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# Transgender Hearing and Healing: The Musical Processing of Trauma in *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story*

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Narratives of Brandon Teena (1972–1993), a young trans man who died as the victim of a hate crime in Humboldt, Nebraska, in 1993, abound in transgender arts and culture.[1] Over the past twenty years or so, again and again new literature, visual art, theatre, film, music, museum displays and other artistic and cultural projects have emerged which take up Brandon Teena's life and death.[2] It can be said that Brandon Teena has become a central figure in work on cultural trauma that deals with transphobia and anti-transgender violence. We might even discuss him as a kind of queer/trans saint or martyr,[3] for his story is widely narrated in queer/trans histories, while the historical places of his tragedy are visited as a kind of pilgrimage. In this way his story functions as a memorial for all victims of anti-transgender hate crime and as a symbol for trans empowerment and trans rights activism. Although the stories of many other victims are also circulated in transculture, Brandon Teena's story is exceptional for having given rise to so many artistic projects, including an Oscar-winning film *Boys Don't Cry* (dir. Kimberly Peirce, USA, 1999), often shown on the Transgender Day of Remembrance, which honours the memory of victims of anti-transgender violence.[4]

In this article I discuss the music of two films that have significantly influenced how the story of Brandon Teena has circulated, both in mainstream and transgender culture: the above-mentioned drama *Boys Don't Cry* and the low-budget documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (dir. Susan Muska & Greta Olafsdottir, USA, 1998). *Boys Don't Cry* drew in significant ways on *The Brandon Teena Story*, and both are early representatives of mainstream transgender films that endeavour to communicate transgenerness in a serious manner to a larger audience.[5] Although these films have been frequently discussed

in queer and transgender studies,[6] the role of the music in the films has been relatively untouched. Yet film itself is a sonic art form, and audiovisual effects involving music are among the most powerful technologies for portraying gender. Furthermore, music is an especially capable vehicle for processing collective traumas,[7] such as soci(et)al oppression and hate-motivated violence. In the present article I am interested in the musical means by which *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* convey the story of Brandon Teena. More specifically, by drawing on transgender musicology,[8] cultural film music research[9] and cultural trauma studies,[10] I will focus on how the films communicate transgender subjectivity and narrate the traumatic subject matter via music. Before turning to the analyses, I will briefly introduce the perspective of cultural trauma studies. Then I will discuss the more widely-known film, *Boys Don't Cry*, and thereafter the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* and the affinities and differences in the musical approaches of these films.

### **Anti-Transgender Hate Crimes and the Cultural Trauma Process**

The term hate crime refers to 'unlawful, violent, destructive or threatening conduct in which the perpetrator is motivated by prejudice toward the victim's putative social group'.<sup>[11]</sup> Anti-transgender hate crime is motivated by bias against a victim's gender identity or expression and can include, for example, assault, rape, murder or victimization in other equally brutalizing ways. Simultaneously, prejudice- or hate-motivated violence against trans people is part of a wider pattern of discrimination and marginalisation that many gender-nonconforming people experience in their daily lives.<sup>[12]</sup> Anti-transgender hate crime is not only a collective trauma and a continuous threat to transgender people, but it is also a contemporary cultural trauma.<sup>[13]</sup> Both *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* describe the assault, rape and murder of a young trans man, Brandon Teena, and his brutal victimization by the police after the assault. The films can be considered films about anti-transgender hate crime. **3**

The cultural study of trauma emphasises trauma as a cultural process. Here it is essential to understand that the emergence of trauma is related not only to traumatic events, but also to the social repression of those events in shared cultural spheres of representation, such as media and art.<sup>[14]</sup> A collective trauma requires collective recognition and processing in the form of public cultural representation in order to be transformed from an unnamable affect that disables the culture (and its individuals) into a symbolic sphere of collective discussion. This process is called the *cultural trauma process*, and art and popular culture play a significant role in this process.<sup>[15]</sup> *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* were early contributions to the cultural trauma process of grappling with anti-transgender violence. As such, the films also serve as collective sites for mourning, honouring and remembering the victims of anti-transgender hate crimes.<sup>[16]</sup> **4**

It should be noted here that, although the cinematic 5  
 representations of transpeople have become more normalized,  
 serious and sympathetic in the twenty-first century, mass media  
 and popular culture are still full of pathologizing or sensational  
 representations of transpeople, and the rates of anti-transgender  
 violence are extremely high. Thus, while popular culture provides  
 a possible public site to recognise, process and learn about anti-  
 transgender violence, the mass media simultaneously bear a  
 significant responsibility for misrepresenting transpersons as  
 'exotic perverts' with 'sensationalist stories' and for  
 misrepresenting violence against transgender individuals as  
 something for which ultimately the victims are blamed.[17] These  
 false representations may become a further source of  
 traumatization for groups that primarily carry the cultural trauma of  
 anti-transgender violence, i.e. for transcommunities. Accordingly,  
*Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* are noteworthy if for  
 no other reason than their being pioneering cinematic attempts  
 through mass media and popular culture to discuss and portray  
 seriously violence against transgender people.

My purpose is to listen to *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena* 6  
*Story* in a *reparative* way, by emphasising the dimensions therein  
 that construct a safe space for transgender subjectivity. Here I  
 draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's psychoanalytical account of  
 queer epistemological practices as reflecting a subject's  
 fundamental constellations of object-relations, trauma and  
 mourning.[18] As Sedgwick points out, our readings of cultural  
 objects, such as films, take place in the oscillation between the  
 paranoid and the reparative subject positions, which govern all our  
 social being in the world. According to Sedgwick, queer readings  
 have often tended to emphasise the paranoid (negative) mode of  
 criticism that seeks faults in queer representations  
 –understandable, given that scholars of the subject frequently  
 encounter oppression, phobia and violence vis-à-vis queer people,  
 especially in the study of mainstream cultural practices. Yet the  
 reparative (positive) mode of criticism is just as important in the  
 study of the objects of both the dominant and the queer culture,  
 since reparative criticism is able to create space for queer-specific  
 modes of being, even under the pressures, strictures and effects  
 of the heteronormative culture.[19] In my analyses of *Boys Don't*  
*Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* I strive for the kind of  
 reparative listening that seeks transgender pleasure and  
 meanings, even in the midst of representations of oppression,  
 violence and trauma.

### ***Boys Don't Cry: An Alternative New Wave Masculinity***

*Boys Don't Cry* features protagonist Brandon (played by Hilary 7  
 Swank) as a young, pre- or non-operative female-to-male trans  
 man, who leaves his hometown (Lincoln) and starts anew in the  
 small Nebraska town of Falls City. Brandon is excited and  
 optimistic about life in a place where no one knows his past or his  
 gender history. He makes new friends and begins a romantic  
 relationship with a young woman, Lana (Chloë Sevigny), who can  
 be regarded as another protagonist in the story. Brandon hides his  
 transgenerness from those around him; telling is not an option in

a conservative, transphobic and homophobic culture. However, his legal gender status and anatomically female body are brutally revealed, after which his male friends, the ex-convicts John [Lotter] (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom [Nissen] (Brendan Sexton III) humiliate, beat, rape and eventually murder him; they also murder Brandon's friend Candace (Alicia Goranson).<sup>[20]</sup>

