Radical Musicology
Volume 7 (2019)
ISSN 1751-7788

Touching from A Distance: Imagining Marit Larsen in Queer Spaces

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Introduction

In Norwegian popular music, the mid-2000s saw an unparalleled case of re-invention. Marit Larsen, who had been a member of the globally successful duo M2M throughout her teens together with her friend Marion Ravn, returned to the limelight after a prolonged absence following the split of M2M. During this time, she re-conceived her pop persona completely, from globalised teen-pop star to grown-up, down-to-earth singer-songwriter who had finally come into her own. Strikingly different both from her previous M2M persona and from her former band-mate Ravn, Larsen nevertheless distinguished herself from both as a way of making her solo persona intelligible to the general public. Deftly performing out an audiovisual persona that seemed tailored for the music, Larsen succeeded in winning over Norwegian audiences by asserting a direct connection between her own jealousy in her relationship with her (then-) boyfriend and the title track of her first solo album, *Under the Surface* (2006), generating the impression that there is no distance between artist and music, between person and persona. 1

Larsen's success in creating her star personality rests in no small part on the illusion that she is just being herself – an unassuming girl next door who has a boyfriend and a handful of songs that she is only too happy to allow people to hear. The hyper-heteronormative thrust of this figure as part of the staging of normality is not to be underestimated. In this respect, Larsen's persona is coded through an array of stereotypes of femininity. In the visual presentation of her persona – through music videos, interviews, and public appearances on- and off-stage, and in clothing, hairstyles, and arguably the voice – she performs figures such as the girl-child, the girl next door, the housewife, and the female singer-songwriter. Clearly, these stereotypes function to her audience as markers of authenticity, imbuing her persona with a nostalgic, even Arcadian femininity that is arguably exemplary of conservative gender notions. Larsen made direct use of this in the presentation of her persona at the onset of her solo career; as I will discuss in this article, her trick of tying the title track of her first solo album directly to her personal life is clearly contingent on notions of gender in conjunction with authenticity. However, I also suggest that this is one of the songs where we find an argument for Larsen's non-straight appeal. 2

There seems to be an almost complete absence of queer perspectives on Larsen in the music press and among fans. One notable exception is openly gay US blogger Perez Hilton, who promoted her music on his website in 2008 and again in 2016.[1] Even though Hilton's praise of Larsen comes through in general and non-committal turns of phrase such as 'You can't watch this video and help but instantly fall in love with Marit Larsen', this connection 3

provides an entry into what I see as the potential for queer readings that Larsen's work enables. In this article, then, I suggest how the possibility of Larsen's queer appeal might be theorised. Drawing on Larsen's professed admiration for singer-songwriters Dolly Parton and Stevie Nicks, I make analytic inroads into her own music in order to imagine how her songs could signify when subjected to queer readings.

4 Analysing Larsen's music in the light of her allegedly autobiographical discourse in the media, I also argue that her employment of stereotypes of femininity, together with her increasing need for privacy, invest her persona with a queer appeal precisely because of the distance this allows her to keep, thus making her work *touching from a distance*.[2] These strategies and the resulting distance between artist and audience may in fact open Larsen's arguably heteronormative project – adding her boyfriend as one of the props in the staging of her persona, employing stereotypes of femininity, and claiming there be a truth-value to these aspects of her project – to a wider array of readings, including queer readings, than her own narrative may suggest.

5 On the meanings of queer in a musicological context, Jason Lee Oakes makes a point that may be obvious, but that nevertheless needs stating and is worth quoting here:

> The word *queer* in this context is not a synonym for 'gay and lesbian'; to the contrary, queerness is less a category of sexuality than an approach to sexuality that may be shared by homosexuals, bisexuals, transgenders, and even heterosexuals who feel a lack of fit within established sexual frameworks […] Acting as a critique of prevailing cultural categories, queerness can be used to challenge identities that are usually broken down according to strict binaries of straight/gay, masculine/feminine, and other dualisms.[3]

Taking Oakes's explanation as a point of departure, I emphasise that this essay does not attempt to label the sexual orientation of Marit Larsen or any of her fans. Instead, I wish to investigate how her music and persona may be open to queer readings. Thus, following Rosalie Fanshel, I attempt to '"out" the queer body' of her songs and performance.[4] This entails an effort to open Larsen's body of work to queer readings and show the possibility of meanings 'beneath the surface' of different readings of an artist whose music, on a superficial level, comes across as contingent on the artist's own, heteronormative version of events.

Strategies of Distance: Authentic Singer-Songwriter, Stereotypical Gender

6 One of Larsen's most spectacular manoeuvres in the creation of her own background story is her 'coming out' as 'a jealous person', which created a stir around the title track of her debut solo album *Under the Surface* in 2006. Appearing on the popular Norwegian television talk show *Først & sist* as part of the promotional campaign for the album, Larsen appeared to candidly disclose her own jealousy as virtually uncontrollable. Referring to her then boyfriend, she bluntly stated that she struggled to cope with the idea of his having had girlfriends prior to her, and that whenever they were out walking and caught sight of one of his ex-girlfriends, Larsen literally had to run and hide.[5] In a later interview, she supplied the story with the information that people have since thanked her for 'expressing what they

had attempted to say', which she took as a sign of the universality of her own sentiment: 'I am jealous, I really am, but so are so many others as well'.[6]

I find this moment worth dwelling on because it provided Larsen with an opportunity to furnish her persona with what Allan Moore, in his tripartite model for reading authenticity as authentication in popular music, has referred to as first person authenticity, namely the illusion that the artist tells the truth about themselves in their songs: 'This is what it is like to be me'.[7] What is more, Larsen told the story in such a way that the audience was potentially left wondering which came first, her own sentiment or the song, thus making the story appear to break down the barrier between artist and work, and between real person and persona. I use the term *persona* here building on Philip Auslander's three-dimensional model of the pop artist as person, persona and character, where the persona is the artist's interface with their fans and the media.[8] Even though the persona and the real person behind it may resemble each other, I contend that they are never entirely similar because the persona needs to retain a part that is not personal, but open to identification by fans. One of Larsen's most dexterous tricks is how she makes the pop star persona resemble her peers, thus seemingly providing her persona with a transparent authenticity: the illusion she creates is that there is no illusion. Invoking several ideas of authenticity,[9] this appearance also placed her firmly in the mainstream not only as a straight-identified (heterosexual) artist, but also as one who accepts her role under patriarchy as the non-rational, emotionally driven female. On the one hand, this allows her to cleverly veil her own agency as an artist and her control over her own career; on the other hand, we might well interpret this as her way of banishing any queer elements from her music *and* her persona, as the audience is left with no choice but to accept the artist's version of her story. 7

In recent years, Larsen has used her persona not only to maintain the impression of an endearing artist, but also to uphold privacy. While keeping up appearances in a professional way in interviews and public performances, she has increasingly refrained from disclosing personal details; in interviews for subsequent albums, she has gone from limiting talk of relationships to mentioning that she and her then-boyfriend had separate work schedules[10] to amicably refusing to discuss the state of affairs in her personal life at all.[11] She has linked this expressly to her music, stating in an interview in 2012 that she does not want to disclose what her songs are about, since 'I do not wish to deprive listeners of the joy of making up their own stories'.[12] Despite what might look like an urge to control her audience's perceptions here, we may see this reticence on Larsen's part about her life and work as opening up the possibility of queer readings. As a professional performer now in her early thirties, not married and with no children,[13] reclusive when not on tour or promoting new music, and secretive about her partner/s, Larsen is as apt for queer readings as for any interpretations of her life and work on a heteronormative basis. 8

