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“What Might Have Been Lost”: The Formation of Narrative Identity Among the Dutch Indie-folk Audience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of “independent” folk music (indie-folk) in personal identity formation. It builds upon Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity, which argues (i) that it is through the mechanism of narrative that people build a more or less coherent life-story, and (ii) emphasizes the role of art (most notably literary fiction and poetry) as a mediator in the comprehension and regulation of transitory life experiences. This article aims to apply these insights to studying the role of indie-folk, a narrative art form adhering to the traditional understanding of folk music as a genre rooted in oral tradition, in the construction of personal identity. Studying the daily use of indie-folk songs by audience members through in-depth interviewing, it shows that (i) the reception of indie-folk music results in ritualistic listening behavior aimed at coping with the experience of accelerating social time; (ii) that respondents use indie-folk narratives as resources for reading the self, and (iii) that indie-folk songs provide healing images that are effective in coping with the experience of narrated time as discordant. In arguing for the central role of narrative in identity formation, this article aims to contribute to existing research on music as a “technology of the self” (DeNora). It specifically emphasizes how narrative particles are tools and building blocks in identity construction, a process characterized by the oscillation between narrative coherence and disruption.

— *And I wrote this song about it, cuz I didn’t care about any worthless photographs.*

M. Ward, *Hold Time*

Introduction

This article investigates the role of “independent” folk music (indie-folk) in the formation of personal identity among members of the Dutch indie-folk audience. It does so by studying the daily use of indie-folk songs through in-depth interviewing and by defining the reception

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of indie-folk as a form of “narrative practice” (Holstein and Gubrium). This means that personal identity is primarily understood as a “practical project of everyday life” grounded in everyday talk and interaction (70–71), while broadening this definition by including the role of musical narratives in the process of identity formation. Independent folk music is defined here, somewhat broadly, as an umbrella term that covers multiple newly established genres within the “folk music stream” (Ennis) – including free-folk, New Weird America, freak-folk, and indie-folk (for historical overviews, see Keenan; Petrusisch; Encarnacao). Although there are marked differences in aesthetics and institutional politics between these various subgenres (Petrusisch; van Poecke), independent folk music could be generally defined as a narrative art form, a genre convention adhering to the traditional understanding of folk music as a genre rooted in oral tradition and storytelling (see Bohlman).

By applying a practice theory-based approach to the study of indie-folk in everyday life, this article builds upon – and sympathizes with – the work of DeNora. DeNora has convincingly demonstrated how (popular) music is effective in the organization of everyday life, as individuals use music as a tool in guiding daily habits, customs, and routines, and as both a tool and resource in processes of self-understanding and self-definition. DeNora therefore refers to music as a “technology of the self” or, more accurately, as “a key resource for the production of autobiography and the narrative thread of self” (*Music in Everyday Life* 158).

However, in researching music’s role in composing identities, DeNora strongly focuses on “formal” sonic qualities such as rhythms, tunes, melodies, harmonies, and styles. As I discuss in this research, musical narratives also play a crucial role in the shaping of the self. I therefore suggest that narrative should be included in the definition of self-identity as mediated by “semiotic particles” (Negus, qtd. in De Nora, *Music in Everyday Life* 62). The work of DeNora, moreover, has been criticized by Hesmondhalgh (11–57), who argues that her account of music as a resource for aesthetic agency is overly optimistic. According to Hesmondhalgh, people are often fiercely *constrained* in constructing a healthy and coherent sense of self, “not only by social and historical factors ... but also by their own personal biographies” (41). More specifically, Hesmondhalgh suggests that some of the traits of contemporary, capitalist societies are constraining people’s identities, as they are characterized by social inequality, the commodification of self-realization, high levels of ontological insecurity, and the favoring of loose connections over strong ties, hence transforming “the self into an individual enterprise” (43). It is because of the constraining influences of social structure that Hesmondhalgh calls for a critical understanding of the role of music in the regulation and mediation of emotion and self-identity. He does so by incorporating the broader sociological–historical perspective, while at the same time adhering to “the undoubted truth that people do have some freedom to shape their own cultural practices” (43).

By arguing for a broader sociological perspective in studying self-identity, Hesmondhalgh’s work relates to a strand of research within the field of practice theory, in which self-identity is conceived of as the product of both autobiographic storytelling and the rule-like discourses of cultural institutions which provide the conditions, procedures, and resources under which self-identity is mediated and constructed (Holstein and Gubrium, *Self* 96–97). That is to say that the analysis of identity formation centers on the interplay between “discursive practice,” on the one hand, and “discourses-in-practice,” on the other (*Self* 104). Holstein and Gubrium specifically argue that, in the context of postmodernity, self-identity is “increasingly constructed at the intersections, or institutional ‘nodal points,’ of specific communication circuits, whose language games serve to differentiate the modern centered

self into the postmodern condition of communicated *selves*” (*Self* 69; emphasis in original). Pessimistically, this postmodern condition could lead to a “crisis of confidence” in the ability of the self to create a sense of self-constancy and coherence (56). More optimistically, however, narrative practice allows the individual to use the word “self” as a representational horizon and, accordingly, to *strive towards* a sense of self-constancy and coherence; even while *experiencing* self-identity as narratively fragmented (71). In the context of the present study I argue that indie-folk, of which narrative themes are centered on representations of community, connectivity, and belongingness, indeed provide resources in coping with the experience of narrated time as discordant.

The rest of this article is organized in the following way. In the theoretical sections, Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity will be explained, first, because Ricoeur’s theory allows for a layered analysis of the formation of narrative identity formation as a triple mimesis, and, second, because Ricoeur is one of the few theorists who sees the *fictional* story to co-exist with autobiographic storytelling and social interaction as a crucial mechanism in the shaping of the self. Accordingly, Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity will be both criticized and augmented by drawing attention, respectively, to the constraints of his theory in the framework of postmodernity and to an investigation of the role of *musical narratives* in the construction of personal identity. After introducing data and method, the results of this article are presented, which are structured in three parts, focusing on (i) the reception of indie-folk as a private ritual initiated for the purpose of “holding time still” (cf. Negus); (ii) the use of indie-folk as a resource for “reading the ‘me’ in life” (see DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*), and (iii) the role of indie-folk as a mechanism in coping with the experience of narrated time as discordant.

Theorizing Popular Music and Narrative Identity: Ricoeur on the Role of Fiction in the Formation of Personal Identity

Over the past three decades, various scholars working within the humanities and social sciences have emphasized that narrative is both a “tool to examine identity development as well as the vehicle by which identity is constructed” (McLean et al. 166). Recurring themes emerging from the range of academic works in this area (see for overviews Habermas and Bluck; Brockmeier; Wertsch; McAdams; McAdams and McLean) are the beliefs that (i) the self is storied; (ii) narrative identity is age-related and only starts to develop in late adolescence; (iii) narrative identity is intrinsically linked with the process of autobiographical remembering (and forgetting); and (iv) both personal memories and narratives of the self are “psychosocial constructions” (McAdams, “Psychology” 101), meaning that they are both embodied and embedded in social practices. McAdams and McLean therefore define narrative identity as “a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some sense of unity and purpose” (233).