The soundtrack of *Boys Don't Cry* is overwhelmingly affective and musically rich. The score is a combination of compiled (i.e. pre-existing) and composed (i.e. original) music. The compiled music consists mainly of American country and rock songs. The original music, composed by Nathan Larson, draws on country and rock styles as well, but also experimental ambient music. The most prominent musical styles in the soundtrack as a whole are country and rock. Some of the compiled songs are heard as diegetic music from radios and jukeboxes, and some are heard as non-diegetic music. Differentiation between the diegetic and non-diegetic music is not, however, important; whether diegetic or non-diegetic, the music functions in similar, basic ways, signifying the place and the time, providing narrative cues and negotiating identities. It is important to understand that, in listening to the film's music, the audience is listening first and foremost to the voice of transgendered subjectivity, since the film is a biopic of a transgender person: the music becomes (re-)signified from the point of view of transgender life. This kind of *transgendering* (queering) of music plays a major role in *Boys Don't Cry's* audiovisual construction of transgender meanings. **8**

I have differentiated four musical strategies in the film's communication of transgender subjectivity. First, the plentiful use of country and rock-based music in the film establishes the story's milieu and the hegemonic masculinity inherent in the heteronormative culture of that milieu. At the same time, this music expresses Brandon's feelings as a young, heterosexual man. Second, the use of psychedelic, punk and new wave rock serves in the film as a critique of hegemonic masculinity that makes way for alternative masculinities, including Brandon's trans masculinity. Third, the ambient-like, experimental music heard intermittently constructs an auditory form of transgender utopia, which heals and makes reparation for the trauma. Fourth, Brandon and Lana's love story is narrated musically by means of a country ballad, 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas', which evolves into a representation of transgender utopia as well and serves as music of healing. **9**

American mainstream country and rock styles provide in sonic form the geographical and socio-cultural setting for the film. The country/rock music serves as an acoustic image of a small, midwestern American town, with connotations of a rural (or rural-industrial) milieu of predominantly white people living in relatively poor conditions amidst provincial conservatism, including heteronormativity. For example, in an early scene, Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Tuesday's Gone' (1993) is heard in the background when Brandon walks into a bar to meet his new acquaintances – Candace, who is working there, and John and Tom, who are playing billiards and drinking beer. The piece is a hefty rock ballad **10**

characterised by the thick and powerful timbre of three electric guitars with a triplet accompaniment. It can be considered stereotypically 'masculine' music: a sonic representation of hegemonic (macho and white) masculinity.[21] This meaning is further enhanced by John and Tom's vulgar (and homosocially bonding) conversation, which concerns their sexual taste in women. As this music is played, Brandon and Lana see each other for the first time: heard from this perspective, the music conveys Brandon's masculine identity and heterosexual desire – his blending in, passing as one of the guys.

The socio-cultural dimension, in terms of class, age, gender conceptions and social problems, is deepened by a more aggressive, noisier hard-core rock style, which dominates the score together with country or country-rock styles. The musical landscape of the Badlands unfolds as a mix of American country and American hardline, psychedelic, punk and new wave rock. As apt as it is for the subject matter of the film (gender non-conformity, i.e. alternative gender), the latter rock styles also represent so-called *alternative* rock styles. We hear, for example, such punk or new wave songs as 'Just What I Needed' by the Cars (1978), 'Burning House of Love' by X (1985), 'Space' by Butthole Surfers (1996) and 'It's Alright' by the Dictators (1999). We also hear a considerable number of psychedelic rock songs, such as 'Cordine [Blues]' by the Charlatans (1966), 'Who Do You Love' by Quicksilver Messenger Service (1969), 'Haunt' by Roky Ericson (1985), 'She's Diamond' by Opal (1987), and 'Fan Blades of Love' by the noise band Ed Hall (1995). **11**

Psychedelic rock is a genre characterised by experimentation and extreme effects, extended solos and improvisation, heavy use of electric guitars and keyboards, early electronic instruments, complex song structures and esoteric lyrics. It emphasises wild, radical and mind-altering experiences, imagination and freedom from the oppressive constraints of society.[22] This counter-cultural ideology of the late sixties also covered gender and sexuality, manifested, for example, in androgynous styles and 'beatnik sexuality'. From this point of view we may hear in the psychedelic rock of *Boys Don't Cry* Brandon's urge to be free of the oppressive gender norms of society; thus we re-interpret the music's counter-cultural message as that of transgenerness. The same naturally goes for the punk and new wave rock heard in the film as well. **12**

In *Boys Don't Cry* this extremely energetic hardline rock becomes associated with Brandon's activities, his zest for life, his youthful enthusiasm and intense dreaming, his socialising with new friends, including dating a girl and building a life of his own. When heard in connection with Brandon, the reverberating, distorted and noisy electric guitars, power chords and throbbing beats narrate Brandon's feelings as a young man whose desires and problems in society are parallel to those of his gender (as a boy/man), his class (white, working, poverty class) and his generation (youth) in general. In this way the music constructs Brandon's trans man masculinity as no different from cis-gendered male masculinity. We can say that Brandon's masculinity is just one instance of the **13**

various 'new wave alternative masculinities', which (post)hippies and (post)punk rockers represent. A gender outlaw – a man with a female body – is just one type of hippie/'deadhead'/punk outlaw.

Accordingly, the hardline rock in *Boys Don't Cry* tells the audience two things: (1) most importantly, that Brandon is a man just like any other, and (2) that he is forced to fight the repressive power structures of society, namely the dominant culture of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative ideology. From the latter perspective, the music under discussion functions as a critique of the hegemonic masculinity that dominates the film's social milieu; it plays out a critique of patriarchal, heteronormative, homo/transphobic and misogynist macho male masculinity. Thus the film's hardline rock also highlights the social problems of the present milieu, such as economic depression, destitution and poverty, unemployment, violence and domestic abuse, alcoholism and drug abuse, juvenile delinquency and the overall gloomy or non-existent prospects of the have-nots: the flip side of the American dream and the trap of hegemonic masculinity as one of the constitutive power structures that create this social malaise.[23]

In my opinion it is a clever solution, gender-politically speaking, to use a hardline rock style to communicate transgendered masculinity and heterosexuality. Hardline rock can be understood as promoting counter-cultural transgression, including alternative masculinities, but at the same time it is hyper-masculine music in its rock-rootedness, virtuoso guitar playing and overdrive energy.

A good example of the effective use of this alternative rock style takes place at the very beginning of the film. The title sequence mixes loud, hardline instrumental rock, the electronically manipulated and echoed sound of fast driving cars, blurred voices and the wailing siren of a police car with images of Brandon as a small town punk. It is early night-time on a deserted highway, and the lights of the cars enhance the sense of excitement constructed by the 'testosterone-filled' instrumental rock music with distorted electric guitars, pumping bass, siren-like guitar figures and heavy drumming (in the soundtrack release Larson called the piece *Boys*[24]). The music signifies thrill, tension and danger – and is stereotypically masculine. A trans man is introduced to the audience for the first time with hyper-masculine and highly energised music that wows the spectator with physical sensations and intense effects. The masculinity of a female-bodied trans man can be as hyper-masculine, highly energised, and exciting as that of a cis-gender man.

