

Please cite the Published Version

Miyake, E (2021) Mancunian Pride: The City, Lesbian and Gay Culture, and Local Music-Making Practices. In: Music and Ideas of North. Routledge. ISBN 978-1-4094-2291-4

Publisher: Routledge

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621012/>

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Chapter 10

Mancunian Pride: The City, Lesbian and Gay Culture,
and Local Music-Making Practices

Esperanza Miyake

Foreword

It was back in 2003 that I first began to investigate the relationship between music and sexuality. At the time I was living in Manchester, the ideal geographical nexus to explore such an intersection – both a ‘musical city’ of the North, rivalling other cities like Liverpool and its ‘Merseybeat’, and the ‘Queer Capital of the North’. More than a decade later, having left Manchester only to come back again, I find myself revisiting some of my old ethnographic haunts. Much has changed across the board since then. Music has migrated mostly into the Cloud, with digital platforms and technologies changing the ways we produce and consume (not to mention presume) music both individually and together. The socio-cultural, legal, civil, and political landscape for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) community in the UK has changed significantly, too,¹ with the establishment of a

¹ There is a long-standing theoretical and political debate within and beyond academia concerning the scholarly and popular use of the terms ‘LGBT’ and ‘queer’. I wish to avoid reductionist explanations of a complex discussion, here, but in brief, the former term is usually more concerned with identity politics and civil rights, whilst the latter attempts to challenge the question of identity altogether: in this article, I use ‘queer’ when I am referring to relevant ideas drawn from queer

new offence of ‘incitement to homophobic hatred’ in the UK (2010), the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act in England and Wales (2013), the election of a number of openly gay politicians throughout the UK, and even the appearance of Prince William on the front of gay magazine, *Attitude* (2016). Manchester itself has been part of a major project involving the decentralisation and regionalisation of power through the efforts of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), leading to the 2014 Devolution Agreement. More recently these social changes have become embroiled within even broader national transformations relating to citizenship and civil rights through ongoing political processes like Brexit.

And yet, walking through Canal Street once again this year, I was struck by how much it has *not* changed and that there is still a core ‘feeling’ in Manchester; a Mancunian *something* that years of political, economic, social, and cultural change cannot seem to erase. The following discussion is part of the ethnographic research I undertook between 2004 and 2006, so it is a ‘snapshot’ of musical and queer Manchester at the time, and as such, should be interpreted within its historical context. Having said this, whilst the discussion may capture a specific Mancunian moment, I also think it touches upon that indelible quality that I suspect Manchester will always have: its sense of pride. This chapter,

theory and when referring to a primary source that uses this term. However, I also use the term ‘LGBT’ for two reasons: first, to respect Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus’s identification with the term LGBT (after all, it is part of the group’s name); and second, where ‘LGBT’ is a historically more accurate term to use when referring to life before the prominent Queer movement in the late 1990s onwards.

therefore, presents an analysis of how music and sexuality were connected in Manchester during the mid-2000s, whilst also demonstrating the continuing significance of pride and place in this great capital of the North.

Music and Sexuality: What was it all About?

Theoretically, there has been a tendency in feminist understandings of music,² queer musicology,³ popular music studies,⁴ and subcultural studies⁵ to conceptualise music and

² After Susan McClary's seminal *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis Minn., 1991), a series of feminist anthologies on music and gender and/or sexuality followed: Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, eds, *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge, 1994); Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds, *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana Ill., 1994); Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, eds, *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick NJ, 1996); Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, eds, *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity and Music* (Zurich, 1999).

³ Queer musicology emerged when musicologists extended the lines of feminist enquiry into music to include issues of sexuality, sexual identity, and queer politics alongside gender. For example, Ruth A. Solie, ed., *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley Calif., 1993); Phillip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary Thomas, eds, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York and London, 1994); and Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, eds, *Queering the Popular Pitch* (New York and London, 2006).

⁴ See, in particular, Peter Webb, 'Interrogating the Production of Sound and Place: The Bristol Phenomenon, from Lunatic Fringe to Worldwide Massive', in *Music, Space and Place: Popular*

sexuality through two main interrelated ways: a) gendered performances and/or gendered readings of music where there is a conflation between the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’; and b) an emphasis on *sex*-uality, where the relationship between music and sexuality involves an erotic or eroticised exchange. I wanted to move away from these in order to explore music and sexuality in an *everyday* life context, particularly beyond the eroticised field.

