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Exploring the Lived Experiences of a Gender-Expansive Youth

Music, Gender Identity and Epistemic Injustice

ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of "Neptune," a 13-year-old non-binary individual in Norway, within the contexts of gender identity, music, culture, and education. Grounded in music education and queer studies, it provides a nuanced exploration of Neptune's narrative, connecting their journey to a comprehensive theoretical framework. The study aims to understand how young gender-expansive individuals navigate their identities in societies favouring binary gender norms. The guiding research question is: How do gender-expansive individuals like Neptune use cultural resources, specifically music and literature, to understand and express their non-binary identities? By examining Neptune's story through the lenses of epistemic injustice and ontological non-being, the study uncovers systemic challenges faced by young, gender-expansive individuals. Additionally, it investigates the potential of music and literature as transformative tools, offering identification means for those alienated from prevailing gender discourse. This interdisciplinary examination contributes to understanding the experiences of individuals outside the normative gender binary and seeks to enrich dialogues on gender identity, social justice, and cultural expressions, providing valuable insights for educators and professionals engaging with gender diversity.

Keywords: Gender-expansive, non-binary, epistemic injustice, ontological non-being, music and identity, critical musicology, queer pedagogy

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> The school environment is just so binary. It's like you have to choose between being with the girls or having to deal with the boy group and their toxic masculinity. The bullying would just never end and at some point, it does something to you. You just get to the stage where you don't fight it anymore […]. I have been called crazy, trans, lesbo, and the f-slur on numerous occasions. Luckily, we are a few queer kids at school now and we stick together.

THE ABOVE EXCERPT provides a condensed version of a more extensive conversation about feeling safe in school environments, which occurred during one of my "walk-and-talks" with "Neptune" – a 13-year-old student who identifies as non-binary or gender fluid.[1] In this article, I delve into Neptune's lived experiences as a gender-expansive individual based in Norway. The narrative unfolds across four key themes: Neptune's use of language to encapsulate their gender-expansive identity; Neptune's journey in developing and negotiating their gender-expansive identity through the lens of music and literature; Neptune's encounters with the Norwegian health system while seeking gender-affirming care; and Neptune's reflections on the role of schools in creating safer spaces for gender-expansive students. These themes both arose from my conversations with Neptune and reflect my scholarly interests in gender, music/culture, and education. Throughout, I aim to provide a rich exploration of Neptune's experiences within these contexts, emphasizing the transformative power of cultural resources like music and books in shaping and expressing their non-binary identity in a world largely oriented towards gender binary norms.

While this article primarily explores the sociocultural dimensions of gender and identity, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing debates within the field of medical ethics surrounding gender-affirming care. For instance, while visibility and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community have significantly increased in Norway in recent years, controversies surrounding transgender and non-binary issues, medical procedures, and related topics persist. Notably, the issue of medical and psychological treatment of gender dysphoria in children and youth has led to heat-

ed discussions (Chait 2022). In Norway, a similar debate has emerged with parts of the government, LGBT organizations, and human rights groups advocating for a third legal gender option (Bakke 2021), which has raised concerns about the impact of gender identities and gender expressions on the Norwegian society as a whole (Klinge 2022; Ottosen 2022). In contrast, some Norwegian medical professionals have warned that limiting gender to a binary model ignores the reality of diverse gender identities (Slagstad 2018; Slagstad et al. 2023). In light of recent developments, the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs has evaluated the introduction of a third legal gender category to improve the legal and social conditions for non-binary individuals (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs 2023).

These debates also extend into the context of education, as the 2020 Norwegian national curriculum for primary and lower secondary school years 1–10 includes learning objectives, or competence aims, explicitly related to gender and sexuality. These objectives aim to promote equality, respect, and understanding for diversity, including sexual orientation and gender identity. The curriculum includes topics such as attractional orientation and consent in social studies (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2020b), as well as gender stereotypes and gender roles in the music subject (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2020a). The inclusion of gender and sexuality in the national curriculum is part of a broader effort to promote social equality and human rights through education. The curriculum aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate complex social issues related to gender and sexuality and to become responsible and informed citizens (see Ministry of Culture and Equality 2022).

In this article, I aim to provide a much-needed voice for the gender-expansive student community and offer perspectives for teachers working with materials central to identity formation for gender-expansive students. The aim of this study is to explore how young gender-expansive individuals navigate and negotiate their identities in societal contexts that predominantly favor binary gender norms. The research

question guiding this study is: How do gender-expansive individuals like Neptune utilize cultural resources, specifically music and literature, as tools for understanding and expressing their non-binary identities? By presenting Neptune's story as narrated to me, I aim to offer insight into the challenges that gender-expansive students face in navigating school and health environments today.

