QUEER VOICES

EXPLORING THE ROLES OF MUSIC IN LGBTQ LIVES

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Queer Voices: Exploring the Roles of Music in LGBTQ Lives

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Queer Voices: Exploring the Roles of Music in LGBTQ Lives.

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Acknowledgments

I put my soul in what I do

Fever Ray – When I Grow Up (2009)

When I first moved to Belgium in 2006, I never expected to find myself here, having written my own doctoral thesis. It is indeed a most fortunate concurrence of events that brought me here. After half a year of hating being an au-pair in Brussels, I moved to Antwerp, to find work and to be closer to my then boyfriend Lorenz—the person who was the real motivation for leaving my home country Austria behind. After a turbulent year, passing a Dutch language test helped me decide to stay in Antwerp to study languages and literature. I still vividly remember the lessons of Bart Eeckhout, the professor who introduced me and my friend and fellow student Lesley to Kate Bush and Alison Bechdel.

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1   Introduction

To introduce my dissertation, I want to take a closer look at what this project started with, namely its title: *Queer Voices*. The polysemous character of this phrase attracted me; just like this research has many different layers to it, a lot of different readings are possible. In many ways, this short title summarizes my research.

Queer (adj.), originally means strange, peculiar or irregular. The adjective has been re-appropriated by the LGBTQ community, after it had been used as a swearword for gay persons. Nowadays, it is often used as an umbrella term to signify the LGBTQ community, as well as a personal identity label, carrying a more political notion of resistance against normative cultures. Its use as a verb highlights the potential of queer, namely to actively question, challenge and to queer normative cultures and categories.

Voices (n., pl.) refers to the literal LGBTQ voices recorded for this project, my research narrators. It also refers to the voices of musicians the narrators listen to. The plural use in the title indicates the multitude and diversity of voices existing within the LGBTQ population. In a more political sense, *voice* (n.) refers to our personal opinions, and, as a verb, to the voicing thereof. LGBTQs remain a minority population, encountering specific experiences and facing specific challenges, which are off the beaten track.

In academic research, sexual preferences and gender expression have often been approached from psychological, medical, sociological or juridical angles. Cultural aspects like media use in relation to gender and sexualities are somewhat less researched aspects. Little work has focused specifically on the experience of music in individual LGBTQ lives, in an overarching manner and on an everyday basis, nor on how music works within LGBTQ identities. At the outset of this project, the main research aim was to *explore what roles music plays in the lives of LGBTQs, if there are any specific ways music works in the lives of LGBTQs, and if so, in which ways and what music*. In summary, I focus on the roles of music in the lives and the identity processes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer persons over the age of 18, researching *to what extent, and most of all, how music plays a role in LGBTQ lives*.

In order to explore these questions, I chose to speak to grown-up LGBTQ persons, record stories and analyse their narratives on music and identity. I conducted 22 oral history interviews with persons who identify themselves as LGBTQ, have lived in Flanders for a considerable time or are Flemish and express an interest in music. As Jodie Taylor puts it, "musical taste and sexual desire

are intensely personal. For this reason, personal narratives are a valuable addition to a scholarly discourse of music and sexuality" (Taylor, 2008, p. 16). Through oral history interviews, the musical life stories of LGBTQs are heard, and as such their stories contribute to writing queer history. By sharing their life stories, a unique insight into LGBTQ persons' lives, their subjective experiences of identity and the questioning thereof is made possible. Their intimate narratives show the use, experience and impact of music in their lives, specifically their lives as LGBTQ people. Furthermore, LGBTQ music phenomena are explored from within an LGBTQ community perspective. The way we attribute meaning to music, and the way it helps us discover and express ourselves are deeply personal. At the same time, music connects us to the world around us: "Music, then, represents a remarkable meeting point of intimate and social realms. It provides a basis of self-identity (this is who I am, this is who I'm not) and collective identity (this is who we are, this is who we're not), often in the same moment" (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 2). David Hesmondhalgh points out that "there is a remarkable lack of material that simply considers why people value the music they like" (2013, p. 136). This is, indeed, what this project aims to do: Listen to what music the interviewed persons like, and what emotions, values and experiences are connected to that music.

Based on this thematic focus, and the choice for a very open qualitative method, my interest in music as a research methodology has developed. How exactly does music function in my research? How do we think about queer lives, how can we get to know more about how music interacts with our identities, and how can we archive that knowledge? As the topic of this research is music, next to LGBTQ identities, using music as a starting point for and guide in the interviews was a natural and logical choice. Music offers a unique way to reflect and tell about our own lives. As a cultural medium, it allows an intimate, affective and subjective access to how the narrators[1] think and feel about their own identities. Music enables us to speak at a meta-level: While talking about concrete music and (tangible) memorabilia, we also talk about the emotional and intimate experiences connected to that music. A second research aim thus emerged: *How does music work in telling life stories, and how can it provide new insights into LGBTQ identities?* This question connects two main research domains: LGBTQ studies on the one hand, and the sociology of music on the other hand.

This innovative, audiovisual approach to oral histories was also inspired by engaging with the concept of the queer archive, feminist research ethics and a strong belief in embodied, reflexive

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[1] In line with the tradition of oral history, I refer to my research participants as "narrators" throughout my dissertation (cf. Portelli, 1981; Bleyen & Van Molle, 2012)

knowledge. As the reader may already have noticed, I consciously chose not to leave myself as a researcher out of the account, but to be present in the written account of this research just like I was present in its creation: I am convinced that my presence as an openly queer cis-woman, who positions herself (towards the research narrators) not only as a researcher but also as an activist, community member, music lover, listener and friend, influenced the way my research and my interviews have turned out. Moreover, the interdisciplinary character of this dissertation is reflected in the style it is written in. My personal background is in literature studies, and this research is informed by the traditions of oral history, ethnography and queer studies. In the arts and humanities, it is more common than in social sciences and media studies to take a rather personal approach to writing up research. In the methodology section, I explore these various backgrounds which informed and shaped my research on a theoretical as well as practical level. Since this methodology is not very straightforward, I will dedicate some attention to the practical implications of employing such a queer and interdisciplinary research approach.

In brief, in *part one* of my dissertation, I review and discuss literature on (LGBTQ) identity and music which has informed my research. In order to situate my research in the geopolitical area it was conducted in, I provide an overview of the situation for LGBTQs in Flanders, Belgium. Then, I delve into the discussion of my research methodology and ethics. After introducing the 22 narrators briefly, I move on to the empirical case studies.

In *part two* of my dissertation, five chapters explore five topics which are dominant within and throughout the oral history interviews. In a bottom up approach, I engage with similarities among the narrators' stories and experiences. Music and identity function on many different levels, therefore the analyses focus on different aspects as well. Some chapters are built around a shared sense of individual identity; others around musical topics, exploring outspoken as well as unconscious connections between music and identity. Without going into too much detail, I would already like to briefly introduce these five empirical chapters: Chapter 4 focuses on coming of age, coming out and coming into the community, and what music may mean for LGBTQs in connection with these experiences. In chapter 5, I focus on sexual fluidity, which was a salient topic in several female narrators' life stories. Chapter 6 on fandom explores various intense ways the narrators engage with music. This chapter shows that clichés contain a grain of truth, but that not all LGBTQ fan activity pertains to these clichés. The width of the scope of LGBTQ fandom is highlighted, as well as the highly individual character of fandom. Chapter 7 investigates another shared identity characteristic: Several narrators are trans* and gender nonconforming. These identities are currently researched in medical, sociological and

psychological fields, yet there is still a dearth in cultural approaches. The last chapter, chapter 8, on music and intimate relationships reveals the manifold uses and functions of music in relationships. Although the music we listen to is very diverse, there are several functions we can distinguish throughout the narratives.

Across the chapters, we see many different ways in which music allows us to learn about LGBTQ lives, and how LGBTQ persons use music in their lives. Listening closely to the narrators' life stories, my research provides insight into lived realities of LGBTQ's in Flanders, in 2014-15 (when the interviews were made) and throughout the narrators' lives (as recalled and framed at the moment of the interviews). My dissertation contributes to research on LGBTQs from a cultural studies perspective. With my dissertation I do not, however, want to claim that music is only especially important in LGBTQ lives, nor that music is the only important cultural influence on our identities.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to quote from two of my interviews. As narrators and partners Dan and Michel (both in their forties) point out in the only double interview I did, music is everywhere around us:

> Dan: Well, actually we always have… that's how we're distracted from reality, a soundtrack. The soundtrack of your life!

> Michel: Yes, and if you look at the soundtrack of your life:

> Dan: Wow! What a diversity!

I believe that music is not only able to distract us from reality, but that it actually enables us to carve out a place for ourselves, as (LGBTQ) individuals as well as a community. While Dan and Michel stress the wealth of and diversity in music we encounter throughout a lifetime, Roxy (26) identifies the deep impact music may have in our lives: "That's what music is about: you listen to it, and it strikes a chord". Roxy voices that music means more than can be explained by words. Music touches people and, as Roxy puts it, when it strikes a chord, music and our sense of self align. Not only does music reflect its listeners; it also produces them through the creation and construction of the self (Frith 1996).

In this dissertation, I indeed engage with the soundtracks of LGBTQ persons' lives, exploring the diversity of music as well as the various functions and meanings music may have in our lives. Inversely, the framework of music enables my narrators as well as myself as a researcher and co-archivist to engage with LGBTQ identity and the diversity among LGBTQ identities. My research

is inclusive towards all LGBTQ identities, especially queer and fluid identities which do not neatly fit boxes because they are rather difficult to grasp and research, and are often viewed as "noise in the data" (cf. Albury, 2015, p. 649). In that way, I want to contribute to the study of music and identity, the study of LGBTQ lives, as well as queer history (in the) making.

PART 1: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

2   Theoretical Frameworks

This dissertation engages with two different research domains, namely LGBTQ identity and the sociology of music, and aims to bring both together. The main goal is to explore and investigate LGBTQ identities, and the roles music may play in LGBTQ lives. Music has a second important function in this dissertation, namely as a method accessing memories and thus life stories. Primarily, this dissertation aims to contribute to LGBTQ studies, providing intimate insight into LGBTQ lives and recording queer life histories, contributing to the collective intangible heritage of the LGBTQ community. [2] Moreover, the dissertation contributes to the empirical, autobiographical research of music in everyday life. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of both fields separately, situate my own position within these fields and try and bring both together.

To start with, I would like to clarify the use of various terms in this dissertation.

I use the common acronym and umbrella term *LGBTQ*[3] in order to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, questioning, genderqueer and other non-normative persons collectively. This acronym best accords with the commonly used Flemish acronyms "holebi" or, more recently,"holebitrans" (literally: **Ho**mosexual, **le**sbian, **bi**sexuals, trans*), which has first been used in the early 1990s and has been in common use since the second half of the 1990s (Eeckhout, 2011, p. 16). I acknowledge that these categories might be limiting to some persons; however, I do not think of these identity signifiers as clearly outlined, or mutually exclusive, and neither assume that any of these identifications are stable, or finite. This shorthand is a compromise, and may be criticised for being either too limiting, or for putting people into boxes again. Yet, it is a useful term which I use as a collective identifier, without trying to essentialise any identities; all identities are viewed as socially constructed and changeable, but may be used to describe one's own sexuality and gender [4]. Internationally, the acronym LGBTQIA is often used, but I purposefully did not include "I" (intersex) and "A" (asexual or ally), as no persons identifying as such participated in my research. LGBTQ, as I use it, is an inclusive umbrella term comprising

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[2] More about the topic of queer histories and queer archives will be discussed in chapter 3.
[3] In some countries, GLBT is used, instead.
[4] An interesting discussion about terminology and the upsides and downsides of politics based on minority identity categories may be found in Barker and Scheele, 2016, p. 11ff.

persons who clearly identify with certain labels, as well as those who resist identity labels. In parts of this dissertation, more specific identifications, as used by the narrators and in academic research, will be discussed; in these cases, I will stick to the identifications used in the original sources.

Queer is sometimes used in a similar way, as an umbrella term for LGBTQ persons or identities: "The term queer is sometimes useful (and sometimes not) as an umbrella term to describe sexual minorities and minority sexualities (marginalized sexual practices) that are perceived or intended to challenge gender and/or sexuality-related norms, even when the actual norms being challenged differ" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1185). Sari van Anders's statement shows that employing queer as an umbrella term is not a straightforward undertaking. In my dissertation, however, queer is mostly used in a narrower sense, carrying a notion of resistance and political awareness, just like it does in its active use as a verb. As Barker and Scheele summarize queer theorist Michael Warner, "we queer things when we resist 'regimes of the normal': The 'normative' ideals of aspiring to be normal in identitiy, behaviour, appearance, relationships, etc." (2016, p. 14).

2.1 Conceptualizing Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans*, Queer and Nonconforming Identities

The question of identity is one that's always haunted me

Pet Shop Boys - Too Many People (1993)

Embracing the complexity and variety of sexual and gender identities, I considered a range of different approaches to identity. Two main ideas are at the basis of the conception of identity in this dissertation, namely the fact that identity is fluid, changeable, and non-linear; and the view that identities are socially constructed and we do have the possibility and agency to change (providing the right social circumstances are given). The complex and little straightforward form of this literature review mirrors the concept of identity as well; muddled realities are not easy to be matched by the clarity and straightforwardness of theory. In engaging with different views of identity and bringing them together, I wish to take a holistic approach to identity, as well as acknowledge each narrator's personal experience of their own identity.

First of all, a general clarification of terms and conceptions of identity will be outlined. Second, I will discuss constructionist approaches to sexual and gender identity. Queer studies provide useful tools to analyse the social constructs and power dynamics surrounding and founding sexual and gender identity. In the third part I outline the queer studies backgrounds which inform my take on identity, and which further develop the social constructionist approach. Lastly, narrative identities will be explored. Telling stories and listening to narratives is not only the method applied in this research; narratives are also a way in which we construct our identities and make sense of them.

In combining these theoretical approaches to identity, I aim to research sexual and gender identities in a holistic, open-minded way, communicating closely with each narrator's own sense of identity.

Before embarking on these explorations, I want to stress that I consciously choose not to use one fixed definition of what sexual and gender identities mean and how they are formed. One starting point of my research is the assumption that all persons have their own, personal approach to identity. I consciously only use umbrella terms when talking about sexual and gender identities, not providing any more specific categories or definitions. This inductive and bottom up approach aims at opening up categories and providing space for exploring and

explaining identity labels. Sexual and gender identities are not assumed to be fully tangible and intelligible, neither for the narrators nor for me as a researcher.

It is important to note that for many persons, their sexual orientation or preference, and gender identity are not central to their general sense of identity (see, e.g., Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Naturally, they are the main focus of these interviews, but I do not mean to imply that my narrators only or mainly identify as LGBTQ. I do not wish to reduce the many layers of each person's identity to factors relating to gender and sexuality, and LGBTQ identities will be explored as well as questioned in this dissertation. The narrators talk about their current identifications at the time of the interview, as well as about different identifications in the course of their lives. Hence, not only their momentary LGBTQ identity is discussed, but also the fluidity and changeability of identity.

Identities?

Identity is a complex concept, discussed in many different contexts, with many possible definitions and applications, as Linda Alcoff (2003, p. 3) sums up: "To understand identities, then, we need to study psychology, culture, politics, and economics, as well as philosophy and history". Therefore, before speaking about sexual and gender identity, some general clarifying notes on identity are necessary. Lorraine Green provides a good starting point of this discussion with the following description of identity from a sociological point of view:

> This sees identity shifting and possessing multiple facets, both ascribed through structures of power and achieved through our own agency, subjectivity and understanding of our narratives and family history. Our identity is as much about positioning ourselves through our identification with and attachment to those we see as similar, through kinship, class, race, gender, sexuality, or musical or sports alliances, as it is about *dis-identification*—distancing ourselves from what we are not. (Green, 2010, p. 112)

Nowadays, it has become a dominant vision that identities are fluid, multiple and unstable, and may even be marked by what one does not identify with, rather than what one does. Throughout the life course we assume different personal, social and situational identities (Kotarba, 2018, p. 68-69). Accordingly, Joseph Kotarba defines the life course as "about the becoming of self: The fluid process through which we acquire new and diverse roles, social identities, and personal identities" (2018, p. 69). As this quote shows, various kinds of identity are

interacting in our lives. Referring to Mead's 1934 text "Mind, Self, and Society", Kotarba asserts that "it is by minding that indeed we create a self" (2018, p. 67). The self is a constant, reflexive process:

> The self, as the word itself suggests, is a reflexive object. […] You are a subject in the sense that you are the one who is mustering attention and directing focus, and you are an object in the sense that such attention is focused on you. (Kotarba, 2018, p. 66-67)

Identity refers to a more enduring "typification of self, either imposed upon an individual by others (*social identity*) or adopted by self (*personal identity*)" (Kotarba, 2018, p. 68). In the context of my interviews, the self and personal identity are discussed throughout the life course, providing a diachronic overview of personal identity throughout life as well as a discussion of a more momentary sense of self.

Stuart Hall stresses that identity does not only come from within the individual person; it is influenced, by social, cultural and historical aspects around us as well: "Identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). His use of "narratives" already implies a connection between our own identity and how we perceive and recount the past; and, as I would like to argue, not only the past but also the present. According to Hall (1996), identities are constructed within representation, within the narrativization of the self, within discourse and within difference. Inversely, identities are "essentially social objects, gaining their intelligibility and force only within a social realm" (Alcoff, 2003, p. 5). In my dissertation, the focus indeed lies on identity in the narration of the self, embedded in the narrator's social, cultural and historical context.

These notions of identity are informed by social constructivism, which is one of my main approaches towards sexual and gender identities. As an epistemological stance, constructivism does not assume that an external or essential truth exists, but that knowledge is always humanly constructed in inter-subjective processes: "Social reality is […] constructed by processes which are specifically social, such as social actions, social interactions, and institutions" (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016, p. 64). Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966) is often regarded as a founding work for social constructivism and an important work in the sociology of knowledge. As Knoblauch and Wilke outline, among the different approaches to social constructionism and constructivism, Berger and Luckmann's concept "*social construction* is the lowest common denominator. [… It] argues for the basic sociality of the construction process […and it] already contains a number of arguments of postconstructivism in stressing a certain objectivity, materiality, and (constructed) reality" (2016, p. 65). Importantly,

social constructivism does not deny the existence of biology and external reality: Referring to Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), Dellinger Page & Peacock sum up that "social constructionists think of the body as a frame of scaffolding, where culture hangs the fabric of meaning and interaction […]. The individual, through interaction with himself or herself and others, moulds the structure into the shape of an identity" (2013, p. 644).

Similarly, Jan Stets states that "the hallmark of selfhood is reflexivity, that is, individuals' abilities to take themselves as an object and reflect back upon themselves" (2006, p. 88). In addition to the difference between self and identity discussed just above, Stets differentiates between three different kinds of identities operating simultaneously, which we must recognise in order to see the overall self: role identities, social identities and person identities (2006, p. 89-90). Role identities vary according to the social contexts and reflect the many roles one person may perform within society and refer to what one does (Stets, 2006, p. 89-90); one person may for example be a parent, lover, academic staff member etc. at the same time. Social identities refer to a person being a member of specific communities and thus, who one is (Stets, 2006, p. 89-90), e.g. European, LGBTQ. Person identities, then, are slightly more difficult to grasp. The term refers to "a set of meanings tied to and sustain[ing] the self as an individual rather that sustaining a group or role", for example one's moral identity (Stets, 2006, p. 90). According to the specific context, other parts of identity come to the fore. While I will not analyse the life stories focusing on each of these identity layers apart, it is useful to keep in mind the different kinds of identities at work.

Except for one chapter which looks at the LGBTQ community as a group, (chapter 4.3), the focus of my dissertation lies on the individual experience of self-identity as well as the (dis-)identification with the social identity LGBTQ, as talked about by the narrators.

I will now zoom in on the constructionist, narrative and queer approaches which inform my take on identity. Within the constructionist approach to identity, I will outline an overview of the many possible approaches to LGBTQ identity in a historical perspective. Constructionist, queer and narrative approaches to identity have many shared features and all three are interlinked. A non-essentialist conception of identity unites these different theoretical approaches, as well as the focus on the individual's agency and reflexivity being in interaction with the social surrounding.

LGBT[5] Identity: A Social Constructionist Approach

Our understanding is that selves and identities are changeable and fluid; although we experience our (sexual and gender) identities on a daily basis, they remain ephemeral and hard to pinpoint. Jeffrey Weeks' definition of sexual identity in "The Languages of Sexuality" (2011) is a good general starting point, as his definitions are concise and to the point. As Weeks puts it, "sexuality has become something that matters in telling the stories of who we are" (2011, p. 187). We often define ourselves and others consciously and subconsciously as gendered and sexual beings, and our sexual identity is connected to our sense of self and group identity (Weeks, 2011). Weeks rightly acknowledges that while sexual identity is a common identifier for everybody, it still matters most for those who are sexually marginalized (2011, p. 186), i.e. non-straight, and, by extension, non-cisgender and non-binary persons. Weeks points out the paradoxical character of sexual identities: They assume "fixity and permanence", while in fact they are fluid and tend to change (2011, p. 188). Post-structuralist and queer theory address this paradox, "arguing that sexual identities are arbitrary impositions on the flux of sexual possibilities, and constrain rather than enable sexual possibilities" (Weeks 2011, p. 188). Hybridity lies at the basis of sexual identities, not uniformity, and they "are built at the intersection of many possible meanings, structures and ways of being" (Weeks, 2011, p. 188). Sexual identities are always relational, depending on social, cultural and political factors, and never exist essentially (Weeks, 2011). Yet, we hold on to them as they contribute majorly to our sense of self: "Sexual identities may be fictions, but they seem to be necessary fictions" (Weeks, 2011, p. 189). Fittingly, Weeks carries on the notion of narration and story-telling throughout his text, emphasising that we create our identities by talking and telling about it. Likewise, we cannot talk about ourselves without relying on our (sexual) identity.

Like Hall stated about identity in general, Weeks stresses that sexual identity more specifically is always an interaction between personal and social identity:

> Sexual identity is a concept that bridges the divide between public and private. It refers to our sense of self and subjectivity, who we believe we really are, but also to our relationship with others, and our membership of sexual communities and social worlds. (Weeks 2011, p. 187)

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[5] In the title of this section I employ the umbrella term "LGBT", rather than "LGBTQ". This is a conscious choice, since LGBT identity and identity politics have a different history and are discussed in different ways in academic literature than queer or questioning identities. A queer approach to identity follows in the next section, but first, I will focus on theories about the more clearly delineated and "graspable" identities L, G, and, to some extent B and T.

While I am most interested in LGBTQ persons' reflections on personal identity and the self, social identities are often discussed in the interviews as well, as we necessarily live our lives in social contexts. Indeed, the labels "lesbian", "gay", "bisexual", "trans" and even "queer" inherently refer to social or shared identities, denominating shared sexual preferences and a political stance opposing heteronormativity. I focus on the individual experience and perception of these identities, and how the narrators view and include the LGBTQ part of their identity into their personal identity. Dimensions of social identity will thus be discussed from an individual point of view rather than in a generalising way, namely through how individuals interact with and (dis-)identify with these social identities.

To analyse the narrators' narratively established identities, a social constructionist approach informs my conception of sexual identity[6]. Lukasz Szulc summarizes the key concerns of a social constructionist approach to the study of sexuality:

> The questions about the possible biological, psychological or sociological *causes* of homosexuality are irrelevant and, most likely, insoluble. The questions which do matter deal with the *meanings* of same-sex desires and practices in general, and the *origins* and *contents* of the dominant modern ideas of homosexual identities in particular. (2018, p. 155)

Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2010) recapitulate the development of a sociological approach to sexualities: "Rethinking sexuality as a social rather than a natural or psychological phenomenon emerged in the 1960s from social constructionist perspectives with their roots in phenomenological and interactionist sociology" (p. 5). With their 1973 work on sexual scripts, John Gagnon and William Simon contributed towards a "first fully developed theory of the social construction of sexuality" (Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 5). Notably, Gagnon and Simon did not focus on the deviant or transgressive, but rather on everyday sexuality: "Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequencing of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience" (Gagnon & Simon 1974, p. 17). On a theoretical level, Michel Foucault's "The History of Sexuality" (1976-1984) is another milestone in the social constructionist approach to sexual identities. Gayle Rubin summarizes Foucault's analysis that desires are not pre-existing entities, but that they are constituted through the course of

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[6] For other approaches to LGBTQ-identity, see, e.g.: Adriaens & De Block, 2015; Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2011.

historically specific social practices: "The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experience, or its institutional forms. Moreover, we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it" (2007 [1984], p. 149). In the 1990s, these theories of the social construction of sexual and gender identities radicalized and fed into the rise of queer theory.

Liahna Gordon and Tony Silva summarize that "social constructionists see the relationship between sexuality, biology, and culture as one in which sexuality is a biological potential that is influenced by culture" (2015, p. 503). For studying sexualities, a social constructionist approach implies that gender and sexuality are conceived of as multi-dimensional, non-linear and fluid and acknowledging the diversity of human experience (Gordon and Silva, 2015, p. 500-501).

The first theories about LGBTQ identity, however, often assumed the development of LGBTQ identity to be a linear process of growth, assuming essential characteristics in all gays—as most of these theories focused on male homosexuality. Various models for non-heterosexual identity formation have been proposed by social and psychological research, and we can observe a gradual movement towards models which are able to account for the changeability, fluidity and multiple dimensions of sexual identity[7]; moving from a rather essentialist towards a more constructivist approach.

Vivien Cass's 1979 model was one of the first influential approaches to gay male identity formation. In six stages, the homosexual comes to terms with his identity: confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance and nearly complete acceptance lead to identity synthesis, when the sexual identity ties in with the other parts of identity (Cass, 1979). Cass identifies important processes many LGBTQ persons go through and which are still recognisable for many today, and stresses that a positive identification as lesbian or gay is possible. However, the proposed linearity and the assumption that all LGBTQs experience these stages in the same way, are not viable. In 1989 and in the wake of the AIDS crisis, Richard Troiden proposed an "ideal-typical" four stage model (p. 43), moving from sensitization through identity confusion towards identity assumption, and commitment to the identity, based on earlier models. Developing the model, Troiden analysed the life histories of "committed" gay males and lesbians, clustering often repeated themes according to life stages (1989, p. 43). According to Troiden, the first two stages occur in adolescence. Indeed, many LGBTQs become aware of their

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[7] For an overview and comparison of the most important sexual orientation and gender identity development models, see also Bilodeau & Renn, 2005.

sexual difference in their youth, but as empirical research confirms, these developments are not at all age-bound or necessarily sequential (e.g., Johnston and Jenkins, 2004; Floyd and Bakeman, 2006; Diamond, 2008; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013).

In the early 1990s, Anthony D'Augelli argues that identity development unfolds throughout lifetime instead of in sequential stages (Fricke, 2010, p. 41). D'Augelli identifies two essential processes in becoming LGB[8]: A "conscious distancing from heterosexist essentialism" and then "creat[ing] a new identity oriented around homosocial and homosexual dimensions" (1994, p. 313). This terminology already points out a shift towards a constructionist paradigm. The six interactive stages he proposes are exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal LGB identity status, developing a social LGB identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status and entering an LGB community (1994, p. 319). As D'Augelli states, "our cultural script is, that we must (painfully) create a non-heterosexual identity; heterosexuality exempts us from this kind of identity struggle, though surely contemporary heterosexual women and men confront some complex issues of sex-role articulation" (1994, p. 315). This is in line with Weeks' assertion that sexual identity still matters most for those who are marginalized. We still clearly see the influence of the previous models, but D'Augelli's model is already much more flexible, taking into consideration outside factors like the invisibility of sexual orientation or the lack of LGB role models which poses more responsibility on the self (Fricke, 201, p. 41), showing a constructionist stance. As discussed by Gordon and Silva, Paula Rust (1996) proposes an even more flexible model, describing "a physical, relational, and ideological environment that is constantly shifting, an environment that she calls the sexual landscape" (2015, p. 502).

In the early 2000s, Janna Horowitz and Michael Newcomb propose a multidimensional approach to homosexual identity (2002). There is no linear process each LGBTQ individual goes through, but identity formation largely depends on the individual's own choice, and their social and temporal context. I agree with Horowitz' and Newcomb's definition of a social constructionist approach:

> From the social constructionist perspective, what is important is the meaning the individual ascribes to the   sexual desires, behaviors, and identity. […] In this sense, the social constructionist perspective empowers the individual's choice in sexual expression, while recognizing that there may not be a choice in the orientation of sexual desire. (2002, p. 16)

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[8] Term as used by D'Augelli.

This social constructionist approach to identity formation and the emphasis on the fluidity of sexuality and its changeability according to individual and social interaction (2002, p. 3) ties in with the feminist notions of situated and embodied knowledge that inform my own research. Furthermore, the constructionists' focus on the individual meaning making of (sexual) identity aligns with the tradition of Oral History and my research methodology, notions I will discuss in chapter 3.

The ambition to fully understand sexual identity development and develop models which grasp as many identities as possible still remains active in psychological and sociological research. In 2015, T.J. Jourian proposed a model of multidimensional sexual identity. This model takes into account trans* and non-binary persons, as well as the fluidity of sexuality (Jourian, 2015). It is the most flexible model I have encountered so far, taking into account assigned sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. All of these are three-dimensional instead of binary dimensions, allowing for all aspects of identity to be described in detail. Shifting the focus to the social implications of coming out and being out as an LGBTQ person, Lake Dziengel (2015) proposes a new model of Be/Coming-Out. The influence of societal structures, self-perception and social relationships are discussed. All three may strengthen resiliency but also install ambiguity about one's sexual identity, and thus have a positive or negative impact on mental health and self-identity (Dziengel, 2015). Dziengel rightly points out that the ongoing process of being out and repeatedly coming out throughout the life span, deserves our attention (Dziengel, 2015). In this spirit, looking at coming out narratives and moments throughout an entire life story makes sense.

For this research project, I consciously chose not to employ any specific model of identity development to analyse my narrators' life stories. There are two main reasons for this choice: For one, I do not believe that there is one single model which is able to contain and explain the vast range, complexity and fluidity of gender and sexual identities. Second, it is not the aim of this dissertation to classify and analyse each life story according to the same, pre-defined categories, and thus, in a way, approaching LGBTQ identities in an essentialist way. Rather, I am interested to learn about the individual experiences and processes of meaning making of LGBTQ identities. I do not aim to discuss in detail the debate between essentialism and constructivism (see e.g., Berg-Sorensen et al., 2010, and Weeks, 2011 for an introduction), nor to recount the entire history of sexual identities (see e.g., Fricke, 2010 for an introduction). However, it is useful to have an overview of the constructionist, sociological approach to sexual identity, and, more specifically, non-straight sexual identities. These models provide important background information on how

LGBTQ identities have been and may be approached, as these models of sexual identity development remain influential and still serve as a basis for analysing LGBTQ lives[9]. The upcoming sections on queering identity and narrative identity equally influence my approach to sexual and gender identities.

To sum up, I would like to cite Dana Rosenfeld who in her research on elderly lesbians and gays describes that: "[I conceive] of identity construction as an ongoing process of interpreting desires and experiences using existing cultural resources, and then situating the self within existing categories of personhood that are both historically and politically contingent" (2009, p. 426). This historically sensitive approach most fittingly summarizes the above and describes my own approach to (sexual) identity construction.

Identity Is a Queer Thing: A Queer (Studies) Approach to Identity

> Queer theory seeks to expose the false truths that have constructed boundaries of centrality and marginality, and have normalised the centre by revealing the performative nature of gender and sexuality and the fluidity of identity. (Taylor, 2012, p. 30)

It may be a counterintuitive thought to resort to queer theory in order to explore identity, as queer theory most of all destabilizes and disrupts the concept of a fixed identity. Yet, queer studies[10] help us to understand why traditional concepts of stable (LGB) identities are inadequate in order to understand the full range of sexual and gender identity. Taylor summarizes: "Queer theory supposes that identities are not normal or natural; instead they are performative and discursively constituted" (2013, p. 195), which is in line with the social constructionist approach discussed above. Queer studies offer tools to critically analyse visible and invisible (normative) structures in our society, which influence our identities. Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele recapitulate the key features of the emerging queer theories of the 1990s:

> Drawing on post-structuralist theories to examine power relations relating to sex, sexuality, & gender through destabilizing the taken-for-granted dominant understanding which assumes that heterosexuality is the normal or natural standard of

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[9] See, e.g., Aronoff & Gilboa (2015), who base their analysis of gay coming out stories on Cass's (1979) model.
[10] I consciously distinguish between "queer theory/theories", referring to the academic current emerging in the early 1990's, and "queer studies", an umbrella term for a set of broader, multidisciplinary studies based on and further developing and applying queer theory.

sexuality, and categorizes people in relation to this by exposing how sexual and gender identities are constructed through the available ways of thinking and being in different times and places, [and] performed: something that we do rather than something that we (essentially) are. (2016, p. 62)

One diagnosis of queer theory is that our Western society [11] is based on an underlying heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999 [1990]). Along general lines, the heterosexual matrix refers to the binary distinction of "man" and "woman", which is linked to the assumption of a logical connection between anatomical sex (or sex assigned at birth), gender identity and gender expression, and the automatic assumption of a sexual preference for persons of the other sex. The binary creates the social expectations that this is a coherent pattern which is the norm in our society. Queer studies unveil this mechanism and undermine it, stating that the heterosexual matrix is not a fixed truth but a social construct. The term heteronormativity, popularized by Michael Warner (2004 [1991]), summarizes this mechanism at work in our society: Heterosexuality is seen as the norm, all relationships are modelled between and within the two sexes, and our society supports these mechanisms. As understood by Teresa de Lauretis, queer theory refuses heterosexuality as the standard on which all sexual formations are based. Queer theory insists that sexual subjectivity is shaped—through race and gender—in multiple ways. Therefore, it moves away from the singular understanding of lesbian and gay studies (all cf. Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 60).

Figure 1: Butler's model of the heterosexual matrix (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 77)

Our curiosity and wish to know about other people's gender and sex is deeply engrained in our society, and Judith Butler offers an explanation as to why: Essentially, sex and gender are what make humans human. Through language and performativity, gender and the binary gender

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[11] For a brief discussion of the use of "Western" in this dissertation, see chapter 3.1.

system are being reproduced over and over, and we therefore experience it as something real or essential. This connection and continuity of sex, gender and desire constitutes what Butler calls our cultural "matrix of intelligibility" (1999 [1990], p. 17), which is a useful concept in working on queering identities. If we do not fulfil these expectations linked to gender and sexuality in our society, we drop out of what we know and experience as "good" and "human". Gender is, however, not an essence but a social construct. Warner emphasises that "if we want to know about an identity, we have much to learn from studying the structures in which it emerges instead of the biological stuff we have wrapped around its existence" (2004 [1991], p. 324). Only by contemplating the social and cultural frameworks within which we grow up and live we may get insights into how (gender and sexual) identity works, and into how these structures shape us and our perception of identity. The connection to social constructivism is very clear here.

Not only does queer theory undermine the notion of essential identities; in recent years, the use of "queer" as an identity label is becoming more common, not only in English-speaking countries but in Flanders as well. The meaning of queer in this sense depends on the personal interpretation of the term, but in general, queer carries a notion of subversiveness, political awareness, and openness towards and/or sexual or romantic interest in people of diverse genders. Despite the fact that queer theory argues against essentially existing identities, more and more persons seem to feel comfortable labelling their identity as queer:

> Queer is more often embraced to point to fluidity in identity, recognising identity as a historically-contingent and socially-constructed fiction that prescribes and proscribes against certain feelings and actions. It signifies the messiness of identity, the fact that desire and thus desiring subjects cannot be placed into discrete identity categories, which remain static for the duration of people's lives. (Giffney, 2009, p. 2)

Similarly, Susan Driver describes that:

> The process of naming oneself queer is understood as a dynamic response and rearticulation of words and meanings in order to convey departures from heteronormative expectations. As such, queer is not a descriptor of fixed qualities but an instigator of a process of engaging with languages and inventing identifications. (Driver, 2007, p. 28)

In a similar vein but many years prior to Noreen Giffney and Driver, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, an influential queer theorist, speaks of an open mesh that queer extends: "'Queer' can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of

meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8). Alana Kumbier picks up this concept and summarizes the meaning of queer:

> The "open mesh" that "queer" enables extends beyond the realm of gender and sexuality to address dimensions of identification and discourses of identity that intersect with gender and sexuality, including race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and dis/ability. It's important to hold these possibilities in mind when we use queer—that it's not a consolidation, or an edgy way of saying LGBT, but it is instead a recognition of that open mesh—a shorthand for referring to the multitude of identifications, experiences and discourses that emerge in and from the daily lives of people who experience themselves between, outside of, and in tension with a number of normalizing forces, like neoliberal or capitalist socio-economic orders, or oppressive social practices and structures— including racism, colonialism, sexism, ableism, and classism. (2014, p. 7)

Putting this "open mesh of opportunities" into a more concrete and practical research context, van Anders (2015) proposes to think about sexual identities using the Sexual Configurations Theory. van Anders (2015) breaks down the limitations of the term "sexual orientation", which is caused by the vague and polysemous character of the term, and considers the difference between sexual orientation, sexual identity and status. Importantly, she questions what parameters exactly are taken into account when we speak about sexual orientation: For example, is it based on gender identities, gender expression or biological sex (van Anders, 2015)? She points out that there are numerous other "axes along which sexuality could revolve, including age, partner number, type of sexual activity, consent, solitary sexuality, and intensity" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1178). These reflections show the limitations with which we (are trained to) think about human sexual diversity, and the problem of over-simplification in thinking about sexual orientation. However, van Anders sticks to using the term sexual orientation, and in fact reclaims it:

> Though it is often understood to mean something that is innate, static, fixed, and/or essential, there is nothing intrinsically semantic about the term that necessitates this. In fact, orientation is used quite widely to mean just a set of interests without connotations of determinism or permanence. (van Anders, 2015, p. 1182)

This dynamic meaning of sexual orientation described here is the one I would like to employ in this dissertation. In that way, we are able to look beyond the most well-known and traditionally employed identity labels, and consider all self-identifications as sexual orientations. This way of

mapping sexual and gender identities shows that it is possible to take an open-minded, queer approach to the human urge to chart identities and structure knowledge.

Inversely, we may learn a lot about normative society and identity structures by researching queer lives. Working on non-binary identities, April Callis points out that non-conformist and non-normative identities are able to uncover underlying social constructs: "Situated between more normative sexualities, non-binary identities such as bisexual, queer, and pansexual provide a critical site for the investigation of how sexual identity is both constructed and de/reconstructed" (2014, p. 63-64). It is exactly identities that are not easily categorized which are able to expand our thinking about and knowledge on LGBTQ lives. In the same vein as Callis explains, queer studies not only inspired my approach towards LGBTQ identities, but also my research methodology and ethics (chapter 3).

Importantly, in the quote above Kumbier highlights that queer theory is not only concerned with gender and sexualities, but also with other aspects of our identities. The intersectionality of various identity traits was an interest for queer theorists ever since the discipline started to emerge. Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term intersectionality, writing about "the various ways race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's employment experiences" (1991, p. 1244). As Éléonore Lépinard puts it, "intersectionality has been adopted as the preferred term to refer to and to analyze multiple axes of oppression in feminist theory" (2014, p. 877). Lépinard summarises the most important ideas of intersectionality in four points:

> (1) The intersection of at least two axes of domination, such as race and gender, constitutes a social category with a specific experience of social life; (2) oppression is not experienced in a segmented but in a unified way, because social relations are interlocked rather than simply added one on top of the other; (3) this experience of a complex form of oppression shapes subjectivity and a specific standpoint and specific political interests; and (4) these political interests have been denied or misrepresented by theories or policies and need to be restored to the political agenda. (2014, p. 878)

Crenshaw discusses three kinds of intersectionality, namely structural, political and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to the social location and specific experiences of each person, and is intimately linked to political intersectionality, which in turn refers to the specific political interests each identity trait provokes and the intersection of these interests (1991). Representational intersectionality refers to the cultural construction of intersecting identities, e.g., women of colour or poor LGBTQs. Crenshaw emphasises that

although identity categories like race and gender are socially constructed, it does not mean that such categories have no significance in our world (1991, p. 1296). On the contrary, intersectionality may help us to expose how "power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1297).

Comparative, situated and ethnographic approaches to research aid in revealing the "interactivity of identity structures" and letting the voices of multiplicatively oppressed groups be heard (Gopaldas, 2013, p. 92). An awareness of multiple identity traits intersecting in each person leads to a deeper insight into their lived experience and self-perception.

Narrative Approaches to Identity

In this section, I specifically want to focus on narrative approaches to identity, which promise to be valuable within the frameworks of my research, tying in with the stance that LGBTQ identities are not assumed to be stable, fixed and essential. As already raised above, various constructionist strands of approaching identity emphasise the importance of narratives for our identities. Many critics agree that identities are socially constructed and conveyed through personal narratives. Stories and narratives constitute the core value of oral histories, as I will further discuss in my methodology section. The unique character of narration reflects each individual's agency and choices, as well as social, cultural and temporal influences which our identity is embedded in.

According to Dan McAdams and Kate McLean (2013, p. 235), our life story and narratives enable us to engage with Erik Erikson's key identity questions: Who am I? How did I come to be? Where is my life going? (1963). How exactly, though, do narratives contribute to or even create our sense of self and identity? Insights from cultural and memory studies feed this discussion. From a philosophical angle, Paul Ricoeur's work on narrative and time offers a rich starting point for discussing narrative identities. As Ricoeur puts it, in "telling stories and writing history we provide 'shape' to what remains chaotic, obscure, and mute" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 115). Indeed, stories help us make sense and structure our thoughts and experiences. Keith Negus (2012) applied Ricoeur's conceptions, investigating the way the popular song may work in the domains of time and narrative. Negus powerfully summarizes the relationships between narrative and identity in our socially constructed world through the eyes of Ricoeur:

> He suggests that the flux, the mess, the chaos, the uncertainty of temporality is given meaning, and is provided with a sense of order and continuity through narrative. Our sense of personal and collective identity is understood through narrative; identities are

comprehended as we create chronological stories with plots that organize our experience of events. As this inevitably involves recounting social interactions, our sense of identity will always entail a narrative that incorporates the views and behaviors of others. (Negus, 2012, p. 484)

Various dimensions of identity are integrated in narrating; therefore narrative identity is an extraordinarily rich and holistic, yet somewhat vague way of conceptualizing identity. The work of psychologists Bertram Hammack (2005) and Hammack and Philip Cohler (2009; 2011) sheds some light onto how narrative identity is a useful concept in studying identity throughout the life course. In Hammack's life course approach, two main principles interact: the principle of historical time and space, and the principle of human agency (2005, p. 269). From his point of view, the influence of history and biology on our identities is balanced by a strong notion of agency of each individual. As Hammack and Cohler put it,

> rather than consider sexual identity development as a static or 'essential' process, with clearly delineated stages, a life course approach views identity and desire as socially situated and politically embedded. The analysis of personal narratives provides access to the meaning individuals make as they navigate the politics of marginalization, subordination, and exclusion. (2011, p. 172)

Our personal narratives are situated within the cultural narratives we are born into and have to find our way in. Resisting or internalizing these norms, or finding a way in between, we inevitably have to navigate them (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). This view is seamlessly connected to the social constructionist approach of identity outlined above. Similarly, Michael Bamberg (2010, p. 5) summarizes the benefits of a narrative approach to identity:

> Narrating, as a speech activity that makes claims vis-à-vis the who-am-I question, requires the ordering of characters in space and time; and thus it has been argued to be a privileged genre for identity constructions: It requires the contextualization of characters in time and space to be presented and accomplished by use of bodily means—such as gestures, posture, facial cues, and gaze in close synchrony and coordination with the way speech is delivered.

Bamberg stresses that not only the story, but also the way in which the narrative is constructed, as well as extra-narrative features such as gestures should be taken into account. A narrative is thus not a two-dimensional, but rather a three-dimensional form of identity work. In order to better understand the various dimensions of narration and its contribution to identity, Bamberg

(2010) differentiates between the "self" as a synchronic, momentary conception of identity and "identity" as a diachronic conception of identity, which is in line with the definition of the same terms as adopted from Kotarba (2018) and discussed above. Rather than a full biographical approach, focusing on the big stories and whole lives as text, Bamberg suggests that a narrative practice approach focuses on small stories and their meaning: "Placing emphasis on small stories allows for the study of how people as agentive actors position themselves—and in doing so become positioned" (Bamberg, 2010, p. 13). Another important characteristic of personal narratives is that they do not necessarily recount an empirical truth, but rather, they convey a personal truth: "Personal narratives are, at core, meaning-making units of discourse. They are of interest precisely because narrators interpret the past in stories rather than reproduce the past as it was" (Riessman, 2002, p. 705).

Indeed, identity narration should be viewed critically: The emphasis lies on the individual experiences and interpretations, and it needs to be acknowledged that the personal experience of narrators is "created out of material circumstances" and does not exist as independent of social processes (Cerwonka, 2013, p. 64-65). Allaine Cerwonka cautions against naturalising and generalising personal experiences:

> If we take seriously psychoanalysis and/or the idea of social construction, we cannot presume that any of us can easily or competently explain our subjective experiences in life…. Much of what we as humans feel most deeply is beyond our ability to explain or be fully aware of. Thus, our personal narratives and analyses of our experience are at best partial and usually cannot provide a full analytical portrait … of the social world or even of ourselves. (2013, p. 67)

Indeed, Cerwonka touches upon what is possibly the biggest strength as well as weakness of a narrative approach to identity: Individual narratives cannot be generalised, and narratives fluctuate with each iteration, even for the narrator themselves. However, narratives provide an extraordinarily intimate access to life stories and identities at work. These characteristics of course have implications for research output in research engaging with narrative identity, but this topic will be further discussed in chapter 3. For now, I would like to focus on the specific benefits of employing a life story or narrative approach in researching LGBTQ lives, as has been acknowledged by various researchers (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2011; Pullen, 2012).

Sexual identity narratives are not only at work in personal stories, but also in society at large. Referring to his seminal book *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), Ken Plummer reflects on how narratives come into existence and how they develop over time (2017). What once was a private

thought and thus in narrative silence may become public narrative through story creation (Plummer, 2017). In the realm of sexuality, the coming out story is a typical example. According to Plummer, at a certain time we begin to identify ourselves with our own stories in what he terms "narrative identity":

> The moment when the stories people tell become part of their lives: Fragile momentary contingencies have been transformed into more stable organising essences. The stories become the person. When people become the holders of their own stories they often start to invent their identities around them and this becomes part of their own narrative world and order. (Plummer, 2017)

In many life narratives, it is indeed clear that the stories the narrators tell are part and parcel of their identity. They have been told before and will be told in the future, as they belong to the narrator's identity. Of course, even these stories will vary at any given telling.

Plummer engages with the social role of sexual stories (1995, p. 19), and stresses that sexual stories are always situated within wider frameworks of power (1995, p. 30). He refers to Rubin (1984) in explaining that in sexual stories, a hierarchy exists of what is good or bad sexuality. Indeed, Rubin's seminal article "Thinking Sex" is still a highly relevant resource in discussing sexual hierarchies and acceptance. Rubin calls for a pluralistic sexual ethics, which is difficult to develop without a concept of benign sexual variation: "Variation is a fundamental property of all life, from the simplest biological organism to the most complex human social formations. Yet sexuality is supposed to conform to a single standard" (2007 [1984], p. 153). More than 30 years later, Rubin's analysis of good versus bad sexuality from the 1980s still applies. Several aspects she describes with her Charmed Circle have, of course, evolved and taboos have diminished; but still, heterosexuality and partnerships of two persons only remain the dominant and socially desirable standards.

Figure 2: An updated drawing of Rubin's Charmed Circle (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 49)

Highlighting the shifts in thinking about sexuality throughout time, Plummer (1995) provides an overview of modernist and post-modernist sexual and coming out stories. In brief, according to Plummer, what constitutes modernist coming out stories are causal language, a linear progression, and the idea of discovering a truth (1995, p. 83). Many of the earlier theories on sexual identity development discussed above fit within this paradigm of the modernist coming out story. However, the lives of stories change together with communities and the social world which is ready to hear and acknowledge these stories: "A key point about the coming out stories is that they progressively acquired an *interpretive community of support* which enabled them to flourish" (Plummer, 1995, p. 121). In that way, the coming out story moved from being a private, secret story to being a well-known genre of stories. Plummer discusses what late modernist or post-modernist sexual stories may look like, and diagnoses that "modernist stories certainly still predominate, and are likely to continue well into the future" (1995, p. 133). A shift in "modes, moods, methods" and in "narratives, myths, metaphors" may characterise new sexual stories (Plummer, 1995, p. 135). The late modernist sexual story, then, is characterised by a move towards participant stories rather than authority stories, stories showcasing difference, multiplicity and a plural universe rather than an essential truth, and stories of deconstruction, in which irony, self-consciousness and play take over from the belief that language reflects reality

(Plummer, 1995, p. 133-134). Indeed, to some extent, we "invent ourselves from the contradictory stories around us" (Plummer, 1995, p. 135). These observations by Plummer provide an interesting background for interpreting my narrators' life stories further on in this dissertation.

Other researchers similarly engage with the interaction between sexual stories that have become established in society and the personal sexual identity narrative. Edmund Coleman-Fountain researches how LGBTQ youth navigate the grand narratives of the community and how they interact with the established LGBTQ identity labels. He draws attention to the complexity of LGBTQ life narratives:

> As Plummer (2012, p. 84) says, there is '*never* simply a discourse but an active process of narrating, symbolizing, storying, even performing' the worlds in which we live in [sic]. Sexual categories, and the stories told around them are at the heart of this as the way in which sexual identities are made. Sexual differences are reinforced by how categories and narratives become embedded in society, as a product of wider material relations within a structure[d] social whole, shaping the stories that people tell of who and what they are. (2014b, p. 29)

Coleman-Fountain takes a narrative approach to identity, addressing the "'everyday' nature of sexuality, seeing it as bound up in everyday sociality" (2011, p. 7). The youths' life stories are interpreted in the context of pre-existing narratives: "It is through stories that people make sense of themselves, as active meaning-makers. This allows for the potential for counter-narratives that contest available representations […] but which are nonetheless rooted in existing historical conditions" (Coleman-Fountain, 2014b, p. 4). Narratives leave room to explore the many dimensions of identity: "Understanding identity as a story recognizes how people negotiate complex and often contradictory subject positions" (Coleman-Fountain, 2014b, p. 4).

In the same vein as Butler, Hammack and Cohler state that "our narrative understanding of sexual identity is inseparably linked to our cultural conception of human development itself" (2009, p. 8). Not only is our sense of self connected to the narratives of our sexual and gender identity, but also our understanding and perception of broader societal issues is related to how we think and talk about sexuality and gender.

Recapitulation

Based on the discussions of social construction and queer studies, I conceptualize LGBTQ identity as socially constructed, non-linear and fluid. Approaching identities as narratives has proved to allow insights into the personal experience of and reflections about identities. As I do not aim to chart and categorize identities in this project, these approaches offer valuable backgrounds. Putting this conception of identity into practice, and in order to acknowledge the "open mesh" of possible identities, I ask the narrators to speak about their identifications in their own terms, in as many words as they like, instead of providing sexual and gender categories for the narrators to choose from. This very open approach to identity categories is in accordance with the constructionist and queer understanding that biological sex, gender identification and sexual preferences are not situated in a binary and fixed system, but all exist on different levels and may change over time. Most importantly, the way my research narrators talk about their selves and identity is central to each life story. The terms and concepts my narrators use to describe themselves are the terms I use when discussing their life stories.

2.2   Theorizing Music in Everyday Life, Identity and Memory

Moving from the discussion of (LGBTQ-) identities, this chapter tackles the second large research area my dissertation is situated within, namely the sociological study of music. Taking into account social constructionist, queer and narrative approaches to identity, I aim to map and interpret these identities as they are linked to music in my narrators' life stories. The subtitle of my dissertation, "the roles of music in LGBTQ lives", leaves plenty of room for interpretation. In an overview of relevant theories and research on music in everyday life, I will situate the way I approach music in this project and touch upon other possible approaches to learn about the roles of music in real life contexts. Thereby, it will become clearer what roles music generally may play in our lives, and what answers I am looking for in my interviews. I will, however, not narrow down music in the sense of genres or intensity of listening or passive versus active musical activity, to provide the opportunity to discuss a broad spectrum of topics related to music. This is also mirrored in the structure of my theoretical discussions: The starting point is a general interest in music in our everyday lives, how we experience and engage with music, and how it may play a role in our identities.

Generally, just like in the discussion of identities above, my approach to music falls in line with what Göran Bolin (2017, p. 21) describes as a constructionist approach to media. Music is viewed as a dynamic interplay of institutional, technological and phenomenological layers. The focus lies on how media are perceived from within the lives and worlds of media users, which puts an emphasis on the individual agency of the media consumer/ music listener (Bolin, 2017, p. 21). Bolin stresses the social dimensions of media: "Social interaction is taking place *within* as well as *with* and *through* 'the media environment'", confirming again that media are a technological structure as well as a symbolic world at the same time. As Bolin concedes, this approach makes it more difficult to analyse empirically (2017, p. 21), as many different layers are at work at the same time.

First, I will discuss approaches to music in everyday life and to the question why music matters. The focus lies on socio-cultural approaches to music; yet, as different disciplines engaging with music have similar approaches and findings and influence each other, these will briefly be discussed as well.

Second, I zoom in on the connection of music and identity within the sociological study of music. Understanding how music and identity interact and affect each other is one of my central research aims. Building on the constructionist, queer and narrative approach to identity

discussed above, music's role in identity processes is investigated. Plenty of research engages with music and identity, and I will review the most important authors informing my own approach.

In the third section, I focus on music and memory. The connection between music, memory and narrative is essential to my project. In narrating life stories and narratively establishing one's identity, music has an important function, as content of the life stories as well as structurally, namely as a vehicle for memories. Within memory studies and sound studies as well as various other disciplines, the mnemonic qualities of music are researched and appreciated, which I will provide an overview of.

Why Music Matters: Music in Everyday Life

Why does music matter in our lives? This question has preoccupied thinkers of many disciplines and still remains of interest. The titles of relatively recently published popularizing books on the topic reveal that we keep being intrigued by why music matters, socially and aesthetically: *Musicophilia. Tales of Music and the Brain* by Oliver Sacks (2007), *How Music Works* by David Byrne (2012) and *You Are the Music. How music reveals what it means to be human* by Victoria Williamson (2014) are only a few examples. Philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote plenty of essays on music between 1930 and 1969 (selected by Leppert and published as a collection in 2002), and Diedrich Diedrichsen offers his approach to the phenomenon of pop music in *Über Pop-Musik* (2014). In the academic context, various disciplines engage with the role of music in our daily lives. I will provide a short overview of dominant approaches to music in everyday life in music psychology, music sociology and in ethnographic contexts in this section, which are the disciplines most related to my own approach, keeping in mind that I study music as experienced by individual listeners.

Music psychology mostly takes experimental approaches to research the functions of music in our daily lives, as the overview of music in social psychology by Peter Rentfrow (2012) shows. Current studies often take place in experimental settings and focus on mood and emotions, personal and individual differences, self and identity, social perception and attraction and social bonding (Rentfrow, 2012). Thomas Schäfer and colleagues summarize the four most important sets of functions of music as identified in music psychology: "*Social functions* (such as the expression of one's identity or personality), *emotional functions* (such as the induction of positive feelings), *cognitive or self-related functions* (such as escapism) and *arousal-related*

functions (such as calming down or passing time)" (Schäfer et al., 2013, p. 5). These dimensions indeed provide a good sense of "the basic ways in which people use music in their daily lives" (Schäfer et al., 2013, p. 5). In a similar vein, David Hargreaves and Adrian North discuss the "social functions of music for the individual", manifesting itself in the management of self-identity, interpersonal relationships and mood (1999, p. 79). These studies show interesting results on music and affect, and are to some extent similar to findings in qualitative studies concerning the use of music in everyday life. However, music psychology often does not take into account contextualised music use in everyday life as opposed to experimental conditions, or how the listeners describe the meaning of music in their own terms.

Although music is being researched in many ways, there is still a "dearth in the biographical analysis in the sociological study of music consumption", as Ben Green rightly observes (2016, p. 334). Most studies in this area focus on specific genres or music groups, rather than the individual life narrative. Andy Bennett states that since the beginning of the cultural turn in the 1990s, music is understood as "one of the available means through which individuals are able to actively construct their identity, lifestyle and even sense of place in late modernity" (Bennett, 2008, p. 427). Yet, there is not one singular cultural sociological approach to the study of popular music (2008, p. 420). There are, however, several scholars who independently work on the cultural sociology of popular music, such as Tia DeNora, Simon Frith, David Hesmondhalgh and Andy Bennett. These scholars' works form an important basis for the sociological and cultural study of the roles of music in our lives. The authors take a sociological approach to music, with DeNora and Frith mostly focusing on the positive effects of music, and Hesmondhalgh taking up a more critical stance. Bennett describes that a recent current in the sociology of pop music is the "endeavor to illustrate the highly nuanced, localized and subjective ways in which music and cultural practice align in everyday contexts" (2008, p. 429). My project aims to contribute new insights to this field.

Frith, one of the most influential sociologists engaging with pop music, states that "a sociological approach to popular music does not rule out an aesthetic theory but, on the contrary, makes one possible" (1987, p. 133). Taste and aesthetic values are not only at work in classical music and High Culture, but in the appreciation of popular music as well (1987, p. 135). Bennett sums up Frith's take on sociology and popular music:

> For Frith, then, top-down analyses of musical texts, the political economy of the music industry or the 'authenticity' of particular popular music artists may claim to explain for us how popular music 'works' at a cultural level, but equally important in this respect is

an engagement with the aesthetic practices and value judgements of music audiences themselves. (Bennett, 2008, p. 425)

Furthermore, in taking a Cultural Studies approach, Frith calls for not only asking what (popular) music reveals about its listeners, but also how it constructs them (1987, p. 137). Music experience is highly individual due to its abstractness, which enables it to speak directly to our emotions:

We absorb songs into our own lives and rhythms into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible. Pop songs are open to appropriation for personal use in a way that other popular cultural forms (television soap operas, for example) are not—the latter are tied into meanings we may reject. (Frith, 1987, p. 139)

Yet, music is "rule-bound", as it is embedded in social conventions; and some music works for us while other music does not (Frith, 1987). While we clearly experience and feel what our music taste is, it cannot be grasped or logically explained. According to Frith, it is exactly this combination of the mystery of (shared) musical taste and the direct personal impact music has on us that makes it invaluable: "[The] interplay between personal absorption into music and the sense that it is, nevertheless, something out there, something public, is what makes music so important in the cultural placing of the individual in the social" (1987, p. 139). As DeNora puts it, Frith views music as "providing a resource in and through which agency and identity are produced" (2000, p. 5), and these dynamics are observable in real life, for example through ethnography.

In a similar vein, in her book *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), sociologist DeNora investigates and describes how music functions in our social and individual everyday lives. She describes that within the sociology of music there is a shift of concerns from "what music means" to "what music does" (2000, p. 49). De Nora's approach to music in everyday life differs from the traditional musicologist approach, which is often a semiotic one. A semiotic approach to music focuses on the musical work only and according to DeNora, it tends to conflate music's *affect* with the way music actually works and is used by recipients (2000, p. 21). Conversely, studies on the reception of music like audience studies tend to abandon the concern with the music itself (DeNora, 2000, p. 23). DeNora calls for an interdisciplinary approach in studying the role of music in social life, considering the music itself as well as its context and audience (DeNora, 2000, p. 23). Indeed, music is more than a symbol which can be analysed through a semiotic reading:

Music is a material that actors use to elaborate, to fill out and fill in, to themselves and to others, modes of aesthetic agency and, with it, subjective stances and identities. This,

then, is what should be meant when we speak of 'cultural construction of subjectivity'—and this is much more than an idea that culture underwrites generic structures of feeling or aesthetic agency as is implied in so many post-structuralist writings and by musicologists trained in semiotic analysis of texts. Such structuralist perspectives remain distanced from the heart of the matter, from how individuals not only experience culture, but also how they mobilize culture for being, doing and feeling. (2000, p. 74)

DeNora considers music as a dynamic material of social existence, and her in-depth interviews show that the respondents have a considerable awareness about the functions of music in their lives. DeNora concludes that "the use of music in private life and the study of this use turned out to be one of the most important features of the constitution and regulation of self" (2000, p. 49). This bold statement points to the importance of the role music plays in relation to self-identity. DeNora stresses that music's power does not only derive from the musical stimulus, but also from the ways in which the listener appropriates the music (2000, p. 42). More specifically, DeNora suggests that music provides a map for making sense of something it is attached to and that sociologists should engage with the question "of how listeners draw upon musical elements as resources for organizing and elaborating their own perceptions of non-musical things, whether these things are the perception of an opera's characters or the perception of a particular plane journey as 'safe'" (De Nora, 2000, p. 26).

Likewise, various researchers have investigated the role of music on our emotional state. Marjorie Kibby, for example, found that music contributes to the construction of an alternative space for oneself: "Music becomes an artificial soundscape that is consciously used to replace the extant sonic environment. Music is also used as protection against the internal noise of unwanted thoughts or feelings" (2009, p. 438). She further specifies that "music provides an illusion of control over both the external world and the inner self" (Kibby, 2009, p. 438). As these examples show, the relationship between music and the thing it is attached to does not necessarily have to be of a highly intellectual or spiritual kind. Seemingly trivial things in life, as well as more serious factors like emotional stability or social relationships may be linked with music. According to this stance, music's role in social life cannot be merely theorized, but needs to be explored in situ.

With his 2013 book *Why Music Matters,* Hesmondhalgh joins the tradition of the sociological study of music. Hesmondhalgh agrees with the stance that music takes up important functions in emotional work and identifies what he terms three predominant explanations of the close relationship between music and emotions: Music imitates or represents emotions; it arouses

emotions as well as expresses them (2013, p. 12). Yet, Hesmondhalgh points out that generally, the intensity of everyday musical emotions tends to be low and hardly qualifies as aesthetic experiences at all (2013, p. 14). As this concessional note already suggests, Hesmondhalgh takes up a critical stance towards the work of Frith, DeNora and other sociologists of music. With his book, he provides "a critical defence of music", reviewing and revising sociological, anthropological and philosophical approaches to music. He points out that the shared dominant approach to music, identity and emotion conceives of music as a "positive resource for active self-making" (2008, p. 330) and offers a critical revision:

> The dominant conception (music as a positive resource for self-identity) seems to me to downplay various ways in which music may become implicated in some less pleasant and even disturbing features of modern life. The dominant conception rightly emphasises the social nature of music and of self-identity, but if music is as imbricated with social processes as the dominant conception suggests, then it is hard to see how people's engagements with music can be so consistently positive in their effects, when we live in societies that are marked by inequality, exploitation and suffering. (2008, p. 333).

Importantly, Hesmondhalgh asserts that music is unlikely to remain unaffected by broader social dynamics, like injustice, inequality, alienation and oppression (2013, p. 35). Not every person is able to access and use music as freely as they wish; their social, historical and their personal biographies may limit how humans can act on their environment and upon their selves (2013, p. 41). Furthermore, music may not only be used to speak the truth, but could also function in keeping up appearances. Music may even be seen in connection with a certain duty to have pleasure, and at the basis of status battles in modern society (Hesmondhalgh, 2008 & 2013). Hesmondhalgh points out some important shortcomings in the sociological approach to music, and his critique based on logical arguments is a valuable addition to the predominantly positive depiction of music in our lives. In Hesmondhalgh's view, we need an understanding of "music's constrained enrichment of lives" (2013, p. 53), considering the following four facts: Music can heighten people's awareness of continuity and development in life; music can combine a healthy integration of different aspects of our being, combining reflection and self-awareness with kinetic pleasure; music can heighten our understanding of how others might think and feel and music provides considerable rewards to those who play it regularly (2013, p. 53ff). These concessions are important to take along when researching the role of music in the context of

everyday lives: Not all persons experience music with the same intensity, in the same social contexts, or with the same amount of emotions and memories connected to it.

Another scholar who has engaged in the same field as Frith, DeNora and Hesmondhalgh is Bennett. Among other topics, he investigates music scenes, as well as the relationship of pop music sociology and the cultural turn, which has influenced academic work since the mid-1990s. In the course of the cultural turn, conventional ideas about pop music as simply a reflection of a pre-determined social reality are being challenged, and music is understood as "one of the available means through which individuals are able to actively construct their identity, lifestyle and even sense of place in late modernity" (Bennett, 2008, p. 427). In what he terms the post-cultural turn in the sociology of pop music, an effort is made to "illustrate the highly nuanced, localized and subjective ways in which music and cultural practice align in everyday contexts" (Bennett, 2008, p. 429). Accordingly, music scenes are actually the product of highly reflexive, creative practices among individuals (Bennett, 2008, p. 429). This approach delivers much less uniform findings about music scenes, compared to top-down analyses of music genres and scenes (Bennett, 2008, p. 429), and focuses on individual listener characteristics such as agency, irony and reflexivity (Bennett, 2008, p. 426).

Overall, the work of these four theorists inspired many researchers, and functions as a foundation for the way I approach music in my project. Moreover, I take an empirical and contextual approach to music, as it is embedded in the everyday lives of my research narrators. Music is conceived of as an everyday activity or practice rather than an object: "A practice approach to media frames its questions by reference, not to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act (Couldry, 2012, p. 35). The listener and their processes of meaning making are more central than the meaning of song lyrics or musical structures. As William Roy and Timothy Dowd describe, "the contextual approach to music maintains that the meaning is never purely in the music because there is never 'a' meaning" (2010, p. 189). Meaning is therefore understood as a set of activities (e.g., interpretation, reflection) rather than a product (Roy & Dowd, 2010, p. 189). Likewise, Christopher Small's concept of "musicking" (1999) acknowledges that music is not merely an object, but an (inter)active form of expression and communication— hence the verbal form "musicking". Roy and Dowd summarize that "Small's musicological position is inherently sociological because it highlights the intertwining of music and interaction [and] people use music to give meaning to themselves and their world" (2010, p. 187).

This empirical and contextual approach to music in everyday life is one I share with biographical and ethnographic researchers like Taylor (e.g., 2012), Istvandity (2014a, 2014b), Green (2016) and other authors, whose work will be discussed later on in my dissertation.

Music and Identity

The previous section focused on general roles of music in our everyday lives. However, sociologists and musicologists have paid special attention to the links of music and identity, social identity as well as personal identity. As these links between music and identity are central to my research question, I decided to dedicate a section to this topic. I will refer to the same authors as discussed above, as all of them engage with music and identity to some extent in their work. In line with a sociological approach to music, I assert that identity and music are interwoven and interact on various different levels in each person's life. Music aids in finding and expressing one's identity, as "musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity—for identity's identification" (DeNora, 2000, p. 49). Not only does music reflect its listeners; it also produces them through the creation and construction of the self (Frith, 1996). Roy and Dowd concisely sum up the connections between music and identity: "Music both signals and helps constitute the identity of individuals and collectivities" (2010, p. 189). This double function of music as constructive and expressive element of identity is what makes music especially interesting to research in connection to identity.

According to Frith, the first and foremost reason adolescents and grown-ups enjoy music is because of its links with our identities:

> We enjoy popular music because of its use in answering questions of identity: We use pop songs to create for ourselves a particular sort of self-definition, a particular place in society. The pleasure that pop music produces is a pleasure of identification—with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it. (1987, p. 140)

Frith focuses on popular music here, but I would like to argue that other musical genres may have the same functions. Music can virtually be seen as a metaphor for identity: It is both performance and story, ethic and aesthetics; music is a simultaneous projecting and dissolving of the self in performance (Frith, 1996, p. 109-110). Frith reverses the usual academic and critical argument: "The issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience—that we can only make

sense of by taking on both a subjective and a collective identity" (1996, p. 109). According to Frith, music not only tells things about people, but also creates them, and thus "the question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about the people who play and use it, but how does it create them as a people, as a web of identities?" (Frith, 1996, p. 121). Identity is always an ideal, not who we are, but who we want to be—yet at the same time, it is real as we enact it in musical activities (Frith, 1996, p. 123). He concludes:

> Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives. Such a fusion of imaginative fantasy and bodily practice makes also the integration of aesthetics and ethics. (Frith, 1996, p. 124)

Like Frith, DeNora stresses that music and identity mutually influence each other. As DeNora writes, music may actually serve as a model of self: "Music is one of the resources to which actors turn when they engage in the aesthetic reflexive practice of configuring self and/or others as emotional and aesthetic agents, across a variety of scenes, from quasi-public … to intensely private" (2000, p. 158). DeNora calls this interaction between music and personal experience "musical framing":

> Musical materials provide parameters (stylistic, physical, conventional) that are used to frame dimensions of experience (interpretation, perception, valuation, comportment, feeling, energy). This framing is central to the way in which music comes to serve as a device for the constitution of human agency. Musical framing occurs when music's properties are somehow projected or mapped on to something else, when music's properties are applied to and come to organize something outside themselves. (DeNora, 2000, p. 27)

What DeNora describes here is an active engagement with music, conscious or unconscious, in contrast to a conception that music acts on us but we remain passive as listeners or users. Importantly, "music is not simply used to express some internal emotional state. Indeed, that music is part of the reflexive constitution of that state, it is a resource for the identification work of 'knowing how one feels'—a building material of 'subjectivity'" (DeNora, 2000, p. 57). Music serves to find self-affirmation and can become a social property the listener identifies with (DeNora, 2000). Similar to studies in music psychology, DeNora finds that music is used as self-care, to shift moods and energies. From her in-depth interviews and ethnographic work with women on their use of music in everyday life, she concludes:

> Respondents use music as a resource for the conduct of emotional 'work', and for heightening or changing energy levels. They also turn to music as a device for on-going identity work and for spinning a biographical thread of self-remembrance. Music provides respondents with a scaffolding for self-constitution. (DeNora, 1999, p. 31)

Listeners tend to find things they value about themselves in the music they listen to, and music thus functions as a self-affirmation. In that way, music and the self mutually reference each other (DeNora, 2000, p. 69). To sum up, DeNora's approach to music in identity work is in line with viewing identity as a (social) construction rather than an essence; the same way identity is approached in this research, and her findings confirm close connections between music and identity.

Of course, these academics are not the only ones engaging with music and identity. Hargreaves and colleagues, for example, published an edited volume entitled *Musical Identities* (2002). Similar to narratives of ourselves, music can contribute to our sense of self: "Music is a fundamental channel of communication, and we argue that it can act as a medium through which people can construct new identities and shift existing ones in the same way as spoken language" (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 10). The importance of music and its connection to self-identity varies for each individual, and Hargreaves and colleagues suggest that those with a higher level of musical engagement will find that music is a more integral part of their self-identity (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 12). For example, performers, those with a job in music, or fans may experience that music is more essential to their self-identity than, for example, a casual listener.

As we have seen, music has an impact on our identity, and at the same time, we use music to explore, create and express ourselves. Importantly, music not only works within and interacts with the personal identity of the listeners, but also within social identities. Furthermore, we have learned that music is an important tool in expressing and regulating emotions, which applies to trivial, everyday situations as well as to critical moments of heightened necessity to regulate one's emotions.

Music, Memory and Narrative[12]

> Understood in terms of bodily affect, the mind is a sewing machine that quilts personal memory onto recorded music, stitched together by emotion and feelings. (van Dijck, 2006, p. 364)

Memory and recollection are essential for my research: All life stories are told according to the personal memories and memorabilia of the narrators. Music and identity are the focal points in these life stories, and here, music's unique link to memory becomes a valuable facilitator for telling one's life story. Music is a temporal medium, and functions as an *aide-mémoire* as it evokes the points in time when the listener previously listened to it. As sociologist of music DeNora states, the past often comes alive by its soundtrack: "It consists of an interlacing of experience (feeling, action) and the materials that are accessed as the referents for experience, its metaphoric and temporal parameters" (2000, p. 67). Like in the opening quote by José van Dijck, we see that musical memories connect concrete situations with affective dimensions. Karen Bijsterveld and van Dijck edited a collection called *Sound Souvenirs*, in which the relationship between sound, musical ephemera and collectibles and memory takes centre stage (2009). In their introduction, they quote Susan Bluck (2003), who identified three functions of autobiographical memory: To preserve a sense of being a coherent person over time, to strengthen social bonds by sharing personal memories, and to use past experience to construct models for understanding the inner self in relation to others. These functions of autobiographical memory are reinforced by sounds and sound souvenirs. Bijsterveld and van Dijck (2009, p. 14) investigate why we remember music that well, and propose that the combination of the structural exactness of our memory of musical composition and the high variety of individual associations elicited by music may be at the heart of it: "music's ability to elicit highly personal emotions and associations seems to help people relive their past over and over again" (2009, p. 13). This characteristic of music holds true for private musical memories as well as shared memories with other persons or even as a link between a whole group of people. Similarly, in an experimental setting Matthew Schulkind and colleagues found that adults are "more likely to recall information or retrieve autobiographical memory when they were cued by a song that moved them emotionally" (1999, p. 952).

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[12] Parts of this section are published in: Wasserbauer, M. (2018). On Queer Musical Memories. In J. Eckhardt (Ed.), *Grounds for Possible Music. On Gender, Voice, Language, and Identity.* (p. 36-44) Berlin: Errant Bodies.

van Dijck identifies various levels of music in memory work: embodiment (how do individuals endow recorded music with emotion and affect?), enabling (how do recording and listening techniques enable a specific recollection?), embedded (how do social practices shape collective memories of the past?) (2006, p. 359). The function of music as a marker of individual and shared memory is therefore connected to many sorts of relationships. An array of research engaging with music and memory on these different levels demonstrates the ongoing interest in the topic. For example, Arno van der Hoeven's research on dance music and the cultural meanings of decade-based nostalgia (2014) discusses these dynamics on a community basis, and Bethany Klein discusses the phenomenon of "our song" in relationships, describing music as "a vessel for embedded memory" (2006, p. 21). In a research set up similar to my own, Lauren Istvandity engages with the connection between music, emotion and autobiographical memory, analysing 28 in-depth interviews (2014). *The Memory of Sound* (Street, 2015), by contrast, is a more poetic approach to the topic.

The temporality of music not only functions in remembering the past but, naturally, in the first place in shaping experiences. On some occasions, we consciously choose specific music, for example to change or enhance our mood, to find ourselves and express ourselves. However, music may also *just be there* at a certain time. When it becomes linked to certain events or persons, what initially is arbitrary becomes symbolic: "A good deal of music's affective powers come from its co-presence with other things—people, events, scenes" (DeNora, 2000, p. 66). DeNora calls this the "conditional presence" of music (2000, p. 66).

Negus argues that songs place events before us in sequence, but that they do not necessarily order or establish a causal relationship between events (2012, p. 495). This thought-provoking claim acknowledges the structuring properties of music in personal narratives, without automatically assuming that music carries a notion of causality. Negus's view on songs and narratives parallels a broader important factor in oral histories: There is never anything like 'the full story'; rather, life stories and "songs allow glimpses of life in progress" (Negus, 2012, p. 495). Negus suggests that "the contemporary pop song—conspicuously neglected in narratology and debates about narrative theory—provides insights into how we seek to give meaning to our temporal selves (as songwriters, singers, listeners)" (2012, p. 492). The popular song is seen as a logical facilitator in music and identity: "As a mode of narrative discourse […], the humble popular song—an "art of time"—has numerous insights to impart, as it mediates between notions of interior and exterior, public and private, fact and fiction" (Negus, 2012, p. 497).

Popular music shapes popular memory and organises our sense of time, as Frith describes: "One of the most obvious consequences of music's organization of our sense of time is that songs and tunes are often the key to our remembrance of things past" (1987, p. 142). Referring to Martha Nussbaum's work, Hesmondhalgh asserts that narrative artworks, for example musical ones, give information about the history of emotions connected to them, which leads to a fuller understanding of these emotions (2013, p. 15-16). Music may provide the narrative and history linked to an emotion, and thus may take a central role in human self-understanding (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 15-16).

As the fields of musicology, psychology and sociology agree on, many musical memories stem from the formative youth years until the late twenties, when music and pop culture are especially relevant. These years full of new life experiences often form us in a musical sense, as media scholar Bolin (2017, p. 10) expresses:

> One component in the generational media experience is thus the intimate relationship that develops with media personalities and content from one's formative youth period. This especially concerns music genres and stars. However, people also develop specific, sometimes passionate, relationships with reproduction technologies such as the vinyl record, music cassette tapes, comics, and other now dead or near-dead media forms.

The music we get to know and love in these years often accompanies us throughout life. Studies in music psychology confirm a strong connection of music and autobiographical memory from the years of adolescence (see e.g., Krumhansl and Zupnick, 2013). This specific connection of music to our formative years will be further investigated in chapter 4.1 on coming of age.

However, we need to acknowledge the unreliability of people's memories, and music may lead to romanticising or sentimentalising the past (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, p. 338). Hesmondhalgh makes an important point here, but at the same time fails to acknowledge that this holds true for all memories, whether they are connected to music or not: Memories are never completely reliable or neutral. I think that the assumption that memories evoked through music should be *reliable* or *true*, is a false one. Music's strength in evoking memories is exactly its intuitive and emotional connection to the past and not necessarily a factual relationship to it. Indeed, the unreliability of memories is not a weakness, but simply a human trait we need to acknowledge: "Rather than being an account of what objectively happened, memory is a narrative that is successively worked on by the individual and is refined each time it is returned to" (Bolin, 2017, p. 30). The argument about the factual reliability of musical memories holds true for life stories and narratives in general as well. Memories constitute the core value of oral histories, and, as

argued above, narratives are valuable in constructing identities and allow unique insights into the personal experience of and reflections about identities.