Larsen's use of images of femininity certainly also indicates such possibilities. Discussing her alleged problems with jealousy in 2006, she is asked by an interviewer whether she would rather her boyfriend were a blank slate. Her response takes a turn: 'I am a girl, you know, and [I] subtract and add. That is what we do.'[14] The will to essentialise 'girls' easily indicates a conservative notion of gender, which also complements the tacit acceptance that, naturally, her boyfriend has had other women before her. 9

With this statement, Larsen not only situates herself as 'girl' (that is, not yet trapped by the constraints of adulthood, of being a woman), but also imbues her persona with what would easily be construed as essentially feminine qualities. We should not, however, overlook the efficacy of the term 'girl' here. On the one hand, Larsen's framing of herself as a 'girl' recalls Jacqueline Warwick's definition of 'girlness', which differs from physical girlhood in that it is 'not a liminal phase but a set of behaviors and attributes available to females at any time during their life';[15] consequently, anyone can 'adopt a girly manner for strategic purposes, and they can play with the characteristics of girlness for their own enjoyment'.[16] On the other hand, there is the question of girls' agency; on this matter, Warwick and Adrian suggest that girls, as 'members of a market group that overlaps with women and with children', may well be perceived as 'leaders and directors of cultural trends'[17] – and, we might add, as agents of popular culture. We may thus read Larsen here as riffing on an 'epistemology of youth' that, according to Halberstam, 'disrupts conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood, and maturity'[18] – and that allows Larsen to create a narrative of her own for her persona that draws on girlness as one of the adult woman's tools. 10

The idea of girlness as a set of behaviours also alerts us to the performative function of this self-styling as 'girl'. Larsen's claim to the universality of the 'girl' may be read as an example of gender performativity, which in this case serves the fantasy of sex/gender/desire she offers to the readers. Equally important, the statement may be read as signifying Larsen's strategy of distance. By universalising her girlness and its qualities, Larsen may be perceived as simultaneously suggesting that her persona is truthful and using the girl to maintain a distance from herself qua 'woman'. 11

This way, we also see how Larsen employs stereotypes of femininity in the construction of her persona. Gender performativity is not only about imitation of gender, but also making gender legible, intelligible, and attractive within a historical, cultural, and sexual context. Her use of such figures as the girl-child, the girl next door, and the housewife takes on a double function: as markers of what might be understood as (nostalgic) femininity, and as means by which Larsen keeps her distance from the spectacle of her persona, and the society of the spectacle at a distance from herself. 12

Strategies of distance as well as of gender performativity, then, are central to Larsen's persona. She pulls this off in part by increasingly keeping her private life at a distance, after initially pulling a trick that seemingly removed any distance between private person and star persona, suggesting a perfect case of first person authenticity. Along the way, she has used stereotypes of femininity to create a persona that is endearing and non-threatening – but also, incidentally, a persona that may be admired by both straight and queer audiences. 13

Against Fixity: Musicology and Queer Takes

Understanding the artist via identity categories such as gender and sexuality, Whiteley and Rycenga argue that popular music is 'not a neatly squared-off discourse; rather, it can be considered as a social force that constructs heteronormativity *and* resistant queer sexualities […] and can thus claim to have played a significant, if often ambiguous role, in the shaping of queer identity and queer self-consciousness'.[19] In the light of this, popular music, with its long history as an intertextual art form, 'contains both hidden histories and 14

iconoclastic figures that have long attracted devoted audiences who sense something quite different from what the mainstream thinks is being projected'.[20] The point of a queer take, then, is not to foist meaning upon the pop text. Rather, queer readings may help us comprehend how the pop text may not just give off different meanings to different listeners, but also how listeners may discover meaning in a text that may not have been intended by the author – a central point to my analysis of Marit Larsen's work.

15 Larsen's framing of her star persona also has an intertextual dimension in that she makes it intelligible in a context of shared musical tastes, that is, by writing about her musical preferences in the media. In 2013 and 2014, she wrote a small series of essays for the Norwegian tabloid newspaper *Dagbladet*, on artists such as Fleetwood Mac and Dolly Parton. In her writing, Larsen comes across as blissfully unaware of alternative readings, as she purports to avoid any interpretation of the artists' work that is not exclusively occupied with the music. This might also be indicative of her gender-conservative streak, as in her wording in the lead paragraph in the article on Parton: 'Forget the tits, the sequins and the wig. As a songwriter, Dolly Parton is in the Champions League with the greatest.'[21] Apparently making an effort to re-establish Parton as a musician and songwriter, Larsen can be seen to reinforce a gender-conservative trait of her persona by dismissing or at least downplaying the importance of the persona to the music, and the possibilities of play, parody and gender performativity that are easily read into Parton's own persona.[22]

16 The choice of Parton opens Larsen's own project to interesting connections. As a female Country & Western artist, scholars have pointed to Parton's hyperfemininity[23] as an important reason for her popularity. Pamela Wilson argues that, 'through the construction of her persona, Parton manages and actively exploits the contradictory meanings associated with the social categories of gender, class, ethnic, and regional identity';[24] consequently, the Dolly persona '*embodies* (there being no other word for it) excessive womanliness, in any interpretation'.[25] Drawing attention to Parton's act as performing a 'masquerade' building on these various categories, Wilson suggests that we might see this masquerade as 'a social parody, a hyperbolic stereotype, a tongue-in-cheek charade that playfully and affectionately subverts the patriarchal iconography of female sexuality'.[26] In this respect, Parton certainly represents a resistance to conservative notions of femininity, in ways that go deeper than just the spectacle on the surface. In her analysis of k.d. lang, Martha Mockus situates Parton in an important historical lineage: 'the butch-femme aesthetic in country music was probably first set in motion by Dolly Parton, whose self-consciously excessive femininity can be read as a humorous critique of gender stereotyping'.[27] She adds that, '[needless] to say, Parton also enjoys a huge lesbian and gay audience'.[28] Nadine Hubbs takes this into a close reading of Parton's music, emerging with salient perspectives on the homosociality and homoeroticism of Parton's song, 'Jolene':

> Am I the only listener who imagines [Parton] and Jolene getting together if the guy doesn't work out? Or a fourth verse that finds this love triangle dissolved into a three-way? Even if we argue that the narrator's eroticization of Jolene comes about only heterosexually by fantasy projection of herself into the man's body – well, that hardly makes things less queer.[29]

Hubbs lists a number of reasons for what she calls the queer aura of 'Jolene', one of Parton's most well-known and oft-covered songs. These include both the artist's own 'well-known queer friendliness'[30] and the song's 'homoerotic, or transerotic, address', which entails that Parton's narrator 'addresses the other woman not violently but homoerotically through the eyes of a lover tenderly detailing her beauty and charms'[31] – a beauty that Larsen also seems infatuated with in her essay. This plurality of gazes in 'Jolene' is also central to Sissel Myhre's theorising of Parton's hyperfemininity as camp. Suggesting that Parton's persona is often perceived as an 'archetype of femininity' who is viewed as 'always ready', Myhre alerts us that hyperfemininity need not be hypersexual,[32] but might also be viewed as femininity camped up:

> By camping up femininity, the hyperfeminine woman reveals the unnaturalness of the everyday gender performance … Parton's performance is decidedly camp. Her look might be revealed as a parody of traditionally feminine aesthetics, a 'burlesquing of femininity' […], heavily sexualised, but in a way so over-the-top that is (almost) stops being sexy and becomes a parody.[33]

Seen this way, hyperfemininity is also deconstructive, exposing the conditions of femininity by turning up the volume radically. This does not necessarily entail giving Parton's 'tits, sequins and wig' propriety at any given time, but neither does it mean erasing them from the image of Parton; on the contrary, exempting the artist's persona from analysis also significantly reduces our ability to comprehend her appeal.