Gender-expansive identities and society

To explore the intricate terrain of non-binary and gender fluid identities, a foundational perspective emerges from Monique Wittig's (1992) linguistic approach to gender.[2] Building on Wittig's ideas, Elizabeth Gould (2012) accentuated the limitations inherent in the non-heterosexual subject position, particularly in comprehending the nuanced landscape of gender identity in music education contexts. Gould contended that the homosexual subject position fails to encapsulate the fluid and dynamic nature of gender identity (2012, 50). Even when acknowledging the existence of fluid gender identity, it is always seen in relation to a fixed binary view on gender, as the subject position of being non-binary or gender fluid would not exist ontologically.[3]

While there has been progress in understanding diverse sexual orientations in contemporary society, the exploration of non-gendered subjectivities still poses social challenges. Mainstream media has traditionally cast gender-expansive individuals as deviations from the binary norm (e.g., Marshall 2010; Dhaenens 2016), possibly rooted in a deficiency of language and concepts capable of expressing their unique experiences. Could it be that the absence of adequate linguistic and conceptual resources contributes to the alienation of gender-expansive individuals from the prevailing binary discourse? Pearce, Gupta, and Moon (2020, 3) argue that the language used to describe trans experiences is insufficient, as it fails to capture the full range of their emotions and identities. While terms like 'cis' and 'non-binary' highlight power dynamics and inequalities, they still rely on binary thinking and absolute categories.

However, in this article I want to suggest that the concept of ontological non-existence is connected to epistemic injustice, as coined by

Miranda Fricker (2007), which sheds light on how social systems can undermine certain groups' recognition as knowers and sideline their experiences and perspectives. Broadly speaking, epistemic injustice can be categorized into two main types: *testimonial* injustice and *hermeneutical* injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when individuals are deemed unreliable or not credible sources of information based on prejudice against perceived identity markers such as gender, race, class, or sexuality (Fricker 2007, 22–23). Conversely, hermeneutical injustice involves the exclusion of certain groups from cultural narratives, leaving them without adequate tools to articulate their experiences (2007, 151). It refers to situations where individuals are unable to make sense of or articulate their experiences due to a lack of shared linguistic and cultural resources, for example in healthcare settings (Carel & Kidd 2017), leaving them without adequate tools for understanding their own experiences or communicating them to others (Fricker 2007, 151). Hermeneutical injustice is particularly pertinent to understanding the experiences of gender-expansive children and youth in heteronormative school settings, where limited linguistic and cultural resources may impede self-expression and understanding. For example, if a non-binary student is constantly referred to by the wrong pronouns or forced to use a gendered bathroom that does not align with their identity, they may struggle to articulate why this is problematic and how it affects them (Garrett & Palkki 2021, 146–147). These experiences underscore the interconnected social and epistemological barriers faced by gender-expansive individuals such as Neptune.

Music, literature, and self-understanding

Given music's close and complex relationship with gender (Björck 2021; Hansen 2022a, 2022b; Hawkins 2016; McClary 2002; Välimäki 2020; Warwick 2015), music teachers can play a central role in informing the debate surrounding gender-(non) conformity (Abramo 2011; Askerøi & Vestad 2021; Bergonzi 2014; Garrett & Palkki 2021; Nichols 2013; Onsrud 2021). As music teachers work with musical materials that can be both gender-normative and gender-challenging, they are uniquely

positioned to affect their students' understandings of gender and sexuality. In music classrooms and ensembles, usually structured around binary gender divisions, gender-expansive youth may feel excluded or overlooked, with specific instruments or genres often associated with either masculine or feminine qualities (Green 2002; Hansen 2022a; McClary 2002; Warwick 2015). The lack of representation of nonbinary or gender-expansive identities in music curricula and educational materials further contributes to the erasure of their experiences and perspectives within the (music) world (Garrett & Palkki 2021, 54–55). This absence of representation not only prevents youth from seeing themselves reflected in the music they learn and perform but also restricts their opportunities to explore music that resonates with their identity and experience (Garrett & Palkki 2021; Peters 2016). Critical musicology[4] have shed light on music's ability for transformation, emancipation and narration (McClary 2020; Tobias 2014; Välimäki 2019; Jarman-Ivens 2011), offering perspectives that can be valuable for music education and music teachers. Importantly, music and popular culture can also uphold gendered and racial prejudice and do not always act as positive forces (Cheng 2020; Dhaenens 2016; Hansen 2022b, 2022a). It is, therefore, necessary to engage in critical reflection on music education and the ways in which it can both reinforce and challenge gender norms (Green 2002; Onsrud 2015, 2021).