Although it is thus acknowledged that self-narratives are “psychosocial constructions,” there is little empirical evidence on how memories and identities are mediated by popular culture (notable exceptions are studies by Van Dijck, Negus, and Van der Hoeven). As McAdams and McLean also argue, “[F]uture research on the development of narrative identity would benefit from a broader consideration of the role of culture” (237). In an early contribution to the debate on narrative identity, Ricoeur has nonetheless argued for the primary role of fiction in studying people’s identities (see *Time*). It is the fictional narrative,

according to Ricoeur, which opens up an imaginary world of themes, events, characters, scenes, and plots that may come to fuse with events, themes, scenes, and plots unfolding in life. Although much of what Ricoeur has written has become commonplace within the debate on narrative identity, his theoretical insights on the role of fiction in the mediation and formation of narrative identity have been ignored to some extent. As this article deals with the question of how *musical narratives* mediate people's personal memories and identities, it is therefore worth exploring his ideas in further detail.

Crucial to Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, first and foremost, is the link between *time* and *narrative*. In the words of Ricoeur, humans only make sense of "the ordinary experience of time" as it is "refashioned by its passage through the grid of narrative" ("Narrated Time" 338). Drawing from Aristotle's analysis of Greek tragedy (*Poetics*, c. 335 B.C.), he more specifically argues that it is through the operation of "emplotment" (*mythos*) that we are able to cope with the phenomenological experience of time as something that is in constant flux yet durable and remaining ("Life in Quest" 21–25).¹ That is, by constructing chronological stories with plots organized in space and in time – stories, for instance, with a beginning, a middle, and an end – we synthesize the heterogeneous into successive events and are subsequently able to draw a "configuration out of a succession" (22). Narratives, in short, create "concordance" whereas the temporal experience of life as such is messy, fleeting, and chaotic ("discordant"), and thus *lacks* any sense of causal and thematic coherence. Hence Ricoeur's definition of narrative as a "discordant concordance" ("Narrative Identity" 195).

In the construction of narrative identity, it is furthermore possible, according to Ricoeur, to distinguish a threefold mimesis. The first level of mimesis – *mimesis*₁ – is related to what he calls "the pre-narrative qualities" of everyday life ("Mimesis" 142). As Ricoeur suggests, daily life is already *narratively prefigured*, as it consists of a repertory of narrative elements, "which we have always already understood when we enter a fiction" (141). Such elements include actions (instead of mere physical movements), as well as projects, intentions, motives, and reasons. Due to the pre-narrative qualities of the everyday, life, in the words of Ricoeur, could be seen as "*an activity and a desire in search of a narrator*" ("Life" 435; emphasis in original).

The second level of mimesis – *mimesis*₂ – relates to the act of "emplotment." It designates the translation of the experienced pre-narrative qualities of everyday life into explicit narratives, including autobiography and fiction. In Ricoeur's terms, it is the "grasping together" of all the heterogeneous events and existents into an organized plot ("Mimesis" 146). The (life) story should be seen as a "concordant," since all the elements within the plot are connected and there are no elements unrelated to the plot (De Mul 254). However, as Ricoeur suggests, self-narratives are always unstable since "concordance is never without discordance," meaning that time – in the form of disruption (*peripeteia*), excessive pride or self-confidence (*hubris*), or unfortunate mistakes (*hamartia*) – continuously breaks through our attempts to domesticate it ("Life in Quest" 32).

The third and final level of mimesis – *mimesis*₃ – refers to the act of reading, that is, to the moment the reader (or hearer) fuses with the writer of the life-story. According to Ricoeur, fiction plays a crucial role at this level, since the individual often recognizes him-, or herself in the fictional story and accordingly integrates narrative fragments in the evolving life-story. Thus, while *mimesis*₁ refers to the narrative *prefiguration* of everyday life, and *mimesis*₂ to the narrative *configuration* of the life-story, *mimesis*₃ implies the "*reconfiguration* of a life by the way of a narrative" ("Life" 430; emphasis added). The fact that the self-narrative is

mediated by fiction, then, implies that it is to a large degree fiction itself. Not, however, in the sense of referring to narrative identity as a “theorist’s fiction” (Dennett), but because personal identity, in the words of Negus, is “realized as much through the ‘fictional’ as it is through the ‘factual’” (485).

Popular Music and Narrative Identity in the Postmodern Condition

One of the constraints of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity is that he places a premium on *linguistic* narratives, as well as that his notion of “emplotment” is connected to the very typical kind of narrative belonging to the modern Western tradition (De Mul 256). According to De Mul, this kind of narrative has little similarity with other media such as, for example, films, computer games, and music, and therefore he argues to broaden Ricoeur’s theory by incorporating non-linguistic narratives. Moreover, although Ricoeur defines the narrative as a “dynamic whole” or “discordant concordance,” he remains faithful to Aristotle’s notion of the unifying plot and even defines narrative identity as “the primacy of concord over discord” (“Mimesis” 427). As De Mul suggests, postmodernist society is characterized by contingency and heterogeneity, which might result in what Gergen (73–74) has referred to as “multiphrenia” – the “splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments.” In De Mul’s words,

the concordant unifying narrative Ricoeur is talking about is no longer able to express the fragmented identity of the postmodern citizen [and] new narrative structures might be better capable to express and to make livable the new forms of identity (256).

McAdams has remarked that it is a matter of cultural debate how true the postmodern framing of the self *empirically* is. As a narrative psychologist, he contends that “postmodern theorists may have exaggerated the extent to which contemporary Westerners believe they have little control over identity and the extent to which they experience their lives as in constant flux.” He argues that a “totally modular view of selfhood would seem too extreme, given people’s phenomenological experiences of, at minimum, some degree of integration in daily life and given the naturally integrative power of narrative itself” (“Psychology” 116). Lahire, on the contrary, argues that actors in the current cultural condition could be multi-socialized and multi-determined. First, because each individual’s dispositions of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting are potentially the product of a plurality of (heterogeneous) socializing experiences and, second, because individuals nowadays straddle in a plurality of social contexts, and are therefore not always able to make a synthesis of external actions and events, on the one hand, and internal (embodied) dispositions and practices, on the other. A relevant empirical question, according to Lahire, then, is whether or not the habitus is still a unifying principle (aiming to integrate heterogeneous events into a single outlook on society and the self), or that experiencing “out of placeness” or feeling “maladjusted” increases in contemporary societies (“Lahire Plural Actor” x–xi).

Both the work of McAdams and Lahire are in line with the empirical work of Holstein and Gubrium, who argue, as previously discussed, that it is in and through “narrative practice” that people construct their identities. This view on personal identity formation in the postmodern condition grants individuals with narrative agency – that is, in the words of Timmer (41), “the ability to navigate through different discursive communities and assemble their own story of the self.” Like the skeptical postmodernist vision of the self, the work of Holstein and Gubrium implies that self-identity is to a large extent mediated

by discourse. However, as Timmer writes, “Instead of just concluding or simply positing that we are mediated and fractured, the focus is on how we still *do* try to make sense of our selves, *even when* fractured and mediated” (41–42; emphasis in original). Following this line of thought, this article investigates how members of the Dutch indie-folk audience construct their narrative identities *in practice*, as well as on how they use musical narratives as building blocks in composing their identities. This, however, first implies an investigation of the role of *musical* narratives in the formation of narrative identity.