Uniting the topics of narrative, the role of things to remember and music, van Dijck describes the functions of music and musical memorabilia as *aides-mémoires* and how they can deeply affect us:

> Upon later recall, recorded songs work as triggers, bringing back waves of emotion, the specificity of a time, an event, a relationship or evoking more general feelings. This "wordless storytelling" precedes language and happens entirely inside our brain; memory for recorded songs appears to hold longer when people turn emotion-infested sounds into internal narratives. (2006, p. 360-361)

By talking about our experiences with music, we talk about ourselves in ways that words alone might not be able to describe. Music, therefore, is not only intimately interwoven with our personal identity; it is also an excellent medium to access life narratives. Neurologist Sacks goes even further and ponders that "when we 'remember' a melody, it plays in our mind; it becomes newly alive" (2007, p. 212). Furthermore, like Hesmondhalgh (2013), van Dijck argues that musical memories manifest themselves at the intersection of personal and collective memory and identity (2006, p. 358). In line with these findings—and at the basis of my general research outset—I propose that music is an excellent way to access individual and collective identities. This naturally holds true throughout the spectrum of genders and sexual preferences, but in my work, I focus on LGBTQ persons. The LGBTQ umbrella encompasses an extremely diverse group of persons, united by their non-normative genders and sexualities. These identity features may be accessed and explored through musical memories and memorabilia.

Recapitulation

Through its connections with our emotions and its capability to invoke memories, as well as its being embedded in our sociocultural and historical environments, music is a rich source through which we may learn about a person's personal and social identity. Music may take up many different roles in our (experience of) selves, identities and throughout our life course, and each person experiences the ways music works differently. Like identity itself, music and our connection to it is changeable and fluid throughout our lives. Accordingly, in my interviews, I will investigate how and in which ways music plays a role in the specific contexts in each narrator's life story. As I have already hinted at and will discuss in my methodology chapter, music has a double function in my research: First, music and its connections with identity are

the focus of the life stories with regards to content. Second, music provides a framework within which I explore and talk about life stories and identities and it structures the interviews. Qualitative research such as oral history offers a good vantage point for research on music and individual identity in everyday life, as the narrators not only talk about which music they listen to, but they also immediately contextualize and, at least to a certain extent, interpret their use and experience of music.

2.3 The Sound of Music and LGBTQs

After discussing LGBTQ identities and music separately, I will dedicate this chapter to the intersection of both. As we saw in the discussion on identities above, the LGBTQ community encompasses a great variety of different identities and in many ways is not a uniform community. The common denominator within the community, namely a shared non-normative gender identity and/or non-heterosexuality does not immediately evoke any musical connections. However, music does have important functions within the community, related to the collective social identity as well as in leisure and night life. Musicality and homosexuality are closely associated in the popular imagination, as well as in queer vernacular: *musical* was even used as an insider expression for being gay (Hubbs, 2000, p. 390). Another musical expression referring to gay men or LGBTQs is "friends of Dorothy". It is inspired by the film "The Wizard of Oz" (1939), in which Judy Garland plays the character of Dorothy, who accepts all those who are "different" in any way. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", from the film's Oscar-winning soundtrack, still is an LGBTQ anthem.

As established above, my dissertation focuses on the narrators' personal engagements and experiences with music and how they make connections between their gender, sexual preference and music. If any link to the LGBTQ-scene, musical and social, is established, it is through the narrator's individual experience. Therefore, I am most interested in musicological and sociological contributions on LGBTQs and music which focus on the individual use and experience of music. However, generally speaking, music has had important functions within the LGBTQ community for a long time, and continues to be a connecting cultural force. Therefore, I want to pay some attention to historical work focusing on music and LGBTQ cultures, as this is indispensable background information.

Providing an overview of the constitution of LGBTQ cultures, Dhoest, Herreman and Wasserbauer (2015) argue that music has played an important role in LGBTQ cultures, and still does. Indeed, Martin Aston's recently published book *Breaking Down the Walls of Heartache. How Music Came Out* (2016) shows that the conscious link between music and LGBTQ cultures may be traced back to the late 1800s. He provides a detailed and extensive historical overview of LGBTQ musicians, LGBTQ references in songs, and political implications, up until today. Highlighting the activist dimensions of LGBTQ music, Aston states that "if any art form can be cited above all other in furthering the cause and rights of LGBTQ people, surely it's music" (2016, p. xvi). In his book, Aston focuses on LGBTQ pioneers of all kinds, and at the same time sketches

the socio-historical contexts for LGBTQs in each decade of the 20th century up until now, showing how music reflects its time.

Historical and ethnographic works like George Chauncey's (1994) delve deep into the role of culture and music in LGBTQ lives in specific times and places. In the Flemish context, research by Robbe Herreman, Alexander Dhoest and Bart Eeckhout (2015) and Herreman and Dhoest (2017) contributes to the understanding of music's role in the LGBTQ community in a historical perspective. Notably, Herreman (2014; 2017) investigates the development of an LGB culture in Antwerp, Belgium, from 1900-1960. LGB bars and cafés provided important safe spaces in which the community was able to flourish (Herreman, 2017) and at the same time are contexts which are often linked to music. Likewise, Paul Borghs (2015) dedicates attention to cultural aspects linked to the community in his history of the LGBTQ movement in Flanders.

Academic interest in music, gender and sexualities overall has grown substantially since the 1990s. By now, there is a great wealth of scholarship engaging with various gendered and sexual dimensions in music from a sociological, psychological as well as musicological point of view. I will here provide an overview of some relevant research into music's specific role in LGBTQ lives from a musicological, sociological and ethnographic perspective.

Reading Music as Queer Text and Reading Musical Text Queerly

In their seminal musicological essay "Lesbian and Gay Music" (2002), Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood survey various connections between music and non-heterosexuality ranging from the discussion of queer composers to political lyrics. Among other topics, they muse about the connection between musicality and homosexuality, which was established early on after the concept of homosexuality entered our collective thinking. According to Brett and Wood, certain music may be read or recognised as gay or lesbian music because of references or allusions to homosexuality; because the artist is an LGBTQ person, or because of certain practices and styles which are connected to gay culture, like camp and diva worship (Herreman & Dhoest, 2017, p. 48).

Among the most influential works in the field of LGBTQ musicology in the early 1990s is Susan McClary's essay on feminine endings. Reviewing her work twenty years later, McClary calls for interdisciplinary research engaging with music listeners (2011). A series of edited volumes collecting work on music and masculinity, femininity, feminist and queer perspectives contributes importantly to LGBTQ musicological scholarship. The most notable works include

those edited by Sheila Whiteley, feminist musicologist and important contributor to the foundations of the study of music, sexualities and gender: *Sexing the Groove. Popular Music and Gender* (1997), edited by Whiteley, and *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2007), edited by Whiteley and Rycenga. Brett, Wood, and Thomas' edited volume *Queering the Pitch. The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (2nd ed., 2006) features essays of the most important scholars taking a gay and lesbian studies or queer approach to musicology. In the volume *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, edited by Freya Jarman-Ivens (2007), a wide array of stereotypical, troubling and queer masculinities in music are discussed. Most recently, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender* (2017), edited by Stan Hawkins, joins the tradition of collected essays.

What was revolutionary work in the early 1990s has become an important field of interest in musicology: Gender undeniably structures our society, and thus the production and reception of cultural products as well. Abovementioned edited volumes present a broad array of critical analyses of songs, artists, genres, lyrics and music videos. Next to gender (in)equalities, feminist issues and masculinities/femininities, LGBTQ specific issues are zoomed in on. Some musical phenomena which are often related to LGBTQ persons or the community and which are discussed in all of the abovementioned works as well as in other contributions, are Camp (see Susan Sontag's iconic "Notes on Camp" from 1964), an affinity with opera (e.g., Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (1994)), the opera diva (e.g., Evans, 2005; Risi, 2011) and the pop diva (e.g., Farmer, 2005; Jennex, 2013), disco as a genre (e.g., Dyer, 1995; Lawrence, 2011; Maitra, 2011; Webb, 2013), or the Riot Grrrl movement (e.g., Attwood, 2007; Downes, 2012; Kearney, 1997; Strong, 2011). These are musical phenomena discussed in the upcoming chapters.

In the musicologist tradition, most of these works focus on the critical analysis of music products rather than investigating the listening audience. These contributions are important, yet, they often start from a binary take on gender, focusing on masculinities and femininities, or connecting certain genres with male/female listeners. This approach is certainly valuable, but at times contrasts this dissertation's conception of gender identity as fluid, changeable and not fixed.

In a decidedly queer approach to musicology, Doris Leibetseder's book *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music* (2012) examines various queer characteristics and strategies within music in depth. Leibetseder describes the potential of music in queer(ing) identities:

> Music is the vehicle for the deployment of queer identity, that is, music serves as a technique of questioning—even an erotics of questioning—the received categories of gender and sexual identity such that the map of identity is theoretically, if not actually, reconfigured and redrawn. (Leibetseder, 2012, p. 12)

Although Leibetseder approaches the topic from a queer musicologist and theoretical perspective rather than a sociological one, I share her view that music may aid in questioning and configuring one's gender and sexual identity.

Media and communication studies show an interest in LGBTQ-related music phenomena, like the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) (e.g., Baker, 2017; Coleman, 2008; Lemish, 2004) or queer music videos (Dhaenens, 2015). LGBTQ audiences are also the subject of investigation: Gomillion and Giuliano (2011), for example, have investigated how LGBTQ media role models positively influence LGBTQ persons, and Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) look into the roles of music in the coming out of gay men. Belcher (2011) links lesbian affective sentimentality to wymen's music. I will return to these studies in the upcoming chapters.

Personal Approaches: Music in Individual LGBTQ Experience

As we have seen, within LGBTQ musicology, the focus mostly lies on the analysis of music, lyrics and gendered performances as text. Additionally, from a perspective of sociology of music, authors have, for example, researched how music is used in everyday life and how music contributes to identity work. From within the actual music scenes, anthropologists and ethnographers provide insights into LGBTQ (sub-)cultures. Taking a sociological, subcultural, queer studies or ethnographic approach to music and its audiences, the authors discussed in the following paragraphs more directly inspired my own approach to music and LGBTQ identities.

In studying music in everyday life, DeNora investigates gender and sexual dimensions of music. DeNora highlights that although music functions as a device of sexual-political negotiation or a device for configuring the intimate environment (2000, p. 116), we need to be careful not to jump to hasty conclusions about female/male sexuality on the basis of intimate musical choice (2000, p. 118). I agree with DeNora, and do not aim to make any claims about sexualities or feminine/masculine qualities based on the music discussed by my narrators. However, I am interested in the gendered assumptions about music as experienced and told by the narrators, as their voices provide an insight into the way our society reiterates gendered expectations and

connects them to music and artists. Other researchers, in a similar vein, challenge gender clichés about music (e.g., de Boise, 2014).

Despite the fact that LGBTQs are not immediately linked to a musical subculture, there seems to be a shared sensibility for specific music within the LGBTQ community, which may be investigated through personal experiences. As Frith points out, there clearly are general patterns of correlation of musical taste with subcultures, ethnicity, age etc., but what provokes the precise fit needs to be investigated (1996, p. 120). In the Flemish context, Dhoest, Herreman and Wasserbauer (2015) have engaged with the phenomenon of (perceived) LGB-music, using a larger online survey as well as in-depth interviews. Considering that "the actual musical preferences of lesbians and gays have not been empirically and systematically studied to date", they set out to explore musical preferences among LGB persons (2015, p. 218). Dhoest and colleagues find that "there is a clear distinction between a gay male culture associated with 'mainstream', popular dance music and divas, and a lesbian culture associated with independent, strong female rock stars and alternative singer-songwriters" (2015, p. 219). Moreover, "the sexual orientation of the artist can give music a gay or lesbian meaning to knowing audiences" (Dhoest, Herreman & Wasserbauer, 2015, p. 208), and is mostly not the main reason LGBs listen to a certain artist, but does feel like "a nice extra" (2015, p. 215). In the context of my research, I do not brand the music discussed here as LGBTQ-specific music, unless, of course, the narrators themselves interpret certain music as LGBTQ-specific. The phenomenon as perceived by the narrators will be discussed in chapter 4.3.

From a queer studies perspective, both Ann Cvetkovich (2003) and Jack Halberstam (2005) consider music as an important part of lesbian and queer subcultures and queer histories. Their works, and especially their engagement with queer archives, decidedly influenced my work, and will be discussed in detail below (chapter 3.3).

Taylor's extensive field work in various international queer scenes shows that music functions as a binding element in the queer scene, although queer scenes are generally not immediately linked to specific music, like, for example, the punk scene is (Taylor, 2012a, p. 31). Taylor does not only do very interesting fieldwork, but also contributes towards theorizing the queer researcher and queer research methods. She acknowledges the interdisciplinarity of queer studies and pop cultures. It is not sufficient "to approach the study of queer subcultures and popular musics from one discipline (e.g. cultural studies, sociology, musicology, anthropology)", but the "incorporation of knowledge from other fields" is required (Taylor, 2013b, p. 195)". And indeed,

as discussed above and as the methodology section below will show, this dissertation is influenced by an array of different, yet connected approaches to music in everyday life.

Only little research zooms in on music in the everyday lives of LGBTQ persons to examine various specific functions. Researching media in the lives of queer girls, Susan Driver ascertains that "because of its accessibility and prolific circulations across media, music becomes a privileged site through which to explore critical consciousness and resistance of queer girl cultural identifications and pleasures" (2007, p. 24). Lisa Hardie, for example, investigates music as a (portable) private safe space for lesbians in their coming out: "Music creates a space where non-heteronormative feelings feel acceptable. In addition to being a space of controlled intimacy, more importantly the listener is detaching themselves from their immediate, heteronormative surroundings, and transports themselves to an imagined space that forges them closer to the object of their desire" (2012, p. 57). Through an auto-ethnography as well as analysing interviews with lesbians, Hardie identifies various ways in which music is able to carve out a space for lesbians. Her main findings include that music evokes a feeling of safe space for lesbians who are experiencing difficulties in coming to terms with their sexual identity; music may even function as a "mobile closet" (2012, p. 39). Furthermore, music may function as an intimate space in which desires may be explored and expressed (2012, p. ii). Third, music functions as a connecting space, either in bars or at concerts which shape the collective lesbian identity, or evoke a sense of virtual community by sharing lesbian-related music online (2012, p. 73). Overall, these themes tie in with more general functions of music, as discussed above; but there are specificities which only apply to lesbian, and possibly other queer lives.

In summary, connecting the specificity of LGBTQ lives to general sociological and psychological functions of music, there are a number of specific functions and meanings music may bear in LGBTQ lives: Music is able to provide recognisable situations and LGBTQ singers may function as role models or even idols. Music may reflect one's personal experiences or evoke emotions related to one's gender or sexual identity. Like with persons of all gender and sexual identities, music has the power to express romantic and sexual desires and provides the possibility to find each other in those. Not only does music provide the possibility to recognise oneself, it also celebrates diversity: Music can represent LGBTQs and increase their visibility. Celebrating extravagance and dreaming up queer utopias in music is just as important as raising specific LGBTQ issues, like homophobia or HIV/AIDS. Certain music functions in the formation and

maintaining of LGBTQ culture, as styles like camp and vogue demonstrate. Overall, music is a way to express ourselves, to discover ourselves and to grow in our gender and sexual identities[13].

Recapitulation

Music is an important source of cultural identification among LGBTQ persons, and has been for a long time, as historical works on the topic show. Nowadays, gender, sexuality and their link with music are being explored from various academic perspectives. While musicological approaches mostly focus on gendered or sexuality-related aspects within music and surrounding phenomena, sociological approaches focus on the music audiences. Both perspectives may be combined, as the examples in research on queer musical subcultures show (e.g., Taylor, 2012). Overall, however, there is little research investigating music in LGBTQ lives throughout the life course, which is one of the aims of my research project.

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[13] I have written a popularizing essay about the specific functions of music for LGBTQ persons, see Wasserbauer, 2016b.

3   Methodology, Context and Ethics

Beginning with my research aim, namely to *explore what role music plays in the lives of LGBTQs, if there is any specific way music works in the lives of LGBTQs, and if so, in which ways and what music*, I started to explore various research methods I could employ in this project. I wanted to gain profound insight into how LGBTQ persons experience their identities and music in the course of their lives (rather than survey LGBTQ lives and music systematically in order to find specific patterns), and therefore decided to work with life stories in a creative way. A winter school by oral historian Selma Leydesdorff introduced me to oral history, which now takes up a central role in my research methodology. In practice, oral histories provide the necessary space for narrators to explain their own interpretation of the relevant concepts of identity (formation) and music in order to explore the research aims guiding this dissertation.

As discussed in my theory section, my research is situated at the intersection of LGBTQ studies, the sociology of music, media studies (studying specific music audiences), and informed by queer studies. This interdisciplinary character stimulated me in thinking further about a research methodology which is able to consolidate these disciplines, and to work creatively with queer oral history. Through my interest in queer studies, I got acquainted with Jack Halberstam's and Ann Cvetkovich's work on the queer archive. The idea of the queer archive, stressing the importance of ephemera and seemingly irrelevant material in making and telling queer history, really resonated with me and ties in with the ethics of oral history. This emphasis on the individual meaning-making of (sexual) identity ties in with feminist and queer theories. I believe in listening to people's stories, and in the co-construction of meaning by talking with each other. In terms of Halberstam (2005), I wanted to be a co-archivist in recording queer histories.

Furthermore, the topics this project sets out to explore raise a number of more practical methodological questions. How do members of a previously underrepresented group portray themselves, and how can I as a researcher do justice to all the different personalities and stories? How can audio (and visual) contents be included into oral history research? In the following sections, I will discuss my personal take on theoretical underpinnings that feed into these discussions and I aim to outline the way my research methodology has come into being.

Starting with oral history, memory studies and narrative inquiry, I move on to discussing the intersection of oral history and gay and lesbian studies, as well as queer studies. This leads me to the queer archive, an idea which interested me on a theoretical level and which I adapted

and put into practice in my project. All of these methodological decisions were guided by feminist research ethics and practices. This chapter ends with a subchapter on the implementation and implications of my methodology in practice.

However, first, I want to motivate my choice of focusing my research on Flanders, Belgium. I will provide a brief sketch of the current social, political and juridical situation for LGBTQs in Flanders, and, by extension, Belgium; as well as the historical evolution of the situation for LGBTQs since the 1950s. These factors determine the climate in which LGBTQs find themselves as a social group as well as individuals, and are important background information for situating the narrators' life stories.

3.1   Put into Context: LGBTQ Persons and LGBTQ Community in Flanders, Belgium

My research is situated in Flanders, the northern, Flemish-speaking region of Belgium. This relatively small but densely populated region[14] is an interesting geopolitical area to conduct this research in, as the following discussion shows. Music and popular culture are geographically and temporally bound art forms, and in order to achieve a more coherent picture of LGBTQ experiences within this specific context, I concentrated on the Flemish area of Belgium. In the case of Belgium, the focus on the Flemish region implies a focus on the Dutch-speaking community: in the Brussels region and Wallonia, the southern area of Belgium, most people speak French as their main language. My elementary French language proficiency would not have allowed to have deep conversations about the research topic.

A useful starting point to gauge the social, political and medical situation for LGBTQs in European countries is ILGA-Europe's rainbow map (available at rainbow-europe.org). ILGA-Europe ranked Belgium second best concerning LGBTQ rights for two consecutive years in 2014 and 2015, and from October 2015 Belgium ranks third (ILGA-Europe, 2015). In the latest edition of this annual comparative review, Belgium ranks 4th among 19 European countries. As ILGA-Europe state, the

> rankings are based on how the laws and policies of each country impact on the lives of LGBTI people. … ILGA-Europe track each country using a wide range of indicators; covering everything from equality, family issues and hate speech to legal gender recognition, freedom of expression and asylum rights. (ILGA-Europe, 2017)

In general, Belgium is nowadays one of Europe's most open and progressive countries for LGBTQs. LGB individuals are largely visible and included in society; and more recently, focus has shifted to the rights of and care for transgender individuals. The social and legal situation for LGBTQs in Belgium is a rather comfortable and safe one, and there are plenty of cultural and community facilities available for a wide range of LGBTQ individuals. In terms of equal rights and assimilation, Belgian LGBTQs found themselves in a good position as from the early 2000s: Belgium was the second country to open civil marriage to LGBTQ persons, has a law against discrimination based on sexual orientation, has opened up adoption for LGBTQs, and provides accessible medical care for transgender persons and reproductive technologies for those wanting to become parents (Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011, p. 1060-1061). Many of these changes

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[14] 6,546,785 persons living on 13,522 km² in January 2018 (Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken, 2018).

were facilitated by a sudden political change in 1999 which side-lined the Christian democrats after being in power for over 40 years: a "federal coalition was formed by the liberal, socialist, and green parties" (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2010, p. 2). In the meantime, other rights like automatic co-maternity for non-biological mothers have been acquired as well. After many years of advocating by the civil society organisation *çavaria,* in early 2018, a new law concerning trans* persons came into effect: in order to change your birth certificate sex designation, you do no longer need a diagnosis have medical procedures (çavaria, 2017). This is an important step towards trans* depathologization and recognition. The commitment to provide and secure LGBTQ rights and policies as well as to improve the life quality of LGBTQs and educate society about gender and sexual diversity remains ongoing.

Having provided a brief overview of the current situation for LGBTQs in Belgium, it is of course important to note that each life story must be considered in its own historical context. Since my contribution focuses on life stories of persons between the ages of 18 and 60, I will here only focus on the most recent Flemish and Belgian history of LGBTQs. I will only discuss some of the most important political developments, policy objectives and areas of conflict concerning the LGBTQ movement. These key moments are not necessarily present or relevant in all narrators' stories or tell a lot about the life stories of the narrators in my research, but are a background against which they experienced being LGBTQ at any given point in time.

This overview is based on historian Bart Hellinck's important contributions to the emerging tradition of LGBTQ historiography in Flanders (2002; 2007), as well as a book on the history of the Flemish LGBTQ movement *Holebipioniers* (Borghs, 2015) and an edited volume on the history of homosexuality in Belgium, *Verzwegen Verlangen* (Dupont, Hofman & Roelens, 2017). Paul Borghs's book provides an overview of the historical development of the Flemish LGBTQ movement, situated in its historical, political and cultural context. From this valuable collection of oral histories, some of which were recorded by me as I was involved with the project as a volunteer, historical records, media fragments and other documents, we may learn about the evolution of the LGBTQ movement.[15] *Verzwegen Verlangen*, in contrast, is a broader approach to the history of homosexuality in Belgium, starting with documentation about the persecution of 'Sodomites' in the Middle Ages and ending with an essay on important cultural influence on and from Belgian LGBTQ persons.

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[15] For an in-depth overview of the intricate political and structural systems in Belgium as well as an overview of the development of LGBTQ rights, see Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Eeckhout, 2011; and Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011.

The foundations for the Belgian LGBTQ movement were formed in 1953 by Suzan Daniel, at around the same time the first organisations for homosexual men and lesbians were founded in the USA and other European countries (Borghs, 2015, p. 11). Daniel was inspired by the more progressive Dutch LGBTQ movement and founded the *CCB—Centre Culturel Belge*; however, it soon became clear that rather than an emancipatory movement, the male members of this early form of the organisation envisioned a private club and the *Cultuur- en Ontspanningscentrum— Centre de Culture et de Loisirs* (CCL-COC) was founded (Hellinck, 2007, p. 110). In the 1960s, homosexuality became more visible, featuring, for example, the first TV documentary about homosexuality in 1966. The LGBTQ movement was still in its fledgling stages and was not able to block the discriminating article 372bis from being included into the law in 1965 (Borghs, 2015, p. 41), which stated that consensual homosexual intimacy was only legal from the age of 18, while heterosexual contact was allowed as from the age of 16. Hellinck refers to this law as a discriminating act with a large symbolic value, which provoked strong protest (2007, p. 112).

From the accounts of contemporary witnesses we know that homosexuals were still often sent off to be "cured" by psychiatrists (Borghs, 2015, p. 55-56); however, slowly, the de-medicalization of homosexuality began. In the mid-1960s, various gay and lesbian groups came into being, amongst others the *Belgische vereniging voor sexuele rechtvaardigheid*, the Belgian association for sexual justice (Borghs, 2015, p. 61). As its name says, the association did not only provide a meeting place for LGBTQs, but also had a political agenda. In the later 1960s, a consensus arose within the Flemish movement that homophiles do not only need their own associations, but that contact with "the outside world" should be established: The homophile should get the chance to speak in public (Hellinck, 2007, p. 112).

And that is exactly what started to happen in the late 1960s and the 1970s: LGBTQs first came out publicly to the streets to protest and celebrate. The public coming out of famous Flemish singer Will Ferdy on TV in 1970 was a milestone for LGBTQ visibility and making the subject discussable. Influenced by the international reverberations of the Stonewall Inn riots in 1969 as well as more radical Dutch and French LGBTQ organisations, two different streams of LGBTQ associations formed in Flanders: on the one hand, a radical gay movement which aimed to liberate homosexuals, represented by the *Rooie Vlinder* ("Red Butterfly"), and on the other hand, a first umbrella organisation called *Federatie Werkgroepen Homofilie* (*FWH*, "Federation of Working Groups on Homosexuality"), which united the interests of smaller organisations. The *FWH* was an important forerunner of the current umbrella organisation *çavaria*. In 1978, the first publicly announced "Homodag" ("gay day") took place. At first organised by the radical *Rooie*

Vlinder, the *FWH* soon stepped in with the organisation and the event was to become "Homo-en Lesbiennedag", explicitly including women (Borghs, 2015, p. 101). Political issues were definitely on the agenda of these meeting days, as a first draft for an anti-discrimination law was designed, and LGBTQs took to the streets to protest against the discriminating article 372bis.

As the name of the first events suggests, the movement was mainly dominated by men, and a separate lesbian and feminist movement was formed in the 1970s, with groups like *Sappho* and *Atthis*. From interviews with active members of these groups, the cleft between men and women and the different interests become obvious (Borghs, 2015, p. 112-114). However, not only political issues and disagreements mark the Flemish LGBTQ scene in the 1970s; sex-positive media and parties were on the agenda as well—we are, after all, speaking about the heyday of disco.

The 1980s proved to be rather difficult years for the movement: The economic crisis, a considerable shift to the right in the social climate as well as the outbreak of Aids caused difficulties in the movement (Hellinck, 2007, p. 126). In addition to these adverse conditions, internal tensions among the umbrella organisation FWH contributed to the almost complete standstill of the movement (Hellinck, 2007; Borghs, 2015). While at first the outbreak of Aids in Belgium was underestimated, in the second half of the 1980s Aids caused fear within the community as well as stigmatization from the broader society (Borghs, 2017, p. 238). Organisations like *Act Up Bruxelles* stood up for Aids activism and within the movement, safe sex was an important topic. A positive development for LGBTQ rights was the abolishing of article 372bis in 1985.

In 1990, the organisation of a "Roze Zaterdag" (Pink Saturday, forerunner of the LGBTQ pride) signals that the movement was finding new motivation after the difficult past years (Hellinck, 2002, p. 32), and so does the change of name into *Federatie Werkgroepen Homoseksualiteit*, leaving behind the obsolete word "homophilia" (Borghs, 2017, p. 243). In 1991, King Baudouin asked the Belgian youth to speak up about their needs and wishes for the future, and one of the concerns expressed was a wish for more acceptance, visibility and equal rights for homosexuals (Borghs, 2015, p. 195). This publication indicates that homosexuality was definitely on the societal agenda. Moreover, many new initiatives were taken within the movement in the 1990s. Importantly, a telephone helpline and an LGB magazine were founded, both of which are still active today.

Paradoxically, the impact of the Aids crisis caused a closer collaboration between the LGB movement and policy makers. Within the *FWH*, a unit focusing specifically on political questions

was founded, and an official spokesperson was appointed, causing first successes in policy questions (Borghs, 2017, p. 244). However, many of these first victories were symbolic, like the city of Antwerp granting same-sex couples the right to officially register that they lived together. There was not yet a lot of room for political and juridical change: Flanders experienced a shift to the extreme right in 1991. The racist and homo- and transphobic agenda of the conservative right-wing party Vlaams Blok caused uproar, and the FWH, then the Flemish umbrella organisation for LGBTQs, organised protests and warned against supporting the party (Borghs, 2015, p. 198). Several attempts to pass an anti-discrimination bill failed since the 1990s, and only in 2003, the bill was passed under a new government (Borghs, 2015, p. 283).

As mentioned above, following the federal elections in 1999, the political climate changed favourably for LGBTQ persons: Liberal, socialist and green parties constituted the ruling parties of the government and the Christian democratic and the Flemish nationalist parties became the Opposition. This new political setup allowed for quick advances in LGBTQ rights and changes in law: marriage equality was introduced in 2003, and the rights for adoption followed in 2006. The umbrella organisation FWH changed its name again in 2002 and was now called *Holebifederatie* ("LGB Federation")—only to change its name again in 2009 into *çavaria*. The name is derived from the French expression "ça va", which is used to ask how someone is doing and to indicate that things are alright or going well. Since 2005 the organisation also advocates trans* rights, and the new name suggests more inclusiveness, indicating "diversity, acceptance and openness" (Borghs, 2017, p. 248).

As Bart Eeckhout (2014) rightly remarks, in the 2010s, homonormative and homonationalist tendencies may be observed in Flanders; yet, these issues and their implications are hardly addressed as such within the community nor in academic contexts. As Eeckhout puts it, "'homonormalization' sums up various complaints about the extent to which post-emancipatory LGBTs in Western countries merely replicate and propagate dominant heterosexual norms in a society that has become willing to 'assimilate' conformist LGBTs" (2014, n.d.). Indeed, Flanders prides itself on the achievement of equal rights, following an assimilationist logic (cf. Sedgwick, 1990), which minimalizes sexual difference and revolution. From a queer studies point of view, these politics may be criticised: instead of challenging normative constructions like marriage, sexual minorities conform to them and diminish their own revolutionary forces. However, as Eeckhout's line of thought shows, such a queer critique on the Flemish situation cannot simply be established: "A more nuanced analysis should pay attention to simultaneous attitudes, internal debates, and double agendas within the organised

LGBT movement that do fit a queer manner of thinking and acting without therefore carrying the 'queer' label or getting conceptualized by those involved as a coherent cluster of social resistances" (2014, n.d.).

Moreover, homonationalism in the sense that Western states embrace LGBTQ rights as an ideological tool and in the sense that there is a "shift among activist LGBTs in the direction of an increased nationalism" (which is rather counterintuitive), is an ambiguous concept in the Flemish context. While in the Flemish region a sense of "nationalism" has grown, "the sense of nationalism and patriotism among Belgians is generally low compared with other nations" (Eeckhout, 2014). Therefore, the idea of using LGBTQ rights in order to promote a sense of nationalism feels slightly out of context here. This is not to say that homonormalisation and homonationalism are not at work in Flanders; yet, as Eeckhout asserts, it is tricky to formulate a straightforward critique on such mechanisms. Belgium is a country of political and societal contradictions. Especially in Flanders, the parallel existence of homonormative and homonationalist tendencies, which may be interpreted to suggest an open-minded and liberal, yet nationalist political climate, seems to contradict the actual political climate which is dominated by a Flemish nationalist party and anti-immigrant and Islamophobic tendencies, rejecting the inclusion of minorities.

Having based my sketch of the LGBTQ movement as well as the current situation for LGBTQ persons in Flanders on LGBTQ rights and policies, I would like to acknowledge that this kind of assessment is not a neutral depiction of the lived reality of all LGBTQ persons. Moreover, critics like Jasbir Puar (2013) engage in intersectional and queer analyses, pointing out that Western countries often align with "acceptable" queers, assimilating lesbian and gay persons, while transgressive LGBTQ persons do not fit this homonationalist discourse, and are often ignored or erased.

Having used the concept "Western" here, I would like to pause and reflect somewhat about its meaning and implications. In much scholarship around LGBTQs, an implicit assumption about "the West versus the Rest" is made, "where the former category usually implies, in this context, North America, Western Europe, Australia and Israel, and the latter, in Altman and Symons's words (2016, p. 3), 'countries struggling with colonial legacies or other forms of social disorder'" (Szulc, 2018, p. 1). It is implied that the West is more open and advanced concerning LGBTQ policies than the Rest. This is certainly not an unproblematic thought, reminiscent of colonialist thinking. Some of the theoretical texts I refer to (e.g., Butler, 1990; Weeks, 2011) do use generalising terms like Western society, and much of the international research I refer to is, in

fact, conducted in the West. Yet, I would like to point out that in my dissertation, I focus only on one very limited geopolitical area, Flanders. Although Flanders is situated in Western Europe, I do not aim to make any generalising assumptions about other geopolitical areas, nor do I want to imply that the Flemish case is exemplary for the West[16].

Returning to Flanders, it is important to recognise that there are still numerous non-normative persons who remain invisible, and the mental wellbeing of many LGBTQs remains at risk, with suicide attempts much higher than in the general population (see, e.g., Cox et al., 2010; Missiaen & Seynaeve, 2016). LGBTQs are at a higher risk of experiencing minority stress, stigmatizing and discrimination, and need to develop specific coping strategies (D'haese et al., 2015; D'haese et al., 2016; Missiaen & Seynaeve, 2016). Moreover, research shows that attitudes of the Belgian society towards LGBTQs are less progressive than law and policy may lead to expect (Verstraete, 2016; Dierckx et al., 2017). This may be linked to different attitudes in the northern, Flemish speaking region and the southern, French speaking region, where there is less of a strong interest group from civil society, and the socio-economic situation is weaker (Verstraete, 2016). As a result of a survey among the Belgian population, Dierckx and colleagues identify that "sexist, homophobic, and transphobic prejudices remain widespread and are rooted in rigid gender belief systems" (2017, p. 5).

As Bart Eeckhout and David Paternotte asserted in 2011, there is a relative lack of academic work on LGBTQ issues in Belgium compared to the country's political spearhead position, as well as a surprising lack of self-reflective exercise, which reflects a "disconnection between grassroots activism and critical academic reflection" (p. 1059). Indeed, the work of civil society, political advocacy groups and policy makers had propelled Belgium forward to be at "the international forefront of countries with an LGBT-friendly legislation and government policies" (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011, p. 1059), and academic work did not reflect this position.

However, since 2011 more scholarship on social dimensions of LGBTQ issues in Flanders and Belgium has emerged[17], and several academics have started to publish on LGBTQs, media and culture. Dhoest (2016) explored, amongst other issues, the media use of LGBTQ refugees living in Belgium; Dhoest and Simons (2012) looked into LGBTQ persons' media usage; Dhoest, Herreman and Wasserbauer (2015) focused on gay and lesbian music preferences; Vanlee, Van Bauwel and Dhaenens (2017) analyse the connections print media made between

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[16] For critical discussion of "the West versus the Rest" in LGBTQ contexts, see, e.g., Altman & Symons, 2016; Puar, 2013; Szulc, 2018; Szulc & Smets, 2015.
[17] Some recent research includes the works cited above and later on in my dissertation, as well as, e.g., Huysentruyt et al., 2015; Dewaele et al., 2013; Motmans et al., 2015.

homosexuality and child abuse in the 1990s. Herreman, Dhoest and Eeckhout (2015) researched music as symbolic resistance in the Flemish lesbians' and women's movement, and Herreman and Dhoest (2017) look into music in the LGBTQ nightlife, namely into music performances of a drag company. Yet, qualitative research on LGBTQ lives is still needed. Accordingly, this dissertation aims to contribute to the research on the lived experience of LGBTQ persons in Flanders.

3.2 Oral History and Narrative Inquiry

On Oral History, Memory and Narrative

My research has a strong exploratory character and is not driven by a specific hypothesis. The primary aim is to learn from LGBTQ persons what *music means in their personal lives, and how they experience music and its interactions with their (LGBTQ) identity.* I think it important to hear the voices of a diverse range of LGBTQ persons, as I believe that we can best learn about a certain topic from life experiences. This approach ties in with Daniel Warner's suggestion that queer research should be aware of the way it constitutes the object it investigates, and that qualitative accounting is most suitable for its object of inquiry: "Qualitative approaches have a better chance of accounting for queer experiences in the same terms as the actual people living these experiences" (2004, p. 334-5). Exploring those topics my LGBTQ narrators think about when it comes to their LGBTQ identity and music in their own terms is exactly what I aim for. What I do not aim to do is to provide a representative sample as I do not think a group as diverse as LGBTQs can ever be entirely represented, nor do I aim to interview specialists in the musical field or leading figures in Flemish LGBTQ activism. My focus thus lies on listening to and learning about music and gender/sexual diversity from the voices of a broader sample of individuals. This bottom-up approach requires a research method to match, and oral history interviews provide the necessary space for respondents to explain their own interpretation of the relevant concepts of identity and music.

As oral history plays a central role in the methodology of my research, I want to provide some more general background information on oral history. First, oral history is a tradition of a certain way of writing history, namely based on individual experiences linked to a certain topic or event. Second, oral history has become a shorthand for a specific qualitative research method. Both of these elements will be discussed in the upcoming sections. Narrative and memory are two concepts closely related to oral history, and thus deserve some attention in this chapter. Oral histories are literally based on life stories and narratives. Therefore, it is a logical choice to engage in narrative inquiry in order to explore the life stories collected. Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term for a tradition of research into narratives and narrative analyses, which I will discuss further on.

The role of oral history has changed in the course of time: Oral histories were initially meant to help to search for facts and complement written histories, and to create recovery or reminiscence histories in that way. Originally, oral history focused on those voices not heard or

registered in history writing, namely those of "ordinary" people or of minorities. Gradually and as a part of the larger linguistic or cultural turn within social and human sciences, oral history came to be viewed as an analytical practice (Abrams, 2010, p. 6). The focus of oral history lies on how we experience the past as individuals, and how we tell stories and narratives. As such, it is an excellent method to learn about how narrators make sense and attribute meaning[18] to specific events and throughout the course of their lives (Bleyen & Van Molle, 2012).

The process of narration is a key element in oral histories: Every story we tell is structured by a larger, overarching and/or several smaller narratives. In listening to or reading oral history interviews, it is crucial to recognise these narratives. I act on the assumption that narratives are consciously and subconsciously used in order to help make sense of the world. It is impossible to ever tell one's whole life story in one interview—or, actually, at all. In order to make sense of life, we organise it into smaller portions or logical units: "How we construct the stories of our lives not only assists us in making sense of our lives, but is itself a reflection of our framework for making sense of the world and our place within it" (Andrews, 2010, p. 153). As Molly Andrews puts it, humans have a desire for narrative disclosure: We have the urgent need to make sense of ourselves and the world around us (Andrews, 2010, p. 156), and the way we try to make sense is through narratives. Philosophers and critical theorists also engage with the importance of narrative. Paul Ricoeur, for example, claims that life demands a narrative and reminds us that narrative facilitates a synthesis of the heterogeneity of life; whereas Roland Barthes famously stated that life is nothing but "scrambled messages" (*communications brouillées*) (quoted in: Andrews, 2010, p. 151).

Narratives help to (re-)construct reality; they are not only literal stories, but they describe the narrator's "world making" (Steyn, 2001, p. xxxviii). Alessandro Portelli famously summarized the different levels of meaning: "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" (1992, p. 50). Narratives help to structure the memories we tell in a life story. Narratives are always constructed *after* the facts they recount happened, and it is necessary to recognise these different temporal levels coming together in any narrative.

Next to these different temporal levels in any narrative, there are even more kinds of narrative at work in each oral history: "First, the narrative created by the respondent, second, the narrative models upon which the respondent draws; and finally the narrative crafted by the historian from

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[18] Bleyen and Van Molle (2012) use the Dutch term "betekenisgeving", which does not have one exact translation but means meaning-making or attributing sense.

the accumulation of oral histories" (Abrams, 2010, p. 109). Lynn Abrams emphasises that in all of these levels, a transfer of meanings takes place. To avoid confusion, I will refer to these "narrative models upon which the narrator draws" as meta-narratives, which can be influenced by factors like period of time, geopolitical situation or family. This view of our personal histories being embedded into and influenced by our socio-cultural and historical environment and its meta-narratives corresponds with the idea of social construction of identities as discussed above. The narratives within a life story are thus more than just structuring elements in the telling of the story.

Like narrative, memory consists of many temporal layers of remembering and re-remembering. Memory is work; it is important to recognise this and give sufficient time and space to the respondents to remember and tell their stories. Maurice Halbwachs stresses the influence of memory on individual identity development: "We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of identity is perpetuated" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 147). Halbwachs nuances this general statement of the perpetuation of identity through memory: Memories change through their repetition in very different systems of notions and at different periods of our lives. Any reproduction of the past through memories can only ever be approximate (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 147).

Oral history narrators tell about their past from their present point of view, as well as about their present life and experiences. The temporal distance to the facts that are recounted at the time of telling a story may influence the way we frame a narrative. Assuming that identity development is an open-ended process, there is indeed no actual temporal distance to many of the topics and processes my narrators discuss. More clearly delineated key moments, like a first relationship or visiting a certain concert, are, however, somewhat more punctual events, and the length of the time span between the interview and that moment will influence the story and the narrative. A person in their early twenties now will have a different frame for and relationship towards their coming out than a person now in their sixties who came out forty years ago. Indeed, an oral history project does not necessarily revolve around facts that have taken place a very long time ago; recent historical or personal events can also be captured by oral history interviews. Again, this is stressed by the fact that oral history is now often seen as an analytical method. Stephen Sloan states that "the worth is not in the narratives' power to achieve an immediate level of synthesis and greater meaning, but in their power to glean out individual experience and meaning, even in raw form" (Sloan, 2008, p. 182).

Another important aspect of narrative worth considering is its relation to collective memory. According to the founding father of the concept of collective memory, Halbwachs, "our personal experiences gain their full meaning only within a broader social, cultural or historical context" (Apfelbaum, 2010, p. 89). To me, this statement works in the reverse direction as well: a broader social, cultural or historical context can only gain its full meaning, when it is enriched with personal experiences—for example, in the form of oral histories. Personal history and its narratives are in interplay with collective memory. Memory is a collective function, and in order for it to be kept alive, individual recollections must be shared at an interpersonal level:

> A memory occurs to us… because we are surrounded by other memories that link to it… These memories are reference points in space and time; they may be historical, geographical, bibliographic, or political notions or everyday experiences and familiar ways of seeing. (Apfelbaum, 2010, p. 86)

Each narrative can take up a different position towards the prevailing collective memory; some may affirm it, others may attest to its collapse.

This connection of the individual narrative to collective memory relates to a secondary research interest within my project, namely *whether music plays special roles in the collective LGBTQ life and subculture*. Since the early 1960s, LGBTQ movements have come and gone in Flanders. By interviewing individuals who have participated in various movements and came of age in different periods within the timespan of roughly 1960 until the start of this project (2014-2015), the importance of music for LGBTQ individuals throughout time may be observed. Kenneth Bindas highlights the importance of the individual within the collective, citing Crane: "By validating the individual within the collective, historians can better 'focus on the way individuals experience themselves as historical entities' so that their 'lived experience[...] becomes part of collective memory'" (Bindas, 2010, p. 116). My project therefore may add complementary elements to the collective memory of LGBTQ culture, and adds knowledge about music and subcultures/lifestyles to existing research. However, this assertion requires critical caution: LGBTQ culture, movement and community are not as united and cohesive as these terms may lead to believe, and the broad range of ages of my narrators imply that they experienced LGBTQ culture and movement milestones in different phases of their lives. There is thus not one concrete contribution towards collective LGBTQ memory originating from this project, but rather, smaller individual contributions towards certain aspects of collective LGBTQ memory (see chapter 4.3).

Importantly, I approach the life story and the identity development of my narrators from one specific point of view, namely that of music. Based on music, musical ephemera and memorabilia, the narrators have a starting point and frame to which they can link their story; music can be interpreted as a filter for my interviews. This dimension of my research will be further explored in chapter 3.3. This consciously chosen focus undoubtedly influences the stories of the narrators, and I will have to keep that in mind during the analysis of the interviews: The oral histories I recorded are told with the specific link between LGBTQ identity and music in mind. Selma Leydesdorff and Nanci Adler describe how the memory of the individual narrator is influenced by and embedded into certain frames:

> Memory not only stores the past but restructures, mediates, and adapts it to the semantic frames and needs of a given society. The memory of personal experience is therefore embedded in and voiced within the historical frames, genres, and grand narratives that enable individuals to make sense of their experiences and to have a credible voice in their societies. (Adler & Leydesdorff, 2013, p. xviii)

I believe that music and sexual preference are two of the frames which enable but also influence the story a narrator who partook in my oral history research told.

As Adler and Leydesdorff put it, individual memory is selective, but "personal narratives add the visceral immediacy of lived experience to the scholarly discourse of history" (2013, p. xiii). It is exactly this intimate, personal, and open-ended character of oral history which made it my research approach of choice. In the upcoming sections, I will discuss how oral history ties in with queer approaches to identity and chronicling LGBTQ lives.

Analysing Content and Narratives

In the previous section I have focused on some theoretical underpinnings of oral history, narrative and memory; here, I would like to explain how I analysed and worked with the oral histories. To provide a sense of the features I paid special attention to in my analyses of each oral history as a whole as well as of those narrative strands within the life stories I chose to focus on, I will provide an overview of the most important sources guiding my analyses on a theoretical as well as practical level.

As Jan Bleyen and Leen Van Molle state, meaning(-making) is fluid; and the researcher is required to tease out meaning from the stories (2012, p. 120). Meaning(-making) is consciously and

subconsciously linked to our social contexts, like cultural patterns and social identities (Bleyen & Van Molle, 2012, p. 120), and these social contexts are formative for the ways we tell our stories. Oral histories contain many different sorts of information: facts, actions, attitudes, emotions and identities, and in order to explore these, Bleyen and Van Molle suggest a descriptive analysis, focusing on the content of the oral histories, as well as narrative analysis (2012, p. 143).

In order to analyse the oral histories of the narrators, I focused on the contents of each interview as a whole, as well as on various narrative strands within their life stories. As discussed above, narratives are valuable resources in constructing and understanding our identities and making sense of life events. Narratives may indeed function as cognitive instruments: the narrative "process of grasping together the storyline serves to assign unique significance to each of the events included in it" (Wertsch, 2011, p. 24). Accordingly, as Catherine Kohler Riessman asserts, the way people tell their story "shapes how we can legitimately interpret it" (1993, p. 70).

Dominique Robert and Shaul Shenshav (2014, p. 4) examine the status of narrative in the specific research context: Is narrative viewed as the fabric of human existence, or rather as a representational device? In my research, I do not make a strong distinction between "life as lived" and "life as narrated" as some narrative researchers do (see Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal, 2004, p. 262). As I am interested in how the narrators make sense of their lives, their narrated truth is the one I work with—even though I am aware that their narrated truth might not always coincide with factual truth. Narratives are the object of investigation, and narratives are assumed to be an aspect of life itself and to be a reality in its own right, rather than merely a representational device. Moreover, I assume that there are numerous narrative strands within each life story, but I always consider a single narrative strand within the context of the whole of the life story and in relation to other narratives. Naturally, oral histories are messy and not necessarily clearly structured, as writing about them on a theoretical level may lead to assume. Therefore, narrative strands may overlap or a single narrative may be fragmented or recur throughout a life story. Such recurring narratives may be recognised for example by recurring topics and actors, or may take the shape of meta-narratives conveying certain convictions or attitudes.

What, then, characterises the narratives I chose to investigate in my research, and what are the guiding principles in these analyses? The narrative strands I focus on are selected because they are exemplary for a certain life story; because they highlight certain personal or collective LGBTQ identity struggles, specific involvements with music, or a connection of both; or because they relate to recurring and salient topics within an interview. Within each narrator's oral history, a

single narrative may evolve around a certain event, person, or experience. A single narrative strand may be just one short anecdote or comprise several pages of interview transcript. Some narratives recur throughout the interview. Although the two main topics of LGBTQ identity and music formed a thematic framework for the interviews and directed the narrators towards talking about these topics, I believe it is possible to apply an inductive or bottom up-approach in engaging with the interview materials. This bottom-up approach is in line with the ideas of queer oral history and the queer archive. To begin with, each individual interview was considered as a whole, and by reading and engaging with the interview transcripts, similarities in topics across all interviews were detected, and these have become the basis of the empirical chapters.

Analysing the interviews, I engaged in narrative inquiry, combining a thematic and structural approach. Narrative inquiry comprises "both the phenomenon of study (storytelling) as well as a research methodology (the study of experience via storytelling)" (Ashton, 2013, p. 61). Like narrative inquiry, narrative analysis "refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form" (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). Among the range of diverse influences and ways of conducting narrative analyses, a common ground is that

> the analyst is interested in how a speaker or writer assembles and sequences events and uses language and/or visual images to communicate meaning, that is, make particular points to an audience. Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language—how and why incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. (Riessman, 2008, p. 11)

Riessman stresses the subjective and situated character of narrative research: "The approach does not assume objectivity; rather, it privileges positionality and subjectivity" (2002, p. 696). The researcher is involved in shaping narratives: the decisions, which passages to analyse, and where any narrative begins and ends, for example, are interpretive acts (Riessman, 2002, p. 699). In the same vein, Heather Fraser notes: "Narrative researchers are aware that in the process of pulling together threads of others' stories, we will be telling stories of our own" (Fraser, 2004, p. 195). The role of the researcher and topics like subjectivity in my specific project will be discussed in the upcoming chapter on the queer archive (3.3) and feminist research ethics (3.4).

On a more practical level, Brian Alleyne's book *Narrative Networks: Storied Approaches in a Digital Age* (2015) provided a basic guideline for my narrative analyses. Alleyne proposes a basic textual analysis, investigating 1) words, clauses and sentences, and 2) how these are combined by the narrator to narrate and persuade (2015, p. 74ff). This analysis addresses lexis (the choice

and meaning of words), transitivity (people and their actions as described in the text), and modality (judgements and opinions of the narrator). Considering various discourse modes which may occur throughout an oral history may help in order to recognise narratives. Based on a linguistic point of view, Alleyne distinguishes between interacting, describing, reporting, instructing, and narrating modes (2015, p. 79). A narrating mode is characterised by "the presentation of a sequence of events within a recognisable narrative structure" (Alleyne, 2015, p. 79). The narrativity of a text may be characterised by a dual temporality in which the discourse time and the story time, i.e. the time of the events recounted, differ from each other and the representation of the narrator's own experience within the narrative (Alleyne, 2015, p. 80). Furthermore, Bleyen and Van Molle point out the importance of indications of time and date, which enable us to understand, organise and shape time (2012, p. 128). Some other pointers based on a more formal structural narrative analysis as discussed in literary studies (e.g., Herman & Vervaeck, 2005) include: are there events in the form of actions and happenings? Are there human/non-human agents involved? Are any transformations taking place? (Alleyne, 2015, p. 80).

As already suggested, underlying meta-narratives may be at work in narratives. McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 234) provide a useful discussion of possible underlying constructs or meta-narratives, like for example a narrative of agency, communion, redemption, meaning making and exploratory narrative processing. These underlying constructs are often connected to our social and cultural environments.

Not only the content of a narrative strand or overarching narratives are important, the "verbal choreography" (Gallo, 2012, p. 205) or narrative choreography of the narrators also carries meaning, and the researcher has to adapt to its rhythm in order to understand the narration. Jumps and seemingly illogical turns within a narrative usually have a specific meaning and should be analysed carefully. Moreover, any story features one factor that is often overlooked: breaks and silences. The narrator of an oral history will take breaks, and silences might be just as meaningful as the speaking itself. A silence may, for example, indicate that the narrator is not ready or willing to face their own narrative, as Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (2010) describe.

In my writing, I mostly focus on the content of the narration; however, especially in preparatory stages, I also engaged with the structural elements of the narrations more in depth. Riessman points out that thematic narrative analysis, in comparison with grounded theory, keeps "a story 'intact' by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across

cases" (2008, p. 53), and sequences are preserved (2008, p. 74). This logic is applied throughout my chapters, focusing on each interview separately before discussing commonalities among the narratives. Accordingly, within each chapter, longer fragments of narratives are reproduced and discussed, rather than a common topic being described and then illustrated by short excerpts from multiple interviews. Moreover, I pay attention to the interaction between the researcher and the narrator, acknowledging my impact as a researcher on the story the narrator tells.

Linking up this section to my chapter on narrative approaches to identity (2.1), I want to briefly return to Plummer, and Hammack and Cohler, who zoom in on the role of narrative in gender and sexual identities. Plummer employs the concepts of narrative engagement and embodied stories in order to acknowledge the complex linkage between story, identity, feeling and the body (Plummer, 2009, p. xiii). Hammack and Cohler further investigate narrative engagement, and viewing sexual identity as a process and product of narrative engagement reveals a dynamic view of identity (2009, p. 13). The construction of sexual identity is intimately linked to the social practice that mediates our understanding of sexual desire and identity categories; in other words, identity is not solely a narrative, but also a narrative engagement (Hammack & Cohler 2009, p. 16). This is a view I closely relate to as I approach narratives embedded in the larger context of the narrators' lives as well as in their historical, social and cultural context. The concept of narrative engagement ties in with my wish to acknowledge my narrators' agency and leaving the structuring of their story as much as possible in their own hands. As discussed in the upcoming section on queer archives, affective and emotional dimensions to a life story are just as important as more concrete accounts of encounters or experiences.

Plummer asserts that in LGBTQ life stories and narratives, "there may be common themes; sameness—absolutely not" (2009, p. xii). This is a statement I strongly agree with, and which is a guiding principle for all of my research project. In my analyses, I first focused on those narrative strands which are dominant in a narrator's story, and then I gathered narrative strands around topics which are salient in several interviews together. These topics and narrative strands from different interviews form the basis for my analytical chapters. My aim is to discuss parallels among the interviews without losing my focus on the individuals' stories. I want to stress, however, that I do not interpret similar experiences as implying sameness or being essential. I do not aim to make generalisations about "LGBTQ persons" or "LGBTQ persons in general", but focusing on those persons I interviewed and parallels among their experiences. By carefully

listening to the life stories and closely reading the various narratives, I aim to gain insight into music, identity and meaning making in LGBTQ lives.

Queering Oral Histories

Doing oral histories is a common way to write LGBTQ history, as the following key oral histories in LGBTQ contexts shows: Madeline Davis's and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy's *Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960* (1986), Chauncey's *Gay New York. Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (1994), *Men Like That. A Southern Queer History* by John Howard (1999), *Wide-Open Town. A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* by Nan Alamila Boyd (2003), and, more recently, the edited volume *Bodies of Evidence. The Practice of Queer Oral History* by Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez (2012).

There are inherent parallels in the aims of gay and lesbian studies and oral history as described by Portelli in the early 1990s: "Both fledgling fields—oral history and lesbian and gay history—were animated by the same imperative to interpret the uneven and contradictory social and political histories of marginalized subjects" (Murphy et al., 2016, p. 5). In a special edition of the *Oral History Review* on queer oral history, Kevin Murphy, Jennifer Pierce and Jason Ruiz discuss "What makes queer oral history different" (2016), charting how oral history, gay and lesbian studies and queer studies meet. They point out that "oral history methods opened up possibilities for examining the myriad ways that sexuality shaped subjectivity and social worlds that troubled the identity categories and truth claims of social history" (Murphy et al., 2016, p. 5). Indeed, oral history is not informed by traditional identity politics and takes an open approach to and sense of identity; and all kinds of members of the community may be included (2016, p. 14). As Murphy and colleagues demonstrate, queer oral history projects may draw from queer theory challenging assumptions around taken for granted categories: "a queer methodology destabilizes terms like *identity* and *community* from the outset" (2016, p. 17). Their queer approach to oral history "not only understands the stories narrators tell us as incomplete and unstable, but also theorizes community in this way" (2016, p. 14). Indeed, this is in line with personal and social identities as conceptualized above in my theory section.

In recent years, various authors have engaged with the topic of queer(ing) oral histories. In "Queering the Interview", Travis Kong, Dan Mahoney and Ken Plummer (2002) chart the changing conventions in researching homosexuality, although we need to keep in mind that

this publication is from 2002 and thus the developments of approximately the past fifteen years are missing. Yet, their article provides a valuable overview. The way of posing questions in interviews regarding same-sex experience has changed significantly throughout time. Moving from the traditional approach (asking questions about etiology and pathology), through the modern approach (focusing on the "coming out" story), the postmodern approach is characterised by "fragmenting; de-essentialized questions; a wider range of questions, often going well beyond the issue of homosexualities; 'queering the field'" (2002, p. 241). In the 1980s, a "drift to reflexivity" may be observed: On the one hand, feminist research practices brought a "heightened self-awareness and reflexivity" to interviewing, as well as a focus on friendly conversation rather than an interrogatory interview style (2002, p. 243). On the other hand, research on Aids and HIV was strongly community based and focused on specific gay and lesbian sensibilities, for example doing fieldwork in gay venues and engaging gay vernacular. This narrows down rather than diversifies a sense of L, G, B, T and Q identities.

In the same vein, Boyd's article "Who is the subject? Queer theory meets oral history" (2008) discusses tensions in a queer studies approach to oral history: Oral history depends on self-knowing and transparent subjectivity; and queer theory challenges binary and heteronormative structures as well as the notion of a stable self/gender/sexuality as a natural given. These concepts are socially constructed and have congealed over time and through repetition, to such an extent that we learned to perceive them as essential, given factors. When we tell our life stories, we rely on narratives we have learned to rely on, for example that sex assigned at birth is supposed to correspond with a certain gender (see also chapter 2.1). Such socially constructed truths may, for example, sometimes be recognised in the meta-narratives pervading certain narrative strands. Boyd (2008) points out these mechanisms and is weary of oral histories building on lesbian and gay identity politics. From her critical argumentation, we may take away that it is important for the researcher not to simply take these meta-narratives for granted but actively acknowledge and possibly deconstruct them. This falls into line with what I have already asserted above, namely that oral history is not an absolute truth and that each life story needs to be situated in its sociocultural context.

Oral history is a good starting point for employing a queer methodology and researching queer lives, taking into account the historical and societal constraints as pointed out by Boyd (2008). Moreover, oral histories seem to be a medium of choice in which "the ephemeral sex factor" may be addressed. With this expression, Boyd refers to the apparent disconnection between the history of sexuality and traditional historical landmarks: Sex and presenting a certain sexual style

change over time, but these changes, often in the form of personal memories, may not easily be linked to other, official records (2008, p. 182). Informed by poststructuralism and queer theory, "the researcher becomes increasingly open and sensitive to how sexuality, among a broad range of identities, is anchored in fleeting ways within the discursive contours of interviewing" (Kong, Mahoney & Plummer, 2002, p. 244). Indeed, this openness of a queer, qualitative approach to doing research on LGBTQ persons is what characterises queer oral history. The topic of employing an appropriate queer method in researching queer lives will be further discussed in the subsequent section on the queer archive.

3.3 The Queer Archive: Moving from Theory into Research Practice and Output[19]

My interest in oral history, lesbian and gay oral history and queer oral history found a theoretical connecting point in theories on the queer archive. At the basis of the queer archive lies an interest to capture voices and experiences of marginalized, disempowered groups. The lack of written records of subjective experience of queerness among non-elites is striking (Kumbier, 2014), and a queer approach to recording and writing history is necessary. Scholars like Halberstam and Cvetkovich propose the queer archive as a concept which is able to contain as well as flexibly adjust to queer history. In this chapter, I discuss theories of the queer archive, as well as how I put it into practice.

Theoretical Underpinnings

A helpful step before discussing the queer archive more extensively, is taking a look at the definition of the archive. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the archive as follows:

> 1: a place in which public records or historical materials (such as documents) are preserved; an archive of historical manuscripts; a film archive; also: the material preserved—often used in plural reading through the archives

> 2: a repository or collection especially of information

The corresponding transitive verb "to archive" means "to file or collect in or as if in an archive" (Merriam-Webster). These definitions focus on archives as passive spaces and collections, as institutionalized archives are often perceived. Dictionaries like the Merriam-Webster or the public encyclopaedia Wikipedia do not yet include definitions or articles on the queer archive. However, scholars Krista Quesenberry and Colin Hogan (2017) provide a concise description of the queer archive. In their definition, there are notable differences to the characteristics of the "archive":

> Queer archives purposefully expose what is left out of institutional, mainstream archives in order to reveal the possibilities for a more complex historical record. Queer archives have a political aim, which is generally to recognise and include LGBT experiences into

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[19] Parts of this chapter have previously been published as: Wasserbauer, M. (2016a). 'That's What Music Is About—It Strikes a Chord': Proposing a Queer Method of Listening to the Lives and Music of LGBTQs. *Oral History Review, 43*(1), 153-169. doi:10.1093/ohr/ohw021

broader historical frameworks. Furthermore, many queer archives emphasize private experiences and non-material records to expand the range of stories that can be told. An institutional archive would exclude these materials as insignificant, and the private record would not be invested in a larger context. In a queer archive, however, these non-traditional artefacts become important—and often central.

These thoughts summarize the core of why several queer theorists suggest that documenting and researching LGBTQ lives requires a special kind of archive, involving sources and ways of knowledge that are traditionally disregarded as ephemera. They suggest that the queer archive conceptualizes a way of approaching queer identity and making queer history more palpable.[20]

Cvetkovich argues that "in the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge" (2003, p. 8). What she describes is the starting point of a queer archive: She suggests that as materials emerge out of cultural and subcultural spaces built around sex, desire, feelings and trauma—like activist groups or music performances—these cultural artefacts become the archive of something more ephemeral. Queer history can and must be collated out of personal collections, which resonates with the feminist maxim that the personal is political and the political is personal. For Cvetkovich, feelings and affect are essential within the queer archive, as places of affect can serve as sources for intellectual projects (2007). This emphasis may be read as one feature which distinguishes the queer archive from traditional scholar's archives. The queer archive does not only exist in literal archives or libraries, but it can also be found in high and low culture. Cvetkovich's examples of the queer archive include the Aids movement and ACT-UP organisation, as well as documentaries of lesbian lives.

Halberstam, whose work partly focuses on researching queer subcultures, specifies what a queer archive comprises:

> [T]he notion of the archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material or hold documents, and it has to become a floating signifier for the kinds of lives implied by the paper remnants of shows, clubs, events and meetings. The archive is not a simple repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function it

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[20] Like theories on queer archives and queering the archives, other disciplines also engage with different possibilities to approach the archive. The open-source edited volume *Decolonising Archives* (2016) is a prime example.

requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making. (2005, p. 169-170)

Similarly, Marcia Gallo asserts that doing queer oral history means that the researcher sometimes has to let go of traditional research methods: "Using nontraditional methods as an oral historian usually means climbing out of the archives, temporarily setting aside the secondary literature, and confronting the fear of interviewing real live people and forming close relationships with some of them" (2012, p. 215). Gallo's statement affirms once again that queer archives focus on individual, small histories rather than on bigger historical lines.

As I am researching LGTBQ individuals and their life stories, the concept of the queer archive serves as an influential and inspirational concept for working with and around my interviews. The diversity within this group of individuals and the many possible layers of the topic fit Halberstam's idea of the "jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making". The queer archive helps to unite queer theories and oral history: the accustomed frame of traditional research methods has sometimes to be left and research has to be conducted beyond our culture's "matrix of intelligibility" (Butler, 1999 [1990]), in order to grasp what LGBT or Q identity can mean. As will become clear in the chapters below, an item as trivial as a CD booklet may become an important carrier of meaning and personal history in exploring one's own identity. Halberstam refers to José Muñoz (1996) to illustrate his point:

> We need to theorize the concept of the archive and consider new models of queer memory and queer history capable of recording and tracing subterranean scenes, fly-by-night clubs, and fleeting trends; we need, in José Muñoz's words, 'an archive of the ephemeral'. (2006, p. 11)

In the article Halberstam refers to, Muñoz explicates why considering ephemeral material is especially important in the history of non-privileged social groups: "The presentation of this sort of anecdotal and ephemeral evidence grants entrance and access to those who have been locked out of official histories and, for that matter, 'material reality'" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 9). To him, "Ephemera includes[sic] traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived" (1996, p. 10-11).

It is important, however, to scrutinize and challenge the specific queer character of the conception of the queer archive. What Cvetkovich, Halberstam and Muñoz propose as a suitable

way to chronicling queer history, may be applicable to other identities as well; the idea of the queer archive is not limited to the queer. Sara Edenheim critiques exactly this acclaimed specificity of the queer archive: She points out parallels with the archive of folklore, which includes everyday objects and commonly presents the archive as a form of anthropological museum (2013, p. 42). Edenheim argues that the idea of the queer archive is merely an add-on to the traditional scholar's archive "—one featuring queers as well—rather than a call for a specifically queer organization" (2013, p. 42). Moreover, the approaches to the queer archive discussed here were formulated by philosophers and queer theorists, rather than historians. Their approach is theoretical rather than resulting from actual engagement with archives. Historians may indeed confirm that there are many types of archives and see clear parallels to archives of the labour movement, the civil rights movement and even gay and lesbian archives employing similar principles of engaging with ephemera, individual stories and emotions.

Yet I do believe that archives can and should be queered, in the specifically sexual as well as the political meaning of the word: LGBTQ lives and same-sex desires need to be made visible in history where they are invisible at first sight, and ideas on what 'archive' means and what it should look like should be challenged and subverted. (Queer) archivist Kumbier defends the queer archive, but reminds us that we must sustain attention to the realities and conditions of archival labour, stressing that we do need traditional archives and those who engage with them (2014, p. 20). Kumbier clarifies that the lack of attention to the physical dimensions of the archive is due to the fact that many scholars engaging with the queer archive are not archivists themselves, but based in cultural studies (2014, p. 20). The emphasis the theorists of the queer archive put on affect, feelings and deeply personal experiences enrich the history of any (minority) group, and are able to make it more accessible, not only on a scientific level, but also on a more intuitive and tangible level.

Overall, the idea of the queer archive ties in with the ethics of oral history, although it could be argued that the queer archive has even greater attention for affective and subversive dimensions of the narrators' lives. A queer methodology, whether in the frameworks of queer oral history or the queer archive, offers an open approach to identity, as its thinking is not guided by traditional identity politics and challenges assumptions about taken for granted categories. Furthermore, a queer methodology supports mining "narrators' life stories for subjectivity, feelings, meaning and imagination rather than for an empiricist historical truth" (Murphy, Pierce & Ruiz, 2016, p. 11), which is certainly the aim in my dissertation.

Putting the Queer Archive into Practice and Employing Creative Research Methods[21]

The collaborative character of the queer archive as described by Halberstam struck a chord with me: "The archive is not a simple repository", but "it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 169-70) and the researcher becomes a co-archivist rather than a mere observer. This is how I, as a queer researcher and member of the LGBTQ community, need to approach this project on music and LGBTQs. I believe in listening to people's stories, and in the co-construction of meaning and knowledge by talking with each other. The diversity of individuals within the LGBTQ community and, accordingly, my research, fit with Halberstam's jigsaw puzzle metaphor, just as the multi-layered character of music does. Bringing all musical aspects of a person's life together in the course of a life story interview and thus aiming to understand the person's experiences, emotions and identity is much like constructing a puzzle. Each person's life story contributes to a greater understanding of the diversity within the LGBTQ community.

It soon became clear to me that I would like to do more than work with only the written transcripts of the interviews, as is often the habit in academic contexts. My research topic is based on studying music and audio consumption, and my research method is based on telling and listening. Therefore, including and engaging with audio materials seemed a natural choice for my research approach. In fact, audio materials became the basis of the oral history interviews. One way to acknowledge the narrators' agency and really giving them a voice, is to let them construct their own story with the help of music and musical memorabilia they prepare beforehand and bring along to the interview. As discussed above, music and musical memorabilia may play an important role in the elicitation of memories (e.g., Van Dijck, 2006; Bijsterveld & Van Dijck, 2009, see chapter 2.2). It seemed logical to make use of the mnemonic forces of music as scaffolding for the interviews, and thus I asked my narrators to think about the topics '(LGBTQ) identity' and 'music' beforehand, and I suggested to bring some 'things to remember' related to these topics to our interview. This suggestion may be interpreted in multiple ways: some narrators invited me to have a look at their CD or vinyl collection, others brought photographs, musical scores, or even a box full of personal memories. Others simply had a laptop at hand in order to look up some music, or brought no things to remember at all. These "things to remember" function as *aides-mémoires*, which let each narrator start talking

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[21] Parts of this section have previously been published as: Wasserbauer, 2016a;
Wasserbauer, M. (2016c). Listening to the Queer Archive — a conversation with Marion Wasserbauer. OUPblog. Oxford University Press's Academic Insights for the Thinking World. Retrieved from https://blog.oup.com/2016/05/lgbtq-stories-oral-history/

about whatever they are comfortable to tell. Musical ephemera like concert tickets, CDs, tapes, iPods, fan merchandize and other memorabilia like diaries and photographs can help to trigger certain memories and to materialize these memories during and after the interview. Moreover, the mnemonic characteristics of these musical ephemera and memorabilia demonstrate that music is so much more than merely sound; the power of music also consists of the culture and cultural practices surrounding the music itself.

During the interview, it is possible, for example, to look up and listen to songs. Collecting photographs of these memorabilia helps to illustrate their stories and make them come to life. Using these musical materials, the narrators are able to structure their story in advance and convey what for them are the most important musical influences. These mental and material preparations encourage a fuller representation of the roles music plays in the narrators' lives than if only asked spontaneously during the interview. The narrators can actively show what are the most important points they will talk about and establish connections, which I might otherwise not have identified. As David Gauntlett rightly remarks, "research participants need reflective time to construct knowledge" and "we can help the brain to construct knowledge—in this case, knowledge about *themselves*—by giving people exercises in which they are able to 'put together' what they know" (2007, p. 185). Music and musical memorabilia do exactly that within my research, they stimulate thinking about identity and music, and facilitate telling stories about these topics.

Analogous to the idea of embodied knowledge discussed below, the aim is to produce what I would like to call "embodied research output" and attempt to put the queer archive into practice. I chronicle the individuals' stories not only by transcribing them, but by mapping them during the interview and making them audible as well. Each interview is accompanied by a soundtrack, created according to the music mentioned in each story, which provides another layer of voicing the narrator's experiences. The narratives are accompanied by field notes; a map of how I experience each narrative was made during the interview, and the narrator is welcome to suggest where to add or place elements.[22]

Photographs of these memorabilia, field notes and playlists feature on my research website. In the tradition of oral history, research material is made available to the public. Narrators are asked, by means of a tick-box on the consent form, whether their material may be disclosed in such a way. The research website includes a page about each narrator, consisting of audio bits of their

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[22] The practice of making and discussing field notes is closely to related to ethnographic research methods.

interviews, parts of transcripts, a playlist and visual material, according to what they agreed to share. All narrators agreed on a basic level, and when I had the archives finished for the website, I double-checked with the narrators. I have changed some content according to the wishes of the narrators. All narrators' playlists may be found on the website, and for some narrators, a more extensive archive is available. The intention is to represent and work with a more tactile and resonant version of the musical life stories told. As music means more than words can explain, it is very important for me to acknowledge the audio dimension within my research and make it accessible alongside written research output: music needs to be able to speak for itself. The online platform YouTube offers a simple and easily accessible way to make playlists available. In that way, the written transcript is paralleled with an "audio-transcript", chronologically featuring the songs and bands mentioned during each interview. With these audio and visual elements, I create a small "queer archive" for each of the narrators, which can be publicly accessed on my research website, queervoices.be. Many of the practices discussed are in line with what Gauntlett (2007) summarizes as "creative research methods".

Except for general demographic questions, which were recorded in a so-called identification file, I did not prepare any specific questions for the interviews. Often, the narrators started their own stories when I asked them how they would identify their sex, gender identity and sexual preference, which was one of the questions in my identification file. In case the conversation got stuck or no musical prompts were provided by the narrators, I brought a sheet with some prompts for topics that might be interesting to discuss. This sheet contains prompts about key moments or phases concerning LGBTQ identity (first realisation, falling in love, relationships, first sexual contacts, first coming out to parent and friends on a personal level, and contact with LGBTQ groups, bars, parties, the role of social media in getting in contact with the community, and who in your environment knows about your gender/sexual identity on a social level) as well as musical key moments (how, when and in what way is music important for you; first musical memories; most important artists or bands; memorable concerts or festivals; music in a private context versus a social context). Additionally, I asked about other cultural input related to LGBTQ identity, and an overarching question which closed most of the interviews and provided an opportunity for the narrators to recapitulate their thoughts, namely: "Do you see a connection between specific music and your identity?"

HOLEBI-SLEUTELMOMENTEN	MUZIKALE SLEUTELMOMENTEN
ID-formation	Hoe/ wanneer/ in welke maat is muziek belangrijk
1ᵉ besef	
1ᵉ verliefdheid	1ᵉ muzikale herinnering
Eerste relatie	
Eerste keer	Meest belangrijke bands/artiesten
Coming out familie	En waarom
Vrienden	
Relaties/huwelijk	Concerten/ festivals die je in herinnering zijn gebleven
	Privé vs uitgaan
ID-integration	
Holebi groep	
Bar	
Feestje	
Rol sociale media/forum in contact met holebi's	
Wie weet 'het' nu allemaal	
Zie jij een verbinding tussen bepaalde muziek en je identiteit?	**Andere belangrijke culturele input?**

Figure 3: The original prompt sheet in Dutch

Summing up, the queer archive has a threefold function in my research: First, the queer archive broadens the idea of traditional historiography, about what valid archival records are and are supposed to look like. The queer archive is making the personal public, it enables insights into LGBTQ lives from a different angle. In this vein, it functions as the theoretical basis for my collaborative and feminist research method. Second, it is an aid for analysis and interpretation; it is part of a creative, audiovisual research method. Where my academic papers are fragmented, focusing on various topics within all of the life stories, the individual queer archives provide a way to get to know more about the narrators and to get a more complete insight into their lives and life stories. The intention is to represent and work with a more tactile and resonant version of the musical life stories told. Third, the small audio-visual archives on queervoices.be are tokens of gratitude towards my narrators; the archives are spaces to store and access their musical life story. Moreover, it is a low-threshold and freely accessible space where a broader audience may get into contact with research involving LGBTQ persons.

3.4   Research Ethics and Feminist Research Practices

Not only the theoretical underpinnings of my methodology and music as a guideline informed my research practice. I find it extremely important to conduct research in an ethically informed and empowering way, as I research very intimate and private topics. Moreover, I work with a group of people who are often viewed as a minority or even as a vulnerable group. Although I do not frame LGBTQs overall as a vulnerable group within my research, I acknowledge that all narrators may have encountered difficult phases in their lives (related or not related to being LGBTQ) and that these difficulties may be discussed during the interviews. As I believe in the power of co-constructing knowledge and contribute to writing LGBTQ histories together with the narrators, it was important for me to be as transparent as possible about the research process.

In this chapter, I first engage with literature on feminist and queer research practices and research ethics in order to describe my take on constructing knowledge in my project, as well as how I situate myself within my research. The second section is a reflection about my own position and its implications within my research, and the third section briefly sketches the procedure of applying for an advice of the ethical board of my university.

I would like to start with a quote from queer music ethnographer Taylor, which summarizes many of the points discussed in this section:

> A departure from alterity—the classical dichotomies of object/subject, self/other and in this case researcher/researched—to embrace the fractured and broadening landscape of the postmodern, has had profound epistemological implications regarding how, as a researcher, one comes to know and relate to the world under investigation. Feminist ethnographic debates have inspired a considerable amount of literature highlighting the usefulness and some of the dilemmas of establishing close and empathetic relationships between the researcher and the observed, advocating personal investment in the research process and a degree of emotional attachment to the field and informants. (2011, p. 4)

Feminist research ethics encourage to pay attention to unequal power relations, modes of listening (Anderson & Jack, 1991), reflexivity (Nencel, 2014), intersubjectivity and positionality (van Stapele, 2014), and are helpful for thinking about the implications of doing research in one's own communities (Bell, 2014). In line with the queer archive, Taylor proposes that intimate and

emotional engagement with the research topic as well as the participants is a productive means of gaining insights, and the researcher's subjectivity is embraced rather than condemned. Furthermore, the notion of embodied knowledge implicates that knowledge is "a temporal construct that is determined historically, locally and personally" (van Stapele 2014, 14), in which social relations and interactions play an important role. This implies that not only the narrated text, but also context and assumptions are a valuable part of the knowledge produced through an (oral history) interview. Here, I will discuss feminist research ethics and practices in theory, my positionalities as a researcher, as well as the approval of my research by the institutional board of ethics.

Ethics and Feminist Practice in Theory[23]

Oral histories inherently carry a notion of subjectivity, as the researcher and narrator form a close bond in what ideally is a very natural talk. The idea is that the narrator guides the talk, and there is no fixed set of standardized questions. Yet, the researcher remains in power over what happens with the life stories and how they are being interpreted. As a feminist and queer researcher, these issues of power and subjectivity raise important ethical questions. The feminist scholarship discussed here informed and influenced choices within the methodological approach of my research project.

As oral historian Joanna Bornat states, "feminist oral historians and ethnographers helped to shift the focus towards the subject by initiating debates that explored the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, raising questions about shared identity, oppression and ownership as well as voice and perspective" (2004, p. 35). Feminist ethics emphasise a responsible and caring research relationship and allow the consideration of issues specific to each single research situation, rather than assuming a fixed position (Bell, 2014). Showing awareness of subjectivities and positionality and consciously incorporating them into the method and outcomes of the research, can only strengthen the research's validity. A common denominator within various approaches to feminist research methods is not to believe in objectivity separate from power, politics, social relationships, ethics and values (Bell, 2014). Although feminist ethics oppose a positivist approach to science in general and oral history specifically, the researcher's goal

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[23] Part of this section has previously been published as: Wasserbauer, 2016a.

remains to represent the narrators as well and as true to life as possible. The concepts of embodied knowledge and situated reflexivity play a particularly important role in this regard.