In addition to music, literature also serves as a powerful cultural resource that influences identity formation. According to Margaret Breen (1998, 233), queer pedagogy involves finding transformative possibilities within texts. This approach can be applied to both music and literature, as they provide narratives that validate queer identities and challenge oppressive norms. For example, Neptune's connection with Rick Riordan's book series *The Heroes of Olympus* and Jeff Gardin's book *Symptoms of Being Human* illustrates how literature can resonate with personal experiences and offer validation and language for expressing one's gender identity. Furthermore, David Nylund (2007) has emphasized that media texts provide materials out of which people create their identities, and engaging with these texts can be a powerful tool for self-

empowerment. Nylund described how young people, like "Steven," a gay youth, used popular culture texts such as the Harry Potter series to find support for their identities. Steven inserted himself into the text of Harry Potter, uncovering hidden "queer" readings and messages that resonated with his experiences. This process of engaging with and interpreting popular media texts helped Steven to navigate and affirm his sexual identity in the face of societal heteronormativity.

By integrating perspectives from both music and literature, we can see that these cultural resources provide critical tools for self-reflection and identity negotiation. Both mediums offer narratives that can either reinforce societal norms or provide alternative frameworks for understanding oneself, thus supporting the identity formation process for young gender-expansive individuals. I argue that this interdisciplinary approach highlights the importance of a holistic view of cultural resources in educational practices aimed at supporting diverse identities. As such, perspectives from critical musicology and literary studies can offer useful insights into how music and literature education can support young gender-expansive individuals in their ongoing processes of identity formation.

Music and other cultural resources serve as vital tools or technologies of the self for gender-expansive individuals, aiding them in making sense of their experiences and asserting their subjectivity amidst epistemic injustice. The Foucauldian concept *technologies of the self*, encompassing various techniques individuals employ to shape and transform themselves (DeNora 1999; Foucault 1994), applies to cultural resources like music and books. As I aim to demonstrate, these resources can be instrumental in empowering gender-expansive individuals to explore and express their identities, providing unique avenues for self-reflection, interpretation, and transformation.

Methodology and ethics

As a researcher, I acknowledge my positionality as a white, cisgendered, homosexual man residing in Norway, a wealthy Nordic country. My background as a music teacher educator motivates my desire to

comprehend the spectrum of gendered and non-gendered expressions among contemporary young people, the full breadth of which is becoming increasingly visible in popular culture and music (Hansen 2022a; Hawkins 2016; Välimäki 2020), thus in our contemporary society. I am convinced that teachers bear the responsibility of creating safer spaces within their educational practices, particularly for individuals who do not conform to normative gender and sexuality categories (Garrett & Palkki 2021; Onsrud 2021; Røthing 2020). I have approached these issues through a narrative-inspired inquiry single-case study (Elbaz-Luwisch 2007; Flyvbjerg 2006; Nichols 2016, 2013), which provides the means for exploring an individual's personal experiences and present them thematically and critically, allowing for a deeper understanding of their lived realities. While single-case studies are sometimes critiqued for their limited generalizability, Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) argued that their depth and contextual richness can yield profound theoretical insights, particularly when they resonate with broader patterns observed in research or practice. In this case, Neptune's experiences were selected for detailed analysis because they align with findings in the research literature and my professional experiences as a music teacher, offering critical insights into systemic barriers and individual challenges.

This study was conducted over a period of three months during the spring of 2022 in a densely populated area of Norway. To recruit participants, I sent an open invitation to several schools in major cities and promoted the study through my personal network, which ultimately led me to Neptune, a 13-year-old non-binary student. Since Neptune was a minor, it was crucial to protect their privacy and ensure research ethics were upheld.[5] Neptune's mother was instrumental in facilitating their participation, as she signed the electronic participation form and accompanied Neptune to our initial meetings. The pseudonym "Neptune" was chosen by Neptune themself, referring to the God character from American writer Rick Riordan's youth novels.

When conducting qualitative research with marginalized groups, it is crucial for researchers to be self-reflective and make active decisions about which life stories to include. Lisa Loutzenheiser (2007) suggested

that researchers should avoid including stories that could be used to reinforce stereotypes or dominant representations; so-called "bad data" (2007, 116). Daniel Marshall (2010) have cautioned against the use of the "victim trope" as it may inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics. Characterizing queer youth solely as victims can undermine their sense of agency, thereby perpetuating an unproductive cycle. Therefore, it is imperative to challenge such simplistic understandings and apply a more critical lens to how we view and address the experiences of marginalized groups (2010, 67).

During my meetings with Neptune, I emphasized their right to decline answering any questions that made them uncomfortable or to withdraw from the study at any time. I recorded our conversations and stored the files on an encrypted server with password protection. After transcribing the interviews, I submitted the transcripts as well as manuscript drafts to Neptune for approval, following Sarah Tracy's (2010) guidelines for ensuring quality in qualitative research. To stay true to Neptune's own words, I conducted interviews in English,[6] ensuring accurate language capture. Meetings took place in cafés, via Zoom, and as walk-and-talks. When invited to Neptune's home for dinner, I raised ethical concerns about disrupting their daily life. Neptune's older sister hoped that the study would promote correct pronoun usage for nonbinary individuals, while their mother valued the insight into their lives beyond formal interviews. This may serve to highlight the importance of researchers conducting themselves ethically in the field and respecting the welfare of research participants and their institutions (Strike 2006).