Theories applying narratology to popular music are, however, marginal.² A notable exception is Negus’s study of the relationship between narrative time and the popular song. By extending the work of Ricoeur to an investigation of the role of the popular song in mediating the human comprehension of ordinary time, Negus claims that the popular song functions as a bridging mechanism in constructing personal identities. Popular songs, however, tell stories differently from most novels, plays, and movies. As Negus suggests, this is mostly due to the fact that popular songs generally express a *cyclical* rather than *linear* notion of time. On a narrative level, this is most commonly reflected in the use of repeated choruses or due to storytelling (which reflects everyday language use rather than the construction, in retrospect, of an organized plot); on a more “formal” level, as inherited from folk and blues idioms, through the use of pentatonic, circular tunes. Due to the expression of circular rather than linear time, the popular song thus expresses and narrates our lives differently – that is, more incoherent, less “emplotted.” In the words of Negus,

Songs place events before us in sequences. But they do not necessarily order or establish causal relationships between events. ... Songs enable singers to narrate stories in a way that can emphasize the very fact that life (unlike most novels, movies, and plays) does not seem to have much of a plot most of the time. If life has no plot – if the plot is created through narrativizing the discorded events in our lives – then perhaps songs come closer to articulating how plotless time is experienced. (495)

Throughout his article, Negus provides suggestions for future research on how the popular song might be distinctively constitutive of narrative identity. One suggestion is to define the reception of the popular song as a “contemporary ritual of plotless time” (492). According to Negus, the expression of circular time might enhance the human desire for “gestures and actions that allow cyclical temporal experience” (492). An example Negus provides is the use of the mp3-player in the setting up of a private ceremony in public space initiated for the purpose of “holding time still” (493). Lastly, Negus argues that such ritualistic – and thus to a large extent non-utilitarian – listening behavior might increase in a postmodern world characterized by the experience of accelerating social time due to new communication technologies and consumer marketing (494). “The cyclical popular song and the way it can be endlessly replayed,” he suggests, “offers a ritualistic experience, providing retreat from the anxieties of time compression and speed, a recurrent moment of redemptive eternity or ‘mythical’ time in the present” (494).

Translating Negus’s work to the topic of this study, it should be emphasized, first and foremost, that folk music might be an exception to the rule that the popular song expresses cyclical rather than linear time. This is because country and folk songs are generally structured around a carefully crafted and linear story (Negus 498, 11fn.). Traditionally understood as a genre rooted in oral tradition and storytelling (see Bohlman, Ch. 2), the lyrics of traditional folk songs are “narrative poems,” most notably ballads and epic verses. This refers to a type of poem that “tells a story,” which is told either from a first or third person perspective, and

of which sentences are typically phrased in the past tense (Jahn). However, as Negus argues, even folk ballads and epics are intersected with repeating melodies, rhythms, and refrains, and therefore suggest cyclical time rather than linear teleology.

This is probably even true for contemporary indie-folk songs, which aim to consciously evoke the cyclical nature of ordinary time and of which narratives do not frequently present coherent stories. As mentioned earlier, there are marked differences in aesthetics and institutional politics between the various folk genres. Generally, a distinction can be made between commercial “indie-folk” or “folk-pop” and experimental “free-folk” and related genres such as “freak-folk” and “New Weird America” (van Poecke). Characterizing music at the experimental end of the spectrum is that recordings are not created following the structure of a typical pop song, in which a sense of musical narrative is evoked by using the verse/chorus/bridge form (Encarnacao 21). Instead, artists such as Six Organs of Admittance, Charalambides, and MV & EE define their work as an “unfinished” process, rather than as an end product, and aim to disrupt linear time in their recordings either due to the incorporation of techniques like noise and musical distortion, or by capturing “real” time in songs “by placing premium on the live, the spontaneous, on improvisation, but also on the imperfect” (Encarnacao 21).

All this is not to say that experimental folk rarely advances a narrative. In fact, the music released by acts such as Devendra Banhart, Animal Collective, Midlake, Smog/Bill Callahan, and Joanna Newsom is more closely related to the understanding of folk music as a narrative art form. However, even the narratives produced by these acts are occasionally fractured and fragmented. This is because lyrics consist of slogans, words, and phrases, rather than being well-rounded stories (Animal Collective); because albums consist of a large number of very short, or very extended tracks (Banhart), or because there is a lack of repetition in text due to the use of long strophes (Newsom) that give the impression of through-composition and only occasionally work towards reaching a sense of narrative closure.

On the contrary, indie-folk music at the more commercial end of the spectrum, including acts such as Bon Iver, Grizzly Bear, Fleet Foxes, and Mumford and Sons, is produced by following the more conventional pop/rock album structure and verse/chorus/bridge (or verse–bridge) song structure. Dimensions of albums are conventional, tracks fall within a durational range of 3–5 min, and albums are mastered so that beginnings and endings are clearly delineated (Encarnacao 23). Despite the more conventional structure of recordings, many commercial indie-folk songs, however, are characterized by the performance of fragmentation and discordance. First, because language is often cryptic due to the extensive use of metaphor and polysemy in language; second, because they are thematically often concerned with the evoking of personal memories about discordant life events and related heavy moods and emotions, most notably melancholia and self-pity, through which the singer/protagonist aims to reflect on the experience of time lost.³ Indie-folk songs, in other words, generally represent the primacy of discordance over concordance. Although frequently they represent agentic, and “typically” American stories characterized by the accomplishment of the singer/protagonist to control his or her fate after experiencing disruption (see McAdams, “American Identity” on his notion of the “redemptive self”). This is something she or he manages to achieve through seeking interpersonal connection in the form of friendship and love (see McAdams and McLean 234). The fact that new folk music is “overflowing with affect” (Timmer) allows listeners to (re)connect with feelings and emotions, to regulate heavy moods such as depression and the feeling of loss (of the self),

and to cope with the experience of discordance. Following Lahire, I argue that discordance is an important constraint in constructing a coherent sense of self. Following McAdams and Holstein and Gubrium (see above), I argue that the integrative power of narrative is crucial in *coping* with the experience of discordance. In the sections that follow, I further elaborate on this argument, after first introducing data and method.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger research project investigating the production, reception, and aesthetics of independent folk music in the Netherlands, for which 48 interviews were conducted with musicians ($n = 14$), gatekeepers ($n = 10$), and audience members ($n = 26$).⁴ For the purpose of this article, which exclusively focuses on the *reception* of indie-folk, interviews with gatekeepers and musicians have been left out of the analysis. This brings the sample of interviewees to 26 respondents in the age bracket 20–57, most of whom are living in the larger urban areas in the Netherlands (Randstad and wider area), have similar socioeconomic (upper middle-class) and educational backgrounds (BA and MA degrees in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and arts), and employ similar – creative and occasionally freelance – jobs in education, social healthcare, IT, arts and culture, and journalism. Nineteen of the interviewees were male; seven were female. Although the genre of indie-folk characterizes itself as egalitarian rather than hierarchical (van Poecke and Michael), the sample of respondents is thus consistent with prior research indicating that the genre of folk music seems to be generally male dominated (Badisco) and folk music revivals are “middle class phenomena which play an important role in the formulation and maintenance of a class-based identity” (Livingston 66).