This is also valid for Larsen's essay on Fleetwood Mac. Focusing on Nicks as a member of 17
Fleetwood Mac, Larsen situates her in a band where the members' personal lives and relationship break-ups were in the public eye in the late 1970s. In a way, this seems to be Larsen's primary concern: as she writes, 'I could analyse at length the smouldering drama of love within the band – divorces, gore, arguments, infidelity and its inevitable effect on their musical universe'.[34] In a way, this is what she does: In an ostensibly straightforward telling of the band's story, she revels in myths and anecdotes about the band's members, where Nicks' relationship with Lindsey Buckingham and her affair with drummer Mick Fleetwood render Nicks herself ostensibly heterosexual and become the background for an autobiographical reading of the band's albums. Thus, for Larsen, the straightness of the artist appears to be central to the story.

On one level, this is in line with Oakes' observation that, 'fans and critics have consistently 18
positioned Nicks on a number of levels as an embodiment of normative femininity'.[35] However, Oakes sees this femininity as 'at the same time highly performative'.[36] This becomes a starting point for Oakes' analysis of the numerous Nicks tribute events originating in gay and drag subcultures in the US since the 1990s, with the annual 'Night of a Thousand Stevies' in New York City as a case in point. Observing how dozens of men and women not only dress up like Nicks but also sing her songs and enact her stage persona, Oakes asks: '[Why] is it that Stevie Nicks, as a heterosexual representative of conventional femininity, has been taken up as a 'queer' icon? How is Nicks's femininity "forged", and why do drag queens and other gender benders often amplify Nicks's most hyperfeminine qualities?'[37]

Oakes suggests that queerness has its basis in 'highly mediated and mutable identities', and argues that this mutability opens Nicks' music to 'queer hearings'.[38] This entails that, in a context of representations of femininity, 'even those meant to be pejorative, queer subjects find a model for identities that are established upon a certain built-in instability (read: flexibility, adaptability)';[39] while Nicks' hyperfemininity 'may confirm gender stereotypes for more conservative listeners, from another perspective Nicks serves as a model of female – and more specifically, feminine – empowerment'.[40] Fans' identification with the artist thus opens up a queer space, where hyperfemininity becomes an asset, a central component of fans' desire. This invokes Myhre's point that '[the] question whether Dolly Parton should be viewed as transgressive or subversive is one without a singular answer; the transgressive potential might be explored through the uses to which Dolly Parton is put by her audience'.[41] In the light of this, Larsen's emphasis on the artist's authenticity on the basis of her musicianship and song-writing craft seems rather quaint. 19

This does not stop us from reading Larsen's own project along deconstructive lines. If Parton's persona can have an appeal not in spite of, but indeed because of its 'constructed-ness', and Nicks' embodiment of normative femininity may be precisely what reveals gender performativity and opens hyperfemininity to queer desire, we may also see how Larsen's persona is open to similar interpretations. 20

'Under the Surface': Spectres of Desire

These examples of Larsen's self-reflexive discourse suggest that her persona evolves and differs across various stages of her career, from the girl of the first-album phase to the ostensibly more mature artist who verbalises about her influences. Larsen appears to be fully in control of how she is perceived by media and fans, but the construction of her persona also offers rich possibilities for interpretations that go against any monolithic view of the artist and her musical output. How, then, is this realised in the music? In response to this question, I offer close readings of two of her songs that lend themselves to what I see as queer-inspired interpretations. 21

One of Larsen's best-known songs and the title track of her first album, 'Under the Surface' (2006) invites the listener in by invoking a range of pleasures: an endearing theme played by a string section, a young woman's non-threatening voice, a waltz-like metre, a piano-driven backing by a band playing solely acoustic instruments (bar electric bass), and lyrics that both make intertextual references to 1960s and 1970s popular music and treat the ostensibly universal subject of love and jealousy in a simple and accessible manner. The prominent element of the song is the theme, a deceptively simple four-bar melody in D Major consisting of four sets of quavers in a descending figure from F sharp down to D, with a leap up to B in the second bar creating the smallest bit of tension on the second chord (F sharp minor). In a subdued, false start, the first bar of the theme is played on glockenspiel before the band enters on a sweeping upward glissando, which leads directly into the main theme, written and conducted by multi-instrumentalist Lars Horntveth of progressive jazz/rock band Jaga Jazzist and performed by an eight-piece string section. 22

In a gesture that gives the theme its particular uplifting feeling, the song oscillates between two tonics. The theme and verses are in D major; via a turnaround of F–Am–G, the tonic 23

shifts to C major for the choruses. The bitonal alternation between keys neatly illustrates the protagonist's oscillation between joy and anguish: music in D sets lyrics that affirm the protagonist's relationship with 'you', while music in C underpins the protagonist's doubts and struggles. In addition to this, there is a further tonal ambiguity in the chord progression in the verses. From D major, the melody moves to F sharp minor, a logical harmonic step, but followed by a move to F major, where Larsen's vocal melody touches on E, the major seventh that creates tension. The subsequent move from F major back to D major is suitably impressionistic, but also effective in creating the impression that the protagonist does not know which leg to stand on. What is more, this can be interpreted as a built-in ambiguity from the start, one that does not only begin when the protagonist's thoughts take a darker turn in the chorus. And, it is an ambiguity that contradicts the seeming unambiguousness of the musical-like theme.

Above all, the song is significant when it comes to Larsen's strategies of distance. The protagonist seems devoid of agency, wearing a beautiful dress and wishing to be seen by the antagonist; but there is no evidence in the lyrics of the 'you' ever paying attention to the protagonist, thereby suggesting that the narrative may well be little more than the song personality's solitary reverie: the subject looks on, but does not partake. The imploring request to 'say that you love me, say that it's true' could thus be directed at an apparition of love, from the safe distance where the protagonist can dream safely. Most tellingly, the protagonist is intensely preoccupied with the third party, the former girlfriend of 'you'. In this respect, the song seems to be neither a love song nor a song about lived emotions, but rather like a diary entry, an unrealised fantasy that assumes its poignancy precisely because of the distance to any consumed love. 24

This also opens for a reading of the lyrics – outside the context of Larsen's explicit linking of the song to her own biography – along queer lines. The song's narrative revolves around three characters: me, you, and her. Heard outside the context of Larsen's compelling first person authenticity, the absence of a gendered male in the song leaves the story open to interpretation as to which gender 'you' is. Moreover, the tension of the competing major chords in the song makes one wonder whether the spectral 'her', the former girlfriend (note the innuendo of the phrase, 'her who had you before'), is still a force to be reckoned with. This way, the song becomes a portrayal of what is in effect a three-way relationship, where the exclusivity of the heteronormative male-female couple is rendered unstable by the absence of a masculine part and the presence of a third person. 25

Could one imagine, then, that this love triangle could, in Hubbs's words, 'dissolve into a three-way'? Or, by extension, polyamory? If, once again, we move away from Larsen's monolithic story of the song's origins, we uncover different layers of interpretation and possibilities of desire, not least the desire that operates beneath the surface, or in the closet. Same-sex and three-way desire have a history of hiding in clandestine spaces, and popular music, with its efficacy in constructing both heteronormativity and resistant queer sexualities, can accommodate both. 'Under the Surface' is fraught with images of secrecy, and reading the lyrics' 'core' as the closet or what is 'under the surface' as queer desire opens for more possibilities than Larsen's own official version of the story would perhaps allow. 26

‘Have You Ever’: The Threesome as Queer Space

Besides ‘Under the Surface’, Larsen has notably explored the figure of the threesome in ‘Have You Ever’. From her third solo album, *Spark* (2011), ‘Have You Ever’ is an up-tempo pop-rock song in C major, characterised by a full band sound once again augmented by strings. A total of 24 musicians are heard on the recording, including 16 string players; the string arrangement resembles 1970s disco music as much as anything else. ‘Have You Ever’ centres on Larsen’s first-person narrator who observes a male-female couple and dreams of their life together, as well as of breaking up the couple and ‘getting out of here’ with the man. In this, ‘Have You Ever’ relates to ‘Under the Surface’ in its description of a three-way situation, only the outcome is different, as the narrator admits in the chorus that the man is out of reach: ‘Have you ever met a man you could love forever / Only to find that he’s with somebody better’. 27