Neptune's story

Through Neptune's story I aim to weave together their lived experiences and the study's theoretical underpinnings. I intentionally opted not to utilize an interview guide in our walk-and-talk conversations, providing Neptune the freedom to guide the conversation and raise topics and experiences they wished to share with me. The themes that emerged from our in-depth conversations and reflections have been organized with the intent of providing a framework for analyzing Neptune's lived

experiences. In the analytic afterwork, I identified four overarching themes. First, I discuss how language and terms encapsulate Neptune's (non-)gendered identity. Second, I examine the formative role of books and music in shaping Neptune's gender identity, drawing from Monique Wittig's linguistic perspective and Elizabeth Gould's critique of non-heteronormative subject positions. The third theme explores the challenges Neptune faced at a medical clinic while seeking gender-affirming care, aligning with Miranda Fricker's concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. The fourth theme shifts focus to school settings, particularly music education. Here, I use music education to unravel the complexities of negotiating gender identity, contributing to a broader exploration of how music and popular culture can reflect possibilities for self-exploration within (or beyond) the conventional gender binary.

Encapsulating gender identity through language, terms and abbreviations

In one of our first conversations, as Neptune and I delved into the intricate language of gender-expansiveness, I posed a question to Neptune about the words and abbreviations they use to express their identity. With a moment of contemplation, Neptune explained:

> I use trans [about myself] when I talk to people I don't really know. And the further people get into understanding, the more accurate I will be in my self-descriptions. I am not just trans; I am non-binary. I am gender fluid. All three of those are my umbrella terms. You could be queer, bisexual, and pansexual at the same time, you know. Different words mean different things to each individual but are also adjusted to the situation as well as who you are speaking with. Sometimes people will use terms that are more familiar to outsiders because it's just too hard to explain. But sometimes they will be forced to choose a label because people will be like "but, what are you?" which is sort of against the point. Because it's just who you are ... if you don't want to have a label then just ... tell them.

The nuances and intricacies of gender identity and sexuality are complex and multifaceted, rendering limited utility to labels in fully capturing the diversity and fluidity of human experience. Neptune's narrative underscores this point, as they spent considerable time searching for terms that resonated with their sense of self. Indeed, Kirsty Lohman and Ruth Pearce asserted that "'[t]rans' does not [...] have a single, fixed meaning; it instead incorporates a multiplicity of meanings that vary according to both individual and social context, and might shift over time" (2020, 73). Matthew Garrett and Joshua Palkki (2021, 37) argued that language holds significant power in addressing and acknowledging gender-expansive individuals, using their preferred pronouns. Being mis-gendered through wrong pronouns, or having to explain themself to teachers, peers, other adults, and even other members of the LGBTQ+ community has strongly contributed to Neptune's sense of not being validated as a person. After us having a longer conversation about this they firmly stated that:

> I like who I like. I guess that I need to have a label, because otherwise people will not understand me and just think that I'm weird. But there are also people in the queer community who don't go by any labels, you know.

This statement is important for several reasons. Neptune's experience of needing a label to be understood by others highlights the issue of hermeneutical injustice (cf. Fricker 2007, 159). Moreover, the pressure to have a label and explain oneself in a society that lacks understanding of diverse gender identities and expressions perpetuates ontological erasure, denying or erasing the existence and validity of certain subject positions, like the non-binary (Gould 2012; Wittig 1992). It is worth noting that the absence of cultural resources for cisgender individuals and those who lack understanding of non-binary identities contributes to ontological erasure. This limitation hinders their ability to comprehend and recognize the existence of such identities, unintentionally perpetuating their erasure. Thus, education and advocacy are crucial

in providing the necessary resources for comprehending and validating diverse gender identities (Garrett & Palkki 2021), as are various cultural resources that can provide a richer basis for grappling with one's experiences.

Developing and negotiating gender identity through literature and music

Ever since Neptune was very young, they had a strong sense of something being "not right" in terms of their gender. Having been born in the late 2000s, gender-expansive people had already gained fair visibility and recognition in media, but Neptune still didn't have a linguistic repertoire to describe their sense of being gender fluid. In one of our meetings Neptune recollected one of their first distinct memories related to the discovery of their gender identity:

> I was at the park with my big sister and her friend [...] and she was explaining [what was] testosterone shots to another friend. And I went, "Oh, that would be so cool! I would really like to be a boy. I really feel that I would be a good boy, and I feel like I would've loved to be a boy." But then I was like, "but I would have liked get to go back as well," you know? Because some days I feel more masculine, some days I feel more feminine, and some days I'm in the middle of the spectrum.