Because of strong similarities in social and educational backgrounds, and due to the fact that the majority of respondents belong to the same age group (the majority of interviewees are in their twenties and thirties), it could be argued that they are part of an “interpretive community” (Holstein and Gubrium, “Self” 70). This makes this research rather limited in scope as it is difficult to generalize beyond the studied community. Another limitation is the focus on the impact of *linguistic* musical narratives on subjectivity and self-identity, whereas indie-folk’s narrative discourse is constructed through multiple media, including lyrics, music, performance, autobiography, prose, and art work (Nicholls). When aiming to apply narratology to popular music these elements should be taken into account, since they too are the interpretive resources we use in shaping the self we live by. However, due to the exploratory character of this research, occasionally pointing to similarities between the narrative themes of indie-folk songs and themes in the interviewees’ self-narratives, it was decided to focus on the role of linguistic narratives. For future research, it would be valuable to further examine homologies between musical narratives and self-narratives, taking into account that self-identity is also constituted on the basis of album cover artwork, visuals, and performances.

Most of the audience members (20 in total) were approached and selected during concerts of indie-folk acts whose music, either by the acts themselves, their record label, or the press, was categorized as “free-folk,” “New Weird America,” “freak-folk,” “indie-folk,” or “folk-pop.”⁵ The remaining six respondents were approached using the snowball-method. Names of some interviewees have been changed in order to protect their privacy. Most of the respondents, however, stated that they did not mind using their own name, and, in fact,

stated that they were not in favor of using pseudonyms. All of the interviews were conducted face to face in a domestic setting, with the exception of two interviews using Skype.

The interviews were conducted following the epistemology of “active interviewing,” referring to a type of interviewing that defines the setting of the academic interview as an “interpretive practice” (Holstein and Gubrium, “Active Interviewing” 113). This means that knowledge and meaning are constructed in the interview encounter itself, and that both interviewer and interviewee are active in the assembling of knowledge and meaning. Rather than merely focusing on the *whats* of the interview – the content of questions and answers – the *interaction between* interviewer and interviewee takes central stage, so that the interview itself becomes a site at which knowledge and meaning is actively produced. As such, it allows the interviewer to provide the interviewee with possible linkages with previous answers, or to bring into play alternative thoughts and considerations (117). Not to direct interviewees into preferred answers and predetermined research agenda’s, but “to explore incompletely articulated aspects of experience” (115). The phenomenon of linking the role of (indie-folk) music to experiencing discordance in the evolving life-story turned out to be an example of such a difficult to articulate aspect of experience, and was brought up by respondents many times. Regarding the *whats* of the interview, questions were structured around the following five topics: (i) musical taste formation; (ii) definitions of indie-folk; (iii) affinity with indie-folk music; (iv) use and understanding of indie-folk music in everyday life, and (v) broader cultural and political practices.

The interviews were transcribed ad verbatim and coded using *Atlas.ti*, enabling me to search for patterns. Analyses were carried out using a combination of “thematic narrative analysis” and “interactional analysis,” the former placing premium on the content of the text (the *whats*), the latter focusing on the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee and therefore also on the *hows* of replying (Riessman 2–5). References to indie-folk albums and specific song titles within the interviews were included in the interview transcripts. Lyrics were accordingly analyzed on possible similarities between musical narratives, on the one hand, and narrative themes in the self-narratives of interviewees, on the other. Analyzing the material first showed that the reception of indie-folk results in ritualistic listening behavior aimed at “holding time still” (cf. Negus); secondly, that respondents use indie-folk narratives as a resource for reading the self (cf. DeNora), and thirdly, that the musical narrative functions as a healing image when experiencing a turning point (*peripeteia*) in the evolving life-story.

The Reception of Indie-folk as Narrative Practice

Holding Time Still: Indie-folk as a Ritual of Plotless Time

DeNora found that people use musical material in their daily lives as both a tool and resource for regulating “the parameters of aesthetic agency” – that is, to shift moods, to manage energy levels, to regulate emotions and feelings, and to get on with daily routines, habits, and customs (*Music in Everyday Life* 53). During the interviews, respondents were accordingly asked to describe how they used popular music – particularly indie-folk music – in their daily lives. This was done by asking them to describe an average day in the week, and what such a day looked like in terms of turning on and/or listening to music during specific moments of the day, from waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night. It turned

out that most of the interviewees listen to multiple styles of popular music throughout the day, and in many cases even explicitly asked to put on quiet or relaxing music during the interview, or to arrange the setting of the interview in a coffee house annex music venue if they preferred not to meet at home. Doing so, they presented themselves as musical omnivores (see Peterson) who were able to connect various styles of popular music to specific moods, energy levels, emotions, feelings, and cognitive states.⁶ The following interview excerpt, taken from the interview with Renske (28, artist, Amsterdam), is exemplary for the way respondents described their weekly days:

When I wake up, I never turn on music, but if I would turn on music, I think I'd go for something quiet, something I can start the day with. It could be Manu Chao, because if I listen to that it makes me cheerful. And if I step on my bike, I'd probably go for Thomas Azier [Dutch electro-pop artist], so I am at work as fast as possible. If I bike back home, probably again Thomas Azier, or at least something like that, and if I return home and start to prepare dinner, probably ... Arcade Fire or Dire Straits. And yes, if I would go out that night, then I would turn on something more up-tempo, probably Mø, a Swedish singer. And I would probably dance to house music, and ... afterwards, before I go to sleep, I would listen to a Bob Dylan song.

(N): Okay... What Bob Dylan song? [Both laugh]

(R): Eh... yeah... good question [long pause]. It could be "Don't Think Twice It's Alright." Yeah, it could be everything. Actually, when it comes to Bob Dylan, it doesn't really matter what I listen from him, I think his voice is very relaxing, as if someone is talking to you.⁷

Here we see how Renske distinguishes between "up-tempo" genres, notably dance and rock, on the one hand, and "relaxing" music (e.g. Bob Dylan-style folk), on the other. The more up-tempo genres are accordingly linked to "integrative practices" (see Schatzki) such as working, studying, traveling, cooking, and eating, while folk music is linked to a more "disinterested" state of mind through which Renske aims to put her mind to rest and to *refuge* the cyclic nature of "within-timeness" (Negus 495).

When focusing particularly on the use of indie-folk in everyday life, analysis indicates that respondents – rather similarly to the everyday use of popular music in general – distinguish between "up-tempo" forms of indie-folk and what they refer to as more "quiet," "laid back," "sad," and "melancholic" indie-folk. In doing so, they indicate using the former type of indie-folk predominantly for the purpose of re-energization or creating "positive" or "uplifting" moods, as well as for the purpose of navigating through more labor-intensive routines such as cleaning the house, preparing for going to work, and studying. The more laid-back indie-folk, on the contrary, is generally listened to when respondents want to seal themselves off from the surrounding world. Renske explained this when asked to elaborate on listening to indie-folk alongside her preferences for electronic and rock music:

I like to pay more attention to it, I guess. ... I like it when I purposely put on that kind of music, to really listen to it. And not that I'm still preoccupied with... that I need to go grocery shopping in the meantime, or that I... I don't know, need to feed the cat, or ... clean the house, or run from room to room in the house, and actually miss the momentum of the music. I like to really sit down on the couch, with a cigarette and a glass of wine, so I can really listen to the music. Similar to reading a book, that's also something you don't really do in between things.