The song might also seem to draw on the same explicitly heteronormative discourse as the one surrounding ‘Under the Surface’ in that Larsen sings about a man and a woman and how, at least on the surface of it, the female narrator desires the man and wishes for him to fall in love with her instead. Like so many of Larsen’s songs, then, ‘Have You Ever’ may be interpreted as a straightforward song about heterosexual romance. However, a reading against the grain opens up potential queer perspectives here. The song is ostensibly about the female protagonist’s wish for the male to fall in love with her. Nevertheless, the lyrics open with a vivid image of the female, as seen through the eyes of Larsen’s ‘I’: ‘Have you ever seen her face / the way it lights up when he walks into the room’. This recalls Hubbs’ point that, in ‘Jolene’, Dolly Parton’s narrator addresses the other woman ‘through the eyes of a lover detailing her beauty and charms’. From the start, Larsen’s ‘I’ seems just as taken with the woman as with the man of the narrative. When she discloses her ideal solution, ostensibly to win his affection, she states that, ‘all I have to do is break her heart’. On one level, then, the song is a tale of female heartbreak, where the man turns into a mere tool for the protagonist to get to her rival – the other woman – who is also an object of the protagonist’s desire. 28

This fantasy of actively breaking the other woman’s heart contrasts the reality of the narrative, where the protagonist watches the couple from a distance and becomes lost in a reverie about their everyday life. In the bridge, the tonic moves to the relative minor (a). Via a series of images that take on a cinematic quality (‘I bet she makes his coffee in the morning / They share umbrellas in the rain / He kisses her without a warning / I bet he’ll marry her someday’), the narrator outlines the ideal couple: he performs the active gestures (kissing *her* and marrying *her*) and she assumes the role of housewife (making *his* coffee). While this active/passive parsing is superficially in line with the gender-conservative streak in Larsen’s persona, the construction of the *couple* as the narrator’s object of desire makes one wonder if the narrator is content just to watch, or if she desires them both, even to the degree that she, again following Hubbs, would want to dissolve the love triangle into a three-way. 29

The repetition in mid-song of ‘all I have to do is break her heart’, with multi-layered backing vocals (2:33–2:47) sounds more playful than menacing, as the narrator clearly revels in the fantasy of engaging with the woman’s romantic feelings – a fantasy that she has no 30

intention of acting on, according to her repeated 'No, I don't / No, I won't'. This does not mean, however, that she does not get pleasure from her fantasy. The first bridge (0:49–1:02) is signified by the dropping out of the drums, leaving Larsen to convey the poignant images of the happy couple against a circular progression of a–b–C–d–e and back to a, accompanied by sparse, plaintive notes in strings, acoustic guitar and bass, like a wistful soliloquy. In the second bridge (1:54–2:09) the drums re-enter halfway through, building up a crescendo together with the bass that makes the lyrics sound more keen than plaintive. The third, extended bridge (2:56–3:24) has a first part where the narrator dreams that the man 'pulls me out onto the sidewalk … / He would fall in love with me', only with plaintive musical backing similar to the first bridge. This makes the reverie sound formulaic to the point that it even bores the narrator: Within a heteronormative frame, this is what she is supposed to dream of, the obvious outcome of her fantasy. This is exemplary of how, as Butler argues, gender norms 'operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealisation of the heterosexual bond';[42] but rather than any joyful celebration of heterosexual courtship, Larsen's narrator makes the reiteration of this idealisation sound like she is going through the motions to placate her (straight) audience. When the images of the happy couple return, however, the bass and drums start cooking up a crescendo immediately, suggesting that this – the hyper-heteronormative couple as fetish – is the stuff that her dreams are made of. Consequently, when we get to the line 'I bet he'll marry her someday', Larsen, her voice augmented with harmony vocals, sounds subtly ecstatic.[43] This returns the song to its upbeat tempo and mood, which turns jubilant in the final chorus, with the band and strings in full flight and a theatrical emphasis of the perfect cadence (G–C) that ends the song.

31 The lyrics of the chorus, 'Have you ever met a man you could love forever / Only to find that he's with somebody better', are also the words that end the song. What is the significance of 'somebody better' here? I propose two readings of this. On the one hand, the idea that the man is with 'somebody better' is a possible admission of shame, that the other woman is somehow better than the narrator herself. This positions shame as a binary opposite to pride, where shame is an effect of marginality, of remaining out of place, or in the closet, rather than coming out and 'selling out', joining the community that gives top priority to pride: 'For the growing number of people who have come to feel alienated from gay pride … Gay Shame offers a refuge, a site of solidarity and belonging.'[44] If heteronormativity is a space that is ostensibly accessible to everyone, but also distinguished (and policed) by its queer surroundings (that are similarly policed), then the non-heteronormative is a space that accommodates shame for not being able to take part. This, then, may be another reason to read the protagonist as desiring both the man and the woman: As a symbol of hyper-heteronormativity, the male-female couple comes to stand metonymically for an ideal love that has shame as its opposite.

32 Larsen has touched on the theme of shame in other songs, notably 'The Sinking Game' (*Under the Surface*, 2006). In a song that resembles a jazz waltz and has a carefree, happy-go-lucky feel, the narrator sings to a 'partner in crime' at a scene that resembles summer festival grounds, where people have dust on their feet and mud to their knees. However, the lyrics also contain images of the abject: The narrator states that 'I've got guilt on my hands' and that 'we dive into disease'. While this may be construed as non sequiturs or even as a quirky description of a one-night stand at a festival camp, the narrator's statement in

the chorus that she is 'coming clean of jealousy and shame' links the song to discourses on gay shame. In a context of gay pride, queerness may be linked to or even engender shame in terms of belonging. Hubbs, taking up questions of lesbian (or 'predatory-dyke') shame, writes that,

> I've never seen the sorts of gay-pride declarations we've come to know in recent years as handles by which I might somehow grasp control over my own queer destiny. More often the rhetoric of gay pride has felt alien and alienating and has encouraged me to see myself as harbouring (shamefully) a very individual and probably pathological condition in living and experiencing my queerness as I do.[45]

The notion of the pathological recalls Larsen's 'dive into disease'. In this instance, 'coming clean of shame' may well be a shibboleth for Larsen's narrator or even an act of emancipation, of breaking free of the constraints of the closet and joining the community that takes pride in its queerness.

The juxtaposition of these two songs indicates the complexity in Larsen's work that a queer 33
reading might disclose. Whereas in 'The Sinking Game' Larsen sings of shame as something she rids herself of, in 'Have You Ever' she embraces shame as a vital part of the queer fabric. As such, shame may be a source of agency. Sara Ahmed, in her interpretation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's later work, argues that to embrace or affirm the experience of shame 'sounds very much like taking a pride in one's shame – a conversion of bad feeling into good feeling'.[46] In a similar vein, as a component of queer identity politics in what Didier Eribon describes as 'the making of the gay self', shame may be perceived as 'the will to dissociate from the group'.[47] Consequently, the protagonist's openness to shame may actually reinforce her queer sense of self.