The notion of embodied knowledge is an epistemological stance that matches the intersubjective process at work in an interview situation. Naomi van Stapele describes embodied knowledge as follows: Knowledge is a result of social relation and interaction, considering context and assumptions as well as the narrated text; knowledge is viewed as "a temporal construct that is determined historically, locally and personally" (2014, p. 14). It is important not to read the narrator's voice as an absolute truth, but, as Boyd affirms, as text produced in a certain context (2008, p. 180). The knowledge gained is not only on the surface level of the text, but lies in the interaction and positionalities of both researcher and narrator as well. These characteristics of embodied knowledge tie in with Donna Harraway's defense of reflexive partial perspectives as objectivity from a feminist point of view: "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (1988, p. 583). In the feminist tradition of the 1980s, Harraway critically investigates objective research claims of the sciences which have determined "what can count as knowledge" (1988, p. 580). In line with the claims for a strong objectivity of standpoint theory [24], she argues that embodied knowledge enables us acknowledge the radical historical specificity of any knowledge claims and knowing subjects (Harraway, 1988).

Acknowledging the narrator's agency is an important part of embodied knowledge. As Harraway puts it, "situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource" (1988, p. 592). van Stapele describes that "agency is claimed through constructions of the self; the way subjects act, think and speak within the dynamics of discursively demarcated spaces and allotted subject positions" (2014, p. 15). We as researchers are required to carefully look at the construction of agency through the narrative. Listening on multiple levels is thus required; especially when a musical dimension is added to these complexities, as another layer of audio material is involved.

A good connection between the interviewer and the narrator is an important condition for doing oral history. According to Halbwachs, the interview partners must have a common ground and even an "emotional community" in order to have a successful communication (in: Apfelbaum, 2010, p. 87). Halbwachs established his theories in the 1920s and we can truly speak

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[24] See, e.g., Harding (2008)

of a theory of affect *avant-la-lettre*, which many theories of (collective) memory build on. A basic feeling of trust and knowing the other certainly helps establishing an emotional community, and it only seems fair for the researcher to provide some personal information to the narrator, as the narrator will supposedly share very personal information and thoughts during the interview. Although the tradition of oral history suggests a close bond between the researcher and the narrator, there still remains an asymmetrical power relation. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu advises to handle the symbolic violence interviews create by the intrusive and artificially constructed character of a research situation with caution (1999[1993]). In order for nonviolent communication to take place, the interview partners must, according to Bourdieu, be socially close and agree on the presuppositions regarding form and content of the interview by continually showing intellectual and emotional participation (1999 [1993], p. 610). Many scholars have written about the issue of engagement and personal involvement of the researcher in their research topic.

Feminist scholars Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack pay plenty of attention to the bond between researcher and narrator as well: Their focus lies on interviewing women as a non-dominant social group. This implies that special interview skills are needed in order to fully comprehend women's voices: "Where experience does not 'fit' dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11). Since my research concerns a non-dominant social group as well, namely LGBTQ individuals, Anderson and Jack's concepts provide a good basis for reflecting on the ethics of interviewing and the role of the researcher. One of their principles for interviewing is that listening in stereo is required. Thoughts and feelings of the interviewee are not usually heard or expressed explicitly, even though they constitute an important part of oral history interviews. Our internalized cultural boundaries tell us not to over-emphasise our feelings, and this is why the interviewer has to pay special attention to these issues during the talk. Anderson and Jack propose three ways of good listening: First, listen to the narrator's moral language. Second, attend to the respondent's meta-statements: "Meta-statements alert us to the individual's awareness of a discrepancy within the self—or between what is expected and what is being said" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 22). Third, listen to the logic of the narrative, noticing the internal consistency or contradictions in the person's statements about recurring themes. Again, much attention is paid to the affect dimension of the interview. Although feelings and morals play an important role in a person's (life) story, the interviewer must not take on the role of a therapist. Anderson and Jack emphasise that there is a difference between an oral history interview and a therapeutic interview. Andrews addresses a similar topic, namely the myth of healing through telling the story. Andrews writes about doing oral history

with traumatized narrators, which requires special sensitiveness to this issue. Narrators can unburden themselves by telling their stories, but they may not expect healing through telling and must be aware of the fact that they might even be retraumatized by telling the story (Andrews, 2010, p. 149).

Returning to the researcher, reflexivity and awareness of intersubjectivity are important tools in working with and interpreting narratives, as van Stapele suggests: "Self-reflexivity is a fitting instrument for researchers to unpack how our own subjectivities impinge on our framing of a narrative" (2014, p. 16). Lorraine Nencel proposes that reflexivity needs to be a situated act, which considers that the background of the researcher, as well as temporal and circumstantial factors influence oral histories (2014, p. 76). In practice, reflexivity often functions as a corrective measure, considering the researcher's position within the oral history as protagonist as well as interpreter of text and silence. It entails discussing the research with the narrator, asking clarifying questions, meeting the narrator several times, as well as employing self-doubt and thinking of suitable textual representation of the oral histories.

Consciously using self-reflexivity, taking a close look at what happens on an intersubjective level during the research, considering situated knowledge as an epistemological basis and handling a feminist ethics of care are valid methods to deal with the inherent subjectivity of the researcher in oral history research.

In recent years, many researchers in the field of sexuality and gender studies critically engage with their own position within their research and writing (e.g., De Craene, 2017; Rosenberg, 2017; Shadix, 2017; Taylor, 2011). Their works show that many dimensions of research are influenced by the researcher's positionality and how they critically engage with it. A common trait described by these researchers is that one's position as a researcher grows and shifts organically as the research progresses. Casey Shadix (2017, p. 130) discusses shared authority between researcher and interviewee, and refers to Shopes: "collaborative work is personally and intellectually demanding, requiring an ability—even the courage—to deal with people and situations that can be difficult; a certain tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty about how a project will work out; willingness to take risks, not follow established protocols, and make decision based on the logic of the work itself" (Shopes, 2003, p. 106).

This description of collaborative research strongly resonates with Halberstam's view of the queer archive, and the researcher functioning as a co-archivist, as I discussed above. Indeed, in my project, the "logic of the work itself", i.e., speaking to a diverse group of LGBTQ persons, determined the research project. Each single encounter with a research narrator creates a new

sort of relationship, and determines the tone, length and content of the interviews. Since there was not a fixed set of questions discussed with the narrators, and they were encouraged to tell their own story using musical materials, each interview is intrinsically different. These decisions enabled me to be as open-minded about my research topic as possible and approach it from the widest possible angle. However, the diversity of and among the oral histories makes it difficult to structure and synthesize "research outcomes". Researching sexual narratives, Shoshana Rosenberg frames sexuality as a text in the tradition of Stuart Hall: "By engaging with a text, we are both transformative and transformed. In turn, the researcher becomes inescapably subjective and fundamentally linked to how the text of an interviewee's sexual narrative is ultimately described" (2017, p. 6). Indeed, this conclusion links to the power dimensions which remain at work within oral history projects, as discussed above. The positionality of the researcher, as an insider (in this case, an LGBTQ community member), further influences the course and tone of the interview; however, Rosenberg points to the fact that insider versus outsider research is in fact an undesirable dichotomy, as these terms essentialise identities and do no acknowledge interpersonal differences among persons belonging to the same community (2017, p. 7-8). Another important inequality in researching sexuality is that while the research participant's sexuality and desires are intimately discussed, the researcher is expected to remain an objective, asexual entity:

> Indeed, there seems to be a remarkable dichotomy between the desiring informant versus the non-desiring researcher. This dichotomy is not only problematic from a methodological point of view—why would the desires of a researcher not influence our interpretations and understandings of the desires of the informant?—it also confronts us with the epistemological question of how a non-desiring body can investigate desire in its very existence. (De Craene, 2017, p. 6).

Rightly, Valerie De Craene points out that the researcher's sexuality and desires are not neutral, but actively influence the course of the research.

Critical Reflections on My Position as a Researcher/Activist/Person

After discussing feminist research ethics in theory and other researchers' works, I would now like to take this discussion to a more personal level and put myself into the picture.

Let me briefly illustrate the ways in which my research is situated at the intersection of various disciplines. I work at the faculty of Social Sciences, within the department of communication

studies. As my research may be framed as 'music audience research within a minority group', and my main supervisor is active in the field of media studies, I think my position within the department is justified—despite the fact that the work I do is very different from what some of my colleagues in media studies do. However, my research may also be framed differently, namely as an oral history project chronicling the lives of LGBTQs, a long underrepresented group of our society, based on music in their lives. My co-supervisor works in the fields of cultural history and the history of sexualities, gender and bodies. The fact that I have studied neither history, media studies nor sociology adds to the sense of oddity of my research: I have trained in languages and modern literature, with a special interest in feminist, LGBT, queer and critical theories. The influence of critical and literary theory certainly shapes my research, and the connection with these disciplines is reinforced through feedback by the chair of my doctoral committee, who is situated in literature and queer studies.

My list of advisors ends here, but there are yet other disciplines my research is connected to: Researching music and its roles in our lives is of course related to the sociology of music and LGBT/queer musicology. Memory studies provide an indispensable background on how memory works, how we structure our stories, and the power of memorabilia or *aides-mémoires*. Last but not least, I am a sexualities researcher. Hearing deeply personal accounts on sexual preference and gender, and focusing on these topics as identity features, sexualities are—together with music—the main focus of my research. Interestingly, however, I am not generally perceived as a sexualities researcher within and outside of the academic environment. At academic conferences and workshops, my interdisciplinarity often makes me an outlier. However, I believe that it is exactly the wealth of different possible approaches to the topic of music and gender/sexual identity which makes this project valuable and accessible.

Added to the implications of the interdisciplinary character, I believe that my personal position as a researcher influences my research project's character. First, there are some general personal features which play a role in any context involving qualitative research: (Assumptions about) the researcher's gender, age, class and education might influence the relationship between researcher and narrator, in turn influencing the interview situation. Second, some features related more specifically to my project may influence my research: as a queer woman with a personal interest in music, I am a part of my research target group. As well as being a feminist, I am a committed member of the LGBTQ community and an activist on different levels within the community, visibly and invisibly supporting diverse organisations. This implies that some

persons from within the community, who are part of my research target group, know me (more or less personally), and that they may have assumptions about my sexual preference.

Half of my research narrators are persons I had never met before; the other narrators are either acquaintances from among my personal, professional or activist networks, or personal friends of mine. Drawing on her queer ethnographic fieldwork, Taylor (2011) reflects about interviewing friends and discusses her position as a researcher, which she terms "intimate insider". Taylor finds that in general, research material co-produced with friend-informants is "significantly greater in length and depth" (2011, p. 11). Yet, she also discusses the downsides and pitfalls of such intimate insider research, like the "potential for data distortion and my lack of objectivity and possible insider blindness" (2011, p. 13). I found that the narrators who already were friends of mine before interviewing them were indeed less reluctant about speaking about very intimate topics, and that in general, these interviews tended to be longer and more casual in atmosphere. However, I do not want to imply that these characteristics are merely connected to our more intimate bond, this may also be related to the narrators' personalities and the specific settings of each interview. With some of the narrators who were acquaintances or friends of friends at the time of the interview, I experienced that sharing their life stories has strengthened our bond. Whenever narrators asked me about my own experiences as a queer person, I shared my story willingly, albeit with the microphone turned off or in a casual talk after our interview was done[25].

Of those narrators who did not know me personally (who, for instance, found my call for participation online), many did not "read" my sexuality correctly, or at all. One research encounter made this very clear to me: after one of my very first interviews, the narrator and I had a coffee in a café and reflected about the interview. The narrator suddenly asked me whether I could relate to these issues at all, and whether I was a lesbian myself. While I thought that it was very clear that I am queer myself, she did not make that assumption or read me as queer. We further discussed the possible implications of (not) disclosing my sexuality, and the narrator told me that it might be a good idea to give people a heads-up about my sexuality, since she had the feeling that she had modified some of her story in this light, and that other narrators might do so too. Another one of her remarks was that it is easier to talk to someone who can relate to their issues and "has been there" as well—thinking of coming out, for example. Until that specific interview encounter, I had not been aware of the fact that being upfront about my sexual preference could have such a big impact on the interviews. From the beginning of my project,

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[25] In a similar vein, Nowak and Haynes (2018) explore the methodology of friendship and its potential to add valuable contributions into music research. This publication is very closely connected to my research but it unfortunately was only published as I was finishing the last revisions of my dissertation.

I always had the intention to be open about myself, but only in case the narrators asked any questions themselves. My intention was not to bias the interview situation or put too much emphasis on my own story. However, through this reflection, I realized that there is no such thing as an unbiased, neutral research relationship with a narrator. After this conversation, I usually gave my narrators a casual heads up, by mentioning for example, that my partner is a soprano singer. In that way, I gave away a bit of personal information about my sexuality and my interest in music, without making it a real big topic. Because of many shared networks, I occasionally meet my research narrators in real life, and enjoy having a little chat. Most are very interested in the progress of my research and I could feel their curiosity and expectation towards me finishing the work or being able to share some "results" with them on the spot—which I am always hesitant about, as I do not think of my project as result-oriented in the sense that I now have "the conclusion about music and LGBTQs". Most narrators politely accept that it is still ongoing and that they have not heard from me about the research in a while. They also express their interest in being kept up to date about the defence and presentation of this dissertation.

Ethics Board

As I already mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I do not frame LGBTQ persons as a vulnerable group in general. However, preparing for the interviews and talking to me may involve engaging with more difficult periods in their lives. The topics discussed in the interviews may be touchy for some persons, for example talking about their bodies, their sex lives, but also about their relationships with their parents, mental health and bullying. Even though the narrators were entirely in control over what they did and did not want to talk about during our interview, it was important for me to sufficiently inform the narrators about my research, and to obtain their consent in a more formal, written way. The research narrators were made aware of their rights concerning participating in this research project, as well as about possible implications. After responding to the initial call for participation, they received an extended leaflet with information about the research. They were informed that they could, at any point, stop their participation, and gave explicit consent to participate in my research.

Moreover, in the tradition of oral history, I decided to work as much as possible with "real persons" instead of anonymizing and de-personalizing my research. These are common practices in social sciences, contributing to a sense of reliability and objectivity of the research. Instead, I aim to write about queer histories which are relatable and authentic, focusing exactly

on the very personal and intimate character of the oral histories recorded. In my opinion, this is one way to acknowledge the importance of individual life stories in learning more about a minority community, and to give a voice to those who often remain(ed) invisible.

Therefore, at the time of our interview, all narrators were asked and specified whether they wanted to participate with their real life first name or whether they would rather like to remain anonymous and choose a pseudonym. 9 persons chose a pseudonym and 13 persons appear in the research with their real life first name. Furthermore, I asked the narrators after the interview whether there are any parts of the interview they would like to exclude or any actors or other identifying materials they would like to be anonymized. All of these decisions were noted on our consent form.

The call for participation, information leaflet, consent form, as well as the general research design were submitted to and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Social and Human Sciences of the University of Antwerp (reference: SHW_14_11_02) before starting the interviews.

Other information in the dossier for the Ethical Committee included an overview of the research questions, methods, questions about possible risks for the participants and a plan for storage and accessibility of the interview data as well as the research homepage.

3.5   Implementation and Implications of the Methodology

Meeting and Introducing the Narrators

Holebi, trans*, queer, muziek en identiteit: oproep voor interviews

Figure 4: Visuals of my call for participation

As the multiple interpretability of "queer" in "queer voices" discussed above implies, the description of the target audience was consciously kept as open and accessible as possible: Anyone who identifies as LGBTQ (or any other non-normative gender/sexual identity), lives or has lived in Flanders for a substantial time, is above the age of 18, and in whose life music is important was welcome to participate. In this way, the focus lies not only on LGBTQ music fans, musicians or those otherwise heavily involved with music; the voices of everyday and average music listeners are just as welcome.

The call for participation was spread online via a Facebook page created for this project, "Queer voices: muziek, identiteit en LGBTQ's" (www.facebook.com/Queer-voices-muziek-identiteit-en-LGBTQs-751330544933033/) which was shared by a few Flemish LGBTQ community pages as well as the twitter account of my university department, as well as by my friends; an early version of the research homepage, www.queervoices.be; and as tear-off posters in LGBTQ bars and party venues[26]. Another important way of spreading the call was by word-of-mouth: I talked about my research to many people and invited some persons to participate if they felt like it, and others passed on my call by talking about it to friends, colleagues and students.

Further communication with the prospective narrators happened either by e-mail, Facebook messenger or texting and phoning. When someone expressed interest in participating, I sent an extensive form with information about my research to the prospective narrators and asked them to take some time and read it. In agreement with each narrator's preference, we agreed on a time and place for our interview. In most cases, I visited the narrators at home; however, one

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[26] The full call for participation may be found on my homepage, www.queervoices.be.

interview took place in a meeting room at my faculty, two interviews were in bars, and three interviews took place at my home. The full interviews were audio-recorded after the permission of the narrators was asked. As I wanted to make sure that the narrators' stories were recorded correctly and represent them in a way they feel comfortable with, I checked back with the participants by sending them my transcriptions, unless they specified that they preferred not to read their transcript. Some narrators provided corrections on content and language, one narrator asked for a second interview as she felt she did not tell everything she wanted to. Upon reading the transcript, one narrator decided she would feel more comfortable if I used a pseudonym instead of her real name as agreed upon in the first place. Other narrators did not provide any feedback about the transcripts.

I did not interview all persons who expressed interest in participating: several contacts ended due to practical issues of finding a date. Some persons also contacted me after I had finished the interviewing phase of my research.

This rather open call attracted very diverse narrators: from heavily involved fans to more casual music listeners, from classical music enthusiasts to former street musicians. The diversity of narrators entails in turn a great diversity of life stories as well as ways in which these stories are told. It is important to acknowledge that these narrators are not selected randomly, and that my research does not aim to represent all of the LGBTQ community or the average LGBTQ person.

This overview of the narrators is based on the demographic information collected before or in the beginning of the interviews in identification files. As already mentioned, these identifications are based on how the narrators identify their sex, gender identity and sexual preference themselves.

name	age	gender	sexual preference
Tobias	36	male	gay
Roxy	25	female	queer/lesbian
Joris	24	male	gay
Laura	24	female	fluid
Nikkie	44	female	lesbian
Nikki	23	female	lesbian
Anna	27	female	lesbian
Patricia	51	female	pan
Dario	18	male	gay
Nina	32	female	lesbian/queer
Dan (+ Michel)	43	male	rather gay
Tom	thirtysomething	trans boy	pan
Kurt	45	male	homosexual
Mostafa	41	male	gay
Robertina	60	lesbian woman in a male body	
Stefaan	33	male	gay
Pieter	31	male	gay
Felix	29	male	gay
Selm	32	genderfluid	?
Marthe	38	he/she/they	
Shary	23		lesbian
Sarah	32	female	lesbian

Figure 5: Overview of the narrators

I will briefly introduce the narrators here.

In 2014 and 2015, I met 23 extraordinary persons who were willing to let me into their homes and lives, in order to tell me all about being LGBTQ and how they experience music in their lives. I briefly want to introduce them here. My first interview was with *Tobias* (36), at my home. After we cooked and ate dinner together, we had what felt like a long talk among friends: Tobias passionately told me about his favourite artists, his interest in the Eurovision song contest and

his past and current relationships. He calmly accepted my first-interview nervousness and made me feel at ease as a researcher. The second interview was with my friend *Roxy* (25), who had meticulously prepared musical memorabilia for our meeting: We discussed musical genres ranging from pop to alternative to classical, how music is able to convey "difference", and how she, as a performer, experiences and interprets being queer. Soon after, I interviewed *Joris* (24), who brought his laptop with a list of important songs. We listened to several songs, and Joris' engaging way of telling stories made me laugh and empathize with his experiences. When I visited *Laura* (24) at her student chambers, our interview was interrupted several times as her housemates came in and out of the common room. Nevertheless, this interview was extremely valuable for me, not only because of the stories Laura freely told me, but also because of the talk we had after the interview at a nearby café. Laura's thought-provoking impulses made me, for example, revisit my own positionality in my research. *Nikkie* (44) offered me a warm welcome with cookies and coffee when I arrived at her house. Since Nikkie had actively engaged with music throughout her life, it was very surprising for me to hear that she actually preferred silence over music at that point in her life. Our conversation really showed me how intensely music may be connected to our emotional life and reverberated for a long time.

At the time of our interview, *Nikki* (23) had just moved back into her parental home after a break-up. That way, we found ourselves sitting next to each other slightly awkwardly at the desk of her childhood bedroom. Just before our interview, Nikki had lost most of her digitally stored music due to a hardware crash. However, Nikki was able to recall much of the music she wanted to talk about, and generously shared musical anecdotes as well as stories about difficulties she had to face in life. My friend *Anna* (27) is the only person I interviewed twice, both times in a very relaxed atmosphere at her home. During our interview we smoked some cigarettes, had a drink and some crisps, cooked dinner, listened to music and tried to ignore her neighbour's noisy construction works. Anna's compelling storytelling drew me into her intimate realms of loneliness, love, liberty and conveyed the great significance of music in all of her life. *Patricia* (51) also invited me to her home, and we spent the first hour of our conversation in front of her CD collection. Each of the CDs carries its own story, and the wide range of musical genres conveys a sense of the many experiences she had and people she met in her life so far. (In retrospect, I am annoyed with myself in this part of the interview, as I feel that I talked too much and asked too many questions.) In the second part of our interview, we sat down and talked about gender and sexual identities, and discovered some musical parallels by means of the timeline I drew during the interview. My next narrator, *Dario* (18), is the youngest of all the narrators; yet he was very eager to participate in the project. He introduced me to what it really means to be a

passionate fan of a certain artist, and just how many aspects of his life are connected to his fandom. Queercore and the Riot Grrrl movement are two music-related phenomena I vaguely knew about, but had never engaged with in depth. Speaking to *Nina* (32) changed this, and I am utterly grateful for introducing me to the movements through her personal stories. In her bedroom in the co-housing project she lives in, Nina shared her personal music and zine archives with me, and her story showed me how feminist and political engagement may translate into musical communities. Eventually, Nina and I even co-organised a zine workshop at a queer festival. The meeting with Nina was the last one in 2014; I then took a small break to organise and work with the wealth of interview materials I had already gathered so far.

My next interview took place in a completely different setting, namely in a café, and it involved two interview partners at once: *Dan* (43) happily told me about his professional and private musical engagements and preferences. When his partner *Michel* (Fortysomething) joined us, we discussed how meeting an intimate partner may influence musical habits. Four characteristics distinguish this interview for me: Dan's hearty laugh, the fact that we were able to throw in German words once in a while (which is my mother tongue), the fact that he had not brought any music or memorabilia at all, and, of course, that I was able to partly interview his partner as well. The next interview came into existence in various phases: Thirtysomething *Tom* and I first met at a queer festival, and had a mail conversation as well as a face to face breakfast meeting to discuss my research, before I recorded our actual interview. I am grateful for Tom's critical and insightful remarks, and appreciate the openness with which he spoke about difficult parts in his life. His story shows that music is a powerful and driving force in our life, and that (making) music may help us find our own voice. The life story of *Kurt* (45) is dominated by two passions: his passion for collecting, making and listening to music, and his passion for men. Since Kurt only came out as gay relatively recently, his coming out is a recurrent topic throughout the interview. *Mostafa* (41) and I knew each other through LGBTQ activism and lived around each other's corner at the time of the interview. For me, this was the most interactive and tactile interview of all: Mostafa is a very vivid narrator, using a lot of mimics and gestures, getting up and walking around, fetching vinyl records, Moroccan instruments, photographs, his laptop, phone or a cigarette throughout the interview. During our long interview on a hot summer's night, he introduced me to lots of Arab traditions, and music and taught me about his personal experience of the intersection of gay and Arab identities.

Robertina (60) arrived with two heavy bags filled with musical memorabilia at the LGBTQ bar we agreed to meet at. Although Robertina always had a fascination with musical technologies such

as radio and deejaying, I learnt that music is a spiritual experience for her as well, and that music surrounds us constantly in things we would not immediately describe as music. Although the past years of her life were marked by hardships, Robertina still exudes positivity and enjoys life. I enjoy that *Stefaan* (33) discussed music on a very personal and emotional level, as well as on an abstract and intellectual level. He tells about several pivotal moments in exploring his sexual identity, which are directly related to music. Through his stories I know that he enjoys sharing music with other persons, and I am happy that he introduced me to some artists I had not discovered before. As his profession is related to music, *Pieter* (31) also has many different perspectives on music. The lively stories about his sequential obsessions with divas ranging from Lady Gaga to Cecilia Bartoli often made me smile, although we also spoke about more serious topics like his difficult childhood. Together, we also tried to put a finger on what exactly makes strong female artists so attractive for gay men. Speaking about strong female artists: "Björk" is the first topic which comes to my mind when I think about my interview with *Felix* (29). The Icelandic artist was the dominant theme throughout our interview. While having coffee and *koffiekoeken*[27] at Felix' dinner table, we had a very calm talk. Felix took his time to think about various topics, and speaks about music and life events in a nuanced way, even when strong emotions are actually involved. For him, music is a great source of comfort and emotional regulation.

Selm (32) and I had been acquaintances for a while before our interview, knowing that we had a shared interest in topics related to gender, emotions and sharing knowledge with a broader audience. Moreover, we shared various community networks. I am very grateful that Selm not only shared personal thoughts and experiences about gender fluidity and sentimentality in music which are valuable for my research, but that our interview also provided an occasion to get to know each other better: after our recorded interview, we spent another hour or so reflecting, comparing our experiences and sharing intimate stories. My friend *Marthe* (38) and I were so involved in our interview that we forgot the water they were boiling for tea on the hob. Marthe's house, which functions as a creative/artistic space and residency, was a great location for our interview, and Marthe's creative energy pervades the whole interview. In late November 2015, I interviewed *Shary* (23) in the living room of the flat she shared with two roommates and her cat Yoncé, who joined us for the interview. At the time of our interview, Shary was going through a rough patch facing mental health issues, as she shared with me. I greatly empathized with her, recognising my own mental health struggles, and felt the need to talk with her off

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[27] Flemish Danish pastry

record. Afterwards, we both felt more at ease, having established a base of mutual understanding. Shary also wished to continue the interview, and reflected about how music has always been a source of consolation for her. My last interview was with *Sarah* (32), whom I was referred to by another interview narrator. While being lesbian is not one of the most important identity traits for Sarah, music certainly is closely linked to her sense of self: Sarah is a passionate hobby musician, playing percussion instrument in various groups and devoting most of her free time to music. The way she speaks about music clearly conveys the importance of music in her life.

Overall, when I think of my narrators, I feel: *grateful* for the time they took and the efforts they made to prepare for our interviews, *humbled* by them so generously letting me enter into their lives and sharing their experiences, emotions and insights, and *proud* to know these persons and be part of a shared community with them.

I set out to research life stories of the members of a minority group which is utterly diverse in itself, and accordingly, I expected to speak to very diverse narrators. When I first started my research project, I had a relatively balanced set of participants in mind, spread more or less evenly throughout all ages, genders, sexual preferences, and coming from a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds. However, as I relied on narrators responding to my call for participation or hearing about my research by word of mouth and contacting me, I did not have a lot of control of these factors. I consciously chose some LGBTQ venues and parties which I knew would attract a diverse crowd, and chose not to announce my call in all mainstream gay-male venues in Flanders in order to avoid over-representation of that group.

As I look at an overview of my narrators, some remarkable traits stand out. I see that most of them are in fact middle class persons with a relatively high degree of education. There is a good diversity of age, genders and sexual preferences in my research sample. However, the high concentration of twentysomethings probably reflects my own age and is telling about my via-via connections in the community. Despite the fact that I did not specifically target LGBTQ persons who work in the artistic or musical sector, the topic of my research attracted remarkably many narrators who in fact do. Four deal with music professionally, either as musicians or in connection with music theatre, ten are amateur musicians. With some of these persons, there is an overlap with working in the theatre world.

Along some other lines, my sample of narrators is, unfortunately, not as diverse as I had hoped. Only one of my narrators belongs to an ethnic minority in Belgium: Mostafa is a second generation Moroccan immigrant. While most narrators belong to the middle class, Patricia

experienced growing up and living in poverty and speaks about her experiences of class difference within the LGBTQ community. Their experiences of being a Moroccan Muslim and gay, as well as living in poverty as a pansexual person will be discussed in the upcoming chapters, and provide insight into what it may mean to live at the intersection of two minority groups.

Materials and Transcription

Following each interview, I collected my thoughts, impressions and connections to other interviews or existing literature in a written memo-document. Together with the hand-written notes or sketches made during the interviews, these memos were valuable sources for structuring the wealth of interview materials I recorded. During transcription and while re-reading the interviews, I often added to these memos, and while writing about specific narratives, I always consulted both the memos as well as the research notes. Moreover, I kept a research diary to record more personal feelings about the talks, the interview process as well as the writing processes. Writing memos and keeping research diaries ties in with ethnographic research practices, and both are part of my own self-reflexive practice in the research process.

The transcription of the interviews is an important step to make the material more readily accessible and prepare it for analysis. I tried to transcribe the interviews as soon as possible: The longer the time between recording the interview and transcribing it, the bigger the chances are of losing grip on the stories and memories of texture and context. The recorded interviews lasted between 48 and 160 minutes, adding up to 38 hours and 13 minutes of interview materials. Although I realized that the full transcription of the interviews would require a lot of attention and time, I still transcribed each interview verbatim, taking note of changes in the narrator's tone of voice, any doubts or pauses in order to get the full picture of every interview. I briefly considered doing poetic transcriptions (see, e.g., Richardson, 2002), which most closely resemble actual speech, but let go of the idea because poetic transcriptions did not prove to be very practical and common in an academic context. Instead, I employed a more conventional system of transcription, depicting the interview as a conversation between the narrator and myself. Yet, I tried to stay as close as possible to the feeling of the actual conversation in my transcriptions. I indicate doubts and shorter pauses with three dots, "…", and longer silences by noting them in square brackets, "[silence]". In order to convey the mood and interaction during the interview and include the narrator's expressions, I include laughter, smirks, coughs, etc. in square brackets,

e.g. "[we laugh]". I did not clean up any "uhm" or stop phrases like "you know" or "well,…" from the interviews, as they are simply part of real life conversations. Similarly, I tried to depict whenever a narrator said something with a special intonation, like "nooooo" or "SHIT"; and when they recall their own thoughts or mimic a third parties' voice within a narrative, I mark these segments with single quotation marks, e.g., "I remember that I thought: 'Hot guy!'". If there are any ambiguities or missing words or phrases in the interview excerpt, I clarify in square brackets.

Whenever a narrator spoke in a dialect, I tried to transcribe the dialect words, although my knowledge of Dutch as a non-native speaker sometimes fell short. In case I was not sure what the narrator said because of noise distortion or because I simply did not know specific words or expressions, I highlighted the relevant section for clarification by the narrator. In translation, it is not always easy to preserve the exact feeling of certain idioms, expressions or slang words; therefore I sometimes provide the Flemish original together with some explanations in a footnote.

Mazé points out the pitfalls and obstacles which transcribing oral history interviews brings with it and reviews relevant literature on that topic. A main question is, whether a transcription can convey anything meaningful about what happens in an oral performance (Mazé, 2006, p. 249). A transcript might be able to capture *what* has been said, but not *how*; the gestures, mimics and tone of voice of the oral history can never be replicated adequately. While during the oral interview authorship is shared equally between all the participants sitting around the microphone, it shifts towards the researcher during the transcription (Mazé, 2006, p. 246-7). In this sense, I paid attention not to remove the oral history from the narrator and turn it into my own work. One way to watch over the co-authorship of the written form of the oral histories is to check back with the narrators: After the transcription was finished, I sent the transcripts to the narrators, and about half of them replied with some comments and corrected any misunderstandings and inaccuracies—in most cases, this concerned idioms or dialect expressions.

PART 2: EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS

Introducing the Empirical Chapters

Having discussed the theoretical underpinnings which guided my research and my research methodology, part two of my dissertation focuses on the narrators' stories. The idea of my dissertation was to work with the materials discussed during and topics arising from the interviews. Just as I anticipated, there is a great diversity in the experiences of the narrators, as well as in their ways of talking about music and identity. Yet, there clearly are topics, experiences and feelings connected to music and LGBTQ identity that are shared by several of the narrators. Moreover, some shared identity characteristics among the narrators stand out, which guided me in investigating these characteristics and their connections to music in depth. Thus, in choosing which topics to discuss in detail, I let myself be guided by the oral histories and the narrators: In five empirical chapters, I explore a range of connections between music and LGBTQ identity. These chapters may be read independently from each other, as each chapter is a self-contained study focusing on one specific aspect related to my overall research question exploring the roles of music in LGBTQ lives. Yet, all chapters are linked to each other through the narrators' stories: certain narratives overlap, return throughout one single oral history or are intrinsically connected with each other. Overall, I aim to provide insights into the roles of music in each of my narrator's life, as well as into shared experiences with music which connect the LGBTQ narrators with each other.

The thematic focus of each chapter enabled me to structure the wealth of information which arises from the interviews. In each of the upcoming chapters, I focus on several narrators and specific narrative strands which relate to the topic of the chapter. While the empirical chapters focus only on specific topics and narrative strands of a narrator's oral history, I still try to provide sufficient background information in order to understand how each topic or narrative is situated in the narrator's life. Here, the queer archives also come in to provide an insight into the narrators' whole story.

The first chapter *Coming of age, coming out and coming into the community* deals with topics all of my narrators spoke about to some extent and often found in LGBTQ studies, namely coming of age as an LGBTQ person, coming out, and coming into the community. In this chapter, which introduces most of the 22 narrators, I investigate how music is linked to these topics. The chapter in fact comprises three sub-chapters, which are interlinked. Even more than

the following chapters, this chapter provides an overview of the diversity of LGBTQ identities and of music experience. In the first sub-chapter, *Tuning into yourself: Queer coming of age and music,* the focus lies on music use and experience in becoming aware of being somehow 'different' and discovering one's own sexual and gender identity. The second sub-chapter, *Coming Out,* follows two narrators up close in their process of coming of age, coming out and coming into the community. Their stories show a close link between music and coming out. The third part of my fist chapter, *Coming in: Music in the LGBTQ community,* explores shared musical experiences within the LGBTQ community.

The following four chapters are based on either a remarkable shared identity trait among my narrators, or on a range of experiences around a certain topic linked to music. The order of these chapters chronologically reflects the order in which I wrote them, which was an intuitive order following the interview material rather than being guided by any strong rationale.

The chapter *"I think I'm quite fluid with those kind of things": Exploring music and non-heterosexual women's identities* investigates notions of female non-heteronormative sexual identities and how the narrators link them to music in their lives. The focus lies on self-identification, music's roles in coming of age and as a facilitator, means of reflection and expression of female same-sex sexualities. Moreover, the function of Flemish lesbian musicians as role models is investigated.

Chapter 6, *Not only little monsters: Diversity in music fandom in LGBTQ lives,* challenges common representations of LGBTQ music fans, broadening the scope by considering a variety of LGBTQ individuals and fandoms.

'Bivouacking in the borderlands'—gender nonconforming trans* persons on music and identity explores the lived reality of five gender nonconforming trans* narrators. Two questions guide this chapter: How do the narrators talk about gender through music? And how does music reflect their (gender) identity?

In chapter 8, a topic which is relatable for persons of all gender and sexual identities is broached: *Music in queer intimate relationships* takes a closer look at the diverse functions music may have within relationships. While I focus on the narrators' individual experiences in chapters 4 to 7 (except for 4.3 which looks at music in the broader LGBTQ community), I here zoom in on music that intimately connects them to lovers or partners.

Some of the chapters are based on forthcoming or published articles and chapters in edited volumes, as I indicate in a footnote at the beginning of each chapter. All chapters are based on

topics arising from the narrators' stories. Within each chapter, relevant narratives from the life stories of several narrators are discussed. For each of these sections, I provide a caption based on a catchphrase or quote which relates to the narrative(s) and the narrator discussed in the particular section.

A Reflexive Note on Focussing on LGBTQ Narrators

Before delving into the oral histories, I want to share some thoughts about the specificities of my focus on LGBTQ persons. Right from the start of my research, one question kept being raised, be it from friends and acquaintances or posed by fellow researchers at conferences, namely: "Why do you think music is more meaningful in the lives of LGBTQ persons than in other persons' lives?" This is an important question, and I would like to take a moment to discuss this "devil's advocate's question", as it was termed by fellow researchers at several academic conferences, before moving on to the actual oral histories.

Many people assumed that I had a straight comparison group next to the LGBTQ narrators. In my opinion, this assumption points out that many people think about gender and sexual identities in binary terms, and expect a juxtaposition between straight and not-straight. A comparative approach to my research topic would certainly yield interesting insights, but such an approach also emphasises heteronormative thinking patterns in which straight is normal and LGBTQs are "other". This is a worldview I do not support; and I am more interested in listening to LGBTQs in depth rather than making comparative findings. So, while I do believe that music may be important in each person's life, regardless of sexual preferences or gender identities, my research consciously engages only with the lives and identities of LGBTQs.

It is indeed a devil's advocate's question, in the sense that academics are generally aware about the dynamics and politics of choosing and framing a research question I just addressed. Yet, it seems that my approach somehow triggers people, academics and friends alike, to express their doubts about the validity of it. I believe that either (subconscious) heteronormative assumptions or a conscious effort to unmask heteronormative assumptions motivated such questions about my research.

There are, however, some peculiarities to LGBTQ lives and the LGBTQ community that may establish particular connections with music untraceable in straight lives. Many of these points will be discussed in this dissertation, but never in comparison to straight lives. Therefore, I want to take a moment and point out some unique experiences LGBTQs may have and which are

unlikely to occur in straight lives. The uniting and social character of music makes it an important aspect in subcultures and communities, and as reviewed in chapter 2.3, music has some very specific functions in the LGBTQ community. For example, straight persons do not have to deal with the internal acceptance of being "different" and do not have to come out to their surroundings, as being straight is the assumed norm. Music and LGBTQ idols may be an indispensable support in such periods. Coming out is a unique feature in the lives of lesbian, gay, bi+, queer and trans* persons, just like coming into the community is. As an LGBTQ person, it is highly likely that you would want to make contact with other LGBTQs at some point in your life, often in bars, associations and communities—places, which are, in turn, often linked to music. Getting acquainted with the community is often referred to as 'coming in'; another issue straight persons do not have to face in their lives—at least not in direct connection to their sexual and gender identity. (Just imagine somebody asking a friend, "do you want to come along to a straight bar, tonight? It's going to be fun, don't be afraid!")

Some artists deal with specific social issues in their music, like homophobia and social exclusion. Moreover, topics like mental health and HIV/AIDS are relevant to the general population, but know a higher prevalence and specific connotations with the LGBTQ community. Many of these points are connected to the fact that being straight and identifying as a cis man or woman is largely seen as the norm in our Western European society. LGBTQs are still a minority group in numbers and in perception, even as we generally have a pretty good life including many equal rights and access to health care facilities in Flanders. Speaking about the good life: LGBTQs like to celebrate their identities in specific venues, listening to specific artists. One example is the Pride, which is a political statement for visibility and equality, commemorating the riotous past of the community and celebrating life all at the same time. Music is an essential ingredient to these events, and it is highly likely that LGBTQ and straight people alike would characterise music connected to Pride events as "LGB music"[28].

Of course, there will always be persons who just do not have a strong connection with music, regardless of gender and sexual identity. In my call for participants, the only requirements for participating in my research were: being above the age of 18, identifying as LGBTQ in a broad sense, and music being an important factor in one's life. Therefore, I only spoke to persons who have a more or less strong connection to music and who find music very important in their lives and link it to their identity in various degrees. Naturally, there are also many LGBTQ persons who

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[28] The phenomenon of "LGB music" or LGB related music will be discussed in chapter 4.3.

do not feel such a strong connection with music; and naturally, those are voices I did not hear and which are not represented in my research.

During a preliminary meeting before our actual interview, one of my research narrators, Tom, expressed his concerns about essentialising and universalising LGBTQ identities based on these interviews. To him, it felt like a very traditional approach to research, to set out and investigate what it is that makes the "other" so different—in my case, LGBTQ persons[29]. At the same time, Tom was concerned that the topic of my research, music in everyday life and identity, was too vague, while being conducted in a very specific target group, LGBTQs. To him, the link between music and LGBTQs was too arbitrary, too abstract. I highly appreciate Tom's critical comments, and we engaged in an interesting conversation about these and other issues. In one of my e-mails to him, I explained that I do not assume that music is necessarily a tool in the formation of non-straight identities; nor that I believe that a person "has" or assumes a fixed gender and sexual identity in their life. Yet, I am interested to learn whether the persons I talk to do experience a connection between music and their identities and encourage the narrators to tell me about their own conceptions thereof. It is exactly this process of meaning making and individual interpretation that makes the link between LGBTQs and music so interesting for me as a researcher.

Moreover, the intuitive, personal and situated approach of my research renders this devil's advocate's question a superfluous one. Each person who reads my call for participation, as well as the reader of this dissertation, is invited to ask him/herself about their very personal experiences and uses of music, as well as to position him/herself on the spectrum of genders and sexualities, rather than compare themselves to others[30]. If anyone would do similar oral history interviews based on music and musical ephemera with straight persons, I am sure they would find that music features in just as fascinating and diverse, yet different ways in straight persons' lives as it does in the lives of my LGBTQ narrators. As the focus lies on the individual experience of each single person and I do not aim to generalise my narrators as a representative sample of LGBTQ persons, the question of comparison is watered down considerably.

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[29] This paragraph is based on an e-mail correspondence with Tom, 28/11/2014.
[30] E-mail correspondence with Julia Eckhardt, 5/05/2017.

4   Coming of Age, Coming Out and Coming into the Community

As the title of this chapter indicates, it addresses three different but narrowly linked and interrelated concepts in LGBTQ lives. All of my narrators, and, I dare generalise here, most LGBTQ persons have their own stories about a first realization of "being different"[31], their coming out, and many LGBTQs have stories about coming into the LGBTQ community. Essentially, this chapter engages with stories about what lies at the heart of LGBTQ identity, and how my narrators individually interpret the concept of LGBTQ identity and experience being LGBTQ.

Throughout my dissertation, identity narratives are read starting from the assumption that sexuality is diverse, changeable and fluid, and that discovering and developing a sexual identity is not a linear and finite process. My approach to LGBTQ identity is informed by social constructionism and queer theory, focusing on the individual experience and self-identification of the LGBTQ narrators. However, as discussed above (chapter 2.1), dominant theories of sexual identity development have long assumed a linear and progressive development in various stages. Throughout time, these models have become more flexible and aim to include more fluid sexual identities. Yet, empirical research shows that even the most flexible and all-encompassing models are not able to sketch or even predict LGBTQ identity development. Ritch Savin-Williams and Lisa Diamond (2000), for example, discuss the theoretical linearity and factual non-linearity of sexual identity development. They resort to identifying key moments in LGBTQ lives, which are helpful to find structures in and common experiences throughout life stories, without necessarily implying a linear progression. More and more research turns towards listening to individual stories, acknowledging fluidity, diversity and non-linearity as the main characteristics of LGBTQ identities (e.g., Coleman-Fountain, 2014; van Anders 2015; DiDomenico, 2015; Rosenberg, 2017). Rosenberg cites van Anders (2015), who suggests that "regardless of sexual identity, sexual self-discovery is highly individualized, and it is influenced not only by a person's gender and the gender of their partner(s), but also by the behaviours, roles, and fantasies involved" (Rosenberg, 2017, p. 5). Joining these researchers, I aim to explore sexual identities as they are experienced individually and in real life, in all their complexity and difficulty.

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[31] I choose to put "being different" in quotation marks in order to highlight the constructed and heteronormative character of the dichotomy between "normal" and "different", where "normal" implies heterosexual and "different" implies being LGBTQ. Yet, many narrators literally use the trope of discovering "being different" ("anders zijn") themselves, which is why I employ it here.

To interpret the coming of age, coming out and coming in narratives of my narrators, I propose the same theoretical frameworks: "From the social constructionist perspective, what is important is the meaning the individual ascribes to the sexual desires, behaviours, and identity" (Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002, p. 16). Indeed, a dialectical process between the principle of human agency and the givens of a historical time and place occurs (Hammack, 2005, p. 269), in which each person has to navigate their own identity. LGBTQs themselves are most qualified to speak about these processes in their own terms and stories. Therefore, in the interviews I do not impose any of these concepts onto my narrators, as I do not assume that every person experiences these to the same extent, in the same way, or in the same stages of life. Rather, I listen to the individual narratives and experiences of all narrators, and to how they define themselves. Starting from these individual experiences, I explore what common experiences arise.

The three phenomena I propose to discuss in this chapter comprise the experiences of many LGBTQ narrators and are therefore useful structural elements. All narrators talk about these phases or phenomena in their lives, each in their own terms. Concepts like puberty, adolescence, and becoming aware of "being different" may be summarized as *coming of age* as an LGBTQ person. *Coming out (of the closet)* may be described as the social disclosure of one's non-normative sexuality. The phrase is often used to speak about the instances of telling others about their non-normative gender or sexuality[32]. *Coming into the community* is a phrase used less frequently, which I employ to span the following important connections with other LGBTQs: Most narrators talk about their first contact with the LGBTQ community, like meeting other like-minded people, getting acquainted with the activist scene, the nightlife and the dating scene[33]. These processes are widely acknowledged within the LGBTQ community and are also part of the larger societal narrative of our contemporary society. What is more, these phenomena are, due to our society's heteronormative standards, (perceived as) intrinsically LGBTQ experiences

This chapter aims to navigate two points of view that may seem somewhat contradictory: On the one hand, I recognise and wish to highlight the individuality, fluidity and changeability of each person's sexual self-discovery, social disclosure and trajectory within the LGBTQ community. For example, for some persons, coming into the community occurs before coming

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[32] In Dutch, the phrases "uit de kast komen" or "ervoor uit komen" are used most frequently; the first meaning literally and figuratively the same as "coming out of the closet", the second translating as "coming out about it", or simply, "coming out".

[33] I found that in the Flemish context, "coming in" is used this way (see, e.g., https://www.allesoverseks.be/seks-van-a-tot-z/coming-in); although it was difficult to find other, international examples. Rosenberg (2017) employs the term "coming in" to signify the same processes I refer to as "coming of age".

out, or both coincide. Some persons may experience a long and difficult coming of age, while others immediately disclose their sexual preference to others. Some have known that they are "different" as long as they can remember; some only realize that they are "different" when they first fall in love with somebody. This diversity and fluidity make it difficult and to some extent undesirable to focus on only one of the three processes in any life story. On the other hand, I make a distinction between these three concepts and consciously want to avoid conflating them and thus minimalizing important processes in how sexual identities come into being. Literature often focuses on coming out as a pivot in LGBTQ lives, and pays less attention to the internal identity work, self-discovery (see Rosenberg, 2017) and coming of age as an LGBTQ person which commonly precedes coming out of the closet. Moreover, I argue that LGBTQ identity work is an ongoing, multi-layered, life-long project. Although coming out is an important step for many LGBTQs, LGBTQ identity work does not end with coming out.

There are two more motivations for structuring this chapter as I do: First, although these facets are intertwined in real life, there is a sense of differentiation between the three concepts within the life stories as told by the narrators themselves, as well as in the relevant literature. Second, the wealth of interview materials this project brought forth makes it impossible to discuss the coming of age, coming out and coming in of all narrators in their totality. Therefore, I will use the three concepts as a guiding structure in this chapter. Yet, I wish to acknowledge the tension between the strict (academic) written structure of this chapter and the empirical, real life fluidity and non-linearity of LGBTQ lives.

Therefore, rather than thinking of coming of age, coming out and coming into the community as a "process in three steps", I would like to encourage thinking of them as three facets of LGBTQ identity work, which do not necessarily have to occur in all LGBTQ lives, nor in this specific order. Coming of age, coming out and coming into the community are closely connected and may be intertwined.

In the first part on *coming of age*, I will discuss seven individual coming of age narratives and the roles music may play in these processes. Coming of age as an LGBTQ person is a very personal, individual experience; yet it also involves thinking about one's position in society at large and in the personal social environment. Increasingly, researchers pay attention to the meaning of these important identity processes, rather than focusing merely on coming out (e.g., Rosenberg, 2017). Indeed, these narratives show a broad range of individual ways in which coming of age may be experienced, and what making sense of one's own identity may look like.

Overall, my narrators' stories confirm that *coming out* remains an important topic for LGBTQs, and it is therefore important to keep paying attention to this phenomenon in research (see, e.g., Guittar, 2013). These stories are part of a greater shared narrative of the LGBTQ community, and, as we will see below, the coming out story may be seen as a genre of its own kind. In the second section, I will focus in depth on two male narrators' experiences with *coming out*. This section functions as a hinge, spanning the two narrators' coming of age, coming out and coming in experiences and following their gay identity work closely. It immediately connects to the previous section on coming of age as well as the following section on coming into the community, as in the narrators' experiences, all three topics are fluid and connected with each other.

The third part on *coming into the community* focuses on shared experiences and phenomena related to music and the LGBTQ community. Within the LGBTQ community, music is important in events and the nightlife. My narrators are active within the nightlife and partying scene to very different extents. Yet, once in the community, there are certain musical experiences LGBTQs share with each other. These are the focus of this section: No entire narratives will be discussed here, but rather, various shorter statements around the same phenomenon. As such, this subsection rather functions in the tradition of qualitative social science than the humanities. Another focus lies on the concept of "LGBTQ-music" or "LGBTQ-related music": There is a sense of a shared preference of or taste for certain music in the LGBTQ community (see also: Dhoest, Herreman & Wasserbauer, 2015). Most narrators discuss this phenomenon, and I will try and synthesize this shared sense of LGBTQ-related music.

4.1   Tuning into Yourself: Queer Coming of Age and Music[34]

Let all them voices slip away

Perfume Genius - Slip Away (2017)

In this chapter, I explore the musical coming of age narratives of LGBTQ persons. These narratives are personal accounts, and show some of the ways in which LGBTQ youths use music in coming to terms with their gender and sexual identity. Their youth experiences reflect the importance of music as a cultural phenomenon and medium in (queer) coming of age. Halberstam muses about time in the work of queer Canadian singer-songwriter Ferron, and describes coming of age as a *coming to voice* (2005, p. 184). While Halberstam uses this analogy in a very specific context, I would like to borrow it and extend its meaning to explore various ways in which coming of age as an LGBTQ youth may mean coming to voice: in the sense of discovering and claiming agency in self-making, relating to others' voices, and speaking about coming of age. In all of these processes, music may play a part, and music may be a way to express what cannot (yet) be expressed in words alone.

From her extensive ethnographic work in queer music subcultures, Taylor derives that "music is one way in which we, as aesthetic agents, can facilitate exercises of self (re-)creation upon ourselves while negotiating the self we are creating in relation to normative codes of conduct" (2012, p. 44). Taylor touches upon many layers connecting music and identity: She emphasises the agency we have as listeners in choosing and using music. We can use music in a conscious way to create ourselves and our social environments, and at the same time, our social environments offer us music that influences us, willingly or unconsciously. Through music and interaction around music, we may express our beliefs and become part of social groups, but we may also express protest and discontent about social constructs.

Many LGBTQs vividly remember the time in their lives they first realized that they are "somehow different" from what is considered the norm in our heteronormative Western society. This realization often, but not always, occurs in our youth, and brings with it a time of reflection, doubt and repositioning the self. Driver stresses that these identity negotiations also apply to

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[34] A similar version of this chapter has been accepted for publication: Wasserbauer, M. (Forthcoming). Tuning into yourself: queer coming of age and music. In D. Marshall (Ed.), *Queer Youth Histories,* Palgrave.

the use of media: "growing up and coming out queer is not merely a personal process of identity, but involves a cultural process of reassessing, embracing, refusing, and combining media representation 'for better or for worse'" (2007, p. 2). Indeed, in our youth—whether straight or queer—, we often search for our own style, relatable media figures to look up to and lyrics to identify with. As LGBTQs we often realize that many mainstream representations are straight, and do not directly apply to our own lives. We start forming an opinion about the representations of LGBTQs, as Driver writes, "for better or for worse". One of the topics in the narrators' coming of age stories is indeed how they engage with openly LGBTQ artists and LGBTQ representation in music.

Focusing on interview material, recounting and analysing my research narrators' musical stories of coming of age in their youth, this chapter investigates the many ways music contributes to self-making in the period of coming of age as an LGTBQ person in the youth years. Before moving to the narratives, however, I discuss some specific terms and theoretical backgrounds.

Coming to Terms

For this chapter, the social constructionist definition of youth Mary Jane Kehily proposes is a good starting point: "A concern with young people as a socially constituted group and an interest in the ways in which young people are positioned and defined within society" (2007, p. 13). I do not handle a strict definition age-wise, but commonly, adolescence (as a biological developmental stage) and youth are understood to comprise the ages of 13 until the early twenties (Kehily, 2007, p. 13). Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2006) identifies five characteristics of emerging adulthood, which comprises the ages of 18-25; and I argue that they also fittingly describe youth (for the controversy around emerging adulthood versus youth or young adulthood, see, e.g., Green, 2010). Youth is an age of identity explorations, instability and possibility, focusing most on the self and experiencing feeling in-between (Arnett, 2006). Arnett states that most identity exploration takes place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence (2006, p. 8); however, my narrators' stories show that LGBTQ identity exploration is important throughout youth, starting in the early teenage years.

Coming of age is another concept with many possible definitions. In literary coming of age stories, the focus lies on the inner world of a young person, showing personal growth, exploring the self and positioning the self in the social environment. Checking with dictionaries gives a sense of the broader meaning of this term. The Macmillan Dictionary proposes these two

definitions: 1) "to reach the age when you are legally an adult", 2) "to become accepted and respected by most people" (Macmillan Dictionary, 2017), and Merriam Webster suggests 1) "the attainment of prominence, respectability, recognition, or maturity" (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In the spirit of the literary genre, I would like to add to these definitions "to come to terms with oneself, to discover oneself, to sexually awaken". For many but not all narrators, coming of age as an LGBTQ person is linked to their youth, and concepts like puberty, adolescence, and becoming aware of "being different" may be summarized as *coming of age as an LGBTQ person*. However, there is no consensus on terminology for this phenomenon, as recent research by Rosenberg (2017) shows. Coming of age as an LGBTQ person is, in public perception and to some extent for LGBTQs themselves, often narrowly connected to coming out (i.e., telling family, friends, and a broader social circle, about one's non-normative sexual preferences or gender identities). In this chapter, I consciously focus on coming of age rather than coming out: I wish to avoid collapsing both with each other and recognise that they do not mean the same thing. Similar to this chapter, Rosenberg (2017) recognises the importance of sexual self-discovery and self-acceptance, but uses the term "coming in" to signify these processes and to describe what I term coming of age here.

The Unique Importance of Music for LGBTQ Youth

It is commonly acknowledged that the music we encounter in our formative youth years is especially influential in our lives: "Research has found that the music encountered during one's late adolescence and early adulthood has the greatest impact on individuals throughout their lives" (Krumhansl and Zupnick, 2013, p. 1). Bolin establishes that "one component in the generational media experience is thus the intimate relationship that develops with media personalities and content from one's formative youth period. This especially concerns music genres and stars" (2017, p. 10). Psychology, memory studies and media studies alike acknowledge the existence of so-called reminiscence bumps in our formative years. We tend to better remember and have stronger memories about music we encountered in our youth, compared to other developmental stages. Bolin goes even further and states that our musical taste is formed in our youth (2017, p. 109).

"Music contributes substantially to adolescent development and mental health", as Suvi Laiho's overview of research on the psychological functions of music in youth shows (Laiho, 2004, p. 47). More specifically, music and artists may influence the wellbeing of LGBTQ youth. Gomillion

and Giuliano (2011) researched the influence of media role models on gay, lesbian and bisexual identity and found that LGB role models are important to LGB individuals, regardless of their age, gender, or background. Furthermore, positive media representations of LGBTQs, for example in music, have a positive effect on LGBTQ youths and strengthen their resilience (Craig et al., 2015). Shelley Craig and colleagues found four uses of music positively influencing LGBTQ youths, including coping through escapism, feeling stronger, fighting back and finding and fostering community (2015).

Youth and music have often been studied in the context of cultural and subcultural studies, as scenes or movements and often related to social resistance and uproar (see, e.g., Bennett, 2017, for an overview). Many studies "interpret the significance of popular music for youth in terms of its cultural resonance with issues such as class struggle, economic inequality and racism" (Bennett, 2017, p. 252). In contrast, this chapter looks at music at an individual level, contributing to the coming of age of individual LGBTQs, and at some of the ways that listening to music might contribute to a group identity. I argue that coming to terms with your gender and/or sexual identity is another one of the struggles youths encounter, which may find resonance in music. It is worth noting here that in the context of music subcultures and queer music subcultures, authors like Bennett (2008; 2017), Taylor (2012) and Halberstam (2005) observe that what previously have been entitled youth cultures often extend to persons of older ages/in other life phases as well. Halberstam reports about the "stretched-out adolescence" of queer culture makers (2005, p. 175), and Taylor observes a similar tendency she addresses as post-youth (2012).

A valuable and somewhat comparable study to my own is Driver's "Queer Girls and Popular Culture" (2007), which provides insight into the many roles music, and media more generally, may play in girls' queer identities. While queer artists function as idols and mentors and explicitly queer lyrics stimulate critical thinking and pursuing unruly desires (Driver, 2007, p. 227), queer girls not only reference explicitly queer music, "but also their own interpretations of visual, verbal, sonorous languages exceeding heteronormative codes, used as part of their ongoing identity work" (2007, p. 196). Similarly, my narrators speak about LGBTQ-related music as well as (popular) music in general. Music influences the emotional realm of queer youths, which they are keenly aware of: "As an avenue to express vulnerability and ameliorate pain, music instigates a collective process of emotionally charged learning" (2007, p. 225). On a social level, music is experienced as a low-threshold way to access queer culture (2007, p. 197), to connect to other queers, and to be part of a larger community (2007, p. 228). Driver concludes that music becomes a "vital tool in shaping queer youth self-perceptions, imaginative longings, and political commitments"

(2007, p. 196). More generally, queer girls "experienc[e] the pleasures of popular media while retaining a shrewd sceptical ambivalence, developing critical ideas in relation to media texts while nevertheless enjoying them" (Driver, 2007, p. 11). Driver's book shows the importance of media in queer lives, and her findings on how music is experienced and used by queer girls strongly resonates with my own research. Drawing on my own narrators' stories, I am confident that these findings apply to LGBTQ youth more generally.

Narratives of Musical Coming of Age

In these seven coming of age stories, diverse roles of music emerge. The first two stories are connected to a rather evident topic in this context, namely specific LGBTQ-related artists, songs and video clips. These are sources for identification and may encourage us in coming of age. Yet, musical LGBTQ role models do not only fulfil positive functions; their visibility and speaking up may also make visible unpleasant sides of being LGBTQ in a heteronormative society, as the third story shows. I then move on to a more implicit function of music in LGBTQ identity: recognising sexual difference through shared music preferences. In the following two stories, the narrators tell about a clear connection between being in love with someone and music, even if in very different contexts. The last story in this chapter shows that music is not necessarily associated with coming of age, even if music generally plays a very important role in someone's life.

From "Secretly" to Sexual Awakening

Two songs played a prominent role in the coming of age of Stefaan (33, researcher). I will take a closer look at the narratives around these songs, and the way Stefaan himself interprets the influence of these songs. He tells that "there are certain songs I associate with my sexual awakening: an important one was Skunk Anansie, with 'Secretly'". When the song was released in 1999 and Stefaan was around 16 or 17, not only the strong, emotional musical qualities of the song touched him; it was the video clip which especially hit a note. He recalls it in minute detail:

> It's about a boy and a girl who… trash a hotel and—no, sorry! Two boys and one girl, and they're actually just road tripping and whatever, […] at a certain moment all three of them end up in a swimming pool. And the girl starts kissing that one boy, and the girl starts kissing the other boy, and suddenly the two boys kiss each other. And it's not being questioned. They just show it, and it is clear: Ok, this is a trinity. And I also remember that

I found that video clip fantastic! Well, there was also this whole fuss around the clip, because MTV censured it. During daytime, they did not show the kiss. And I remember that I was already engaging with the issue then, like: Come on, why not [show the kiss], this is important! I know that in secondary school I sat there and had a discussion… so I took up a pro-gay position, without claiming the identity for myself. But I remember that I really defended that video. The video ends with the girl sneaking away at night because she came to the conclusion: These two belong together. And that clip was… super important in this awa[kening]… Because it was two boys who were not—well, depicted in a cliché way, also younger, right, not older characters whom it's more difficult to identify with […] Almost nobody was out of the closet! […] It was pop music that had to do that. And I remember that with this clip, I was like: OK.

Stefaan refers to the clip as "crucial" in his sexual awakening. It conveyed the powerful message that two guys may be meant to be with each other, and that sexuality and relationships may be fluid. The protagonists were relatable, and their adventurous story spoke to Stefaan's imagination. It is an interesting coincidence that this song with the title "Secretly" helped him realize what he secretly longed for and what he does no longer want to keep a secret.

As Stefaan's fascination with "Secretly" shows, pop music may play an important role in the identification of young LGBTQs. The visibility of queer characters in mainstream media allows young LGBTQ people to find someone to recognise themselves in and to identify with. Heterosexual romance is ubiquitous in pop music and pop culture in general, while LGBTQ flings are not depicted that often. The queer characters and relationship in the video clip not only triggered Stefaan personally to reflect on his own sexuality, but also made him engage in political discussions with his peers. Although LGBTQ people are now represented more frequently, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Skunk Anansie's video was a rare queer exception in mainstream media. As Driver (2007) proposed, music indeed is an important and easily accessible way to get into contact with queer culture, especially when other LGBTQ materials are scarce. Pop music speaks what its listeners are not (yet) able to express, and it may take an avant-garde position in queer visibility, employing artistic freedom in order to deviate from the normative. In this specific case, it is the depiction of a queer love triangle in a video clip, but queer visibility in music may also be expressed in lyrics, or in the appearance and position of performers (like, e.g., David Bowie as a glam rock bisexual person).

Figure 6: Screen captures from the music video to Skunk Anansie's "Secretly"

Another such song is Jeff Buckley's "Like Young Lovers Do", which featured in a theatre play Stefaan attended with some friends aged 18. By then, he already had feelings for one of these male friends, and the theatre play's outspoken gay plotline made him realize his feelings more clearly: "The funny thing is, at that moment; you feel that implicitly I clearly know, but it's not that I… excluded women at that moment. In the sense that the longings were there, but I don't think I saw it as an identity. Or, I had too little confrontation with it. So… it was still something too vague for me". The sentiment of the theatre play and the song explicated his more vague feelings. In this instance, neither the song itself nor the musician are directly linked to LGBTQ identity, but the context in which Stefaan encountered the song turned it into a song with a clear gay dimension for him. After this evening out, Stefaan made a note in his diary about new beginnings awaiting him, referring to a change in his sexuality.

These two narratives on "Secretly" and "Like Young Lovers Do" demonstrate that the artist and music need not necessarily be LGBTQ-related in order to have an impact on LGBTQ coming of age. However, the representation of queer characters in lyrics or video clips often attracts young LGBT persons and may function as a source of identification.

From "Something's Not Quite Right Here" to Bonding with Lady Gaga

Dario (18, hairdresser in training) sees a clear connection between coming of age as gay and his growing interest in Lady Gaga. He tells about first realizing that he might be interested in boys in the first or second year of secondary school (age 13-14):

> Dario: There were these older guys from higher grades at school, and you're like: 'Hot guy!' But I think that every gay guy also has this stage where he still insists that he's bi, but in the end he turns out to be entirely gay.

Marion: Mmmh… and how was it for you when you realized 'oh, that guy is attractive', instead of 'oh, that girl…'? Did you find it strange, or was it more like 'OK, then'?

Dario: Well, it was not like… like I started to hate myself for it, or so, because there is always a moment like 'something's not quite right here'. You know, but it's also that many people, or the grown-ups around me whom I still know, they knew it from the very beginning. Because when I was small, like in kindergarten or so, I was always someone who played with the girls, and the Barbie dolls and such. I've never really been a… matchbox-car-type boy.

Marion: Yes, OK.

Dario: But yeah, then you don't realize yet that you are part of the family.

In retrospect, Dario interprets the fact that he did not behave according to stereotypical gender roles as a young boy as a possible indication for being gay. However, he stresses that at such a young age, you do not realize what that may imply, but that for others around him, it was already clear that he was gay. Overall, his narrative reflects an age of doubt and uncertainty. This uncertainty is reflected in the fact that he mentions that many guys first identify as bi, which may seem a more "safe" or less definite coming out[35].

Around the same time as becoming aware of his sexuality, Lady Gaga started to gain fame:

I like her style. It's also, well, it was in the first year of secondary school [age 12-13], when she started her career, and that was also the moment, well, a bit later, I also started to come out about my sexuality, so. Well, that creates a sort of bond.

Two mechanisms are at work here: On the one hand, the music of Lady Gaga was "just there" in Dario's early teenage years (cf. DeNora, 2000, p. 66), mainstream pop in the late 2000s was heavily influenced by her. On the other hand, Dario was also looking for role models. The artist and her music reached him at just the right time in his life: When Dario was not yet able to speak up for himself as a young gay teenager, Lady Gaga did. Sadly, Dario experienced bullying and violence related to his sexuality. Lady Gaga's message reached him when he was in need of a positive, affirmative voice. This is in line with the findings of Gomillion and Giuliano: LGBTQ role models may inspire pride and viewing LGBTQ identity more positively, and may provide comfort (2015). Her positive attitude towards LGBTQs certainly continues to inform Dario's Gaga fandom: He appreciates Lady Gaga's support of the LGBTQ community, which she addresses within her

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[35] As discussed later on, Stefaan describes a similar experience.

songs and messages towards her fans. Moreover, Gaga speaks up openly about her own (bi-) sexuality. Moving from a tentative feeling of "something is not quite right", Dario is now out and proud.

An Ambiguous Trans* Idol

As the next story shows, discovering LGBTQ artists as role models is not always only related to positive identifications. Genderfluid Selm (32, dramaturge) talks about Dana International, who was a role model in Selm's puberty, but at the same time occupies an ambiguous position. The fact that she gained a lot of visibility and media attention winning the Eurovision Song Contest for Israel in 1998 marks an important moment for Selm: "[She] was the first transsexual whom I thought about: oh, she looks quite good! […] that was quite liberating for me". The international media reacted in a similar way, almost ritually affirming and praising her femininity (Ziv, 2007).

Selm remarks that in the late 1990s, there were not a lot of positive trans* role models. In fact, before Dana International's success at the Eurovision Song Contest, Selm's image of transgender persons was heavily influenced by media depictions which often made it seem that trans* people are freaks; there were a lot of bad examples of people who 'crossed over'. Selm recalls that in her puberty she "already was… I surely was thinking about it", referring to her gender identity. Dana International contributed to creating a new frame of possible identities for Selm, like she did for many trans* and gender-nonconforming persons: "It became a reality for me, there is a path, a sort of way you can walk; there is a sort of transition". As research by Craig and colleagues (2015) shows, a positive media representation of LGBTQ celebrities has a positive influence on LGBTQ (youth), and strengthens resilience. Selm notes that she has not been particularly interested in Dana International's music, but rather in her as a person. However, she quite enjoys her winning song "Diva" which "carries that sentiment" of liberation and becoming visible Dana International's victory had on Selm. As I will discuss in chapter 7, Selm's own quest of gender identity went a more fluid and non-binary way, which stands in contrast with the ideal of the "perfect transsexual" Dana International embodied in the late 1990s. Yet, she was the first role model Selm ever felt happy to identify with.

However, Dana International's life story also has a bitter taste to it for Selm:

> Because it was this painful truth, 'yes, I'm doing this, entertainment, while I actually could have become a pilot in the Israeli military, or a doctor—she wanted to become a doctor—but how could I, as a transsexual, choose that path?' This is what I read in the

newspapers. And then I realized like: oh no. In that sense she's not really a positive role model.

This second part of Selm's narrative on Dana International shows how her visibility and the extensive media coverage made it clear for Selm that being trans* may have negative effects. Her story made Selm realize that being trans* possibly makes life less straightforward, less self-evident, and might even involve getting fewer opportunities. As well as being a positive role model, her life story functioned as a reality check for Selm, pointing out heteronormative and gendered structure in our society.

When Music Speaks for Itself

In her youth, Nina (32, librarian and zinester) felt attracted to and admired two lesbian/queer musicians. In fact, the very first narrative in our interview relates to coming of age as a lesbian/queer woman in a small town and is linked to music:

> I think that my first realization of being lesbian/queer actually started with music [laughs]. […]It was in a small record shop in [the town] I was living then and where I have been raised, and I think that she was a lesbian as well, the shop assistant who worked there, and uhm, who thought that I had good taste because I bought those CDs [laughter]. So yes, someone who likes the combination of Ani di Franco and Skunk Anansie: I don't think they are straight.

Nina stresses that this anecdote shows "how I think about it now"; she is aware that our memories alter and that at the time, she may not have felt the connection between the music she bought and coming to terms with her sexuality so clearly. Of course, now Nina knows that the musicians whose music she intuitively bought when she was around the age of 14 or 15, are icons for many members of the LGBTQ community, especially queer women. She knew the artists from hearing a few of their songs on the radio and intuitively liked their music. The music led to a moment of mutual queer recognition with the shop assistant. Without actually speaking about identity or sexuality in any way, a connection between the two queer women was established: Music spoke for itself.

Nina identifies what attracted her so much to these artists in particular:

> I found both of them extremely cool, and I think that I had a bit of a crush on both […] I wanted to identify with them as well. I wanted to be like them and make music myself

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[…] both are very clear in their opinions and you can't mess with them, they are very vocal, and assertive or… loud, actually, each in their own way or so.

Altogether, this musical moment sparked her fascination for lesbian/queer musicians and music. Nina has a big collection of Riot Grrrl, feminist, and queer music and literature, and is one of the organisers of Ladyfest Belgium. She plays in a band, and is an activist in many ways. For her, music was a way to discover and shape her lesbian/queer identity, and music still is a way to express her identity and feminist politics, which is comparable to Dyer's findings (2007).

Figure 7: Ani di Franco and Skunk Anansie in Nina's CD collection

Since Nina did not talk about her feelings about becoming aware of her sexuality in this first anecdote, I asked her later on in the interview whether she remembered what it was like for her. Rather tentatively, she tells that it took her a while to realize that she was into women:

Nina: Yeah, well, I've also had crushes on boys, so… but no relationships, uhm, I think that, I mean… yeah, I don't know. Mhh. I don't know. Yes, no, I don't know, it was a rather slow realization, I think.

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Marion: Do you… do you still know who the first one you told about it was?

Nina: Noooo, I have really no idea. But I think that it's also just me, I ponder and doubt a lot. And… yes to some extent you, you don't want it and to some extent you absolutely do want it, because it's also so, well, fun? Yes, because it also is who you are… [Silence] So, yes.

This part of her coming of age story provides insight into her inner life at that time, and shows that coming of age was not simply a fun identification with queer singers and a shopkeeper. Indeed, realizing and coming to terms with being lesbian/queer was a slow process, and the ambiguity of it all is reflected in the way Nina talks about it. As she expresses, being lesbian/queer is essential to her self-identity; yet, at first, she felt the tension between not wanting to be lesbian/queer and thus "not normal" according to heteronormative standards, and being attracted by everything queer and really wanting to be "like that".

A Mix Tape of Mixed Feelings

For Roxy (25, student and singer), realizing that she was into women occurred together with falling in love for the very first time. Before that, she explains, she just did not get the craze about boys her female peers exhibited; she just found it silly and had no patience for the boy-girl love drama. As our interview was rather conversational in style, I will cite our conversation as a shared narrative we constructed.

At age 13, she found herself inexplicably attracted to a new classmate:

Roxy: Uhm… there just was this girl in our class and I immediately had the feeling: I need to become her best friend, NOW. And two months later I… I sat at home and was just like: SHIT.

Marion: And what did that "shit" mean?

Roxy: Just like… it was a rather scary realization. Not that I was afraid of it or so, or that I found it bad, but it still was like: OK, obviously I want more from her, and how am I ever going to manage that? Yes.

Marion: And how did you handle the situation then?

Roxy: Rather straightforward, actually! No, it was actually a very confusing situation, in the sense that I actually became best friends with the girl for a whole while, and that she also

went pretty far in that, and after a while the situation was totally unclear. Was it… well, was it friendship or love? And there was also… I searched through my memorabilia, at some point she sent me a mix tape… which created a lot of mixed feelings for me because the mix tape had quite some romantic value for me, but obviously did not for her. Or so it turned out. But yes, I think that a mix tape often has this kind of influence or so, that makes you think… well yes, you're also going to start searching for meaning in the songs… I really don't remember what was all on there, that's why I was looking for it. It was a cassette, so maybe it doesn't exist anymore. But I do know that it had a big impact on me—more than she intended it to have, actually. […] I know that [Jacques] Brel's "Ne me quitte pas" was on it, which is quite a cliché, but for the rest I really don't remember what was on it—strangely enough.

Mix tapes are intimate, carefully curated gifts that often address a loved one (see, e.g., Bitner, 2009). Jansen points out a possible difficulty in creating gift tapes:

The fact that a gift tape has both a sender and a recipient to satisfy sets up a productive tension. Ideally, the songs define something like a musical 'common ground,' that is, they create a musical experience that is appreciated by both and therefore truly shared. (Jansen, 2009, p. 48)

Unfortunately, Roxy can't recall more of the music on the tape; but Brel's "Ne me quitte pas" is indeed a rather romantic song and a strong message to send to someone who you consider to be "just a friend". Roxy tells that they used to send each other letters, "it felt a lot like love letters, or so it did for me, but not for her". In the case of this mix tape, the aim of creating a soundtrack of common ground failed, and the message of the mix tape was interpreted differently by the sender and recipient. The music on it reinforced Roxy's romantic feelings and made her assume that these feelings were mutual. Roxy eventually told the girl that she was in love with her and after half a year of confusion about their relationship, they became just friends.

Crushing All the Way into an Emo Identity

Similar to Roxy, Joris (24, student) finds that his coming of age is musically connected to being in love with someone. Searching his own identity is an important theme throughout our interview. He first realized that he might be gay at age 12 or 13, in what he calls an "oh, fuck!" moment:

I don't remember exactly how, but I think I must have gotten into contact with images, porn magazines, that's what we did back then, and I must have encountered an image or so, of a half-naked guy or boy or so… it was not a real person, it was really something porn-like, but probably not real porn. And back then I told myself that I was attracted by girls [puts on a fake voice] "ah naked breasts, so hot"—who am I fucking kidding?! [We both laugh].

The initial "oh, fuck!" feeling relates to the fact that "homo" was used as a swearword by the young boys bullying each other at school, and him realizing that he actually *was* what everyone is always laughing about. In realizing that he was gay, Joris also realized that the societal standards as well as the standards among his peers are heteronormative, and that there is a clear friction between himself and these standards.

In secondary school, Joris learned to navigate two different realms of music, namely the kind of music he honestly liked as a younger boy (including musicals and what he calls "happy-peppy" pop music, e.g., the Spice Girls and Aqua), and the music that was then regarded as "cool" by his peers (like Eminem and Robbie Williams). He finds it difficult to decipher what he honestly liked, and what he only listened to because his peers did so too. Going to a fancy boarding school (some of the attributes he names are "giant snob school", "Ralph Lauren", "cliques and jocks"), he really longed to fit in, and music was one way to be a part of his peer group. At heart, however, he felt that this was not really the music that fit his personality. A girl whom he describes as "a really cool girl […] a hip, socialist-communist girl I found really interesting, and she really didn't care about what anyone thought of her" drew his attention to what he calls alternative music, when they exchanged mix CDs with each other. As his own account of this new friend and the music she brought with her already shows, the music was important to him and pleased him, but the connotations attached to the music were also important and pleasurable: "I liked everything that was alternative, because it literally was an alternative for me, for the world I was then living in". At this age, he started carving out an alternative place for himself, in music as well as in society at large. Joris's story of searching his own place among his peers shows that "musical preference is an important factor in in-group and out-group membership, for self-esteem and for the maintenance of a positive social identity" (Dibben, 2002, p. 124).

In about the same period, at age 15 or 16, Joris came into contact with emo music, which he connects to coming of age as a gay man:

I had a crush on a boy. And he was a big fan of Panic! at the Disco, and for that reason, I also became a fan. But he was… he was also gay, back then. And that's emo rock, you

know. I must say: I had a bit of an emo period! Because of Panic! at the Disco, and My Chemical Romance, that kind of thing. […] For me, this was a period of identity, because it was just a few years before I came out of the closet; so, my being gay started coming into existence then. Somehow I did know it, and I loved it when a boy was a bit effeminate […] or skinny boys, who were not such [stereotypical boys]… I also wanted to be like that, and I looked up to them.

As Joris expresses it, this was a significant period of engaging and coming to terms with his identity. He was looking for himself, and found a part of himself in the emo culture, which was omnipresent at that time in the early 2000s. Joris now reflects on the fact that there is a clear connection between the favourite music of the boy he had a crush on and adapting to this style:

I really liked it for a while, and now I think it's horrible again [laughs]. That's how things come and go all the time! But of course, this starts with the boy I liked, who listened to this music. I like him, I like his interesting taste in music, so I want to be like that.