Much like smoking a cigarette, drinking wine, or reading a book, the more laid-back style of indie-folk is used for more laid-back activities so as to create a setting in which respondents can block out disturbing sounds and/or withdraw themselves from daily life. This generally

results in the usage of a different musical setting, so that they are capable of fully grasping the music. That is, while up-tempo music is often played digitally (using mp3) or used as a form of background music, laid-back indie-folk is frequently played on CD and occasionally on vinyl. Moreover, when indie-folk is purposely put on to create a refuge from everyday life, respondents often stated that they intentionally prefer to listen to the entire album, with the songs in the right order as intended by the producer – unlike the potential of skipping through online playlists or using the shuffle modus. Here, we see how “laidback” indie-folk songs, unlike more up-tempo music, are effective devices in setting up a “literary mode” (Alexander 215), which is aimed at escaping the routinized – and occasionally referred to as hectic – nature of ordinary time. As will be emphasized below, this allows respondents to be involved in more reflective processes of priming, mental time traveling, introspection, daydreaming, and for purposes of self-definition.

While up-tempo indie-folk is linked to the regulation of integrative practices, respondents reference “laidback” or “melancholic” indie-folk as a companion to “dispersed practices” (Schatzki 91), most notably to the practices of reflecting, memorizing, daydreaming, explaining, and imagining.⁸ It is used, more accurately, as a vehicle with which they are able to break with the experience of ordinary time as cyclical and repetitive and to “hold time still” (cf. Negus). It is indicated as a state of mind during which respondents, often involuntarily, start to evoke and reflect on past memories and associated heavy emotions. This is explained, for example, by Ronald (41, visual artist/art teacher, De Bilt), who engages in “mental time traveling” (Williamson et al. 270) while listening to the repetitive “free-folk” music of the late Jack Rose (1971–2009) – as if imaginatively riding a train:

Of course, music also takes you on a journey, I believe. Which is not definitive, you know. You can't say that this music is definitive or fixed, but it is still open. Although I think, regarding Jack Rose, that it takes you along with it. That's a different kind of infinity, you know? So to dwell on things, openness, and filling it in yourself. But you can also put the music in motion and go along with it. And also, yeah experience new things.

(N): Do you mean that you take this music with you on a journey? So when you go traveling? ... Or do you see it as a metaphor, to go on a journey?

(R): Well, it sets my mind in motion. And I get the feeling as if my body moves and I stumble upon many things. Things indefinable. Landscapes within you... It could be everything. That you ... have to think involuntarily about vacation, about friendships, about certain memories. ... There's a sort of cadency in that kind of music, maybe that's it. You know, things that repeat themselves, a certain rhythm that seems to work, that almost seems in sync with your own heartbeat. Or with a train. ... The music of Jack Rose, that is what calms me down.

In this excerpt, Ronald compares the experience of listening to folk music with riding a train; a connection similarly made by many other respondents. The spaces of travel – subway stations, train stations, and trains – are returning sites and spaces throughout the interviews. Analysis shows that up-tempo indie-folk is occasionally referenced by respondents as a tool to “freeze” the experience of accelerating social time. As described by Maarten (34, IT specialist, Amsterdam), who explains his experiences of listening to the music of Vampire Weekend:

(M): Some music... if you listen to it, in the train and you look outside, for instance, the world changes.

(N): How does that work in your case?

(M): Ehm... well, yeah. What I occasionally find a bit funny is that when you, for example, walk around in a busy train station or Utrecht Central Station, where people walk by each other and it is very hectic, so to speak. Yeah, then it's like ... you have these movie images, where everything is put in slow motion, that people then... and that you walk among them slowly yourself, something like that.

(N): Do I understand correctly that you are saying that you see yourself like being in a movie?

(M): Yes... not that I think like being in a movie, but it's more like a cinematic experience. ... Like a movie soundtrack that is able to change the tone of the movie.

The music of Vampire Weekend could be characterized by drawing on a range of styles, including American blues, Appalachian folk, and Afro-pop, characterized by the use of repetitive rhythms and pentatonic melodies. According to Maarten, it is this type of music that enables him to transform the experience of accelerating social time – typical of hectic train stations – into something more “tangible.” The cyclical temporal experience enhanced by music allows him, more accurately, to put time in slow motion. This corresponds with Negus's suggestion that the popular song holds the capacity to “hold time still.” Analysis furthermore indicates that laid-back indie-folk is particularly listened to by respondents during the hours spent on traveling (before and after work) – for the purpose of relaxation and letting off steam, as well as for the purpose of “introspection” (DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* 62). As one respondent metaphorically explained, “to visualize your life as a kind of train ride” (Rolof, 30, health care worker, Utrecht). The more emotionally-laden and narrative indie-folk, then, seems to be effective in the process of “priming,” when music brings back waves of emotions and past relationships (DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* 65). As Maarten explains, he often starts to feel “sad” and “melancholic” when listening to emotionally-laden indie-folk in the style of acts such as Animal Collective and Bright Eyes, mainly because he gets overwhelmed with what he refers to as “whiffs of memories.” A similar experience is described by Jacco (35, freelance journalist, Utrecht), when explaining what occasionally happens to him while listening to the music of Animal Collective:

Real folk music just... that can be seen as songs with protagonists who come across something, those are well-rounded stories. In the case of Animal Collective, it's more like a feeling, and for example a sentence like “open up your mouth.” That's on *Merriweather Post Pavilion*. Or ehm... “support your brother.” I think at least in the case of “Brother Sport,” those are terms like, yeah... in one way or the other, they stick. And I know that... For fun, I one time searched for what those people [the musicians] say about the album, and they say it's an album about family, family relationships, having children, et cetera, it's a sort of theme.

(N): And you are saying that sometimes you need to think about those phrases?

(J): Yeah, or think about them. ... They pop into my mind.

(N): During what kind of moments does that happen?

(J): Yeah, I don't know... probably when I... just walk around. ... When I'm not doing something very concrete, when I walk staring in front of me, or when I'm on my way, sitting in the train or something. ... And I don't have other music with me. ... Sometimes then a certain melody or phrase from a song appears, because they are good at inventing such slogans, a sort of calling out a sentence, and repeating it extensively.

In this excerpt, we see how Jacco first distinguishes between “real folk music” (which is concerned with “well-rounded stories”) and contemporary folk music, which is about “feelings,” “slogans,” and “sentences.” In the song “Brother Sport,” to which Jacco refers, the extensive

and repetitive use of slogans such as “support your brother” and “open up your throat” results in lyrics that are fragmentary and cryptic yet suggest the story of family members coping with the loss of the father. From the perspective of Jacco, this results in an example of “involuntary musical imagery” (INMI), namely when he indicates that narrative fragments involuntarily pop into his mind when sitting in the train.⁹ It has been argued that in circumstances of INMI people tend to use musical imagery as a memory trigger, that is, as a resource to associate music with past memories (Williamson et al. 270–71). This seems to be the case with Jacco, as he links the musical exposure with his experience of contemplating family relationships and future expectations such as “having children.” Thus, although this research also shows that respondents frequently put on music to *voluntarily* recall and relive past memories – particularly self-defining memories about discordant life events (see below) – the above indicates that autobiographical memory is often evoked on a less utilitarian level.