Initially, my fieldwork began in the gay nightclubs and bars that line Canal Street. However, these being overtly eroticised places, any interviews conducted there inevitably took on a sexualised tone, which was specifically what I was trying to avoid. By chance, I came across and consequently joined the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus (MLGC) as a singer in February 2004. Through qualitative interviews and participant observation, I thus began my ethnographic research with the MLGC in 2004 and continued until I left the

Music and Cultural Identity, eds Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins (Aldershot, 2004), 66–85; Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford, 1998); Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York, 2000); and Sheila Whiteley, ed., *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London, 1997), esp. Will Straw, ‘Sizing up the Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture’, 3–16; and Will Straw, ‘Communities and Scenes in Popular Music’, in *Subcultures Reader*, eds Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London, 1997), 494–505.

⁵ Angela McRobbie, *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion, and Popular Music* (London, 1999); Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy and Vitality* (London, 1999); Mavis Bayton, ‘Women and the Electric Guitar’, in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley, 37–49.

chorus and Manchester in December 2006.⁶

Methodology

Qualitative Interviews

When I joined MLGC in February 2004, the Choir officially amounted to approximately 60 members (25 women, 35 men),⁷ aged between 25 and 70 years old, and from Manchester or the areas around. Members paid either the full (employed) or concessions (unemployed/receiving benefits/old-age pensioner/student) rate each week, although by 2006, the Treasurer was insisting on a monthly standing-order system. No auditions were required and, in general, the Choir maintained an ‘open for all’ policy. By the time I left in December 2006, official membership was over 160 people, with a similar gender ratio, although the age range had widened to between 18 and 80 years old.

I interviewed 14 ‘core’ members (9 women, 5 men), that is, those who attended rehearsals and performances regularly, between the ages of 25 and 65: Tinny, Clara, Katya,

⁶ For other publications arising from this project, see my ‘Coming Out with Music: From Gay Subculture to Queer Culture’, *Manchester Region History Review Journal*, 25 (2014), 107–12, and ‘Understanding Music and Sexuality through Ethnography: Dialogues between Queer Studies and Music’, *Transposition: Musique et Sciences Sociales*, 3 (2013) <<http://transposition.revues.org/150>> [accessed 13 June 2017].

⁷ There are no exact figures and records from the time, possibly because the Choir was not as organised as it later became, but people (including myself) recall ‘60’ being the official number back then.

Katherine, Eleanor, Denise, Kristen, June, Charlotte, Jed, David, Chongwei, John, and Jeff.⁸

In addition to these, I had many informal conversations with other participants. During the recorded interviews, we discussed a wide range of topics in relation to music, the Choir, and their lives – from their favourite types of music, thoughts on events and performances the Choir had taken part in, their relationship to other choir members, and their reasons for joining the Choir, to their earliest memories of music. Whilst I always made the effort to talk to as many members as possible, the 14 people I approached specifically with an interview in mind were those who had already been quite vocal about their opinions on music, the Choir, LGBT issues, and so on. Most of my interviewees were delighted and proud when asked, and even more so when I informed them it would be a *recorded* interview. This was particularly the case with Chongwei, who wanted to use the opportunity of a recorded interview to have the Choir's history and foundations chronicled and 'on record' in some form. I was even contacted by a member after I had left the Choir about the possibility of using these interviews for archival purposes. For ethical reasons, I declined, but such a response demonstrates the historical value of such oral narratives to those who participated.

Participant Observation

⁸ Quotations in this article are taken from my transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews, and are used gratefully with full permission. Names have been changed where requested, although some participants wished me to use their real names for reasons relating to personal pride.

As a queer ethnographic chorister,⁹ I juggled and tried to integrate three different kinds of participation: as a member of the local LGBT community in Manchester, as a researcher, and as a chorister.¹⁰ Members were very supportive about being ‘observed academically’, indeed even treating it as a matter of pride. My project became *their* project too: ‘so, how’s the writing going – are we there yet?’. Musically, my participation started as a soprano, and by summer of 2004 I had joined the Committee as a ‘Soprano Representative’, which meant I was also part of the Choir’s administrative and policy-making body. I was concerned initially about ‘changing the nature of the field’ in this role, but having discussed the issue with the Committee and the members of the Choir at the time, it was decided that I should join the Committee regardless as a queer chorister: I was truly a part of the day-to-day running of the Choir, because I cared both for the music and for the LGBT issues (safety,

⁹ Exploring gay and lesbian choruses around the US, Paul Attinello employed quantitative research methods (questionnaires); see his ‘Authority and Freedom: Toward a Sociology of Gay Choruses’, in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, eds Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, 2nd edn (New York and Abingdon, 2006), 315–46. See, also, Shannon D. Henderson’s and Stan H. Hodges’s phenomenological approach to gay choirs in cities in Oklahoma, in their ‘Music, Song, and the Creation of Community and Community Spirit by a Gay Subculture’, *Sociological Spectrum: Mid-South Sociological Association*, 27/1 (2006), 57–80.