Returning to 'Have You Ever', Larsen's narrator – the one who voices her words – may 34
ultimately be more interested in her own subjectivity and desires than the actual object she appears to desire. But, lest we forget, this object is not entirely unambiguous either. And this brings me to the second reading of the chorus: a realisation that even though the narrator started out coveting the man, she finds the woman even more attractive. Recalling Hubbs' interpretation of Parton's 'Jolene' and how the narrator appears smitten with the woman rather than the man, we see how Larsen begins and ends 'Have You Ever' with observations of the other woman, describing how she sees her face light up, and stating that the other woman is 'better' – in this case, the better choice for Larsen's protagonist; one that she is more infatuated with than the man (and the one she would be better off 'getting out of here' with).[48]

Again, this goes against the superficial cinematic aesthetic of the narrative, however 35
powerful this may be to listeners. The images of the couple, as the protagonist imagines them, sharing an umbrella in the rain and getting married, could well be lifted from any romantic Hollywood film, not to say Disney romance: As Carrie Cokely argues, '[much] of the magic that is produced by Disney is entangled with notions of romance, true love, and the white wedding', and the marriage plot: 'finding true love and, inevitably, marriage'.[49] For an audience of children as well as adults, this is coded as heteronormative: The dream that 'someday my prince will come', 'puts forth the notion that it is so "natural" for women

to want to be married that it consumes not only their dreams, but that it also spills over into their waking thoughts as well'.[50] What is more, this discourse also entails 'the underlying message that it is indeed the male who is the "aggressor" in a heterosexual relationship'.[51] At first sight, 'Have You Ever' appears to tick all of these boxes, thus, like Disney, aiming at a mainstream, heteronormative audience:

> To derive this pleasure from [Disney films], one must be firmly situated within the dominant ideologies of heterosexuality and patriarchy that are reinforced through these films. Those of us who are located within these structures not only establish our identities through cultural productions, such as films, but are also able to reaffirm those identities.[52]

This brings to mind Butler's description of the heteronormative logic of sex/gender/desire. However, the fluidity of desire on the part of Larsen's protagonist reminds us of the possibility of more than one reading. Evans and Gamman, following Butler's anti-essentialist view of fluid identity categories, argue that, 'anti-essentialist discussion of identificatory processes actually challenges the fixity of notions about gay, lesbian or straight identities' as well as 'essentialist ideas that relations of looking are determined by the biological sex of the individual/s you choose to fornicate with, more than any other social relations […]'.[53] Against this background, they argue that, 'the heterosexual subject position is equally as unnatural, and more importantly, as *fluid*, in terms of gender identifications, as homosexual and lesbian subjectivities'.[54] Given that Larsen's narrator could be heard as expressing a desire – literal or not – to fornicate with both the woman and the man of the couple she takes pleasure in looking at, her own subject position is characterised by just such a fluidity. Consequently, the scenario becomes open to interpretation as other and more than a deterministic image of heteronormative sex/gender/desire logic (with all the attendant qualities of gendered identity that culture ordains), and exemplary of the gaze as available to both women and men – and those who, like Larsen's protagonist, might wish to be with both.

In and out: 'Solid Ground', 'Coming Home', and the closet

There is also a strain in Larsen's oeuvre of songs that could be interpreted as dealing with emancipation and the closet. In what follows, I offer brief readings of 'Solid Ground' and 'Coming Home', songs that I see as exemplary of this in different ways. 36

The mention of the closet warrants some clarification. Central to twentieth-century discourse on homosexuality, the figure of the closet has played a crucial part in the practice of discretion. Maus suggests that the closet is, 'a way of regulating speech-acts, determining what could and could not be said about sexuality',[55] but thereby also a device for creating and circulating discourse: 'the closet constituted homosexuality, made it knowable, in the obscure way that it was generally known'.[56] This enabled knowledge about homosexuality as, in no small part, 'how to say certain things and avoid saying others'; a circulation of knowledge where people 'could become deft at this practice without explicitly recognising it for what it was'.[57] Ahmed has suggested, along similar lines, that '[we] could consider "the closet" itself as an orientation device, a way of inhabiting the world or of being at home in the world'.[58] 37

Going along with these concepts, I would suggest that the closet is not only present in Larsen's work, but also that this further enables us to read the artist's queer agency. Stan Hawkins argues that the closet is 'a crucible of meaning, policed by language and institutionalised power structures',[59] and points to the important function such a device may have in music: 'In pop music well-rehearsed techniques of submission are envisioned in pleasure as much as pain, where the motive is to not only "open up", but also conceal'.[60] As I suggest in the following, Larsen's strategies of concealing open up her songs to apt readings by queer audiences. 38

Recalling Larsen's use of stereotypes of femininity, notably how she has employed the figure of the housewife explicitly in the construction of her visual persona,[61] it might seem curious that, despite her frequent use of passive or introspective female protagonists, she does not thematise domestic life to a similar extent in her music. Even so, at least one of her songs, 'Solid Ground' (*Under the Surface*, 2006), lends itself to an interpretation in the light of this particular figure. Situated between the jaunty Country & Western pastiche of 'Only A Fool' and the up-tempo 'Recent Illusion', 'Solid Ground' offers a moment of quiet reflection on Larsen's début album. The song initially has a subdued, waltz feel, which is displaced by a 6/4 rock band feel when the drums come in after the second chorus (1:59). Instrumentation is mainly acoustic, including two piano tracks (one of which is a treated piano that plays a complementary, spectral figure together with the main piano) and a cello which assumes the function of conversational, complementary voice in the second verse. 39

Within a context of the dutiful housewife, the lyrics read like a set of instructions for the 'you' who has to keep a straight face. One obvious (and, frankly, banal) reading would entail understanding the song as words of warning from the older, experienced Larsen to a younger artist – perhaps even a younger version of herself – about the perils of the music industry. However, the song opens itself out to other interpretations as well, not least because of the exhortations about the enigmatic, undisclosed 'they' of the narrative. Instead of a piece of advice from 'I' to 'you', the lyrics could indicate an inner monologue, wherein the 'I' admonishes herself and makes sure she remembers how to behave as expected. The ghostly-sounding descending piano figure that seconds the piano accompaniment, and the legato tones in the cello, could both be interpreted as signifying the queer voices that are erased, silenced, by 'they', who do not accommodate anything but the demure, smiling, heterosexual good material for a housewife. 40

In this sense, the song can be heard, not as a song about coming out, but as a gentle instruction to remain in the closet. In this light, 'the risk you take' and the consequent 'fall' of the lyrics could be indicative of the perils of coming out; conversely, knowing 'your secret way' could entail remaining in the closet. As such, the closet provides safety, 'a way of staying in'.[62] To take the risk would thus include risking having to be 'the strongest at goodbyes' in order to be able to 'expand your wings and fly', free of the confines of the closet. However, there is also the implied risk of something that lets go inside of the protagonist, and that consequently puts both 'me' and 'you' at risk. This way, the song again comes across less as internal monologue and more as a clandestine conversation between two parties whose desires remain implied, unspoken. 41

At the opposite end of this spectrum we find the song 'Coming Home' (*Spark*, 2011). As the first single from Larsen's third album, the song was significant of a turn in her work, where she moved away from the acoustic folk-pop style of the first two albums and into a more electric, pop-rock paradigm that would appeal to her new-found Continental audiences. The opening lines of the lyrics are themselves worthy of attention: 42

> *I wonder if you know when you kiss me like that*
> *You ruin me for anyone else*

Superficially, these words lend themselves to at least two readings, none of which threatens to destabilise heterosexual romantic love. On the one hand, the lyrics open almost blatantly to a reading where a young woman renounces her chastity for the right person – in Larsen's ostensibly heteronormative universe, a man – carrying with it notions of purity and patriarchally correct femininity. On the other hand, the lyrics could possibly also be read as a send-up of the idea of 'true love' that is 'worth waiting for',[63] with the protagonist and her partner in love and indulging in adult (sexual) pastimes. As an interesting opposite of idealising patriarchal images of femininity – a deeply problematic message that would not be out of line in Larsen's work – the song could also be read as describing an exit from the closet. Who is the 'you' kissing the protagonist? And is she truly ruined for anyone else (i.e., by the man who has, *mutatis mutandis*, taken her virginity away), or merely for anyone of the opposite sex? In this sense, the title 'Coming Home' may just as well be understood as 'coming out'. This is subtly underlined by the vocals, such as the double-tracking of Larsen's voice during the second part of the verse – 'Do you know it's never been better / than [with] you'. Even though the double-tracked vocal has a long lineage in recorded popular music, the effect of hearing two vocal tracks in these lines is not at all unlike that of hearing two of the same gender sing to each other.[64] Similarly, Larsen's harmony vocals to her own lead vocal in the line, 'broken dreams, hopes, hearts, promises' in the second verse could suggest a duet between lovers with similar voices, a union which returns – and comes to fruition – in the final chorus.