Reading Yourself in Indie-folk, or, Seeing the Bigger Picture in the Tiny

Similar to how DeNora describes the intention of people to use music as a resource to identify “the me in life” (*Music in Everyday Life* 69), analysis shows that respondents use indie-folk as a mirror of the self. Typical of indie-folk as a narrative art form, however, respondents explained that they recognized themselves in the *lyrics* as much as in song structures. Exemplary in this respect is how Robert (23, University College student, Utrecht) explains his love for the music of the American indie-rock/indie-folk band Midlake, particularly for their second studio-album, *The Trials of Van Occupanther* (2006). Revolving around the story of a somewhat eccentric scientist named Van Occupanther, this album is a typical example of one of the core conventions of the indie-folk genre, in which acts such as Midlake have redefined the album “as an autonomous text or narrative, rather than simply a collection of songs ... linked only by the time and place of their production” (Hibbett 59). In the following interview excerpt, we see how Robert explains how he read himself in the lyrics of the title song:

There is this beautiful excerpt, for example, that says ... “Talking with *the* friends.” With an emphasis on *the*. That is what the lead singer says, namely talking with *the* friends, not with *someone’s* friends, but with *the* friends. ... It’s actually about ... his wife, so “My wife was talking with *the* friends.” So he is talking about how his wife is talking with *the* friends. But he is not talking about *his* friends, or *her* friends, but *the* friends. And it’s not really explicit what the relationship is between *the* friends and his wife or himself. But because he doesn’t use “his” or “my” friends, or “her” friends or “our” friends, he creates an enormous distance between himself and the friends. And that is what makes him sort of an outsider.

(N): Yes, and ... is that... Is the role of observing, in this case the singer of Midlake, is that... something that is important to you when listening to music?

(R): Yes, yes. First of all, I recognize myself a little bit in the role of observing. ... And identification in music is something that I find really beautiful, which for me is a way to discover my own position, to analyze myself. And to talk about my own emotions, or to talk about them differently, or to recognize – this is what I recognize in myself, and to learn more about myself.

Later in the interview, Robert refers to one of the song lines: “Let me not be too consumed with this world.” Similarly to the way other respondents used indie-folk to “hold time still,”

this phrase has special meaning for Robert as it enables him to “freeze” time. Moreover, it enables him to reflect upon his position *in* the world rather than being fully consumed *by* the world – a world which is defined by Robert as “demanding,” “pressing,” and “media-saturated.” Moreover, Robert goes deeper into the subject of how he uses music as a tool for self-understanding and self-definition, which he does not simply define as a form of mimicking – using music as a *mirror* of the self – but rather as a “dialectical process” between his own personality on the one hand and his preferences for indie-folk on the other:

It's dialectic in the sense that, also my own identity, my personality has a certain preference. ... Yes, I have a certain identity and music has a certain identity, and those two can match and affect each other. And that is why I recognize certain things in folk music. ... If I must choose between those two and say which one is the most important, I think it's my own identity, my own “I,” my own way of saying and doing things, and that folk is something that fits to that. But the other way around, it is also... to some extent they affect each other. Folk music also reinforces, as mentioned, new ways of looking at the world. Certain phrases which are inspirational. And that too can change the way I see myself, it can change myself.

From an emic perspective, Robert explains how, by reflecting upon the lyrics of an indie-folk song, he is not only capable of *reading* but also of *changing* himself. From an etic perspective, this links to Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, in which he describes the formation of narrative identity, as discussed above, as a dialectical process during which the storyteller comes to a fuller understanding of himself or herself through the process of “reconfiguration” (*mimesis*₃), “the intersection of the world unfolded by fiction and the world wherein actual action unfolds” (“Mimesis” 148).¹⁰ In the two interview fragments, we witness such an aesthetic moment, when Robert points out that he comes to a more global and thematic understanding of himself through the fictional. That is, when he reads himself in the lyrics and defines himself as someone who takes time to see the bigger picture in the tiny.

Rock Bottom Riser, or, the Indie-folk Song as Healing Image

When asking respondents what it is that draws them to indie-folk music, I found that they most frequently mention the lyrics. Some of the respondents even explicitly draw a comparison between listening to indie-folk and reading a book or novella (see above), and quite a few of them characterized themselves as being “text-oriented.” This corresponds with an analysis of the broader musical and artistic preferences of the interviewees, which indicates that they actively distinguish from electronic music, and they are often avid readers and (art house/indie) film enthusiasts, and almost without exception do not watch television, aside from “quality” drama series and documentaries – that is, the more mimetic and narrative art forms (see Van Poecke, “Pure Taste”).

With reference to indie-folk, respondents frequently stated that they are particularly drawn to the genre because the lyrics are “poetical,” “metaphorical,” “cryptic,” or a bit “vague,” and due to their “openness” create space for imagination and interpretation – that is, for the projection of personal “facts” into the imaginary world that unfolds in and through the music. More accurately, most of the respondents explained how indie-folk narratives often produce “poetic images,” and how such images accordingly instigate a process of what Ricoeur calls “iconic augmentation” – the ability of creative language to *augment* reality so as to invite the reader (or hearer) to dwell into the creator's story world and to *participate* in the process of constructing meaning (“Function” 123).

Zooming in on this process, it can be concluded that respondents frequently use poetic images in coping with “nuclear episodes” in life (McAdams, *Review* 108), episodes during which the concordant self-narrative is abruptly disrupted (*peripeteia*) and needs to be recomposed. As can be deduced from the interviewees’ narratives, respondents frequently experienced depressive times throughout their lives during which lyrics – revolving around similar memories from the part of the singer/songwriters – were of particular significance. Respondents indicated that they have incorporated fragments from those musical memories into their own personal memories and biographies, thereby becoming integrated within their “embodied narrative habitus” (Smith 395).

Analyzing the interviewees’ narratives on “nuclear episodes” provides information both on *how* musical memories mediate respondents’ autobiographies, as well as on how they have used such narratives in coping with discordance. The following excerpt taken from the interview with Ronald, during which he talks about the music of Bill Callahan/Smog, first provides information on the *hows* of autobiographical remembering:

- (N): You were just saying: “The images that I get from his music, or the metaphors, they really stick to me.” Could you maybe explain how that works?
- (R): ... Yeah, he makes a sort of still lives, I guess, a number of elements he puts together, and which is really well fabricated. ... If it’s just right, it remains. He doesn’t pull out too much, and he just tells enough, which forms an image, or something like that. Now that I think about it, but I can’t really explain it.
- (N): No, no, but that’s also a hard thing to do... But can you try to explain what kind of images you get from his music?
- (R): Well, I think they are healing images. That I can place myself. ... Not that I can place myself within his memories, but that he settles in my memories, that it becomes part of my memories. That’s it. They almost become my own memories. Yeah, I think that’s it. You have experienced all kinds of things throughout your life, and that’s becoming part of it then. ... For example like... talking about your grandfather or grandmother. That you memorize lots of things you saw on photographs. And those become memories you may not have even experienced yourself. It’s the same with music. At least with Bill Callahan I experience it like that. Sometimes it’s inside your head all of a sudden. Yeah, that’s kind of funny.