After the episode in the park, Neptune did research on the internet and social media to find other people who felt like them. Additionally, they found resonance from fantasy books written by Rick Riordan:

> His [Riordan's] series is about Greek mythology, with the protagonist Magnus Chase.[7] Magnus, who is pansexual, falls in love with Alex, who is gender fluid […] which is what I am. Spoiler alert! [both of us laugh].

Books have remained an important source for resonance and entertainment in Neptune's life. In one of our meetings Neptune took me to one of their favorite places, a shop that sells anything related to fantasy

genres and anime, and Neptune was eager to recommend several books to me. Later, as we were walking together Neptune spoke of a specific book, *Symptoms of Being Human*,[8] that helped them talk to their parents about their gender identity:

> The book describes gender fluidity very well. It's [written] from the perspective of Riley, who is also a gender fluid person, which was something I was struggling with quite a lot before I came out, and [...] when I read those words, I was like "this makes a lot of sense, that is how I feel." I had mentioned to my dad before this that I thought that I might be trans. He has always been really open; they both [parents] have. They have always said that I could tell them anything [...]. One day I went downstairs [from my room] and [I said] "mom and dad? Read this section in this book, because it makes a lot of sense to how I feel."

This excerpt highlights the important role that representation can play in helping individuals understand and accept their gender identities (Garrett & Palkki 2021, 20–21) and effectively communicate this understanding to others. Neptune's connection with literature, such as Rick Riordan's series and the book *Symptoms of Being Human*, illustrates how these texts resonate with their personal experiences and offer validation and language for expressing their gender identity. Margaret Breen (1998) suggests that literature can be used in classrooms to address LGBTQ+ topics by transforming narratives of self-hatred and suffering into positive, celebratory stories, making it an essential teaching strategy for lesbian and gay literature. Through representation, individuals can strive to be understood not only by themselves but also by others, fostering a sense of recognition and acceptance. Neptune also emphasized the challenges and fears that can come with coming out to loved ones, even when one knows they will be accepting. This is a common experience among gender-expansive individuals (Goldberg & Kuvalanka 2018; Khayatt & Iskander 2020), as the social stigma and lack of understanding surrounding gender identity can create a sense of isolation and fear of rejection.

During hard times when Neptune was struggling with poor mental health caused by gender dysphoria and others' lack of understanding and validation, they found solace and comfort through music. During our meetings, Neptune would often refer to songs they loved, many of which were from musicals and depicted fighting back from oppression and finding one's voice. One song, in particular, stood out to me – a simple tune with ukulele fingerplay and a medium-pitched voice, titled "I Wish I Were a Boy" (MJ 2020, September 10). Neptune knew the lyrics by heart and cited them while we listened to the song:

> I wish I were a boy.
> Not all the time, just sometimes.
> I wish I could put on eyeliner and glitter and actually look good,
> And have girls whisper about me in bookshops because I look like a character from their favorite book.
> I wish I were a boy.
> With dark fluffy hair that I love to mess up, and shake, and makes everyone stop and stare.
> And I wish I were a boy,
> so I finally look cute in dresses and skirts and pants and suits.
> And I wish I were a boy.
> With a deep rock and roll voice
> That makes people stop in their tracks. But I don't have that choice.
> And I wish that I did because every song that I write for myself
> never sounds right because it was meant to be sung by somebody else.
> I'm happy being me, but sometimes I wonder:
> What I would be like as the opposite gender?
> Would I finally be happy being me?
> Because I like being a girl
> But ...

The lyrics made me reflect upon the complex interplay between the social and cultural expectations of gender roles, the desire for self-expression and the yearning for a sense of belonging. The lyrical wish

for a male persona is not a categorical longing for a fixed identity, but rather a desire for the fluidity of gender expression. I asked Neptune to reflect on why this song in particular resonated with them:

> It just describes it so perfectly. Because you do want to appear different, and your voice does cause dysphoria. You will listen to recordings of yourself, and you'll be like "everyone must think that I'm feminine, because of my voice" and it's just so ... hard.

The concept of the gendered voice can be explored through two interconnected facets. Firstly, the voice holds queer potential as it operates in a "third space" between bodies and language, transcending gender and allowing for performative expressions (Jarman-Ivens 2011, 17–18). Secondly, listeners play a crucial role in reinforcing (and opposing) gendered stereotypes by interpreting a speaker's gender based on their voice's characteristics (Garrett & Palkki 2021, 159). This highlights the subjective nature of gender perception, indicating that gender exists in the ear of the beholder. Consequently, these insights challenge the notion of an inherently gendered voice and call for a critical examination of societal norms surrounding gender and the voice as discussed by musicologists (Hansen 2022a, 36–37).