The tension of hegemonic vs marginal is distilled in the film's title, *Boys Don't Cry* – a quotation from a song of the same name by an English alternative rock band, The Cure. One of the most famous of the band's songs,[25] it tells about a boy who has lost his love and is hiding his emotions, grief and tears beneath his laughter, 'because boys don't cry', i.e. owing to the dominant gender norms. As in the film's title, the phrase expresses the conflict between accepted and non-accepted masculinity and the stereotypical heteronormative understanding of gender difference and the

related hegemonic (patriarchal, macho) masculinity: girls/women are allowed to be emotional and fragile, i.e. they may cry, but for boys/men crying is not allowed.[26]

For many people in the film's audience, the well-known song is about the younger generation's sense of alienation and rage in a society that denies humanity (emotional expression) to boys/men.[27] As Carol Siegel writes, The Cure's song opens up 'the hidden depression and defeats that traditional macho posturing attempts to hide', while conveying 'a sense of the dark emptiness many young men feel as they perform culturally approved masculinity.'[28] References to this song are one example of the film's subtle ways of negotiating gender, hegemonic/alternative masculinity and transgenerness – portraying a trans man's masculinity as an alternative masculinity. Brandon's masculinity is different from the hegemonic masculinity in the film, not only in the sense that he has a female body, but also in the sense that he does not express patriarchal ideology, machismo and misogyny; rather he is expressive and talkative in his emotional communication and he bonds well with women. **18**

The song 'Boys Don't Cry' is heard in the film in an important scene, although not in the form of The Cure's original version, but Larson's cover version made specifically for the film.[29] The song is played during a scene in which Brandon is in jail for small-time theft and fraud. It is precisely this episode that reveals to his friends that there is something unusual about him, since he is put into the women's department; the police officers act according to Brandon's legal gender status and the name on his identity card (Teena Brandon). Lana comes to visit Brandon in jail and bail him out, and is surprised to find him in the 'girls' cell'. Brandon whispers that he is a 'hermaphrodite', having 'both girl and boy parts', and 'not quite a he'. Lana responds that she does not care if Brandon is 'half monkey'; she just wants to get him out of jail. After this dialogue Lana reaches through the bars and takes Brandon's hand in her own, at which point the song 'Boys Don't Cry' begins, as if in joyous, emotional outpouring following the pair's conciliatory and mutually approving conversation. The energetic and uplifting music seems to reinforce the bond between them and their overall optimistic attitude of overcoming all barriers between them, including those of gender. The song works here as an emancipatory 'power song' for alternative masculinity. On the other hand, heard from the transgendered point of audition, the song's lyrics can be interpreted as depicting Brandon's loneliness, grief and pain at having to hide his transgenerness and female body from his girlfriend: **19**

I try to laugh about it  
Cover it all up with lies  
I try and  
Laugh about it  
Hiding the tears in my eyes  
'Cause boys don't cry  
Boys don't cry....

These words are heard in a lovemaking scene in the car just before Lana says to Brandon that she would like to touch him in the same way he touches her, and she makes a move to do so. Brandon cannot respond to her desire because 'boys don't have vaginas'. He rejects her efforts and hides the tears that come to his eyes.

### Transgender Hearing, Sonic Utopias and Music of Healing

From the perspective of transgender subjectivity, perhaps the most interesting musical effects in the film are the otherwise silent (dialogue-free) sequences in which Larson's original music builds a beautiful, quiet, slow, ambient-like and experimental soundscape that buzzes electronically and 'futuristically' with strong, reverberating electric guitar sounds and 'hallucinatory' echo effects. There are numerous variations on this experimental, ambient music in the film. Often it is characterised by wind chimes or other tinkling and humming elements, as well as by a drone and heavy reverberation. Its ambient nature is important: the music does not construct a linear progression, but rather conveys a floating stillness and a sense of vast space, as if out of ordinary time and place. This music is combined with experimental and neo-surreal visual techniques of time-lapse photography showing static, night-time landscapes in an accelerated tempo, which result in stunning light phenomena. The audiovisual co-ordination constructs an imaginary space of possibility – queer time and space.[30]

The dreamy, floating and quivering ambient music can be understood as the sonic equivalent of the 'transgender gaze', which Jack Halberstam has traced in the film.[31] According to Halberstam, the visually experimental moments in slow motion or at high speed create an imagistic counter-narrative in the film, a transgender gaze that enables seeing through the present to a future elsewhere.[32] This form of transgender/queer audiovisual pleasure also forces the audience to adopt Brandon's transgender gaze and thus look *with* the transgender character and not *at* him. Likewise, we might speak of 'transgender hearing', which the experimental, ambient music constructs in the film. The music plays out a sonic realm of transgender dreams, hopes and power, a sonic transgender utopia, a kind of acoustic 'Wonderland of Oz', where one can be whatever one feels is right:[33] a safe space for a transgender mode of being in a world to which the audience is listening with Brandon. This music processes the trauma of transgender oppression by outlining a sonic space of possibility and a vision of a positive (transgender) future, serving as music of healing. This experimental, ambient music is heard in many places throughout the film and is always related in one way or another to dreaming about the future.

This experimental, ambient music can also be thought of as constructing a safe haven for transgendered subjectivity outside cruel reality when Brandon – and the audience with him – experiences hard times, even violence. In one traumatic scene John and Tom humiliate Brandon at Lana's home in front of people he has thought of as his friends. John and Tom strip

Brandon and examine his intimate areas violently, forcing Lana to watch his exposed genitals. Just before this violent act, we hear for a brief moment experimental, ambient music like a protecting sonorous envelope,<sup>[34]</sup> which remains 'the true Brandon' as long as the music is intact. The ambient music is heard when Lana tries to help Brandon by saying she knows that Brandon is a guy, and he does not need to show her anything. Brandon explains that he was born with 'this weirdness', which is like a 'birth defect'. Lana responds that she has 'really weird stuff too' and looks out the window where the camera constructs the transgender gaze with a time-lapse shot of a spacious landscape with a blue, night sky and rapidly moving clouds. The music hums and floats in a gentle way with some guitar picking, a quiet vibraphone tremolo and flute-like chords. Lana continues: 'That's us. We can beam ourselves out there.' The audiovisual transgender utopia reinforces the transgressive bond between the two protagonists, their urge for freedom and their idea of a better world, and serves as a healing counter-narrative to the story of anti-transgender violence. When a further humiliated and naked Brandon is shown in slow motion in a posture that reminds of the crucified Christ or the topic of *Ecce homo*, there is total silence for about five seconds. Silence is a traditional sign of trauma and death. Here it is an effective gesture: a way to 'stop' the film for a moment and make the viewer stop as well. In front of the painting-like image of a transgender martyr – an icon – the audience may reflect, mourn and pay respect to the victims of transgender oppression and hate crimes.<sup>[35]</sup>

The evolving love relationship between Brandon and Lana is narrated musically in the film in a significant way. One country song in particular, 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas', serves as a leitmotif for their love and develops into a sonic symbol of transgender utopia and healing for the trauma process. Originally, the song was a country pop hit by Restless Heart (1988), a mix of mainstream country, rock, pop and adult contemporary crossover. But in the film the original version is not heard. Instead, we hear various other versions made specifically for the film. The song is a country ballad that tells about a lost love that endlessly haunts the narrator. The 'I' in the song is driving a car, and when he/she/they looks at the rear view mirror, the memories fill his/her/their mind, simultaneously with the sunset, and he/she/they hopes for strength to carry on. The song is first heard in an early scene, when Brandon and Lana meet for the first time, in a bar. Lana, Candace and Kate (Alison Folland) sing the song together in a karaoke performance. As they sing, Brandon and Lana exchange glances. A romantic atmosphere is thus attached to the song from its first appearance. The relationship between Brandon and Lana begins with this song. The second time we hear the song, Brandon is in bed at Candace's, trying to sleep and dreaming of Lana. The experimental, ambient music (discussed above) is here based on the material from 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas'. In this way the experimental music and 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas' are combined into a powerful, sonic symbol of transgender hearing and utopia. The song is next heard when Brandon walks into a county courthouse to deal with his penalties or citations. Brandon and Lana have already become lovers, and, as he walks, Brandon

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dreams about his future with Lana; we hear Brandon's voiceover telling Lana about his plans to make a home with her. Simultaneously, 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas' is heard in an instrumental arrangement, dominated by softly reverberating arpeggios on an electric guitar. Here, too, the music is attached to intense dreaming and love. The piece is also heard at the end of the film, after the murders, when Lana wakes up next to Brandon's dead body. A static, fragmentary and chaotic version of the theme is played in a minor mode (originally the song was in major) and with a strongly distorted electric (slide) guitar and robust tremolo effect: the song of Brandon and Lana is 'broken'.