Here, we see how Ronald first explains how the song is able to produce a “still life,” and, second, how his memories are blurred by the musical memories on which the song is based. Furthermore, Ronald interprets the poetic images he distills from the songs as “healing images,” thereby referring to the fact that they are not only capable of – involuntarily – evoking the past but also to “heal” personal and somewhat painful memories about the past. Pushing the interview a bit further by asking Ronald to provide examples of such “healing images,” he refers to the Bill Callahan song “Rock Bottom Riser” (2005), a song telling the story of someone who finds himself “rock bottom” but is saved by some of his family members from “drowning” in his own self-destructive behavior. For Ronald, the song has produced a “healing image” of the importance of family members during depression. In so doing, Ronald refers to some of the major narrative themes in indie-folk music referred to above. Despite the fact that indie-folk songs, as discussed, are agentic stories narrating the accomplishment of a protagonist controlling his fate during discordance, they often emphasize intimacy, belongingness, and community (McAdams and McLean 234). From the part of the hearer, the emphasizing of interpersonal connection through friendship and

love seems to result in the visualization of a “redemptive self” (see McAdams, “American Identity”), providing agency in times of discordance and ontological insecurity.

Alongside Ronald’s interpretation of the way musical memories are capable of mediating personal memories and autobiography, analysis provided many more accounts of album titles, songs, song titles, and slogans, phrases, or even words that were linked to similar memories about the experience of discordance. These episodes included both high points, low points, and turning points, and were linked to memories ranging from the birth of a child to the loss of a friend or parent, the illness of parents, the breaking up with a boy or girlfriend, marital separation, or, as Renske explained, to the moving of one place – in life – to the other:

Particularly I like ... songs through which you start to experience something. ... That it brings you back to a certain period in life, when you ... when something happened and it ... makes you think about that, a certain memory.

(N): Could you maybe give an example, of music... which brings back memories of something beautiful... or less beautiful?

(R): Yeah, there is this song “Sweet Carolina” [“Oh My Sweet Carolina”] that I really like. ... That particular song, it triggers something, but actually the entire album [*Heartbreaker*] does the same thing.

(N): And could you maybe explain which memories you link to that album?

(R): ... It relates to the moment that I studied at Art Academy, and then I left Utrecht, and I ... I was about to say goodbye to that piece of Utrecht and was going to live somewhere else. So that was very typical of that particular moment in my life, which ultimately disappeared. ... I regretted it a lot that that moment was over. So that I needed to take a new step in life, and this album was really emblematic for that particular part of life that I enjoyed so much. Thus, it is really typical of that really joyful period, which has turned out to be a bit sad because I had to say goodbye.

The song “Oh My Sweet Carolina” (2000) by alternative country and indie-folk musician Ryan Adams tells the story of a protagonist traveling from one place to the other, while he yearns to return back home. In the interview excerpt, we see how Renske links the album and the particular song to a turning point in life, not just because the music was there, but rather because there are similarities between the narrative theme of the song and a theme in Renske’s evolving life-story. Now the song contains meaning, as it triggers memories related to “that really joyful period in life, which has turned out to be a bit sad.” This means that the song has become melancholy-impregnated, for it relates to a self-defining memory during which “something” – a place in life, friends, relationships, and with that, a part of the self – was lost.¹¹ The song has become a “device of prosthetic biography” (DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* 66) and is voluntarily played by Renske when she is searching for time lost. Additionally, the narrative, revolving around the theme of moving on in life (and passing through time), has produced a healing image referencing the reassuring feeling of homecoming.

Conclusions/Discussion

In this article I have investigated the role of indie-folk in the construction of personal identity among members of the Dutch indie-folk audience. It shows that musical narratives

are crucial tools and building blocks in the formation of personal identity. Respondents indicate that they have incorporated “snippets” of musical narratives into their evolving life-stories. This could be seen as a realist illustration of how people incrementally spin their “narrative thread of self” (DeNora), a process characterized by the mediation of the factual by the fictional. On the level of everyday life (*mimesis*₁), it turned out that indie-folk, much like other types of music, is effective in the organization of everyday life, that is, in the regulation of routines, habits, and customs; in the changing and regulation of moods and energy levels, and in terms of connecting with emotions and feelings. This article, however, also showed that musical objects vary in the aesthetic agency they provide actors in everyday life (cf. DeNora). While more up-tempo forms of music have turned out to be “devices” that allow for the *regulation* and *structuring* of routinized behavior and associated affects (cf. Ricoeur on everyday life’s “pre-narrative qualities”), more “laidback” genres, like indie-folk, allow for the creation of a “literary mode” with which actors are able to *escape* the routinized – and frequently framed as “hectic” and “time-consuming” – nature of ordinary time. On the level of the reconfiguration of the life-story (*mimesis*₃), it followed that fragments of indie-folk songs afforded respondents to memorize episodic particulars from the life course, to include narratives of indie-folk songs in autobiographical memory, and to use lyrical fragments for purposes of self-understanding and self-definition. These are processes, nonetheless, which have turned out to be highly private, involuntary, and mediated by discourse, rather than exclusively arising out of social input. This suggests that self-identity is and remains a form of interpretive practice, although it increasingly arises out of the multiple discourses, including those produced by American pop culture, that are at play in everyday life (cf. Holstein and Gubrium).

This research furthermore shows, as discussed, that the current social condition is frequently framed by respondents as “hectic,” “pressing,” “time consuming,” and “media-saturated.” This seems to suggest that postmodernity functions as a background framework in and against which respondents situate themselves. Indie-folk songs, characterized by the expression of cyclical time and a “laidback” atmosphere, have turned out to be effective devices in coping with the experience of accelerating social time, as they allow respondents to get into a literary mode, which accordingly allows them to be involved in processes of priming and mental time traveling and, hence, to momentarily step “outside” of everyday life. The reception of indie-folk repeatedly takes the form of ritualistic listening behavior during which respondents aimed to “hold time still” (cf. Negus). The “freezing” of time is linked with the need of respondents to voluntarily evoke and relive past, self-defining memories, but is primarily associated with the desire to momentarily escape from the repetitive nature of daily existence – that is, to de-accelerate the experience of ordinary time as repetitive, accelerating, and consuming.

Indie-folk, on the one hand, could be seen as a *product of postmodernity*. The genre is eclectic and intertextual as it builds upon aesthetics “borrowed” from existing canonized genres within popular music, because lyrics mostly revolve around coping with the experience of disruption in the life-story, and because it has incorporated “postmodern” sonic qualities such as noise, distortion, and narrative fragmentation – all of which suggest the primacy of discordance over concordance. This is also partly true for the self-narratives of respondents, since these narratives, too, are characterized by a movement oscillating between temporal narrative coherence and disruption. This indicates that the identities of respondents are constrained by their own autobiographies, which are marked by the

frequent experience of and coping with psychic difficulties due to the occurrence of nuclear life episodes in the evolving life-story (cf. Hesmondhalgh).