The relations between societal norms and gender stereotypes reinforced by the human voice connects with Neptune's personal experience of the challenges faced by gender-expansive individuals and the emotional turmoil caused by dysphoria. The dynamicity of gender can be observed in the song protagonist's desire to wear eyeliner and glitter, look good and be whispered about by girls in bookshops, and have the freedom to wear dresses, skirts, pants, and suits without any social constraints. These desires are not limited to any one gender but rather are indicative of a deeper human yearning for self-expression, freedom, and acceptance. Furthermore, the song speaks to the problem of essentialism in identity formation, where the self is assumed to be an immutable entity with a fixed essence. The lyrics highlight the limitations of such essentialist thinking and instead suggest that identity is a dynamic and

ever-evolving process, constantly in flux. The desire to be the opposite gender is not a rejection of the self but rather an exploration of the limitless possibilities of the self. As Hawkins put it when exploring queerness in pop music: "Any divergence from norms can lead to unlimited possibilities for queering" (Hawkins 2016, 192). In this sense, the lyrics also highlight the importance of self-discovery and self-exploration in the formation of a queer identity.

Neptune found representation in music and literature that reflected their gender identity and helped them build a sense of self. David Nylund (2007) emphasized that media texts provide materials out of which people create their identities, and engaging with these texts can be a powerful tool for self-empowerment. For example, Neptune's engagement with aforementioned books helps them to uncover 'queer' readings and messages that resonate with their experiences and support their identity formation. Addressing a similar issue, Jeananne Nichols (2013) highlighted the pivotal role that music can play in the lives of gender-expansive students seeking community and self-expression. Music and literature can provide individuals with the tools to explore and express their gender identity, allowing for a more fluid and nuanced understanding of their identity. Neptune's relationship with "I Wish I Were a Boy" exemplifies this. The song reflects a dynamic interplay between social expectations, personal desires, and the existential journey towards self-understanding. It is a poignant reminder of the importance of fluidity, self-expression, and the constant exploration of the limitless possibilities of the self.

Encounters with the Norwegian health system

As Neptune contemplated their gender identity, they also grappled with the physical changes that puberty would bring and the accompanying gender dysphoria. With the support of their parents, Neptune sought hormone blockers at a medical institution that provides gender-affirming care for trans individuals and is also a starting point for many teenagers with gender dysphoria seeking hormone treatment. Unfortunately, Neptune's experience at the medical institution was distressing,

culminating in a traumatic encounter during which they were confronted with a form that forced them to choose between two binary gender options:

> I refused to fill that out.

Having completed the rest of the form, Neptune was called in to meet the medical professionals without being able to bring their mother with them into the room:

> They told me that I couldn't get the blockers because it would affect my growing and do irreversible damage on my body. I tried to argue my case, but they didn't show any interest. It was like they had decided already. I exited the room, feeling completely suicidal and in desperate need for a hug. I felt empty, finished.

Neptune's mother was then called into the same room and was told that there was no reason to give Neptune, a healthy young person, hormones that could cause irreversible damage. As their mother explained to me, "It was no use to argue. They had already made up their minds." Neptune then looked at me and stated:

> I have a friend who has been through the same process. They advised me to present myself as trans to get the right treatment. I decided not to do that as I believed that they [the medical staff] would understand, which I was completely wrong about. The fact is that I can't tell right now which gender I feel at most at home in. The blockers could have offered me a chance of having more time to think about it, which I find less intervening than having to undergo gender corrective surgery at a later stage. Right now, it feels as I'm running out of time.

Neptune's experience with the medical institution highlights the challenges and barriers that gender-nonconforming individuals might face when seeking medical treatment for gender dysphoria in Norway. In

particular, their account prompts consideration of whether medical professionals exhibit the necessary understanding and sensitivity towards queer identities:

> I think one of the major problems is that most of the people that worked there are not queer and don't know how it feels to go through every day feeling uncomfortable, feeling judged.

As I understand Neptune, the utilization of familiar labels when describing one's identity often stems from the difficulty of conveying its nuances to those who may not share a similar understanding. Furthermore, this alludes to the structural obstacles facing gender non-conforming individuals within medical systems that operate through a binary gender paradigm (Slagstad 2018; Slagstad et al. 2023). Neptune laments the lack of queer representation in healthcare spaces, which leads to the alienation of non-binary individuals within these systems. This alienation forces individuals to choose between enduring psychological and physical distress by conforming to binary gender norms or risking social ostracization and potential violence by rejecting these norms.

Neptune's experience seeking medical advice for hormone blockers highlights the potential for epistemic injustice in the medical system. In Neptune's case, their gender-expansive identity may have contributed to medical professionals dismissing their request for hormone blockers, exemplifying testimonial injustice. Neptune's situation underscores the complexity of medical treatment for gender dysphoria. While hormone blockers are often used to slow down abnormal growth in children and young teenagers in addition to treatment for transgender youth (see Rew et al. 2021 for an extensive literature review on the topic), their use may pose additional challenges. Additionally, it's important to note that Neptune's experiences at the clinic play a significant role in their narrative. Discussed in nearly every one of our meetings, these experiences offer a poignant lens through which we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of seeking gender-affirming care and navigating societal norms around gender identity in Norway.