Research shows that we are inclined to adapt our own music preferences to those of a person we feel attracted to, which is exactly what Joris did (Denes, Gasiorek & Giles, 2016). However, once he explored emo culture, he found that the alternative kind of androgynous masculinity in the emo scene attracted him. Just before coming out as gay, Joris experimented with gender expression, hairstyles and music: the emo scene provided a space for him to explore alternative masculinities. He does not appreciate that music anymore, but has a clear sense of what it then meant for him, and where his fascination came from. The last sub-clause of this narrative, "so I want to be like that", reveals that music truly serves as a source of identification and self-making for Joris. Although this phase was rather short-lived and it did not arise directly from his identity quest but was connected to his crush on an emo fan, he experiences it in an intense way, and as deeply connected to discovering his gay identity. However short-lived, "even our transitory likes and dislikes, form part of our musical identities" (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 12).

This narrative goes to show that other persons as well as the musical trends of a given era may heavily influence our self-identity. In hindsight, the quest for our authentic self also involves taking detours and discovering styles that we later find embarrassing or plain funny.

No Music Involved

As the stories above show, music may be related to coming of age in a range of ways, and while most of my narrators do have some musical memories connected to their coming of age, others do not. Shary (23, student), for example, does not connect any specific music to her lesbian coming of age although generally, music is very important for narrator Shary. She almost constantly listens to music, and making music is her way to deal with any difficulties she faces. In the following interview excerpt I asked her when she first realized that she was "different", and she answered: "Well, that was rather early on, you know! Yes I'm already out of the closet since I'm 16, so that's rather early". Expecting more background story, I confirmed:

> Marion: Yes?
>
> Shary: Uhm, yes… [thinks] I don't know if your question is whether music played a role in this? Or?
>
> Marion: Well, also, but I actually just wanted to know when… but just tell me what you think!
>
> Shary: How that went… well, I don't know, at some point you just realize it! I was surrounded by people who all started looking for lovers [girlfriends and boyfriends], and I knew rather early on that, well, that I was different. Uhm, even already when I was—I used to be in the Scouts, for example, and in hindsight you realize that 'oh, yes, I was always fascinated by that person' and then you realize in hindsight 'oh, yes, that was a woman!' Well, at that moment, at that age you cannot yet define like 'yes, that's because of [being lesbian]', yes… I went to a free school[36], so it was also not so… not so strange. I had the chance to discover myself rather quickly when it comes to that [sexuality]. And that's how this happened.

A little later on in the interview, Shary mentions that a declaration of love by her best friend was an important moment in her coming of age: "I hadn't considered this at all, and then she suddenly said: 'Yes I actually I think I am in love with you', and then I started thinking about it and I thought like: I see! Now it all makes sense, right?"

While she talks about how the confession of her lesbian friend moved her to think about her own sexuality and her school environment making it easier for her to discover herself, she does not mention any music connected to that period. My invitation to people to prepare for the

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[36] She refers to the fact that her school was liberal and open-minded.

interviews by browsing music, diaries and musical paraphernalia generally refreshes musical memories and makes the narrators think specifically about identity traits and their possible connections to music. This preparatory work usually triggers memories and to some degree accounts for the narrators' heightened awareness of and focus on such connections. Shary's question shows that she is very much aware about the fact that I might be interested in any musical connections, but she simply does not have any. Her story shows that not everybody has music they connect to this specific phase in life; which is a fact I want to acknowledge and include in this chapter.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I would like to return to the analogy of coming of age as coming to voice I borrowed from Halberstam (2005, p. 184), and elaborate on different musical ways of coming of age as coming to voice. As the narratives show, coming of age as a young LGBTQ person often involves coming to terms with your own sexual and gender identity, facing the upsides and downsides and speaking about it for the first time. Music is a multi-faceted medium which allows many of us to engage with our own identity in all stages of life. Throughout the narratives, a variety of specific functions of music in the coming of age of LGBTQ youth emerges. As Bolin summarizes, "social interaction is taking place within as well as with and through 'the media environment'" (2017, p. 23). This holds true for music in these narratives: music is often used to find and express yourself, identify and connect with others, and explore your own place in society as a young LGBTQ person.

For many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer youth, realizing that they are not straight is connected with first falling in love with or being attracted to somebody, and noticing that in this respect they are "different" from their peers (Roxy, Joris, Dario). For the first time, they sit down with themselves and negotiate what that means; they are *trying to find their inner voice*. Music is indeed used as "a tool in shaping queer youth self-perception" (Driver, 2007, p. 196), as the narratives show. From the narratives discussed here, we may discern that the moment of realizing that you are "different", in the sense of not straight, can be a vulnerable moment in coming of age as an LGBTQ youth. Moments of "SHIT", "oh, fuck!" and "something's not quite right here", however, do not mean that young people necessarily go into an existential crisis or hate themselves for being "different". The accounts show that an awareness of the heteronormative surroundings kicks in, and that the narrators struggle with how they are going

to navigate these. Youth may be an age of feeling in-between at the level of sexual identity, as we read in the narratives of Dario, Stefaan, and Nina. All speak about also having had heterosexual crushes, and having complicated relationships with identifying as gay.

Searching for and finding yourself in the music you like are topics in all of the interviews. The narrators are able to find what they are attracted to in music. A common phenomenon is that LGBTQ young people often recognise themselves—or a self they strive to become—in certain music or a musician, and at the same time, they may fall in love with the artist. Nina and Roxy both describe experiencing an intuitive connection to LGBTQ music and musicians, even before they knew they were queer themselves. Both of them state that they interpret these musical preferences now in the light of being lesbian/queer. In coming of age as an LGBTQ person, music may spell out the queer feelings which one is not yet able to express. Dario found support and encouragement in the lyrics and messages of Lady Gaga, and Stefaan's longings were expressed in the video clip to Skunk Anansie's hit. Music literally broadened his sexual horizons, and, as he says himself, it played a crucial role in his sexual awakening. However, not everybody experiences a strong connection between coming of age and specific music, like Shary's story shows—even though generally, music is utterly important for her.

In times of uncertainty, *relating to others' voices* can provide comfort and a sense of belonging. LGBTQ musicians like Lady Gaga or Skunk Anansie's frontwoman Skin (discussed by two different narrators here) provide the promise of a positive outcome for LGBTQ youth in the sense that it really is okay to be gay. Their strong appearance and (outspoken or subtle) message about LGBTQ persons may have a powerful impact on one's own attitude towards being LGBTQ. However, as Selm's story about Dana International shows, the story of out and visible singers may reveal some of the barriers that many queer and gender non-normative people are confronted with. Identifying with and relating to others' voices is especially important at a peer-level as well. Music functions as a means of belonging to certain (peer) groups, showing affinity with certain people. It can help people to delineate a resistance towards certain societal structures. Repeatedly within the narratives, finding your own niche in music is like a musical coming of age: Dario's Gaga fandom connected him to a large LGBTQ fanbase and gave him a sense of belonging. For Joris, it was not mainstream pop but alternative music which did the same thing. Nina found herself in feminist and queer subcultural music scenes rather early on in her youth. Connecting with others through music also takes place at an intimate level, as Joris's and Roxy's stories show. Music may be used to express your own feelings, and (romantic) feelings for others. For Joris, adopting the favourite music style of his crush indicates that music

is one way to get closer to each other, to have a common ground with the person you are into. However, music is not only connected to positive memories about relating to others. As Roxy's story shows, it may cause confusion rather than bring people closer to each other: what Roxy thought to be a mix tape of love was actually intended as a sign of friendship by the sender. The ambiguous character of music and the very personal way in which we interpret it is bound to cause such misunderstandings once in a while.

Another important moment connected to coming of age is literally *speaking up about it* with others for the first time. Whether taking up a pro-gay attitude in defending a queer music video in a school setting (Stefaan), confessing one's love to a peer (Roxy) or coming out at an early age (Shary), queer coming of age is marked by first times of speaking up, becoming visible and audible.

Coming of age as a queer youth means tuning into yourself on many different levels. Coming of age as a queer person is a topic often neglected in LGBTQ studies, particularly compared to the amount of attention directed to coming out. However, as these narratives show, it is an important time in LGBTQ lives, full of exploring and questioning emotions, sensations and meanings. The real life experiences of LGBTQ persons reflecting about coming of age in their youth demonstrate that music is strongly connected to our sense of self-identity as well as group-identity. Various strategies for exploring identities involve music, whether on an intuitive level or by actively searching for solace or connection to other LGBTQ people. Music is a valuable tool in helping us negotiate and come to terms with our sexual and gender identities, and it strengthens our sense of self during queer coming of age, as we come to discover our own voice.

4.2   Coming Out

The time has come for me to break out of this shell

I have to shout that I am coming out

Diana Ross - I'm Coming Out (1980)

Most LGBTQ persons are familiar with the feeling: During or after discovering and coming to terms with your sexual and gender identity (which may have been a rather easy process, or a lengthy and heartbreakingly difficult one, or anything in between), the moment arrives to tell somebody else about it all. Coming out is one facet of LGBTQ identity work which I expected to be discussed by my narrators, and indeed: All of them did talk about one or several instances of disclosing their sexual preferences or gender identity to other persons. As stated above, coming out remains an important topic in LGBTQ lives, and therefore, in research on LGBTQ identities.

In this chapter, I will take the opportunity to follow the identity trajectories of two gay male narrators up close, rather than discussing several coming out experiences in brief. One motive for choosing to discuss only these two stories in depth is that both narrators talked about their coming of age, coming out and coming into the community at length. Additionally, in the stories of Tobias and Kurt, coming out processes are intimately linked with music, if in very different ways. In both of their stories, it is impossible to differentiate between coming of age, coming out and coming into the community. I find it important to show that in real life the three topics are interweaving processes and experiences; and that the timing and order of these processes are different for each LGBTQ person. Tobias' coming out story is closely linked to the LGBTQ youth movement of the early 1990s and has a special musical dimension to it. Kurt's story provides insight into coming out in his forties, overcoming gay shame and internalized homophobia, as well as into how his musical trajectory is connected to coming of age and coming out. Moreover, for Kurt, living as an out LGBTQ person is still a rather new experience, and the coming out narrative determines most of the interview.

As stated above, the coming out experiences of other narrators will be discussed in the upcoming chapters to some extent.

Theorizing Coming Out Narratives

A wealth of academic literature exists focusing on the coming out, coming out stories or being out of LGBTQ persons, relating to various aspects of life including: Coming out in the professional work context (e.g., Wax, Coletti & Ogaz, 2018), in sports (e.g., King, 2017), in the family context (e.g., DiVerniero & Breshears, 2017), and in educational contexts (e.g., Harbeck (ed.), 1992). Moreover, coming out is being researched in various geopolitical contexts, in intersectional perspectives considering ethnicity and religion (e.g., Gattamorta & Quidley-Rodriguez, 2017; Provencher, 2011), and in connection to mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Corrigan et al., 2015). In more recent years, the use of new media in coming out has been researched extensively (e.g., Szulc & Dhoest, 2013; Cover & Prosser, 2013). Age and historical context (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Dunlap, 2014), as well as coming out in old age (e.g., Harrison, 2006) are further fields of interest[37]. Generally, in this literature coming out is seen as a crucial climax in LGBTQ identity formation or development. Likewise, in many of the stage models referred to in the theory section above, coming out is seen as an important, necessary and clearly demarcated stage in the process of LGBTQ identity development. Society has come to view the coming out of LGBTQ persons as a given, and even as the "pinnacle of sexual self-comprehension and self-acceptance" (Rosenberg, 2017, p. 18).

In contrast, I would like to argue that rather than a single, punctual moment in time when an LGBTQ tells their family, friends and other social environments about their sexual preferences or gender identity, coming out is a process of variable length which may or may not bring along inner struggles and confrontations with societal norms. This view coincides with Dziengel's, who points out an important shortcoming of the term coming out, namely that it "does not accurately capture the ongoing stress of being out and, for most people, the reality of repeatedly making choices regarding disclosing their sexual identity throughout their life span" (2015, p. 306).

As we have just seen, coming of age narratives vary greatly and are highly individual; and the same holds true for coming out narratives: "Coming out does not have a universal meaning among LGBQ [sic] persons; rather, it varies on the basis of individuals' experiences, social environment, and personal beliefs and values" (Guittar, 2013, p. 168). At the same time, all LGBTQ persons have to position themselves within society and its dominant structures and narratives. Cover and Prosser assert that LGBTQs "construct, disseminate and reinforce a particular,

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[37] Due to the amount of literature available, it is impossible to include a full review of this coming out literature in my dissertation.

coherent, intelligible and recognisable narrative of sexual non-normativity" (2013, p. 85) in their coming out stories. Coming out stories are thus not mere reflections of the past or representations of a non-heterosexual self (Cover & Prosser, 2013); they are an active means of constructing and performing identity. The way we talk about these negotiations in disclosing our sexual identities reveals a lot about how we view the world and ourselves within it. In this sense, coming out is closely linked to coming of age. As Plummer puts it, "[u]ltimately, the coming out story is a tale concerned with establishing a sense of who one really is—an identity which ideally exists not just for oneself alone, but which is also at home in the wider world" (1995, p. 85-86). Coming out, and the storytelling about it, is a lifelong process, rather than a singular, momentous event in our lives (DiDomenico, 2015, p. 622). Research on individuals telling coming out narratives shows that our coming out stories change ever so slightly with each telling; we adjust our stories according to those who listen to it (DiDomenico, 2015).

However, the coming out narrative is not merely a story of personal experience; the coming out story may be even seen as a genre of its own kind. Over time, "[a] small experience has become a major cultural form", as Plummer puts it (1995, p. 86). Certain meta-narratives and social scripts concerning coming out have become engrained in our societal perception of LGBTQs, creating certain expectations and perceptions of what coming out "truly" means[38].

Concerning coming out of the closet, Cohler and Hammack (2007) identify two dominant narratives at work in our society: the narrative of struggle and success, and the narrative of emancipation. The narrative of struggle and success largely coincides with what Plummer (1995) terms the modernist coming out tale. The modernist coming out tale is, among others, characterised by the following features: Gay youths are viewed as victims of harassment and internalized homophobia, accompanied by mental health issues (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49). Gay identity development then is "realized through social practice in the larger gay and lesbian culture […] as a triumphant model of resilience in a heterosexist world" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49). This narrative has become popular in the 1980s and 1990s and has been the base for many models of gay and lesbian identity development (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 53). The narrative of struggle and success largely coincides with the assumption that gay identity is developed in consecutive stages, contrasting LGBTQ identity against "normal" identity development. On the contrary, the narrative of emancipation "reveals the increasing fluidity in self-labelling among youth with same-sex desire, depathologizes the experience of sexual identity development among these youth, [and] emphasises the manner in which sexual

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[38] For an overview of the history of the coming out story see, e.g., Cover & Prosser, 2013.

minority youth cope with issues of minority stress" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49). The narrative of emancipation thus acknowledges the agency of the subject, no longer framing homosexuality as the "other" or abnormal in a heteronormative framework. Moreover, "the narrative of emancipation suggests that same-sex desire need not be the primary index of identity, the anchor of the personal narrative" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 54).

These two narratives describe as well as influence how we experience and how society perceives coming out. Both may interact with each other and are linked to the cultural construction of homosexuality. Cohler and Hammack argue that young LGBTQs encounter both of these narratives in coming out, and have to navigate between them:

> These seemingly divergent narratives, coexisting in the current discursive frame to which youth possess access through a variety of media sources, in fact reflect the tension of a shifting historical context for sexual identity. Today's gay youth are confronted with both of these narratives simultaneously, and their identities are naturally influenced by both. (2007, p. 51)

Themes and traces of these meta-narratives may be found in many personal coming out stories.

Indeed, as Plummer puts it, "the sexual story becomes a political story", forming the basis of much of lesbian and gay identity politics (1995, p. 87). Although LGBTQs have gained equal rights and visibility in many terrains, heterosexuality remains the dominant, "normal" background within which LGBTQs have to situate themselves and disclose their sexual "difference". As Stevi Jackson justly remarks, "moves towards gay citizenship rights may have made it easier to live outside heterosexuality, but they have not seriously undermined heterosexual dominance" (2006, p. 110). The proverbial closet still remains a lived experience. By publicly disclosing one's non-heterosexuality, story by story, LGBTQ lives become visible and integrated into public discourse. These stories may disrupt the hegemonic heteronormative order to some extent, but at the same time reconfirm the hegemonic order—precisely because of the symbolic significance of the coming out, which is that the queer minority has to be accepted by the heterosexual majority. The coming out story serves as an alternative to the dominant, heteronormative narrative which is often the only one available to us (Plummer, 1995, p. 84): Through the personal coming of age and coming out stories of others, we may find recognition. Thus, the collection of others' personal coming out stories constitutes a new kind of history and cultural script, which was not available to LGBTQs before these stories became available, accessible and mediatized. Of course, as coming out stories are reiterated and compiled, they may become prescriptive and normative themselves. Coming out stories

contributed towards lesbian and gay identity politics, which are in turn centred on singular sexual identities. The interplay between these dominant coming out narratives and personal narratives is an interesting field of tension. Kate Klein and colleagues, for example, researched how the normativity of the coming out narrative is received by young LGBTQ persons, and how it influences their own coming out (2015).

In the overview of literature on coming out at the start of this section, I have not mentioned the connection between music and coming out, which is related to the fact that I have not encountered a lot of literature focusing specifically on music and coming out. Based on literature on music and identity in general, we may assume that music in coming out may be associated with certain important moments, events and emotions. Music may function as a companion, as well as solace in difficult times.

As Koestenbaum put it, "historically, music has been defined as mystery and miasma, as implicitness rather than explicitness, and so we have hid inside music: in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word" (1993, pp. 189-90). Various writers engage with music and the closet in the edited volume "Queering the Pitch" (2006). However, this research focuses on musicological analyses of works of specific composers (e.g., Benjamin Britten) and songs, rather than engaging with music in the real life coming out experiences of LGBTQ persons. Repeatedly, the opera is connected to the closet and coming out. As described in literature, the affinity of many LGBTQs with opera may be linked with social codes, which historically played an important role in LGBTQ communities (e.g., Irvine, 1996). Monica Pearl investigates gay autobiographical writings about opera and even likens coming out as a fan of a diva to coming out as LGBTQ: "Whether male or female, it appears that the queer opera lover of the late twentieth century is just as cloaked in the secrecy of opera loving as of homosexuality, if not more so" (2015, p. 50). Maybe this secrecy and the opportunity for a silent coming out in music are among the reasons why coming out and music have not yet been researched extensively.

One study does specifically focus on the individual experience of music and coming out: Aronoff and Gilboa examine the functions of music in the coming out of seven gay men (2015). While the research question and method (semi-structured in-depth interviews) are highly interesting and related to my own research, the framing of LGBTQ identity they employ differs greatly from my own: Cass' 1979 consecutive stage model of homosexual identity formation is applied, and coming out is viewed as being situated between "identity tolerance" and " identity acceptance"

(Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015, p. 425). The results show three categories of roles that music played for the interviewees: Music as a companion, music as a means for concealing and exposing, and music as a means of making change (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015). Aronoff and Gilboa claim that when people identify in a more fluid way, "it seems that music does not play a major role in gay people's lives before 'coming out'" (2015, p. 433)—a statement the above chapter on coming of age challenges.

Gauging Coming Out Among My Narrators

Without going into too much detail at this point, I briefly want to sketch common experiences in coming out among my narrators. Most of these will be discussed in the following chapters, but this overview might be helpful in order to situate the stories of Tobias and Kurt in the larger context of the coming out stories of all narrators.

Within the life stories of my narrators, coming out narratives are among the most clearly delineated stories, often more focused than other narratives. I could sense that these are often narratives told before: The coming out narrative is part and parcel of the LGBTQ experience, and the narrators seem to have anticipated that they will tell their coming out story in our interview. Most narrators focus on one or two instances of coming out to others, mostly concerning their very first social disclosures. Close friends or peers at school are often the first persons my narrators confided in, just like persons they were in love with. Family is the second important group mentioned by the narrators, and the impact of the family's reactions seems to be greater than that of the friends and peers.

As established in the previous chapter, coming of age as an LGBTQ person takes place in youth for many narrators, and linked to that, a first instance of coming out. This holds true for my narrators: About half of them tell about first coming out in their teenage years. The age of their coming out greatly differs for the other narrators, ranging from the early twenties to the late fifties.

A few narrators talk about estrangement from their closest family members following their coming out (Robertina (60), Shary (23), Tom (thirtysomething)). A more general discrepancy between societal expectations and their personal gender and sexuality experiences and expressions is described by multiple gender non-normative narrators (see extensive discussion in chapter 7). Some narrators struggled with mental health problems related to their sexuality or gender identity. Roxy (25) and Felix (29), for example, experienced what they describe as a "dark

phase" or "feeling depressed". Dario (18) changed schools as he was bullied and attacked because of being gay. Happily, there are also narrators who report not having received any negative reactions at all (e.g., Sarah (32)).

Elements of both dominant meta-narratives, struggle and success and emancipation, are traceable in the narrators' personal coming of age stories. Some dominant tropes are connected to these narratives. Several narrators report a sense of *"I have always known"*, which is a common trope in coming out stories (Cover & Prosser, 2013, p. 85). Shary (23), for example, recalls that she knew from an early age that she was "different". As Dario and Nikki (23) recount, it was their parents rather than themselves who realized quite early on in their children's lives that they might be gay/lesbian. Of course, it has to be noted that these connections may seem stronger when interpreted in hindsight and in narratively constructing an LGBTQ identity. Another common experience I have encountered among the narrators is the trope of *not wanting to be different*, and therefore not wanting to come out. For example, Kurt (45), Sarah (32) and Nikkie (44) struggled with accepting their gay and lesbian identities because of such feelings, and were afraid they would not be accepted by others. In the story of Nikki, an ambivalent position towards being "different" is sensible: On the one hand, she did not want to be different in the sense of non-heterosexual, but on the other hand, she enjoys being different, and being different in her music choices. On the other end of the spectrum, Roxy fully and consciously enjoys being different, and anything queer and different in music attracts her. Although Roxy fully embraces being different, in the period of her first coming out, she experienced a sense of *I am the only one* and *I am going to be alone forever*. Andy Dunlap summarizes these personal difficulties in coming out as "loss of connection" and finds that many LGBTQs tell about these feelings in their coming out stories (2014, p. 425). It is a trope linked to coming out by several of my narrators (e.g., Anna (27) and Felix (29)).

Tobias's Musical Coming Out

For Tobias (36), coming out, coming in and his first relationship went hand in hand. His story does not only convey his personal experiences, but also provides insight into the situation for LGBTQs more generally in the 1990s. He recounts that he fantasized about other boys in his early adolescence, but did not classify these feelings as being "different" or problematic: "It was not really a problem, because you just want to discover". He adds that at some point this phase of "innocent discovery" ended because he realised what the dominant societal positions on

homosexuality were. In the last year of his secondary school in the mid-1990s (age 17-18), he did realize what these feelings implied, namely that he was gay. He really started to analyse his feelings, and the realization that he was gay came as a bit of a shock to him. As Tobias insinuates, it is often not personal feelings that make it difficult to be gay, but dominant heteronormative standards; the strong force which he became aware of at this point.

In order to situate Tobias's experience in the sociocultural context of the mid-1990s, I will briefly outline the Flemish political situation and its impact on LGBTQs. The impact of the AIDS crisis as well as personal and political conflicts within the different LGBTQ groups caused difficulties within the LGBTQ community in the late 1980s. However, the movement started to blossom again in the 1990s (Borghs, 2015).

About twenty years ago, LGBTQs were far less visible in society at large, and information and support were not as readily available as they are now. Therefore, LGBTQ support groups and political initiatives were important facilities and provided the possibility to meet other LGBTQs. Despite the conservative political climate, the LGBTQ movement was growing, and several youth groups emerged. Once at university, at age 18 or 19, Tobias stumbled upon posters advertising an LGBTQ youth group. He contacted an LGBTQ youth group and recounts that it was required to do so by writing a letter to the group:

> I wrote a letter to the organisation, and you had to post it in a specific post box, and I received a letter back. It was from a boy, and it was common to have a conversation with that person, they called it a welcome-conversation—and then we started a relationship [laughs].

These one-on-one conversations following up an introduction letter were a common intake practice to welcome new members to an organisation. I will return to Tobias's relationship with the volunteer in a moment, but first want to zoom in on the sociohistorical context of his first encounters with the community. When I asked Tobias what exactly motivated him to contact the group in the first place, he tells:

> Tobias: Probably, because you feel different… and because you're confronted with these organisations… there were posters on the walls at school—at university, of course. It was those kinds of things. I first saw a poster and then went to a party […, laughs] oh dear oh dear. Yes, those were good times.

> Marion: Yes, that's what it sounds like! But I could imagine that it took quite a lot of courage to write such a letter?

Tobias: Yes. First of all, because there were no media to inform you sufficiently. And if there were any media, and that often was the case in different libraries, they had all these books, often medical books which obviously contained clinical information about what "it" was. Second, when you came into contact with an organisation it was actually always from a distance because there was nothing like a house you could go to and knock on the door and say like 'look, I am this or that way, can I talk to anyone?'—like you can do now, for example, with the pink houses [colloquial reference to LGBTQ community centres in major Belgian cities]. So it was through a post box. It's something very anonymous, you had no idea who you were actually writing to, who was in front of you, and so also about what you were going to tell… but when the first letter arrived… yes, it was a… oh, it gave me such a good feeling, absolutely!

Meeting other LGBTQs and joining the group was an important step for Tobias. The way he tells about these first encounters conveys a sense of relief about sharing his story and acknowledging his sexual identity. Other voices confirm the positive impact of youth groups. Activist Yves Aerts, who worked as a volunteer in one of the youth groups in the 1990s, recalls: "We shared our stories in the youth group, and it made everyone stronger. Strategies were figured out and agreed upon: One person would tell his parents if the other one did so as well. And that helped. It was a safe environment. Subconsciously, people felt that change was in the air" (Borghs, 2015, p. 226; translated by me).

As already mentioned, this new contact did not only connect Tobias with other LGBTQs, it also led to his first gay relationship. After meeting said volunteer at the intake talk, they continued writing letters to each other:

He wrote a letter to tell me he liked me, I received it, arriving at my student halls, and just half an hour later he stood in front of my door, and I think that I went home with him […] We stayed up all night… oh, it was true love, yes. […] And actually it was not allowed. The rule was that someone with more experience—let's put it that way—was not supposed to date a newbie. It was like letting an experienced fisher fish in a fishbowl. […] He was really a good guy, and a handsome one.

Against the formal rules of the group, they started a relationship[39]. For Tobias, coming into the community and his first relationship preceded coming out. Coming out was not an easy step for

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[39] More about the role of music in Tobias's relationships may be read in chapter 8.

him to take as it implied facing two daunting things: "One, knowing that you might be gay and having to tell everybody, which was absolutely not a self-evidence at that time. And two, if I tell anyone, it means giving up something else. Relationships with women, and so on". Yet, encouraged by his first encounters with the community and his boyfriend, Tobias was ready to come out of the closet to his friends and family at the age of 19.

The coming out towards his fellow students was literally connected to music:

> Tobias: I did my coming out at school this way: We had a dancing class, in the first year, and we had to learn to dance. It varied from Renaissance dance, to folk dance, to children's dance; and coincidentally, I was part of a Renaissance dance, I had to show my back a lot. And I had received a T-shirt from 'Verkeerd Geparkeerd' [an LGBTQ youth group; literally: Parked in the wrong place], or I had bought it, and it had a message written on it. 'Fijn om holebi te zijn' [literally: Fun to be LGB], or something like that. And then, let me tell you, there is no better moment to do this: Everybody was able to see my back all of the time. And *voilà*, that's how it went! [We laugh].

> Marion: […] What were their reactions?

> Tobias: I don't remember, nothing bad in any case! Otherwise I would remember. Like I said before, it was… we felt like the fame academy [Tobias spontaneously sings a bit of "Fame"; we laugh].

Tobias reports that certainly the freethinking and artistic atmosphere at his school made his coming out easier. In a playful way he literally integrated and showed off his gay identity in a dancing class. Music indirectly functions as a way of exposing his gay identity (cf. Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015).

Coming out to his mother was somewhat more serious, although Tobias can only recall some bits and pieces of it. He analyses that in hindsight, his mother reacted relatively well considering the zeitgeist:

> Tobias: It made a deep… a deep impression in my memory, it made a lasting impression. And as it was so intense, you'd think that it was probably also very difficult and heavy— and it probably hasn't been easy. But I think that it was quite progressive for that time, you know, concerning my parents. It was really quite alright, in the end.

> Marion: What did your parents say? When you really said it out loud for the first time?

Tobias: Well… it was only my mum. That she hadn't known [she had no idea], for one, and that we were gonna be just fine; that's what it was like. […] But I don't quite remember so much of it, it's more like loose memories… yes, it went well. It's a pity somehow, that it's all so much work—don't you think?

Marion: Yes, indeed [we laugh]

Tobias: You can't do it any other way, I think, but if you could go back in time you'd do everything much quicker and smoother, and be much more confident—but it wasn't possible. I didn't know, what it was—I hardly knew what it was. There you go.

He stresses that at the time he hardly knew what homosexuality was, and even less so did his mother. Tobias uses the word "work" in order to describe coming of age and coming out as gay; and indeed, it is hard identity work, in circumstances made more difficult because of the lack of readily accessible information. Here we may notice a remarkable change over the past 20 years in Flemish society; starting in the early 2000s, more information became available through the new media on the one hand and growing LGBTQ activism on the other. LGBTQs are overall much more visible and less of a taboo. This does not mean that coming of age and coming out has become "easy", but the outer circumstances have changed.

Talking about coming of age, getting into contact with the LGBTQ organisation and coming out, Tobias on the one hand stresses the difficulty of it, but on the other hand nostalgically refers to this period of his life as "good times", remembering fun moments and the relief he experienced when he told others about his sexuality. Coming into the community in the sense of contacting the LGBTQ organisation was an important step for Tobias: He found the support and information he needed, and what is more, he found love for the first time.

Kurt's Coming Out of Gay Shame and Coming to Voice

Kurt (45) tells about his becoming aware of being gay and about important moments in the process of coming out. Coming out of the closet was truly a life-changing decision and process. Around age 40, he found his gay voice. Kurt's life story shows that sensitization and identity confusion, to speak in Troiden's terms (1989), may certainly not only occur in adolescence, but in later life stages as well, contradicting essentialist assumptions of the development of

homosexual identity such as Cass's (1979), and Troiden's (1989)[40]. A large part of the interview was held in front of his CD closet, which is divided into a classical cupboard and a pop/other cupboard. His collection will be discussed in detail in the chapter on fandom; for now, I will concentrate on his coming out, and its immediate and musical links with coming into the community.

It took Kurt a long time before he was able to accept his homosexuality. The way he speaks about it clearly reflects this struggle: He calls himself a "hidden homosexual" and speaks about a strong suppression of his feelings. Much of the language he uses reflects feelings of repression and a connotation of being gay as something dirty and naughty. His upbringing at home and the strict Catholic school he attended heavily influenced his own perception of homosexuality. Kurt tells about being scared of his parents' reaction, and recalls his brother making homophobic remarks, which gave him the signal that he would not be accepted. His sister is a religious education teacher, which also formed an obstacle in telling her. Most of all, Kurt was "afraid of being rejected", which is a fear several other narrators describe as well. As research shows, the lack of family support and contact with the queer community in the face of the stigma of breaking heteronormative rules, may lead to the internalization of this stigma and experiencing shame about one's sexual identity (Rosenberg, 2017, p. 4). Like in Kurt's case, this may even lead to the repression of your own sexuality.

Despite only coming out later in life, Kurt realized that he might be gay as a teenager. One of his oldest "homosexual memories", as he refers to it, is his fascination with the young main character of the 1984 film "The NeverEnding Story":

> And the main character was almost exactly my age, and I found him such a terribly pretty boy [laughs]. I still remember that I was actually focusing on the looks of the main character just as much as on the content of the film… That's about the oldest memory I have concerning uhm homosexual feelings. That's why I bought the movie on Blue Ray some years ago, because of this memory.

While discussing his pop music collection, several artists evoke memories of his teenage years, when he attended language camps during the summer. Artists like Duran Duran, the Bangles and Boy George, who ranked high on the hit lists in the early 1980s, remind Kurt of these summer

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[40] As will be discussed in later chapters, Robertina and Patricia also came of age in later stages of their lives.

camps, and a boy he was intrigued by. He describes that he preferred to stay away from the parties at camp:

> Kurt: I preferred going to bed or sitting somewhere on my own, I didn't feel good in that atmosphere. But I also have some other memories abou it [chuckles].
>
> Marion: Yes?
>
> Kurt: Yes, about a boy who was rather cute , I felt butterflies several times.
>
> Marion: And throughout your youth you managed not… to hide it away…
>
> Kurt: I didn't dare to! I felt it, like 'oh, I seem to be more attracted to men than to women', but uhm…

In his teenage years, Kurt thus became aware of feeling more attracted to men than to women, but did not dare to act on his desires. Although he already had a first homosexual experience at the age of 20, he only started to accept his homosexuality around the age of 30 for himself. Another ten years later, he started coming out of the closet and publicly disclosing his preference. In all of these years, he never fell in love with any girls, but he recalls the few gay persons he encountered before coming out in the minutest detail, reflecting the deep impression they made.

Throughout the interview, Kurt's urge to do good and achieve things in life, as well as wanting to do the (morally) right thing, pervades. He has high expectations concerning his academic career, and when he spent several years researching and teaching abroad, work and its obligations always came first. Kurt would have liked to go out in the LGBTQ scene, but thoughts like "are the students allowed to know this? Won't I be in trouble?" kept him from living out his desires. What he learned to be the dominant societal expectations dominated his own thinking and prevented him from following his feelings when he was younger.
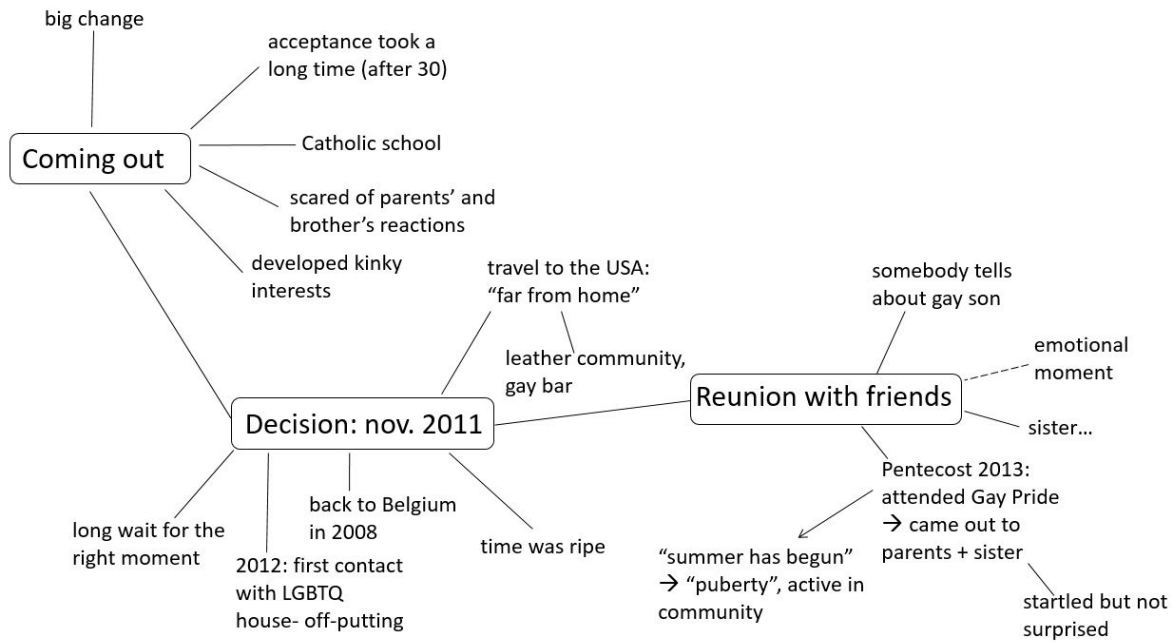
Figure 8: Digitalized interview notes related to Kurt's coming out

The interview notes I made during our interview show the different steps in and aspects related to Kurt's coming out. In 2011, he decided to come out of the closet, inspired by a stay in a large city in the USA where he discovered gay nightlife: "Yes, it was the night of my life, a revelation!" On the way back to his hotel, he remembers thinking: "Why am I staying in this closet?! I actually had a good evening, why do I continue denying that to myself?" He further explains: "I was far away from home, so I wasn't scared of being discovered. I think the time was just ripe. The idea had been growing for a while like, see… uhm… actually". In this sense, Kurt's coming out is immediately linked to coming into the gay community; a fun night out gave him the positive impulse he needed to tell others in his social environment about his long-hidden secret. Plummer discusses that in many coming out stories, a catalysing factor often pushes the narrator to move towards accepting their sexual identity and take steps towards doing something about it, as he puts it (Plummer, 1995, p. 85). Indeed, often it is cultural or community factors "facilitating this self-awareness" (Plummer, 1995, p. 85).

Soon after, he joined a local gay men's choir, and was readily welcomed into the community. Kurt compares the first period after coming out to puberty:

> And then you're gonna do some… so it has been a wild summer. [Laughs] Puberty kicked in. [Laughs] Yes, in the first year everything is new… it was a very wild year. Now I calmed down again. It really was a year of discovering.

The way he tells about these events indeed mirrors the enthusiasm and sense of excitement one would expect from a teenager telling about their sexual awakening. Indeed, many lesbian and gay persons who come out in mid-adulthood describe a similar experience of going through a "second adolescence" (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004, p. 21).

Moreover, Kurt reflects about his interests in kinky sex, which were especially strong right after he decided to come out, and expresses that he feels they may be a result of the long repression of his feelings:

> It was probably also part of processing that I did not want to give in. I mean, feeling that you are different but not admitting that you are gay… because since I came out of the closet it [i.e., interest in kinky sex] is much less than before. It's still in me but uhm… I don't have such strong needs as before. It was probably also part of processing it all.

Upon coming out, Kurt acknowledged his specific desires. As Kurt frames his sexual interests, they may be seen as a sexual self-discovery and rebellion, two common characteristics of adolescence. In contrast, in his "first adolescence" in his teenage years, Kurt was a studious boy and did not rebel; which is another phenomenon described by other lesbians and gay men who came out later in life (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004).

Making music has already been important in Kurt's life from a young age onwards: As a boy, Kurt enjoyed a singing education at a prestigious Flemish cathedral choir. He was forced to quit singing there when he lost his child voice, but continued playing an instrument. When he started to study at university, his musical activities ceased: "Partly because I had no time, partly because it interested me less". As a student, Kurt hardly ever went out to enjoy student life, because he was struggling with his hidden homosexuality. A parallel in his timeline appears: As we saw above, around the time of his coming out, he took up singing again in a gay men's choir, as well as in a more professional organisation. The gay men's choir has a double function: On the one hand, he enjoys singing again and was able to reinforce the choir. On the other hand, as he admits through mischievous hints, the social aspect of the choir is also very important to him: "A gay men's choir, that's also attractive for another reason". The choir is an important link to the gay community and, as he hints at, for flirting with other men[41]. Much of the music he listens to now is influenced by the choir he sings in.

By now, Kurt has become so involved with the community that he consciously tries not to engage exclusively in LGBTQ-related activities: "I try not to be LGB each weekend [laughs]. Over

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[41] For further research on the social aspects of singing in a gay men's choir, see Henderson and Hodges (2007).

time you attend so many activities that you think like, OK, I should not neglect the rest of my friends and so on". The way he feels at home in the community and engages in it stands in stark contrast with the fear and anxiety of facing his sexuality before his coming out. However, he recalls the rocky start he had with the Belgian LGBTQ community, when he wanted to visit the local LGBTQ bar for the very first time:

> I think it was already after 2011, the first time I wanted to go there, it was an open day or so, so I did not attract too much attention. But I returned home. I also told them afterwards, you know… It was exactly on such a day [open door] that several transvestites and such were stationed at the door on their terrace… and… the confrontation was just too strong. I mean, I am not like that, so I wasn't able to identify with it either. Afterwards, now that I go there more often and also help with their projects, right, I told them about it, and they understood it. But they also say, what can we do about it? You discriminate against them if you send them away… They should just use their intellect and [see that] on such a day you shouldn't show up like that. I mean, you want to attract people from the outside world and then you put all the existing clichés about the gay scene on your terrace… that causes people to get a wrong impression and you scare people off instead…

These concerns are similar to the concerns that kept him from coming out for such a long time, namely the fear of rejection through breaking with the societal consensus of what is normal and what is not. In Kurt's story, we see a careful navigation of gay shame and gay pride. While he acknowledges that exuberant transvestites are part and parcel of the community, he experienced being confronted with such forward expressions of gay pride as being too much for him to handle, when he was just starting to become familiar with the community.

For Kurt, coming into the community happened at the same time as his decision to come out of the closet; but telling his friends and family took some more time. After several missed opportunities due to family circumstances, and his family not picking up any of his earlier subtle hints, Kurt finally found the right moment to tell his friends and family in early 2013. First, during a weekend away with his friends, Kurt heard a friend talking about his gay son in such a normal and reassuring way that he almost felt obliged to speak up—but he did not dare to, as his sister was present. Later that weekend he finally broke his silence in a one on one conversation with another friend. Kurt experienced a breakdown, and his friend took care of him:

> Yes, so many emotions were liberated at that moment… then I drove home, but [I felt that] someone of the family should know, so I called my other sister the next day, she is

a religions teacher. And from then it was two more months of looking forward to a moment to tell my parents. There were a few times when I thought, 'yes, I'll do it tonight!' but then it failed again. The day I finally told them was Pentecost of 2013. Gay Pride was the day before [laughs].

In the end, attending Gay Pride in 2013 was the occasion that made him tell his parents, which was definitely the hardest and most anxiously anticipated part of his journey. His sister ended up supporting him in coming out to his parents, contrary to his expectations. His parents were quite surprised, although "uhm, my father did not admit this to me but he did to others, that he was actually not very surprised. My brother apparently knew for a long time. Maybe he made some of these [homophobic] remarks in order to lure me out of the closet, but it had quite the opposite effect". From his friends and colleagues, Kurt experienced positive reactions.

Looking at Kurt's coming out story, it indeed "can be pictured as a move from an 'inner world' of telling stories to the self privately to an increasingly public one where the circle of discourse becomes wider and wider", as Plummer (1995, p. 126) puts it. For Kurt, this meant more than two decades of coming to terms with his homosexuality, and starting to share his feelings with others. In some of his stories, a sense of regret or having missed out in all those years waiting arises. As he literally puts it, "any way I look at it, I have missed a quarter of a century of my life". He does not want to focus too much on regret in his life, but explains that he feels that had he come out earlier on in life, he might have a partner now. By now, he feels that he might be too used to living on his own, although he does long for a partner.

Coming out as well as coming into the community are linked with specific music, as becomes clear throughout the interview. He indicates some changes in listening to music connected to coming out of the closet. First of all, he sees a connection between the time of his coming out and starting to listen to Romantic music. He talks about how listening to music comes in periods for him:

> Kurt: For a while, I mostly listened to baroque, and in the past years, like the last two or three years, I am more focused on the Romantic period; Beethoven, Brahms and such... Schubert, Schumann, the whole array. [Silence].

> Marion: And do you see a connection with your life, or is it just because you were tired of the music of that period?

> Kurt: That's a difficult question, I already thought about it but uhm... I don't know whether there is a link, but the romantic period is also the period when I started coming

out of the closet. But I don't know whether I was in a different state of mind that made me appreciate the music more, or whatever happened then…

Later on in our conversation, we return to the topic and connotations of romantic music. Kurt did not intentionally choose this music as his coming-out soundtrack, but he does see why he was so attracted to it in that particular period:

> There is a lot of power in romantic music, propulsion, in a different way than in baroque, and maybe this is a factor that made me more interested in it at the moment my life underwent such a heavy change. When I was in the process of coming out of the closet.

Kurt indicates that the properties of Romantic music coincided and fit with the feelings he experienced in the period of his coming out. As DeNora describes, musical materials are able to provide us with parameters we may use to frame our experiences (2000, p. 27). The propulsive power of the music, often written for large orchestra, and high emotionality of the arts of the Romanticist era, indeed seem to fit with a life decision bringing about a big change and sense of departure into a new phase of life[42]. His emotional state finds expression in and is mirrored by the music he listened to.

Second, as he started frequenting gay bars and parties, he got to know or reconnected with a lot of pop music, which he listens to on Spotify. The music he collects digitally and since his coming out is rather different from the music in his CD collection, and often has a connection to the LGBTQ community: "'Euphoria' of course, that's an obligatory song in the gay scene [laughs] and 'Rise like a Phoenix'". Kurt refers to two winning songs of the Eurovision song contest which became anthems within the community, but states that he is not really interested in the song contest as such. This music is less connected to emotions, but rather to the LGBTQ community. Shared experiences and memories are linked to the music, and it is a symbol for a shared social identity.

Strikingly, most of the artists in his CD collection are men, while many other gay men prefer listening to female singers. Within classical music, most music is available in different renditions and, as he explains, some of the music has been bought explicitly because of a specific artist performing it. Generally, he finds that "classical [music] is more of a men's world, right". Some of the female artists among the pop section of his collection are artists who, according to Kurt,

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[42] Similarly, another narrator, Nikkie, connects Romantic music to an important period of becoming aware of being different.

typically speak to gay men, like Eurythmics and Tina Turner. In an interesting conversation about this topic, we discuss whether these penchants reveal something about us unconsciously. Kurt states that his collection of pop music came into existence subconsciously: "There is little among it where I thought, 'man, I feel gay so I'm going to buy this'". Kurt further reflects about the difference between consciously and subconsciously choosing music to listen to and add to his collection:

> I don't know whether there's a conscious connection, I think that it's rather a subconscious connection. […] For example, you made a remark about there almost only being men in my pop and rock CD cupboard, I had never realized that. So that is really 100% subconscious. I like to see a piece of opera once in a while, is that linked to a specific sense of drama or so they sometimes attach to gay men? I don't know, I daren't say so…

Neither does he especially admire typical gay divas like Maria Callas. Kurt touches upon the cliché of LGBTQ-related music, and the debate about its existence, and more on this topic will be discussed in the following section.

Kurt is not only fascinated with the male singing voice, but with men, masculinity and the male body more generally, as becomes apparent in the interview. He contemplates the range of masculinity within the gay world, and states that he himself is not very effeminate, "I am not really into the whole fuss with girlfriends and such". With this comment, Kurt touches on a well-known gay stereotype, namely the effeminate gay surrounded by so-called fag-hags, a group of female friends. Several comments infer that he prefers more masculine men, like he is himself: "So all the glitter and such, that is… well, I can't say that it's not my thing at all, but it's not really my thing". At the same time, he concedes that he does enjoy the odd 1970s disco song, which reminds him of the period he was just getting aware of the current pop music and culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I zoomed in on the identity work of two gay men, one in his adolescence in the mid-1990s, the other in his forties in the early 2010s. The coming of age and coming out stories of these two gay men who were born less than ten years apart from each other could not be more different. Tobias became aware that he was "different" rather early in his youth, but only realized what being gay really meant in the early 1990s when he went to university. After establishing contacts within the LGBTQ movement, he decided to come out to his peers and parents. Ever since his early twenties, he has been out of the closet. This rather linear trajectory

ties in with what many of the earlier stage models describe as typical gay identity development. As discussed above, coming out in the mid-1990s was not an evident thing to do; yet Tobias's disclosures were received relatively well. Although the political and social climate has changed a lot from the 1990s to the 2010s, coming out is still a difficult process, as Kurt's story shows. Although he also felt first attractions towards men in his early youth, Kurt's story developed very differently than Tobias's. He internalized societal expectations of what a "good and normal" person should be, and being homosexual was not one of those things. Especially the fear of the reaction of his family and work environment kept him from taking the big step and coming out. Only in his forties, he decided to opt for his own happiness and came out as homosexual.

These two trajectories highlight that coming to terms with gay identity and identity disclosure are highly individual processes. Although LGBTQs may haves similar experiences connected to their gender and sexual identity identities, they may react to those experiences in very different ways and in different stages of their lives. In their stories, there are clearly some overlapping elements, yet each of the two men react differently to similar aspects in their identity trajectories and experience being gay in our time and age very differently.

Moreover, their stories show that coming out is not necessarily related to youth, but may as well occur later on in life. Although coming out stories are often in the standard repertoire of LGBTQs, it is important to notice that these stories are fluid and keep changing as well. As Rosenberg notes, "for many, if not most, queer people, social disclosure (coming out) is only one aspect of a lifelong, nonlinear, constantly shifting, and ever-deepening process of self-discovery" (2017, p. 20).

All three facets of LGBTQ identity work I propose in this overarching chapter are inextricably linked in Tobias's story. For Tobias, consciously thinking about his gay identity, coming into the community, falling in love and coming out all happened around the same time, in the span of about a year when he was around 18 or 19. Coming out was only one part of discovering his sexuality, and not necessarily the most important one. The sense of relief he felt when he contacted an LGBTQ youth organisation may have been just as important as coming out itself. Tobias tells about two very different ways of coming out: He casually informed his peers about his homosexuality by wearing a T-shirt with an LGBTQ affirmative slogan in a dance class, and did not receive any negative reactions. He was much more anxious about coming out to his mother, which was a more serious talk, but also resulted in positive reactions.

While I do not assert that coming out is necessarily a pivot moment in each and every LGBTQ person's life, it certainly was for Kurt. After a long period of coming of age as a homosexual, his

coming out and coming into the community occurred at around the same moment in time. Overall, Kurt's coming out was a life-changing experience, and there are many musical links to it. Two factors may contribute to the fact that the coming out narrative plays such an important role in the life story he told me: Kurt only started to come out of the closet relatively close to the time of our interview, and it is therefore a prominent topic connected to relatively fresh memories. Second, because Kurt came out in his mid-adulthood, there is a heightened sense of it representing a change in life. After all, he experienced all of his youth and part of his grown-up life as a closeted gay man, and thus in the perception of others, as a non-gay man. Coming out indeed marks the beginning of a new phase in his life. Repeatedly, the LGBTQ community and community events encouraged him to speak up; notably a positive experience in gay nightlife in the USA and attending the Belgian Pride parade. At the same time, he acknowledges that the LGBTQ community may have a scary or off-putting effect on those just coming out of the closet. Now that Kurt is out of the closet and his gay voice (in the sense of agency over his own identity and sexuality) is widely heard, his singing voice resurfaced. He is now proud to have both of these voices heard and visible[43].

The three functions of music in the coming out processes Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) found in their research participants are recognisable in some of my narrators' stories. However, I would like to challenge the generalizing assumptions linked to the three-stage model Aronoff and Gilboa propose, which links one specific function of music to one specific identity stage. While all three functions of music occur in my narrators' stories, they are not clearly linked to a specific stage in their identity work. I therefore want to challenge the assumption that there are standard functions and roles of music in LGBTQ identity, namely music as a companion to identity confusion; music in concealing/exposing to identity comparison; and music facilitating making change to identity tolerance as proposed by Aronoff and Gilboa (2015, p. 432). As the stories of Tobias and Kurt show, just as the above chapter on coming of age, identity stages are not as clearly delineated as suggested by Cass (1979), and neither do they exactly overlap with one specific use of music.

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[43] A similar coming to voice is discussed in the stories of Tom and Marthe in chapter 7.

4.3   Coming In: Music in the LGBTQ Community

Music makes the people come together

Madonna - Music (2000)

Of the three phenomena discussed here, music features most naturally in the social context of coming into the LGBTQ community. The term "community" is widely used, but, yet again, it carries different kinds of meaning. As a starting point, Kotarba's definition is useful: "Sociologically, we think of *community* in broader terms than commonly thought. A community is a group of people, real or imagined, who offer a sense of belonging to and a source of meaning for the individual […]. People come together in a community, physically or virtually, on the basis of shared ideas, goals, and/or history" (2018, p. 34). Kotarba continues his definition: "By their very definition, communities have social boundaries. These boundaries are shaped in part through the shared interests and lifestyles of individuals. In the more traditional sense, they are also shaped by geography, as we see when we refer to a neighborhood or small town as a community" (2018, p. 120). Here, I employ the term LGBTQ community to denote the imagined and manifest group of people connected by a shared LGBTQ identity in general, and more specifically, LGBTQs frequenting the same social activities, bars, clubs and groups. In the first place, shared identity, social and political concerns unite this community.

Plummer engages with the term "community" as well and identifies some difficulties attached to it: "The term 'community' probably still implies something too stable, solid, bounded, shared. It also brings with it a certain nostalgia for things past. I do not believe that 'community is in decline', but rather it is taking on new, even exciting, forms. People still strongly identify with shared meanings, sense of history, 'communities of memory', but they do it in different ways to the past." (Plummer, 1996, p. 191). More than twenty years later, Plummer's words are still valid, within a very different socio-historical context. As Plummer's words indicate, community is not only interpreted in a literal way: Sexual stories, in the sense of shared sexual interests or shared identities, may contribute towards a sensed community (Plummer, 1995, p. 44), as well as towards a sense of actual, manifest community. Similarly, Weeks asserts that sexual identity also concerns our sense of a "membership of sexual communities and social worlds" (Weeks, 2011, p. 187). As discussed in the theory section above, sexual identity always interacts with personal identity and social identity.

Since the focus of this dissertation lies on music and LGBTQ identity, the question arises whether the LGBTQ community may also be interpreted as a musical community or subculture. Kotarba focuses on musical communities, and argues that "subcultural scenes include communities formed around musical genres. These have included jazz, punk, indie rock, extreme metal, rock, rap and hip-hop, goth, and straight edge, to name a few" (2018, p. 120). These are examples of clearly delineated musical communities, recognisable and relatively uniform. The LGBTQ community, on the contrary, is a very broad, open, and not easily definable community, joining people of all kinds of ages and backgrounds. Kotarba goes on to define musical communities:

> Music communities emerge out of communicative exchanges, whether these happen at sanctioned events in dance clubs, on the radio or official band websites, or through informal channels that can be found in teens' bedrooms, at school, or online via blogs, chat forums, and social networking sites. The nature of these communities is often political in the traditional sense […]. (Kotarba, 2018, p. 120)

While Kotarba focuses on musical communities, Plummer focuses on sexual communities. Although Plummer does not talk about music in particular, he confirms the increasing role of media within this community building:

> The media is increasingly generating its own fictive communities, interpretive communities, communities of memory. Here, people consuming media come to identify with a social world or community without any direct face to face relating. Media 'audiences' hence become sources for sensing new communities and new social worlds—sharing common stories, icons, memories. (Plummer, 1995, p. 44)

Plummer mentions books and TV as examples of media in which sexual stories act as community "glue". The internet and social apps would of course now be added as two main media forming sexual communities; and I argue that music also contributes to a sense of community. The experiences and memories LGBTQs connect to specific music constitute a shared musical narrative of the LGBTQ community.

In this chapter, I explore the connections between music and the LGBTQ community, and discuss how my narrators' stories challenge the assumption that the LGBTQ community is one homogenous social group. I discuss my narrators' individual experiences of the connection between their social identity, sexual identity and music's roles therein. The five sections of this chapter are as diverse as the community itself. According to their personality, some try and find contacts within the community at a rather early age and love to go out in LGBTQ venues; others

do not want or feel the need to engage in any specific LGBTQ social or nightlife activity at all. Throughout the interviews, some shared experiences and phenomena related to music and the LGBTQ community emerge. First of all, many narrators talk about a sense of a shared gay or LGBTQ music. In discussing these "typical preferences" with the narrators, a number of characteristics which might make certain musical genres and styles more appealing to an LGBTQ audience arise. Second, several narrators recount their memories connected to one specific song, "La Bamba", and a dance linked to it in the LGBTQ scene. These first two sections cover shared memories and a common sensibility for music among LGBTQs, constituting more general and even clichéd links between LGBTQs and music. However, my narrators also speak about more specific musical experiences linked to parts or subgroups of the community. The third section focuses on Dan and Michel's insights into music in the gay fetish scene. In the fourth section of this chapter, Mostafa's story shows that when several identity traits intersect, one of them might be more connected to music than another. To conclude this chapter, I briefly zoom in on two specific groups within the LGBTQ community: several narrators highlight diversity and hostility in the women's scene; just like several trans* narrators discuss the community—or rather, the lack thereof.

Sounding Out: Nuancing "LGBTQ Music"

Does anything like typical LGBTQ music exist, and if so: What is it exactly, and what does it sound like? Frith describes the power of shared music within a social group: "[The] interplay between personal absorption into music and the sense that it is, nevertheless, something out there, something public, is what makes music so important in the cultural placing of the individual in the social" (1987, p. 139). While it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly LGBTQ music is, there is definitely a sense of shared music in the narrators' stories. Moreover, there are plenty of clichés about LGBTQ people, culture and taste; and the narrators discuss whether there is a grain of truth in these clichés. These ideas and interpretations of the narrators is what I focus on in this section, rather than describing what LGBTQ music "really" is.

Throughout the interviews, the narrators link gay men most often explicitly to specific music, more so than lesbians, bisexual or trans* persons. In the experience of Dario (18), gay men are more likely to engage with pop music more in-depth than straight people:

> Hm, there is no such thing, well, 'gay music', that's not a genre as such, but I think if there is anything the gays are most attracted to, it must be on the commercial side. Like pop

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music, the things you hear on the radio, that's what they listen to most, because they are informed about everything, you know. They follow the blogs and such, so, I think that a straight guy is going to engage in stuff like that.

Dario links this preference for pop to another gay cliché, namely a stronger interest in gossip and lifestyle compared to straight men.

Dan (43) first realized that there is something like gay classics when he started going out in the LGBTQ scene and visiting gay venues: "That there are songs that are so incredibly linked to the gay scene, which I didn't know before. […] Yes, ABBA, and Boney M, 'I will survive'… definitely the disco music". Based on the style and groups Dan mentions, exaggeration in affect and appearance are features that seem to attract a gay audience. Yet, it is not only the music per se that makes it attractive to LGBTQ people, but also the things surrounding the music, the glitter and glamour. These characteristics (artificiality, exaggeration, a penchant towards all things theatrical) resonate with the notion of camp as described, for example, in Sontag's "Notes on Camp" (1964). The association of gay male culture with glitter, glamour and disco music is one that recurs throughout many of the interviews; it is a stereotype confirmed, and scrutinized to the same extent. Dan explains that disco and funk are "what is considered mainstream in gay music […] there is this kind of consensus: that's that music". However, he nuances that he is not entirely convinced that this really is true, and thinks that now, "what's called hipster music will influence generations of gays, more than disco or New Wave!"

Another common topic in discussing LGBTQ music arose when I asked Kurt (45) about what his ABBA CDs meant to him:

> Kurt: The fact that there is a gay aspect to it has surely played a role too. I still like to listen to them at a party but uhm…
>
> Marion: I just wanted to ask you, because that cliché exists, of course
>
> Kurt: Yes, yes…
>
> Marion: Where do you think it comes from?
>
> Kurt: Uhm, that's the disco period, the period of all glitter. A lot of glitter and show and that's what makes it quite attractive to gays, I think.

Kurt confirms that "glitter" attracts gay men in music, but that he generally is not a big fan of it. He likes this kind of music for a party, but does not have a strong emotional connection nor does he associate a specific memory with it, like he does with other music.

A related feeling connected to gay music may be found in comments by Laura (24) and Sarah (32). In a less gender-specific way, Laura connects what she calls "bad music" or "wrong music" to LGBTQs. Telling about LGBTQ parties in a café in a Flemish city, she explains that there was mainly "foute muziek":

> Well, it's the typical gay music, that's what I'd call it. Uhm yes, 2Fabiola and such […] I think if you look at the LGBTQ top 50 [referring to popular gay hit lists], you'll probably find a part of the music there [laughs]. Uhm, yes, the fierce beat, and with electronically manipulated voices and such.

Similarly, Sarah talks about an LGBTQ party and says that the music they played was popular music, Oldies and "typical gay music". When we discussed this notion of typical gay music, she says that "yes indeed, that's difficult to say! Uhm… [thinks] I don't know, it's the kind of music everybody… well, it's actually kind of *fout*, but still everybody likes it [we laugh]. I don't know what else you should write down!" Sarah's description indeed indicates that there is a shared sense of gay music, but it is difficult to really characterise it other than with a link to "bad taste". As Dhoest, Herreman and Wasserbauer put it, "in the context of LGB culture, subverting one's own taste parallels subverting heteronormative society" (2015, p. 218). The LGBTQ music these narrators describe is not necessarily the music they listen to at home or which they are fans of, but they do appreciate and enjoy it in the context of community events and there is certainly a connection to a kind of community spirit.

The link between LGBTQs, and more specifically, gay men and pop music, disco and glitter is remarkable, and has been discussed in other research. Lawrence (2011) explores how the rise of disco culture in the 1970s queered the dance floors. Disco culture disrupted and subverted social and cultural norms, for example by moving from couple's dance to social dance, and by creating new musical temporalities through altering and mixing songs (see Lawrence, 2011). Paraphrasing Richard Dyer's argument from "In defense of disco" (1995 [1979]) that the playful rhythms of disco are non-phallic, polymorphous and thus available for people of all genders, Lawrence states that "disco opened up the possibility of experiencing pleasure through a form of non-penetrative sensation" (Lawrence, 2011, p. 237). Moreover, the rise of disco culture is linked to a diverse audience, but especially gay men of color (Lawrence 2011). Disco's link with camp sensibilities, its subversive characteristics as well as its immediate link with a queer audience may be some of the reasons which make the genre so appealing for LGBTQs—or make people in general associate LGBTQs with disco.

The comments discussed above show that there is a tendency for pop and disco music to be associated with gays—and likewise, there is a connotation of specific music (stereotypically) connected to Lesbians. Pieter (31) contrasts lesbian and gay music in describing the music played at a gay party in the early 2000s:

> So they played what you might describe as lesbo-music [laughs] like with Anouk [a Dutch singer-songwriter/ rock musician] and such things, and gay music is more like Gloria Gaynor and all the stars, Madonna and such, and they mixed it all up, which was actually quite fun.

Pieter's comment indeed reflects the genres most commonly mentioned when talking about lesbian music: Just like gay men, lesbians appreciate strong women, although we see that a different kind of diva is appreciated. While gay men tend to like and are assumed to like extravagant pop divas, lesbians are associated with "women with balls" in rock and singer-songwriter genres (see also, Dhoest, Herreman & Wasserbauer, 2015). For Roxy (25), it goes without saying that K's Choice belongs to the canon of lesbian music. Lead singer Sarah Bettens is openly lesbian and has become an idol for many LGBTQ people. At the same time, the quality of their music seems to attract a lesbian audience: A strong, female lead singer, and a crossover between rock and singer-songwriter genres. The late lesbian Flemish singer and idol Yasmine is yet another frequently mentioned lesbian music favorite[44]. In a similar vein, singers Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge, Macy Gray, and Tanita Tikaram are characterised as "lesbian music" by multiple narrators. I asked hobby DJ Dan (43), who plays for all sorts of LGBTQ audiences, what exactly attracts a lesbian crowd:

> Dan: That is actually a good question, because I don't really know it. But I'd think more sensitive… not like 'bang bang', something less hard and in your face; more subtle, in fact… uhm, I think. And more moody, uhm, more atmosphere than something like psssssssh [makes an exploding sound] and it is also interesting to see that actually, different audiences prefer different kind of music.

Dan's onomatopoetic descriptions in fact tie in with what Christina Belcher summarizes as the "lesbian aesthetic of affect": "Such aesthetics mobilize feminism's 'ethics of emotionality,' or 'getting personal,' as means of maturing beyond emotional repression (Tongson)" (2011, p. 417). Halberstam points out that the cliché that gays are excessively sexual, while lesbians are actually

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[44] More on out Flemish musicians and their meaning for LGBTQs may be read in chapter 5.

'getting personal' with no one are reflected in the music they supposedly listen to as a social group (Belcher, 2011, p. 417).

Overall, my narrators' experiences and opinions about different preferences among different sub-groups of the community coincide with Dhoest et al.'s findings asking LGB persons about their music preferences:

> Despite a lot of variation, a clear pattern arose: gay and bisexual men tend to prefer pop and dance music, while lesbian and bisexual women prefer rock. […] Musical preferences turn out to vary strongly according to gender, as they do in the broader population, but in the opposite direction: our male participants tend to prefer music which is culturally coded as 'feminine' (pop, commercial, mainstream), while our female participants tend to prefer music coded as 'masculine' (rock, independent, alternative). (2015, p. 219)

However, the queer character of music may also lie in less obvious features. While many narrators recognise and characterise "mainstream" or cliché LGBTQ music, I am also interested in more subtle and personal experiences of LGBTQ music. As the stories in the upcoming chapters will show, several narrators describe their penchant towards music off the beaten path, reflecting their own queer gender or sexual preferences. Anna (27), for example, refers to the music of the French female band Mansfield TYA as "sounding very gay"—in her case, meaning queer or lesbian rather than gay male—which for others may not carry that notion at all. Their music has been described as "minimalist at the surface, punk at the center, classical and even wise in depth" (Varrod, 2011).

Strikingly, most narrators also question the common perception of LGBTQ music. When I asked Stefaan (33) whether he thinks that something like LGBTQ music or a gay sensibility exists, he answered elaborately:

> Uhm [sighs] there is… that's the funny thing, because I think it's primarily interesting to refute LGBTQ music, like: If you'll say 'LGBTQ music' to a random person on the street, chances are that they will start talking about YMCA, 'I will survive' and all that kind of stuff, or or Melissa Etheridge [laughs] whereas for me it does not really exist. But you can rather use—and I think that's a good word—'gay sensibility' or 'queer sensibility', it expresses that association but the difference is: It is very individual, and that means that a lot of music may have a gay sensibility. Depending on who relates to it. For me, Metallica has nothing of a gay sensibility to it [laughs], but I could imagine that maybe in the bear

scene it is something like: Metallica! James Hetfield! [we laugh] You know? I think what's more interesting for some people is to find out 'why does it have that gay sensibility for you?' And in my case, it's that physical aspect, the contact I can suddenly feel with that voice, rather than specifically looking for LGBTQ music. Because I also think that it is a very commercial thing, right. People are rather susceptible to trends, and when something gets the label 'LGBTQ music': [Sighs] that… the whole hustle and bustle around Lady Gaga, she also co-created that herself. Of course, it's got to do with political messages, but in my opinion she partly marketed it herself, and it's maintained through the broader community, but it's dangerous to label that as LGBTQ music, exactly because you'll exclude some things again. Some music gets that label, although for me, pfff, it only has little to do with LGBTQs, or is even problematic for the LGBTQ community. Uhm but I find that gay sensibility is a nice concept.

Clearly, Stefaan is annoyed by common stereotypical notions of LGBTQ music, and he stresses that it means something else to each single person. However, he does feel that LGBTQ persons experience music in specific ways and connect to elements which speak to their sexual identity.

In a similar vein, Tobias (36) points out that musical genres are social constructs rather than objectively existing genres:

I prefer to call it 'LGBTQ-related music', yes, because people themselves attach that meaning to it. I don't think it's inherently within the music. People listen to certain artists, styles, certain texts and connect that to it, gay music. Indeed, it does exist as a genre, because people… just like rock exists, right. But: Rock as such does not exist! Rock only exists because we attach meaning to it, you know?

His statement summarizes the feelings of other narrators. Of course, whether certain music sounds or is straight or queer, is in the ears of the beholder. However, it is interesting to notice throughout the interviews that there is an implicit consensus within the community, that there is something like LGBTQ music, or an LGBTQ taste in music. At the same time, most narrators like to nuance and specify that term, and their accounts show that most have thought about the topic before. LGBTQ music is a social construct rather than a genre, and is very diverse. As Dhoest et al. conclude from their research on LGB-related music, "many participants connect the notion of LGB music to subculture and collective music consumption. In this sense, the appreciation of the music discussed throughout this article is at least partly an acquired taste" (2015, p. 218).

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La Bamba: The *Kuskesdans*

After discussing a general sense of LGBTQ music, I will now zoom in one song which is part of the memories of many LGBTQ persons getting into contact with the community. Often, narrators struggle to remember the music that was played in the venues they used to go out in their youth, but one song reoccurs in several stories: Los Lobos' *La Bamba*—also referred to as the *kuskesdans*—the kissing dance. Originally a Mexican folk song, Ritchie Valens' rock'n'roll version of the song became famous in 1958, and has been widely known in Flanders. The version played as the *kuskesdans*, however, is Los Lobos' 1987 cover version of Valens' take, which was featured in the movie "La Bamba" (1987) and became a number one hit in many countries in the late 1980s. Let us listen to narrators' memories connected to this song and the signature dance.

Tobias (36) explains what the *Bamba* exactly is:

> Well, the *Bamba* was by Ritchie Valens; and when they played it all the gays and lesbians immediately formed a circle—sometimes there were two circles, one for the women and one for the men. Inside of the circle there were several people and those walked along the circle and when they found somebody they fancied you would give them a kiss. And then it changed, the ones forming the circle went into the middle and vice versa. And then you'd do another round. And then it's possible that somebody kisses somebody they kissed before and you know what that means […] Afterwards you had three or four slow songs to get to know each other. A Bamba like that easily lasted 15 to 30 minutes, and of course one single song couldn't span that time, so there needed to be other music with it. As far as I remember, those were never the latest hits because they already had been played or were still to come.

Tobias expresses that the dance was actually "a big meat market"[45]; but also tells that he actually met a boyfriend through the *Bamba.*

Likewise, La Bamba was the song that led Pieter (31) to getting into contact with gay men of his own age at parties, while before he only ever dated much older men. He recalls the atmosphere at a party when the *Bamba* started:

> Just imagine! [laughs] Everybody participated, it was so, that's actually really crazy! […] It was the Bamba and everybody… there were a few people who didn't participate, but

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[45] Translated from Flemish: "één grote vleeskeuring".

only maybe like 10 in 500 people stayed at the bar. Everybody else participated. And so everybody was like "wooooh!" [cheers]
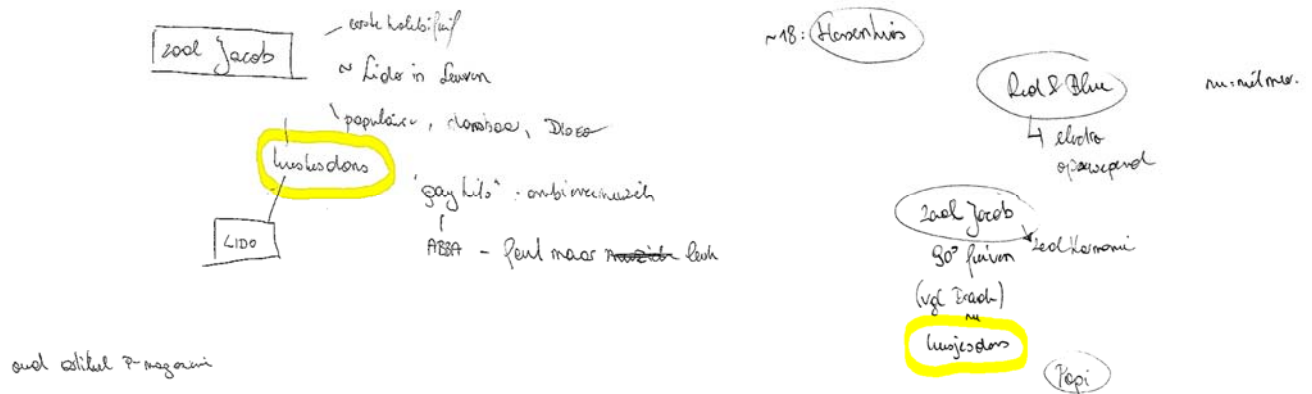

Figure 9: LGBTQ parties in Sarah's story (left) and Pieter's story (right)

As my field notes of the interviews with Sarah and Pieter show, both of them remember the *kuskesdans* to be a central element in their experiences of going out in the LGBTQ scene in their youths. They both link the dance to specific venues in Antwerp and Leuven, the general atmosphere of these parties as well as the music that was played there.

Sarah (32) remembers that she had even read about the phenomenon *Bamba* in the LGBTQ scene when she was still in the closet and thus before she started going out to LGBTQ parties:

> I read an article about a reporter who went out in the lesbian scene in Antwerp undercover; but for me, I was 14 or 15 or so, I was already working things out [about my sexual preference], I was really curious about it. And then I accidentally saw this article, and all kinds of things were in there: Zaal Jacob[46], and also about the kissing dance at three AM—and then it was so funny when I went to parties myself and indeed at three AM the kissing dance… [laughs]
>
> Marion: And it's still around!

The individual memories of the narrators about the *Bamba* form a part of the collective memory of many Flemish people of all kinds of ages: The *Bamba* is a common phenomenon at wedding parties, in youth movements like the Scouts, as well as in many parties in the 1990s and 2000s. The *kuskesdans* and the associated memories are certainly not an LGBTQ exclusive phenomenon: It is exciting (or embarrassing) for all people to dance and kiss a person or be

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[46] A venue for casual parties in Antwerp in the 2000s, widely known among the LGBTQ community.

kissed by a person they do (or do not) like. However, for the LGBTQ people I spoke to, the *Bamba* is connected to taking their first steps in the LGBTQ scene and possibly even being kissed by a person of the gender they feel attracted to for the very first time. Whenever this song is played, these memories come alive.

What Does a Gay Fetish Club Sound Like?

The field notes from my interview with Dan (43) visualize that he connects the gay scene to different kinds of music. Under the header "gay classics", we find the kind of music often perceived as gay or LGBTQ music as discussed above. Personal memories of different kinds of parties when he started going out in the scene are mixed with more general observations about the gay scene. Dan feels that when you first come out as gay, there is always a soundtrack:

> I read a quote on Facebook recently, and I kind of liked it: Reality really lacks a soundtrack [laughs] But when you come out as a gay man, there actually always is a soundtrack. When you go to bars, there is a soundtrack, and to the clubs.

However, Dan quickly discovered that he did not feel at home in the mainstream gay scene, which is partly connected to the music in the scene:

> I always found it a pity that they played this stupid cheap techno in the gay scene. And thus I actually never… also not in the Nineties, it was the kind of man: The beardless, hairless man was *in*, and it was very clear to me that that did not interest me [we laugh]. And so I never felt at home… uhm, in the gay world.

Later on in the interview, we return to the connection between techno, the gay scene and masculinity. Dan and Michel (fortysomething), his partner who joined the interview half-way, provide me with insights about a part of the LGBTQ community which I as a female researcher and LGBTQ community member cannot experience myself, namely about the music in gay fetish clubs.

Different parties
- TDs (tea dances) with DJ Piet: '80s-95; classical dance
- Coming out time 24/25 y/o: mixed parties

Gay classics
- ABBA
- Boney M.
- Disco
→ glitter, show, glamrock

Cheap techno music

→ Did not feel at home there

Gay scene

Smooth guys

Acceptance for it has changed → also in music

Realization?

Music in fetish clubs
- Anonymous
- Different sense of time
- Robot-like//woman-like

In love with a man: "huh?", "Oh, but…"
→ 18

Late bloomer in taking action → waited 10 years

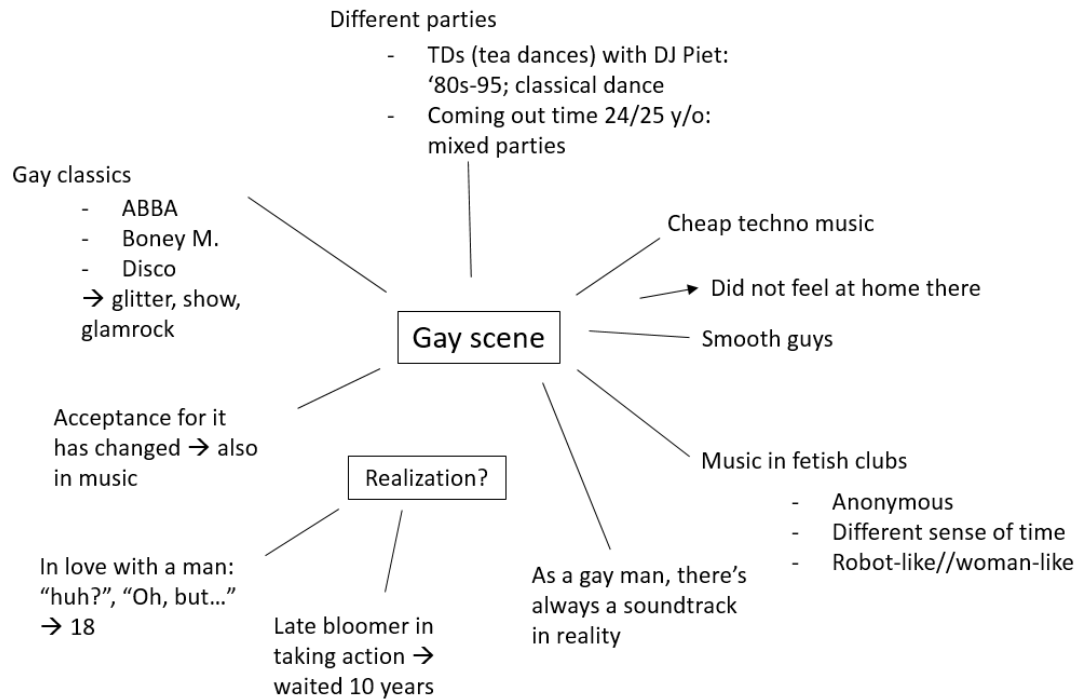As a gay man, there's always a soundtrack in reality

Figure 10: Digitalized and translated version of my field notes from Dan's interview

Through talking about the metal-scene, the idealization of extreme masculinity and the potential homo-eroticism within the metal scene, the subject of fetish clubs came up:

> Michel: It became one of the clichés of the types you'll encounter in a gay bar, right, the leather and the chains and, it became one of the [stereo]types!

> Dan: Yes, but what is so weird is that in the fetish world after all it is still techno you will hear. Actually it should… it must be really interesting to play metal in a fetish bar.