Rather than “merely” being something that occurs in the life-story, the experience of discordance, however, also seems to be indicative of how the social “dwells” in the singular accounts of individuals (cf. Lahire). As this research has focused on researching the formation of narrative identity among one particular interpretive community; more specifically, on how members of this community use the discourse of indie-folk music to construct their narrative identities, it is beyond the scope of this article to draw steady conclusions about whether identities are plural and/or how individuals cope with the experience of a fragmentation of the self. Nonetheless, this research did occasionally point to the fact that feeling “lost” or “out of place,” and the subsequent search for a new “fit” in society, occurred due to geographical and occupational mobility. These are occasions that might be particularly experienced by individuals employing flexible and therefore precarious jobs, which quite a few respondents that took part in this research do.

In conclusion, this leaves the impression that the construction of a more or less coherent sense of self is experienced by respondents as highly challenging. This is not only due to “internal” factors such as experiencing psychic difficulties after the occurrence of discordance, but also due to the struggle with “external” social factors such as accelerating social time and the experience of “cultural shocks” (Lahire x) as a result of social factors such as, most notably, occupational and geographical mobility. At the same time, however, this research has indicated that indie-folk narratives are capable of producing “healing images,” which respondents have used as a coping mechanism in the struggle with discordance. This indicates the integrative power of narrative, enabling the individual to create a feeling of coherence and self-constancy.

Lyrics of indie-folk songs are frequently “overflowing with sentiment,” most notably with heavy emotions such as sadness and melancholia. It seems that the “melancholic structure of feeling” (Timmer 44) characterizing indie-folk music allowed respondents to cope with traumatic experiences and a subsequent loss of the self. Particularly because many indie-folk songs revolve around themes of communion, connectivity, and the intimacy of family and friendship, they allow for a more relational understanding of subjectivity and self-identity (cf. Gergen; Timmer). That is to say, that subjectivity, within indie-folk, is presented as something that arises out of social interaction, as a “product” of interpersonal and intimate relationships. This interpersonal sense of subjectivity hence allows hearers to visualize a more “modern” version of self-identity formation, which suggests that indie-folk, apart from being a product of postmodernity, also is a *response to postmodernism*. Although there is no *explicit* critique of postmodernism in indie-folk discourse, the emphasis on affect and intersubjectivity is very different from a postmodern discourse in which irony has been celebrated and the subject is generally framed as a “mere node within self-governing and semiotic systems” (Best and Kellner 284). It could be argued, then, that the formation of narrative identity among members of the Dutch indie-folk audience is the product of two related interpretive resources (Holstein and Gubrium 71) – of both a postmodern struggle with discordance and a modern desire for constructing a coherent and stable notion of the self over time.

Notes

1. This is what Ricoeur refers to as his first aporetic of time, namely that there is a gulf between objective (cosmic) and phenomenological (lived) time – which can only be bridged by narrative. It exists next to two other aporetics, namely (i) that we experience time as divided between past, present, and future yet can only access the past and anticipate the future in the here and now (this is what Ricoeur calls “the paradox of the triple present”), and (ii) that narrative or narrated time is a “discordant-concordance,” by which Ricoeur refers to the quality of time to continuously break through our attempts to domesticate it (“Narrated Time” 340–41).
2. One of the reasons is that theorists working within the field of musicology have argued that narratives and music are so fundamentally different that it is highly contested whether music can be narrative at all (see Meelberg for a theoretical overview). Nattiez, for instance, has claimed that, due to the ontological differences between music and stories, affording an interpretive grid consisting of *sounds* and *words*, respectively, “music is not a narrative and that any description of its formal structure in terms of narrativity is nothing but superfluous metaphor” (257). Nattiez’s formalistic account of music as a non-narrative art form, however, is purely based on instrumental music. Nicholls therefore suggests that instead of focusing on Western art music solely, narrative theory should be applied to popular music too, since the popular song almost by definition has a narrative component in the musical setting (300–01).
3. Fonarow argues that the genre of “indie” is part of the ongoing historical narrative of Purito–Romanticism, as it is characterized, for example, by a fetishizing of sensibility, pathos, and melancholia (77–78). This is particularly true for indie-folk, of which narratives, as discussed in this article, revolve around expressions of discordance and related heavy moods and emotions, most notably melancholia.
4. The project is titled *Authenticity Revisited: The Production, Distribution, and Consumption of Independent Folk Music in the Netherlands (1993–present)* and is funded by the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands.
5. Audience members were approached and selected during the concerts of Mumford and Sons (Ziggo Dome, Amsterdam, March 30, 2013), Woods (Paradiso, Amsterdam, May 20, 2013), Animal Collective (Melkweg, Amsterdam, May 27, 2013), CocoRosie (Tivoli, Utrecht, May 29, 2013), The Lumineers (Heineken Music Hall, Amsterdam, Nov. 18, 2013), and during the yearly Incubate festival (Tilburg, the Netherlands, Sept. 16–22, 2013) and the yearly Le Guess Who festival (Utrecht, the Netherlands, Nov. 28–Dec. 1, 2013).
6. Drawing from Goldberg, Hannan and Kovács, the indie-folk aficionados interviewed for this study could be best defined as “poly-purists:” cultural consumers who sample broadly, but who – on the basis of their aesthetic disposition – are able to assess cultural objects on the basis of their “categorical purity.” This makes the consumption of indie-folk a performance of social distinction, particularly of a community that is part of the cultural upper-middle class in society, drawing boundaries around overt commercialism, snobbism, and populism (see van Poecke on the consumption of indie-folk as a performance of “poly-purism”).
7. Interviews were originally in Dutch; excerpts have been translated by the author.
8. Schatzki defines “integrative practices” as “the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life” (98). They are contrasted with “dispersed practices” including “describing, ordering, following rules, explaining, questioning, reporting, examining, and imagining” (91). According to Schatzki, dispersed practices can take place within and across different domains of everyday life.
9. The phenomenon of “involuntary musical imagery” (INMI) refers to “the experience of a piece of music that comes unbidden into the mind and repeats outside of conscious control” (Williamson et al. 259).
10. In cultural anthropology, and related disciplines such as folkloric studies, the distinction between etics and emics refers to the “application of our theories in analyzing others’ behavior and institutions” (etics) and “the interpretation of others’ worlds as they appear to them” (Jardine).

11. Independent of its clinical definition as a depressive disorder (DSM V), melancholia could be defined as a mental and emotional condition associated with the feeling of “loss.” Typical to melancholia, however, is the feature of not knowing exactly what has been lost and what exactly causes the sadness and “grief.” It is this characteristic that sets melancholia apart from mourning, where the “object” of loss can be explicitly identified and consciously evoked (Clewell). Moreover, what characterizes melancholia, in comparison to grief, is that the sadness or grief is directed to the self. Since people invest their libidinal energy in objects and persons throughout their lifetime, the *loss* of such an object or person automatically results in a loss of the self (see Koopman). The feeling of “loss of the self,” after the loss of a loved person, is clearly expressed by respondents in this study.

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Discography and Other Media

- Motto of the paper: M. Ward, "Hold Time" (*Hold Time*, Merge / 4AD, 2009)
- Midlake, *The Trials of Van Occupanther* (Bella Union Records, 2006)
- Ryan Adams, *Heartbreaker*, Bloodshot Records, 2000.
- Smog, *A River Ain't too Much to Love*, Domino Records, 2005.
- "What Might have been Lost." "The Wolves" by Bon Iver (For Emma, Forever Ago, Jagjaguwar, 2007).