Reflections on the role of schools in creating safer spaces

This theme covers Neptune's reflections on how schools can create safer spaces for gender-expansive students, emphasizing the importance of supportive educational environments. Neptune told me several stories of bad experiences in school with bullying, being pressured to undress in front of their peers in swimming class and repeatedly having to correct teachers using wrong pronouns. Despite the multitude of bad experiences, Neptune believes that schools have the potential to play a critical role in normalizing queer identities. They emphasize that teachers, in particular, have a significant responsibility in this regard.

> Schools and teachers in general can normalize using people's preferred pronouns and names. If people do that, then everyone else will follow suit. They can also include small things, like gay sex in sex education or even pamphlets outlining different resources and terminologies.

Indeed, the impact of normalizing queer identities in educational spaces goes beyond just the classroom. As Neptune mentions, it can have a profound and lasting effect on the attitudes and beliefs of future generations:

> I think a common misconception is if people begin to normalize queer things in public or educational places, everything will be centered around queer people, which is not the case. Normalizing queer things in educational spaces specifically would be a great step into normalizing queer people in public. When you think about it, if you normalize queer people to an entire school, they will pass that knowledge on to their children and future generations. Suddenly, an entire group of people is supportive or at least has a mild understanding of queer people and see them as people deserving of respect and love.

This "paying it forward"-effect can help combat the lack of shared cultural resources by introducing language, concepts, and resources to young people that they can carry with them into adulthood, much in

line with queer pedagogical thinking (Breen 1998; Garrett & Palkki 2021; Onsrud 2021; Røthing 2020).

I told Neptune that the new Norwegian national curriculum for the music subject contains a competence aim for 7th grade that expects the students to be able to "investigate how gender, gender roles, and sexuality are presented in music and dance in the public sphere and create expressions that challenge stereotypes" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2020a), and asked them what they thought about it. Neptune immediately asserted that:

> Music teachers have a special place in this because they teach a very open form of art, which is very much able to be modeled to the student's meanings and diversities. Music is used as a tool to spread messages and can definitely be utilized in a way that is fun and inclusive.

According to Neptune, music educators have an important role to play in creating safer and more inclusive environments for gender-expansive youth in music education. However, this requires a nuanced approach that may benefit from drawing on critical musicology to address the epistemic injustices that marginalize non-binary identities in the music world. Epistemic injustice in the context of music and popular culture arises when dominant narratives and perspectives in music exclude the experiences and contributions of marginalized groups. For gender-expansive teenagers in school settings, this can manifest as a lack of recognition for their gender identity and exclusion from musical networks and curricula, hence their ontological erasure (cf. Gould 2012). Furthermore, gender-binary structures in music classrooms and ensembles can limit the opportunities for non-binary youth to explore and express themselves through music. I find this necessary to point out, as music and arts tend to be presented as predominantly positive forces in people's lives (e.g. DeNora 1999).

To address these issues, music teachers could engage in a collaborative exploration with their students to critically examine how dominant narratives and perspectives shape music and contribute to the perpetu-

ation of epistemic injustice, much in line with queer pedagogical thinking. In doing so, music educators can advocate for greater representation of gender-expansive and non-binary musicians and traditions within the musical repertoire used in classes. This can be achieved for example by incorporating a curated selection of music that represents or addresses gender-expansive and queer issues, as well as works created by queer/trans artists (Onsrud 2021).

The aforementioned competence aim in the 2020 Norwegian music curriculum for 7th grade could thus be interpreted as a starting point for promoting safer spaces in music classes. However, the inclusion of gender and sexuality in music education curricula must be approached thoughtfully and critically. Music has the potential to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity, but it can also reinforce power dynamics that limit non-conforming identities (see e.g. Dhaenens 2016). As Neptune suggests, music educators can implement policies and practices that recognize and affirm non-binary identities, such as using gender-neutral language and pronouns and allowing students to perform music that reflects their identity and experience (Garrett & Palkki 2021, 37). It can also involve incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into music curricula and educational materials (Peters 2016, 28) and creating opportunities for non-binary teenagers to participate in musical networks and communities. As Neptune notes:

> Music can challenge boundaries and is often something a variety of people can understand. In dance, female and male roles are often blurred and can be very easily made to represent very many different things.

Concluding remarks

This study aimed to uncover how gender-expansive individuals like Neptune utilize cultural resources, specifically music and literature, as tools for understanding and expressing their non-binary identities. By examining Neptune's narrative through the lenses of epistemic injustice and the concept of ontological non-being, I have highlighted the systemic challenges faced by young gender-expansive individuals. Cultural

resources such as music and books can serve as transformative tools, providing spaces for self-exploration and self-expression, allowing for the emergence of new subjectivities. In Neptune's case they have found solace in songs such as "I Wish I Were a Boy," which provides a space for them to explore their subjectivity as a non-binary person and find representation. Through listening to music, individuals like Neptune can create a space for self-exploration and self-expression, allowing for the emergence of new subjectivities. Similarly, books like *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* and *Symptoms of Being Human* offer alternative ways for thinking about gender and allow for the possibility of non-binary and gender-expansive individuals to be ontologically recognized.