I noticed that the "mechanical techno", as Dan refers to it, seems to be rather linked to the cliché mainstream gay scene, and Dan theorizes that "techno has been socialized through the LGBTQ world". For Dan and Michel, there are three reasons why techno has become the standard music in fetish clubs: It is genderless, de-humanized and allows for the creation of a different sense of time.

As Dan puts it,

> Techno is… the first time that a gender freed music came into existence, actually. There were no looks connected to it, in the beginning. You never knew who the producer is, what they look like: You only knew the music. […] And that was the first time that

sexuality actually no longer played a role in popular music. And that is why it became so mythical.

The audience could only speculate about the producer and their sexuality. A similar thought of electronic music and techno as being freed from gender recurs in Marthe's interview (see chapter 7). Talking about the genderlessness of techno stimulates another thought in Michel:

> Maybe this is a ridiculously bad idea, but it is an intuitive idea about, about the music you'll hear in fetish clubs: To me, as a classical musician, it feels like a dehumanization of music. So what do they take away from it? Human voice, often, human voice—tell me if I'm wrong!—only sounds, rhythm, no real melody. So actually, if you are going to look for that in order, uhm, to lose your own personality to go and experience something in a dark corner, which does not directly have anything to do with your own personality nor the other's personality? Looking for a sort of mechanical, anonymous sex, and thus not too many personal things like melody and voice, which you could associate with a face. That's a feeling I have.

Not only is techno genderless, it is also dehumanized. Michel connects the anonymity and mechanical character of that music to the kind of sex visitors of a fetish club might seek: anonymous and straight to the point. "Straight" is of course an interesting word in the context of a gay fetish club, but it may well describe the kind of music played there—even though Dan and Michel link techno to the gay scene. In his musicological analysis of music in a gay club in New York, Amico (2001) makes a difference between straight and gay sounding music based on previous research in musicology and gender. He describes gay music as happy and puffy, in contrast to straight music, which he links to drums, big beats and techno (2001, p. 364). However, he notices that in the gay club, men were portraying a rather straight masculinity (2001, p. 365), which may be counterintuitive. Yet, his observations link up with those of Dan and Michel about masculinity, anonymity and techno.

The two go on to discuss the sorts of voices which may occasionally be heard in the kind of techno they are talking about:

> Michel: If there are any voices at all in the music, it's like robot… robot voices.

> Dan: Yes, or female voices like "aaah, oooh" [imitates the sounds; we laugh] like sensual women's voices

> Michel: But not in fetish clubs! I don't think so.

Dan: Well, I've heard it before, but…

Michel: The few times I went there it has always been sounds and mechanical voice, compressed voices…

Dan: But it's true, I once went to such a club where they played pop songs, and I found it horrible, it didn't work [laughs heartily].

Music clearly serves as a means to set the tone for the sexual encounter in fetish clubs, and for Dan, pop music does not fit that purpose. In chapter 8 on music in intimate relationships, I will discuss another "failed" musical backdrop for an intimate encounter.

Another topic in our conversation is the temporality techno creates. Dan notes that time goes by differently in techno than in pop music, everything is connected with each other into a "rush" or "never ending mix":

Dan: The time is different. With pop songs: That's three minutes. You feel how time passes by, because: Oh, we've already heard ten songs. Or twenty.

Michel: Indeed, that's right!

Dan: And in techno, or in clubs which play minimal techno: It goes on forever. And you actually know… sometimes you go to the club and when you come back out [you realize]: Oh, have I been there for two and a half hours?! […] Well that's the effect of techno, it's that uhm, the time changes…

This rush which makes one lose one's sense can indeed be seen in connection with the sensation of uninterrupted sexual pleasure fetish clubs aim to provide. In this sense, techno is a logical soundtrack for gay fetish clubs. The blurring of time Dan and Michel describe may also be linked to Halberstam's thoughts on queer time and temporality. Halberstam argues that queers use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood and responsibility (2005, p. 13). Electronic music is indeed a genre which challenges the borders of songs which we are used to in popular mainstream. It may thus be argued that techno is a musical strategy of queering time in the gay scene. Albeit in a very different context, Lawrence (2011) makes a similar argument about disco music in the 1970s, which also challenged the norms of the song, as I discussed above. Moreover, another dimension which may add to the loss of sense of time and rush created by techno is that "techno is also linked to drugs, ecstasy and such are being used a lot, and maybe even more in the gay scene", as Dan puts it.

The way Dan and Michel discuss and analyse music in the gay scene and the fetish scene shows that music indeed provides material and space for an aesthetic reflexive practice (cf. DeNora, 2000). The professional musical backgrounds of both surely deepen their insights into the gendered and sexualized aspects of music within the LGBTQ scene. Not only do they discuss what music they prefer when going out, but also the music they connect to different sorts of LGBTQ and most of all gay venues. As such, this narrative provides insight into the musical conventions of gay nightlife and gay sex clubs, which are places of shared musical experiences for a specific part of the LGBTQ community. In Dan and Michel's experience, a specific kind of techno is connected to a specific sexual community, which goes to show that there is more than the one kind of stereotypical LGBTQ music discussed above. Their story also points out that the LGBTQ community is not as homogenous as it is often viewed from an outside perspective: In the case of sex clubs, only part of the community has access to and/or chooses to frequent certain venues.

Intersecting or Separate Communities?

The sections above focus entirely on music in and connected to the LGBTQ community. In the story of Mostafa (41), the sense of belonging to yet another community is much more present, namely the Moroccan and Arab[47] community. Mostafa was born and raised in Belgium, and is the son of a single mother of Moroccan descent. His Moroccan heritage is an important part of his sense of identity, and throughout the interview, he introduces me to numerous Arab and Muslim traditions, which are strongly connected to music. Two social identities intersect in Mostafa's life: His Moroccan identity, and his gay identity. From his interview I learned that within the Moroccan community and Arab culture, a different approach to gender and sexuality is common than in Flanders at large: "It's not only about homosexuality. Sexuality in general: We don't talk about it". As he explains, in his family and the Moroccan community it is very important what "other people" might think, and therefore, things are often not called by their name. Mostafa explains that homosexuality certainly is a taboo, and it came as a shock to himself when he realized that he preferred men. He further explains that he dislikes the word "homosexual", because it so explicitly refers to sex, while in fact, homosexuality is much more than that.

For a long time, Mostafa did not experience being attracted to men as a sexual or social identity:

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[47] Mostafa himself uses both terms, Moroccan and Arab, alternatingly without making a specific difference between them. I adopted the same language use, here.

> Mostafa: My worlds were separated. On the one hand I had gay friends I had sex with, but no relationships or so […] until I met someone I fell in love with. And then I was like 'whatever', uhm, and then it was also more like, I never had to come out of the closet. People just quietly figured out. And then it was like, suddenly: I was in a relationship, and that was also what completely changed, uhm, how I thought about homosexuality.
>
> Marion: If you say that it changed, how did you think about it before?
>
> Mostafa: Well, before, it was actually purely sexual. That's what it boils down to. So, I had my group of friends, nobody knew anything about it, I was always with them; and once in a while I met someone purely for the sex. OK, maybe going for a drink or so, but never in a real relationship or so. I also didn't envision myself in a relationship in the future. A relationship with a guy, living together: No, no, that's nothing for me.

This excerpt shows that being gay for a long time was something Mostafa only associated with his private life. Only when he was in a relationship, being gay started feeling like an identity trait, and he assumed the identity label. He stopped caring about the opinion of others. Yet, this part of his identity is private rather than shared in a community.

However, in the past few years, Mostafa has become active in the LGBTQ community and stimulates a dialogue with Muslim communities. In the year of our interview (2015), a delegation of Moroccan LGBTQs and allies participated at the pride parade for the very first time. Mostafa confirms that the two communities are starting to approach each other, and pleads for a gentle attitude:

> I always say: We are a new generation, and we actually have to pave the way for the next generation. […] We really want a soft approach, while some others want it to go very fast, 'something needs to happen, and maybe next year or the year after, we'll have our own float'—no, no, no! Maybe in five years' time. A little more visibility, next year. Maybe a banner, next year, or a flag or so; more visibility, but step by step.

According to him, these things cannot be rushed, and both communities must make a move towards each other. In Mostafa's account, the tension of the intersection of his gay identity and Moroccan identity is reflected on a political and ethical level. Concerning homosexuality and gender diversity, both communities have divergent political agendas. As an activist, Mostafa aims to gradually bring the communities together and learn to understand each other's backgrounds. Being acquainted with Arab and Muslim traditions as well as the Flemish LGBTQ politics, Mostafa is well aware of the dangers of trying to impose Western LGBTQ politics upon

the Moroccan community. It is a difficult exercise to balance the power dynamics between the two social identities in the respective community contexts.

Musically, Arab culture is much more prominent in our conversation and in his everyday life than LGBTQ culture. However, this has not always been the case: He only started to engage more profoundly with his "culture of origin" and listening to Arab music when he started making music and theater professionally. He says that "as a kid you don't have any affinity with your culture of origin, right, then you think… if only we had different music, more Western music". Now, his first connection between music and identity refers to Arab traditions and music:

> Marion: Are there certain moments in your life where you'd say that music and identity are inextricably connected with each other?
>
> Mostafa: See, I immensely love rituals, immensely. Rituals are something you connect with your descent, and descent like in: not only Morocco. It goes much further, as a person, as… you know? And I find that very important for your identity. I try to work a lot with rituals. Sometimes I take a ritual dance and give it a spin so it's not directly related to the ritual, but in my performance, I know: This is my ritual.

Mostafa experiences that music and rituals have a strong uniting character in Arab countries and culture, unifying all the different communities within. In contrast, Mostafa does not connect a lot of music specifically to the LGBTQ community, as he also never really went out to specifically gay or LGBTQ parties until somewhat later in his life. More on this topic in his life will be explored in chapter 6 in connection to notions of fandom.

Mostafa's story is an example of different cultures intersecting and how one may be musically more prominent than the other. Although my research focuses specifically on the connection of music and LGBTQ identity, this link is not equally strong or clear in each narrator's life. Moreover, it shows that we must not assume that sexuality is necessarily the most prominent or important part of a sense of individual or group identity among LGBTQ persons.

Two Pleas for More Diversity Among the Community

After showing some different facets of diversity among the LGBTQ community based on music, I wish to acknowledge that my narrators also discussed the diversity and smaller single-identity-based communities among the larger community in a broader context. As these experiences and narratives are not linked to music, I will not discuss them at length here. Yet I think that it is

useful to include the most important topics here in order to provide a fuller picture of the way my narrators experience getting into contact with the community.

Nikki (23) tells that she does not usually go out in the *lesbian scene*. One of the first times she ever did, she had a troubling experience: Nikki was wearing high heels and a dress to a mainstream lesbian party in a club, where the typical dress code involves blue jeans and tank tops. The negative response to her feminine appearance was striking:

> Someone approached me and said: 'If you're here to find a woman for a threesome with your boyfriend, you might as well just leave'. I was like WHAT?! I was still so young and […] I didn't get it, I found that SO horrible because I thought: sorry, you are—or 'we'—are already discriminated against in so many ways, and then you're starting this thing from within… I thought it was really nasty. And later that night, or the next time I went there […] another person approached me: 'Yes we've got a bet on that you're straight, aren't you? Because then I'll get some beers'.

Nikki experienced not being recognised as a lesbian due to her feminine appearance, and was actually discriminated against by the lesbian crowd. Although she stresses throughout her interview that she enjoys and searches ways in which to be different, she states that after these incidents she started changing her appearance, 'because I wanted to belong, in a way'.

The issue of belonging to a (lesbian) community is also broached by Patricia (51). As mentioned above, Patricia most of all just wants to be accepted for who she is, regardless of her clothing style and personal choices concerning her body. She links not feeling welcome in a certain lesbian group to class differences and gendered expectations: "Actually, I find that there is little tolerance within the lesbian milieu towards lesbians who are bi, or who look a bit masculine, or who have a bit rougher hobbies or listen to rougher music than they do". In her experience, non-exclusive sexual orientations are met with prejudices from within lesbian circles as well. Patricia talks about some of the prejudices she has experienced: "That we… do it with everybody, that we want to do it with everybody, that we can't choose between men and women, if we have a relationship with a woman there will always come a moment where we will choose for a man eventually". Moreover, as Patricia highlights, sexual orientation is not class-bound, and just like in many other areas, it is especially difficult for LGBTQ organisations to reach poor LGBTQ's, especially when a negative attitude towards them comes from within LGBTQ groups. "That means that there is a large group of people who won't get the chance to meet each other," she recaps.

Patricia and Nikki had similar experiences, both being discriminated against from within the lesbian community because of their gender expressions, and met with prejudice about non-exclusive sexualities. Naturally, these negative experiences do not represent all of the lesbian community, but these are interesting points to notice. One would indeed expect that in a community that exists because of and strives for sexual and gender diversity, diverse gender expressions and open sexualities would be welcome. Yet, it appears that there are certain expectations and norms within separate lesbian groups, which may lead to the exclusion of those who differ. This is exactly the problem of single identity based politics as discussed in chapter 4.1.

Within the *trans* community*, or connecting trans* persons more broadly to the LGBTQ community, music does not seem to have such a prominent position as a connecting feature. However, the interviews provide general insights into the trans*community—or the lack thereof. On the one hand, the narrators discuss the associations they are acquainted with and whether or not there is a trans* community in Flanders. There are several trans* associations in Flanders; Tom has even actively started one but left the project, and Patricia as well as Robertina are part of trans* associations. Patricia makes an important suggestion for LGBQ and T communities: The trans* community must interact with LGBQ communities, as there are trans* people with all kinds of sexual preferences, and queer people with all kinds of gender identifications.

On the other hand, in Selm's experience there is no real trans* community, in the sense that there are lesbian and gay communities: For many mtf and ftm or more gender conforming trans* persons, being trans* is, indeed, a transient state and not an identification they want to share in a community. In the narrators' experiences, many trans* persons rather identify as one clear-cut gender than keeping things in the middle. This is also the reason why Tom found that his association could not really work: Many gender nonconforming persons actually desired medical assistance and could not, at the same time, be critical of the very system that reinstates the gender binary. As there are no mtf or ftm trans* persons among my interviewees, it is unfortunately impossible to compare their experience with and within trans* communities. These accounts however show that gender nonconforming persons are currently not yet in the focus of the LGBTQ communities and associations.

Conclusion

This chapter presents individual perspectives of shared experiences within the community and shows the relationship and possible tension between the individual and community experiences. While the LGBTQ community does have a basis of some "shared ideas, goals, and/or history" (Kotarba, 2018, p. 34), these stories show that "*the LGBTQ community" is not one homogenous social group* or social identity. Quite on the contrary, there is a large diversity within the community and many different social identities, sexual preferences and individual stories are comprised by the term LGBTQ community. While the LGBTQ community is an important support and positive place for many individuals, others have mixed or negative encounters with the community. As we saw in the section on trans* communities, not all persons feel at home in the mainstream community, and it is also not easy to found or find a group or community which fits each personal identity.

Taylor found that music is a binding element in the queer scene, although the queer scene is not immediately linked to specific music (2012b, p. 31). Music works in a similar way in the LGBTQ community: There is a *strong sense of stereotypically LGBTQ-related music among the narrators*, whether they personally enjoy that kind of music or not. The stories about disco, the *Bamba* and techno in the gay scene show that music is reinterpreted and reappropriated within the LGBTQ communities (see also Driver, 2007 and Taylor, 2012). As Taylor puts it, music is a way to "reconstruct and reorder culture queerly" (2012, p. 151). Indeed, while the *Bamba* is a phenomenon widely recognised in Flanders, the dance has a special layer of meaning for some LGBTQ narrators as it signifies the first contact with either the LGBTQ community or a romantic partner.

The v*arious sections of this chapter are just as diverse as the members of the LGBTQ community* themselves. While the first two sections focus on shared musical experiences within the community, the third section zooms in on the personal experience of a very specific part of the community, namely the gay fetish scene. As Mostafa's story shows, different social identities may intersect in one's life, and bring different cultural and musical influences with them. The last section focuses on shared experiences of difficulties within the community, again by listening to several voices about the same topic. All of these stories, and many more, contribute to what LGBTQ community means, and show how music may unify but also diversify a community.

5 "I Think I'm Quite Fluid with Those Kind of Things": Exploring Music and Non-Heterosexual Women's Identities.[48]

> *I, you, she together, come on, baby let's go*
> *I don't have to make the choice, I like girls and I like boys*
>
> Peaches - I U She (2003)

In a 2014 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Indie-Rock star Annie Clark (St. Vincent) was asked whether she identifies as gay or straight, to which Clark replied: "I don't think about those words. I believe in gender fluidity and sexual fluidity. I don't really identify as anything". She added, "I think you can fall in love with anybody", and: "I don't have anything to hide, but I'd rather the emphasis be on music" (Weiner, 2014). The musician summarises what many women feel, namely that simple labels often do not suffice in order to comprise the complexity of sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual fluidity in recent years has received quite some media attention, with stars like Miley Cyrus showcasing a no-label sexual attitude in front of a large audience. Sexual fluidity, though, is by no means a new or VIP-only phenomenon, as various studies have shown.

As the overview of the demographics of my narrators shows (see chapter 3.5), the self-identification of several female narrators strikingly transcends clear-cut definitions: Descriptions they used include "queer/lesbian", "fluid", "lesbian but…", and "pan". By contrast, most of the male narrators intuitively use the clear-cut label "gay". Based on theories of music and identity and notions of female sexual fluidity, this chapter investigates how non-heterosexual women make sense of their sexual and gender identity and how these are linked to music in their lives. Diamond observes that, when it comes to sexual fluidity in women, "questions of causation typically receive the most debate and attention, but questions about expression are equally important" (Diamond, 2008, p. 11). This chapter focuses exactly on the expression of sexuality and sexual fluidity through music, rather than on questions of causation.

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[48] A similar version of this chapter has been published: Wasserbauer, M. (2017). 'I think I'm quite fluid with those kinds of things': exploring music and non-heterosexual women's identities. In A. Dhoest, B. Eeckhout, & L. Szulc (Eds.), *LGBTQs, Media and Culture in Europe* (pp. 80-97). New York: Routledge.

First of all, the women's narratives demonstrate the complexity of situating themselves as non-heterosexual and non-gender-normative women. Secondly, it is worth looking more closely into music's roles in the coming of age and identification of these women. Moreover, music as facilitator, reflection and expression of female same-sex sexualities will be discussed. A special focus on Flemish musicians mentioned by several narrators stresses the importance of non-heterosexual role models.

Non-Normative Sexualities and Sexual Fluidity in Women

Generally, terminology for sexual minorities is a delicate subject matter, as all terms are loaded, historically and culturally defined, and imply social consequences. "Lesbian" and "bisexual" are, certainly in Belgium, widely recognised identity concepts, understood to signify, respectively, a woman being romantically and/or sexually attracted to another woman and "feeling romantically and/or sexually attracted to men and women"(çavaria, 2015). Yet, there are plenty of other terms of sexual and gender identification women employ; and identifying themselves is not as straightforward as these two common identity labels would suggest.

In research involving sexual orientation, meaning "sexual attraction, identity, arousals, fantasies, and behaviours individuals have for one sex, the other sex, or both sexes" (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012, p. 85), those who identify as "other" than heterosexual or homosexual are often excluded from analysis, as they do not fit into neat categories, are not commonly recognised and are difficult to account for. Additionally, the conception of sexual orientation is frequently based on a binary distinction between two sexes and does not take into account/ is not applicable to genderqueer or trans* persons. Queer and post-structuralist theories argue against the concept of sexual identities, as these are "arbitrary impositions on the flux of sexual possibilities, and constrain rather than enable sexual possibilities" (Weeks, 2011, p. 188). There is, for example, not necessarily a link between sexual orientation and sexual behaviour: "While designations like *man, woman, gay, straight, bisexual* are supposed to indicate sexed and gendered identity, they actually tell us very little about what people do with their bodies, or what their desires, pleasures, or fantasies might be" (Albury, 2015, p. 654). Descriptions like MSM or WSW ("men who (also) have sex with men" and "women who (also) have sex with women") focus on sexual behaviour rather than identities, and are often used in research on epidemiology and public health (Young & Meyer, 2005). However, the use of these terms is controversial as well, precisely because they obscure the social meaning of sexuality (Young & Meyer, 2005). Kath Albury proposes to consciously take into account "impossible", difficult identity data in order to

investigate what it means when people strongly identify with multiple categories (2015, p. 651-2), and to consider "adventurous sexualities" (2015, p. 659).

In a similar vein, Better articulates that

> there is more queerness and alternative expressions of sexuality and sexual behaviour than we know to look for and that our lack of both language to describe it and the taboo on its discourse hinders our true understandings of the depths of the pervasiveness of these behaviours. (2014, p. 29)

Drawing on empirical research into women's sexualities, Better suggests that we look beyond lesbian and bisexual identities. Self-identification of sexual orientation, independent of scales or pre-defined answers, is therefore essential in studying sexualities. Similarly, an understanding of gender as a socially constructed and performative phenomenon (Butler, 1999 [1990]) requires a focus on self-definition, which in turn implies that the use of "woman" should be substituted by "female identified individual" (Tate, 2012, p. 19). Accordingly, "woman" should be read as "self-identified female individual" throughout this chapter.

Fluidity is a useful concept when thinking about female non-heterosexuality, as research shows. A survey by Ross, Daneback and Månsson (2012) measures sexual fluidity looking at the gender of the object of sexual fantasies. This study shows that sexual fluidity is more common in women (49,8 %) than in men (15,4%), and that education, religiosity, living situation and sexual activity are relevant factors linked to sexual fluidity (2012, p. 456f). Diamond's longitudinal research into sexual fluidity in women shows that "the notion of female sexual fluidity suggests not that women possess no generalised sexual predispositions but that these predispositions will prove less of a constraint on their desires and behaviours than is the case for men" (2008, p. 24). This statement is confirmed by the fact that most of the female narrators discussed in this chapter do to some extent identify as "lesbian", but have the urge to refine, alter and add to this basic definition, as discussed below.

In this chapter, the oral histories of seven women between the age of 23 and 51 years were analysed for narratives on sexual fluidity, self-identifications and the connection to music. This subset of interviews is striking because of the narrators' fluid gender and sexual orientations and the focus on these topics. Nikki, Laura, Shary and Roxy were students at the time of the interview; Anna is an artist; and Nina and Sarah had a regular job. It should be noted that all narrators either already had a diploma in higher education or were about to finish their studies, which reflects the general tendency of highly educated persons participating in my research.

Situating the Sexual Self in a Musical Landscape

Most interviews start with a conversation on sex, gender and sexual orientation,[49] in which the narrators situate themselves. Same-sex sexualities are in reality not as straightforward as labels like "lesbian" and "bisexual" might lead to assume; neither is it easy to put these sexualities into words. Several women narrate anecdotes in order to frame their sexual orientations; others struggle to find the right words to express themselves, reflected in silences and abrupt turns within sentences. Some women focus on their current identity, but most also tell coming of age stories, covering various stages of their lives. Two salient and interrelated topics within the narratives are "coming of age as non-heterosexual women and music" and "music as reflection and expression of female same-sex identities". Diverse personalities as well as gender and sexual identities of the narrators are connected to and reflected through music.

Nina on Defying Norms

Riot Grrrl and zinester Nina (32) explains that she fancies 'just women'. She identifies as "lesbian slash queer or so [laughs]", elaborating as follows:

> Nina: I find the queer movement quite interesting, […] I think I do criticise it somewhat, some aspects of it, but… I don't know. It's a broader term maybe. Or uhm, well it also implies some links with transgender for me, and I appreciate that…
>
> Marion: An openness concerning gender or something…
>
> Nina: Yes. [Silence] Although I don't find it necessary to identify as trans or genderqueer in order to deviate from "the norm", well, the usual gender expression-like things.

Nina does not pin her sexuality down to one single label, and her description shows the flexibility and interconnectedness of identity categories marking gender and sexuality, which ties in with the experience of the queer women Better interviewed (2015, p. 31). Nina's affiliation with and critical position towards queerness may be linked to her feminist engagement, her activities in the queercore and Riot Grrrl scenes, as well as her academic training in women's studies. Diamond (2008) found that such academic studies are likely to provoke (more nuanced) thinking about one's own gender and sexuality and a tendency to deviate from binary thinking about gender. However, Nina's personal interest in and self-study of feminism started much earlier, and she already recognised her attraction towards women as a teenager. As we have seen in chapter

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[49] As mentioned above, this is a section in my identification file which is most of the time filled in before the actual interview starts, providing a good conversation starter.

4.1, singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco and Skunk Anansie's lead singer Skin have been lesbian idols since the 1990s, and Nina decided to buy their music which she intuitively liked. When asked if she could specify what exactly makes their music so attractive to lesbians, Nina raised a number of features:

> It's acoustic, like folksy music opposed to metal/rock-like music, so… that combination: most people will rather like one [style] than both. […] But both are bi as well, so I don't know. [Laughs]. […] They are very clear in their opinions and don't let anybody mess about with them and they are very vocal and assertive or yes… loud, actually, both in their own way. […] It's not really hard music, but it is kind of strong.

Not only their music but also the empowering appearance and messages of both singers attracted Nina: "I found both of them extremely cool, and I think that I had a bit of a crush on both. I think that came hand in hand, somehow". With this formulation Nina pinpoints a feeling towards female musicians that various narrators describe: A combination between having a crush on them and wanting to be them or strongly identifying with what they express. Similarly, Nina felt as if she wanted to become friends with the lesbian CD shop assistant, as she was one of the few lesbians Nina knew at that time in rural Flanders. Music is thus in many ways deeply connected with Nina's coming of age as a feminist lesbian/queer woman. She emphasises that her identity is inextricably connected to music:

> Nina: I think the music I mostly listen to is very strongly connected to my identity. Because a lot of it is feminist music, queer music and DIY music… yes. I don't know, politically inspired things… […].

> Marion: And would you say it is also somehow connected to your sexual orientation?

> Nina: Yes, I think so, to some extent. Actually, I ask myself sometimes, had I been straight, I would probably still… to a large extent still listen to the same music, I guess! Because then I would search for it, or would still want to listen to it because it's women, and you want to see women on stage.

Although Nina does enjoy that some of her favourite musicians are queer, her statement clarifies that gender is a more important aspect than sexuality in the music she listens to, but also in the music she makes. She actively supports female artists organising and visiting Ladyfests, and is a member of an all-female crust[50] band. In her experience, the dynamics within a band change if

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[50] A genre linked to punk, metal, hardcore and political lyrics

there is a male member in it. The feminist concept of an all-female band is inspired by the Riot Grrrl movement, which seeks to draw attention to the fact that the punk and grunge scenes were male-dominated and misogynist. Music is a medium in which Nina (at first intuitively and later on actively) searches and finds a reflection of her ideas about gender and her larger worldview, and the music she listens to and she makes both signal and help to constitute a lesbian/queer identity, which are two important properties of music in relation to identity (Roy & Dowd, 2010, p. 189).

Anna: A Non-stereotypical Lesbian

Actress Anna, 27, describes herself as "lesbian a priori", but then goes on to add elaborate modifications:

> I think it was a long path for me, like for anyone, and by now I just know for sure that the thing I want is: Being with a woman, living with a woman, spending my life with a woman. […] Concerning pure sexuality, that is something quite complex for me. Uh, ever since I was young, I've always had this thing, like more a sort of courtly love, towards women, so […] they always were a bit "holy". And thus untouchable with regard to sexuality: It didn't even cross my mind, because it almost seemed like blasphemy to me. […] I think that it is by now better regulated with growing older, in the sense that I am able to see my partners as sexual as well […]. Uh, concerning men it's kind of the other way round, I have always felt that I could not be with them, I don't want any intimacy and daily life and affection with them, I have little complicity with them […] but I have… I could always, and actually still can, get aroused by simply the male sex.

For Anna, there is a clear difference between her attractions to women and men. While she may be attracted to male bodies as sexual objects, Anna can only make emotional connections with women. Like Anna, many women experience different degrees of emotional and physical attraction to people of different genders, which confirms that sexualities are multi-layered and often difficult to speak about as we lack appropriate terms and taboos are connected to certain behaviours (Better, 2014, p. 29).

Although Anna looks very feminine and has learnt from an early age onwards to make use of that femininity, she feels strong feminine as well as masculine energies inside of her:

> In my body, the masculine feeling is like… is faster [snaps her fingers], is straightforward […] I feel more grounded and less emotional, less nebulous, less uh, receptive and

sensitive and transparent in the world; then I am more active in the world. I am more sun then and less moon, *voilà*.

Anna tries to find a balance between both energies as much as possible. The (translated and digitalized) interview notes showcase the complexity of her gender and sexual orientation.
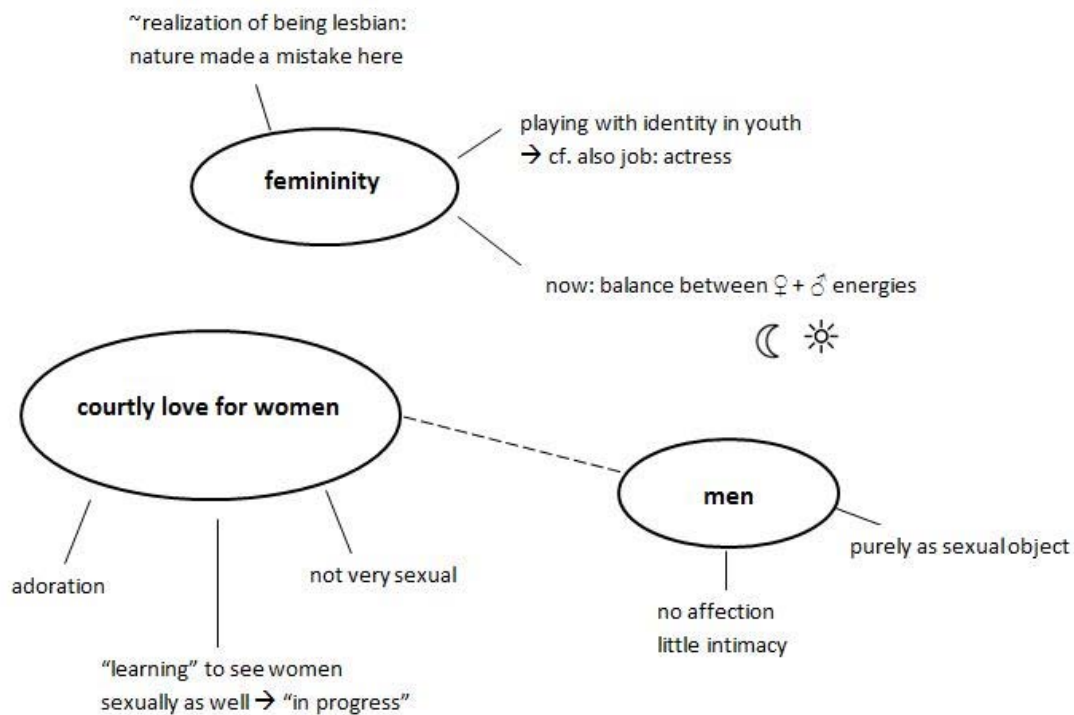
Figure 11: A sketch accompanying Anna's narrative

For Anna music has been an essential companion ever since her adolescence. Unlike most of her peers, she did not listen to popular but to classical music, French chansons, and feminist and political music of the Weimar Republic. Anna went through a phase of great loneliness and isolation, as "any adolescent [does], you think… that nobody in the world is as sad as you are. And that you are completely alone". The biggest factor colouring Anna's loneliness was her realisation that she was attracted to girls and not boys. She started to find comfort in music and other arts, and recalls thinking "thank you that there will always be music, that I will always have that. Luckily, because otherwise I probably might not want to live any more". Renowned soprano Maria Callas became an important figure in her life: Anna fell for her beauty and recognised herself in the drama of Callas' love life[51].

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[51] Anna's relationship with Maria Callas will be discussed in chapter 6 on fandom.

In a similar manner, actress and performer Greta Garbo played an important role in Anna's identification as a lesbian. Not only did Anna hardly know any lesbians at that time, but

> The ones I knew, they didn't look anything like me. […] I looked in the mirror and really felt: […] 'Nature made a mistake here or so', because either I had to get *this* package and just be straight or I had to be lesbian but just look differently. And I really thought that I was the only lesbian […] who looks feminine, like me, and feeling super feminine too […] until I discovered Greta Garbo. […] I found her so transcendentally beautiful, and so attractive and magnetic and… and absolutely unbelievably fascinating. When I discovered that Greta Garbo most probably was a lesbian… that was huge, huge, HUGE! […] I thought 'aaah, I'm not alone! [We laugh].

Because there were no real-life examples available to Anna, the comfort of knowing that she was not alone in being a very feminine lesbian came from music and popular culture. Anna's sexual identification is connected to gender in various ways; she experienced the pressure of gendered expectations and learnt to navigate those as a non-stereotypical lesbian.

Nikki's Musical Fluidity

23-year-old student Nikki's narrative shows an ambiguous approach towards her lesbian identity. Although she notes that 'I've always been that way', at the same time she describes that it was a long and hard struggle to come to terms with being different and attracted to the same sex. This ambiguous feeling is paralleled by the mixed reactions she received from her parents to her coming out as a teenager. Her father fully embraced the diversity Nikki brought to the family, whereas her mother was concerned about questions of normality, "decency" and "what will other people think?"

> Looking back, I think I've always been this way. Because, for example, when I was three years old, apparently, I went to the circus with my parents, and there was a female acrobat who I apparently found very fascinating, and on our way home, I said that I would marry her later. And of course, my parents laughed that off, like "haha, that's cute", but yes, years later, when my mother got to know, she said: "I should have known from the start!" But when I first realized: First or second year of secondary education, something like that? — [she suddenly thinks of another incident] oh yes, well yes, yes! I was super in love with my Dutch teacher, but really: a bit obsessive, a bit pathetic. And at some point one of my [female] friends said: "Oh, you're so in love with her" and I was like "Huh? No, that's not true" and then… Then I

started to ask myself some questions concerning those things, and then it became clear pretty quickly.

Nikki uses the first short story to convey her conviction that she has always been a lesbian. She, as well as her mother, interpret incidents like this one at a very early age as attractions to women. She then shifts to a later point in time when she consciously realized she might fall for women. Her friend's remark made her question her sexuality around the start of puberty. The second part of this story comes from her own memory, not from her parents' story about the past.

As an adolescent, Nikki tried to date boys, in part because her mother encouraged her to try it with a guy, because "you can't know [that you're a lesbian], until you have tried it with a guy". She proceeded to try being with some guys, and told me about her first sexual experience, which was with a guy.

> Well, the first boy… I thought, I don't want any relationship stuff with a guy anyway. I just have to—and maybe that was really nasty, really plastic—but I just have to have sex with boys, that's it. […] So I tried [dating him] for a few weeks, but ooh I found that really…. I don't know, even just cuddling or so: I'm not good at that. […] I don't consider myself a difficult person, but if something doesn't feel right, I just can't do it, I need to respect myself.

Nikki listens to a great diversity of music genres and artists, most of whom are female. In her life story a parallel between liking women and female musicians shows up. When I asked her to describe the difference between liking guys and girls, she answers that she does not find men attractive at all; to her mind,

> First of all, I don't find men attractive at all, I mean, I sometimes see a guy and think "wow, he's a really handsome guy", but… maybe it's just the simple things like sending a text message like "I want to see you", or "I miss you", or "I wish I could hold you now": I can't even imagine ever sending something like that to a man. […] Girls are much more beautiful, and… I can really feel attracted to them, while a bloke, that's like—OK. […] I enjoy being intrigued by things. If I'm fascinated by something, I can find it the most amazing thing on earth. And a woman or a girl can fascinate me, intrigue me, but a man, seriously, no.

She refers back to this description when we look through a pile of CDs, discussing the music she used to listen and still listens to, remarking that she prefers women's voices and has only recently started to listen to male singers voluntarily. She also tells me that her mother remarked that she

"only ever listens to women". When I ask her whether she connects this to her sexuality, she answers:

> Ha, now it seems as if I hate men—that's not the case at all, but… well, as I already said: I can be interested in something only if I am intrigued by it. And yes, with a guy, it's gonna cost a lot of effort until I'm interested, and with women… well.

When we look at Nikki's music tastes, the prevailing stereotypes on lesbian music preferences are confirmed (Sarah Bettens, Tegan and Sara, P!nk, Melissa Etheridge, Tracy Chapman are all mentioned) but they are also diversified. Nikki remarks that she does not think of music in terms of good and bad, and neither does she like to put people into boxes:

> I try to be a little different in my own way, and my music: I don't know. On the one hand, I think things touch you unconsciously, and on the other hand, well, the way you want to identify. And how you identify is also strongly connected to your environment […] but I think I'm quite fluid with those kind of things, compared to other people who are like 'I listen to this and it's the best music'. I'm totally not like that, no. It probably says something about me… but I'm not sure what?

Her question suggests that she sees a connection between her identity and the music she listens to; only, it is not easy to make sense of these connections and put them into words. Nikki is very open and fluid, as she puts it, in her music taste, and does not like to think in boxes and stereotypes about her music. At the moment, her sexual identity is less fluid: She tried to be with boys in the past because she wanted to experience what it feels like—or was convinced by others that she should give it a try. Nikki's fluidity in music bespeaks her general open and unprejudiced attitude, but does not show any clear parallels to her sexual identity.

Roxy's Path Off the Beaten Track[52]

A common theme among the various stories is that the women-narrators prefer female singers. This is confirmed again by Roxy, who notes that she has never been a fan of a male musician or a boy band. Roxy is 25 and identifies as queer/lesbian: Both being lesbian (romantically and sexually attracted to women) and being queer (in the sense of critically questioning the heteronormative and binary ways Western society conceives of gender and sexuality) are part

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[52] Parts of this section are published in: Wasserbauer, M. (2018).

of her identity. Roxy used musical memorabilia including CDs, DVDs, booklets, and music scores to structure her story and subdivided her memorabilia into a pile concerning pop music, and another pile of classical music. Within these, she made further distinctions connected to her sexual identity: Pre-coming out, the coming out phase, and post-coming out. These are categories she chose and named herself, which provides insight into how she thinks about her own identity. As Roxy remarks and as her material demonstrates, it is striking that most of the pop artists she likes are female and present themselves in very strong and confident, sometimes androgynous ways.

She emphasises that at the time of the conversation her queer identity is very important to her. This was different in the past, though: After first realising she likes women, Roxy was convinced that everything would be very difficult for her because of being a lesbian, yet she calls this

> An idea I don't agree with anymore. But just, the first years after my coming out I was like… yes, I'm into women and I am lesbian, but that does not necessarily have to be such a big deal […] I was very much against these movements and parties in which LGBTQs separated themselves from others. I don't agree with that stance anymore at all, because now I see where that comes from and that it really is necessary and that you need this sort of collectivity and space […] There were some years when I was not activist and just was myself who also liked women, whereas now I am Roxy, and lesbian, and very openly feminist and yes, well, that's a transformation which also found expression in my music taste.

The change in Roxy's identity is paralleled by a similar change in her appreciation of lesbian music. Browsing CDs in a media store, Roxy discovered a CD by Lesbians on Ecstasy, which Roxy describes as "extreme lesbo-music", a genre and attitude she came to embrace.

> It was a hot pink case with triangles and weird lesbians, gays, poodles […] Then I opened it, and it said BUTCH LESBO in the middle; that was also very intriguing. [...] I was a little scared of it. […] You know, I just wasn't ready for it. Now I find it awesome!

Roxy's friends have come to project her outspoken queer/lesbian identity onto her music and associate her taste in women with her taste in music. For example, they expect that one of her favourite musicians, St. Vincent's lead singer and guitarist Annie Clark, is lesbian, too: "It's funny,[…] people think that if I like her music so much there must be something gay to it".[53]

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[53] At the time of the interview, Clark was assumed to be straight, but, as mentioned in the introduction, Clark publicly spoke out about her sexual fluidity just weeks after my conversation with Roxy.

Roxy's story shows that music does not only serve to find self-affirmation (DeNora, 2000); it can also become a social property with which others identify a listener. She says she has something like a "queer taste", or a taste for everything queer:

> I always look for queer aspects in books; it's just to identify with it, because that's what art is, and what literature is and what music is: You listen to it and it strikes a chord. And strictly straight things don't do the trick for me, especially not in music.

Accordingly, Roxy likes to discover music off the beaten track. Talking about her taste in music stimulates her to reflect on her personality and sexual orientation as well:

> Maybe I'm trying to be different in that… although I don't have to try to be different, as I am already different through my orientation… but I've always searched more in the periphery, and that's what appeals to me. Like pure mainstream is something I can enjoy, for example something like Lady Gaga or so […], but that is never anything that captures my interest completely—except for Madonna!

A fascination with strong and androgynous women has always been part of Roxy's musical appreciation. Madonna is one of these women, and from a young age onwards, Roxy preferred her to other music her peers listened to. As a girl she was also fascinated by Annie Lennox' androgynous appearance and she now describes Lennox' music as feminist and strong.

Roxy remembers having a discussion about her preference for female artists with her father, long before she was actively aware of her sexual preference for women. Jo Lemaire is a Belgian singer, who intrigued her from her early childhood, she tells while skimming through the CD booklet:

> Roxy: So, I was really intrigued by that picture in this booklet, despite her being a straight woman. Although the terms 'straight' and 'LGBTQ' had no meaning to me yet, back then. But that woman has short hair—it is a pretty powerful image of a woman—and she wears a suit by Ann Demeulemeester, and quite simply: That was super intriguing. Back then I did not yet know the reason why, but I knew that I was really intrigued by that picture.
>
> Marion: And what is your interpretation of that picture now?

Roxy: Well, it's really a butch image. Or wait, it's not a butch woman, I meant more like: a woman in a suit, who is in a duel against herself… there are two pictures of her on the front page; it's like also an inter-feminine relationship. So, I really get it now why I felt like that back then, and she also has quite a low voice, and it is quite powerful music. I always preferred the strong, powerful songs; to put it that way.

Figure 12: Our interview setting

Figure 13: Roxy's copy of Jo Lemaire's album

Without even listening to the actual music, the picture of Jo Lemaire alone reminds Roxy of how she felt about the singer then, and it also provides an opening for interpreting her feelings in the past. Roxy even discovered a pattern in the music and singers she liked when she was a child: She talks about similar feelings of intrigue and attraction to Annie Lennox, the androgynous lead singer of Eurythmics.

Figure 14: The CD booklet of Eurythmics' Greatest Hits

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She points out that the booklet of the "Greatest Hits" compilation of Eurythmics she took from her mother shows quite some wear and tear. She now reflects about some pieces of music and artists that "you're intrigued by them, and they invoke some sort of sentiment in you, like Eurythmics, for example, when I just felt: There is something queer about that, and that's why I like it."

It is interesting to notice the importance of the images discussed here: These are photographs of Roxy's own materials, which were at that time the only images available. The internet was not yet as freely available as it is now, and CD covers and posters were therefore treasured items to swoon over. Without being aware of it when she was younger, Roxy was intuitively attracted to the music of androgynous and very strong women. She now, at the time of recounting her life story, interprets this fact in the light of her queer/lesbian identity.

Her taste for music from off-the-beaten-track, which allows Roxy to express herself, also extends to the sphere of classical music. Roxy was surrounded by classical music from an early age onwards: She grew up with her parents listening to classical music and her aunt reading Mozart's *Zauberflöte* as a bedtime story. Throughout her youth, Roxy sang in various choirs and took singing lessons, and she studied classical singing. Roxy is still fond of Mozart, not only because of her childhood memories, but also because of the queer dimensions of Mozart's work. *Le Nozze di Figaro*, for example, features a famous *Hosenrolle*: A female singer acting a male role, as a high tessitura is required to sing these parts. Cherubino, a female in a male character, admires another female character, making for a traditional love story gone queer. Figures like Cherubino appeal to Roxy, both musically and in terms of plot.

As Roxy's story shows, music does not only reflect its listeners; it also produces them through the creation and construction of the self (Frith, 1996). Personal identity and music are in dialogue with each other, and Roxy's conscious choices in the music she listens to and the music she performs reflect this interplay.

Shary on Understanding Gender as a Spectrum

Shary (23) states that for her, being a lesbian does not influence what she does and how she thinks; being lesbian is not her main identity feature. This is also reflected in the music she talks about: There is only one musician she explicitly connects to being lesbian, which I will return to shortly. When Shary first talks about her sexuality, she explains that she is simply into women:

So I'm actually a lesbian. [...] Concerning sex [referring to her physical body], I am a woman [laughs], but how I identify gender-wise is... not so straightforward, because a lot of people just separate gender into two boxes, and I don't see it that way. For me, gender is a spectrum, so yeah: You choose where you want to position yourself, concerning gender. On some days I might be more male, on others I might be more female.

Shary embraces the complexity of her own gender and stresses that gender is not a natural given, but that we have agency to gender self-determination. Her personal way to express her own genderfluidity is through her clothing: "It's mainly through my clothes. So [laughs] there are some days when I get up and think "yes, today I am *really* feminine, I'm a real diva", and on other days, yes, I just feel much better hiding a little in men's clothes, I think". Also on a larger scale, awareness about gender fluidity is very important to Shary:

Being really a hundred per cent fixed, are you a man or a woman: It doesn't work like that. And it certainly doesn't work anymore now, in this society. I mean, it's really... it's just like in politics, right: "You are left-wing or right-wing"—no, it doesn't work like that anymore! There is a really large spectrum, and in some moments, you maybe tend more towards the left, and in others more towards the right. I find it important that people realize that.

In a similar way, Shary returns to the topic of sexual orientation, and nuances that she also does not believe in fixed sexual orientations:

So I may be a lesbian, but that doesn't mean that I can't find men attractive, you know. Sometimes I also think like "hey, boy, come on home with me", so to speak [we laugh]. [...] With a guy, it's rather going to be something emotional. You know, I'm not into me... purely physically, it doesn't work like that with me. Yes, if I fell in love with a man, it would be purely emotional. Although I could do it, you know! If I... if I open myself up to it, it would be possible but... you know, it's just not my preference! [Laughs].

What we see here almost feels like an inner monologue: We see that Shary is not entirely sure whether she could or could not have a physical relationship with a man. Although the first sexual identity label she identifies herself with is "lesbian", she does not discard the idea of being with a man altogether. Her thought process shows that she really believes in the fluidity of sexuality. Shary stresses that we should be honest with ourselves and admit our attractions to people of all kinds of genders, even if this means transcending borders and definitions of sexual identities.

In the same way, she emphasises that we need to stop stigmatizing bisexuals as "not being able to choose".

As these passages show, Shary is a very reflexive person. A recurring topic in our conversation is that culturally, she feels attracted by anything which helps her understand herself better:

> Lots of people… don't do that, well, they don't try to better understand themselves, even though that is really crucial. Not just for yourself, but also for the way you encounter others and you are able to get along with them, yes: I am really in a constant process of trying to understand new things about myself, or smoothing out rough edges. […] I really want to be somebody who understands people and does not prejudice others, like I have experienced. […] I think respect is tremendously important. And you can really develop that by searching for yourself, and that happens through music, sports, museums, well: Whatever floats your boat.

Shary is convinced that music and other cultural products help us to become reflexive, respectful and open-minded persons. Moreover, she expresses strong feminist views throughout the interview, although she prefers not to call herself a feminist as there are too many negative connotations connected to the label "feminist". She states that "to me, everybody is equal", and emphasises that she is not a "man hater" kind of feminist.

For Shary, music is an important way to express herself: Next to playing the piano, the guitar and experimenting with electronic music, she writes poetry which she describes as performance poetry: "It's mostly about my feelings. You know, they say that… a poet writes when he is either very unhappy or very happy. Those are indeed the moments when I write." In the music she plays and makes, Shary's contemplative and melancholic nature is reflected. She says that she enjoys all kinds of music, instrumental as well as with lyrics, but music with lyrics

> Is very important for me because I find that you can better express your words with music. Because, yes, with music you can convey a certain feeling, and that's very important. You can't do that with words only—or at least not always.

Music does not only express her feelings and helps her to learn more about herself, but also has a protective function: In times of anxiety and depression, music helps her to calm down. Music also helps her to "keep the world" out, and protects her from unwanted impulses as well as from overwhelming silences. Whenever she leaves the house, she listens to music on her MP3 player. These functions of music are also observed by Kibby (2009, p. 438), who finds that music helps to contribute towards an alternative space for oneself. Like with gender and sexuality, Shary does

not think of music in boxes: Her musical taste is very broad and changeable. As her playlist shows, there are only few genres she does not like to listen to, but overall there is a clear focus on melancholic music. This fits with Shary's observation that music has got a cathartic effect on her, rather than making her explicitly feel happy. Shary sums up that "music is always there for me".

Only one artist we talk about is explicitly connected to being lesbian: When we scrolled through Shary's Spotify account, I noticed that Ani DiFranco was featured as a musician she frequently listens to. Shary says that DiFranco is "the only real LGBTQ idol I listen to" and that she does not especially look for music made for LGBTQs as "it does not have an added value for me". Yet, we had a conversation about the importance of DiFranco for Shary, as well as for the larger community:

> Marion: Does she have a special meaning for you?
>
> Shary: Ah, [laughs] actually, yes, she fights for… she sings for LGBTQs of course, you know. And yes, she is also just really good, you know. Her lyrics say a lot, her music is technically almost impeccable so yes: she actually means a lot to me. I like almost all of her songs, I have all her albums…
>
> Marion: Yes, and can you still remember how you came across her music?
>
> Shary: Uhm, I think that I got to know Ani DiFranco through my housemate, and she is lesbian as well. So then the…
>
> Marion: You nod very knowingly [laughs].
>
> Shary: Well yes, then the connections is quickly made, then it's a deal. So it's through her.
>
> Marion: I asked you about her because you are not the first one to mention Ani DiFranco…
>
> Shary: Yes, I can imagine! Although there are not so many people who know Ani DiFranco [laughs]—among straight people, I mean. If you talk to LGBTQs, you will encounter her more often.
>
> Marion: And you say that she means a lot for LGBTQs, is that something you… how does it happen, do you have any explanation for it? I'm really curious to know why people like Ani DiFranco are so interesting for lesbian women.

Shary: Because… well, because they actually sing about what we feel, or rather… rather about what we do or don't experience, if you just listen to a group for straights, well, you will feel less addressed by that, because they don't know what it [being LGBTQ] means. That is quite important, she can… yes, what she says is in line us, because she *knows* what it means.

The combination of the recommendation from a lesbian friend and DiFranco's musical abilities make her one of Shary's idols. As Shary states, it is important for LGBTQ persons to find content and stars they are able to relate to and recognise themselves in. Like Nina, Shary finds such an idol in Ani DiFranco. In her work on queer girls, Driver also observes that Ani DiFranco successfully expresses emotions experienced by many queer girls (2007, p. 203).

Laura on Sexual Fluidity

Laura, 24, describes her sexuality as fluid:

I feel female… and my sexual orientation: I find that more difficult. They call that […] sexual fluidity? A little bit, well, I'm not a hundred per cent sure… well, actually I think I am, but because at the moment I don't have a girlfriend… I don't think men are repulsive either. […] I didn't fall in love with any, but I can find men interesting. Yes, I find it a bit difficult to say: "I am a hundred per cent lesbian ". I never say that to others either because then you're pushed into a box… I don't know, that's a bit of a cliché answer, but yes…

Revealing her sexual orientation as lesbian is an ambiguous task for Laura. Although she generally prefers women, she could also imagine being with a man, and does not want to limit herself to the narrowness of the category. Her comment "that's a bit of a cliché answer" conveys that from her point of view, many queer women share this experience of not fully or not exclusively identifying as lesbian. Laura also wants to avoid the label "uninteresting except for threesomes", which men in her experience adhere to lesbians:

I find it very difficult to—when you're single, to say to friends and new people you meet "I like women" because you… well, I don't know that a hundred per cent for sure. Well yes, in the past 20 years I've only been… no, that's not true: Uhm concerning love it was mostly women, only women. But I feel that, pffff, I want to, if you say to guys "I am a lesbian", then you get this kind of label: "Not interesting any more"… not interesting to go any further with that, and only interesting for maybe a threesome. Something like

that, you know. While if I say it when I have a girlfriend, I don't mind saying it at all: "I have a girlfriend". I have more courage to say it then, actually.

From Laura's story, we see that the way in which she speaks about her sexuality depends on the context as well as her relationship status. Her family might have influenced her tentative position as well:

> I said sexually fluid or so… because I don't really know for sure. This label thing. By now they seem to understand more that you don't exclusively like women, or exclusively men, but still. But that is also something that they [referring to her parents] instilled in us at home, like, "wait with telling everybody", because I think they secretly hoped that I would still fall for a guy, and telling everybody I prefer women would have disturbed that process.

Clearly, the stereotyped thinking and the presumed rigidity of sexuality which is attached to the label "lesbian" troubles Laura. "Lesbian" does not cover her sexual orientation in the sense defined above. The notion of non-exclusivity Laura introduces is a central point to Diamond's conception of sexual fluidity. Diamond makes a distinction between 'lesbians who had been exclusively attracted to and involved with women throughout the study and who are least likely to change their identities' and 'everyone else' (2008, p. 68). Strikingly, non-exclusivity in attraction is the norm rather than the exception in women (Diamond, 2008, p. 83). As Laura's story shows, non-exclusivity involves a constant gauging of her own feelings and her environment. Having a girlfriend makes her sexuality more clear for herself and for her environment, while being single makes her more aware of other options and of what people may associate with the label "lesbian".

The list of songs Laura prepared for our interview clearly connects music to experiences, feelings and persons. Although music is not essential in Laura's identity, she connects certain musical choices to being a fluid lesbian. Thus, P!nk was very important at a certain stage of her life, because her lyrics were very recognisable and her tough attitude attracted Laura. Likewise, the voice of Tracy Chapman intrigued Laura at one point; an artist she spontaneously connects with lesbians: "[Laughs] a lot of other lesbians are also going to mention her". Indeed, Tracy Chapman was mentioned by several other narrators as well, all of which agree that Chapman is an important LGBTQ idol. Most importantly however, she strongly identifies with lesbian or queer Flemish or Dutch singers, as elaborated below.

Sarah: Musical and Gendered Differences

Rather early in her life, Sarah (32) realized that she was somehow different from her peers. Two characteristics distinguished her in particular: her gender expression and the music she listened to. Sarah describes that she was rather tomboyish, preferred to play with boys and to do tough "boys' things". From a young age, she listened to her parents' music instead of music made especially for children, like Kinderen voor Kinderen or Samson en Gert[54]:

> I felt very awkward about it, because I realized that in my class, everyone [big sigh] was watching Samson and Kinderen voor Kinderen [we laugh], I just didn't get it… I mean, I was still kind of into Samson. But it just wasn't enough for me, it did not quench my thirst for music, so I really went on a quest. Well, I still remember that I was eight and our mother asked me: "What do you want for Christmas?" and I wrote a note and mum read it and looked at me like: "Really, a CD by ABBA? Seriously? Are you sure?" [we laugh] and eventually I got it. So it was those kind of things I was occupied with.

Her taste for music evolved, but she always felt more attracted to alternative music and Oldies rather than mainstream pop or the boy-bands her peers were crazy about.

When Sarah was about 13 or 14, she discovered the term "lesbian" and somehow made a link to her own feelings. Yet, it took several years for her to get used to the thought and accept it for herself, and then some more years until she came out. Sarah explains that she did not want to be "different": She was very worried about what other people would think of her, and that they would even drop her altogether.

In her teenage years she also experienced being attracted by all things lesbian:

> Well, it was like… it just attracted me, anything about the topic I came across… I wasn't able to or I didn't dare to come out about it, but anything I read about it, or when there was a film on the TV that touched the topic: Yes, it fascinated me enormously. It's the only kind of recognition you have at that moment. Actually, I was searching for it—I mean, we're supposed to talk about music, but I was more looking for it on the TV or in magazine articles, rather than looking for it in music. Uhm, how come? Probably because I already… well, music: I was weaned on it[55] and I don't really associate it with me being lesbian.

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[54] Two popular music television shows for children. Kinderen voor Kinderen is among the first musical memories of many narrators.
[55] Dutch: "Dat is mij met de paplepel ingegeven"

Like many LGBTQ teenagers, Sarah was looking for persons to identify with. However, as discussed below, TV personalities were more important sources of identification for Sarah than music. Music has always already had a great importance in her life, and she explains that therefore there she sees no specifically strong connections between music and her sexuality. Both of Sarah's parents played music instruments, and from an early age, Sarah joined them going to marching band practices and concerts: "I've never known it any other way [...] I found it awesome". She jokingly says that she was predestined to go to music school—which she did, and started studying percussion. Asking her about her choice of instrument, she says:

> Maybe it's also the boyish thing in me? As I said: I didn't want to be a boy, but was interested in anything boyish. Most girls started playing the Western concert flute[56], but: no way, I was way too tough for that! [...] And it seemed like fun, sitting at a drum kit: I find that very tough, yes.

For Sarah, the choice of musical instrument distinguishes her from other girls; she experienced these two instruments as stereotypically gendered, and, as usual, the girls' thing did not interest her. Sarah's perception confirms that the gender stereotyping of musical instruments reflects how powerfully gender beliefs operate in the domain of music (Dibben, 2002, p. 122).

Making music is Sarah's biggest hobby: She plays in a marching band and several other bands, with a wide range of genres like psychedelic folk, Latin jazz and Rockabilly. Music is "an outlet, right: It's my recreation. And it's also my social life, totally. It's not purely about making music, it's also about all the surrounding things. Like having a drink afterwards, yes". The way Sarah talks about music really conveys her passion. Making and listening to music is strongly connected to social aspects: her family, as well as her fellow musicians. In Small's terms, musicking (1999) is an important part of Sarah's self-identity as well as social identity.

Contrary to her fears, Sarah received mostly positive reactions when she came out of the closet at around age 20. Sarah partly connects these reactions to the fact that she is very "chilled" about being a lesbian nowadays: She does not make a big deal out of it, and by handling it as a very normal thing, others pick up on that vibe. However, upon coming out she did receive some questions about her gender identity, and whether she feels that she is a boy. Sarah tells that she reflected about the topic, but the answer is no. She just is rather tomboyish, and has always been.

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[56] A common kind of transverse flute

In fact, her coming out was triggered by a relationship with a boy: "Well, this boy was in love with me and it was very convenient for me, because I really didn't want to come out of the closet". The relationship made her realize that this really did not work for her; it was impossible for her to have an emotional connection with the guy. Sarah says that she "wasn't able to fake it any longer". She fully acknowledged that she is a lesbian and says that in fact, "it was never blurry/unclear[57] with me": She is a lesbian. When I asked her whether she minds explaining a little more about her feelings, an interesting friction arises:

> Marion: And is it like—and please, tell me if this is too private to ask—but is it rather the physical part, or the emotional connection which would not work out with a boy? Or is it just all of it, like…

> Sarah: Uhm, well, both, I think. Uhm… [Thinks about it] Physically, it could work out for me, and in that sense I have tried some things [laughs] But yes, that's certainly different, I mean… With a woman, there's also an emotional connection, and with a man: Well, it just doesn't work. I don't find that with a man.

This excerpt shows that for Sarah, physical or sexual attraction does not equal or is not directly linked to her sexual identification: She clearly identifies as lesbian, yet she can imagine having sexual contact with men. Indeed, as Albury (2015) asserts, sexual identity labels often do not really tell anything about the actual desires and behaviours; and sexual identity is much more complex and fluid than can be expressed by a single label. Sarah's story confirms Diamond's findings: "Fluidity implies not that women's desires are endlessly variable, but that some women are capable of a wider variety of erotic feelings and experiences than would be predicted on the basis of their self-described sexual orientation alone" (2008, p. 10).

Despite the fact that there are no direct musical connections between music and her sexuality for Sarah, certain themes are remarkable: Like in her music preferences, Sarah noticed that she was "different" from her peers concerning her tomboyishness and interest in all things tough and traditionally viewed as boyish. She confirms these tendencies when telling about the choice of her music instrument. Implicitly, Sarah links her tomboyishness to being lesbian throughout her life story; and so did some of her friends when she came out.

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[57] Dutch: "Flou"

Local Heroines

A topic specific to the Flemish context deserves special attention on this occasion: Throughout the interviews the discussion of local lesbian heroines stands out. Most musicians discussed by the narrators are international stars singing in English; after all, the general knowledge of English is relatively high in Flanders, and according to the "European Survey on Language Competences" the English knowledge of Flemish youth is one of the best in Europe (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs & Vorming, 2012, p. 34ff). However, a special bond with Flemish (lesbian) musicians and role models emerges from various stories, and it appears to be stronger than with international stars. Accessibility of the singers, the language advantage and recognisability are three important characteristics of these local heroines.

Roxy brought a CD of the Flemish rock band K's Choice to our interview—"obviously", she added. She characterises its lesbian frontwoman, Sarah Bettens, along with Flemish singer Yasmine, as the "archetypical Flemish things of lesbo-music", with Bettens being the first person to come up in many people's minds when thinking "gay and Flemish". Despite the fact that her lyrics are in English, Sarah Bettens is a very relatable and proximate idol as she grew up in Flanders. In Roxy's opinion, her band offers "explicitly lesbian music" with a lesbian story behind it, namely "that the singer first tried very hard to hide [her homosexuality] from herself and that she actually knew for a long time that she fancied women and everyone else knew for a long time" before she came out. Roxy further acknowledges that she is not a diehard fan of the music itself, which she describes as "all very similar […] very calm in the beginning with then a sudden rock-ish outburst". Nevertheless, she and her lesbian best friend had a strong bond with it.

Roxy's contemporary Laura uses exactly the same words when she talks about her CD of K's Choice: "Yes of course, obviously, K's Choice". Laura met Sarah Bettens backstage after a concert and took a photograph with her: "That was cool. Especially back then, I was crazy about it because it's the same thing as with Yasmine: The lyrics were super recognisable, and I almost felt that I knew her in person [laughs]." Bettens was clearly an important person she identified with as a young lesbian. Laura explains that when she came out in 2003, not a lot of role models were around and visibility of the LGBTQ community was low. Laura sums up by saying that listening to K's Choice is mostly linked to the lesbian characteristics of the music:

> Laura: I think you look for that much more. Because, actually, there are other lyrics which are just as recognisable, but that was a nice extra or so, because you know that that person is also writing for a woman […].
>
> Marion: So there's a certain bond or so?

> Laura: Yes, I think so. That's so cheesy, but yes [laughs].

Sarah also mentions Sarah Bettens as a lesbian icon, but declares that the fact that she liked her as a person did not automatically make her enjoy the music:

> She interested me as a person, because I was like "oh, [she's] also a lesbian". So you want to identify with her, uhm, but that does not mean that all of a sudden I like everything of K's Choice just because Sarah Bettens is lesbian. It was more about her as a person, for me. […] The things I really liked: It was always about the music [rather than the artist], but… I never found K's Choice especially good, I was never a super fan, but I tried to follow Sarah Bettens as a person.

This statement connects to Sarah's general experience that music is not immediately linked to her being lesbian, since music has always already played such a big role in her life.

Nikki's story bears many similarities with the other narrators' experiences. At one of the few occasions she went out with an LGBTQ youth organisation, her peers were 'astonished about my "unknowingness of gay people"', and told her to look up Sarah Bettens. Nikki did this and I asked her, whether she liked her mainly because she is lesbian: "Originally yes, I think so, but actually, I really found it a good CD". She also met K's Choice for an interview as an adolescent. Shary is also aware of Bettens being an LGBTQ idol, but is wary about linking her own listening to K's Choice to her sexual orientation:

> Well, I like to listen to her but just because so many LGBTQs are like "oooh Sarah Bettens" [imitates enthusiastic voice], well, I must say: For me it [being lesbian] is not my foremost identity characteristic, so with me it's also not like "ah she is LGBTQ, so now I like it".

From Shary's comment, we may deduce that she experienced that mostly those persons who either strongly identify as LGBTQ or those who explicitly look for LGBTQ idols to identify with appreciate persons like Sarah Bettens. In contrast to the other narrators, the musical qualities are what make Shary appreciate (some of) K's Choice' work.

Another Flemish lesbian idol is Yasmine, a TV host and singer who died by suicide in 2009. Just like Sarah Bettens, Yasmine is mentioned by narrators throughout all genders and sexualities alike. Yasmine was an out lesbian public figure who also wrote lyrics with lesbian topics. Roxy only briefly mentions her and one specific song, but Laura elaborates on Yasmine's status as a crucial lesbian role model:

I found it great that she was a woman who came out to all of Flanders, as she was a famous person, but that she also was someone who did not fit the clichés or stereotypes. She was not a masculine—well, you didn't have to guess whether she was a man or a women, and she was very witty and funny.

Sarah has very similar feelings about Yasmine and about her ex-partner Marianne Dupon:

Sarah: She was such a beautiful woman, really a feminine woman who was on TV and, well, you do want to identify with her. She was just open about it, and I found that very impressive, and then you hope that you'll also be able to do that one day, like that.

Marion: Yes, so she is a bit of an idol, or do I put it too strongly?

Sarah: Maybe she is a bit of a role model, indeed! I can definitely say so. And well: The same holds true for Yasmine. She was a role model for many women, and she actually was one for me.

In both of their accounts, the need for a feminine, non-stereotypical and widely visible lesbian role model becomes clear. Both focus on Yasmine's appearance and charisma, rather than on her music. However, Laura adds that she also listened to Yasmine as a teenager and describes that "her lyrics fit with what happened at that moment […] I was able to identify with it a lot because it was just so recognisable. […] She was a bit of a role model, yes."

Finally, two narrators talked about their admiration for *kleinkunst*, a form of cabaret or floor show popular in Flanders. For both Laura and Nikki the choice of (Flemish) Dutch as a language is an important feature because they find lyrics very important. Laura explains that Flemish singer Mira sings about everyday life, but "often with an ironic touch to it". She likes the recognisability of the songs, and admires that Mira sings in Dutch: "It's great when you're able to do that in your mother tongue. English is always easier; well, it's not easier, but you often hear that people prefer singing in English rather than in Dutch, because it sounds so weird". Nikki expresses similar feelings about Mira: "I find it beautiful how people are able to express their emotions well in words and such—most people suck at that". Mira's strong and explicitly Flemish accent in her songs is possibly one of the reasons why she and her music prove to be especially relatable.

Conclusion

> I am a bit of a strange gay, […] I am maybe not totally representative [laughs] and […] my musical tastes are just a little bit different, too… I'm just a bit of a weirdo. (Anna)

With this statement Anna is actually very representative: In the life stories discussed in this chapter, *there is no such thing as a "typical lesbian"*. There are many different lesbian, fluid or female same-sex identities. For some women, sexual orientation is a primary feature of their identity which is strongly connected to feminist or queer politics, while for others it is primarily a gut feeling. Thus, not only the kind of identification, but also the strength of identification based on sexual orientation differs among the narrators. Shary and Sarah, for example, emphasise that being a lesbian is not a main identity feature for them. Similarly, Coleman-Fountain finds that many of the LGBTQ youth he interviewed prefer a politics of identity where lesbian, gay or bisexual signifies only sexuality and is not the signifier of the main identity forming characteristic (2014a, p. 814). Youths question the meaning of the labels they use and the tension between these labels and claiming identity as "normal people" (Coleman-Fountain, 2014a, p. 814).

On one hand, Belgium is an ideal playground to explore sexual identity and its fluidity as it is a relatively comfortable and safe place for LGBTQs. On the other hand, there is but *little attention to this diversity in everyday life*, and non-heterosexual and non-exclusive sexualities are often conflated and reduced to fit the stereotypical boxes of lesbian, gay and bisexual. To some, music affords a possibility to discover fluid and non-normative sexualities.

As the interviews show, *identifying and describing sexual orientation is not a straightforward act*. Two women use multiple labels to describe their sexuality, namely "lesbian/queer" or "queer/lesbian". This compound use indicates that the fluidity of sexuality does not fit any rigid sexuality labels, and that they feel connected to both of these identity categories. Both Nina and Roxy highlight that queer implies a more open, broader and political approach of sexuality. Others label their sexuality according to their social or relationship context and thus express their sexual fluidity situationally. A shared quality among the narrators is that they view sexuality as fluid and as a continuum, rather than permanent and exclusive. Although the narrators modify the term or also identify with other terms, "lesbian" remains an identity category all of these women identify with to some extent. When it comes to describing music and musicians related to sexuality, or when talking about the community, however, the narrators use the term "lesbian" rather than any other descriptors. In a way, "lesbian" in these contexts seems to function as an umbrella term or shortcut of its own kind, which implicitly also includes queer, fluid and other

identities related to "lesbian". Overall, the narrators show a great reflexivity about their sexuality and a high awareness of connotations and subtleties of common identity categories. The same holds true for the music and artists they discuss.

Strikingly, Shary is the only woman speaking about bisexuality; and none of the six women explicitly identify as bisexual although they may be into women as well as men. This reflects my narrators in general: None of them identifies as bisexual, and only few discuss bisexuality in their interviews. Statistical research indeed suggests that bisexual desires and sexual activities often do not coincide with a self-identification as bisexual (Buysse et al., 2013).

Overall, a *strong preference for female musicians may be observed*. Although the narratives presented here are very diverse in style and subjects, it is clear that female musicians and their music function as building materials of the women's subjectivity, thereby supporting DeNora's findings (2000). This appreciation of female artists is not necessarily connected to sexual preferences, although in some instances, it explicitly is. Both Nina and Roxy see a clear connection between the music they like, the way they appreciate and read it and their queer/lesbian sexuality. Their queer/feminist activist view of the world clearly extends into their musical preferences and enthusiasms. Queer music and musicians seem to attract them, with a focus on (androgynous) female artists, even if they work in rather different genres. In fact, most of the narrators consider it self-evident to prefer listening to female musicians. They connect this preference to feminist and political attitudes, identification with the music and musician and a stronger general interest in women. It is indeed important to consider the feminist, political and activist dimensions in the music appreciation of these narrators as well, as these are connected to their sexual fluidity. The diversity of motivations behind this commonly observable phenomenon related to lesbian women highlights the multiplicity of lesbian or queer interpretations. Thus, Roxy and Nikki both express how they feel different and know they are different through their sexuality, and at the same time also enjoy and long to be different. Both express this difference in their music styles, wandering off the beaten track and exploring musical margins.

Several narrators c*onnect music to first getting in touch with other LGBTQ persons and exploring their own sexuality*. Finding idols functioning as soulmates (Anna) or through the CDs the lesbian CD-shop assistant sold them (Nina). Despite their more fluid identifications, lesbian musicians function as role models to the extent that their music is very relatable, as the stories of Nikki, Shary and Laura show: Lesbian musicians sing about relatable experiences from an insider perspective. The focus on local lesbian heroines in several interviews points to the fact

that non-heterosexual women need role models who represent them in public, especially in the time of their coming out. In sum, music definitely reflects the women's sexual identification on various levels and for some women contributes to their coming of age.

As the anecdotal style of the interview excerpts conveys, gender identification, sexual orientation and music preferences do not only come from within, but are strongly connected to social environments and social interactions. Music simultaneously serves as expression of identity and affords a connection to the community; as such it is an important medium in LGBTQ lives.

6   Not Only Little Monsters:

Diversity in Music Fandom in LGBTQ Lives[58]

We love this exaltation (woh oh, o-o-oh)
We want the new temptations (woh oh, o-o-o-oh)
It's like a revelation (woh oh, o-o-oh)
We live on fascination.

Alphabeat - Fascination (2007)

Most of us are self-proclaimed fans of one artist or another, but what does this expression actually mean? And what have our sexual and gender identity got to do with it? In this chapter, we approach fandom in LGBTQ individuals, as many narrators spontaneously addressed fandom. Within the narrators' life stories the topic of being a fan arose naturally in a variety of ways. It is not surprising that discussions of fandom and the meanings of being a fan also emerge in music-related research that is not focusing on fandom, as in contemporary society most individuals come across fandom in their daily lives. According to Koss Zwaan, Linda Duits and Stijn Reijnders, "it has become common sense that 'everybody is a fan of something'" (2014, p. 2). Similarly, Cornel Sandvoss states that (under the influence of new media) fandom became an ordinary aspect of life from the early 2000s (2005, p. 3). Even if—or especially because—some of our narrators would not immediately use the term fandom to describe their strong involvement with certain artists and genres, their stories broaden our understanding of fandom and its importance in LGBTQ lives.

The focus on the individual's story allows for a situated interpretation of fandom embedded in each narrator's life, highlighting the diversity within this group and avoiding generalisations as often originate from single-object fandom studies. Hence, this chapter moves beyond the study of single-object fandom and towards a deeper exploration of music in relation to identity formation, two key issues in contemporary music fandom research according to Mark Duffett (2013). We map a continuum of ways in which music (fandom) matters in everyday life, taking a close look at various instances of fandom and discussions of the meaning of "being a fan" within eight narrators' life stories, exploring the different dimensions of fandom for LGBTQ individuals.

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[58] A similar version of this chapter has been co-authored with Alexander Dhoest and has been published as: Wasserbauer, Marion, and Alexander Dhoest. 2016. "Not only little monsters: Diversity in music fandom in LGBTQ lives." *IASPM@Journal* 6 (1).
As the article this chapter is based on was co-authored, it is written in a "we"-form.

While all narrators in this project discussed fandom and fan-related activities to some degree, the two female-identified and six male-identified individuals discussed in this chapter were selected because they talked spontaneously and extensively about the matter of fandom in their lives.

The central questions guiding this analysis are: What fan-like activities and behaviours do these LGBTQs pursue, and what roles do emotions and affect play within their fandom? Do they make connections between their fandom and their sexual and gender identity?

In order to do justice to the various (explicit and implicit) forms of fandom each narrator mentions, as well as their personal contexts, we discuss their stories separately rather than ordering the analysis thematically. Within each life story, we focus on two interrelated aspects of fandom. First, we look at the narrators' investments and involvements in fandom for a range of objects and genres, their reflections providing insights that single-object fandom research is often unable to provide. Second, we investigate the narrators' emotional involvement and their meaning making processes, discussing affective aspects of their fandom as connected to their sexual and gender identity.

Music Fandom and LGBTQs

Most authors describe fandom as a strong affective involvement and emotional investment in particular cultural objects. C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby provide a basic definition of the fan, focusing on the affective involvement of fans in arguing that "fans are different from casual viewers in that they make a significant emotional investment in cultural objects that speaks to central issues of play, creativity, and subjectivity" (2005, p. 483). While their work focuses on television viewers, we argue that the same definition applies to music listeners. In the same vein, Sandvoss defines fandom based on the lowest common denominator as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (2005, p. 8). Again, fandom is viewed as a form of sustained and affective consumption; a description which certainly applies to our narrators' engagement with music. More recently, Duffett stated that although the internet has transformed fandom, some elements remained the same: the fascination with music, various romantic and folk ideologies, the emphasis on a star system, the tendency of fans to form social communities, to pursue shared concerns, and to follow characteristic practices (2014, p. 4). Consequently, he defines contemporary music fandom as "a cultural conviction […] that combines a threshold of affective engagement with, variously or in combination, musical appreciation, music practice, celebrity-following, social networking, dancing, collecting, and self-expression" (2014, p. 7).

As these definitions convey, music fandom is closely linked to notions of the self and expressing one's identity, as is music more generally (Frith, 1996; DeNora, 2000). Involvement with music is also connected to sexual and gender identities, which are indispensable and crucial (if not always the most central) aspects in the lives of LGBTQs.

As Richard Dyer notes, "lesbian and gay male subcultures have been linked, though often only tangentially", but they "are not one" (2004 [1987], p. 138). Gay men are often associated with a camp taste and the worship of extravagant divas. Thus, Brett Farmer notices that "female star adoration or, as it is more commonly known in queer contexts, 'diva worship' has been a vital staple of gay male cultural production, where it has sustained a spectacularly diverse array of insistently queer pleasures" (2005, p. 169). Within the sociology of music and musicology, the connection between non-heterosexuality and music have been researched often with a focus on fans of specific artists, genres or scenes (eg. Taylor, 2012; Leibetseder, 2012), or phenomena like the Eurovision Song Contest (eg. Lemish, 2004; Heller, 2007). In *The Queen's Throat*, Koestenbaum (1994) explores opera diva worship of gay men. Two decades later, based on interviews with gay male Lady Gaga fans, Craig Jennex (2013, p. 343) asserts that the veneration of female icons and cross-gender identification are still relevant within the gay community. Contrary to the gay predilection for camp and divas, queer female music research has often focussed on participation and community rather than pure fandom, researching for example the Riot Grrrl movement (Leonard, 1997; Downes, 2012), "womyn's" music festivals or "celesbians" (Taylor, 2013a).

In this chapter, we build upon this literature by discussing both male and female narrators, but rather than focusing on their strongest objects and practices of fandom, we discuss the full width of each individual's music preferences and listening habits. In this way, our research responds to the recent call to pay attention to everyday practices of media consumption instead of spectacular subcultural styles (Osgerby, 2004, p. 136), and to explore how we can "access and explore fan-related experiences that are less obviously interpreted as fan activity" (Hassan, 2014, p. 58). Along these lines, Nedim Hassan (2014) researches hidden fans and their practices, while Sandvoss and Laura Kearns (2014) stress the importance of everyday, ordinary fandom. The Janissary Collective speaks about "fannish behaviour" (2014, p. 77), highlighting that there is a plurality of fandom, not only the highly visible aspects and practices. To them, "the difference between 'ordinary' audience members and fans is a matter of degree rather than kind. What

media fans do, how they engage with a text, is an expansion and extension of (what we understand to be) typical receptive practices" (2014, p. 78).

These tendencies in fan studies highlight the point Sandvoss (2005, p. 5-6) made on the need to broaden the scope of fan studies:

> It should be noted that what has formed as a field of academic study of 'fandom' does not necessarily include all fans and their activities, but rather focuses on specific social and cultural interactions, institutions and communities that have formed through the close interaction of committed groups of fans in a subcultural context. In a broader understanding of 'fandom', as on a most basic level the state of being a fan, this focus on communities and tightly networked fans fails to conceptualize important aspects of the relationship between the modern self, identity and popular culture.