Later, at the very moment Lana begins to read the letter Brandon has written to her the day before, the music transforms into a humming ambient sound, and the letter is heard read by Brandon in a voiceover. At the same time we see a landscape through the window of a moving car being driven by Lana. The focus has shifted to Lana alone and her future away from Falls City. At the precise moment when the letter (and Brandon's voice) ends, we see the highway – itself a symbol of freedom – at night and in speeded-up motion, and the auditory space fills with powerful music. Here, at the very end of the film, we hear for the first time the entire song, 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas', in a relaxed and easy-going full-band version with the affecting voice of Nina Persson and a powerful guitar solo. Lana smiles and blue rays shine from her eyes. The audiovisual aesthetics that close the film affirm the transgender perception – the transgender gaze and hearing – Lana has adopted, and perhaps the audience has too. The last few seconds of the image track (before the end titles begin to roll against a black screen) exploit the experimental visual techniques of speeded-up motion and graphics, which result in an explosion into a brightly-lit runway in radiant stripes of pastel colors, pointing to the future. A transgender utopia at the end of a film that deals with oppression, violence, murder and trauma is an effective reparative strategy. Significantly, the song keeps going when the end credits start to roll. A song that begins at the end of a film and continues during the closing credits often has a ritualistic, meditative and 'religious' nature, prolonging the film's message beyond its story and elevating it to a more general level.<sup>[36]</sup> The music is tragic, since it reminds us of Brandon's lost life, but simultaneously the song is empowering and uplifting, a song in which transgender subjectivity continues to flow. In this way, *Boys Don't Cry* closes effectively with a reparative sonic space of transgender utopia, perception, hearing and healing.

### ***The Brandon Teena Story: Hillbilly Music and Songs of Remembrance***

Although it is not mentioned in the film credits, *Boys Don't Cry* drew on *The Brandon Teena Story*, a documentary film, which was released when *Boys Don't Cry* was still in production. The document film clearly served as an important source for the drama film.<sup>[37]</sup> About an hour and a half in duration, *The Brandon Teena Story* focuses on the assault, rape and murder of Brandon Teena and the aftermaths of these crimes, including the non-action taken by the police officials after the assault and the murder trials of

John Lotter and Tom (Marvin Thomas) Nissen. The film is made up of three basic cinematic materials:

- (1) shots of rural landscapes and small town views of Nebraska, often filmed as if from a car window in a road movie or in experimental style;
- (2) rich archive and media materials about Brandon, the crimes and their aftermath, such as television news reports and police materials from the murder inquiry and trials; and
- (3) abundant interviews, by the filmmakers, of Brandon's family members, friends and girlfriends, Lotter and Nissen and their family members and ex-cell-mates, police, public servants and other people somehow involved in the case.

These materials alternate rather rapidly, which creates a certain rhythm and flow to the film, together with a rich soundtrack composed, significantly, mostly of country music and documentary voices of the interviewees, news reporters and other persons involved.

Much space is devoted to Brandon's girlfriends at the start of the film, who describe him as a boyfriend. Later the emphasis turns to the socio-cultural milieu of Falls City and Humboldt, the assault on Brandon and the triple murder of Brandon, Lisa Lambert and Phillip DeVine. Considerable emphasis is placed on the mistreatment of Brandon and the discrimination against him by the legal authorities after his rape, demonstrating that those responsible for his death were not only Lotter and Nissen, but also the homo/transphobic legal system, which humiliated and violated Brandon after he turned his rapists in to the police, who took no action against them. Perhaps most shocking in the documentary is the authentic audio recording of the abusive questioning of Brandon at the police station after his rape, as well as the nonchalant tone of Lotter and Nissen in their interviews. Likewise, the news footage is insensitive to transgenerness and revolves around shock value, mis-representing Brandon as a 'woman who posed as a man'. The main style of the film is to allow the collected and produced documentary materials to speak for themselves and to prompt the audience to reflect on the situation in its own right; no conclusions or explanations are offered. **26**

The soundtrack of *The Brandon Teena Story* combines compiled and composed music, the first mentioned being the more prominent and with well-known country songs. Yet original music, composed by Geoff Marx and Thomas Muer and displaying a country-inflected ambient style, also has an important role. I have identified several narrative functions in the music of *The Brandon Teena Story*, which reflect the ambiguous, multi-discursive and disconcerting nature of the film and its 'open' or 'distanced' aesthetics. **27**

First, just as in *Boys Don't Cry*, the country music that dominates the soundtrack signifies place and socio-cultural milieu, the rural midwest American and small town environment populated **28**

predominantly by white and working-class people. Second, many of the country songs heard in the film are sentimental songs about love, life's hardships and existential searching, which build an emotional dimension into Brandon's story. Third, instrumental and peaceful country or ambient music, which is heard in combination with shots of barren landscapes, entices the viewer to reflect on and create space for difference and transgender subjectivity, in a somewhat similar manner to *Boys Don't Cry*. Fourth, anempathetic music that is noisy and chaotic, or mechanistic and weird, sharpens the description of violence in the film. Fifth, from time to time, music is used in a contrapuntal and ironic relation to the image, which contributes to the socio-culturally critical tone of the film. On the one hand, the overall trend in the film's music is towards music of remembrance and mourning, which offers a sonic channel for the troubled affects evoked in the audience. On the other, the music often feels detached from and not empathetic to Brandon's tragedy or subjectivity, as do many of the interviews. This suggests a critical distance to the content, especially the disturbing interviews and news materials, and underlines trans/homophobia in midwestern America. Yet simultaneously the music constructs a sense of seriousness and depth in the documentary. In general, the soundtrack alternates with the voices of talking heads and country, old-fashioned pop or ambient music. Music does not accompany the interviews, but rather is heard only in more narrative, audiovisual scenes with a series of photographs showing Brandon and in road-movie-like passages showing landscapes. In such places the music often seems to reflect the tragedy and mourn the lost life of this young trans man.

It is worth noting how much space is given to the rural landscape of Nebraska, both in *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story*. In the latter, the landscape receives so much attention that it becomes one of the film's protagonists.<sup>[38]</sup> As a symbol of midwestern life, the landscape even seems to function as a kind of responsible factor in the violent happenings. The use of old and contemporary country music is so conspicuous in the film that, together with the abundant landscape images, it creates the statement that the socio-cultural factors and dominant values of the midwestern America are to be blamed for the tragedy. **29**

The older country songs in particular seem to refer to the idea of a backward and narrow-minded provincial milieu, hostile to all kinds of difference, including gender non-conformity. For example, early in the film, Brandon's move from Lincoln to Falls City is narrated. We see road-movie-type sequences as with montages of Falls City, and we hear the contemporary country singer Lorrie Morgan singing 'I Just Might Be'<sup>[39]</sup> (1996), a brisk country piece with a train beat, rootsy honky tonk sounds and a powerful feeling of travelling, forward-progression, personal growth and change. After the song, the country-romantic narration of Brandon's geographical and inner journey changes into a description of Falls City as an intolerant and violent milieu, illuminated by excerpts of interviews with Lana Tisdell, John Lotter and Chief Deputy Sheriff Steve Goldsberry. After these interviews, we hear a creaky recording of an old country hit from the 1950s, 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels' (1952), sung by Kitty Wells.<sup>[40]</sup> **30**

Simultaneously, Falls City people are shown as antediluvian, stereotypical 'hillbillies' at a demolition derby. It is precisely the music that ensures this understanding of the Falls City population.