The sense of emancipation is reinforced by the jubilant musical elements in the song, such as the ecstatic piano from the second chorus on, and the glissando in the bass guitar that introduces the final chorus. Given that it is the bass that provides the (solid) ground for Larsen's voice from the first verse, this musical gesture seems only appropriate, as it ushers in the final, upbeat chorus. Here, the lyrics 'are you falling like I've been falling / 'cos it feels like coming home' subtly echo 'Solid Ground': perhaps the protagonist has fallen, that is, come clean of jealousy and shame. Perhaps she has indeed been turned back into herself, that is, returned to her true self after having been closeted for so long. The notion of coming home thus implies a coming out in the safety of one's own home. We may favourably read this in the light of Ahmed's mention of the home as itself a queer space; she argues that, at least for 'some queers', homes are 'already rather queer spaces, and they are full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires'.[65] So, even the home of the housewife might become a queer space, as well as a space where queer subjectivities may come into their own. 43

As examples of the function of the closet in Larsen's work, these two songs are marked by complementary strategies – staying in and coming out – but also show how the employment 44

of this device may enable us to see how her work signifies in queer spaces. Hawkins suggests that, '[given] that the closet is always in sight in pop music, the strategy of queering as a tactic for enticement accounts for pop music's strong appeal'.[66] If this holds true, then a queer reading could add a subtle, but valuable nuance to Larsen's work, enabling us to imagine her songs as open to a broad range of interpretations.

Concluding Thoughts

Could we imagine, then, that a queer reading could actually shed new light on Larsen's work? I imply one possible answer in my mention of the monolithic view of her music and the perceived naturalness and authenticity of her persona. Whether stated by the artist, her fans or her intermediaries, the belief that there is but one truth to an artist – in this case, Larsen's own story of herself – overlooks the potential of fans' interpretation and imagination, which may in turn enhance fans' desire as well as their subjectivity. Freya Jarman-Ivens has deftly pointed out that '[once] we see queer as an open-ended practice – not the exclusive property of any one group that is organised around a collective and stable identity, and not connected per se to any such identity – it becomes possible to reinsert queer into a framework concerned with subjectivity'.[67] Lest we forget, fans do not necessarily base their impression of the artists on the story that the artists tell about themselves, and I would suggest that this is where Larsen's music lends itself to queer readings. 45

One particularly salient example of music as open to non-hegemonic readings is the phenomenon of 'shipping', notably in the case of British-Irish boy band, One Direction. Short for 'relationshipping', the term designates a 'short fiction genre that imagines celebrities in relationships with each other'.[68] As Duncan Cooper casually mentions in a recent interview with former One Direction member Zayn Malik, shipping 'often means matching the bandmates up with one another'.[69] This situates shipping within the genre of fan fiction known as *slash fiction*, 'a genre of fan-written stories that involves a sexual and/or romantic relationship between two (or more) characters of the same sex'[70] where the term *slash* 'derives from the separation of character names with a virgule to denote homosexual content'.[71] Originating in the 1970s as a fantasy activity for fans of *Star Trek*, slash fiction has grown to be a popular platform for fan communities across a range of films and TV series, from the *Batman* series and *Lord of the Rings* to *Lost* and *Heroes*.[72] At least since the 1980s, research has shown that his type of fiction enables female writers to the extent that large numbers of fan fiction authors are female.[73] As an example of queer-oriented and female-produced fiction, then, slash fiction accommodates shipping and enables fans' agency in allowing for non-normative readings of artists. 46

In the case of One Direction, it is a popular practice among female fans to create fantasies around the secret romantic relationship between band members, notably Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson. The couple has been designated the make-believe joint name 'Larry Stylinson' and widely imagined by their fans to be 'connected'.[74] While this may be perceived as no more than fans' harmless daydreams, former One Direction member Zayn Malik has appeared to take offense over this on behalf of his ex-bandmates, stating in interviews that, 'It's not funny, and it still continues to be quite hard for them'. This extends to public appearances as well, as the two 'won't naturally go put their arm around each 47

other because they're conscious of this thing that's going on, which is not even true. They won't do that natural behaviour.'[75]

48 The example of 'shipping' raises issues relevant to this article. As an example of predominantly female fans' agency and subjectivity, the practice among One Direction's fans of readings that may not be implied by the artists arguably also allows fans 'the chance to explore their own sexuality in a safe environment'.[76] This alerts us to slash fiction as a creative space for female fans, as indicated by one of Lothian et al.'s informants: 'When I think of the exuberance I felt participating in fandom, I think it was at seeing women stepping forward to describe their own erotics, because our culture silences female desire as effectively as it silences queer desire'. [77] Theorising slash fiction as a space that counteracts the silencing of desire also enables a view of slash fiction as queer resistance: as Dhaenens et al. argue, 'by conceptualising resistance as fluid and situated, we are unable to differentiate fixed, recurring patterns or to make general statements about the (in)existence of articulated queer resistance in the media sphere'[78]. In turn, the practice of shipping exposes Malik's homophobic response to the fans' narrative as well as his theorising that the fantasy of the two members as a couple estranges the young men from their 'natural behaviour', and points to the radical potential of imagining artists in queer spaces – both as an antidote to homophobia and an example of the efficacy of queer readings.

49 Against this example, Larsen may come across as a more accommodating artist, approving of Perez Hilton's plugging of her music by commenting that she especially appreciates 'the right kind of attention'.[79] Opaque statements such as this sit well with the overall opacity of Larsen's work in terms of how she might be seen to engage with such topics as secrecy and closeting. In this sense, even a reading of her work as heteronormative and gender-conservative does not necessarily expose homophobia or rule out queer potential in her music and persona. On the contrary, Larsen's alignment of herself with artists such as Parton and Nicks illuminates not only her own employment of hyperfemininity in the construction of her persona – the interface with her fans that is also, as Auslander argues, not a reliable source of information about the performer as a real person[80] – but also its queer appeal.

50 The importance of queer as what Jarman-Ivens calls an 'open-ended practice' should not be underestimated, whether we talk about artist or fans. As Marquita Smith argues in her analysis of Nicki Minaj, '[seeking] any performer's personal truth is futile; what matter are the meanings that are inscribed by audiences'.[81] This makes a case 'against fixity', in this context against fixing either Larsen or her fans in one single interpretation or even 'truth'; rather, as in the case of One Direction's fans and 'Larry Stylinson', it makes the artist in question more complex, not to say ambiguous, due to the possibilities of interpretations that differ from the artist's own. For all we know, this ambiguity is intentional on the artist's part; but, given my suggestion of Larsen's employment of stereotypes and the seemingly heteronormative context of her music, I argue that the possibilities of a queer sensibility arise out of a deconstructive reading that may or may not be in line with the artist's intention.