My goal with this interdisciplinary examination was to contribute to a multifaceted understanding of the experiences of individuals who identify outside of the normative gender binary and to seek to enrich broader dialogues on gender identity, social justice, and cultural expressions. Additionally, community and peer support play pivotal roles in the well-being of non-binary youth. The experiences of non-binary youth are intricately shaped by ontological, epistemological, and social factors, which this study has aimed to illuminate. Further research is needed to center the experiences and perspectives of gender-expansive individuals in knowledge production. This involves creating empowering spaces for the development of their own hermeneutic practices. As researchers and practitioners, our responsibility lies in critically examining and dismantling binary norms and assumptions. Through this engagement with Neptune's narrative, this article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced nature of gender identity and advocate for more inclusive and supportive social institutions for gender-expansive individuals.

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SAMMENDRAG

Denne artikkelen presenterer en narrativ studie av opplevelsene til "Neptune", en 13 år gammel skoleelev som identifiserer seg som ikke-binær. Som forsker innen musikkpedagogikk og queer-studier ønsker jeg å gi en nyansert og empatisk fremstilling av Neptunes historie, samtidig som jeg plasserer hens opplevelser innenfor en større teoretisk ramme som kan bidra til at (musikk)lærere og andre fagpersoner som møter barn og ungdom kan få en utvidet forståelse av kjønn i praksisene sine. Spesifikt fokuserer jeg på to dimensjoner i Neptunes historie: hens opplevelse av å leve mellom kjønnsbinariteten og hens bruk av musikk og bøker som verktøy for selvforståelse. Jeg argumenterer for at Neptunes opplevelser kan forstås gjennom to sammenkoblede teoretiske linser: epistemisk urettferdighet (Fricker 2007) og konseptet ontologisk ikke-eksistens (Wittig 1992; Gould 2012). Ved å undersøke Neptunes opplevelser gjennom disse konseptene ønsker jeg å belyse hvordan unge kjønnskreative individer ofte blir utsatt for diskriminering i en verden som favoriserer binære kjønnsidentiteter. Jeg ønsker å utforske potensialet til musikk og litteratur for å tilby identifiseringsmuligheter for kjønnskreative individer som føler seg fremmedgjort av den rådende kjønnsdiskursen. Jeg argumenterer for at musikklærere, musikkpedagogisk forskning og musikkutdanning generelt kan bruke denne kunnskapen for å utvikle [trans- og] ikke-binært-orienterte inkluderende praksiser i musikktimer (og i skolen generelt). Det overordnede målet er å tilby en tverrfaglig forståelse av opplevelsene til ikke-binære individer og bidra til utvidede samtaler om kjønnsidentitet, sosial rettferdighet og kulturelle uttrykk.

NOTES

1. To refer to the range of diverse gender expressions, I have opted to use the term "gender-expansive." I have borrowed the term from Garrett and Palkki (2021), who define "[...] *gender-expansive* as an umbrella term to describe a broader range of gender expressions and identities" (20, italics in original). However, in quoting Neptune, I will use the terminology that they personally identify with.
2. Feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray had already made significant contributions on this topic prior to Wittig. For the purpose of this article, I have opted to build on Wittig's concept of the ontologically non-existent/disappeared. Wittig argues that gender serves as a linguistic marker of political division between the sexes, where only the feminine gender is specific, while the masculine gender represents the general rather than a distinct gender (Wittig 1992, 62).
3. Ontological non-existence is, if drawing on Wittig's (1992) concepts, the state of being denied a subject position to engage with the world.

4. I am using the term "critical musicology" in this article to refer to the study of the complex interplay between music and gender, as well as to highlight the critical examination of societal power structures and the desire for transformation. While terms like feminist musicology or queer musicology also exist, I believe "critical musicology" more aptly captures the multifaceted nature of the intersection between music and social critique.
5. The study was approved in 2020 by SIKT, The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.
6. English was Neptune's preferred spoken language.
7. Magnus Chase's relationship with Alex Fierro, a gender-fluid demigod, is a significant part of the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series by Rick Riordan. Their relationship highlights the challenges faced by individuals with fluid gender identities and the importance of acceptance and understanding in relationships.
8. *Symptoms of Being Human* is a young adult novel written by Jeff Garvin, which tells the story of Riley, a gender fluid teenager who creates a blog to document their experiences of being a teenager with an anonymous identity. The novel explores Riley's struggles with gender identity, mental health, and bullying, while also highlighting the importance of self-expression and acceptance.