For its part, modern country music in the film, while also signifying place and social conditions, is associated with the idea of life as a journey and creates a road movie feeling enhanced by the way in which the landscape is filmed. This genre feature of a road movie is highly appropriate for narrating a transgender story, since a journey is a common metaphor for a transgendered life.<sup>[41]</sup> At the same time the heightened affectivity and emotional story-telling in the country songs bring a sense of 'authenticity' or 'realness' to the film. This also pertains to the original music, the country-style, instrumental and ambient accompanying score, which signifies place and landscape, constructs the feeling of a serious documentary and gives space to transgender subjectivity. Moreover, the reflective country music constructs the sense of a story told in the past tense. The idea of the past tense and a painful history is heightened by the prominence of sentimental and suggestive country ballads at the beginning and end of the film. **31**

The documentary's intriguing beginning was imitated in *Boys Don't Cry*. We see a dark highway at night, shot through the windshield of a moving car with a hand-held camera, combined with the whooshing sound of wind and distant traffic noise. For a moment, the image blurs in an experimental style, and the sound of a beating heart is heard. The road can be interpreted here as a symbol of life, the unique path each of us follows, which can end suddenly, abruptly. The conventional trope of a journey is thus established at the very beginning of the film. At a more concrete level the road imagery refers here to Brandon's move from Lincoln to Falls City, where he starts a new life as a man. Moreover, the journey trope can be read as a reference to the filmmakers' and audience's journey into the darkness of anti-trans violence. **32**

Similarly, *Boys Don't Cry* starts on a dark road and with a journey. But whereas in *Boys Don't Cry* it is clearly Brandon who drives the car in a story told in the present tense, in *The Brandon Teena Story* it is the documentary filmmakers (along with the audience) who drive the car and tell the story in the past tense. Furthermore, whereas in *Boys Don't Cry* the hyper-energetic rock music paints the opening driving scene as something exciting, in *The Brandon Teena Story* the few traffic sounds, the heart beat and the absence of conventional film music make the opening bleak and ominous. **33**

Then, after about ten seconds, three gunshots are heard, after which the image focuses on a signpost at the roadside: 'NEBRASKA ...the good life'. The contrapuntal, that is, the conflicting, combination of sound and image<sup>[42]</sup> emphasises the undercurrent of violent forces in rural America and the fact that the idea of the 'good life' is an ideological construct meaning different things to different people. It also points out the discrepancy between what is said and what is reality. The three gun shots refer to the three murders triggered by homo/transphobia and start a montage of documentary footage from television news reports of **34**

the murders and the sensational details of the gender of one of the victims. Then the image turns back to the dark road, and music begins simultaneously with the opening credits. The first piece sets the tone of the story: 'It's a Heartache', a song made famous by Bonnie Tyler in 1978.<sup>[43]</sup> But here it is not the Welsh singer who is heard, but the American country singer Lorrie Morgan, whose 'Americanized' version (1992) employs country timbres such as a slide guitar and violin riffs.

Montage sequences of Nebraska landscapes unfold against this song and photographs of Brandon and his tomb. The music creates a strong atmosphere of remembrance. This music is also easy to identify with, since it is a well-known song whose lyrics abound in an abstract way with the blows life delivers to many of us and with their remorse. The song also suits the first interviews in the film in which Brandon's ex-girlfriends reminisce about their romantic affairs with Brandon. Indeed, as at the beginning of the film, the highly emotional country ballad suggests various signifying dimensions: a signpost of the place and the environment, the inner voice of Brandon and his transgender burden, a critical comment on a homo/transphobic culture which panics in the face of difference, a sonic channel for the difficult affects aroused in the audioviewer and a lamentation: in effect, it is music of trauma and collective memory, mourning and remembrance. **35**

### Whose Voice Are We Listening To?

Despite the different film genres of *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* (a drama and a documentary), both films are biographical and probably used much the same source material available about Brandon Teena to build their stories. Common features in the manuscripts and audiovisual aesthetics of the films include abundant road movie-like sequences; prominent use of country music, signifying the place and socio-cultural milieu; experimental aesthetics that combine landscape shooting with ambient music and provide space for subjectivity and difference; Brandon's letters heard as voiceovers; a karaoke scene; a driving scene at the opening of the film; a closing scene built on a sentimental country pop ballad that constructs a powerful process of mourning, remembrance, and healing; and an epitaph during the closing credits referring to the memory of Brandon Teena. Yet there are also interesting differences in the musical approaches of the two films, some of which derive from the different nature of drama and documentary film, and some from the different understandings of transgenerness and approaches in communicating these understandings. **36**

Because *The Brandon Teena Story* is neither a drama film nor a drama documentary, we do not see Brandon in the flesh as the story's protagonist. There are photographs of Brandon, an audio-document of the interview with him at the police station and some letters written by him and read aloud by other people. All the other images and sounds are of others telling about Brandon. Because we do not see Brandon alive as a character, it is unclear whose music we are listening to when we are watching the film. In *Boys* **37**

*Don't Cry*, the protagonist Brandon dominates the screen as an active subject, which is why the music is heard as describing his feelings and life events shown on the screen. This basic identification mechanism of film music does not work in *The Brandon Teena Story*, where almost all the time we are looking at people other than Brandon, who is present only as a 'ghost', as Jack Halberstam points out.<sup>[44]</sup> In *The Brandon Teena Story* there is no ordinary protagonist with whom to identify and from whose point of view we can hear the music. The protagonist is absent and the narrative unfolds in the past tense, whereas in *Boys Don't Cry* the protagonist is present in the flesh and the narrative unfolds in the present tense.

However, the confusion over whose voice we are listening to in *The Brandon Teena Story* results not only from the absence of the protagonist on screen, but also from the songs chosen. In *The Brandon Teena Story*, there really is no music that seems particularly suitable to characterise Brandon as a trans man or that would help make transgenerness understandable. One might expect that the songs heard in *The Brandon Teena Story* would compensate or substitute for the voice of Brandon, which is lacking in the documentary, but this seems not to be the case, since all the non-diegetic country and pop songs in the film are sung by female voices, even by stereotypically feminine voices, and most of them are written from a first-person perspective. This seems insensitive to Brandon's identity as a trans man. In *Boys Don't Cry*, however, the audience is listening to the voice of transgendered subjectivity, as the predominantly masculine music fits unproblematically with Brandon's trans masculinity. In contrast, to listen to the music in *The Brandon Teena Story* as communicating the thoughts, emotions and overall subjectivity of Brandon as a trans man is problematic, confusing and fallacious. One cannot help but hear this "feminine" musical approach as a lesbian-feminist one that prioritises women's voices over men's, even when talking about a trans man. The film's musical approach can be heard as participating in the (Lesbian) Butch/FTM border wars,<sup>[45]</sup> taking the side of the first mentioned – as if Brandon were a 'failed lesbian' and not a trans man.