In a recent book chapter on ordinary fandom, Sandvoss and Kearn yet again stress the importance of "the more extensive exploration of everyday life, ordinary fans" (2014, p. 102.) Given the framework of this paper, being part of a research project on music and LGBTQ identity, we naturally move beyond the study of 'single object' fandom and towards a deeper exploration of music in relation to identity formation, two key issues in contemporary music fandom research (Duffett, 2013). The focus on the individual's story allows for a situated interpretation of fandom embedded in each narrator's life. Even if—or especially because—they would not immediately describe their involvement with certain artists and genres as fandom as such, their stories broaden our understanding of fandom and its importance in LGBTQ lives. LGBTQ is an umbrella term for an extremely diverse group of individuals who identify their sexuality as non-heterosexual and/or their gender as non-normative. By focusing on individual narratives, the diversity within this group is highlighted and generalizations as often originate from single-object fandom studies, are irrelevant.

Dario: A Little Monster's Story

Dario is 18, identifies as male and gay, and lives with his mother in a medium-sized Flemish city. He trains as a hairdresser and dreams of moving to Antwerp, the biggest Flemish city. The genres he listens to are pop, hip hop and rap, and the artists he likes are almost exclusively female. His iPhone is an important tool for his fandom, as it contains all his music and photos of him and his idols, which are key achievements in his fandom. His interview had a clear focus on being a fan of Lady Gaga, and, to a lesser extent, of Nicki Minaj and Kesha.

Dario calls Lady Gaga his biggest idol, explaining that for him there is a difference between just liking the music of an artist and the artist actually being an idol. His fandom means a lot to him and he expresses a "YOLO-you only live once" attitude, travelling and spending a lot of money on his divas. He does not mind skipping school to visit Gaga concerts abroad or working in order to pay for meet and greets. Spontaneity is a key characteristic in his fandom in order for the stars to always come in first place: "well, now that I have put some money aside from working vacation jobs: let's say that I see a tweet like "Lady Gaga spotted in Amsterdam": if there is a train to go there within the next hour: I'll be on it!"

Dario also collects objects related to his idols, in particular perfumes by Nicki Minaj and Lady Gaga, some of which he even orders from abroad. In the future, he plans to have them as a central piece of decoration in his home.
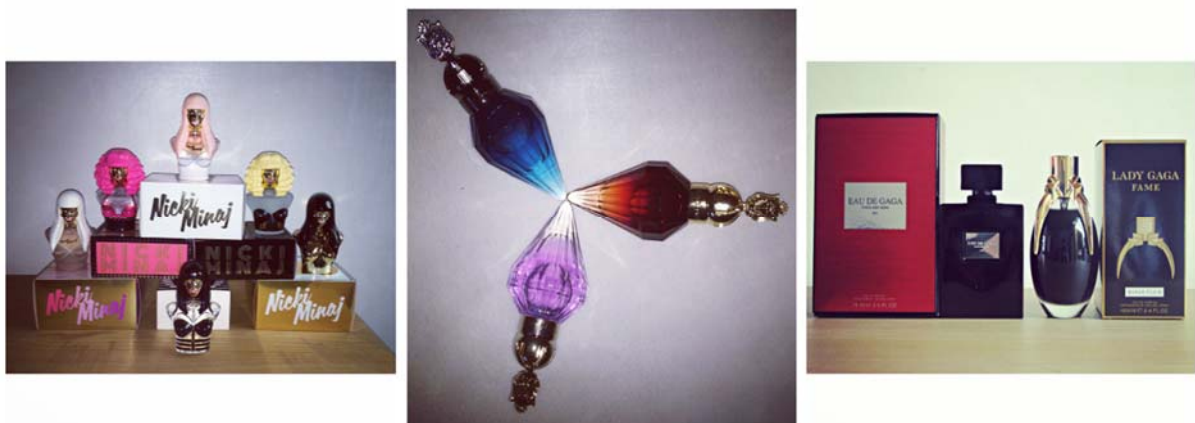

Figure 15: Dario's collection of perfume bottles

Clearly, Dario is happy to spend a lot of time, money and effort on his idols, in particular Lady Gaga. He is even prepared to get a tattoo related to their shared birthday:

> I designed a small tattoo, well, not very Gaga related, […] it's simply the Zodiac sign of Aries, with a triangle in the background, but slightly finer. Uhm and the dream is then, if I ever meet her, that she writes down 'March 28th' and I would have that tattooed in her handwriting, underneath.

The fact that Dario was born on the same day as Lady Gaga creates an even closer connection with her. He describes this tattoo as his "goal of the moment" in his Gaga fandom, referring to a

recurrent idea of fandom "goals". The ultimate goal is to reach the "full circle" of fandom for his idols: seeing their shows, meeting them, getting an autograph and being followed by them on Twitter.

Dario is also part of a Gaga fan community, in a secret Facebook group called "Belgian Little Monsters". From the beginning of her career, Lady Gaga emphasised that fans are essential to her and created an enormous following of what she calls "Little Monsters". The collective experience and sense of belonging together is very important, and media such as the secret Facebook group reinforce this experience. Being part of this community also entails social pressure concerning "good fandom", as Dario mentions repeatedly. For example, it is necessary to restrict the amount of idols one admires: "I… I really like of all of them [referring to Nicki Minaj, Kesha and some other female pop stars he mentioned before] a lot, but it's not like… [silence] you know, you can't have too many idols, otherwise you don't seem serious any more". Although referring to a different genre and period, this statement echoes Koestenbaum's diva manifesto, disclosing a clear parallel between pop idol adoration and opera diva veneration: "The opera queen must choose one diva. The other divas may be admired, enjoyed, even loved. But only one diva can reign in the opera queen's heart; only one diva can have the power to describe a listener's life, as a compass describes a circle" (1994, p. 19). Koestenbaum then laments how difficult this is and describes his own allegiances with about a dozen divas.

Throughout the interview, it became clear that Dario feels strongly about Lady Gaga and his fellow fans. These emotions are conveyed in his style of narrating and choice of words. For example, he recounts being "so jealous" because one member of the Little Monster group managed to see Gaga at the airport while he did not. This made him very angry at himself but also at Lady Gaga: "I was so angry at her that I didn't listen to her for three days". His disappointment about missing some chances to meet Lady Gaga or Nicki Minaj are just as strong as his joy when he recounts meeting Kesha at a meet and greet after a concert. The way Dario talks about Gaga bespeaks a parasocial relationship: he feels close to her, as if he knew her in person. Both Click et al. (2013) and Bennett (2014) found similar strong identifications with Lady Gaga, as her strong media presence and personal communication via Twitter give her fans a sense of personal connection.

For Dario, this connection also extends to his sexual orientation:

It's also, well, it was in the first year of secondary school [age 12-13], when she started her career, and that was also the moment, well, a bit later, I also started to come out about my sexuality, so. Well, that creates a sort of bond.

Yet again, this biographical connection confirms that Gaga's importance in Dario's life is not limited to music; her persona and social messages deeply influence his life. More generally, Dario connects Gaga to homosexuality on two levels. First, Lady Gaga's explicit engagement for the LGBTQ community is one of the reasons he enjoys and admires her so much: "Well yes, that's also something… she is famous for her… fight against, well, for gay rights, so yes, she is somebody I look up to. And also, I like her style". Second, Dario notes that straight men are not that likely to be Gaga fans, drawing on his experiences with the online group of the Belgian Little Monsters, where many male fans came out as gay after some time. Dario links this to Lady Gaga's extravagance but also her staying true to herself, and of course to her active engagement in gay rights. This echoes Jennex' (2013, p. 350) findings that Gaga shapes the everyday life of some fans and changes the way they understand themselves as gay males, drawing on Gaga's persona and discourse to develop and perform identities. Like Dario, in his research many fans report that they became more out and flamboyant after becoming Gaga fans (350). Dario's story confirms Jennex' findings that young gay males are still in need of and actively engaging with female divas and camp (p. 343) and that "[t]his extreme fandom offers gay men confidence, community and, for some, the hope to envision a better future" (p. 357-8). Hence, we conclude that Dario's experiences, although unique (as any fan's), clearly parallel those disclosed by other Gaga fandom research, as well as the broader literature on gay men's veneration of idols or divas.

Pieter: Serial Diva Worshipping Across Genres

Pieter is a music theatre dramaturge aged 31, who is professionally involved in the opera world. He describes his sexuality as gay, and himself as being rather feminine. He realized early in life that he was gay and started to come out around the age of 15 or 16; but had a difficult time with his mother upon his first (involuntary) coming out and left home aged 18. Just like with Dario, the emphasis in the interview with Pieter lies on female performers. However, he calls them divas instead of idols and the genres he discusses are more varied, ranging from pop and opera to country.

In the very beginning of the interview, Pieter states that he has been thinking about his own and other gay men's fascination with divas like Céline Dion and Madonna:

I asked myself what it could mean, uhm… because it's often the gays, isn't it, who love women […]—very glamorous women, naturally, and everything surrounding them, and well: are those mother traumas? And then I thought: is it identity formation in gays?

It is striking that divas are Pieter's first association when thinking about music and homosexuality. He recounts that aged 12 or 13, *Titanic* was released, and Céline Dion became his great diva until a teacher introduced him to Maria Callas' famous interpretation of Bellini's "Casta Diva" in class at 15 or 16: "Maria Callas became the diva, I've got all her biographies here, and I have two large [artworks depicting Callas]… All she… all she ever recorded, I've got it on CD, so [laughs]." Collecting all things Callas is surely a sign of his admiration and fandom. He mentions that her Hollywood glamour intrigued him, but also "the tragic life around her, with Onassis—it's not only the music itself, but uhm, her whole appearance, actually".

Like Pieter, many fans of Maria Callas report a fascination with her voice, glamour and grace on the one hand, and the passion and tragedy in her life on the other. Koestenbaum, for instance, describes his interest in Callas as part of his sexual and cultural identity (1994, p. 135) and states that she "remains the operatic diva most closely (…) related with gay fandom" (1994, p. 35). In fact, Pieter read Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat* years ago, and leafing through his copy during our interview, a section he annotated struck us: "Did I love her? Or did I envy her?" (1994, p. 18).
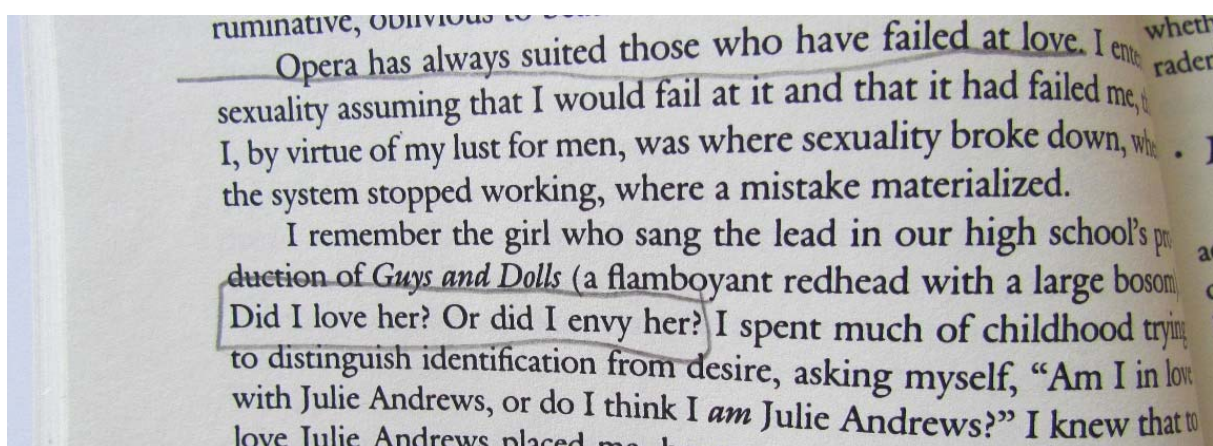

Figure 16: Photograph of Pieter's copy of "The Queen's Throat", p.35

These questions connect to Pieter's fascination for Callas and his general interest in the connection between music, divas, gender and homosexuality. He ruminates on his own teenage experiences of not feeling at ease with himself, being skinny and awkward and angry at his

family, and then making a connection to "super strong women, the huge volume and singing and so on; that is something you look for then, I guess". Pieter expresses that divas were able to compensate his own insecurities and give him a sense of empowerment. Moreover, apart from his own story, he feels there is a sort of natural connection between gay men and divas within different musical genres, but he cannot quite pinpoint what exactly it means. In fact, Koestenbaum implicitly provides a possible answer to the question of why gay men so often find themselves attracted to divas, because they are "out there":

> A diva is said to *come out* from behind the curtain for her bows: after a successful performance [the diva] had to "come out again and again." When we see a diva she is, by definition, out. We know she is there only because she has projected a self for us to hear. Once she is a diva she may have the liberty to articulate a self loudly. (1994, p. 86)

Full of confidence, the diva is unapologetically visible, audible and proud to be out—characteristics many gay men strive for.

One of the most striking features in Pieter's story is his serial obsession with stars: "It always happens that I am obsessively engaged in one thing. Sometimes that might be just one song or one aria or so. Afterwards [i.e.: after Callas] […], I was about 20 or so, and stood in line with my boyfriend and best girl friend to meet Cecilia Bartoli, I've got a photo of that in my kitchen". These obsessions embrace very diverse musical genres: Starting with pop divas Britney Spears, Madonna and Céline Dion as an early teenager, Pieter moved on to explore opera diva Maria Callas and, later on, Cecilia Bartoli. As he explained, his interest in Bartoli is mainly a musical one, but he still enjoyed meeting her after a concert. So, while Dario's interview disclosed parallels between pop and opera diva fandom, Pieter's shows that these are not distinct fields of fandom but can be combined in one person. In his early twenties, he went on to discover country stars Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash and started admiring Elvis Presley; and rap and hip hop are yet more genres Pieter enjoys. Remarkably, he sees a close connection between rap and opera, stating that both genres pick out feelings and biographical events as a central line and render these in dramatized and enlarged ways. He appreciates the aggression and power in the music of for example Eminem or Nicki Minaj, and talks about it in similar terms as Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*: "It cuts so deep… I can't describe it any other way. It is so hard, that it really, (…) it gives me gooseflesh".
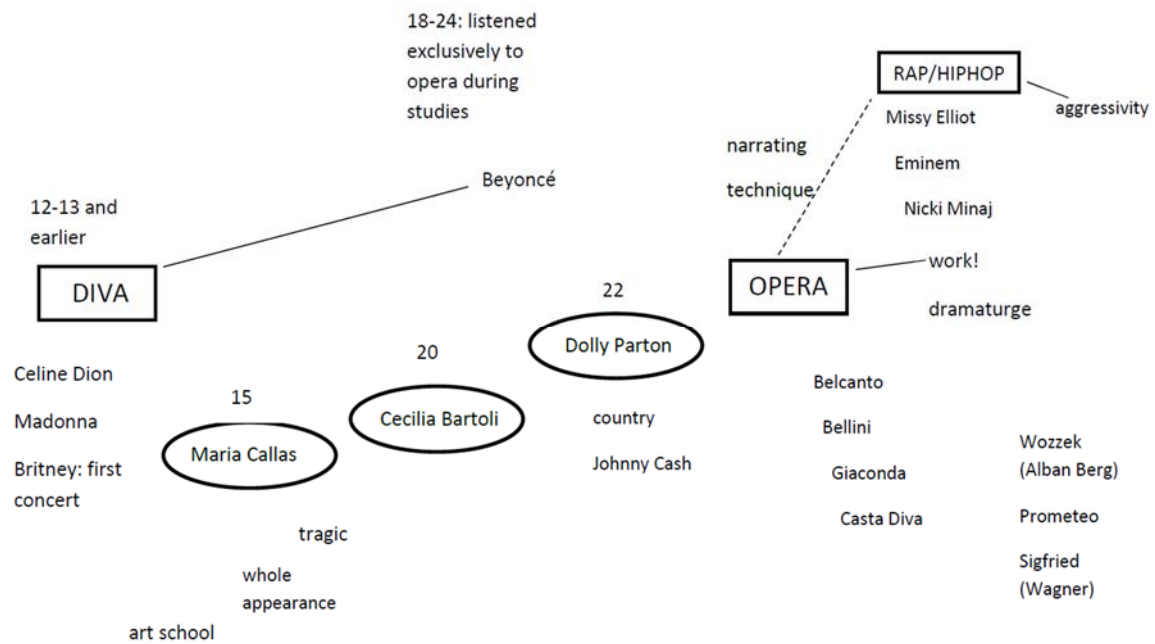
Figure 17: A sketch of Pieter's musical landscape based on my field notes

When asked whether he would call himself a fan of the divas mentioned above, Pieter decidedly answers: "Yes yes, of course, yes yes yes". Similarly, he frequently uses verbs and adjectives expressing an intense involvement with and experience of music: he speaks about going into "trance", experiencing "magical moments", getting carried away by the music, and "overwhelming" experiences. Throughout various genres, Pieter describes experiences of being starstruck and catharsis through musical performances. His first pop concert ever, Britney Spears' *Onyx Hotel* tour, left him speechless, thinking "this is paradise, really". Interestingly, he parallels this with being deeply touched by Wagner's opera "Siegfried", "even if that is on a wholly different level, that it still has something… […] that you go into a trance, almost":

> I don't know whether you know the last part of *Siegfried*, it is… an increase of, it's a sort of love-duet, and it increases and increases and then it explodes at some point, and I… it's been more than ten years ago when I first started going to the opera, and I still remember that when it was over, I really jumped out of my chair, like in a movie [he cheers and claps his hands; we laugh] I was really… but it was apparently a feeling many other people at the opera also had, so luckily I wasn't standing there alone.

Pieter's experiences confirm Green's observation of people reporting about the impact of so-called peak music experiences: the "afterglow" of such experiences "can provide motivation for the days, weeks or even years to come, informing everyday identity" (Green 2016, p. 337). Pieter is convinced that music is able to change a person and alter one's mental state, as it really

touches us. Both professionally and privately, Pieter is much more interested in the emotional impact of music than in technical properties, always looking for moments of total connection and excitement and catharsis. When asked about the link between certain music and his identity, he sees a close connection:

> The diva stuff we talked about, but also the pop music, the *janettenmuziek*[59] [laughs], that's what I love to dance and act silly to and then, well, the very hurt, aggressive, biographical within music, well, yes, that is connected to my identity, yes.

As with Dario, his story contains some features of what is traditionally considered to be typical of fandom, for example collecting all available records of Callas, reading biographies, and asking Bartoli for a photograph after a concert. Echoing the definitions of fandom in the literature review, a strong emotional and affective dimension characterises his fandom throughout his eclectic music taste, as he seeks and finds identification. His experiences are in line with what Harris (as cited in Farmer, 2005, p. 169) describes as two features that lie "at the very heart of gay diva worship"; namely "the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity" and the desire to "elevate [one]self above [one's] antagonistic surroundings". Throughout his story, Pieter compares his own experiences to those of other gay men, confirming a shared cultural practice and Farmer's claim that diva worship is a staple of gay culture (2005, p. 169). To these insights, Pieter's interview adds that pop, hip hop and opera diva fandom are not only similar but can also be combined, as part of broader patterns of taste which remain hidden in research focusing on single objects of fandom.

Anna: A Female Perspective on Divas

As we saw in the last chapter, Anna (27) describes her sexuality as "predominantly lesbian". Music and women are the two great loves of her life, so this interview felt very special to her. Anna realized that she was different in her teen years and thought she would be forever alone, until she met her first big love in her late teens.

An outstanding feature of Anna's interview is her musical and artistical focus on the past. As she puts it herself, "I actually did nothing that was contemporary. I didn't listen to contemporary music much, always classical and times long gone; I only read old books, I only watched old films. I was inside a completely nostalgic thing". Some of the genres and periods she appreciates

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[59] Dutch for "faggot music"

are classical instrumental music, political and lesbian songs from the German Weimar Republic era (1920s), French chansons from the 1930s and 1940s, and Nina Hagen's 1980s punk. Anna states that she has a "nostalgic spirit" which this music of times long gone speaks to. Talking about these periods, Anna uses plenty of expressions highlighting her intense, fannish engagement with the music, describing herself as a "diehard fan" or "super fan" of certain artists, "wild about", "completely into" and even "in love" with certain singers, in particular Maria Callas.

A central theme unifying her eclectic taste in music is the strong emotional connection to music. As Anna describes, she went through a period of loneliness and isolation as a teenager, caused by her sexual orientation and the lack of other feminine lesbians to identify with. Music was the most important consoling factor for her: "Music could always arouse and simultaneously appease a desire—a very strange process of catharsis". Discovering Maria Callas, for example, touched her deeply, since she was able to identify with her music and tragic life:

> I can never separate an oeuvre from a life, for me that is something that belongs together. So, I heard her voice and started to listen to her CDs and I was totally wild about it, and then I started to discover her life, and I found that so incredibly tragic, and I recognised myself so intensely in her sorrow, the loneliness and the complete sacrifice for love, which she did have, and a sort of—yes, an immense idol-thing started between that woman's voice, which is so vibrant and so powerful and which contains all the passion of the world, and then knowing that she actually experienced this in her life, and that in my opinion, she actually more or less died from lovesickness—yes, that was just, for me that was… I recognised myself so much in it, and I… I could really imagine that I would also die for love, or commit suicide for love, or rather because of loneliness.

In the same period, she also became acquainted with Greta Garbo, who became a major figure in her lesbian identification: Through Garbo, Anna realized that she was not the only feminine lesbian in this world. She found her "absolutely incredibly fascinating" and was simultaneously identifying and in love with her.

In her discovery of music through time, Anna encountered many more musical idols and aspects she identified with. For instance, both the openly lesbian French singer and actress Suzy Solidor, famous in the Paris scene in the 1930s, and German *Kabarett* singer Claire Waldoff, most famous in the 1920s, attracted her attention. Anna is a fan of both women, although she does not

necessarily like Waldoff's rough singing voice but is rather attracted by the political and critical dimensions of her music, as well as her openly lesbian attitude. When it comes to Solidor, Anna remarks that one feels the pathetic tone in her voice, a loneliness and a certain impossible desire. German punk singer Nina Hagen's music is connected to a wilder phase in her life, and exudes a certain sexual energy for Anna. Anna is aware that her taste in music is rather unique, being intensely fascinated by the singers' lives as well and showing a special interest in their gender and sexual identity, defining this as a sort of "gay" taste.

Anna's fandom is clearly not limited to music but also connected to her personal life and politics. For instance, her interest in music of the Weimar Republic era is rooted in the political and gender bending notions of that period. She mentions that women dressed and behaved like men, undermining traditional gender roles: "I actually really listened a lot to that music because the lyrics were good and sharp and satirical and full, really full of lesbian undertones". She sums up that all the music she ever liked is linked to 'that idea of freedom and controversy and rebellion (…) Not always per se with a lesbian undertone, but always something… yes, against the current, and for freedom, in one way or another, whether it is political or intimate or…".

Although this political edge sets Anna apart from the narrators discussed so far, her adoration of Maria Callas is certainly a form of diva worship in line with that of Pieter. The description of her adoration of Callas and Garbo, as well as her self-declared later "Piaf obsession" resemble the swooning for divas by gay men as described by Koestenbaum (1994) or Dyer (2004 [1986]): The glamour these divas exude as well as their tragic lives seems to not only fascinate many gay men, but also some lesbian women. This is in line with Pearl, who scrutinizes diva-adoration and dismisses "the notion that opera fanaticism is the province of gay men only" (2015, p. 49).
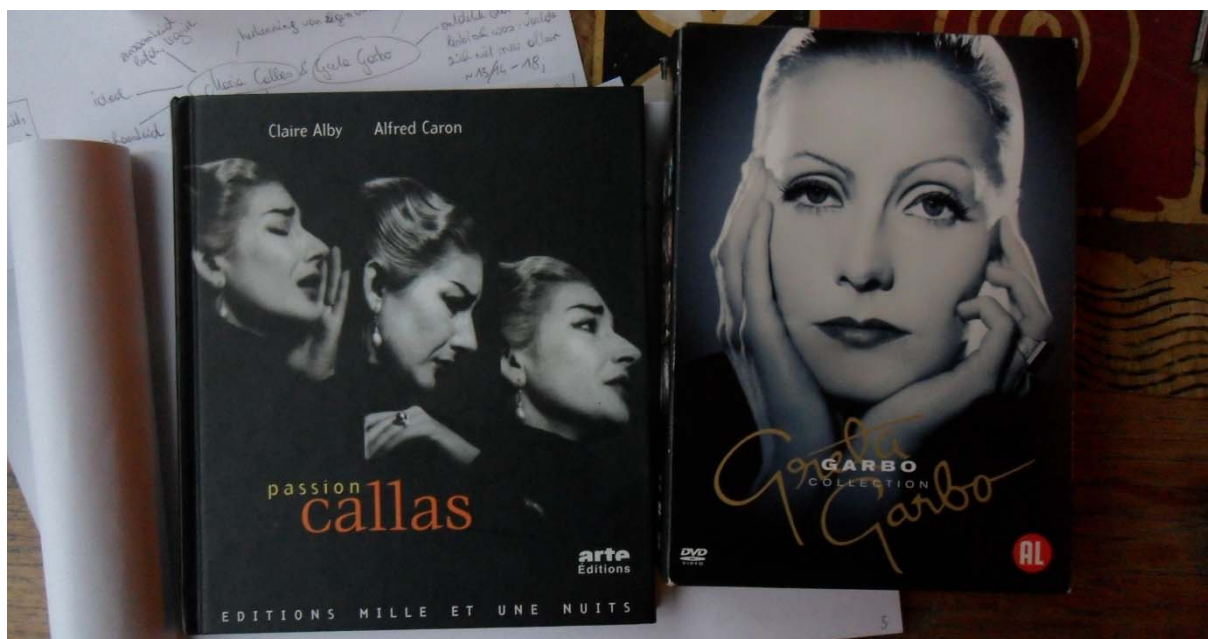
Figure 18: Some items from Anna's collection of memorabilia

Women are often excluded from the discourse on diva-adoration, which reinforces the common conception of gay male diva worshippers. On a related note, Elly-Jean Nielsen (2016) discusses notions of lesbian camp; a phenomenon most commonly associated exclusively with gay men. As Nielsen argues, the adoration of and fascination with divas and "over-the-top, old Hollywood stars" (2015, p. 116) may also be read as lesbian camp. Just like Pieter, Anna is simultaneously in love with Callas and idolizing her, recognising herself in her adored diva.

Mostafa: Adoring Arab Divas

Mostafa is 41 and describes his sexuality as gay. Most of what we talk about during the interview is heavily influenced by Arab culture and his family community. After speaking about identity, Arab identity and gay identity for about an hour, we turn to

Figure 19: Mostafa's record of Om Kalsoum

music. Mostafa immediately starts the topic by telling about Om Kalsoum[60], the big diva of classic Arab music:

"Yes you see, I'll tell you one thing, really... Every Arab from Morocco to Iraq grew up, and not just us: our parents, our grandparents... That music has lasted for generations, that's Om Kalsoum." His statement immediately clarifies that Om Kalsoum is not only celebrated within the gay community, but is admired by a transnational, mainstream Arab audience. Just like Dario, Pieter and Anna, Mostafa has detailed knowledge about this diva's music and life, and he emphasises that "nobody has been able to equal her".

While his swooning reminds of the typical gay diva worship discussed above, for Mostafa admiring Om Kalsoum is not connected to his sexual identity as much as his Arab identity. An anecdote he recounts literally connects the singer to his Arab identity: after a period of not being interested in Arab music as a young man, he rediscovered a record by Kalsoum at his mother's place. Taking a closer look at the record sleeve, he found pen scribblings on it and suddenly remembered that this must have been the first Arabic word he has ever written in the late 1970s: "So I went over the record sleeve, and I wrote, not knowing what the letters meant, I drew over them with a pen. So that is also my rediscovery, that's really bizarre—my first words of Arabic". The words he traced on the sleeve were "Om Kalsoum". When asked whether he considers himself as a fan of Om Kalsoum, Mostafa affirms: "yes, naturally," adding that he feels that in order to become a fan of someone, they have to be an established "monument" in his culture. Another artist he is a fan of, is Akim El Sikameya, a contemporary Algerian singer living in France. Mostafa says that he enjoys really all of his songs, which to him, again, is a sign of truly being a fan.

Clearly, fandom takes on yet another meaning here: besides being expressed through a strong involvement with a diva and connected to sexual identification, for Mostafa his fandom carries a strong cultural meaning. This cautions against a narrow focus on the connection between music fandom and a single aspect of identity, such as sexuality. Instead, we should be attentive to the multiple and intersecting social positions informing and being informed by fandom, in this case also ethno-cultural identity.

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[60] The name of the singer may be spelled in various ways, including Umm Kulthum, Oum Kalthoum and Om Kalsoum.

Although Mostafa asserts that most individuals of Arab origin are fans of Om Kalsoum and other great Arab singers, he also feels that gays especially react to these divas. He recounts talking about Barbra Streisand and other Western gay divas with a friend recently:

> And I said 'that's remote from me, I'm not gay, in that respect I'm not gay', until I caught myself, that in Arabic music... I really am. […] And he also thought about this, how does it come? I really don't know.

Likewise, Mostafa feels that with other widely famous Arab singers, there are some characteristics which are especially appreciated by gays, including the sentimentality of the music and the kitsch in many of the videos:

> Warda as well: with some of her music or some characteristics you really feel: that is so typically gay. […] Sabah, she is also widely known, but most of all with gays. She is really who I would call Barbra Streisand—well, Barbra Streisand maybe did not sing as much— […] well, like one of those stars especially famous among gays. Hmmm [plays some of her music] I love that kind of melancholic music so much. […] [We listen to the music] This is really what I would call "wrong music". It's got a very kitschy quality, I envision this… in rooms filled with disco balls, red lights…

Many of these characteristics Mostafa associates with Arab singers are reminiscent of how Sontag describes camp in her famous "Notes on Camp" (1964), with core ingredients like a penchant for glamorous divas, irony, and kitschy, oversentimental or especially happy music.

Next to his intense nostalgia for various Arab singers and the connection he sees between their music and gays, Mostafa tells about another striking characteristic in his music fandom, namely *not* listening to specific artists precisely because he likes them so much. He talks about being a huge fan of Alpha Blondy, "it's African Reggae[…], I went to see him twice in Germany, three times in the Netherlands, and four times or so in Belgium, and he's also been to Paris several times… it was like: whenever he came somewhere near here, I dropped everything and went there". His enthusiasm and willingness to travel to neighbouring countries betrays a strong fannish engagement, but when it comes to listening to Alpha Blondy at home, Mostafa employs a different strategy:

> Sometimes I consciously choose not to listen to music. Like Alpha Blondy, for example, I told you that I really am a big fan; but I only listen to it every few years, for a short period, and really only to Alpha Blondie—and then I stop it. Really like two days of continuous listening to the music, I'll put on a Best Of CD. I always made my own best of CDs out of

all of his CDs. But it's not like one CD, it's like Best Of 1, 2, 3—because he has so much good music. […] No, that's how music stays magic. If you keep on listening to it continuously, I don't know, but I find that the magic wears off. And now it's still… it's maybe been two years since I've heard Alpha Blondy, or rather put it on and listened to it consciously for a period of time. And I know that when I'm gonna do it again someday: "Oh, wow!" That's how music stays good, you know.

What Mostafa describes here is his very personal way of enjoying and preserving music's magic, as he calls it. This is rather contrary to the listening behaviour one would expect of a real fan, namely listening to their favourite music over and over again. Many narrators actually use the Flemish idiom "grijs draaien" when they speak about certain music they listen(ed) to over and over again because they were so involved with it. The expression literally comes from listening to the same vinyl record over and over again until the heavy usage shows in the record turning from black to grey and, eventually, not working any more. Mostafa's metaphor about music's magic wearing off thus actually does have a real-life counterpart.

Stefaan: Indie Fandom

Stefaan is a man of 33 who describes his sexual orientation as gay. Music takes up a central position in his life, which is why he offered to do this interview. To support his story, he fetched a notebook which he kept from when he was a teenager, and we listened to various songs during the interview. Stefaan enjoys introducing people to new music and has a soft spot for archiving and structuring music in the form of mix CDs, playlists, and best-of lists. As he stresses, music in itself is very important in his life, independent of being a fan of specific musicians. Music has started to play a role early in his life: "Music was one of the first things that gave me an identity when I was 16-17. In the sense that: I was rather good and mainstream, but I sensed that music gave me an identity on the one hand, and also a passion on the other hand". Stefaan links various key moments of his LGBTQ identity to music. When he was 17 or 18, a male friend he really liked took him to see a theatre play involving gay characters. Jeff Buckley's 'Love as the young ones do' was part of the soundtrack, and this song is unforgettable for Stefaan. After seeing the play, he made a note in his notebook: "Well, the end is near and the new beginning is awaiting me". This (musical) moment signifies a change in his attitude towards his sexuality, coming out as bisexual and, eventually, as gay.

Stefaan describes developing a real passion for music. The emotional characteristics and effects of music especially attract him and of all music genres, Indie touches him most: "I can really get gooseflesh watching a show and experiencing that intensity". Certain types of male voices enable a particularly close connection to the musician, which Stefaan enjoys immensely. He names Sean Carey and Sufjan Stevens as artists who manage to evoke these feelings of connection and affection in him: "If I hear that I feel like cuddling that guy". Yvon Bonenfant explores this phenomenon of queer vocal timbres, explaining that "timbre carries connotations of touch through its relationship to the notion of texture. […] It is layered, multi-faceted and rich with complexity and information" (2010, p. 75).

Elaborating on the connection between music and identity, Stefaan describes: "So music became identity in different ways: personal identity, but also social identity". In his own words, he reflects what Hesmondhalgh describes, namely that music "represents a remarkable meeting point of the private and public realms, providing encounters of self-identity (this is who I am; this is who I am not) with collective identity (this is who we are; this is who we're not)" (2008, p. 239). An example of both his personal and social identity being connected to music can be found in Stefaan's various musical alter egos on online platforms, his nicknames throughout the years referring to songs or artists, most recently "Sufjanboy", referring to Sufjan Stevens, and "Indieboy". To Stefaan, these alter egos prove "how important music was in the way I presented myself". Concerning his gay identity, Stefaan mentions another two important songs and videos that intrigued him and made him aware of his gay identity: Skunk Anansie's "Secretly", depicting flirtations between a girl and two boys, and Sigur Ros' "viðrar vel til loftárása", in which two young boys kiss.

In the interview, Stefaan introduces the concept of fandom himself, describing it as "that one step further" to just liking an artist. He sketches how his fandom evolved over the years: when he was younger, he was a fan of many bands at the same time. Showing a densely packed scheme of all shows he wanted to see—40 in total, all ranked and rated afterwards—at a music festival in the early 2000s, he uses the word "maniacal" to describe his obsession with music. He clearly remembers a concert of Radiohead when their music had just taken a more electronic turn, at which point he expressed his fandom through buying band T-shirts and posters (one of which still features in a frame on his wall) as well as making an email-address referring to them.

Figure 20: Stefaan's original annotated festival scheme

At the time of the interview his fandom focuses on a few select musicians, in particular the American singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens. He expresses his fandom through a broad range of activities such as checking Sufjan Stevens' blog daily, using a Sufjan screensaver at work, collecting articles on the artist, and buying his records:

> I also buy his records while I already have his CDs, collecting as much as possible. And swooning over Sufjan [laughs]. Going to his shows, for instance shortly in Luxemburg. I would not go to Paris or Luxembourg for many artists, but I do for Sufjan. So that's fandom to me.

This excerpt discloses Stefaan's attitude towards his own fandom. First, there is a clear parasocial relationship: whenever he talks about Sufjan Stevens, he simply calls him "Sufjan" and it feels as if they are very close. Second, his attitude is somewhat ambiguous: he is very serious about it, following Stevens closely through online media and liking to showcase his fandom. Yet, when he talks about swooning over Stevens, his voice mocks the exaggeration "swooning" seems to imply, and his laughter indicates a hint of shame.

What is interesting about Stefaan is that he discloses a strong, worship-like attachment to indie artists occupying a very different position in the musical spectrum as the pop and opera divas discussed above and in academic literature. Again, this interview highlights the diversity of

LGBTQ fandoms, as well as their non-exclusive nature. Stefaan's interview illustrates how the link of music fandom and sexuality, while important, is not necessarily clear nor explicit. Just like the other narrators discussed above, he shows a great interest in his favourite artist as a person as well as a musician, but the link with his sexuality is less straightforward. Stevens does not disclose a whole lot about his private life, he is neither explicitly gay nor straight; and Stefaan, while being gay and highlighting the importance of music to his identity, enjoys the ambiguity in Stevens' songs, not addressing men or women explicitly but leaving things in the middle.

Felix: Emotional Landscapes[61]

The story of Felix, 29, bears a lot of similarity with Stefaan's, both living a subdued sort of fandom towards the outside but with their favourite musicians being intensely present in everyday life. However, the focus of Felix' story is much more centred on one specific musician, Björk, and less on enjoying music in general. Felix got acquainted with Björk's music and life in his teen years, which implies that he has been a fan of hers for almost half his lifetime. Björk is mentioned 40 times during the course of the interview of about two hours. The field notes of the interview visualize that Björk is the linchpin in his story: Nearly all aspects of the life story he tells are connected to her in some way. Felix connects to her and her music on an emotional level and ties many memories of specific periods in his life to her. Björk provides solace and hope, and connects him to other people. At times, the border between him and Björk seems to blur, blending his own and her world view. Towards the end of the interview we talk about this pattern, and he agrees that Björk majorly influences how he looks at the world. Felix' story shows that music is not only connected to specific people and memories; it shapes and expresses his entire personal identity.

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[61] A shorter version of this section was published in Wasserbauer (2018).
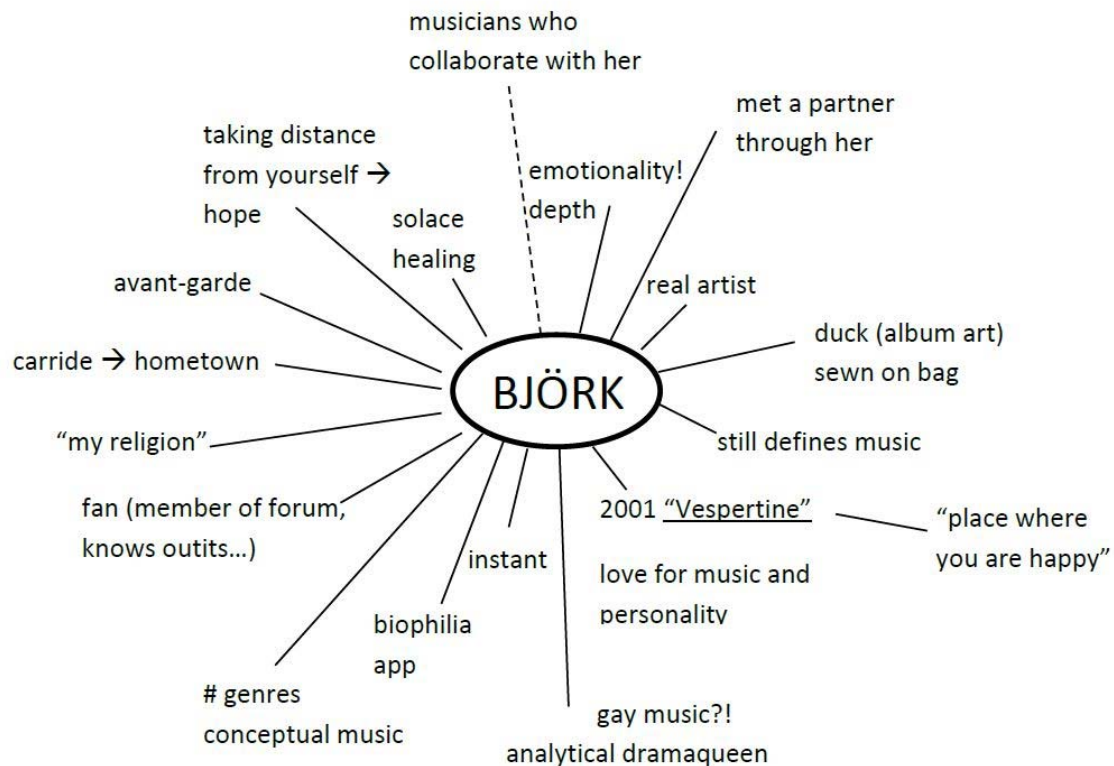
Figure 21: Translated and digitalized excerpt of the field notes to Felix' interview

Felix states that his involvement with Björk surely has characteristics of fandom, but that his connection with her actually goes even deeper than that:

> It also has this dimension [fandom], yes. For example, I am a member of a forum, and I'm a bit ashamed about this, but I secretly enjoy paparazzi photos and such although that's actually disrespectful. And I know all of her outfits and small facts about her. Uhm, but I think it also goes deeper than that; I was discussing religion with my partner and I noticed that "oh, maybe Björk is my religion", and then I thought "no", because I'm actually atheist, and look at me bragging about "I am super rational, I don't believe in God and such, I don't need that" while… sometimes it feels like that, she just gives a framework to my world, and also the fact that I find Björk the best of the best and all other artists are below her.

Björk provides a framework for his world and although Felix is atheist, he expresses that his religion might actually be Björk. These comments certainly testify to the strength of Felix' bond with Björk.

Concerning the more commercial side of fandom, Felix has so far been to four concerts of Björk and considers travelling to neighbouring countries in order to see her. Similar to Stefaan, he owns a framed poster of Björk's album *Vespertine*, which is the first of her albums he got

acquainted with and still his absolute favourite. He indicates that he enjoys engaging in typical fan-activities like reading about the star's private life and outfits, but admits that he feels ashamed about this engagement to some extent. During the interview, he calls himself—half-serious, half laughing—a "freak" for being able to talk about Björk for hours without ever getting tired of the topic, and "neurotic" because of his rituals linked to Björk. Like in Stefaan's story, the sincere admiration and fandom is accompanied by a notion of shame for the at times irrational passion about his object of fandom. Both narrators are rather rational and highly educated persons with strong reflexive tendencies in their interviews as well as in their lives in general. As Felix gave me a digital tour through the app Björk has released together with her album *Biophilia*, he explains that he likes the way she connects the mathematical side of music with primary instincts and the forces of nature. He expresses that her (way of thinking about) music surpasses mainstream pop music: "And once you start thinking about it that way, you can't just simply listen to a pop radio channel any more, it's like… you enter a different world or so". A similar notion of Björk as an intellectual musician arose when talking about the audience at the last concert he attended, which he describes as mainly happy girls and gay men of his age. Suggesting that Björk is not the classical gay diva, Felix muses about the topic:

> Yes, as you said yourself, the diva thing, the female drama that I think a lot of gays appreciate in music, if I may generalise, Madonna and like the more classical ones, [those who embody] what diva really means in our times… and Björk is indeed, I would call her… she is a bit of a drama queen, right. Like in her music, it's all about grand emotions and such. But yes, always in a more analytic manner. She completely analyses what's going on, why it was that dramatic or so [laughs].

Not only does Felix enjoy Björk's music and personality, his story also highlights the emotional involvement with her. Several times, Felix describes Björk's music as healing and comforting. Starting in his teenage years when he first discovered *Vespertine*, he found that her music was able to carry him through his loneliness: It had "the emotionality that I needed". He explains that as a teenager, he was very introverted and preferred books and staying inside, comparing himself to what Björk does:

> I think she is somebody who is very emotional, but also very self-analytic. She looks at herself in a mocking, ironical way, and sings about it like that. And I think that is what I needed at that moment. It enabled me to take a bit of a distance from myself and look at myself and see: 'OK, you are just lonely right now, it's gonna get better'. There was a lot of hope in that, and there still is.

Felix describes that Björk helped him in finding himself and recognising his loneliness, and at the same time provided him with great hope for the future. He says that in his most gloomy period, her music actually made it worth for him to stay alive. The intensity of his emotional involvement reminds strongly of Anna's story, who found solace in Maria Callas in the loneliest periods of her teenage years. Some years ago when his family went through a difficult phase, he found comfort and healing in listening to *Vespertine* a lot.

Throughout the years, he recalls reflecting her music and the themes of her albums onto his own life and tending to see congruent patterns; he calls this "trying to synchronise what maybe can't be synchronised". Felix states that he is aware that this kind of thinking might be dangerous and it better not go too far. The way he reflects about (the music of) Björk, addressing philosophical and even existential questions, bespeaks a very strong relationship with her as an artist and her music. Although Björk may be framed as an alternative diva whom he admires, her importance in Felix's life seems to exceed mere fandom.

Kurt: The Story of an Audiophile CD Collector

The story of Kurt (45) highlights a facet not directly linked to traditional notions of fandom but which also an intense engagement with music: collecting music. Kurt describes himself as a collector and an audiophile, collecting mostly super audio CDs, which are recorded in a superior quality. Collecting records is a topic that has gained interest from various disciplines, amongst which are gender studies in musicology[62]. The musical objects—whether hard or soft, digital technology—typically remain in daily use, yet have a symbolic value to the listeners, and thus function as personal archives as well as collections: "An archive becomes a collection when incorporated into the ritual of everyday life" (Kibby, 2009, p. 434). A large part of our interview focuses on Kurt's collection and the process of collecting. Record collections often "serve as a kind of cultural autobiography for their owners, by attaching to specific moments, events, and relationships across the life span […]" (Giles, Pietrzykowski & Clark, 2007, p. 431), and Kurt's story confirms that a music collection may be an important part of one's personality (Kibby, 2009, p. 437).

Going to university in 1987 marked the start of his personal collection of CDs: Upon moving out, his parents gave him a portable CD player, which was then the newest available technology. His

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[62] Less research focuses on CD collections; however, I find that the literature on record collections Sapplies to the newer medium as well.

parents, classical music lovers themselves, insisted on the fact that vinyl records and cassettes would soon be outlived by the compact disc, and that he should immediately start listening to music on the novel carrier. At first, he mostly bought Pop and Rock music—one of the first CDs he bought was Paul Simon's iconic *Graceland*—but eventually his interest focused more on classical music.

Ten years ago, Kurt bought a high quality set of surround speakers, which prominently feature in the otherwise minimalistic living room, and which made him enjoy listening to classical music to an even greater extent. It was actually one specific piece of music that convinced Kurt to upgrade his sound system:

> A phenomenal recording of "Pini Di Roma" [by Respighi]. That's what I actually bought the speaker in the middle for. [laughs] I first had a small one, […] but I found it sounded so meagre in comparison with the two big ones, so after two weeks I went back [to exchange it for a bigger one]

More powerful speakers accentuate the opulent tone poem for large orchestra, and allow for an orchestral sensation at home. The way Kurt speaks about music equipment shows that it has a high idealistic as well as material value for him and highlights his pride about the technology and his affiliation with and trust in the CD as a music carrier.

Another important feature in the living room is the custom made CD closet, which we stood in front of and examined during the interview. Kurt's CD closet stresses both aspects defining a music collection according to Kibby (2009): The CDs are kept safely and beautifully organised, while still being easily accessible for everyday use. While many collectors provide a prominent spot in their home for their collection, celebrating its status as a sacred object (Giles et al., 2007, p. 435), in Kurt's case, protection seems to be more important.

In the past years, Kurt's soft music collection is growing as well. Among the special memories connected to more recent popular music is "the first LGBTQ party, when I just came out of the closet. But that's mostly in my playlist on Spotify. I haven't really bought them on CD yet, I'm like: That kind of pop music sounds good enough on Spotify". The choice of the digital/online platform Spotify for collecting and listening to popular music connected to new experiences and memories instead of buying CDs, bespeaks Kurt's late coming out in the 2010s. Another way he uses Spotify is to discover new music, pop or classical, and listen to new pieces he has to learn for singing in the choir.

Clearly, Kurt attaches certain values to the music he owns, which are connected to emotional attachment, genre, digital versus analogue music and quality of the music. For example, Kurt owns a series of compilation CDs which he has yet to classify, and laughingly refers to those as "the less noble music"; indicating that for him there is a different meaning to buying an artist's full album versus buying their music included on a compilation. For some (pop) music, the quality of a digital file is good enough, while other music only works for him in superior recording and playing quality. For Kurt, there is a big difference between his material CD collection and his online collection. However, research has shown that the assumption that music listeners have more affective attachment to "hard" technologies, like vinyl record or CDs, than to "soft" technologies, like MP3 files or items in online playlists, does not always turn out to be right (Kibby, 2009). Changing music technologies influence personal music collections, and physical as well as digital music may function as personal archives as well as collections (Kibby, 2009, p. 428).

When I asked Kurt whether he is a fan of certain divas, male or female, in classical music, he answered that "I rather have some favourite conductors. I found Claudio Abbado fantastic […] maybe he is *the* conductor for me". Concerning composers, it is "difficult to say, it kind of evolved over time". He prefers the "warm, lively" style of Vivaldi over the "frightening perfection" in many of Bach's and Mozart's works. In general, Kurt enjoys powerful classical music, like Saint-Saëns's organ music. Currently, Beethoven's symphonies attract Kurt a lot, and this is reflected, of course, in his collection: "I think I have each symphony in four or five different recordings. And then I have them again in a series of DVDs". This is an interesting specificity about classical music: There are, of course, multiple renditions of each work, and for Kurt, it is important to be familiar with several of them.

Furthermore, Kurt speaks about a French countertenor he owns various CDs of: "He does not only sing fantastically well, but he's also a handsome little fellow. [laughs] But it works like that: OK, you really like the music, but maybe there is just that small extra thing that makes you like certain things". Like other LGBTQ persons have described before, the artist's charisma, appearance and sexuality is often a pleasant extra, but not the main reason why LGBTQs listen to specific music (Dhoest, Herreman & Wasserbauer, 2015). In this case, not only the music, but also the handsomeness of the artist influenced Kurt's music listening. Generally, Kurt finds it difficult to say whether there is a connection between his sexual identity and the music he listens to. He sees that there might be a subconscious preference for certain music, but at the same time highlights that not everything is necessarily connected to being gay:

In any case it is reflected in your music choice… […] But it's not that I would intentionally buy Schubert because he is whispered to be gay. OK, there is some heavy, pathos-filled music in my collection, but you're going to find that with any music lover, straight or gay, so I am hesitant about making any connection to the sense of drama gays supposedly have. I really wouldn't dare to say so. And the operas… unless I unintentionally bought some in that direction, but they are not necessarily the things with most passion or drama.

Connected to being a collector and connoisseur of classical music, a sense of pursuit and achievement surfaces, which corresponds with Giles and colleagues' findings: One psychological meaning of personal record collections they discovered among collectors is termed "commitment", and integrates expressions of "music collecting as a triumph of effort, and ultimately pride" (Giles et al., 2007, p. 434). Similarly, Hesmondhalgh discusses music as a means to display cultural capital (2013, p. 50). Surely, Kurt's story shows his pride in his music collection. He goes to considerable lengths to find specific CDs he wants, but, what is more, his commitment extends to the knowledge of classical music itself. For example, Kurt admits that he is still getting to know and like Mahler: "Mahler, that's still more difficult. I do my best, I have almost all of his symphonies, but I did not yet manage to listen to them all. I find it more difficult to grasp that music". A similar statement on Sibelius shows that he experiences his knowledge as yet incomplete.

Interestingly, Will Straw describes record collecting as a practice of connoisseurship and systematic consumption, which stands "in an uncertain relationship with masculinity" (1997, p. 5). The vagueness of this description derives from the different qualities associated with record collecting:

Record collections are seen as both public displays of power/knowledge and private refuges from the sexual or social world; as either structures of control or the by-products of irrational and fetishist obsession; as material evidence of the homosocial information-mongering which is one underpinning of male power and compensatory undertakings by those unable to wield that power. (Straw, 1997, p. 4)

Despite its binary approach to gender, which stands in contradiction with the general queer approach in my dissertation, this analysis of record collecting in the light of masculinities fits Kurt's life story. His story has a strong focus on men and masculinities; and as we saw above, Kurt mostly listens to male artists and "male music" (see chapter 4.2). Although according to psychological literature, "males and females tend to accumulate objects with equal intensity"

(Straw, 1997, p. 5), collecting is historically a gendered activity connected to femininity (Straw, 1997, p. 5), and most forms of collecting are devalorised in male peer groups (Straw, 1997, p. 10). Record collecting, however, is attached to masculinity, prestige, homosocial activity and connection with other men (Straw, 1997, p. 5). Although collecting music records may be a nerdish activity, it is, according to Straw (1997, p. 10) "almost never irredeemably nerdish"; collecting records is considered a hip thing to do.

In summary, this story of an audiophile collector shows that distinction, taste and quality matter on several levels: First, in the kind of music or the composers he listens to; second, in the physical collection and storage of the music; and third, in the listening experience, enhanced by superior technology in recording and playing music. Kurt's music serves as a vehicle for social distinction, and at the same time tells a lot about his personal memories.

Nina: DIY and Riot Grrrl Sounds

Nina is 32 and identifies as lesbian/queer. In our interview, Nina provided a glimpse into feminist and queer music scenes and communities. As mentioned above, a large part of our talk focused on Riot Grrrl, a network or movement of women protesting the misogynist and heteronormative character of alternative music scenes, emerging in the USA in the early 1990s and subsequently spreading all over the world (Leonard, 1997). Taylor (2013) and Halberstam both describe a connection between the Riot Grrrl scene and third-wave feminism, and more specifically, lesbian feminism: "Riot dykes", as Halberstam terms them, "set themselves up against an earlier conception of white lesbian community which included elements of sex negativity, gender separatism, cultural feminism and womanism" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 180). Nina's feminism and involvement with queer, punk and squatting scenes has shaped her identity and influenced her musical tastes. While she is deeply involved in a particular music scene, she is not a fan of specific artists so her music consumption, participation and admiration works differently from what we have seen with the previous narrators. Nina's story represents that of a queer DIY community often overlooked in fan studies, since they do not engage in typical fan activities or self-identify as fans. We would argue, however, that Nina's story testifies to the fluidity of audience, participation and fan research, as her intense everyday life engagement with music touches on all these fields.

Nina is an active member of the scene: She is one of the co-founders of Ladyfest in Belgium, an alternative Punk, Rock and Grunge festival for women, featuring women only or mostly female

bands. Moreover, she plays the guitar in her own band, one of the few Belgian female-only crust bands. Crust is a sound Colin Larkin (2009) describes as blending "elements of metal, hardcore and punk with uncompromising political lyrics". Driver experienced that many participants in her research on queer girls talked about being in a band and making music (2007, p. 230); and, like Nina, experience that queer music scenes are occasions to meet and connect with other likeminded persons (2007, p.228).

Nina owns several posters of bands and Ladyfests she talks about, as well as T-shirts and plenty of CDs and cassettes. When asked whether she would consider herself to be a fan of these bands, she answers:

> Hmmm, as such yes, but I don't see it that way... Yes, that's sort of... I think within the Riot Grrrl, Queercore, punk-crust scenes it is like—you are a fan, but you also participate. You are part of... So it's not like: Your idol is on stage and you watch it and you buy stuff, and you just consume, or you're passively admiring, but you also... You can start your own band or your own zine and you can write about the shows or start a record label, organise shows...

> M: So, it is really activist?

> N: Yes, yes or—well, to some extent you can interpret it as activism, but it's also very much the DIY idea that everyone just participates, and you can also just talk to them [band members], it's not like they're sitting backstage and don't come out any more [once the performance is over]. They also often go to other concerts and they are often kind of your friends.

Nina describes a rather activist interpretation of fandom which has a DIY character and involves active participation, as opposed to fandom focused merely on consumption. Nina compares the activist and participative character with more mainstream music fandom: "That's what I really like about it. I mean, you can also still enjoy music—well, I don't know. [Silence] I've been to a Neil Young concert, and then you just know that you're not going to chat with others or so, but… I mean, it's also still nice: The music may be beautiful and… but well… it's just something extra [referring to the DIY character]". Her experiences tie in with what Halberstam (2005) identifies as the specific workings of queer space and time in feminist/queer subcultural scenes; the borders between subcultural producers and audience are permeable, just like the position

of the researcher of queer subculture (Halberstam, 2005, p. 161)[63]. These feminist and political scenes question and redefine the roles of music scene participants.

Consequently, the music scenes Nina is part of do not only centre on music or musicians, but are all about the community that forms around them and the activities connected to them. These activities involve, for example, hosting fellow bands, making zines, travelling to Ladyfests around Europe, cooking for the participants, maintaining squats, learning to play instruments and searching for fellow female musicians to make a band. Two other important concerns are keeping the events affordable and accessible, and minimizing the distance between the audience and the musician, literally and figuratively, as similarly highlighted in other research on Riot Grrrl culture (e.g., Downes, 2012). There is a strong feminist tendency in Nina's music listening and making. She remarks that most of her CDs are by female artists, who have always been especially intriguing to her: "That's even cooler, when a woman makes music! I don't know, I think it's the two: It's extra nice to listen to, but it's also an incentive to make things yourself".

Figure 22: Nina included some self-made drawings about music in one of her zines

Beside this primary interest in female musicians, Nina has an interest in queer music, which is linked to her lesbian/queer identity, for example queercore. Taylor (2012, p. 126) describes queercore as akin to punk, "distinguished by its loud, fast and raw sound, its physically energetic and interactive performance style, and […] its lyrics", which are "queercentric, remorselessly

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[63] See the discussion of the queer archive and the researcher as co-archivist in 3.3 and 3.4.

vulgar, antagonistic and political, relying heavily on a balanced mix of both anger and humour". As Halberstam points out, queercore is distinct from lesbian and gay positions (2005, p. 161). Queercore may be seen as an anarchic countermovement against mainstream gay culture (Taylor, 2012, p. 143-144), which many queers did not associate with. Nina particularly appreciates the fact that queercore musicians were rather androgynous; "It was OK to break with gender norms; I enjoyed that". Nina's experience ties in with that of Driver's participants who experience that "music provides possibilities for queer inclusivity and diversity, referring not only to a range of artists and styles but also to how musicians are 'talking about being queer'" (2005, p. 196).

Overall, Nina sees a strong connection between music and her identity: "I think the music I mostly listen to is very strongly connected to my identity. Because it is a lot of feminist music, much queer music and much DIY music… yes. I don't know, politically inspired things…" For Nina, music does not only function as entertainment and in relation to individual identity. Rather, music, lyrics, genre, musicians and production are political dimensions protesting heteronormative, androcentric and misogynist norms. Crust and anarcho-punk are traditionally male or "masculinist" music genres (Downes, 2012), just like many subcultural scenes are based on male audiences (Halberstam, 2005, p. 160). This standard is undermined by Nina's female-only approach to the genre. Generally, the Riot Grrrl movement attempted to challenge "conventional standards of hetero-femininity; including challenges to beauty standards, competition for male approval, Whiteness, heteronormativity, sexual double standards, and consumerism" (Downes, 2012, p. 210). Nina's story ticks all these boxes.

Compared to other narrators, Nina speaks less about her personal emotions connected to the music. However, identification with music is essential for her on a more structural level, criticising societal norms. Yet, Riot Grrrl culture and queercore do not only embody serious topics; the openness, playfulness and rebelliousness of these scenes also make the music attractive for many queer persons. Leibetseder, for example, emphasises that contrary to most streams of feminism which focus on the search of an authentic self, Grrrl culture provides a playful approach to serious topics, and a flirtation with ironic and provisional constructions of the self (2012, p. 27). Despite Nina's strong, fan-like involvement in a particular scene, both the genres she likes and the active ways she participates set her apart from the other narrators and what is typically considered fandom.

Conclusion

One of our aims was to explore the various forms of sustained and affective consumption of and engagement with music among LGBTQs. Sticking to Sandvoss' basic definition of fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption" (2005, p. 8) of popular text such as music, we conclude that all narrators discussed here are "fans". More specifically, we took a special interest in how the fans' sexual and gender identity influences what music they are fans of, and vice versa. Our findings show that in the lives of our narrators, the *mutual interaction of identity and music is very important*. Hargreaves and colleagues suggest that those with a higher level of musical engagement will find that music is a more integral part of their self-identity (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 12) for example, performers, those with a job in music, or fans may experience that music is more essential to their self-identity than, for example, a casual listener.

Addressing our first research question, concerning the fan-like activities and behaviours these LGBTQs pursue and the roles emotions and affect play within their fandom, we can conclude that *the narrators reported a lot of "fannish behaviours"*, to employ the Janissary Collective's term (2014). Many fan activities were spontaneously discussed: From less involved expressions of fandom such as going to concerts and buying records, to more engaged forms such as collecting albums or CDs, (signed) pictures, merchandising and paraphernalia, following blogs and Twitter accounts, becoming part of fan communities, travelling abroad to concerts, meets and greets, and even considering a tattoo. While such activities do not generally distinguish our narrators from straight fans, they do bespeak a strong and emotional attachment to music which accompanies them in their everyday lives and identity formation.

Often—but not always—*their idols are strong female divas*. Former research of gay communities and fandom often focussed on gay male diva worship, and the discussion of divas by various narrators certainly affirms that this focus is justified. However, we argue that there are more nuances to diva worship than have previously been acknowledged. Focussing not on one single star but examining the meaning of diva fandom throughout different ages, musical genres, cultures and genders, it becomes clear that for each narrator, their diva has a very specific meaning in relation to their sexual identity. Anna's story, for example, shows that diva worship is not at all limited to male opera queens, Mostafa's story draws attention to the position of divas in Arab culture, and Felix' relationship with Björk demonstrates that diva worship also occurs in more alternative music. Farmer argues that "most critical discussions of gay diva worship posit in some fashion that gay men engage divas as imaginary figures of therapeutic escapism" (2005,

p. 169). In our case, not the researchers but the narrators themselves made connections between their personal and emotional lives and their engagement with various divas. Various narrators reported recognising themselves in and at the same time being in love with their adored stars. Again, this phenomenon occurs throughout genres.

This brings us to the second research question, concerning the connection between fandom and sexual and gender identity. Most narrators report close links between the music they appreciate and their personal identity. Although not all of them immediately report clear links with their sexual identity or the queer community, *a heightened awareness of gender and sexuality dimensions within the music and the artists emerges*. Dario's story provides insight into the intensity of what is often perceived as the cliché of "the gay fan", connecting Lady Gaga—a contemporary embodiment of the pop diva archetype—to his own sexual identity as well as the broader gay community. Pieter combines a more cerebral approach, reflecting on and theorizing gay men's diva worship and homosexuality, with a strong emotional investment in various divas across musical genres. Like Pieter, Anna sees her sexual and gender identity as inextricably linked to music and performers, and she shares his admiration for Maria Callas amongst other female singers. However, she lives this fandom in a private and emotional way, not participating in any conventional forms of fandom. While the first three narrators connect their fandom to their sexual and gender identity, Mostafa sees a closer link between his favourite diva and Arab culture. Nonetheless, he does recognise a parallel with Western gay diva worship. Stefaan further complicates the picture: While he strongly connects his fandom to his coming out process and sexual identity, its object is not situated in pop or classical singing but in Indie music. Björk's music had and still has an important role in comforting Felix in more difficult life phases. Moreover, Björk was the connecting factor between him and his first boyfriend. In Kurt's case, specific pop music from his youth got a new meaning once he encountered it in the context of LGBTQ parties. Finally, Nina's lesbian/queer sexuality and feminism are closely linked to the music she appreciates, but she considers herself more as a participant than a fan. She is part of highly interactive and subversive DIY communities, which aim to "trouble the distinction between audience and performer" (Downes, 2012, p. 222), bespeaking an engagement with music which is more oriented towards creation than consumption. Whether they recognise themselves in their idols, find strength and positive messages through them, or whether they are drawn to a certain queer timbre or the appearance of an artist: All narrators connect their own experiences being lesbian, gay, or queer to the music they listen to. Music fandom actively facilitates the formation and expression of their sexual and gender identity.

As a whole, these interviews *confirm but also complicate the body of knowledge on LGBTQ music fandom*. While many statements echo earlier findings, what became apparent is the diversity of fandom within this "community", both in terms of objects, activities and affects of fandom, and in terms of connected sexual and gender identifications. By considering a diverse range of individuals and not focusing on a single genre or artist, a more complex and nuanced view on LGBTQ fandom emerges: LGBTQs can venerate multiple idols, serially or simultaneously, in different genres; some gay men are fans of pop divas and some prefer opera divas; some like both while some like neither; queer women can have similar or more alternative tastes, questioning the rather clear-cut genre and gender division sketched in the literature review. Other divisions such as education or cultural identity further complicate the picture, so we think it is crucial for future research to further explore these intersections between music and identities, doing justice to the diverse and idiosyncratic forms of music fandom as rooted in everyday lives.

7 "Bivouacking in the Borderlands":

Gender Nonconforming Trans* Persons on Music and Identity[64]

We break a box to find a hundred more

Gimme a human drama

There's lots to learn, but so much more to unlearn

planningtorock - Human Drama (2014)

Mon Genre est fabuleux—my gender is fabulous, says a sticker belonging to narrator Selm. Through life stories built on music, the complexity, difficulties and fabulousness of non-normative trans* lives are explored. These five musical trans* narratives show some individual experiences and strategies in navigating and narrating being trans* through music. Within the scope of my research project, five out of twenty-two narrators self-identify as trans*, non-binary, genderqueer, genderless or fluid. The five persons whose life stories I discuss here do not experience their gender as either male or female; their stories defy a binary gender system and show that transgender also means gender-ambivalent (cf. Prosser, 1998), gender-nonconforming, third gender, genderfuck and "other". This chapter focuses on gender identities and gender fluidity, rather than sexual identities and fluidity as discussed in chapter 5.

Throughout this chapter when talking about the trans* persons, I use the term "trans*" rather than "trans", as it "signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals" (Tompkins, 2014, p. 27). The asterisk functions like a Boolean internet search operator, indicating a wildcard: Any term beginning with the stem "trans-" is indicated by the asterisk. In the trans* community, the asterisk comprises identifications like genderqueer, non-binary or genderfluid which are not literally preceded by "trans". However, both terms are used interchangeably in the literature and within the community, and as suggested by recent language guidelines in the International Journal of Transgenderism, trans without an asterisk is also frequently employed to "include a very broad

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[64] A similar version of this chapter has been accepted for publication: Wasserbauer, M. (Forthcoming). 'Bivouacking in the borderlands' — gender nonconforming trans* persons on music and identity. *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*. (issue 18.4 or 19.1)

and all-encompassing understanding of the diverse trans communities" (Bouman et al., 2016, p. 6).

Figure 23: Selm's fabulous sticker

These interviews reflect the way the narrators identify at the time of the interview, as well as how gender identifications—and feelings and thoughts about them—may change over time. Although their experiences are very diverse, all of them challenge (the presumption of) a heterosexual matrix and the heteronormative standards Western society is based on (cf. Butler, 1999 [1990]). I summarize the gender identifications of the narrators discussed here as *gender nonconforming trans* identities*, referring to "the extent to which a person's gender identity, gender role and/or gender expression differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex, within a certain society and era" (Van Caenegem, 2015, p. 1281).

As Susan Stryker proposes, "one important task of transgender studies is to articulate and disseminate new epistemological frameworks, and new representational practices, within which variations in the sex/gender relationship can be understood as morally neutral and representationally true" (2006, p. 10). Subjective gender identity development and expressions of "gender atypicality" (Stryker, 2006, p. 3) are central concerns of transgender studies. I aim to

combine both concerns by listening to gender nonconforming trans* narratives and regarding music as a referential framework through which we may express subjective experiences of identity. In this spirit, I propose an interdisciplinary and cultural approach to trans* narratives and stress the value of music in trans* lives, focusing on empirical material. In order to provide holistic and realistic insights into trans* lives, I will also discuss the narrators' medical narratives, which may appear to be somewhat disconnected from the musical life stories, but which are in fact central elements in the narrators' lived experience.

Trans* Identities in Perspective

Queer studies help us understand why traditional concepts of stable (LGBT) identities are inadequate to comprise the full range of sexual and gender identity. Taylor summarizes: "Queer theory supposes that identities are not normal or natural; instead they are performative and discursively constituted" (2013b, p. 195). Transgender studies and queer studies share a "profound rethinking of the relationship between sexuality, identity, and the public sphere" (Stryker, 2006, p. 7). As Butler analyses, the binary distinction of *man* and *woman*, which is linked to the assumption of a logical connection between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual preference (for a person of the other sex) contributes to the cultural intelligibility of humans: The assignment of a sex and gender is what makes us into subjects and, essentially, human (Butler, 1999 [1990]). Gender nonconforming trans* persons undermine and queer this binary, and destabilize what is generally assumed to be the norm.

In our society at large, the umbrella term *transgender* is still often conflated with mtf or ftm *transsexual*, while within transgender studies, a much more expansive conception of transgender is handled. Although knowledge and ethics around trans* topics are evolving fast, legal, medical and social facilities for trans* people are currently still largely based on dysphoria (Davy, 2015; Van Caenegem et al., 2015), and "to this day, gender transition processes are classified as mental disorders in diagnostic manuals" (Suess, Espineira & Walters, 2014, p. 73). Most trans* persons are indeed confronted with questions of "body versus gender" and consulting medical care related to their gender identity and expression; but not all trans* persons' experiences are the same in this respect. Queer theory and criticisms of the gay rights movement teach us that "rights based on any kind of essential fixed identity risk undermining what they're fighting for, because they retain the binary (straight/gay, man/woman), the power relations underlying it, and the assumption that such categories make any kind of sense" (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 76). I argue that this diagnosis also applies to the trans* community: Gender nonconforming persons often remain invisible, even within the LGBTQ community. In real life,

there is a great diversity in gender identities and expressions. Nonconforming identities are often fluid. As such, they not only get erased within the community and from popular representation; they also find themselves in legal and medical no (wo-)man's land.

However, in recent years, politics, medicine, and the media are changing towards adopting a more inclusive concept of trans* as well. In May 2017, a change in Belgian law has been proposed: In order to change your sex designation, you do no longer need a diagnosis or follow medical procedures (çavaria, 2017). The law entered into force as from January 2018, and is an important step towards trans* depathologization. Yet, gender nonconforming persons are not fully taken into account: The new law on sex registration does not acknowledge gender fluidity, as the change of sex designation is possible only once without going to the court, and there is not yet a legal option to register as third gender (çavaria, 2017). In early 2018, *çavaria* started taking legal actions to revise the law and make it more inclusive for non-binary and genderfluid persons (Depoorter, 2018). As these changing policies and medical/legal standards so directly impact some trans* persons and the community, there will be more reference to such topics in this chapter than in others. These narratives are most of the time not connected to music at all; yet, they are so essential in the lived experience of my narrators that I did not want to omit them here.

At the same time, Flemish mainstream media start raising the topic of genderfluidity and non-conformity. For example, the popular weekly magazine *Knack Weekend Flanders* (2015) pronounced "The Transgender" as human of the year. Similarly, mainstream glossy magazine *Flair* picked up the topic in 2016 (De Groef, 2016), and in early 2017, major newspaper *De Morgen* published an extensive weekend supplement about gender diversity, entitled "De Genderrevolutie" ("the gender revolution"). These publications feature genderqueer, fluid, non-binary and trans*persons, and some well-known Flemish trans* persons speak about genderfluidity and the stigma and invisibility attached to it. Moreover, the Flemish daily soap opera *Thuis* ("Home") features an mtf transgender character since 2016[65]; and in early 2018, the Flemish public service broadcaster *Eén* launched the documentary series "m/v/x", documenting the lives of five Flemish trans* persons. These are only a handful of the media picking up a trans* topic in the past few years. Such publications increase visibility, stimulate awareness and tolerance and aid trans* persons.

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[65] For a critical discussion of LGBTQ characters on Flemish television, see Vanlee, Dhaenens and Van Bauwel (2018).

Van Caenegem and colleagues assert that "the currently observed numbers [of gender nonconforming persons in Flanders] are much higher than the prevalence of gender dysphoria in clinical settings" (2015, p. 1286). Although an estimated 30,000 gender nonconforming persons currently are living in Flanders (Van Caenegem et al., 2015, p. 1281), there is little research considering their lived experience. Similarly, a comparative European study on LGBTs from 2012 shows that there is a great diversity of gender identifications within the trans* community, with only half of the trans* participants describing themselves as "trans women, trans men, female cross dresser, male cross dresser" or "transgender" (FRA EU LGBT survey, 2014, p. 16). The other half of the trans* participants describe themselves as "gender variant"[66] or "queer/ other" (FRA EU LGBT survey, 2014, p. 16). As Lisette Kuyper and Ciel Wijsen affirm, "the simplicity of the current measurement does not do justice to the complexity of identities, feelings, and experiences of gender variant individuals" (2014, p. 384).

Another domain in which the simplicity and binarism of our common language use becomes clear is sexual preference: As sexual preference is most often expressed based on gender identities, gender nonconforming persons disrupt the standards of thinking about preferences in terms of straight or non-straight. It is interesting to think about what happens when gender is destabilized and can therefore no longer function as the foundation for thinking about sexuality in terms of straight or gay/lesbian. These labels imply that a person has one stable gender/sex to start with, and indicate that you either prefer persons of the "other" or the "same" gender. When gender is fluid or nonconforming, these terms do not apply any longer, according to their original definition. Due to the complexity and fluidity of the personal and societal frameworks of their sexualities, it may even be difficult for trans* persons themselves to situate their sexuality. As the experience of other researchers confirms, "[d]escribing sexual identity was often not possible with single labels or even short phrases for trans*-identified participants or for participants who had trans* partners. These participants often pointed to the inadequacy of traditional identity labels used on the sexual orientation scales" (Galupo et al., 2015, p. 441). It is therefore interesting to pay attention to how the narrators navigate the terms of sexual preference.

After this overview of the current situation for trans* persons in Flanders, it is important to recall that my interviews were recorded in 2014 and 2015, which means that these more recent positive evolutions in trans* rights are not included in the narrators' experiences. In many

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[66] Often a synonym for gender nonconforming.

respects, gender nonconforming trans* persons are becoming more and more visible; however, more research on their lived experience is needed.

Music, Identity and Narratives

Qualitative research based on oral history and life narratives is one way to learn more about gender nonconforming trans* experiences: As JR Latham suggests, investigating trans* life narratives undoes the dominant clinical logic (2016, p. 349), providing insights into aspects of trans* identities and lives that go beyond medical and legal discourse. Trans* persons are experts on the matter of "experiencing multiple gender identities", and narratives of their lived experience "facilitate a deep understanding of systemic gender complexity" (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p. 52). Narratives leave room to explore multiple dimensions of identity: "Understanding identity as a story recognizes how people negotiate complex and often contradictory subject positions" (Coleman-Fountain, 2014, p. 4). Trans* people rephrase and reconstruct discourse around bodies and gender, and, according to Jason Cromwell, "once transpeople begin articulating their own transsubjectivities, […] new discourse, and thus the expansion of binaries, can begin" (2006, p. 519). Prosser's *Second Skins* (1998) deals with trans* narratives on several levels. Prosser identifies narrative as a central component of transition: "Narrative is not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition itself" (1998, p. 9). Trans* narratives often do not end in transition, as was long assumed to be the standard (Prosser, 1998). Instead, Prosser suggests reading "transsexual narratives to rupture the identity between the binaries, opening up a transitional space between them" (1998, p.16). Narrative is able to bridge the split between "the subject of the enunciation and the subject enunciating" and create a "coherent subject" (Prosser, 1998, p. 102). Similarly, in the life narratives as they were told to and co-constructed by me, the trans*persons bring together their past and current gender identifications. It is not the intention of this research to make any universal truth claims about gender, nor to (re)write an origin myth or morality tale, as many early academics studying trans* people did (cf. Stone, 2006[1987], p. 224).

As discussed above, narratives contribute notably to our understanding of music in everyday life and identity work. As Kotarba highlights, "music is a narrative resource. By employing narrative resources and constructing a sense of self endowed with a feeling of continuity and growth we engage in biographical work" (2018, p. 75). Music aids in finding and expressing one's identity, as "musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity" (DeNora 2000, p.

49). Our interaction with and interpretation of music is what makes it so valuable in our lives: "Music can be seen to arrive as a partly filled narrative that is completed in the subjective experience of reception, never finally but sometimes memorably" (Green, 2016, p. 339). Queer musicologist Taylor highlights the active role music may take in our lives: "Much more than a static object or product, music is a collection of the interconnected activities and texts employed as strategic resources in the production and transmission of self-narrative and collective belonging" (Taylor, 2012, p. 41). As Taylor found in her research on queer music scenes, "music is used extensively in queer identity work to contest gender and sexual norms" and "this particular function of music is especially important to queers because it accommodates emotional, physical and sexual expressions that may be unavailable to them in other expressive forms or in other aspects of daily life" (Taylor, 2012, p. 45). As such, "music is a way for us to translate, perform and intensify through our bodies, intimate thoughts, feelings and desires of the body" (Taylor, 2012, p. 43). Furthermore, DeNora asserts that music provides a map for making sense of something it is attached to and that sociologists should engage with the question "of how listeners draw upon musical elements as resources for organizing and elaborating their own perceptions of non-musical things" (DeNora, 2000, p. 26), which is exactly what this research does. By talking about our experiences with music, we talk about ourselves in ways that words alone might not be able to describe.

A Reclaimed Passion for Music: Tom's Story

At the start of our interview, Tom ponders about the following question, and thus identifies a key question of my research: "Does your taste change to some extent—or does even your identity change?" He wonders whether a change in sexual preference and gender experience might imply a change in our (music) taste, or even in our identity at large. Although at first he is critical about such links, in the course of the interview, several narratives show a parallel between music, wellbeing and sexual orientation/gender identity in his life.

