha don’t feel silly, it’s prob my speech impediment, no 1 ever understands what I’m trying 2 say 😂.”

Similarly, in the 2016 NPR interview originally quoted at the top of this article, Grimes explains that she thinks her lisp is “a really awesome trait,” that she enjoys having a “weird voice,” one that she notes is immediately recognizable to listeners. Grimes’s social management of her lisp resonates with the simultaneously shrewd, resistive approach that many disabled people adopt when negotiating the stigma associated with their disabilities in an effort to reclaim the power typically lost in such interactions. By celebrating its “weirdness” and “awesomeness,” she can harness its novel, stylistic appeal through a set of arguably gender-neutral designations (i.e. awesome and weird) that escape the infantilizing and sexualizing connotations of the word “cute.”

Fittingly, Grimes has adopted a variation on the 4chan lisp spelling on Instagram: while her general account handle reads “grimes,” she defiantly spells the actual name associated with her account as “Grimezsz.” When conceptualized as a liminal envoiced form of resistance, then, her lisp arguably serves as a means through which to sonically infiltrate and critique the ableist, male-dominated discourses and spaces that have sought to contain her.