Comparison between *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry* is illuminating in this sense. The various songs heard in *Boys Don't Cry* guarantee Brandon's masculine identity by means of a careful gendering logic in the vocal parts. In particular, the songs that accompany Brandon are sung by male voices: the music never imparts female vocal subjectivity to Brandon. The first five songs in the film are sung by male singers; the first time we hear a female singer is when Lana is loafing at the gas station and Brandon watches her affectionately; here the music ('She's Diamond' by Opal, sung by Kendra Smith) embodies Lana. In one song we hear a female and a male voice singing together. Lana has come to meet Brandon, who is going away for a while. The scene has a strong romantic feeling, and the music ('Burning House of Love' by X) resonates with their mutual affection. The last song, 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas', is sung by a female voice, which emphasises that the focus has shifted from Brandon (or Brandon and Lana) to Lana alone, and the music represents her

as the bearer of transgender utopia. In contrast, in *The Brandon Teena Story*, all the songs are sung by female voices with the exception of one diegetic song heard in a bar, 'Folsom Prison Blues', which refers not to Brandon, but to Lotter and Nissen. In another song, there is a male voice performing back-up vocals to the female lead singer, but the song, 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels', is associated with Falls City people and not with Brandon.

Of course, we might interpret the songs in the documentary film as not being intended to help to understand Brandon's trans subjectivity, but rather to portray the feelings of those close to him, as well as a sense of loss and tragedy, and to reflect the audience's sentiments. Yet if this is the case, why isn't the soundtrack more manifestly (trans)gender-political? If these songs are heard as referring to Brandon's girlfriends, who do appear frequently in the film, and their romantic memories of Brandon, one might still wonder why the emphasis in the soundtrack is on Brandon's girlfriends and cultural representations considered feminine, and not on Brandon. Indeed, why is Brandon's subjectivity not heard at all in the soundtrack of *The Brandon Teena Story*? 40

Yet the emotional country songs heard in the film often dwell on themes of existential questioning, change and the search for new life and a 'new me', and this goes well with transgender themes, despite the systematic gender discrepancy. The songs may even narrate rather literally events in Brandon's life, like the song 'Go Away', sung by Morgan, heard with images that show Brandon about to leave Lincoln. In any case, these songs make the narration emotional, as if the songs were portraying the feelings related to Brandon's romantic relationships and his longing to start a new life, but they fail to refer to Brandon as a man. Here the music of the film corresponds to many of the interviewees who failed to refer to Brandon with male pronouns or to talk about the gender re-assignment process in transpolitically correct terms. The music in *The Brandon Teena Story* does not help us understand Brandon's transgenerness, whereas the music in *Boys Don't Cry* does. It seems that the music for *The Brandon Teena Story* does not so much portray Brandon but rather functions more as a description of, reflection and commentary on the present social milieu and its narrow-minded people, Brandon's childish girlfriends, the insensitivity of many people involved with Brandon or the murder case, and the overall sadness and hopelessness in this mental landscape of hate-motivated crimes. 41

### **Music of Violence, Trauma and Mourning**

The musical communication of violence and trauma is manifold in *The Brandon Teena Story*. The most traumatic moments may be the ones in which Brandon is heard on the authentic police interview tapes after his rape. No music is added to these scenes. We hear only the voices of Brandon and his interrogator, Sheriff Charles B. Laux, as well as some background roar on the tape combined with black-and-white photographs and quotations from a transcript of the hearing. Sheriff Laux's psychologically violent 42

and offensive behaviour gets a great deal of time in the film and is presented as yet another traumatising assault on Brandon.

A somewhat surprising musical device is the use of church bells and Christmas music in passages that describe the assault and rape of Brandon and their fatal consequences. In addition to church bells, we hear two Christmas songs: 'Jingle Bells', played on a glockenspiel, and 'Silent Night', played on an accordion. The 'cold', mechanical, music box-like Christmas music feels weird, eerie, ominous, and recalls the musical conventions of horror films. Indeed, it is *a silent night*, but not in the sense of peacefulness but of the indifferent society covering up its violent undercurrents. Christmas music also underlines the fact that the rape took place on Christmas Eve, while the murders of Brandon, Lisa and Phillip happened on New Year's Eve. As music that is contrapuntal to the action, the pieces construct ironic meanings and deepen the film's socio-cultural critique, which targets the white Christian communities in rural America and their understanding of the 'good life'. Often the music is combined with images of dark roads, dirty snow and muddy fields, as seen through a car window. The interview clips of Lotter and Nissen describing the humiliation and rape of Brandon deepen the horror, disgust and anxiety evoked in the audioviewer. The trauma is effectively communicated here, since no compassion for Brandon can be heard on the soundtrack, no music of lamentation, few sympathetic words are uttered by anyone; instead, there is weird and mechanical, anempathetic Christmas music. After a while, a dark road is seen through a car windshield, just as in the beginning of the film. Then we become aware of ambient sounds of humming and a signboard reading 'NEBRASKA – the good life'. Three gun shots accompany the photographs of Brandon, Lisa and Phillip. The sound of wind is heard, as if emphasising the fragility of life and functioning as an anempathetic sound that deepens the sense of violence and trauma.[46]

An interesting use of diegetic music is a band's rendition of the prison song classic, 'Folsom Prison Blues', written by Johnny Cash, originally released in 1955, in a local bar where Lana and her friends are hanging out and line-dancing. Between, the audience sees newspaper headlines and documentary clips of Nissen and Lotter going to court. The prison song is thus attached to Brandon's murderers. This is the only song in the film sung by a male, and it is linked to the criminals and ex-convicts Nissen and Lotter.[47] The musical communication of gender here enforces the stereotypical idea that men are criminals and women are victims, and midwestern people are old-fashioned 'hillbillies'. [48] We also see, in front of the county court house, transactivists demonstrating against hate crimes. The music stops when the image turns to the transactivists who are interviewed for the documentary.[49]

It is worth noting that, intermittently in *The Brandon Teena Story*, (original) instrumental music provides peaceful moments that seem to give space to transgender subjectivity in a manner that is developed further in *Boys Don't Cry*. This takes place when the barren Nebraska landscape is filmed in a somewhat experimental

manner, with a focus on tiny details in the everyday environment that reveal life's beauty, such as hay blowing in the wind or a ray of sunlight. Combined with the contemplative images, the country-inflected ambient music seems to be reverberating from an environment and suggests quietness and timelessness. For example, when Brandon's diary-like letters are heard as voiceovers in the beginning of the film ('Changes are going through my life that will change me forever...'), the words are combined with a static drone that seems natural, like an environmental hum, a distant roar of traffic or the squawking of night birds. Because we hear actual words by Brandon, i.e. 'his own voice', the ambient music becomes firmly linked with his subjectivity and transgenerness. Similar music is heard later, when Brandon's letter to his mother, written in the Falls City prison, is read. The voiceover is combined with blue-tinted images of feet walking, shadows on the ground and ambient music. Thus, both *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry* draw on experimental audiovisual aesthetics combined with ambient music and landscape images shot with a hand-held camera to communicate transgender subjectivity. These peaceful moments in the midst of fraught traumatic events form a counter-narrative to the story of anti-transgender violence and offer reparative spaces of healing.

Another musical idea from *The Brandon Teena Story* that is developed further in *Boys Don't Cry* is a karaoke scene. As discussed earlier, in *Boys Don't Cry* a country ballad, 'The Bluest Eyes of Texas', functions as an important narrative and structural element. In *The Brandon Teena Story*, there is a short documentary clip in which Lana sings the country ballad 'Don't Close Your Eyes'[50] in a karaoke performance at a local bar, and the film ends with a song that refers to Lana and her friends singing karaoke. During the closing credits, against an ambient hum, boxes of text explain what happened to different individuals connected with the murders and, for example, how the charges against the accused ones were resolved. Then a piano plays an intro, which develops into a powerful closing credits song. The song, 'If You Came Back From Heaven', is an extremely sentimental country-pop number performed by Lorrie Morgan.[51] The first lines are accompanied by a photograph of Brandon in a car and the text 'In memory of Brandon Teena'. Later we see photographs of Lisa Lambert and Phillip DeVine as well as text dedications to them.[52] The lyrics revolve around an idea of what would happen if the deceased beloved would come back to life and one could start over again.