For thirtysomething Tom, sexual and gender identity are fluid and may change throughout time. Pansexual is a good descriptor of his current sexual preference, as he explains:

> I think there are not only boys and girls—actually, that's just a fact: There are people who identify neither as a boy or girl, concerning gender, but on the other hand concerning body as well, there are people who are born neither… who can't be put into one of those two boxes.

Clearly, Tom does not think of gender in a traditional, binary way; he naturally acknowledges genderfluid, trans* and intersex persons. Self-determination concerning gender and identity is essential for Tom. He chooses not to go on any medical trajectory, as he is happy in his body as it is. Nevertheless, he feels that life might be easier for him if he did, because his personal decision is often not recognised by his environment, or by society at large:

> I think there are loads of trans people who only take hormones or even have operations and such in order to be recognised in their gender, and not because they feel their body is their problem. […] I know for sure that should I ever take that decision, then I would just… take hormones for a year or one and a half years, and I would be super comfortable, right? That would be fantastic, everybody would say "he", and nobody would question that any more [laughs]. So yes, that [i.e., taking hormones] remains something I would possibly still do, someday. Just to feel peaceful for once… well yes [laughs]… but actually I don't want that, you know, because I don't have a problem with my body.

From the context of the interview and Tom's half-serious tone of voice, it is clear that he has much more nuanced opinions and criticism about the seemingly "simple solution" of taking hormones than the transcript fragment conveys. Contrary to his own decision, he knows of trans* persons who adapt their stories to the dominant medical narratives and take hormones or have surgeries in order to be accepted by society for who they really are, rather than because they experience strong body dysphoria. Zowie Davy's research indeed confirms that many trans* persons adjust their narratives to the perceived "correct" trans* narrative (2015, p. 1169), and non-binary research narrators in Vincent (2016, p. 106) share very similar experiences. Indeed, as Davy puts it, "therapeutic models are based on stereotypical aesthetics and behaviours that have become less prevalent in Western societies today" (2015, p. 1170). In the medical and diagnostic world, trans* stories and trans* bodies are often still streamlined, normalised and assimilated towards a binary gender/sex congruence[67]. This implies that for trans*persons who wish to have access to body modifying interventions such as hormone replacement therapy or gender confirming surgery (also known as sex reassignment surgery), it is necessary to reiterate the normative narrative. It appears to be commonly known among the trans* community that certain elements of a story, such as confirming a strong dysphoria, are required in order to

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[67] Gender identity disorder is still included in the DSM-5, the fifth version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the American Psychiatric Association which is the most authoritative diagnostic tool for psychiatric diagnosis. By maintaining the medical categorization and thus framing being trans* as a disease, trans* pathologization is reinforced and normative "standards" are re-confirmed.

receive for example the hormones they require. Further on in this chapter, similar experiences are discussed by Selm.

Tom stresses that it is not his body which bothers him, but it is others' attitudes and expectations around gender that make things more complicated: "Everybody expects me first of all to be a girl, and second, to consequently fall in love with boys and boys only, [so] it's not that easy to just be like that [pan/trans*]". In fact, Tom here summarizes the burden of the expectations of a heteronormative society. He expresses ambiguous feelings about speaking up about his gender and sexual identity throughout the interview: Generally he does not feel the urge to overtly identify as pan and transgender, as he overall does not think gender identity all that important. He points out that sometimes he hates all the "fuss around gender". However, he makes it clear that it does become important to overtly identify as pan and transgender whenever people start making heteronormative assumptions about him, misgender him or problematize the fact that he identifies as a boy. Another reason for him to speak up is that he wants to make people more aware of the multitude of gender diversity "and that that's perfectly fine". Although Tom sometimes finds it important to out himself for personal or political reasons, he adds that "outing myself is not a casual thing, you often create a problem. Well, not for myself, but the people I outed myself to suddenly start being tense about it […] I think it is because they have to adjust their world view and that people really don't like to do that". As Tom's story affirms, conflicts around being trans* often do not lie within the trans* person, but in our society "characterized by transphobia and gender binarism" (Suess et al., 2014, p. 74).

Throughout his life, Tom's interest in music reflects his general world view, and connections between music, gender and sexual identity emerge. Just like many Flemings, Tom liked the music of the Flemish rock band K's Choice in his teenage years. The androgynous appearance of lead singer Sarah Bettens intrigued him; in fact, she was the only woman with short hair he knew at that time. Tom was assigned female at birth and raised with the mind-set that he is a girl, that girls should look a certain way and should be in relationships with boys: "For a long time, I couldn't imagine anything else, I didn't know it existed […] we didn't know any LGBTs […] when I still lived at home". The openly lesbian singer broadened his horizon and disrupted this heteronormative thinking pattern, just like she did with many other LGBTQs. Tom thinks her voice, which is rather hoarse, limited in pitch "and therefore a bit 'masculine', according to our culture" contributes to her appeal to the lesbian community.

In his mid-twenties, Tom developed a strong interest in feminism: "If you're interested in feminism … you're just going to question and challenge things". Soon, he realized that his music collection and taste reflected the patriarchal structure of society: "There were no, or almost no women in my music collection". He then consciously started to discover female artists and writers like jazz legends Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn and Nina Simone. However, his interest in feminism did not result in looking only for feminist music or musicians, as "the quality of the music is always most important to me, more than the [ideological] background". For Tom, Ani

Figure 24: CDs of some of Tom's favourite artists

DiFranco is one of the few musicians who succeed in pairing feminist thought with great music. Joining a queer collective as a student "was the beginning of realizing that there is so much gender diversity, and other diversity as well". He learned about pansexuality, asexuality and queers, and quickly realized that many people are suspicious of these "strange" identities.

Making music is a process of personal growth for Tom. At a young age, he internalized what his mother taught him: that he is incapable of playing any instrument. He was madly in love with the violin, the same instrument his mother used to play, and convinced her to let him take up the instrument. However, his mother kept saying "actually you're not able to do that, just don't do it", and he ended up stopping his violin studies after only three months: "It just didn't work. If you just have no support at all, quite on the contrary, it can't work." For many years of imposed self-doubt, he did not attempt to make music. When at age 30 his life changed for the better, he realized that "anyone who wants to is able to learn some chords on the guitar, literally *anyone*. So why should I not be able to?" Eventually, he switched to learning piano, which he has played for several years now. Tom says that "music is actually the most important thing in my life, because I get so much pleasure from it". Making music is strongly connected to mental well-being: Tom states that the extensive period of his "inability" to play an instrument coincides with being in a depression. Now, music is essential to express himself: Composing songs and writing

lyrics allows him to "be more honest and be visible through something artistic". Tom also takes singing classes and started performing in front of audiences. Again, we can see a parallel in his music consumption: After some years of listening almost exclusively to women, he is now looking for male singers he really enjoys and with a higher pitch, similar to his own. One of them is Philippe Jaroussky, a countertenor who combines "technical knowledge or almost perfection … with a great way to express things, to tell a story". The connection between technical and emotional dimensions of singing makes him a favourite of Tom's, just like Rufus Wainwright. Tom states that in many of the artists he enjoys, there is "something non-straight", something other people would likely declare "out of the norm".

Tom elaborates about the Flemish singer Trixie Whitley, whom he does not only admire on a musical level, but who also reminds him of himself. When he saw her at a concert recently, he was overwhelmed by her beautiful and strong voice:

> From the moment she starts making music, she is a certain persona, like, she's so present. But then after the performance she lingers about, just like I would, full of insecurity, and then I went there and said: 'Thanks, I found it really beautiful', because I wanted her to sign my CD [he shows it to me]. And then she's like: 'Well, I'm doing the best I can' [laughs] While, I mean, there really aren't a lot of people as good as her!

Whitley's attitude after her performance resonates with Tom: He recognises himself in this humble demeanour and links it to a general Flemish attitude of being humble and full of self-doubt. This is what he calls the "Flemish petty-mindedness". Tom laughingly admits his own insecurities: "I also have that, an uncalled-for insecurity, which is totally unnecessary. […] I'm trying hard to get rid of it". Throughout our conversation, the topic of insecurity keeps re-emerging, and it becomes clear that Tom was raised with these values and is still angry at his parents for teaching and instilling him with self-deprecating values. For Tom performing music is a possible way to escape this petty-mindedness, as Whitley's transformation on stage proves.

Taking these examples from Tom's life into account, we may return to his opening question about whether music and identity influence each other: His experiences show that our own subject positions may influence what music we consciously listen to; music is able to afford a sense of belonging and connection, and, vice versa, the music we listen to indicates to others what we identify with. Tom's experiences with gender as well as his experiences with playing music are strongly shaped by his family and environment. He had to find his own ways to frame gender nonconformity and making music in a different, positive way. As Taylor puts it, "music is one way in which we, as aesthetic agents, can facilitate exercises of self (re)creation upon

ourselves while negotiating the self we are creating in relation to normative codes of conduct"
(2012, p. 44). Music made him see different paths and new feminist, queer and trans* horizons
throughout the years, and more recently, it has become his most important outlet. Tom's life
story shows that music has a strong transformative power and may be the key to set ourselves
free—from toxic family ties as well as normative gender expectations.

Marthe's Queer Voicing

Marthe (38) prefers for me to switch pronouns when referring to him/her/them.[68] In this
interview, music and gender are narrowly connected and interwoven: Marthe does not talk
about gender or sexuality without linking it to music, artists or queer forms of voicing, and vice
versa.

Right in the beginning of our interview, Marthe expresses that as an artist he is seeking to find
ways of *queer voicing*.[69] He wanted to participate in my research as the title of my research,
Queer Voices, resonated with him. Queer voices/voicing is a common denominator in both of
our interests in music, gender and sexuality, and it is a great way to think about the implicit and
explicit connections between those concerns: "Who am I, and how, well, how do I want to
express myself, how can I express myself, and voicing, well, the way you describe it: Queer
voicing, that seems to touch these issues in a way". Marthe emphasizes that voicing is more than
communicating: "I also see it as something political, obviously. I mean, voicing is not only… it's
not for entertainment, right. … It's not only about identity, but also about time, and place, and
environments…".

Here, Freya Jarman-Ivens's work on queer voices provides valuable insights. "Voice" refers to
various concepts: To the singing voice and, by extension, the artist; to (implicit and explicit)
communication; as well as to empowerment, voice in the figurative sense of being heard. Voice
as a queer phenomenon "functions in a 'third space' in between the voicer and the listener" and
"it operates as a mediator between body and language, which are gendered spaces" (Jarman-
Ivens, 2011, p.13). These properties reflect Marthe's conception of queer voicing perfectly. Not
only language or music enable queer voicing, but also creating (electronic) music (instruments),
or seemingly nonsensical sounds. Just like queer voicing is not one single, straightforward
concept, being queer is not a fixed identity for Marthe either; neither do they explicitly choose

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[68] Marthe used all of these pronouns in English rather than Dutch throughout the interview, although the rest of
our interview was in Dutch.
[69] Marthe used this term in English throughout the interview.

"queer" as an identity label. The only direct reference to how they currently feel about their own body is the following: "I've got breasts, but I would possibly prefer not to have any, but I'm not going to take any steps about that. I'm not going to… not going to start taking any medication". Although Marthe prefers not to talk about this directly, he is clearly exploring his own gender and the diversity and possibilities of gender in our society: "I find collective voices, like 'it', 'they', and 'she' more interesting than 'he'. Even though… uhm, female to male, that's also quite interesting. I don't really know. But actually that's all a bit outdated". Just like her gender is fluid and changeable, Marthe's sexual preference is as well. Marthe says that they sometimes find it difficult to say "I am a lesbian", as this term implies being female-identified and having a sexual preference for other female-identified persons; it does not leave much room for any gender and queer flexibility. Reviewing his past sexual preferences, Marthe tells about "straight relationships with weird guys", her "Liesbian" phase (she was in a relationship with a person called Lies) and "actually I'm just into certain… dynamics and personalities, I think. But yes, well, the the… [pauses] well, it's women who appear to be men and men who—yeah no, many women… ah, this is so difficult!" Terms for sexual preferences are most often linked to binary gender assumptions, and therefore it is difficult to find the right way to express sexualities.

Marthe introduces "non-gender" as having a political dimension as well; finding a place where you just have the right to be you, without thinking in the category of gender. A musical metaphor resolves the tension in talking about gender at this point in the interview: "It's about a sort of depth…" Then he starts to growl and grumble, "eeeeeeeh". We both laugh, because it is very clear what she wants to express, namely the struggle of having to deal with categories we wish did not exist but still exist:

> Marthe: See! Now I've finally arrived at the queer voicing, because I feel I can express it like that… but of course, that doesn't work when you meet people [we laugh].
>
> Marion: Hello, who are you? "Eeeeeeh" [growls].
>
> Marthe: Eeeeh [growls along] What do you do? Mmmmmh [another kind of growl] come on, everything goes so slow [about the laptop which does not cooperate but suddenly starts playing a song on its own] what's this now?! Liliane Saint Pierre, I AM a Soldier of love[70]! [Laughs].

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[70] Marthe here refers to the Belgian contribution to the European Song Festival 1987, "Soldiers of Love" by Liliane Saint-Pierre. Marthe had looked up this song in preparation of our interview.

Queer voicing is enacted in our interview, and it has a freeing effect on both of us. At a point in the interview which is rather heavy and philosophical, the spontaneous identification as a soldier of love is a surprising, yet very honest musical identity metaphor. Instead of talking about personal gender identity in a direct way, talking about it through music and queer voicing is much more comfortable. This links with Jarman-Ivens's proposition to think about queer as an "open-ended practice" (2011, p. 17).

These rather abstract contemplations about queer voicing become clearer through the first musical memory Marthe connects to queer voicing, which is a song by the popular Dutch children's group Kinderen voor Kinderen ('children for children'). Before our interview, Marthe looked up one specific song on YouTube:

> *Met een been op de stoep, met een been in de goot* ('One foot on the sidewalk, one foot in the gutter') [...] well it is about someone who walks with one leg on the sidewalk and one leg in the gutter, right, instead of just walking on the street or on the sidewalk, [...] well, not everything makes sense in our world. And when you watch the [video] clip, now, well, it's queer as can be! They're also wearing those really weird costumes, and what's also really interesting is that it's not their real voice [referring to the singing children] [...] in that time [1987] the pitch was manipulated a lot.

Marthe actually used to walk just like the children in the song, with one foot on the sidewalk and one foot in the gutter. Now, Marthe interprets this song as being about going through life with a different perspective:

> Thinking back, this is the first moment in music, and if I'm to read it from those queer voices, then it's also something that… that kind of touches many things, it's not a sort of maturity that needs to conform, right, and silliness can sometimes… provide a much greater freedom or so to be who you want to be.

Kinderen voor Kinderen 8 - Een been op de stoep

Figure 25: Still from the music video Marthe talks about

Marthe's analysis transforms the children's song into a queer manifesto on subversion and difference: "You can somehow feel what may provide resistance to a sort of assimilation in what you already feel naturally in your body, or how you speak or how you are: That you can't conform or assimilate".

Similarly, a song by Belgian singer Sandra Kim was important in her youth: "J'aime la vie" ('I love life'), the winning song at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1986. Marthe tells about the song "because I knew there was something strange/queer about her, I knew that it was 'j'aime LA vie', but that she actually sings 'j'aime LE vie' […] if you listen to the lyrics. The background choir sings 'la vie', but she doesn't". Because of this twist in the grammatical gender caused by the unclear/wrong pronunciation of the French definite article, the word *vie* ('life') is queered: "I find that queer voicing too", says Marthe. Later on in our interview Marthe resorts to this song when they get stuck talking about gender. Since it has recently been a topic he feels he needs to address but at the same time tries to avoid, it is very understandable that it is hard to think and tell about. Marthe refers back to Sandra Kim: "Because that's, well, you understand a bit what I…, about 'J'aime LE vie/ LA vie'". Although this sentence is incomplete, it is clear that Marthe identifies with the feeling of interchanging male and female pronouns, of seeing life in a gender-shifting or non-gendered way, queering existing genres. In that way, Marthe indicates that they

are feeling non binary, and possibly trans*. The musical reference here expresses what words cannot explain: Queer voicing is happening.

On a different level, for Marthe queer voicing is also enacted in electronic music. Rather early in life, Marthe discovered an interest in electronic music, which constitutes the better part of their CD and LP collection.

> Marthe: In the end, it's the frequency that's passed on. Uhm, the bass, the beat, and that doesn't actually have a body. […] now it also has this star culture, but when it started: OK, there was a DJ who played the records, the music producers were there but they only made…
>
> Marion: So it was really about the music and not about the… star?
>
> Marthe: Yes, and also not about the identities around them! And it was very different music that didn't have a clear line, or a melody, rhythm and… what else are characteristics of pop music? And also not that tough, rock [aura].

In contrast to the pop music his peers listened to in his teenage years, the focus here lies on the music and not the (gendered and sexualized) identities of the artists.[71] In the second half of the 1990s, Marthe was involved in the organisation of underground electronic/acid/breakcore parties and intuitively produced music on her computer with sequencers and synthesizers. Rather than being just part of the audience, she enjoys actively playing music and "co-creating this dynamic".

Marthe tells that at some point they "started to dig deeper" into the world of genderqueer musicians, as a counteraction to the dominant machismo in the electronic music world. Artists who keep changing identities and reinventing themselves as musical groups especially intrigue Marthe. One of them is Kevin Blechdom of the band Blectum from Blechdom who "already started to play with identities back then. She was called Kevin Blechdom, but she is physically a woman. I don't know what they are by now. […] I think that's considered queer electronics. I really like her a lot". Similarly, "Terre Theamlitz is someone who did a lot of reflection on queer identity and the vocalization and personification of it". These artists create mash-ups, glitches and confuse their audiences' expectations. This may be summarized by what Marthe terms "multi-identity", a recurring characteristic in the artists Marthe talks about. Artists may create multi-identity for example by using looping techniques, multiplying and transforming their own

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[71] As discussed in chapter 4.3, Dan and Michel similarly experience electronic music as dehumanized and genderless.

voices. When describing the music he talks about, Marthe often uses the Dutch word "raar", meaning "strange", "weird" or "queer", and this weirdness is clearly a positive characteristic which is appealing to Marthe.

To sum up, for Marthe, queer voicing means communicating about identity and gender, without necessarily speaking about these topics directly. It is a mutual understanding of things, and allows for losing oneself in and following the dynamics occurring in interaction with others. Queer voicing does not always happen in the form of songs as such, but may emerge through intuition, collaboration and dialogue—like in our interview. In our interview, we abandoned normative conversational conventions and just went with the queer voicing. Moreover, musical and electronic technologies allow for queering and questioning voices, bodies and identities; and music is often able to communicate what we are not able to transmit within the constraints of our language.

Music as the 5ᵗʰ Dimension: Robertina's Nonconformist Life Story

Robertina is 60 and identifies as a lesbian woman in a male body. For our interview, Robertina and I met in a queer bar. Our table was packed with musical paraphernalia Robertina brought with her, including vinyl records, her first pair of headphones, a cassette player, booklets and homemade music equipment. Right at the beginning of our meeting, Robertina asserts:

> Music is very important for me, it's even the fifth dimension for me, and you link things you think or say or see with music. And it mostly matches. Uhm, come together [At that moment, "Come Together" by The Beatles is playing in the background] and be free… [We laugh].

The Beatles' hit accompanying our coming together confirms Robertina's view that music often matches the things happening inside and around us. Throughout our talk, there are several occasions when the music played in the bar matches Robertina's story or triggers memories. But music for Robertina signifies more than just single songs or genres; music is in all kinds of sounds and energies, like the sound of leaves of a tree moving:

> To me, music is energy as well, it's vibration, hertz, airwaves, and you emit these, it's emotion, it's mathematics as well—all music is math. […] Everything is inside of music, or in texts. And if you combine all these things, you see the entirety. And everything is connected.

For Robertina, music is everywhere; music is spirituality and mathematics at the same time. The fact that she is a highly sensitive person intensifies her awareness of sounds, like other sensory impulses. As these first two interview excerpts show, my conversation with Robertina has a very different quality than other interviews: Robertina is a very intuitive narrator and at times it feels as if she shares her stream-of-consciousness with me. This implies that the interview is much less focused on identity and music in the narrow definition. Although music is so important to Robertina, there are only very few specific artists or songs we talk about. Whenever she tells about a single experience or incident, she also connects it to the "bigger picture"; either in the context of her own life, in science, or in our society at large. Accordingly, her narratives as well as our conversation overall have a rather circular quality. Robertina is a very reflexive person, and emphasises the way she looks at life, and how that differs from how other people look at life. She likes to do things differently, and to explain why and how. Many of her stories refer to the tough period she had to face in the past few years, which in turn is related to her gender identity. Yet, throughout all difficulties, Robertina kept an open and positive mind.
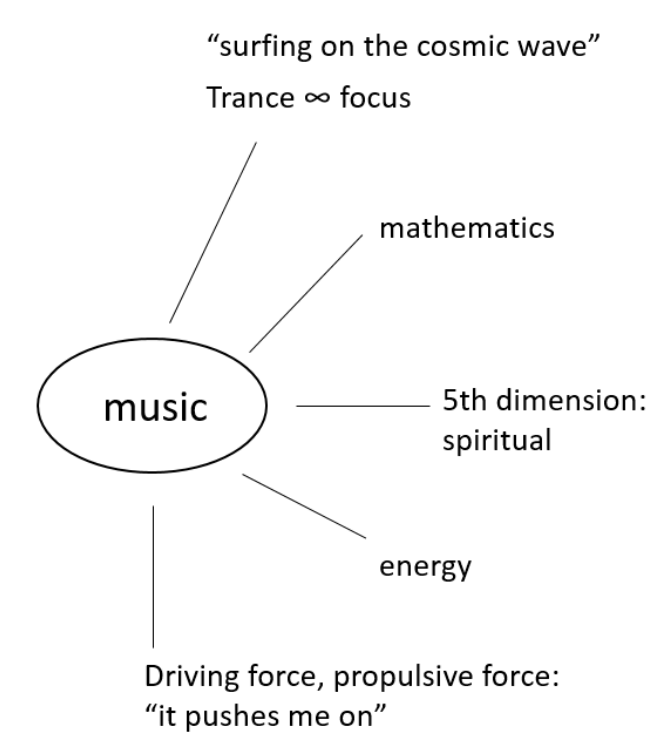

Figure 26: Different meanings of music for Robertina

Robertina's active gender quest started in the late 1990s, and coincides with being admitted to a psychiatric ward due to complete exhaustion following an extremely stressful period at work. However, Robertina relates to this episode as a spiritual awakening rather than a breakdown: Through her interest in religion and spirituality, Robertina discovered that what she experienced

at that moment correlates with what the mystics describe as a spiritual awakening: "It's like a flash of lightning—bang! And in a fraction of a second everything exposes itself. […] It's just like a door that opens. And it's a completely different world you see there." Then in her forties, Robertina realized what her true identity is, and that she is in fact a woman, not a man: "In that short moment: Aaah! It's like the pieces of a puzzle falling into place: That's the way it is!" The metaphor of pieces of a puzzle falling into place is one used by various narrators talking about realizing that their sexual or gender identity is different from what they thought before. However, Robertina first wanted to keep this to herself and find out more about her gender identity: "So then it took me 15 years; I actually carried out a self-psychoanalysis on myself." Only three years ago, Robertina revealed her female gender identity and started to dress as a woman in public.

Coming out as a lesbian woman in a male body had consequences in several fields of Robertina's life. Her wife of 35 years made her leave their common house and they split up. What is more, Robertina's former wife saw the changes in her partner as a sign of mental illness and had her admitted to a psychiatric ward again at age 57. In the same period, Robertina's employer had her attested unsuitable for her position. Her employer even called her a risk, and Robertina suspects that "they are not ready for a man wearing women's clothing". Despite being judged and bullied for being different, she is staying strong and resilient. Robertina emphasises that resilience is linked to believing in oneself:

> I totally believe in myself. Accepting who you are. And then you love yourself, without being exalted, and then you're able to love as well. And then nothing can harm you.

Accepting your true self also refers to Robertina being trans*. During her more recent stay at the hospital, Robertina "opened the door of my room and people came in to talk with me instead of the medical staff. […] Well, because I always played music there, and people were also attracted by the music." One of the songs she played on repeat is Major Lazer's hit "Be free": "I played this to set myself free". By chance, this song is played in the bar during our conversation and it clearly means a lot to Robertina: She cannot stop smiling and moving to the song. Robertina's story here embodies what DeNora describes as a mutual referencing of music and the self (2000, p. 69). In this instance, music literally was part of Robertina's identity work (cf. DeNora 2000, p. 70): It expresses Robertina's state of mind and functions as self-care or even almost like a mantra. As Robertina puts it herself, music is a driving force. This anecdote is, in fact, one of the very few connections between her being trans* and specific music.

Robertina differentiates between gender identity/expression, birth assigned sex[72] and body:

> Uhm, there's gender identity […] the hypothalamus which regulates your gender. […] It also controls other things, but your gender as well. In most people obviously this matches, right, man-man, woman-woman. But [sighs] there are exceptions. Like as a transgender you're an exception.

Here, Robertina sums up prevailing heteronormative presumptions, and frames being transgender as an exception to the rule, which is that your gender is supposed to be aligned with the societal expectations of the bodily reality of a penis or a vagina. At the moment of our interview, she takes a clear stance against hormonal and medical options available for trans* persons:

> I am a lesbian woman when it comes to gender, but I'm born in a male body. And I accept my body as it is, I'm not going to have myself transformed. I knew that immediately, or I felt immediately: No, they're not going to touch my body. I'm not a woman, physically. I think it's attacking your body. I'm in contact with a lot of transgender persons, and, well, it's all plastic surgery and keep taking pills, or they get ill.

Robertina is fine in her physical body as it is and although she may at times feel the societal pressure around these topics, she does not wish to consult any medical care. Of the five gender nonconforming trans* people I interviewed, Robertina's description of her sexual preference is most clear-cut. She is attracted to women, and as her gender identity is female, lesbian is a good term for her. She does not further elaborate on the topic, and the only intimate relationship she talks about is the one with her ex-wife.

Throughout her story, Robertina does not hesitate to refer to herself as "Rob" referring to points in time before her coming out. Some trans* narrators prefer not to talk about these times or disclose their name given at birth, but Robertina embraces these parts of her identity. In fact, Robertina is convinced that all of us have male and female energies inside ourselves. Looking back to her childhood and youth, Robertina now sees certain hints that she felt more like a girl than a boy: "My mother always had to dress me as a boy in order to say: It's a boy. Otherwise everyone thought that I was a girl; I also preferred playing with girls".

In the 1970s, Robertina was one of the first boys being allowed to attend her secondary school, which only just changed from being a girls-only school to a mixed one. 6 boys joined the 300

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[72] Cf. guidelines by Bouman et al., 2016.

girls attending the school. To her, this is not a coincidence: "The other 5 boys didn't really like it there, while I felt at home". She recalls the teachers asking her for advice on how to handle boys. Her narrative emphasises that she has always already had insight into the worlds of more than one gender. In various metaphors and references, Robertina expresses her admiration for persons who accept the fact that they are man and woman in spirit at the same time; these persons gain unknown genius and power. In the same vein, Robertina refers to two-spirits' high status in several indigenous North-American societies.

From an early age, Robertina was fascinated with music. When she was around 14 years old, she started listening to music instead of doing her homework. She constructed various music-related items like a lighting console and a spring reverberator. As a DJ, Robertina had her own radio show focusing on "cosmic music". The popular Dutch radio program "The Superclean Dreammachine" by Ad Visser was a big inspiration for Robertina's "Dream Evenings", where she played New Age music and read out texts about spiritual topics. She played music at two different Antwerp youth clubs from her teenage years onwards, and later on made the soundscapes for several theatre plays. In order to get the music she needed for her radio show, she recorded music from the radio with a hand-held microphone connected to a cassette player, as this was the only available technology at that time. Playing music for other people and collecting music are two important musical themes in Robertina's life. Music is a powerful medium, which is able to attract as well as annoy people: "As a disc jockey you can play on/manipulate all of your audience with the music you play. You can also make them all run away".

Music is energy, and there is a message in all music. These messages often relate to energy within oneself, the power of love, and spirituality. Robertina found one such message in the first vinyl single she ever bought, "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" by The Temptations, first released in 1972. She elaborates on the meaning of the song in her life:

> "Papa Was a Rolling Stone", it also describes a bit how I am: I am home everywhere. I feel at home wherever I am, it doesn't matter: Place me in Japan and I'll learn the language, and I'll be at home there. Many people are afraid of that.

One line of the song's lyrics summarizes these feelings and reflects Robertina's adaptable personality: "Wherever he laid his hat was his home". The song recapitulates her attitude about her own gender, accepting all different energies in herself.

A musical idol who has provoked people throughout the years with his changeable personality is David Bowie. Robertina admires Bowie, who changed his stage persona multiple times throughout his career and showed that there are many different ways to express gender. Bowie is famous for his gender-bending appearance and expression, as well as for showcasing his fluid sexuality. The world of music provides a space in which shifting characters and genders are more readily accepted than in general society:

> David Bowie is also a trendsetter, he just didn't care what others thought, and he just did his own thing. And he also transformed frequently, right, first he was like this, then he was something entirely different and… well, when you say that to psychiatrists [they answer]: 'Yes, that's possible in the world of music, that's a different world'. I say, 'yes but why am I not allowed to do that?' […] because it's seen as 'not normal' in the ordinary world. But David Bowie can do that, because, well, in the world of music that's normal.

Robertina wishes that it was acceptable in the ordinary world to change from persona to persona. Despite trying to get more details about her admiration for David Bowie and his concert she saw at a festival in 1975 or 1976 in Belgium, Robertina does not tell any in-depth stories about him. She quickly switches to other topics, which emphasises that Bowie is only a small part of her musical realm of experience: "I am also a fan of David Bowie, obviously, but not only of David Bowie, I am… I don't really have one specific pop idol". For Robertina, music is interwoven with the whole of her identity and everything around her. It therefore makes a lot of sense that in her story, music and gender identity do not intersect explicitly on many occasions, but rather complement each other.

Not only concerning gender, but in many respects, Robertina is non-conformist. Overall, she has a very open-minded and positive mindset about being a gender nonconforming trans* person. She patiently yet firmly encounters those who do not understand her and tries to broaden their horizon—not only concerning gender, but also concerning other societal matters.

Patricia's Story of Fluid Identities and Musical Preferences[73]

Patricia (51) identifies as pansexual. For her, "it means that you could fall in love with everyone, with men, women, bi, but also transgender, or with people who are androgynous or… everybody, really". This fluid approach to sexual orientation is paralleled by Patricia's fluidity in gender and gender roles, which I will discuss below. Throughout her life, Patricia has had various

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[73] Parts of Patricia's story have previously been published in: Wasserbauer, 2016a; Wasserbauer, 2017.

relationships with persons from all over the world, who all "brought their own music and food with them". The music Patricia mentions in our conversation mirrors her life story. Throughout her life, she has listened to numerous music styles and each change in style reflects a new phase or a different aspect in her life. Giles and colleagues liken record collections' autobiographical function to that of a photo album or diary:

> The purchase of specific recordings is tied to certain memories and sentiments relating to that period in the consumer's life. Like an old photograph, it may reveal something about an earlier version of the self that is now seen as redundant or even embarrassing: Indeed, in the same way as we can never bring ourselves to destroy old snapshots, there is a clear tradition among music collectors of retaining 'embarrassing' records, typically bringing up the rear of the visual record display. (2007, p. 437)

Indeed, Patricia's CD collection functions like a photo album, but in contrast to this statement, Patricia embraces all facets and phases of her life instead of tucking the more difficult ones away. All music is equally important, and there is no hierarchy in her CD cupboard.
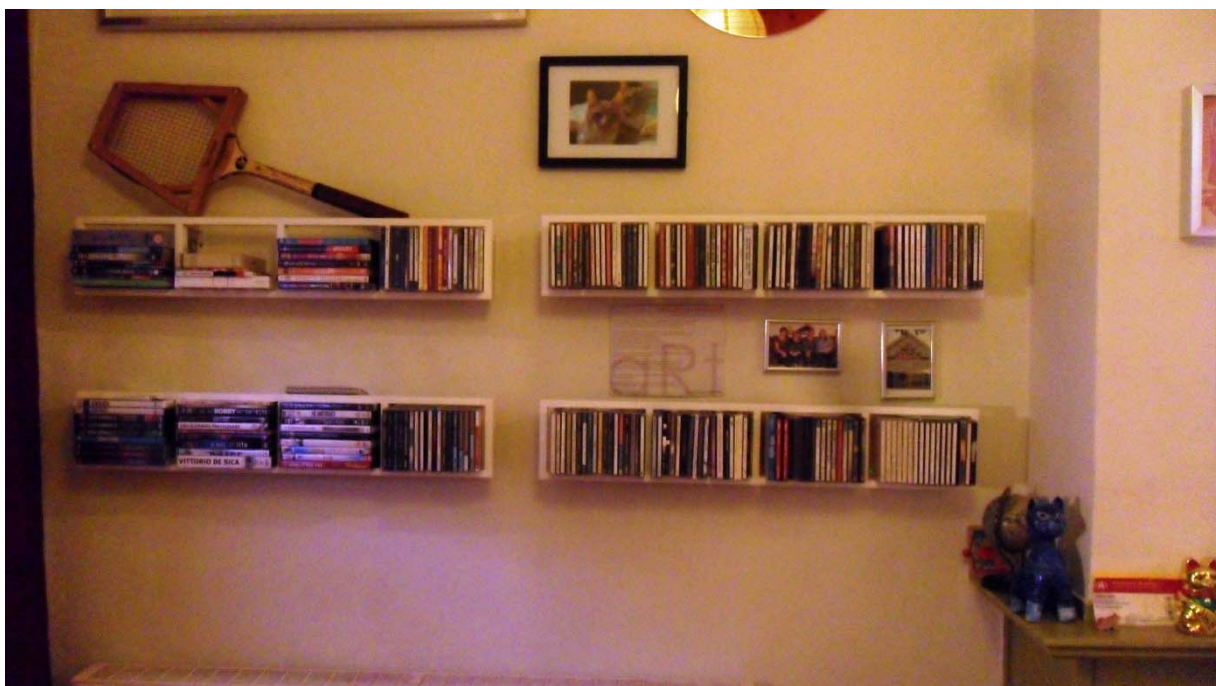

Figure 27: Patricia's CD collection

Throughout her narrative, a clear preference for sensual music can be sensed, like that by Prince, African music, or salsa and mambo. Another common characteristic of the music she appreciates, is that she likes surprising, unpredictable and dissonant sounds, like in Chinese opera, or the work of Miles Davis. At the end of guiding me through her CD collection, Patricia

remarks: "But what I actually notice is that they are very many different sorts of music and that… that characterises me as well. Also in my contacts, in my networks, I have very many people who come from very diverse backgrounds".

Until the age of 18, Patricia did not have the opportunity to listen to any music of her own, since she grew up in a children's home due to her difficult family situation. At 18, the contact with her family was restored, and her siblings introduced her to various music scenes. She recalls encountering gays, lesbians and trans* persons for the first time in music club Cinderella's Ballroom in Antwerp, a legendary dance hall in the punk scene of the late Seventies and Eighties. In Cinderella, underground music und punk rock brought together open-minded people, and everybody was welcome (Aerts, 2013). Coming home also meant being introduced to drugs: "Because they did that at home, and also because it was a way for me to belong to them". This shaped Patricia's life; she did, however, manage to get off the drugs and start a clean life.

As Patricia remarks, her sister's music collection included a lot of artists "who are uhm also appreciated by a lot of LGB's, like David Bowie, for example. Or The Style Council". Her brother, on the other hand, introduced her to the hard rock scene. Patricia loved listening to her records: "I was someone who actually very often listened [to music] alone. I sat in my room and listened to music alone". Soon after she returned to her family, she picked up singing and playing the guitar, only ever having followed three music lessons. She is able to just listen to some music and then learn to play or sing it. Her first big crush on a woman is closely related to music, as she fell in love with a fellow street musician in her twenties. Within these alternative and underground music scenes, she felt at home and discovered an openness towards gender and sexuality which fitted her own views.

Patricia certainly does not only listen to specifically gay or lesbian music, but there are several musicians in her CD collection she connects to an LGBTQ fan base: "The Smiths […] I associate that also with… with LGB's, there are a lot of people who like to listen to that, at least in my circle of friends". In the case of The Smiths, she connects the singer Morrissey's sexual ambivalence with an LGBT audience: "I don't really know if he's gay, but he does not tie himself to being straight either". Similarly, David Bowie "is such a figure who actually doesn't, uhm, want to be pinned down to being straight". Prince and his music became important to her when she got to know his music in a drug rehabilitation centre. She owns a lot of his albums and describes: "I find that it has such an enormous sexual energy, Prince, his music. I find him enormously… how

do you say that—stimulating[74]? I get, I get all warm from it, let me put it that way". She fell in love with Tracy Chapman, being impressed by "her physical appearance, but also her heavy voice, also uhm the songs, well, the lyrics, they had quite some content, they were very uhm… well, socio-political statements". Chapman is a lesbian icon for many, although Patricia was not really considering her sexuality. The LGBTQ music icons Patricia talks about are of all genders: men, women and gender fluid artists influenced her.

Just like her taste in music and her sexual preference, Patricia describes that her gender feels rather mixed or fluid, stating that "I am not able to say 'I am lesbian' or 'I am bi' or 'I feel like I'm a man' or 'I feel like I'm a woman'". These feelings and identifications shift:

> When I'm in a relationship with a woman, my manliness actually comes more to the foreground […] well, I also have such masculine feelings […] a tougher side. And that becomes more prominent like—also the protective, the more attentive and gallant, opening the door, going to fetch something in the shop—such things. […] And when I'm with a man, I feel actually more woman. And actually I find it regrettable that I have to suppress that male part in me.

Patricia feels comfortable in various gender roles and likes to embrace her masculine side. However, her story shows that not all LGBTQ persons are as flexible as herself in thinking about gender expressions and gender roles: She has experienced social exclusion in some of Antwerp's traditional lesbian groups and links not feeling welcome to class differences and gendered expectations: "Actually, I find that there is little tolerance within the lesbian milieu towards lesbians who are bi, or who look a bit masculine, or who have slightly rougher hobbies or listen to rougher music". When I asked her what kind of prejudices bisexuals in particular experience in these groups, she answers that many lesbians are very narrow-minded in their thinking:

> That we… do it with everybody, that we want to do it with everybody, that we can't choose between man and women, if we have a relationship with a woman there will always come a moment where we will choose for a man eventually. And then things like: 'It's a phase, you just don't know yet, you are a leach, you want to butter your bread on both sides, you are actually straight but also want a lesbian adventure'.

These are prejudices many bisexual persons experience, as research confirms (e.g. Callis, 2014, p. 67). Patricia experienced negative attitudes in her private life with partners expecting her to

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[74] She uses the Dutch word „opzwepend", which may also be translated as "energetic" or "stirring".

behave in stereotypically feminine ways she is not comfortable with as well. She passionately defends her point of view:

> Patricia: It's something stupid, really, but all of the girlfriends I've had so far—and it's not that many—they all want me to shave my legs, for example.
>
> Marion: You don't have to.
>
> Patricia. No. I don't have to. But they make, we make it—it's an issue. Most of the time I give in because then I think 'gosh, it's just my legs'. But then it starts like: 'And this. And no chequered shirts allowed. And this and that, and a more feminine jacket, and my Arafat-shawls [keffiyeh] were a problem' because those are apparently things that invalidate the feminine. And meanwhile I am like 'pffff' [shrugs and makes a sound indicating "whatever"].
>
> Marion: 'What's the big deal?!'
>
> Patricia: Had I been straight: There are also straight women who wear an Arafat shawl. There are also straight women who wear a good, decent […] jacket that doesn't look that feminine, but it's warm! And a little… OK, tough-looking, but there are also straight women who wear tough clothing. And I'm not allowed to do so because I'm with a woman?! [upset].

Moreover, having experienced prejudice because of her upbringing and family background, Patricia emphasises that class differences make a difference in belonging or not belonging to certain LGBT organisations:

> I feel that there are also… there are quite some prejudices about people who live in poverty. Also within the LGBT community that's an audience which is very difficult to be reached. Although it's not class-related, your sexual orientation.[…] Uhm and I also think that this plays a role, that this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult for me to connect [within the community].

Similarly, there used to be two different lesbian bars in Antwerp in the 1980s that were linked to class and status. When Patricia realized, "'oh! I'm into women' [expresses surprise in her voice]—because I wasn't bi, at that moment, I was into women—I immediately started going out in the scene". People who went to café Shakespeare were looked down on by those women who went out at Betty Boop's. Patricia experienced the negative effects of power dynamics related to intersecting identity categories. As a pansexual person who has lived in poverty, she felt

prejudices about her social status as well as her sexual preferences from within the lesbian movement.

Recently, Patricia got involved with transgender communities:

> Yes, now I'm actually [laughs a little]… for a few years now I am engaging with [the concept] 'transgender'. And for a few months I've been going to Genderflux[75]. […] It's not that I want an operation or anything like that, or that I want to take hormones, I actually just want to… be… be who I am without being judged for it.

At the time of the interview, Patricia was only just starting to delve into the trans* topic, and she did not feel the need to consult any medical care. As stated above, Patricia experiences that her gender is "actually quite mixed", a fact that is not troublesome to her. However, she has got the feeling that others are troubled by her gender ambivalence:

> Because when you go out, someone will always ask this question. Or at some moment it's always about past relationships, or yes, about sex. Well, maybe not that explicitly about sex, but about… someone says something about transgender, 'they look rather…' or 'they act like…' [silence]… and it's all about [thinking in] boxes, and I actually don't really feel like any boxes. From the moment I think or feel 'oh, I belong to that box' I start to feel irritated.

Similar to the other narrators, Patricia experiences that it is in fact our hegemonic society which causes most trouble related to gender ambivalence, even more so than a person's own relationship with their gender identity, expression and body.

Patricia's story shows that gender and sexuality are not stable but fluid, changing throughout life. She has encountered a lot of hardship from an early age, but always continued to go on. Music is a constant companion which is in some ways, yet not always, implicitly or explicitly connected to her gender identity or sexuality. Her playlist is the most diverse one of all narrators, which forms a parallel to her pansexual identity, within which anything is possible. The fluidity of Patricia's gender identity is paralleled by her flexible and multiple music preferences.

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[75] A local trans* organisation.

Inhabiting the Borderlands Selm's Way

Selm (32) is genderfluid, and wants to define gender as little as possible, describing her trajectory as a "bypass off a bypass" in the world of gender. Selm knows well how to articulate her thoughts and has worked on various contributions about gender for the Flemish and Dutch media. A shelf full of books on gender and trans* topics in her living room reflects that she has thought about gender a great deal. Still, Selm does not see herself as a "figure of the barricades" and humorously expresses that she does not constantly want to deal with the "gender fuss": "I don't want to be a gender warrior all the time, I sometimes just want to go to a sauna or just live". At the time of the interview, Selm preferred the pronoun *she;* however, in theory, neutral pronouns like *they* or a recently emerging Dutch alternative, *hen* are very appealing to Selm.

Likewise, Selm's sexual preference is more fluid and not easily describable using conventional categories. She describes her current relationship situation:

> For example, it's a non-issue with my current girlfriend. I mean, she calls herself a lesbian, although she was always also into men or so… for her, it's currently very important to delineate this, and to simply put me into the box "woman" [laughs] […]. And actually, I find that quite comfortable. If she would do it the other way round—it's a very nuanced thing.

For her former partner, the question of sexual identification became problematic:

> According to her, she was in a hetero-relationship; while I was more in a—well, I don't know what? A lesbian relationship, yes. So in principle, I try to delimit and define this as little as possible, but it is because of others that I have to.

 With her agreement, I note a question mark on the identification form and Selm adds that her attraction generally is "leaning more towards the female".

Selm addresses encountering a common misconception about genderfluidity. While genderfluidity implies a sort of gender freedom, it does not mean that Selm constantly changes gender: "It's not like […] I wake up and [think] 'oh, am I a man or a woman today?' or so: No […]. To me personally, it's also a sort of non-gender, I am sort of done with it [referring to binary gender]". Selm describes that she is now "bivouacking in the borderlands" of gender, which is a precarious yet comfortable place for her, after a long quest for gender identity:

There was always a sort of, uhm, an unease or… what they call dysphoria, sure, and uhm yes it took quite some time before I was able to handle it or understood where it began and also where it ended or so, and where my comfort was in all this.

Of the five narrators, only Selm has started a medical trajectory. The binary medicalized structures when she first entered the gender clinic around 2010 did not offer her the possibility to take a genderfluid side-path and still receive medical and psychological care. However, Selm points out that trans* care is becoming increasingly individual and flexible:

Selm: I still remember when I registered at the 'genderteam'[76], it was not *à la carte*, like it is now! […] Now I can simply choose: I'll take hormones but won't have a breast augmentation, I won't have sex reassignment surgery, I don't… also, 'my gender expression is neutral or androgynous' or so, whereas in the past—and it's not insanely long ago, like five years ago[77] or so, it was VERY clear-cut.

Marion: One thing or the other.

Selm: Yes, exactly! And back then you just didn't get in. If I had said from the start […] 'oh, yes well but I think that it's a bit more nuanced' or 'I don't believe in a binary gender system' or so: Well, I don't think I could have started treatment. And that has changed incredibly over the past few years… so, well, how did my story go? I felt a sort of discomfort […] [But] it is of course just—it just is my body, so I… it's not that I feel that 'I am really born in the wrong body', or so, uhm… well yes, 'if it's not the one thing, it must be the other', this black-or-white, this binary: That was where the quest was. 'Oh yes, if it's not "m", it must be "f"', and then moving into that direction and gradually finding nuances.

Like Tom, Selm experienced that the medical care available for trans* persons in the past was not nuanced enough; and that often people adjusted their personal narratives to the normative medical narratives in order to receive the care they needed. Yet again, I wish to stress that Selm's experiences with medical care date from around 2010, and that trans* care has become much more flexible and tailored to individual needs[78]. At the time, Selm started a more standard

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[76] Referring to the renowned *Centre for Sexuality and Gender* at Ghent University Hospital.

[77] As I interviewed Selm in 2015, she here refers to the period around 2010.

[78] Moreover, the *Transgender Infopunt* takes up an important role in Flanders, bridging the gap between the lived experience of trans* persons and the medical approach to trans* issues. Such initiatives contribute towards care made to measure for trans* persons and their environments. Big events like the annual T-Day, organised by the LGBTQ umbrella organisation *çavaria*, gain more and more popularity, functioning as social as well as informative events. In 2016, this event focused on non-binary (trans*) persons, which goes to show that non-binary and gender nonconforming persons gain more and more visibility in Flanders.

trajectory of hormone replacement therapy, but decided not to go any further in terms of medical procedures. Since she does not experience her gender as an "either/or", she did not feel the wish to further adapt her body. Selm found her very own comfort zone in the borderlands of gender.

After discussing and contextualizing Selm's narrative about gender identification, I want to return to the topics of music and gender/ sexual identity. Generally, Selm thinks that music "is determining or formative for identity, and […] most of all about belonging". At the age of twelve, Selm did not belong to either of the two dominant music-cantered peer groups, "the Johnnen, and the rappers",[79] but to the "large rest group". She loved listening to Flemish *kleinkunst*, a folk singer-songwriter/ cabaret genre popular in the Low Countries:

> I found it more… comprehensible than music in English […] there is often something nostalgic in that music, something… or something humorous […] But the problem with that kind of music was that it wasn't really anything to be proud of, or which I could share. There was no *kleinkunst* peer group who wore *kleinkunst* outfits [we laugh] so that was quite annoying.

Selm further analyses her own taste in music and explains why especially the protest songs within *kleinkunst* kept intriguing her:

> I think that for a very long time, until a few years ago or maybe almost until yesterday, I just felt very misunderstood […] [the music] resonates with a feeling like, mmmh, not entirely belonging, or not entirely uhm, being part of the mainstream or so, or like a sort of struggle or quest.[…] It's searching for friction.

In her early youth, Selm took a musical bypass instead of any popular main roads. Eventually, she found a real sense of belonging to a small music scene discovering what she entitles "the Scandinavian wave". Bands like Sigur Ros, Efterklang and Thomas Dybdahl deeply touch her: When she talks about Dybdahl's music, she says that his music feels like, "a sort of, you know, warm winter jacket or so, … an old jacket that just fits really well and that you can't let go". Selm

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[79] Literally, 'the Johnnys'. A denigrating term used to refer to working class males (comparable to the British chavs), associated with hard techno music.

loves this specific Northern sentimentality and harmony, "where everything just fits and works out". These musical properties fit Selm's description of her sense of belonging, and seem to stand in contrast with the friction in music she used to search for.

Selm muses about links between being genderfluid and music:

> If I am to establish ties with gender and orientation, then I think: […] Maybe I would prefer for the world to be more harmonious [laughs] and fitting, I could try to explain it that way, and that now and then it doesn't fit.

The properties of the music Selm listens to may be seen as a mirror of her feelings about the rigid binary understanding of gender prevailing in our society. It expresses frictions and protest against injustice, but most of all a longing for acceptance, inclusivity and softness. Selm engages in musical framing here:

> Musical materials provide parameters (stylistic, physical, conventional) that are used to frame dimensions of experience (interpretation, perception, valuation, comportment, feeling, energy). This framing is central to the way in which music comes to serve as a device for the constitution of human agency. (DeNora, 2000, p. 27)

Two trans*/queer artists made a deep impression in Selm's life. As we saw above, Dana International was an important role model for Selm in the late 1990s[80]. Similarly, Conchita Wurst resonated with Selm when she became famous winning the ESC in 2014: "Alright, it can also be vague like that!" The gender ambiguity and confusion Tom Neuwirth created with the character of Conchita Wurst overwhelmed the European audiences and touched Selm: "Because I am aware: […] I have evolved in this, but I know how important it is, how such figures […] provide a sort of different reality, a different possibility".

Of the five narrators, only Selm has started a transition trajectory and has taken a bypass, not going for a full transition. Selm's experience starting a journey towards transition and then "bivouacking in the borderlands", as Selm describes it herself, is a plea for a more client-focused and self-determined trajectory in trans* health care. Selm's taste in melancholic yet troubled music, conveying a longing for harmony, and music that carries a sense of friction, parallel her approach to gender.

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[80] See also chapter 4.1.

Conclusion

Gender nonconforming persons are rarely included in the public, medical, legal and mediated discourse on trans* persons. Through the narrators' stories we do notice, however, that Davy's and Kuyper and Wijsen's call for a more complex and up to date understanding of gender is gradually being answered in all of these domains. I argue that one way to better understand how gender nonconforming trans* persons think about and navigate their identity is listening to their narratives. A focus on music provides a creative and intuitive access to their life stories and shows that music works as a cultural means of identity creation and reflection. Although at first reluctant about whether music and gender/sexuality are linked, the narrators are convinced that music and identity are inseparable. While telling their life stories to me, most narrators discovered connections between their gender and sexual identity and the music they listen(ed) to or make, and that this music has a range of emotional and social functions. These connections may be explicit or indirect.

In line with Taylor's findings (2012), my interviews show that through music, gender nonconforming trans* persons are able to express themselves and music or musicians may express what they are not able to. *Music provides alternative ways of expressing themselves and musical techniques offer the possibility to create multiple or genderqueer identities*. Similar to their gender identifications, these are often not the most straightforward, but very individual and creative practices. Looking at Tom's story, we see (making) music first having a negative connotation undermining his confidence, and then becoming an outstanding way to express himself. Playing his own songs at concerts, music gives him self-affirmation and has become a social property he strongly identifies with (cf. DeNora, 2000). Marthe introduces the concept of queer voicing and their story shows how music is able to speak for us where words do not suffice. In music metaphors, they find ways which aptly express their gender fluidity, be it through interchanging definite articles or walking in a funny way. The fluid and multi-layered character of voice parallels gender fluidity, and queer voicing creates a space in which talking about gender feels safe and right. Music is omnipresent in Robertina's life; but for her, music does not only signify popular or classical music, but also energy, frequency and emotion. As the fifth dimension, music is a spiritual part of her life rather than merely a recreational one. Music literally reflects her own rhythm, and how she moves through the world: Making her own music in tune with the cadences of biking is a unique way of expressing herself. Likewise, for Patricia music and her identity go hand in hand; she enjoys making music as well as intensely listening

to music throughout the genres. Not able to identify with the music her peers listened to, Selm found herself liking a marginalized music style from an early age, *kleinkunst*. Selm's taste in melancholic yet troubled music, conveying a longing for harmony, yet also carrying a sense of friction, parallels her approach to gender. Both in music and gender identity, Selm balances between a yearning for belonging and yet keeping her individuality.

Clearly, *music parallels specific phases and interests in their lives*. Some examples include Tom's interest in feminism resulting in looking for strong female idols; Tom starting to sing himself and therefore looking for male singers with a higher pitch; Marthe trying to complete her overview of the history of electronic music by reading up on and listening to female musicians; Patricia spending some time traveling and playing in Ireland and consequently getting interested in Irish songs, and Selm's longing for harmony and awareness of social frictions are reflected in the music she likes. As a street musician, Patricia has encountered persons and travelled to places she would otherwise never have met. Robertina's radio show, mindfully put together from her big collection of minutely archived music, was her way to reach others with New Age music. Furthermore, music is obviously linked to wellbeing in all of the stories, and in a diverse range of ways. Making music is empowering, and functions as self-expression where words don't say enough. Self-expression is, naturally, extremely individual, and therefore music as expression looks different for each person. For one, making and playing instruments and singing has a strong empowering dimension for these narrators.

Notably, the *narrators seem to identify more with certain queer aspects of a musician, like tone of voice, lyrics or appearance and expression, than with a musician as a whole*, in the sense of being a fan of a single artist. Rather than a literal identification on a gender level, there is a connection through an expression of being different or viewing the world differently. Moreover, lyrics about freeing oneself and being somehow "different" are common sources of identification for the narrators. Nevertheless, LGBTQ idols remain important in specific phases of their lives. Sarah Bettens disrupted Tom's heteronormative social environment, and Dana International and Conchita Wurst are important music idols Selm associates with a victory of gender nonconformity and trans* visibility. Patricia appreciates artists who are fluid in their sexuality or ambiguous in their gender expression, like Prince, David Bowie, Morrissey or Tracy Chapman. The world of music provides artistic freedom, which also means freedom of expressing changeable genders and characters, as especially the case of David Bowie in Robertina's narrative shows. Generally, artists who disrupt heteronormative patterns, like

androgynous and queer artists who play with pitch or multiple identities are held in high esteem among my narrators.

All of the gender nonconforming narrators show a *great awareness of and insight into gender diversity.* They have nuanced opinions about gender and the body and wish for more openness, tolerance and less "gender fuss". Gender, and sex, for these narrators is not a concept of "either-or", but a concept which allows for several identifications at the same time and throughout time. Their narratives contrast the dominant images of trans* persons and demonstrate that there are many nuances in gender diversity. A common theme among all narratives is the wish to be accepted and respected in whatever way they choose to express their gender; however, they experience that societal expectations about gender expression are still most often linked to the physical body and genitals. Each narrator discusses their own thoughts about medical care and the politics of medical care. The diverse attitudes of these five narrators are indeed an indication that standardized medical care will not suit all trans* persons.

A *fluid gender identity seems to correspond with a rather fluid attitude towards sexual preferences* as sexuality is discussed as being fluid by most of the narrators. The narrators' descriptions of their preferences reflect the destabilization of the binary system through their gender nonconformity and the consequent quest for suitable descriptors of sexual preference. The human desire to name things remains, and to call a spade a spade may have a freeing effect. In that vein, Tom, Marthe and Selm confirm that "queer" is a freeing and useful concept, although they do not necessarily agree with it completely or identify as such. Marthe explains how their sexual preferences change throughout their life, and both Tom and Patricia feel comfortable with the term pansexual, indicating that they may be interested in all kinds of persons and genders. As Tom emphasises, he strongly dislikes the commonly used Dutch word "geaardheid", which means orientation and implies a fixity and essentialist character of sexuality. He suggested that I should always use "sexual preference" instead, avoiding any essentialism. Selm's hesitation to name a descriptor of her sexual preference is partly caused by her paralleling gender fluidity. A question mark functions as the descriptor, followed by "leaning towards the female". Robertina is the only one of these narrators who uses a more clear-cut, traditional label describing her sexual preference, but only in immediate connection to describing her gender: "I am a lesbian woman in a male body".

"Bivouacking in the borderlands" or *living a genderless or genderfluid life is a way of resisting the dominant power dynamics.* Being queer or gender fluid are ways to disrupt the binary, and it is a conscious and often political choice to keep inhabiting the gender borderlands. This

similarly applies to their engagements with music: Marthe, Selm and Tom have very conscious ways of listening, in the sense of actively seeking and paying attention to feminist, queer and political dimensions, and being aware of different layers of music. It is important to acknowledge that the strong focus on gendered and political ways of listening and making music in their life stories is surely also a result of my specific research question. The fact that I encouraged the narrators to think about the topics beforehand and the interviews as such were a reason for the narrators to think about these connections in-depth, gather material and even do some written preparations. Undoubtedly, Marthe and Tom have explicitly engaged with music, gender and queerness in theory and in practice before. However, the specific framing of our interview brought these activities and musings even more to the foreground. Patricia and Robertina both approach music from a more intuitive perspective; they experience less direct connections between their gender identities and music. Although all five narrators approached music and its relationship to gender identity and sexuality in very different ways, music shows to be an important element in contributing to their sense of self and reflects the fluidity of identity throughout life.

8   Music in Queer Intimate Relationships

I remember, how could I forget
How you feel
And though you were my first time
A new feel
It won't ever get old, not in my soul
Not in my spirit, keep it alive

Frank Ocean - Thinkin Bout You (2012)

In this chapter, I will explore a topic most of us are able to relate to, namely music in intimate relationships. All research narrators talked about a variety of social relationships in the interviews, most notably about their relationship with their parents and core family, friends, their peer group and lovers or partners. Although music in kinship, friendship and peer group relations is most certainly worth looking into, this chapter focuses on intimate relationships defined as "a romantic or passionate attachment" (Merriam-Webster). Most narrators talk about music in their love lives and intimate relationships to some extent, so this topic spans all age groups, genders and sexual preferences. The fact that these topics came up in so many of the interviews indicates that the narrators experience intimate relationships as important and even essential parts of their lives, shaping their identities and their world views.

In many of the interviews, these intimate relationships are linked to music. These musical associations may either be directly linked to a partner, lover or crush, or more generally to a period in which they had an intimate relationship, and the music the narrator connects with that time. In some cases, the fact that these intimate relationships are queer relationships is stated and discussed explicitly; in others, it is a given with no need to stress the non-normative character of these relationships. In this chapter, I will investigate what functions music has in these relationships, and how these specific functions link up with functions of music in our daily lives as investigated by sociology of music. Another aspect that I will analyse is whether there are any specific LGBTQ qualities to the music mentioned in connection to relationships. Clearly, music figures in intimate relationships no matter what the sexual preference and gender identification of the partners are; the importance of music in relationships does certainly not pertain to LGBTQs exclusively. However, as my narrators' stories and other studies establish, there is a specific interest in LGBTQ-related music (see chapter 4.3) and musicians among the

LGBTQ population. Therefore, it might be assumed that LGBTQ music may also play a special role in LGBTQ relationships.

A review of literature on music and intimate relationships revealed that this connection still needs to be explored. This gap in research may be linked to a more general "dearth of biographical analysis in the sociological study of music consumption", as Green rightly points out (2016, p. 334). The scarcity of research on music and intimate relationships is especially noticeable when focusing on specific populations, like LGBTQ persons. I agree with Green's call for more studies of music through biographical narratives, as music in everyday life can only be investigated to a certain, unsatisfactory extent in experimental settings. Real life narratives are needed in order to investigate music in everyday life and real life relationships. Only few sources tackling the topic directly could be found, but there are several fields of research engaging with topics related to music and intimate relationships, as the following overview shows.

Theoretical Frameworks

It is a known fact that much popular and classical music lyrics are about love and sex. Accordingly, musicologists and sociologists alike have written about the reception of such songs and their effect in intimate relationships and the perception of relationships through these songs (e.g. Agbo-Quaye & Robertson, 2010; Glass, Curtis, & Thomas, 2005; Gueguen, Jacob, & Lamy, 2010). As Taylor summarizes, "popular Music is commonly understood as a primary means of managing feelings, regulating moods, remembering and (re)constructing relationships" (2012b, p.143). Focusing on personal music experience in everyday life, DeNora describes music as a "touchstone of social relations" (2000, p. 126), which may either be connected to a specific moment or to larger periods in time (2000, p. 65). In her ethnographic work she finds that "the most frequent type of relationship respondents described in relation to music was romantic or intimate" (DeNora, 2000, p.63). Music is used to set the tone of an encounter and may be used by partners to "configur[e], via their musical choices, the prospective structure of their encounter" (2000, p. 113). DeNora refers to this mutual choice of music as an "aesthetic reflexive activity" (2000, p. 113) and concludes that "when music was used as a backdrop for intimacy, it was because it contributed to intimate interaction—for example, it served as an aid to relaxation, a signal about style, a motivator, an occasioning device" (2000, p. 118).

Hesmondhalgh, who works in a similar tradition as DeNora, dedicates a chapter of his 2013 book *Why Music Matters* to the topic of "Love and Sex". He discusses sexual politics in pop, rock, punk

and other music scenes throughout the second half of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century. The genres have different prevailing approaches to love, sexuality and intimacy and often refer to these topics in lyrics. However, the reception of the topics of love and sex within intimate relationships or the specific use of music to express or evoke a sense of intimacy are not discussed in Hesmondhalgh's work.

Social psychology confirms links between music and attraction. As Rentfrow's overview of the field shows, attraction and social bonding are important topics within the connection of music and affect (2012, p. 411). Various studies indicate that people seem to believe they will be more satisfied in a relationship with someone who shares their music taste, as

> One of the assumptions underlying research on music and social bonding is that shared preferences reflect similarities in values and dispositions—that people who enjoy the same music see and experience the world in similar ways and therefore agree about more things than do people with different preferences. Such reasoning suggests that it is not music per se that is important in social bonding, but that music acts as an indicator of one's values and traits, which mediate the link between shared preferences and attraction. (Rentfrow, 2012, p.412)

More general characteristics about partners may be deduced from their musical preferences, and genre preferences are linked to more general norms and values (Agbo-Quaye and Robertson, 2010).

What happens, however, when a love interest or partner has got completely different musical preferences? Experimental studies in the psychology of music show that the more we feel romantically attracted to our interactional partner, the more we are inclined to accommodate to a partner's dissimilar musical preferences (Denes, Gasiorek & Giles, 2016, p. 1195). Denes and colleagues conclude that "attending to and adjusting for another person's musical tastes may thus be a simple, nonverbal way to demonstrate positive regard to interpersonal partners and show respect for their preferences and desires" (2016, p. 1199). For love interests and romantic partners, this may translate into a higher accommodation to the partner's favourite music, even if their musical preference is dissimilar to one's own. Again, these studies are most often conducted in experimental settings and do not offer concrete evidence on the roles of music in everyday life and intimate relationships; they do, however, confirm the fact that music and attraction are linked.

In research concerning music and its connections to autobiographical memory, intimate or romantic relationships are often a topic touched upon, but not researched in depth. Out of all studies consulted, Istvandity's research from 2014 is most consonant with my own study. Within her doctoral thesis on musically motivated autobiographical memories, Istvandity explores the topic of music and emotions through analysing in-depth interviews with 28 participants. One salient topic is that of musical associations with romantic relationships, which, unfortunately, only a short section of the doctoral thesis is dedicated to. Istvandity ascertains that music functions as a bonding tool and is used to express feelings when words fail (2014, p. 140). Interestingly, Istvandity's interview data suggest "a trend towards musical memories for past partners rather than current partners" (2014, p. 140). This may be linked to the strong mnemonic qualities of music, as we experience that the past often comes alive by its soundtrack: "It consists of an interlacing of experience (feeling, action) and the materials that are accessed as the referents for experience, its metaphoric and temporal parameters" (DeNora, 2000, p. 67). Often, Istvandity's participants talk about break up music rather than relationship music; and a gender based bias in this matter may be observed, as female participants show stronger memories and emotions linked to such break up music (2014, p. 141ff).

Similar to Istvandity and DeNora, Bijsterveld and van Dijck stress that "music's ability to elicit highly personal emotions and associations seems to help people relive their past over and over again" (2009, p. 13). It is clear that there is a strong connection between music, emotions and memory. Crushes, intimate relationships and breakups are often events in life narratives that stand out, being highly emotional turning points which may be linked with music. Often, with a new partner new cultural and musical influences arrive and lead to remarkable music experiences. In his research on music and emotions, Green (2016) focuses on "peak music experiences", in contrast to more general music experience in everyday life. Green ascertains that peak experiences are central in biographical narratives: "They are interactions that reveal meanings and produce feelings which, through their intensity, leave an imprint that affects future interactions. In this way they make visible the more constant, subtle construction of music's meaning and effects" (2016, p. 334). It should be noted that of course such peak music experiences do not only occur within intimate relationships, but also in other contexts of the narrators' lives.

A common phenomenon in most real life intimate relationships is "our song": Certain musicians or songs have a great emotional value attached to them and may function as symbols for the relationship. One of DeNora's respondents states that "everyone has their relationship songs"

(2000, p. 64). In an otherwise unpublished conference paper, Klein explores this phenomenon. She argues that "the dialogic nature of popular music does not simply provide a space of embedded memory; it also offers a forum for embedding memory" (2006, p. 9). Providing a concrete example for the function of a shared song, Klein remarks that pop songs give couples the romantic terms in which to express and experience their emotions; music comes in where words fail (2006, p. 20). Music is often used in exchanges between persons in a relationship. That way, each intimate relationship has its own soundtrack. Bitner's popular book *Cassettes from my Ex: Stories and Soundtracks of Lost Loves* (2009) is a beautiful homage to the soundtracks of relationships past. Bitner collected the stories of ex-lovers about the music that connected them in the form of mix tapes. Such collections attest to the fact that music matters in intimate relationships, connecting the partners or lovers whether they share a same taste in music or not.

As we learn from the literature, music acts as a strong bonding agent between two (possible) romantic partners. However, music retains specific meanings and functions for each partner within or connected to romantic relationships. Kotarba ascertains that "[a] significant aspect of the continued popularity of rock-inspired pop music is its use in helping make sense of others, especially in intimate relationships" (2018, p. 72). Accordingly, one important reason for turning to music is in order to interpret romantic phenomena (Kotarba, 2018, p. 73): Music listeners can "(re)-interpret music to fit romantic needs" or "gravitate towards music that can be perceived as romantic" (Kotarba, 2018, p. 73). Moreover, the association of a particular song with a partner or crush may occur in a one-sided way, when there is no actual relationship or when one is too shy to share one's feeling through that song (Kotarba, 2018, p. 73). Music may intensify feelings of longing for the loved one, or help to deal with heartbreak. In music psychology, these functions of music in mood control or management are researched. For example, Tom ter Bogt and colleagues (2017) investigate the consoling properties of music, a feature many lovers experienced. In my literature review, I have not encountered specific research focusing on music in LGBTQ relationships.

In sum, various research disciplines touch upon topics related to music in intimate relationships, but no empirical, biographical research on that topic has, to my knowledge, yet been carried out. This stands in a sharp contrast to the fact that a large part of popular and secular classical music centre on the topics of friendship, love and heartbreak. Hesmondhalgh proposes to "consider music, sex and love together in order to assess music's complex possibilities in spheres of intimacy" (2013, p. 58); which is indeed what this chapter aims to do. In several of the interviews, narratives about intimate relationships have especially prominent positions, or show

striking connections to music. In order to contribute to the biographical study of the roles of music in intimate relationships, these narratives will be presented and discussed. Then, common topics will be summarized and discussed.

Nikkie's Musical Intimacies

In Nikkie's life story, there are several connections between music and being in love or being in a relationship. However, as we will see, music itself also has a very intimate character for her. Nikkie, 44, had a rocky start with music, but fell in love with the piano and studied the piano from age 15 on. Beethoven's fifth piano concerto is linked to the first time she fell in love with a girl when she was 17 and attending a strict boarding school for music education. The girl was two years younger than her, and Nikkie never told her about her feelings. They used to spend their breaks at school together, and Nikkie calls it a platonic, even courtly sort of admiration. When the girl once asked her directly whether she was in love with her, Nikkie denied her feelings. They were just good friends, and still are. Nikkie connects the same period, her teenage years, with composer Rachmaninov, saying that she is sure there is a connection between teenage hormone levels and this intense, emotion-laden (classic/early Romantic and late Romantic) music.

Nikkie recalls that I prompted to think about the "soundtrack of your relationships" in my call for participation and picks up that topic: "I only ever had one relationship in my life, that's quite extraordinary, so I can't… because of that, I don't have that many soundtracks". When I asked her whether she wanted to tell a bit more about that relationship and her ex-girlfriend, the first descriptor Nikkie gives is actually a musical one. Talking about her partner of 11 years, she says:

> Nikkie: She was a really good singer. Sometimes I accompanied her [on the piano] at music school—we always had rows about that, because she never did what it said on the score [she jokingly speaks in a stubborn voice; we laugh] No, yes, what can I tell you about it…
>
> Marion: You don't have to, but… it is beautiful that you made music together, it's quite exceptional, isn't it?
>
> Nikkie: Yes, but… it didn't go so swimmingly, you know [laughs].

From the way Nikkie tells about this anecdote, it is clear that talking about her ex-girlfriend is not easy, which is connected to the fact that she is still processing their break-up. However, in a way, she can now laugh about their little rows about making music together. Nikkie shares some fond

memories about the relationship, and recounts that the song that really makes her think about her ex-girlfriend is "Baby's got sauce", by G. Love and Special Sauce: "It's fun music, it's… we danced a lot to this song. We put it on here at home, and… it's a sort of slow, actually." It is a happy, easygoing song by the alternative hip hop band characterised as "known for their unique, 'sloppy', and 'laid back' blues sound that encompasses classic R&B" on Wikipedia ("G. Love & Special Sauce", n.d.). "Baby's got sauce" is the song epitomizing good times in Nikkie's former relationship, and within our interview she characterises this song most outspokenly as "their song". As my interview notes show, Nikkie connects specific music to specific phases of a crush or relationship.

Figure 28: Excerpts from the interview notes. Highlights indicate relationships

In fact, meeting her girlfriend at age 28 was a concrete reason for her to come out and made her embrace being lesbian:

> Within a week we went to both our parents together, and yes: That was directly uhm… I still resisted for a while—I can't actually remember why? But yes, I mean: You feel that everything suddenly makes sense, all the years of all the questions—feeling that I had struggled with it—I suddenly didn't have to any more. Well that was quite crazy… [referring to the long struggle] But I also didn't have any relationships, I found there needed to be a… direct cause [to come out] [laughs a little].

Before meeting her, it took Nikkie a long time to process the fact that she is lesbian. She describes that it was painful to realize that you are not who you thought you were: "I didn't actually per se

want to be different". This is, in fact, a feeling other narrators have experienced as well (see Sarah's narrative in chapter 5).

It is characteristic of Nikkie's music habits that she listens intensely to certain songs and compositions connected to a specific period, and then leaves them behind with that period. In that way, Nikkie connects the end of their relationship to an intense musical experience. When they broke up several years ago, Nikkie was in a tremendous amount of pain and became obsessed with the fifth symphony by Mahler:

> Nikkie: When I liked something, I played it over and over[81], you know. Really really really, verging on madness. Almost until I was fed up with it. The last piece I did that with, and that's about two or three years ago when my girlfriend left, was a symphony by Mahler. That is my last conscious memory of, yes, "experiencing music". Also, a symphony, that's a long piece. It's the Fifth of Mahler. It's quite a heavy thing, you know. But also very flowing, romantic, melancholic, yes.

> Marion: So that's actually connected to a goodbye.

> Nikkie: Yes, yes. [Silence].

Nikkie's tone of voice changes when she speaks about this period of grieving over her relationship. She has not listened to that symphony since, suggesting she could not bear to listen to it or would at least not enjoy it, because she had overdone it before. What is more, she describes her obsession with it as her last real moment of music experience. She refers to the music as "heavy" and "melancholic", which reflects her own emotional state in that phase of her life—and still, the music helped to alleviate the heaviness. Nikkie experienced this intensive listening as "a sort of therapy". Listening to Mahler provided her with a cathartic experience: The music at the same time expressed and enhanced her mood. A large majority of people use music for consolation, as ter Bogt et al. (2017) confirm. Importantly, "not only happy and joyful music, but also sad music is important for alleviating mood and coming to terms with negative, distressing events" (ter Bogt et al., 2017, p. 158). Furthermore, ter Bogt et al. found that highly involved listeners are "more likely to achieve mood regulation" (2017, p. 158). Nikkie's near-

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[81] In Dutch: „Grijs draaien". Many narrators used this expression to talk about their obsession with a specific song, CD or record. Unfortunately, there is no English translation capturing the precise meaning of this idiom, meaning wearing out the LP or CD or song until it literally turns grey. There used to be an idiom related to this, namely "wearing out the needle", which refers to the literal wear and tear of the record needle. This idiom is not used as commonly nowadays.

obsessive music listening and musical background certainly qualify her as a highly involved listener.

Strikingly, nowadays Nikkie generally prefers silence over making or listening to music when she is at home, stating repeatedly that she has had her portion of music in life. Two exceptions are her singing in a female Barbershop group, and singing in a polyphonic ensemble:

> Singing polyphony on Wednesdays, that's my ritual, and I'm always looking forward to it; but it's more than…, yes, I love polyphony, and that's mostly because of the connecting… when you sing, and especially when you sing together—because I'd never want to sing alone—yes, it's got something, uhm, for me, better than sex, so to say. It's that connecting, tuning into each other [harmonizing]—yes, I find that incredible [laughs].

Making polyphonic music and creating sound together is an intensely connecting and intimate experience for her. It is worth noting that merely singing together creates this intimate experience, without having any actual or physical intimate relationship with the persons involved in the ensemble.

Tobias, His Husband, and the Eurovision Song Contest

Relationships are the basic framework of the life story Tobias (36) told me, and much of the music he talks about is linked to his past relationships. The relationship with his husband at the time of our interview is strongly linked with the Eurovision Song Contest[82]. Within a week of meeting each other at a party 10 years ago, they were in a full-on relationship and spent a lot of time together.

> Tobias: And music that was very present was this [he points to his CD "50 Years of the Eurovision Song Contest"]. Since 2004, we constantly engaged with the Song Contest—the months before, of course. We knew all the songs, we of course already had the internet then, so we could easily access it. Uhm, and that has always stayed that way. We have not skipped a single year together [except for one year because of work obligations].

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[82] This is the official title in English; in Dutch, however, it is commonly referred to as the *songfestival*, as Tobias does.

Marion: So it's really a passion for both of you, the Song Contest. And how did you discover that you were both into it that much?

Tobias: I don't know… probably because I said 'I can't meet up on those days' [referring to the time of the transmission of the pre-competition or the festival itself] or maybe it started with the Song Contest itself.

Figure 29: The CDs Tobias brought to the interview

Tobias can't remember exactly how they discovered that they are both heavy fans of the song contest, but his answer suggests that Eurovision is a serious matter to him: Tobias is not willing to miss any part of the show, not even for being with his boyfriend. For Tobias, the Eurovision Song Contest started to be important in his childhood and soon became a serious interest:

On the one hand, I had always watched it with my parents and brothers and sister, back then. And on the other hand it was… well you could… it is as serious as a soccer fan loves the World Cup. […] And I like it on several levels. I'm not going to directly comment on the music; but the fact that various diverse sorts of music come together and [influence] each other… a cross-fertilization emerges, which is absorbed by the audience as well as the artist. It is one of the largest TV shows in the world, so it is very well made. There is a lot of money involved! [It is] Europop, and ethnic pop, yes. But it's not only about the music, it's about much more than that. […] A soccer fan is also going to look

at what a player wears for an occasion like FIFA or the World Cup or whatever those events are called… It's more about the whole event. Which people are rewarded, what newcomers… Is it more about the act, about the song itself, who is voting, who is counter-voting and so on.

As Tobias explains, there are various musical and peri-musical dimensions he appreciates, and that make the Song Contest such an exciting event. The comparison to soccer tournaments is a striking one; it emphasises the strength of his Eurovision fandom. Baker (2014) indeed used a similar metaphor, namely describing (and questioning) the Eurovision Song Contest's status as the "gay Olympics". In the LGBTQ community, and especially in the gay community, the Song Contest enjoys great popularity. In interviews with gay ESC fans, Dafna Lemish encountered a strong association of the ESC with a gay audience (2004, p. 46). Lemish also asserts that "the ESC is clearly a site of camp-related pleasure" for her research participants (2004, p. 47). Musical camp, according to Jarman-Ivens (2009), is characterised by exaggeration, flamboyance and playfulness—criteria which Tobias generally seems to enjoy in the music he listens to and talks about.

Luckily, Tobias' then boyfriend shared the intense passion for the Song Contest (which he in turn learned to appreciate through an ex-boyfriend), and they fully enjoyed the spectacle together. Clearly, their shared enthusiasm is a strong bonding agent, and the Song Contest remains important to their relationship. The music gained an even deeper meaning when they chose a contribution from the year they met as the opening dance at their wedding: "We got married in 2007, and we chose a song from 2004, from Cyprus. It was a quiet piece, and, obviously, nobody knew it. And that was our opening dance". Although to the wedding guests the song probably had no specific meaning, for the two of them it symbolizes their common passion and deep connection. By re-interpreting the song in the context of their relationship, they attached their own romantic meaning to it. Even if with a slight notion of irony, the song became one of "their" songs. Moreover, the Eurovision Song Contest is not only their personal shared passion; it is also implicitly and explicitly connecting (them to) the LGBTQ community.