Queer readings and interpretations of popular music are every bit as real and meaningful as any 'straight' reading would be, and equally important, not least because of the plurality of voices to be heard when it comes to the reception of the artist. Susanna Välimäki makes the valid point that 'homosexualised' music 'brings out the question of whose voice and whose experiences are heard in society – or, in the history of music'.[82] Larsen's songs lend themselves to readings that raise similar issues. As such, her music comes across as more complex than one would think from a face-value (read: straight) interpretation of her own strategies of distance and employment of stereotypes – richer and more open to queer interpretation, or to imagining in queer spaces, not least the kind of queer spaces implied and opened up by the artist herself.

Notes

[1] Perez Hilton, 'Watch & Listen: Our New Favorite', *Perezhilton.com* 25 September 2008, http://perezhilton.com/2008-09-25-watch-listen-our-new-favorite#.VsHvo8pOBaV (25 January 2016); Perez Hilton, 'Listen To This: If A Song Could Get Us Her', *Perezhilton.com* 20 January 2015, http://perezhilton.com/2016-01-20-marit-larsen-i-dont-want-to-talk-about-it#.VsHvq8pOBaV (25 January 2016).

[2] I borrow the phrase 'touching from a distance' from the title of Deborah Curtis's book *Touching From A Distance: Ian Curtis and Joy Division* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995). While I do not suggest any other connections between Joy Division and Marit Larsen, I find the book's ambiguous title an apt description of Larsen's project. My reading of Curtis suggests that she does, in part, see her late husband Ian Curtis as a persona that fans might find poignant when viewed from a certain distance. My point here is exactly that Larsen's music yields different meanings when given a critical reading up close than we find in the discourses on her in the context of Norwegian popular music.

[3] Jason Lee Oakes, 'Queering the Witch: Stevie Nicks and the Forging of Femininity at the Night of a Thousand Stevies', in Whiteley, Sheila, and Jennifer Rycenga (eds.), *Queering the Popular Pitch* (London: Routledge, 2006), 41-54: 48.

[4] Rosalie Zdzienicka Fanshel, 'Beyond Blood Brothers: Queer Bruce Springsteen', *Popular Music* Vol. 32, No. 3 (October, 2013), 359-383: 359.

[5] See Simen V. Gonsholt, 'Kvinne på randen', *Dagbladet* (22 July 2006), 24-25.

[6] 'Jeg er virkelig sjalu, jeg er det, men det er det veldig mange som er.' Gonsholt, 'Kvinne på randen'. This and all subsequent translations from the Norwegian are my own.

[7] Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as Authentication', *Popular Music* Volume 21, No. 2 (2002), 209-223: 212.

[8] Philip Auslander, 'Musical Persona: The Physical Performance of Popular Music', in Scott, Derek B. (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 303-315: 305.

[9] These would include Larsen's 'realness and honesty' as a solo artist after her tenure in the global pop industry as a member of the commercially-oriented duo M2M, her display of endearing femininity vis-à-vis the ambitious manner of former M2M partner Marion Ravn, and the singer-songwriter ethos where the artist supposedly discloses her own true feelings in her music. The fact that Larsen writes and sings in English, which is not her mother tongue, troubles assumptions of authenticity even more, as the idea of honesty is displaced from the artist's origins to the realm of popular culture, meaning that the artist is always already masked by language and thus removed from complete honesty. See Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik, *Scratching the Surface. Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn: Popular Music and Gender in a Transcultural Context* (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2014) for an extended discussion of the complex function of English in Norwegian popular music.

[10] Ida Giske, 'Redd for å bli for lykkelig', *VG Helg* (11 October 2008), 6-12.

[11] Maiken Grønning Fotland, 'Privatisten', *Dagbladet Magasinet* (19 November 2011), 48-51; Tormod Kvithyld Åmotsbakken, 'Jeg har kastet bort så mye tid på å være redd', *Dagbladet Magasinet* (2 August 2014), 40-46.

[12] '[Jeg] vil bevare mystikken og ikke ta fra lytteren gleden av å lage sine egne historier.' Anne-Lill Aas, 'Sparer Hemmelighetene til Sangene', *Telemarksavisa* (9 February 2012), 50-51. Again, Moore's model of authenticity takes on relevance as the pop artist's ability to leave the meaning of a song to the listener may

also be read as an imperative, where Larsen effectively gives the listener license to perceive her songs as describing the listener's emotional life. This is what Moore ('Authenticity', 220) calls second person authenticity, where the impression is that 'the music is "telling it like it is"' for the listener.

[13] These are the kind of facts that newspapers 'disclose' in conjunction with interviews with the artist; in this case, the journalist writes that Larsen 'does not wish to state her relationship status, but is not married and has no children'. Fotland, 'Privatisten'.

[14] 'Altså, jeg er jo jente, og trekker fra og legger til. Det er det vi gjør.' Gonsholt, 'Kvinne på randen'.

[15] Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, 'Introduction', in Warwick, Jacqueline, and Allison Adrian (eds.), *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-11: 2.

[18] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

[19] Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, 'Introduction', in Whiteley, Sheila, and Jennifer Rycenga (eds.), *Queering the Popular Pitch* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xiii-xix: xiii.

[20] Ibid. xiv.

[21] 'Glem puppene, paljettene og parykken. Som låtskriver er Dolly Parton i Champions League med de største.' Marit Larsen, 'Ustoppelige Dolly', *Dagbladet* (9 July 2014), 48-49.

[22] This apparent disinterest in the extramusical traits of Parton's project may also well be interpreted as an employment of fake (strategic) naivety that masks the constructed-ness of Larsen's persona in order to create the illusion of a non-threatening, endearing artist. See Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik, '"Armed with the Faith of a Child": Marit Larsen and Strategies of Faking', in Hawkins, Stan (ed.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2017), 253-266, for a discussion of naivety as a trait of Larsen's persona.

[23] I use the term *hyperfemininity* here as a twin term to *hypermasculinity*, which designates an exaggerated variant of masculinity 'as male artists conform to physical stereotypes and imagined social norms'. See Stan Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality* (London: Routledge, 2016), 180. The result is certainly a form of masculinity-on-display, with emphasis as much on sexuality as on physical strength and aggression. Such traits underpin hypermasculinity and 'often [spill] over into parody'; Marita Buanes Djupvik, '"Working It": Female Masculinity and Missy Elliott', in Hawkins, Stan (ed.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge 2017), 117-131. The element of exaggeration that enables parody applies equally to concepts of hyperfemininity; as Sissel A. Myhre points out in her unpublished master thesis *Shades of Pink: Performing Dolly Parton* (University of Oslo, 2010, 53) hyperfemininity 'might also be viewed as femininity camped up'. The point I want to make is that, while exaggerating traits that connote femininity provides pop artists with opportunities for staging a hyperfeminine persona, these traits need not be overly parodic or disclose the theatricality that makes them efficacious; to this end, Marit Larsen provides us with a relevant example of the latter.

[24] Pamela Wilson, 'Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton', in Tichi, Cecilia (ed.), *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky Tonk Bars* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 98-120: 99.

[25] Ibid. 100.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Martha Mockus, 'Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d. lang', in Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood & Gary C. Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 257-271: 270.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Nadine Hubbs, '"Jolene", Genre, and the Everyday Homoerotics of Country Music: Dolly Parton's Loving Address of the Other Woman', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* Vol. 19 (2015), 71-76: 72.

[30] Ibid. 73.

[31] Ibid. 75.