The affectivity of the song grows until the closing credit sequence suddenly jumps into a documentary clip of Lana Tisdel, Michelle Lotter (John Lotter's sister) and Ralph Gilkerson singing the same song in a karaoke bar. Not only do we see Brandon's friends singing karaoke, but also we hear them. The recording of Lorrie Morgan is edited to include a passage in which Brandon's friends are singing, and the transition is perfectly smooth.

In both *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry*, the closing credits songs are slow-moving, country-pop ballads sung by female voices and alluding to Brandon's girlfriend Lana singing karaoke. And in both films the closing credits contain road movie-like landscape images seen through a car window and symbolising a person's life path. In both films the music during the closing credits works as music of mourning for a lost life and music of healing, which allows the trauma to be processed. Healing music at the end of a film that deals with traumatic content offers the audience a non-verbal channel for the difficult emotions evoked. In psychoanalytical terms the music serves as an acoustic, reparative container,<sup>[53]</sup> which returns the fraught affects to the perceiver in a bearable – and even beautiful – form, and thereby gives the viewer the power to confront the trauma. The music reconstructs the lost object (the transgender subjectivity) in symbolic form. **48**

## Conclusion

The aim of my analysis has been to show the importance of music in the narration of Brandon Teena's story, as well as in communicating transgenerness in *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story*. Music is a powerful vehicle for processing trauma, as music may create a shape for something, such as trauma, that otherwise would be difficult or impossible to engage with and that exists in the realm of the body, affect and the unconscious, beneath reason, language and the symbolic. *Boys Don't Cry* constructs Brandon's transmasculine identity through various musical strategies: through music attached to stereotypical as well as alternative masculinity, through conventionally romantic music and through ambient music that builds a transgressive space of possibility. *The Brandon Teena Story* clearly offered musical inspiration for *Boys Don't Cry* in many ways. Yet the music in *The Brandon Teena Story* does not seem to communicate transgenerness or transmasculinity; rather it comments on the socio-cultural context of the story and the violent undercurrents in a homo/transphobic society, at the same time as it mourns the lost life of a young, unconventional man. **49**

Both films process the trauma of anti-transgender violence with experimental ambient music, heard here and there throughout the film, and with a sentimental country ballad accompanying the closing credits (and in *The Brandon Teena Story*, the opening credits as well). As anti-transgender hate crime films, both *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry*, despite aspects that can be considered trans-politically problematic, demonstrate ethical responsibility in outlining, identifying and dealing with the cultural trauma of anti-transgender violence in a shared, public and collective form that is available, in principle, to anyone to view and reflect on. **50**

Various practices and modes of remembrance and commemoration are needed in cultural trauma work. Representations in art and popular culture have an important and responsible task in this work because they can tell stories of cultural traumas with exceptional freedom, from various **51**

perspectives, emphasising an individual's experience and side-stepping 'official truths' or conventional modes of representation in a society. Such art may function as a form of societal conscience, as collective remembrance and as a source of cultural self-knowledge, identity and empowerment.

## Notes

[1] I have previously discussed the music in *Boys Don't Cry* in more detail in Susanna Välimäki, 'Listening to Transgender Utopia in Boys Don't Cry', *SQS Journal – Journal of Queer Studies in Finland*, No. 1–2 (2013), <http://ojs.tsv.fi/index.php/sqs/article/view/50794/15471> (10 February 2016). My analysis here of *Boys Don't Cry* follows this previous study. However, in that article, I do not discuss *The Brandon Teena Story*, and the focus is not on cultural trauma processing.

[2] See, e.g., John M. Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 50-82; J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 22-92; Lisa M. Pollard, *Violence and Hope: A History of the Murder of Brandon Teena and GLBT Activism in the Modern American West* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2009).

[3] E.g. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 32.

[4] The worldwide *Transgender Day of Remembrance* takes place annually on 20 November. This day of commemoration was established in 1999 to memorialise transgender people who have been murdered as a result of transphobia and hate-based violence, as well as to raise public awareness of the prejudice and hate crimes that continue to be directed against trans people. Activities typically include readings of the names of those who have died as victims of anti-transgender violence in the previous year, together with demonstrations, memorial vigils, film screenings and other art and cultural displays, events and discussions.

[5] On transgender films, see, e.g., Wibke Straube, *Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Difference in Contemporary Film* (Linköping: Linköping University, 2014); Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 24-33, 76-96; John Phillips, *Transgender on Screen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[6] E.g. Patricia White, 'Girls Still Cry', *Screen* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2001), 217-221; Brenda Cooper, 'Boys Don't Cry and Female Masculinity: Reclaiming a Life and Dismantling the Politics of Normative Heterosexuality', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol. 19, No. 1 (2002), 44-63; Annabelle Willox, 'Branding Teena: (Mis)Representations in the Media', *Sexualities* Vol. 6, No. 3–4 (2003), 407-425; Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 50-82; Ann J. Cahill, 'Boys Don't Get Raped', in Russell, Dominique (ed.), *Rape in Art Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2004), 113-128; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 76-96; Heiko Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender and Sexual Identity: Poststructuralist Perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010), 141-168; Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 57-62.

[7] E.g. David Schwartz, *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Susanna Välimäki, 'Musical Representation of War, Genocide, and Torture: Treating Cultural Trauma with Music', in Hartama-Heinonen, Ritva & Pirjo Kukkonen (eds.), *Pax* (Helsinki: The University of Helsinki, 2015), 122-136.

[8] Transgender musicology can be understood as its own field arising out of or as part of the broader field of queer musicology; it is an implementation of transgender studies in the field of music research, which aims for a transgender-conscious way of listening to and interpreting music. See, e.g., Susanna Välimäki, 'Confronting the Gender Trouble for Real: Mina Caputo, Metal Truth and Transgender Power', in Hawkins, Stan (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Susanna Välimäki, 'The Audiovisual Construction of Transgender Identity in *Transamerica*', in Richardson, John, Claudia Gorbman & Carol Vernallis (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 372-388. For transgender studies, see, e.g., Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (eds.), *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan Stryker & Aren Z. Aizura (eds.), *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[9] E.g. Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (New York: Routledge, 2001); John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman & Carol Vernallis (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013).

[10] E.g. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe & Leo Spitzer (eds.), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999); Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser & Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

[11] D. P. Green, L. H. McFalls & J. K. Smith, 'Hate crime: an emergent research agenda', *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 27 (2001), 479-504: 480. See also Donald Altschiller, *Hate Crimes: A Reference Handbook*, 3rd edition (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015).

[12] Jordan Blair Woods and Jody L. Herman, 'Anti-transgender hate crime', in Hall, Nathan, Abbee Corb, Paul Ciannasi & John G. D. Grieve (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook on Hate Crime* (London: Routledge, 2015), 278-88: 278-80. On anti-transgender violence, see, e.g., Richard M. Juang, 'Transgendering the Politics of Recognition', in Currah, Paisley, Richard M. Juang & Shannon Price Minter (eds.), *Transgender Rights* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 242-261; Dean Spade, 'Methodologies of Trans Resistance', in Haggerty, George E. and Molly McGarry (eds.), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 237-261: 246-248; Altschiller, *Hate Crimes*, 69-75; Lori B. Girschick, *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2008), 139-143.

[13] See, e.g., Christopher A. Shelley, *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Laura S. Brown and David Pantalone, 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Trauma Psychology: A Topic Comes Out of the Closet', *Traumatology* Vol. 17, No. 2 (2011), 1-3.