Tobias explains that he has a strong musical connection with his husband, much more than with any other men before that. Thinking about past relationships, he realizes that many of the musical dimensions were "in playing and writing music myself", rather than in listening to existing music together. For example, he composed piano music for some partners, which he now characterises as "Amélie-Poulain-like". He refers to Yann Tiersen's famous soundtrack for Jeunet's 2001 film "Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain", describing the music as "sparkling,

rather light, French sounding and rather filmic". Tobias emphasises that he would probably find those compositions very naïve now, if he were to listen to them again: "I'm not going to say 'juvenile'... but 'young'". Tobias was used to composing and playing piano pieces in his early twenties, as he enjoyed a musical education. However, he explains that when he started studying musicology later on, he started composing in a much more philosophical manner.

With his husband, he shares "mostly a connection with existing music we gave our own meaning to".

> Tobias: It's a gigantic amount of music. And it's good that you make me think of it; I actually never had that before with the others, while it seemed logical to me to think that we would all have the same relation with all ex-partners, concerning music. But that's not the case!
>
> Marion: That's very interesting!
>
> Tobias: So it could be a sign, or it could signal that he is the man of my life [laughs].

As Tobias deduces, sharing the same amount of passion for the same kind of music is one factor that explains his love for his husband. Music as a shared cultural value may indeed indicate compatibility as partners, as enjoying the same music indicates similar values and dispositions in general (Rentfrow, 2012, p. 412). It is interesting that Tobias comes to the same conclusion from his own experiences. As music is so important in his professional and private life, it absolutely makes sense that he would seek an intense connection to his partner through music.

Selm About Tuning in With Her Ex

Throughout the interview, Selm (32) focuses more on music in her past relationship rather than her current one, confirming Istvandity's research experience (2014). This may also be related to the simple fact that she was together with her former partner for nearly a decade, while her current relationship only began quite recently. A lot of Selm's musical memories of the past ten years are in fact connected to her ex: In their relationship, her partner was generally the person introducing new music and choosing what music they listened to. Only after their breakup Selm realized that she adapted to her ex-girlfriend's music preferences and choices quite a lot:

> I realized in the past year that I'm not that likely to go to a concert on my own initiative, rarely. It was more like: For almost 10 years, I have been in a relationship with someone who—who had more of an eye for that and who dragged me along to concerts.

While in many relationships a mutual exchange of music happens, Selm was predominantly on the receiving end. Similarly, Selm's friends are more likely to introduce her to new music than the other way round. Because this only rarely happens, Selm states that she sometimes feels very proud of her own musical discoveries.

As further narratives in Selm's interview show, she and her ex had quite different music preferences: Selm explains that her taste in music has always been a bit off mainstream, from an early age onwards[83]. In general, she prefers melancholic and quiet music, such as Thomas Dybdahl's oeuvre. Throughout the day, Selm listens to the radio quite a lot:

> I turn on Radio 1. In my former relationship it used to be Studio Brussel, she used to turn it on all the time, but it was often too… too noisy and showy and… but that way at least I found a bit of connection to the mainstream [laughs], through her.

The two Flemish radio stations Selm compares offer quite a different program: Radio 1 of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT describes its musical profile as focusing on rather traditional genres like rock, soul and singer-songwriters, offering "recognisable and grown-up pop music", and stresses its focus on news and societal topics (VRT, 2018). In contrast, Studio Brussel is described as "the trendsetter", the young and alternative station of VRT. Its main focus is music, comprising "a mix of high-quality pop and rock, discoveries and new music genres" during daytime, and providing a platform for alternative music genres like urban, metal, alternative dance, alternative rock and indie music" at night (VRT, 2018).

By comparing these radio stations, Selm indicates that her own music preference and her ex-partner's differ quite a lot. From the context of the interview it is unclear whether Selm experienced these musical differences to the same extent while they still were in a relationship; but the break-up certainly made these topics more clear to her. Although Selm frames these differences in a rather negative way, she also finds positive outcomes in the fact that she accommodated to her ex partner's musical style: Listening to Studio Brussel enabled Selm to be up to date concerning trending music and artists, and getting to appreciate some more mainstream artists like The Editors. Selm's flexibility towards her partner's dissimilar music preferences may be interpreted in the light of the findings of Denes et al. (2016), suggesting that the high level of accommodation to the other's musical preferences indicates a high level of relational closeness.

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[83] See also chapter 7.

While their musical preferences were generally rather divergent, Selm and her ex shared a passion for Norwegian singer songwriter Thomas Dybdahl. In fact, Selm talks about her doubts about going to an upcoming concert of the artist, precisely because of the strong associations with her ex. After talking about their different preferences of radio stations, I asked Selm:

> Marion: This is indeed something I wanted to ask you: Do you connect certain music with certain persons or relationships in your life?

> Selm: Yes, indeed, I think so, yes. To persons, to situations and sometimes I can become very nostalgic by doing so. With my ex-partner, I am going to go—well, I was planning to go to [a concert of] Thomas Dybdahl with her [laughs] as it's rather connected to [her], because it is connected to a period, a certain feeling, and the fact that I want to evoke that through music, apparently. [Silence] Uhm, although I have realized by now that that's not a good idea, and I am going to take someone else with me to that concert, really. Yes, because it's not that smart. Sometimes you mustn't wallow too much in those kinds of things.

In many relationships, going to a concert together makes for memorable moments and strengthens the connections of the artist to the relationship. These musical peak moments are also often emotional peak moments. For Selm, Dybdahl is strongly connected to the former relationship; they used to go to Dybdahl's concerts as a couple. Just like Green (2016, p. 334) describes, these intense past experiences left their mark on Selm, and influence the way she listens to Dybdahl now. The music is infused with memories and emotions and remains a connection between Selm and her ex-partner, even though their relationship is over. Selm analyses her own feelings and realizes that there is something in her which actively seeks to activate and connect with those feelings about and for her ex. Even without listening to the actual music, Selm is aware of its power to evoke these sentiments. Dybdahl's music makes the past come alive, and the emotions his music evokes are pleasant and painful at the same time. Selm realizes that at that time, going to the concert equals wallowing in nostalgia about their former relationship, and that it is perhaps not the healthiest thing to do.

Anna About French Connections and Psychological Tricks

The first time Anna (27) fell in love with a woman was at the end of her teenage years. The woman of her dreams was a married Parisian woman who was much older than her. The Parisian and her husband were a libertine couple and Anna was in a kind of relationship with the woman

for quite a while. Describing her, she compares her with Marlene Dietrich: "It's an incredibly strong woman, a deep voice… she has something like Marlene Dietrich: Very seducing, something masculine in her energy once in a while […] you can't really classify her as a soft woman". Composers Bach and Scarlatti will always be linked to the Parisian: Anna received CDs with Scarlatti's music and sent some Bach back in exchange. For Anna, this musical exchange created a sense of shared music, confirming a similar taste in music (see Rentfrow, 2012).

Travelling back and forth from Belgium to Paris, Anna started speaking French and got to know and love French culture, like the francophone music of Edith Piaf. This is music Anna connects more generally to her life in the period of that relationship, rather than to the relationship itself: "I found a tremendous amount of recognition and solace in the texts of Piaf, then". As her experience shows, music does not only figure in relationships directly, but also in the relationships' spatial and cultural peripheries. It evokes a certain era rather than only a specific moment (DeNora, 2000, p. 65). There was a curious incident in their relationship, when a musical joke became reality: Anna had once jokingly mentioned to the Parisian couple that she would like to have sex to Mozart's requiem. One day, while she was intimate with the Parisian, her husband actually put on the requiem and blasted it through the loudspeakers next door. Anna laughingly says, that that's not a recommendation. This is, of course, a rather extreme example, but it goes to show that music may be a mood killer in intimate moments.

Not only the Parisian woman is connected to musical memories; Anna's stories about other flings and relationships are accompanied by musical anecdotes as well. The following occurrence is remarkable, as it shows how much our taste in music may be influenced by emotions connected to a beloved person:

> Something I experienced previously, when someone I was in love with liked certain things, I really just took them over, even if I did not necessarily like them… uhm, sometimes I did, for example Cat Power: I took that over from a person I was in love with, and I still think that's good, and it also sounds quite gay [positive connotation], but, for example, this also once happened with Bryan Adams—that was dreadful! Seriously!

Anna talks about the curious incident of going to a concert by Bryan Adams with a person she was in love with and getting all emotional by the music, although she originally did not like his music at all. Anna feels a bit ashamed talking about this incident, and explains:

> I knew that uhm it was a transference-thing and that she loved it, and that's why I was super emotional, but I actually really didn't find the music that good. I started liking it

because it made me so emotional […] crazy, isn't it? And when I stopped being in love with the woman, I never listened to Bryan Adams again.

Transference is a concept in psychology and psychoanalysis, which greatly interests Anna, indicating a transference of feelings for one person to another. Stretching the original concept of transference slightly, Anna analyses that she was only touched so deeply by Bryan Adams, because her crush was as well. She adopted her crush's musical preference and emotional reaction, abandoning her own taste in music for the duration of her crush. Looking at the playlist of Anna's life story, Bryan Adams is indeed a surprising presence, next to Anna's penchant for female singers, nostalgic and classical music. Within the framework of communication accommodation theory as researched by Denes and colleagues, Anna's reaction may be interpreted as strong accommodation to her crush's musical preference, communicating the strong interpersonal closeness and high level of attraction towards her (Denes et al. 2016, p. 1199).

In Anna's intimate relationships throughout the years, music took on a lot of different functions. Bach and Scarlatti served as a connector between her and the Parisian woman, bridging the long physical distance between them; and certain French music is linked more broadly to the era of their relationship. In another relationship, Anna was surprised by how much her taste in music was able to adapt to that of her lover's.

A Clean Cut With Relationships Past: Shary

Shary (23) was with her first serious girlfriend from the age of 18 to 20. She describes that it is rather difficult to now name music which is connected to that relationship, as she likes to leave the past behind:

> Uhm… she used to send me a lot of music, but to be honest: It wasn't my thing at all. But we also have shared artists we both like, and Moby is one of those. Uhm, well, she was also not very stable… so, well… the music [she doubts a little] yes she sent me a lot of stuff, but a lot of them I really did not like. Indeed, we do have shared artists, but it's such a long time ago now, and I'm someone who actually just drops my ex-partners afterwards [laughs], because I'm not so good at that. So now I actually don't know at all what music to attach to it. But I do know that Moby is one of them.

Shary recalls that her ex used to send her lots of music, which was predominantly very heavy and reflected her emotional and psychological instability. Clearly, her ex used this music to

express and communicate her feelings, which also weighed Shary down. When Shary thinks and speak about the music of her ex, a sense of heaviness seems to overwhelm her. It seems as if merely thinking of that music makes her feel the heaviness of it, and along with that, the heaviness of the relationship. The thought of the music elicits feelings she associates with her past relationship (see, e.g., Bijsterveld and van Dijck, 2009).

For example, her girlfriend listened to Screamo, which Shary describes as "for example, Fallout Boy or Panic at the Disco! […]Emo, but then with metal. So they just constantly scream these very corny things, and that was just totally not my thing". Despite the fact that Shary generally appreciates all kinds of music, this is a genre that really did not appeal to her at the time. Musically, she did not match with her ex, and the fact that she was in love with her girlfriend did not automatically make her appreciate Screamo, which is a mechanism that can be observed in other relationships. It is remarkable that Shary did not talk about any music she sent to her ex. Together with the girlfriend, the music of that time is past for her; likewise, she also does not keep any letters or other keepsakes connected to the ex-girlfriend. The music they listened to together is part and parcel of their relationship, which is now over. It would be interesting to know if Shary had left the music of that period behind completely, had their musical preferences matched.

Moby, however, is an artist both of them equally appreciated and whose music remains important for Shary. This may be related to the fact that Moby already had an important place in Shary's life before her girlfriend came along: Her father loves to listen to him as well. A lot of memories about her father and family are connected to Moby, like long car trips to France in the summer vacation with Moby's album *18* on repeat:

> And uhm I think that's where my love for Moby came from, and his music is also very… very melancholic. And I like to listen to it, but it also hurts a little, of course. Because it's got to do with my Dad, and it's not that we have a very good… relationship with each other.

Shary's father, whom she describes as a hard rock fan, generally influenced Shary's music preference a lot, and he is mentioned in connection to music various times throughout the interview. The strong impact of her father on her music preferences reflects the fact that the music we encounter in our formative years typically influences and shapes our music preferences forever (see, e.g. Bolin, 2017 and the discussion in 4.1). Listening to Moby evokes ambiguous feelings: of course, Shary likes his music, but there are many layers of melancholy

and emotionality linked to it. On the one hand, the music itself is rather sentimental, and on the other hand, it is forever linked to happy as well as sorrowful memories of her father.

Shary's story shows that music is a very emotional part of her life, which may be intensely connected to certain persons. Listening to and even thinking about specific music or musicians may trigger intense emotions; in some cases like Moby and her father, Shary can enjoy this feeling of nostalgia, and in other cases like with her ex-girlfriend, she prefers to get rid of the music she associates with the ex.

Dan and Michel on Broadening Musical Horizons

Regarding relationships, this interview is unique: The main interview was with Dan (43) at a café in Brussels. His partner of many years, fortysomething Michel, joined us for part of the interview. Therefore, insight into music in their relationship is obtained from two distinct perspectives and their interaction around the topic. Both Michel and Dan work with music professionally: Michel is a classical musician, and Dan is an artist and theatre director. Not only personal experience, but also professional insights and analyses inspire them when talking about music.

Dan and Michel met when they were 29 years old, and Dan recalls that when he just fell in love with Michel, he participated in a queer artist's project where he was asked on camera:

> Dan: Uhm, 'when did you fall in love for the last time' or so, and you could answer that. I remember that I said: 'When I'm in love, I have to sing…'—no! I, I started singing Summer Time, [sings] "Summer Time and the living is easy"…. And I linked it that way, when I'm in love, I sing. And then I sang that song.

In the beginning of their relationship, they jokingly made up songs with and for each other. Dan "[sings] 'those blue eyes… of yours' [Marion laughs] in a silly way…".

For Dan, the entrance of classical music into his life is directly connected to Michel. It is interesting to zoom in on how both of them reconstruct the way classical music has entered into Dan's life, as both experienced this process in a slightly different way. For Dan, it is very clear that Michel is the person who brought classical music into his life, while Michel highlights that Dan had already come in touch with classical music before, namely through a performance based on Bach's music and directed and choreographed by Alain Platel[84].

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[84] Most likely, Dan and Michel refer to this performance: "Iets op Bach", http://www.stuk.be/nl/iets-op-bach

Marion: And so classical music is something you got from Michel? A new world?

Dan: Yes! But when we got to know each other, the first conversation was actually about dance, because he also loves going to dance performances. And then… yes, because he, his passion is music as well […] that was super nice! Because these totally different… well, for me it was super nice. That I am like the pop kid, and he the classical one, and then we talk about music but uhm… still, everyone has his *jardin secret*, his secret garden…

Michel: But before you got to know me, you had already seen that performance by Alain Platel, right.

Dan: Yes.

Michel: That is, I mean, that is quite important, because you had already experienced this kind of shock, like "this could mean something to me, now", this old music, "it can touch me now".

Dan: [Confirms from the background] Yes.

Michel: I didn't have anything to do with that.

Michel emphasises that Dan had already experienced this "shock" before they met, meaning the introduction to classical music in a completely different context than in religious settings, where Dan previously knew classical music from. This emphasis on the right order of the events implies that Michel thinks it is very important that Dan had already made contact with and was ready for getting to know classical music.

Dan mentions that both of them had very different approaches to music at the time they met. He calls himself the "pop kid", while Michel mostly listened to classical music. Michel reinforces the sense that both of them have very different musical backgrounds, stating that "if I am going to tell about what I got to know from you, I'm not going to know those names, you'll need to help". In order to get the names of the bands right, he needs Dan's expertise on pop music. Not only the difference in the kind of music they listened to intrigued Dan, he also noticed that they had completely different styles of listening to music:

Dan: That was actually also nice with Michel, the difference: He listens to music differently. [addresses Michel] You don't often put on a record and listen to it from start to finish.

> Michel: …very rarely.

> Dan: And for me, that was and still is very important: I listen to records, I don't just listen to musics, to songs. […] I still comprehend the time lapse of a record.

Possibly, the difference in listening to music is linked to the different kind of music they listen to. Classical music works in quite different ways than pop music: One could argue that classical music requires more concentrated listening to selected pieces, while for Dan the concept of an album as a musical entity plays an important role in pop music.

From the beginning of their relationship, their mutual passion for music was a bonding agent between them. Talking about music and performances was already present then, and both still engage in aesthetic reflections about music and each other. The fact that both of them appreciate music in such intense ways professionally and in private, may have signified for them that they share similar values and passions, across the border of genres. Getting to know each other's completely different yet equally passionate musical worlds and ways of listening certainly enriched both of their worlds. For Dan and Michel, music is a way to comprehend and describe one another, and they keep negotiating musical spaces, as the interview excerpts show. Music certainly is a bonding agent and communicator in their relationship.

"I'll Be There for You": Laura [85]

For our interview, Laura (24) had prepared a box full of memorabilia, CDs, and letters, as well as a list of songs that are important to her. Most of these are in fact connected to her first relationships, which demonstrates that for Laura, music is closely connected to important persons in her life. Laura had her very first girlfriend at age 13, which she feels was "not a real relationship, in hindsight" and her first serious relationship from the age of 16 to 19.

Several songs on the list Laura prepared are connected to her very first girlfriend. Laura explains that the meaning of these songs needs to be seen in context:

> I was 13, 14, 15, then, and we were actually very mentally unstable adolescents, my girlfriend and I. Because she had… pfff, she had all kind of things going on, she had a very hard life […] And I had—compared to her: peanuts—but it was also not always very easy at home. So we both were, and actually that's kind of the reason why I think back to that with such a bad feeling: We were heavy for each other and actually we only weighed

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[85] Part of this story has previously been published in: Wasserbauer (2018 (forthcoming)).

each other down. OK, so: "I'll Be There for You" is typical: One feels down, and then the other would send a song… something like that. Yes. [Laughs self-consciously] Then, Roxette's "Stand by You": That's kind of the same genre as "I'll Be There for You". "Sadness" was my first slow, "Sadness" by Stash, again: characteristically in the theme of lability and sadness… because, you know, it goes "sadness has a colour that is blue just like your eyes", and my girlfriend had blue eyes and blah blah blah [laughs].

Laura accentuates that she is aware that these songs do not only have a specific meaning for her and her girlfriend, but that their choice of music is linked to a specific historical context, namely to them being teenagers in the early 2000s, and that these songs should also be interpreted in this context rather than merely from a present point of view. As sociologists have established, the role of music must always be considered in its context(s), and in situ. Intuitively, Laura provides these contexts in our conversation. She summarizes the style of the music they sent to each other as "typically poppy/emo […] meaning with emotional lyrics". The lyrics of these shared songs express the feelings both experienced and at the same time were meant to comfort the other, reflecting their romantic needs (cf. Kotarba, 2017). These songs create a sense of security and mutual understanding for the young girls. In hindsight, they characterise the good as well as the bad sides of their relationship.

As Laura talks me through her box of keepsakes, it becomes even more apparent that pop music lyrics were an important vehicle for communicating with her teenage girlfriends: In letters and e-mails, the lovers sent each other fragments of lyrics or even the complete lyrics of a song. On one particular sticky note, her first serious girlfriend expresses her feelings for Laura by means of a song by Gregory and the Hawks, called "Boats and Birds". It reads "If you'll be my boat I'll be your sea (I live to make you free)" and includes a spelling mistake, which makes this note an even more endearing keepsake. Laura calls it "a very tender, protective text. So that was kind of the soundtrack of this first relationship". In this case, the sharing of music is less about liking the music overall or about a particular connection to the artists, but about the message of the lyrics within the relationship.
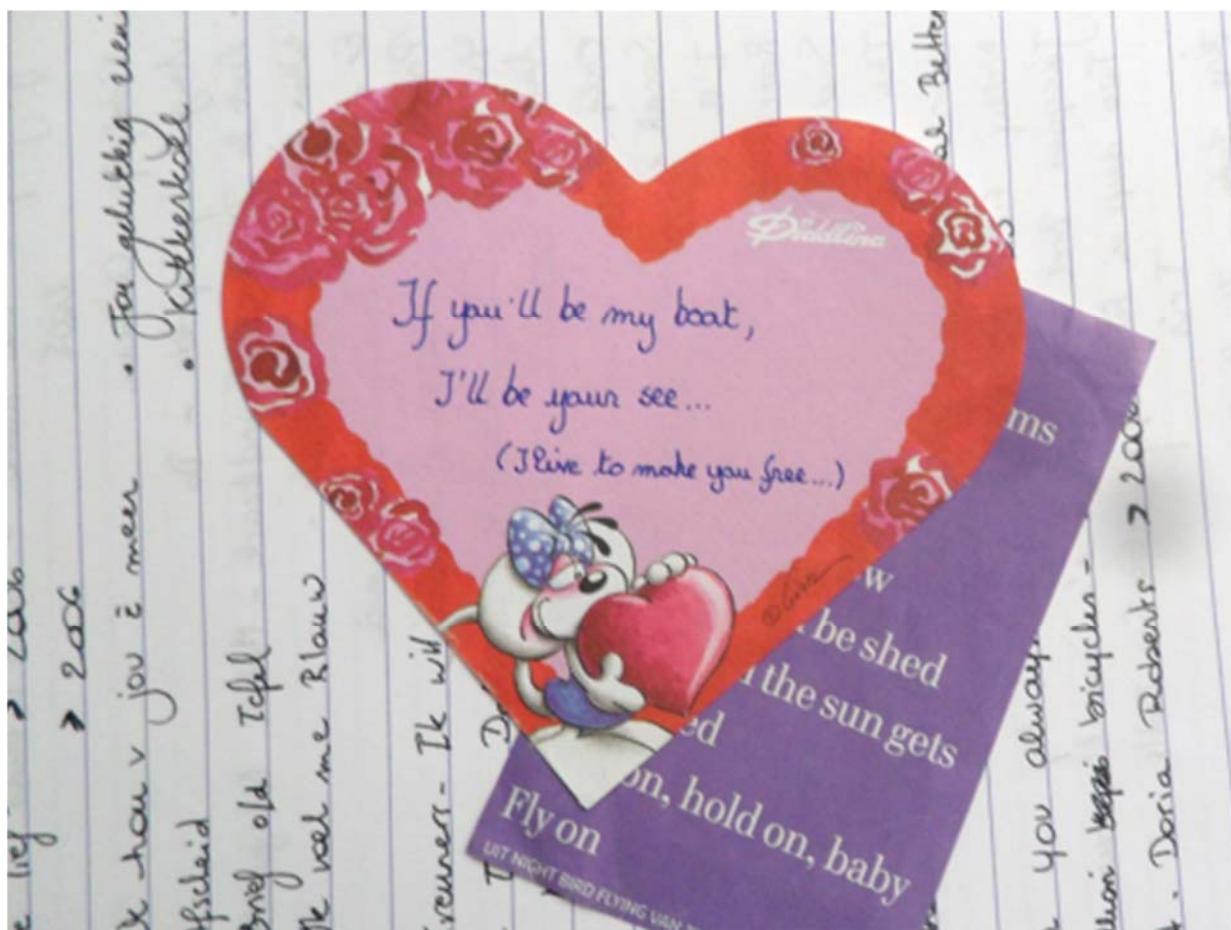
Figure 30: Laura's keepsakes

Similar to several other self-identified female lesbian/fluid narrators in their early twenties, Laura talks about the Flemish lesbian icon and singer Sarah Bettens of K's Choice. For Laura, the singer as well as the music are connected to one of her girlfriends. Laura remembers one song in particular, "'My Heart': I remember that my first real girlfriend sent that song to me." The lyrics of this ballad as well as its fragile melody and acoustic guitar play brings home the message many teenage lovers want to communicate to each other: "Break my face, my back, my arms, my neck, but please don't break my heart". The song expresses the fragility of a relationship and their wish to stay together and not hurt each other. The same girlfriend organised tickets to a concert and they met Sarah Bettens backstage, which really was a musical peak experience: "That was cool. Especially back then, I was crazy about it because […] the lyrics were super recognisable, and I almost had the feeling that I knew her in person [laughs]". This was an exciting moment for both of them: Meeting *the* Flemish lesbian music icon and meeting her together, knowing that her music has a special meaning in their relationship. The significance of these musical memories about K's Choice thus lies in both the personal realm of Laura's relationship with her girlfriend, and in the collective LGBTQ experience.

Sarah and Emotional Music Technology[86]

As Sarah (32) asserts, much of the music she likes to listen to stems from her childhood and teenage days, and is influenced by her parents' music choices: "Really: What [dad] used to play then, I still find that good music!" Sarah remembers being obsessed with her family's hi-fi system and record player as a child:

> Yes, my Dad's stereo system, it fascinated me immensely, and so I was always nosing around his records. For example Status Quo: I could hardly read then, but I was able to recognise that record—I found it so awesome! Actually I was not allowed to touch the stereo system but then… the urge was too strong, I couldn't help it! [we laugh] I simply had to put on those records, and somehow I just had the right feeling for how it all works, and then I was allowed to put them on myself. First he told me off, but then my dad saw that it was a hopeless case, and that he could no longer try to forbid me to touch it, so he said like: 'OK, but be careful with that needle! And like this… you're allowed to play records' … that was around the age of 7 or 8.

Her early love for music, vinyl records and musical technology remained with Sarah throughout her life. Sarah's story ties in with Bolin's findings about how we may not only have a special affinity with music from our youth, but also with music reproduction technologies (Bolin, 2017, p. 10). In fact, a beautiful vintage radio and record player cabinet is one of the most prominent pieces of furniture in her apartment. It is an ex-girlfriend's gift to her, and it feels like opening the cover of the cabinet equals opening a box full of memories. When I asked her what records she listens to, Sarah tells that she actually prefers not to listen to her records at all, rather than engaging with the memory-laden gift: "If it just stands here it's OK, but if I actually use it, well, it always takes me back to the moment she gave it to me [her voice trembles]". She indicates that she feels a bit silly about not being able to use it, but she cannot help herself. Upon breaking up, Sarah suggested to her ex-girlfriend to return the gift, but the ex-girlfriend would not even consider it:

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[86] A similar version of this section was previously published in Wasserbauer (2018)

"She found it on a flea market and immediately knew that she wanted to give it to me. It was for my birthday. […] She found that it really belongs to me, and that it fits with me, and yes, it's true: It's a beautiful cabinet."

Figure 31: Sarah opened her record cabinet for me

Of course, this affects Sarah's music listening habits more widely: She hardly listens to her vinyl collection, which includes records she received from her father and was fascinated by in her childhood. Although she does not use the record player, she is not able to sell it either. DeNora's finding that respondents avoid certain music because it is too painfully linked to certain memories and ex-partners (2000, p. 65) is expanded here: Not the music itself, but the technology used to play it turned into a highly emotional object, inextricably connected with memories of her former relationship. The fact that Sarah felt such a strong attraction to her father's record player in her youth most likely even strengthens her emotions for the cabinet now.

Except for the strong connection between the record player and this particular ex-partner, Sarah also talks about more general musical memories connected to ex-partners. She tells about the big contrast between her love for music and a long-term girlfriend who did not really care about music:

> She didn't have a lot of CDs, she was totally not into music, so strange! [laughs] Believe it or not, she was really only engaged in sports, and she owned like ten CDs or so, and of those ten, two were by the Levellers. And these were the only two of her ten-part music collection I could at least associate with a little [we laugh]. So yes, it's like: When I hear the Levellers now, I often think back of that. Uhm, but yes, it's often like that: Music you know through friends or a partner. Uhm, if you hear it, you make the link and think of them. And then… it adds something to that special feeling, the fact that this song

provokes something in me personally, something another person won't feel. So it's something very personal.

Sarah shares the experience that often, specific music is connected to specific persons in one's life. As she analyses, music may indeed be the carrier of an intimate and exclusive bond. Only the lovers understand the exact significance of a certain song or artist. This is one of the peculiarities of music: Not only specific lyrics or artists with a deeper meaning make us associate music with particular persons. As Frith puts it, "[w]e absorb songs into our own lives and rhythms into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible. Pop songs are open to appropriation for personal use in a way that other popular cultural forms […] are not" (Frith, 1987, p. 139). The rather arbitrary presence of The Levellers in her ex's music collection forever established an intimate connection to her ex for Sarah.

Conclusion

Listening to narratives about music in the relationships of these LGBTQ narrators contributes to biographical research on music in everyday life. To a great extent, these findings connect to previous, more general findings on the functions and effects of music in sociology and psychology, replenishing the findings with real life narratives. As DeNora (2000) asserts, romantic and intimate relationships are among the most discussed topics in relation to music by her respondents; and the same holds true for my interview narrators.

To summarize the most important points learned from these interviews, I am going to begin with some general observations, which are applicable to the broader contexts of music in everyday life, but emerge in these conversations on intimate relationships. Music helps to *evoke memories* about specific times, events, spaces, persons, and thus also relationships. In most of my 22 interviews, specific music is linked to specific persons the narrator is or was in love with, or is or was in an intimate relationship with. In line with these persons, the music is connected to the specific life phases in which the intimate relationship occurred. Notably, adolescence is an important time for musical connections to love interests, as the stories of Nikkie, Laura and Sarah show. Musicologists, psychologists and sociologists agree that many musical memories stem from the formative youth years until the late twenties, when music and pop culture are especially relevant. These years full of new life experiences also often form us in a musical sense, as the work of media scholar Bolin (2017) confirms. It is therefore not surprising that the narrators have strong musical memories from their adolescence. However, plenty of other situations seen

above indicate that music in relationships is important throughout all life phases. Similarly, music of all genres matters in relationships.

The interviews reveal *only few specific connections between LGBTQ musicians and intimate relationships*, while in general, LGBTQ musicians and LGBTQ music are important in the self-identity of my LGBTQ narrators. Arguably, LGBTQ musicians and LGBTQ music are more important to individual identity and group identity than in relationships. Two notable exceptions are, of course, Tobias' life story, where the Eurovision Song Contest features heavily in connection to his husband, and the fact that Laura and her girlfriend had a special connection with K's Choice.

Zooming in on more specific traits of music in intimate relationships, these narrators' cases show that *shared musical preferences* are not a prerequisite for relationships. Dan and Michel, for example, had totally different musical backgrounds when they met, and getting to know each other, they also got to appreciate each other's music. However, it might happen that the partners really do not connect with or even strongly dislike each other's music. Shary's and Anna's anecdotes show two different scenarios on how this difference might be handled: Shary still disliked Screamo, although she did like her ex-girlfriend. On the contrary, Anna was suddenly emotionally touched by Bryan Adams, which is music she would never appreciate on her own. Her being in love affected her music appreciation, so to say, but after the crush was over, so was her appreciation of Bryan Adams. In one of Sarah's past relationships, there was a big contrast between music-lover Sarah and her partner who did not care much for music at all; this did not, however, negatively impact their relationship. Some narrators use their and their partners' shared or divergent music preferences in order to *frame the relationship*. Tobias speaks about very strong shared preferences and interprets this as an indicator that his husband may be the man of his dreams. In contrast, Selm tells about the differences in preferences between her and her ex-girlfriend. At times, it feels as if for Selm these musical differences are a way to frame and even legitimate their break-up.

Sharing music with partners is important: Music may be given to the partner in the form of CDs or lyrics. Likewise, concert tickets or musical gadgets like a record player cabinet make for great gifts. Although not a lot of narrators talked about music in the bedroom, music may be a background in intimate moments. As Anna's story shows, this can also turn out to be a bad idea. Yet another way of experiencing music together is actually *making music together*. Nikkie accompanied her singing girlfriend on the piano, and Tobias even composed some songs on the piano for former lovers. On a less serious note, Dan and Michel invented little songs for each

other. These active forms of engagement with music are often connected to emotional and musical peak experiences, which strengthen the bond between partners and create strong music-related memories. From the interviews, we learn that sharing music is an intimate practice, or, as DeNora puts it, an "aesthetic reflexive activity" (2000, p. 113).

Music is most often connected to emotions, when speaking about relationships. Of course, we only hear one partner's point of view here, so this is about the feelings one partner has about a relationship. First, a rather straightforward and active use of music in relationships is to *express emotions* and feelings to each other. Both Shary and Laura assert that the music they received from and shared with their partners conveys emotional states like instability or caring love. These emotions may be conveyed either through the lyrics in a direct way, expressing what words alone are unable to (see Laura), or through the general sentiment of a song or musical genre. For Tobias, expressing his feelings for a partner worked in a more active way, namely by composing songs for them.

Whether positive, negative or ambiguous: Music connected to past and present relationships is able to *evoke strong emotions*. Even merely thinking about or speaking of relationship-specific music or memorabilia is able to evoke these emotions (see van Dijck, 2006). Even though the narrators do not always explicitly mention how certain music makes them feel, the way they talk about it often communicates these feelings. Hesitations, changes in the tone of voice or laughter are some of the non-verbal ways the emotional effects of the memories connected to music are conveyed during the interviews. Nikkie's memory of G. Love & Special Sauce will always be connected to good times she spent with her partner. Certainly, music does not only evoke positive emotions. Many persons associate negative or painful memories with certain music, or an ex-partner might be forever connected to certain music. Some narrators are aware of the power of music to evoke these feelings and choose to avoid certain music, if possible. Likewise, DeNora (2000, p. 65) experiences that respondents avoid certain music because it is too painfully linked to certain memories and ex-partners. Like Shary left the music of her relationship behind, Nikkie never listens to Mahler's Fifth any more, which is strongly connected with a break-up. For Sarah, this also holds true for musical technology in the form of a record player cabinet she received from her ex. Others face the confrontation with the memories connected to certain music, or even look for the ambivalent feelings and nostalgia music can evoke in us, as we learn from the story of Selm. As Hesmondhalgh (2008) critically remarked, it is important to pay attention to all of these possible reactions to music, as music sociology is often seen to focus too heavily on the positive effects of music. Remarkably, and in line with Istvandity's findings

(2014), most narrators talk about music in relationships past, and about their post-break-up connection to that music, rather than about their current relationship. Tobias, and Dan and Michel form an exception by talking about music in their current relationships.

Some narrators express that they use specific music in order to *enhance or change their emotions* within or related to a relationship. Laura and her girlfriend used to send each other songs in order to make each other feel better. For Nikkie, repeated listening to the same music feels like therapy. These examples confirm findings on mood control and music: For example, ter Bogt et al. (2017) found that music is used for consolation and comfort.

In various ways, the narrators talk about *experiencing music together* with a partner or love interest. Most of them have specific *relationship songs*, which is a common phenomenon in all relationships. In line with Frith and DeNora, Green poetically expresses that music's meaning is always created through its context and individual experience with it: "Music can be seen to arrive as a partly filled narrative that is completed in the subjective experience of reception, never finally but sometimes memorably" (2016, p. 339). Relationship songs are inextricably connected to the partner, symbolizing the relationship of two persons. In a broader sense, shared preferences for a genre or an artist may have the same bonding function. More often narrators talk about their relationships in the private realm rather than the public realm. Not a lot of persons connect for example going out in LGBTQ scenes with relationships. When the public realm is concerned, it is in a more general way, for example when speaking about *visiting concerts together*. These are often memorable moments and peak experiences in relationships, as Laura's story of meeting K's Choice together with her girlfriend exemplifies.

Summarizing all of these functions, we may establish that music certainly functions as a *bonding agent* in intimate relationships. Music in relationships is connected to the individual preferences and identities of both partners, and at the same time gains new meanings in the context of the relationship. The narrators' stories confirm previous findings in the sociology and psychology of music. All of the relationships discussed here are one-on-one relationships; it would be interesting to look into the roles of music in other forms of intimate relationships like in polyamorous contexts or open relationships.

9　Conclusion

In this last chapter of my dissertation, I want to discuss some overarching findings, limitations and contributions of my research. First, I will discuss some thematic conclusions and observations. As each of my chapters has a conclusion of its own, I will not repeat all thoughts discussed there, but rather focus on some more overarching topics arising from the interviews and synthesize findings on music and LGBTQ identities. Second, I return to the methodological discussion in chapter 3 and review my research methodology put into practice: How does music work as a framework for oral history interviews? How did the queer archive guide and influence my research? Third, I will move on to some reflexive notes about the writing process and choices I made as a researcher which influenced the shape and content of this dissertation. In these reflections, I will also point out some of the limitations as well as specific contributions of my research, and point towards openings for further research.

9.1　Overarching Thematic Conclusions

Setting out to research the roles of music in LGBTQ lives was an ambitious and, to be honest, rather vague endeavour. I did not have any strong research hypotheses at the outset of my research and fully embraced the exploratory character of this project. Therefore, it is hard for me to summarize what my findings are, as I worked with individual life stories and did not set out to draw very general and sweeping conclusions about music and LGBTQ people. I cannot present one strong, overarching finding, which directly answers to my research question, except for the fact that the LGBTQs I spoke to find music very important in a diverse range of ways, and in connection to their LGBTQ identities. The title of my dissertation, Queer Voices, emphasises the exploratory and multi-layered character of my research project, as well as the diverse nature of observations and experiences I made during the project. Through the oral history approach I took, I have learned in great detail about the roles of music in each of the 22 narrators' lives. Each narrator has an individual relationship with music, and music plays multiple roles in each narrator's life, as the empirical chapters have shown. There are many voices related to queerness and music in each single story.

Looking at all of the oral histories together, and as the empirical chapters demonstrate, there clearly are specific connections between music and LGBTQ identities, and specific roles music may play in LGBTQ lives emerge from the interviews. Several topics connected to LGBTQ identity and music return in multiple interviews, which became the basis for my empirical chapters. Overall, this project supports DeNora's assertion that music may actually serve as a model of self: "Music is one of the resources to which actors turn when they engage in the aesthetic reflexive practice of configuring self and/or others as emotional and aesthetic agents, across a variety of scenes, from quasi-public […] to intensely private" (2000, p. 158).

The overarching conclusions here are drawn from the experiences of the 22 narrators, and I want to stress yet again that I do not mean to generalise their experiences in order to speak about all of the LGBTQ population. This approach to a conclusion may seem rather hesitant, but ties in with the feminist research ethics emphasising the situated and subjective character of knowledge production and generalising knowledge claims. Some of these conclusions have already been touched on in the conclusions of the empirical chapters, and I here want to take the chance to look at the various chapters together and add the discussion of some (underlying) tendencies I observed throughout the interviews.

Diversity in Music

Throughout this dissertation I have stressed the great diversity of identities and music experiences among the interviews. It may thus not be a surprise that one of my conclusions is the ascertainment of the great diversity of music my narrators listen to, and the ways in which they engage with music.

To start with, like the length of the interviews (48 and 160 minutes), the musical focus of the interviews varies a lot. Some narrators clearly stated that in their preparation for the interview they focused on music which for them is explicitly connected to being LGBTQ (like Nina and Roxy, for example), while other narrators talked about music more generally. Dario and Felix focused on very few artists which are immensely important in their lives, while other narrators discussed a broad range of genres and musicians they listen to (e.g., Shary, Pieter, Joris, Sarah).

My narrators *interpret "music" itself in a range of ways*, a fact which sometimes surprised me and made my research so interesting. As I had expected, a wide range of music genres was touched on throughout the interviews, many of which count as contemporary popular music. Notably, several narrators told me about their passion for classical music: Kurt's story is mostly focused on classical music, and especially the technical backgrounds of recording and playing classical music in a superior quality. In Roxy's life, classical music has been present starting from an early age, and she has in fact made this passion her job as a soprano. Although at first she struggled with music, Nikkie studied music in order to become a pianist, but has now developed an ambiguous relationship to music. Her story very clearly shows that our relationship to making and listening to music is not stable throughout a lifetime, but develops and changes in focus and intensity. For Pieter, classical music is not only important in his work life, but also in his private life. Yet, he does not make any hierarchical distinctions concerning the worth of any music. What is more, Pieter points out parallels in popular music and classical music which I had never thought about, and in his sequential admiration divas, pop and country stars are as present as classical singers. Anna's story shows a very clear preference for music from times past, rather than contemporary music, encompassing classical music as well as popular genres ranging from the 1920s to the 1990s; only a few contemporary artists are featured in her story.

As Robertina's story taught me, music may mean so much more than what we listen to on the radio, the internet or at a concert: Robertina only mentioned very few musicians and artists in our interview, but focused on the greater meaning music has to her. As she puts it, music is the fifth dimension; it is everywhere in our surroundings, and we constantly create a cadence or beat

in moving through the world. Music is mathematical and esoteric at the same time, comprising and uniting sensory and analytical dimensions of human life.

In the interviews, many different ways and intensities of *active engagement with music* are mentioned or arise implicitly. Some narrators are active fans and avid music listeners; others are more casual listeners. As mentioned above, more than half of the narrators actively engage with music in a professional or recreational context. The fact that they make or work with music likely heightened their interest in participating in my research, and I do not claim that this big proportion of LGBTQs actively engaging with music professionally is representative of all of the LGBTQ population. Making music is described as an important form of recreation by Sarah, and as an emotional outlet and way to express himself by Tom. For Kurt, singing in choirs has been important from his childhood, and with his coming out, he joined a gay choir, which he enjoys not only because of the singing but also as a means of getting to know other gay men. Similarly, Nina describes how making music in an all-female band is not only about the music itself, but also a form of resistance against prevailing standards of the music industry and queer/feminist activism. Robertina, Marthe and Dan all deejayed at some points in their lives, and talked about their experiences in shaping and influencing an audience. Although these narrators all deejay(ed) in very different contexts (respectively, a youth club in the 1970s, the electronic underground scene in the 1990s, and private parties and LGBTQ parties in the 2000s until now), a shared sense of taking pleasure in guiding the respective audience and interacting with it arises. Similarly, yet on a more private level, Stefaan enjoys sharing music with people surrounding him, introducing them to new music: "At work, I'm known as the one who always sends songs to people, or shares music and makes compilations for birthdays, like 'look, you've got to get to know this'".

Additionally, the narrators are very diverse in the ways they *listen to music*. Shary always surrounds herself with music, as it is able to calm her down and protect her from the outside world, and similarly, it is a constant companion for Dario. Joris even states that it feels like there is a jukebox in his head which is constantly playing: "Because there is always a song in my head and I sing it all the time, and now [my friend and roommate] sometimes just says 'shuffle' and then I move to another song". On the other end of the spectrum of the intensity and frequency of listening to music, some narrators prefer music in small doses: Selm only listens to music casually, and Nikki in fact prefers silence over listening to music on a day to day basis. Marthe talked much more about music in a social context, namely in the scenes they go out in and in the context of making music with their band, rather than listening to music on their own.

The narrators' stories show that *music of others influences us greatly, and we influence others with our music*. Strikingly, the focus in my narrators' stories lies on how the music of friends, lovers and the community influenced them, rather than the other way round. I interpret this fact in the light of the narrators focusing on their own feelings, perspectives and experiences: The perspectives discussed in the interviews are rather passive and frame the narrator as the recipient rather than the sender of music, but I suspect that in fact there are a lot of mutual musical exchanges. As mentioned just above, some narrators talk about how and why they enjoy sharing "their" music with others, but as Stefaan's experience shows, this does not always go smoothly:

> Well, you can also miss the target: recently a girl friend of mine said 'yes I want some good music for sex and such', and, well, misjudged that a little. I gave them one of these [an R&B compilation], and I was thinking: maybe that's cosy. But it clearly was not the right mood, and she said: 'I have the feeling that the music made me cry. And we both sat there, being really sad…' And so I learned my lesson: 'OK, R&B…' [implies: doesn't work for everybody]

Most narrators talk about sharing music in intimate relationships with their lovers and partners, as I have examined in chapter 8. Except for lovers and partners, family members, friends and peers apparently are the most important people who influence our choice of music. In many interviews the music the narrators encountered in their youth, whether through family, friends or on their own through media like MTV or the internet, still proves to be important in their lives. These stories confirm the wider assumptions within media studies that the music we encounter in our youth proves to be crucial in forming our music preferences and tends to stick with us throughout our lifetime (see, e.g., Bolin, 2017).

LGBTQ-Related Music

As explored in chapter 4.3, there is a *shared sense of LGBTQ music* or an LGBTQ sensibility for specific music. Almost all narrators recognise and discuss this topic, or label certain artists as being well-known and liked among the community, confirming previous research on the subject (e.g., Dhoest, Herreman & Wasserbauer, 2015). What made the conversation around these topics most interesting is the fact that the narrators had very nuanced ideas and opinions about music perceived as LGBTQ music. Most stated that they like that kind of music to go out and have a good time, and in the context of LGBTQ community parties or events, but that they

do not necessarily like to listen to that music on their own on a day to day basis. There is a strong tendency among the narrators to perceive LGBTQ music as a social construction and appropriation rather than an essential or natural connection between certain music and its appreciation in the community. I suggest that this sense of LGBTQ music is mostly related to community contexts and leisure activities, which may be an important part of one's sense of LGBTQ identity.

However, I would like to propose that *music may also be LGBTQ-related in more personal ways*. Leibetseder describes that

> music is the vehicle for the deployment of queer identity, that is, music serves as a technique of questioning—even an erotics of questioning—the received categories of gender and sexual identity such that the map of identity is theoretically, if not actually, reconfigured and redrawn. (2012, p. 12)

Some narrative strands definitely tie in with this statement: Throughout the interviews and across genres, an affinity with queer artists, things out of the norm, and "a bit different" is sensible. These may be very subtle and unique queer links between the music and the listener. Some narrators make these affinities explicit and talk about appreciating artists queering the electronic music industry (Marthe), admiring and envying David Bowie's way of showcasing gender fluidity and extravagance (Robertina), identifying with Philippe Jaroussky's high-pitched male voice as a trans*man (Tom), and appreciating the extravagant queer sensuality of Prince (Patricia). In Roxy's search for music off the beaten track matching a queer/lesbian identity off the beaten track, she discovered that there are many queer sides to the music of French composer Francis Poulenc: Poulenc was openly gay and collaborated with other queer artists, like writer Jean Cocteau. He actively looked for feminine qualities in music, like using "feminine harmonies" and composing to poems of female poet Louise de Vilmorin—an unusual and empowering choice in his days. Roxy describes that there is a distinct queer sentiment to his music, and all of these characteristics make Poulenc an especially interesting composer for her. These examples show that, indeed, music listeners "gravitate towards music that fits their everyday life concerns" (Kotarba, 2018, p. 69). Moreover, as Kotarba enigmatically yet accurately puts it, "through music, we continuously 'self' ourselves into being" (2018, p. 69). Music is able to provide queer alternatives to heteronormative standards, be it through the artist's expression, lyrics or in challenging standards of a certain genre. On a very personal level, this music is related to LGBTQ identity; an understanding which may or may not be shared with other members of the community.

On a more general level, concerning *listening to music made by LGBTQ artists*, two different dominant attitudes may be observed among the narrators: Some narrators explicitly search for music made by LGBTQ artists, looking for music they can identify with and which addresses and expresses their feelings. In the same vein, some narrators experience that music becomes even more interesting when they discover that an artist they like is an LGBTQ person. These experiences of music show that heteronormativity also affects media like music, and representation in media. We might not always notice, but most music is based on heteronormative experiences, and even in 2018, there is a lack of sufficient and diverse sources of identification for LGBTQs. This is one of the reasons why role models, out musicians and lyrics which explicitly speak about non-straight persons (or leave room for interpreting them in non-straight ways) are still so important. Then again, for other narrators, musical qualities have priority, and they clearly state that they are not going to listen to music they do not really like just because the artist is an LGBTQ person.

Related to the topic of LGBTQ music, in hindsight, *I wish I provided more clear prompts for discussing aspects of masculinity and femininity*. Not all narrators speak about the way they perceive gender roles, gender expression and societal expectations around these in daily life as well as in music. These aspects are specifically important for the LGBTQ community: Gay men have historically been perceived as more feminine and effeminate, and lesbian women have often been perceived as more masculine. In relation to music preferences, this is an interesting area to study, for example investigating common stereotypes versus real life experiences. In lesbian and gay musicology, gendered dimensions in music preferences are investigated, and it would have been interesting to connect my narrators' experiences and opinions to that work.

Diversity and Difference in Diversity

With this project, I set out to discover musical and identity diversity among Flemish LGBTQs. *Holebi's en transgenders* (LGBTQs) are frequently framed as one cohesive community in mainstream Flemish discourse. It seems that we tend to forget that the term is an acronym, a collective term comprising many different identities. Naturally, when thinking about LGBTQs as a community, the focus often lies on what unites different sexual and gender minorities: common needs and goals, like protection against discrimination or marriage equality. There are certainly many shared traits in the LGBTQ community, and the fact that most LGBTQs share

similar experiences connected to their gender and sexual identity at some point in their lives provides an implicit basis of mutual understanding.

In this part of my conclusion, I will zoom in on diversity and difference within the LGBTQ population as reflected in the stories of my narrators. One fact which highlights the diversity among LGBTQ persons becomes apparent in the range of meanings the narrators attribute to the same terms.

In chapter 5 on female sexual fluidity, it becomes clear that "*lesbian" is often used as a catchall term* for women who are interested in women, rather than really signifying a narrower definition of women who are sexually and/or romantically exclusively attracted to women. Queer and fluid women also identify with the term lesbian to some extent, and the fact that they use the term does not imply that they may not feel sexually or emotionally attracted to men and others as well. When they talk, for example, about looking for identification in music, films and famous persons, all of the female narrators speak about looking for "lesbian" content, rather than some other term like "queer", "fluid" or "bisexual", even if they identify as such. The narrators speak about lesbian music, lesbian singers and lesbian content they identify with. Yet, they are aware of subtleties in identifications, and are very nuanced when it comes to their personal sexual identifications. It appears that the narrators are able to identify with the more general term "lesbian" when it comes to shared traits and values of the community of women loving women; but that they do prefer being more nuanced when it comes to their personal identification.

Terms used for describing sexual preferences and gender identities often do not suffice to cover the subtleties of personal gender experiences. The inadequacy of popular terms describing LGBTQ identities becomes very clear in chapter 7 on gender nonconforming trans* persons. All five trans* narrators describe how they experience their gender identity in their very own words and ways. It is often in daily life that they experience the insufficiency of the words we most often use to address or point at a person, namely the third-person personal pronouns "he", "she" and their derivations. The everyday language use in our society reflects the binary thinking about gender and sexuality, and reiterates and reinforces it (cf. Butler's concept of performativity, 1990). As Butler puts it, gender is essential in the matrix of cultural intelligibility (1999 [1990]); what we cannot name, we cannot recognise, understand and appreciate as what it really is. From the stories of the gender nonconforming narrators, we gather that these practices are very confrontational, and that being misgendered may be a painful experience. Constantly being questioned in one's very existence because of not being easily readable as "one or the other"

when it comes to gender, is a stressful and annoying experience, as especially Selm's, Tom's and Marthe's stories show.

Moreover, *terms for sexual and gender identity may be interpreted in very different ways*, as the stories of Selm and Shary show. While Selm for example stresses that gender fluidity does not mean to her that she feels like a woman one day and like a man the next day, but rather as a sort of "non-gender", Shary does experience gender fluidity in feeling more masculine or more feminine on a day to day basis. Both of these interpretations are of course valid. Such interpersonal differences highlight the importance and added value of an in-depth biographical approach to researching LGBTQ lives: there is a high amount of diversity among this specific population group, which may often only be discovered in details and margins.

Overall, there is a high amount of *reflexivity about what it means to be LGBTQ in our society* among my narrators. LGBTQ persons are still perceived as "different" and experience in person what it means to diverge from heteronormativity. As their stories demonstrate, all narrators are confronted with being "different" at some point in their lives, and most experience continually being confronted with it throughout their lives (think of experiencing a same-sex crush for the first time; coming out to friends; being outed against one's own will; making new friends; being stared at in public toilets; etc.) These experiences confirm Dziengel's call to pay attention to instances of "Be/Coming out" (2015) throughout the life span of LGBTQs, rather than focusing on one moment of coming out as being pivotal. Throughout the interviews, we see instances of struggling with sexual and gender identity, but also examples of fully embracing it. Identity is an ongoing process, and like our identity itself, our own attitude towards being LGBTQ may shift in time. Some narrators are proud LGBTQ activists, while others do not strongly identify as LGBTQ at all; other identity traits are more important to them and they do not define themselves through their gender and sexual identity. The constant confrontation with being "different" in a heteronormative environment virtually forces LGBTQ persons to figure out how to position themselves and to have a politically informed opinion about societal standards. This is reflected in the way they speak about their own identity, namely always in critical, nuanced and informed ways. What is more, the numerous humorous and ironic anecdotes in the interviews show that many narrators are able to put their identity struggles in perspective and have an overall positive relationship to being LGBTQ. Insights on intersecting identity categories, for example in the stories of Patricia and Mostafa, may guide organisations towards paying more attention towards intersectional issues and being more inclusive.

What my narrators' stories remind us of, is that each single letter of the queer alphabet is yet another umbrella term, covering many individual takes on gender and sexual identity. And yet, there are many experiences which connect this ephemeral community.

9.2   Methodological Insights and Reflections[87]

With my dissertation, I did not only aim to explore music in LGBTQ lives, but also to explore how combining oral history, the queer archive and music/musical memorabilia as guiding elements for the interviews work as a research methodology. In this section, I want to return to this question and reflect on how music and music materials work in my research exploring LGBTQ identities. Moreover, I consider the process of co-constructing knowledge together with the narrator in the interviews. All of these elements contribute to my approach to queering oral history and the archive.

As well as exploring the roles of music in LGBTQ lives, in my dissertation I set out to *explore a creative research method inspired by queer studies and informed by feminist research ethics*, namely how music enables us to tell about ourselves. Music is a very open medium, it may be interpreted and used in many different ways, according to personal preferences. DeNora states that "musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity—or identity's identification" (2000, p. 49). Music aids in finding and expressing one's identity, and as such, music provides room to explore and express one's gender and sexual identity. In my research, I explored what DeNora's assertion may look like in practice. Relying on music's mnemonic functions and stimulating the narrators beforehand to think about connections between music and their identity, I did not have an interview guide. Here, I provide some insight into the way music worked specifically in three different interviews, and point out some general observations about music and the queer archive as a research method.

Pointing Out Subtle Connections: Tobias

Tobias brought a bunch of CDs with him, around which he constructed his musical narrative. This particular story was told in what can be identified as two parts, both of which merged by the end of the interview. Tobias (36) told me that he preferred that I start by asking some questions. In the first part of our talk, we talked about his finding out about being LGBTQ and what the most important key moments were in this process. It soon became clear that Tobias structured these events around the people he dated at specific times. Whenever I asked if he still knew what age he was then, he referred to one of his dates. In the second part of the interview, he asked me whether he could lay his CDs out on the floor. He constructed a tree

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[87] Parts of this chapter have previously been published in: Wasserbauer, 2016a.

structure and then proceeded to explain to me what each branch meant and how things interrelated[88]. One of the concepts he identified in his musical taste was crossover. When I asked him what that meant to him, he answered:

> Well, everything is in there. And that's a form of crossover. I think that this . . . do you still remember what I just told you about being a rebel? Well, I think that a rebel can also be something in music . . . and crossover means, that genres are getting mingled. ABBA did that a lot, the [Eurovision] song contest does it continually, and this is one of the first examples I got to know: Vanessa Mae, when I was 16, and she mixed classical with pop.

By giving him complete freedom to tell his story in whatever way he wished, I acknowledged his agency, and he was able to jump back and forth in his story and make connections which would otherwise possibly have been lost. Had he not mentioned it, as a researcher I would possibly have missed the connection between his referring to himself as a rebel in his teenage years and early twenties and his strong attraction to musical crossovers. The chances of misinterpretation decreased, and although the life story can never be complete, a feeling of a more exhaustive version was achieved. The visual evidence is also a part of the queer archive on what I came to know about him, his LGBTQ identity, and his music.

Making Sense of Musical Shifts Together: Joris

The following notes were made during my interview with Joris (25), and serve as an example of what embodied knowledge and situated reflexivity put into practice could look like in oral history research. Joris brought with him a laptop on which he opened a Word document and YouTube. In the document, he had collected names of songs and bands that he considered important in his life; he had written them down in an unstructured manner just as they came to him when he thought about music and being gay in preparation for the actual interview. He used this document with songs as a guideline for his narrative and structured the songs chronologically while telling me his story. We listened to a lot of the songs on his list, and there were many moments of laughter and mutual understanding of what these songs mean and meant in their temporal context. For Joris, music was clearly the structuring force in the life story he told me; elements of LGBTQ identity were secondary. In retrospect, he clearly saw that his fascination for musicals, for example, marked him as different; but remarks like these felt more

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[88] A picture of the interview situation may be found in chapter 8.

like asides than main story lines. During our conversation, I made notes of the story he told, which became a "map" of how both of us perceived his story.

Figure 32: Map of notes accompanying Joris's interview

The sheet of paper lay between us, and I wrote down characteristic and remarkable things he said about music and identity. Some examples were marked with striped frames. For example, he started the talk by stating that all the music we were about to discuss was very "embarrassing", so I wrote this down in the top left corner. In the lower right corner, a striking statement that could function as the overarching title of Joris's life story was put down: "It's like there constantly is a jukebox in my head." He suggested an important cleft in the music he listened to before and after entering secondary school, which is why I marked it on my research notes. He explained this cleft to me as genuinely liking music versus having to like certain music in order to belong. With his agreement, I wrote these statements down. Towards the end of our talk, different musical phases seemed to emerge from his narrative: a phase from his early childhood until secondary school in which he listened to music he genuinely liked; a phase in which he listened to music he was supposed to like in order to fit in at school; a parallel phase of musical fandom; and finally a phase in which he discovered "alternative" music (his own

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choice of words), in which he rediscovered genuinely liking music. So I drew lines encircling the cloud of songs I wrote down and suggested to him these phases. As he agreed to them, I wrote them down as well (see the ovals). From the beginning of the talk, it was obvious that music for him was strongly linked to emotions; this is why I put down "music—emotion" in the top right corner. This reflexivity and interaction with the narrator about whether I understood and read him correctly feels to me to be a valid method to acknowledge his agency in constructing his own story and building on a shared, embodied knowledge.

Discovering Parallels Between Music and Identity: Patricia

The third example of co-creating knowledge and music as a guide for the interview comes from my interview with Patricia (51). As elaborated in chapter 7, Patricia's CD collection reflects many different phases in her life. Our interview started with the two of us standing in front of her CD shelf for about an hour. Patricia guided me through almost all of her CDs and told me which people and which phases of her life were connected to them. About half an hour into our talk, we agreed to draw a timeline, as I noticed that she thought about her life structured by various phases, always connected to specific music, but it was hard for me to follow the chronology of the events. First, I made these notes most of all for myself, so that I could follow important music and events in her life. After talking me through her music, I asked whether we could still talk about her gender and sexual identity, and we sat down on her sofa. Our change of topic and setting seems to have influenced the pace of our conversation as well. Although Patricia at first seemed a bit suspicious about what was to come, she opened up and told me about her private life very fluently, in much larger and more narrated blocks than in the first part of our interview.
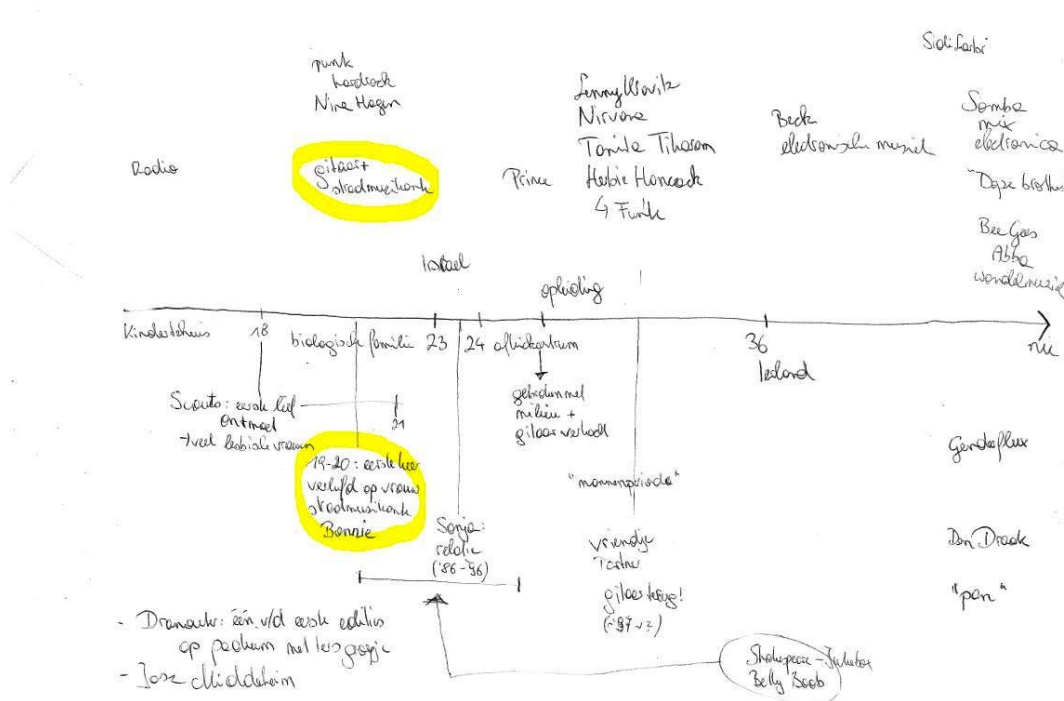
Figure 33: A timeline accompanying Patricia's story

The musical timeline created before came in handy, and we both used it as a guide to situate what happened when in her life. Patricia's life and sexual identity are closely linked to music: The first woman she fell in love with, making her realize she might be gay, was a fellow street musician (see the highlights in the field notes), and her connections to the punk and new-wave scenes opened up her view on gender binaries and sexualities. These connections also became visible on the timeline we created.

It seems that guiding me through her life on the basis of music and then looking at important moments and phases in her private life and visualizing both on a timeline, Patricia was able to make connections about certain structures in her life that she indicated she had not made before. The CDs certainly worked as *aides-mémoires*, and talking about music first seems to have opened a path for a conversation on more intimate issues later on during our interview. Patricia herself made meaning out of what she told me, and this is an important dimension within my research project. The interview is more than simply telling about past and present; it becomes a moment of co-construction of reality, which is one of the traits that distinguishes not only the queer archive, but oral history itself. She is the one who lives and makes her own history, and I become the co-archivist, to speak in the terms of Halberstam (2005, p. 163).

Concluding Thoughts

Reflecting on the objective of putting queer and feminist research methods into practice and seeking to establish a queer archive of each narrator's life story, I can conclude that the methods proposed are very productive for the oral histories collected and that the archiving of memorabilia proves a fruitful way of enhancing the mapping of (musical) LGBTQ life stories, albeit with very diverse outcomes. In my approach to oral history through music and musical material, the queer archive provides a space for collaboratively constructing knowledge and writing LGBTQ history. As the three examples above show, the queer archive is indeed "greater than a collection of factual information or evidence" (Kumbier, 2014, p. 18). The methodology presented here is strongly influenced by feminist and queer theories, which complement and at the same time add another layer of critical thinking.

Each narrator interpreted the invitation to bring music and musical memorabilia to the interview differently: Musical things to remember were used to literally map out the patterns of music in the life of a narrator, as well as to illustrate the development and constants in musical taste. Music was used to establish and verify common grounds of understanding between the narrator and the researcher, and to exemplify certain feelings connected to a specific time or relationship in the life of the narrators. Each narrator made a different connection between music and being an LGBTQ individual. In some periods the two are inextricably linked, while at other points in time music plays a lesser role. Non-material things to remember, like a list of songs made by the narrator in preparing for the interview, also worked as a trigger for memories and scaffolding for telling the life story.

As fruitful as this method is, it is rather messy: Leaving the approach to the interview mostly to the narrators, it was rather unclear to me as a researcher what the contents and topics discussed in each interview would be. The prompt sheet mentioned in the chapter on methodology was only used in case the conversation got stuck or if the narrator preferred for me to ask questions to begin with. However, in most of the interviews most of the topics got covered organically, at least to some extent. More than once, my "undisciplined" approach to qualitative research earned me a questioning look by colleagues. I would like to turn to Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* to defend and even advocate my messy research methodology: "For some kooky minds, disciplines actually get in the way of answers and theorems precisely because they offer maps of thought where intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results" (2011, p. 6). Both the narrators and myself, the co-archivist, sometimes got lost and had to find our ways in

contemplating their oral histories, which indeed, as I would like to argue following Halberstam (2011, p. 14), provides for more possibilities than being guided rigorously.

Intuition was indeed a key element in my interviews: As each narrator took a different approach to telling their story, a different sort of reflexivity and positioning myself as a researcher was required. Situated reflexivity proves to be a useful concept, as a fixed position of the researcher is not possible within this very loose and collaborative research context. The epistemology of an embodied knowledge is a positive starting point for this research: the narrators seemed to enjoy telling their stories as well as to analyse certain moments of their stories together with me. Music and musical memorabilia clearly enhance the agency of the narrator and provide a strong basis for life stories. The collaborative mapping of field notes supports mutual understanding and working towards the notion of an embodied research outcome.

Each narrator's oral history, musical memorabilia, music playlist and the accompanying field notes contribute to a queer archive on listening to music in LGBTQ lives, which enables gaining a fuller understanding of and new insights into LGTBQ lives. The research homepage accompanies this project and aims to make these oral histories more tactile, visible, and—most importantly—more audible. Admittedly, it is rather time-consuming to make the individual playlists and archives. However, I really enjoy getting to know my research narrators through the music and memorabilia they share with me. These are often vital elements to their narratives, so it only seems fair to spend time on making them accessible. I believe that these mini-archives are a way to not only add vital visual and audio information about the narrator, but to acknowledge their whole life story and help create a sense of ownership of their own story.

9.3   Reflexive Notes and Limitations

To end this conclusion, I want to reflect on some choices I made in the research process, as well as point out the limitations and contributions of this dissertation.

Reflexive Note About Selecting Narratives and Writing Chapters

Selecting narratives for each chapter flags the limitations of my research, and of biographical research in general: we try to present a well-rounded, consistent story; one we shape out of the raw interview materials. We do this with the very best intentions, namely to represent the narrator's experience in the most accurate way possible while still applying the analytical lens of a social scientist. While life stories are messy, with narrators jumping from one topic to the next one, and intermingling different topics and narratives, we try to form a more consistent story, highlighting core topics and major narratives. Life stories are almost as messy as life itself, and not all things connect or align beautifully. It feels important to acknowledge this, and to be upfront about the fact that I did not forcibly establish connections between my narrators' experiences and music, but that I am also not willing to leave certain narratives out because they don't fit into the story I want to tell as a researcher.

This tension between the messy life story and the expectation of a coherent academic story especially struck me in the chapter on nonconforming trans* persons: I struggled with how to include the medical narratives, which are so essential to some trans* persons' experiences, but which are mostly disconnected from music. Yet, this is what I sense to be my task as a co-archivist (cf. Halberstam, 2005): to record, (re-)tell and analyse life stories, as well as to record and pay attention to what does not align.

Reflexive Note About Changing Life Circumstances of the Narrators

As mentioned several times throughout my dissertation, the interviews were recorded in 2014 and 2015, which now seems a long time ago. Even more importantly, all interviews were recorded at a very specific moment in the narrators' lives. The content of the interviews as well as the ways these stories were told are inextricably connected with that specific moment, and that specific time in their lives. All stories convey the narrators' experience and truth at that moment. As I have discussed above, I do not assume identities or music experiences to be fixed and unchangeable, quite on the contrary. Therefore, it may be that the narrators' life situation

has changed—a bit, or a lot—since the time of the interview. I can imagine that for them, it must feel weird to read what their past selves told me, a few/several years later. Gender identifications and sexual preferences may have fluctuated and contexts may have changed. Possibly, some painful memories will be re-awakened; maybe some relationships have come and gone; maybe some music is now cherished and other has disappeared from their lives. From the outset of this project I knew that I would only interview the narrators once, and yet still it feels like a shame that I am not able to "update" their life stories. However, I feel that this momentary insight into someone's intimate life has its very own charms: It is a precious chance to learn about a person's sexual and gender identity as well as music from this very particular point of view. This is one of the reasons why I tried to situate each narrative within a life story in as much depth as possible; each story's context matters tremendously.

Limitations And Openings For Further Research

As already hinted at in the reflexive note above, there are many more interesting topics in the oral histories which I would have liked to explore more in-depth. There is a great wealth of stories within my 22 narrators' oral histories, and there are other topics connecting LGBTQ identity and music which I would still like to explore. However, I hope to have provided a good insight with the five empirical chapters on topics arising from the interviews.

My specific focus on the connection between music and LGBTQ identity situates certain topics outside of the scope of this dissertation. In the interviews, many *issues are discussed which are important in LGBTQ lives but are not connected to music*. For example, and as mentioned in some of the chapters, various narrators speak about mental health issues; an important topic, as LGBTQs still prove to be among the most vulnerable groups when it comes to mental health and suicide (e.g., Missiaen & Seynaeve, 2016). My narrators were very open in sharing their more difficult moments with me, which I appreciate a lot. However, I do not discuss these narrative strands in detail, as they are most often not connected with music in any way. Similarly, some narrators talk about the experiences with bullying, homophobia, and social exclusion. Again, these are topics I touch on briefly in my empirical chapters, but more in the sense of providing an insight into the context of the narrators' stories, rather than looking at these specific narrative strands in detail.

Likewise, there are many interesting *musical facets which are not related to LGBTQ lives*, which I have not discussed in detail. Spanning from my oldest narrator, Robertina (60) to my youngest

narrator Dario (18), the availability and technologies of music have changed enormously. While Robertina grew up with vinyl records, later recorded music from radio stations to cassettes with a microphone and classified all the music she had carefully in hand-written files, Dario grew up with music being available at all times on his own mobile phone. Like Sarah (32), Joris (24) still clearly remembers his fascination with his parents' hi-fi system; and Joris also told me about how he experienced the short-lived success of the MD. Although Bolin asserts that media "memories tend to center on genres and content instead of technology" (2017, p. 52), I find that many of my narrators have specific and fond memories about music technologies they encountered and used throughout their lives. These different qualities of engagement with music and music technologies would be very interesting to explore more in-depth.

Another limitation of my research is the *relatively small pool of narrators*, compared to the vast diversity among the LGBTQ population. From the outset of my research project, I did not aim to investigate a representative sample of LGBTQ persons, nor to make generalisable statements about all LGBTQs and music. An oral history project like mine builds on individual stories and never aims to be representative; yet, I feel that I would still like to hear other persons' stories. As the overview of my narrators shows (chapter 3.5.1), they all are relatively young, with only two narrators being above the age of 50. However, I think that it would be very interesting to speak to more LGBTQs of an older age and see if and how their music experiences differ from those of younger persons.

On a related note, my project somehow did not seem to reach one specific part of the LGBTQ community: The common Flemish acronym "hole**bi**" acknowledges bisexuals explicitly whenever referring to LGBTQs. We could assume, therefore, that bisexuality is a sexual identity that is rather common. Remarkably, there are *no self-identified bisexual persons among my narrators*. In some of the interviews, bisexuality is mentioned as a "transition phase", and implicitly, bisexuality is discussed in several interviews in the sense that several narrators are non-monosexual, meaning that they may feel attracted to more than one gender. As I aimed to explore the roles of music in LG**B**TQ lives, I was of course interested in digging a little deeper and finding out more about the absence of bisexuals in my narrators. I mentioned this absence to a befriended LGBTQ activist, who invited me to join for a meeting of "werkgroep bi" (task force bisexuality) of *çavaria*, the Flemish LGBTQ organisation. In August 2016, I joined a meeting and got the chance to address this seeming invisibility, and my questions related to it. After explaining a bit about my research, the seven attending bisexuality activists who all identify as bi(+), answered some of the questions I asked myself connected to this apparent absence: Is the

label too "charged"; does it carry negative connotations; does it reinforce the man/woman binary? Is the term simply outdated? What are the parallels and differences with queer or pansexual, and why do these terms seem to have more positive connotations? Is (the distribution of) my call for participation the reason why I did not reach any bisexuals? Do my own identity and network have any influence on this? Together with the bisexuality activists, I discussed issues like bi erasure, invisibility and their political implications, as well as the activists' experiences with bisexual communities. Our conversation made me aware of some pitfalls that possibly provide an explanation for why no self-identified bisexuals talked with me. Moreover, I learned about new ways of framing and reclaiming bisexual identities. I will not discuss this meeting in more detail here, as most points were not related to music but focused on identity questions. Although among my narrators identifying as "pansexual" or "queer" seems to have more positive connotations than "bisexual", this does not necessarily reflect society at large.

Moreover, the insightful discussion with the bisexuality activists made me realize that group discussions or focus groups could have been a fruitful method in researching the roles of music in the lives of LGBTQs. The meeting showed me that the discussion of common phenomena arising from individual interviews in group is able to provide deeper insights and allows for discussing different points of view and experiences side by side.

Contributions to Understanding the Lived Experience of Flemish LGBTQs

As I asserted in my methodology section, Flanders is an interesting area in which to research LGBTQ lives from a cultural point of view. In general, LGBTQs are widely accepted and become more and more visible. However, I argue that the *diversity and difference among the members of the LGBTQ community* often gets erased in public discourse which focuses on shared political agendas of the community. As I have already stated above, the LGBTQ community is not in fact as homogenous as it is often depicted. In the assimilationist movement towards being fully recognised and gaining equal rights, the individual and subversive character of LGBTQ persons often gets lost. Talking about music provides a low-threshold and yet in-depth way to explore individual LGBTQ identities, and music (experience) reflects each individual's character. With my project, I hope to show how LGBTQs experience(d) living in Flanders, and how they situate their gender and sexual identity in their own lives and in relation to societal standards, in their past as well as at the time of the interviews.

Some of the experiences of gender and sexual identity the narrators speak about are rather universal; others specifically relate to the Flemish context. To me, the specificity of the contemporary Flemish context is most sensible in the trans* narrators' stories: Trans* rights are an important topic on the agenda of the Flemish LGBTQ organisation *çavaria*, and many legal and medical aspects have changed in the past few years. Moreover, trans* persons, and especially non-binary or gender nonconforming persons have become much more visible in society at large in the past few years. The narrators' accounts confirm the positive impact of these changes, and yet advocate for more openness, tolerance and respect in the Belgian society for trans* persons.

Contributing to the Interdisciplinary Study of Music and Identity

Overall, my research project shows the importance of cultural influences, and music in particular, in the lives and identity processes of LGBTQ persons. As Hesmondhalgh put it, "there is a remarkable lack of material that simply considers why people value the music they like" (2013, p. 136). The oral history approach of my research allowed me to discover questions like "why do people value the music they like", and, moreover, it provided space for the narrators themselves to explore and answer such questions, as well as to interpret music's meaning in their lives together with me. Considering why and how people appreciate certain music implies discovering the use and effects of the music, and, in consequence, its influence on our daily life, sense of self and identity.

Moreover, a *cultural/musical approach towards gaining insight into LGBTQ lives offers the chance to avoid framing LGBTQ people mainly as a vulnerable minority group*. My narrators talked about specific experiences related to their gender and sexual identity; however, the starting point was an open and neutral one, not assuming that I was only interested in what made them "different" or in the difficulties they faced related to being LGBTQ. My project shows that the universal, yet culturally and temporally determined character of music and musical memorabilia is a fruitful starting point in getting to know a person: Every person experiences, uses and interprets music differently, and these individual approaches are productive grounds for investigating identity work. Although it is such a flexible and changeable cultural product, music provides a framework stable enough in order to connect one's life story to it.

The *interdisciplinary character* of my research was sometimes challenging for me as a researcher. As a curious and open-minded person, I am interested in many different areas of research and

approaches. As my theoretical frameworks and methodology show, my research is indeed informed by a range of disciplines. An interdisciplinary approach makes it more difficult to develop and outline a clear and structured approach to framing a research question and analysing the research material. Academic conventions generally still seem to favour mono-disciplinary approaches; straightforwardness and clarity are much appreciated traits in the scientific community.

Yet, being the "kooky" co-archivist I am, I fancy and seek the productivity of areas of overlap and friction. I believe in the benefits of addressing any one subject from multiple perspectives. This kind of multidisciplinary approach is open-minded by definition and reminds us that there are always many sides to one story. The connection of music and LGBTQ identities may be found at many different levels in the oral histories of my narrators, and I believe that listening to them (or reading them) with a mind informed by LGBT and queer studies, music sociology, memory studies as well as narrative inquiry, enabled me to access meaning and meaning making processes on many levels. It is especially interesting to look at overlapping interests in the various disciplines. In my research, narrative is one such field: media and music studies, identity studies and memory studies alike stress the important role of narratives in our lives and, more specifically, to our sense of identity. My methodology based on oral history fully focuses on narrative: first of all, on the stories about music and identity as my narrators told them to me, and second, in analysing narrative strands within the oral histories in order to focus on specific topics.

Throughout my dissertation, I have pointed out that there is a lack in the *biographical study of music*, the study of music in everyday life, and the study of music in LGBTQ lives. My study of individual music use and experience throughout life contributes to filling this gap in music studies and identity research (cf. Green, 2016). Music and narratives provide the room to tell about and investigate all kinds of identities; even the ones that do not neatly fit into boxes. Such queer gender and sexual identities are rather difficult to grasp and research and have thus long been viewed as "noise in the data" in various disciplines (cf. Albury, 2015, p. 649). In fact, these queer identities are among the most interesting ones to research, as they invite us to question societal structures and preconceptions about gender and sexuality. Overall, I believe that my dissertation contributes to the fields of oral history, LGBTQ studies and the sociological study of music. It highlights that it is a rewarding exercise to engage with a topic from several disciplinary points of view, and that music is an unusual yet fruitful way to engage with and learn about LGBTQ identities.

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