[32] Myhre, *Shades of Pink*, 53. Myhre links the notion of hypersexuality to star personalities such as Parton and Marilyn Monroe, who pander to male fantasies in identifiable ways: Parton's 'Dolly-act' trades in engaging male fantasies (ibid. 52) and also resembles Monroe in that her performance suggests 'simultaneously both childlike pleasure and sexual delight' (ibid. 67). However, Myhre also emphasises that Parton's image is 'carefully crafted in a way that simultaneously exploits male fantasies while maintaining

her dignity' (ibid. 68) and thus retains control. Myhre's point is that what might be perceived as hypersexuality – the fantasy that the hyperfeminine woman is always ready to pander to male fantasies and allow the man access – might as well be a camped-up version of femininity that reveals the constructed-ness of everyday gender performance (ibid. 53). My point in employing these terms is that 'hyper'-variants may be understood as sources of pleasure for the listener as well as terms that enable non-monolithic readings.

[33] Ibid. 53.

[34] 'Jeg kunne skrevet meg inn i en mye lengre analyse av all ulmende kjærlighetsdramatikk innad i bandet – skilsmisser, gørr, krangling, utroskap og dens unektelige utslag i deres musikalske univers.' Marit Larsen, 'Have You Any Dreams You'd Like to Sell?', *Dagbladet* (15 October 2013), 64-65.

[35] Oakes, 'Queering the Witch', 43.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid. 44.

[38] Ibid. 49.

[39] Ibid. 52.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Myhre, *Shades of Pink*, 56.

[42] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), 231-232.

[43] This is even more pronounced in Larsen's performance of 'Have You Ever' on the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's nationwide television programme *Lydverket* in the autumn of 2011, as part of the promotional campaign for *Spark*. Here, Larsen is filmed from a distance as she sings the first part of the final bridge; the camera then zooms in on her, filming her face up close as she sings the second part, face flushed, shaking her hair and intensely returning the camera's gaze. The band enters into the final chorus, in C major via F major and G major, and Larsen sings the line, 'have you ever met a man you could love forever'; then, she tilts her head back, closes her eyes and opens her mouth in a gesture that might signify sexual climax, in anticipation of the line, 'only to find that he's with somebody better'. Marit Larsen, 'Have You Ever' (Live performance),*YouTube,* 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VUHV0Watao (28 September 2018).

[44] David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, 'Introduction', in Halperin, David M. and Valerie Traub (eds.), *Gay Shame* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 9.

[45] Nadine Hubbs, 'On the Uses of Shame and Gifts of a Bloodmobile: Musings from a Musical Queer Apprenticeship', in Halperin, David M. and Valerie Traub (eds.), *Gay Shame* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 111-116: 114.

[46] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 175.

[47] Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. Michael Lucey (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 73.

[48] The idea of the other woman as 'better' is also significant with regard to fashion magazines. Lewis and Rolley suggest that 'women have long been tutored in consuming other women's bodies, in assessing and responding to the desirability of other women', a process that 'potentially involves far more complex forms of identification and desire' and makes it difficult 'fully to separate admiration from desiring to be and from desiring to have'. In this way, the narrative of 'Have You Ever' may well be read as exemplary of both Larsen recognising/feeling the attractiveness of the other woman, but also of the paranoid situation that is prearranged by the heteronormative society on women, where 'women are generally understood to be more critical and perceptive with regard to dress and appearance – especially that of other women – than the majority of men'; i.e., they are always-already made to think of all other women as potential threats that take the men away. Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, '(Ad)dressing the Dyke: Lesbian Looks and Lesbians Looking', in Nava, Mica, Andrew Blake, Iain MacRury & Barry Richards (eds.), *Buy This Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1997), 291-308: 292. I am grateful to Anna-Elena Pääkkölä for this reference.

[49] Carrie L. Cokely, '"Someday My Prince Will Come": Disney, the Heterosexual Imaginary and Animated Film', in Ingraham, Chrys (ed.), *Thinking Straight* (London: Routledge, 2005), 167-181: 168.

[50] Ibid. 170.

[51] Ibid. 172.

[52] Ibid. 177.

[53] Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, 'The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing', in Burston, Paul, and Colin Richardson (eds.), *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 13-56: 40.
[54] Ibid., authors' emphasis.
[55] Fred Maus, 'Intimacy and Distance: On Stipe's Queerness', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18.2 (2006), 191-214: 206.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid. 207.
[58] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 175.
[59] Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music*, 63.
[60] Ibid.
[61] For a pertinent example, see Giske, 'Redd for å bli for lykkelig'. Here, in an in-depth interview in Norway's largest national newspaper, *Verdens Gang*, Larsen is presented visually over several pages as a model 'housewife' in her own kitchen, wearing an apron and baking muffins, allegedly for 'her band'. The images are accompanied by statements by Larsen such as, 'I am probably good material for a housewife. I can spend two to three hours in the kitchen.'
[62] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 175.
[63] 'Verdt å vente på' (which translates as 'worth waiting for') was an awareness campaign in the mid-1990s by ten Norwegian Christian organisations whose aim was to inspire Christian teenagers to postpone having sex until marriage.
[64] In the music video, Larsen mimes the song on a makeshift stage with a band that includes one female backing singer and four male musicians, everyone positioned in a circle and facing each other. During the guitar solo, Larsen trades vocal lines with the backing singer, both using the same microphone (2:30–2:39). This is the only moment in the video when Larsen interacts directly with any of the musicians. The proximity and interplay of the two women, singing the line 'feels like coming home' to each other while standing close together around the same microphone, gazing into each other's eyes and smiling, amplifies the sensation of voices and desires that are 'coming out' to each other. Marit Larsen, 'Coming Home', *Youtube*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzfkxexhcQg (28 September 2018).
[65] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 176.
[66] Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music*, 72.
[67] Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.
[68] Duncan Cooper, 'Zayn Malik's New Direction', *Fader*, 17 November 2015, http://www.thefader.com/2015/11/17/zayn-malik-fader-cover-story-interview-solo-album-one-direction (16 January 2016).
[69] Ibid.
[70] April S. Callis, 'Homophobia, Heteronormativity, and Slash Fan Fiction', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 22, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0708 (28 September 2018).
[71] Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse, and Robin Anne Reid, '"Yearning Void and Infinite Potential": Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space', *English Language Notes* Vol. 45, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007), 103-111: 106.
[72] Frederik Dhaenens, Sofie Van Bauwel, and Deniel Biltereyst, 'Slashing the Fiction of Queer Theory: Slash Fiction, Queer Reading, and Transgressing the Boundaries of Screen Studies, Representations, and Audiences', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* Vol. 32, No. 4 (October, 2008), 335-347.
[73] Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, 'The Paratext of Fan Fiction', *NARRATIVE*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2015), 40-60: 58.
[74] Lucy Mapstone, '"It's hard for them": Zayn Malik reveals Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles STILL shy away from showing friendly affection due to 1D fans' "Larry Stylinson" romance rumours', *Mail Online*, 18 November 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3323393/Zayn-Malik-reveals-Louis-Tomlinson-Harry-Styles-shy-away-showing-friendly-affection-1D-fans-Larry-Stylinson-romance-rumours.html (15 January 2016).
[75] Mapstone, '"It's hard for them"'.
[76] Cooper, 'Zayn Malik'.
[77] Lothian et al., 'Yearning Void', 106.
[78] Dhaenens et al., 'Slashing the Fiction', 345.

[79] Øystein David Johansen, 'Perez Hilton Med Ny Favoritt', *VG Nett*, 26 September 2008, http://www.vg.no/rampelys/hollywood/perez-hilton-med-ny-norsk-favoritt/a/530492/ (28 September 2018).
[80] Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 5-6.
[81] Marquita Smith, '"Or a Real, Real Bad Lesbian": Nicki Minaj and the Acknowledgement of Queer Desire in Hip-Hop Culture', *Popular Music and Society* Vol. 37, No. 3 (May, 2014), 360-370: 368.
[82] Susanna Välimäki, 'Musical migration, perverted instruments and cosmic sounds: queer constructions in the music and sound of *Angels in America*', in Richardson, John and Stan Hawkins (eds.), *Essays on Sound and Vision* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2007), 177-219: 183.

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