[14] Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 1-30; Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-10. The concepts of collective and cultural trauma refer to the same phenomenon at a general level. However, when using the concept of cultural trauma, my aim is to emphasize the cultural, which connotes the struggle for representation of trauma: a process of grappling with the traumatic event and signifying it painfully within a timespan of several decades or even centuries. This is the central idea in cultural trauma studies based on the psychoanalytic theory of cultural trauma. Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] The research literature on film and cultural trauma is enormous; see, e.g., E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (eds.), *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek & Julia B. Köhne (eds.), *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema: Violence Void Visualization* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). I have previously written on music and cultural trauma, e.g., in Välimäki, 'Musical Representation of War, Genocide, and Torture'.

[17] Juang, 'Transgendering the Politics of Recognition', 254.

[18] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 126-152.

[19] Ibid.

[20] In reality, when Brandon Teena was murdered, two other persons were murdered with him: a young white woman, who was a single parent, Lisa Lambert, and a young African-American man, Phillip DeVine, both of whom were friends of Brandon. In *Boys Don't Cry* Lisa's name has been changed to Candace, and Phillip is not included in the storyline. Scholars have pointed out that the film eliminates the question of race by omitting the young black man from the story. See, e.g., Jennifer Devere Brody, 'Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies', *Screen* Vol. 43, No. 1 (2002), 91-96.

[21] See, e.g., Barbara Ching, 'Where Has the Free Bird Flown: Lynyrd Skynyrd and White Southern Manhood', in Watts, Trent (ed.), *White Masculinity in the Recent South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 251-265; Sheila Whiteley (ed.), *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997). By *hegemonic masculinity* I am referring to a presentation of masculinity that is culturally dominant and exalted and is intended to maintain the legitimacy of patriarchy, i.e. the dominant position of men and the subordination of other genders. Physical strength, gender-normativity (non-transgenderness), heterosexuality and readiness for violence, for example, are important features of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary western culture. *Marginal or alternative masculinities*, for their part, are masculinities that differ and are thus culturally marginalised and subordinated to the hegemonic masculinity. See Raewyn [R.W.] Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

[22] Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counter-Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 61-81; Nadya Zimmerman, *CounterCulture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspective on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Katherine Charlton, *Rock Music Styles: A History*, 6th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 144-155.

[23] The music in the film is completely 'white': we hear musical genres and styles that are dominated by white musicians and white audiences. For discussions on the representation of the white working class in *Boys Don't Cry*, see Lisa Henderson, 'The Class Character of Boys Don't Cry', *Screen* Vol. 42, No. 3 (2001), 299-303; Carol Siegel, 'Curing Boys Don't Cry: Brandon Teena's Stories', *Genders OnLine Journal* Vol. 37 (2003), 1-26, [http://www.genders.org/g37/g37\\_siegel.html](http://www.genders.org/g37/g37_siegel.html) (9 March 2016); Jean Bobby Noble, *Masculinities Without Men? Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Daniel Mudie Cunningham, 'New Queer White Trash Cinema', in Peele, Thomas (ed.), *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 169-182.

[24] Nathan Larson, *Filmmusik* [CD] (Commotion Records, B0007Y090K, 2005).

[25] The song is from The Cure's first album, *Three Imaginary Boys* (1979), which was later reissued as *Boys Don't Cry*.

[26] The question of masculinity vs. femininity is further nuanced in the title of the film with the expression 'boy', which opens up the palette of different masculinities and the cultural division between men (adult, hegemonic masculinity) and boys (young, more feminine and not-yet-stabilised masculinity). This 'subalternised', 'undeveloped' and 'feminine' masculinity of the 'boy' resonates powerfully with androgyny, queer and transgenerness. See Ian Biddle & Freya Jarman-Ivens, 'Introduction: Oh Boy! Making Masculinity in Popular Music', in Jarman-Ivens, Freya (ed.), *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2007), 1-20: 5-7.

[27] Siegel, 'Curing ~~Boys~~ Don't Cry', 2-3, 6.

[28] Ibid. 4.

[29] According to the director, The Cure's original version of the song sounded too British and evocative of the 1980s to fit the film, which is why Larson was asked for a new version, one that would sound more American and 1990s; see Kimberly Peirce, on the Director's audio-track in the DVD release of *Boys Don't Cry* (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002).

[30] Cf. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*. Ambient music is an effective way to express queer identity, since it deconstructs many conventional binarities of musical discourse, such as movement vs stasis, tension vs release, or masculine vs feminine (as traditionally understood in music). See 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), 177-220.

[31] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 83.

[32] Ibid., 77-78, 83-87, 91-92.

[33] According to the film's director, Kimberly Peirce, the idea of a Wonderland of Oz was important for the film's audiovisual aesthetics. See Peirce, Director's audio-track on the DVD release of *Boys Don't Cry*.

[34] I owe the term 'sonorous envelope' to Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau*, 2nd ed (Paris: Éditions Dunod, 1995 [1979]); see also Susanna Välimäki, *Subject Strategies in Music: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Musical Signification* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Semiotics & International Semiotics Institute, 2005), 312.

[35] Indeed, different kinds of silence are important to the film's auditory narration and effectively used, for example, in the much-discussed sex scene between Brandon and Lana, shortly after Brandon's rape. I have discussed the music in this scene elsewhere; see Välimäki, 'Listening to Transgender Utopia', 11-12.

[36] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art*, tr. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 158-160.

[37] Megan Carrigy, 'Hilary Swank and Charlize Theron: Empathy, Veracity, and the Biopic', in Bell-Meterau, Rebecca, and Colleen Glenn (eds.), *Star Bodies and the Erotics of Suffering* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 80-98: 89, 92.

[38] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 26.

[39] The song was written by John Moffat.

[40] The song was written by J. D. 'Jay' Miller.

[41] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 82-83, 101, 116-117, 184; Välimäki, 'The Audiovisual Construction', 375.

[42] In audiovisual counterpoint, sound (or music) gives new meaning to an image by means of contradictory content, affects or information in the sound (or music) vs the image, often resulting in ironic signification.

[43] The song was written by Ronnie Scott and Steve Wolf.

[44] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 78.

[45] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, 'Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol. 4 No. 2 (1998): 287-310.

[46] *Anempathetic music or sound* does not reflect or respond emotionally to the narrated events in the screen, but is strikingly indifferent to these. Often mechanical or noisy in nature, anempathetic music or sound describes a hostile and indifferent environment. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, tr. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8-9.

[47] John Lotter, who systematically denied committing the murders, was convicted for all three and sentenced to death in 1996. Tom Nissen was offered a deal for testifying against Lotter and was sentenced to life in prison. Much later, in 2007, Nissen gave a statement in which he said that he had lied and that in reality he committed all three murders. Yet Lotter's death sentence has remained in effect and he still is on death row (he has spent 20 years on death row).

[48] Some scholars and viewers of the film have criticised the film as having an obvious class bias in depicting the people of Falls City and the midwest; see, e.g., Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 26-29. Halberstam further points out that Phillip's murder does not receive the same attention in the film as Lisa's and that his family members or friends are not interviewed, nor is his presence at the murder scene explained, as if the filmmakers did not consider a black victim or a cis-gender man worthy of the same attention given a white victim, a woman or a female-bodied trans man.

[49] Among the interviewees is Kate Bornstein, for instance, a prominent transgender activist, artist and gender theorist, well known from their book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

[50] This country hit song was written by Bib McDill and made famous by the country music artist Keith Whitley in 1988.

[51] The piece was written by Lorrie Morgan and Richard Landis.

[52] *Boys Don't Cry* is dedicated to Brandon Teena only.

[53] Wilfred R. Bion, *Learning from Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1962).

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