¹⁰ All members knew beforehand about my research through an email I sent to the Chair straight after my first attendance, and I was particularly careful to let them know about my sexual orientation and commitment to the LGBT community, my love for music, and how these were important factors behind my research.

activism, and so on) that the Choir represented. In 2005, I moved to the tenor section. The change in musical positioning meant I gained insight into a different micro-social network defined by vocal register: I was able to talk to more gay men and gain their perspectives on the Choir.

One final note regarding a method I considered, but ultimately did *not* undertake: a comparative study between the MLGC and either a straight choir (to which members such as Clara or David alluded) or another LGBT choir (Birmingham, Leeds, and London all have well-established LGBT choirs). I concentrated solely on the MLGC because at the time – and even today – it was the only queer choir in Manchester (hence it became choral queer representatives for Manchester at both local and national music events). The accounts and general ethos of the MLGC were so deeply rooted in Manchester that I felt the need to study this specific relationship in depth – between the Choir as an LGBT body and the city with which they so strongly identified. Manchester, as a place, was in fact one of the strongest themes to arise from my fieldwork. Despite having gained international success since I left back in 2006,¹¹ the MLGC marked its 10th Anniversary in 2011 by turning back

¹¹ The Choir's first international engagement came in 2006, at EuroPride in Trafalgar Square, London. Bouncing off the success of this event, the MLGC went on to win 3rd and then 2nd Place at the World OutGames Chorus Competition in 2006 (Montreal) and 2009 (Copenhagen) respectively. The MLGC now organises its own independent events and performances, and sings at local, national, and international events in major cities: Berlin, where it held a joint concert with a German choir and recorded its first CD in 2008; London, in a West-End stage debut at Trafalgar Studios, the same year; and Paris, as performing guests at Paris Pride in June 2010. More recently

to its roots: ‘instead of going abroad’, the website records, ‘we chose to celebrate this landmark by bringing our music back home to Manchester’. A look at the events list on its website indicates its current activities (in 2014–16) are still very much supportive of the local community, from weddings to collaborations with Manchester Central Library and Manchester People’s History Museum.¹² Manchester clearly continues to play a pivotal role in the MLGC’s existence and identification as a lesbian and gay chorus.

Through an examination of everyday life accounts of the members of the MLGC – particularly their references and connections to Manchester as a place – the following discussion will explore how music and sexuality are linked through the idea of place, and present one way in which we can understand the relationship between music and sexuality beyond questions of gender and the erotic.

Musical Grounding: ‘Manchester’s a Musical Place to be’

I just love living in Manchester – I’m from 30 miles away so I am alien still
– but I just love being in Manchester. I mean, it’s got a lovely Village. I mean

the Choir has organised more events specifically in Manchester: concerts at the Royal Northern College of Music in 2011 and The Lowry in 2014; a musical protest, ‘Safe to Sing’, as a response to a homophobic attack on Manchester’s trams in 2014; and in 2015, they performed for the National LGBT and History Festival in Manchester.

¹² Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus website <<http://mlgc.org.uk/>> [accessed 18 July 2014 and 9 June 2017].

it's got its faults doesn't it, the Gay Village, Manchester's got its fault. But it was to *mean* something (*pause*) to *ground* us. So we've got the meaning with our Lesbian and Gay kind of notions, but we're also grounded as a Manchester choir, so it would locate us. And I'm really proud to live in Manchester.

(John)

Manchester's been my home and it's characterised what I've done in my life for 20 odd years (*pause*) I suppose I've always been involved in music, for most of my life really, so it's kind of part of being a lesbian, living in Manchester, which is quite a musical place to be. I've been in a lesbian band before and stuff like that back in the 80s, so music's been quite a big part of my life.

(Charlotte)¹³

According to John, for the MLGC to *mean* something for its members it needed to be 'grounded as a Manchester choir'. How and why does Manchester 'ground' the Choir and make it a meaningful place for lesbian and gay amateur local musicians? Fellow member Charlotte's explanation of why she joined the MLGC suggests a possible answer: for Charlotte, Manchester brings together all aspects of her life ('it's characterised what I've done in my life for 20 odd years') and this includes her being involved in music and being a lesbian. Such a statement points toward the importance of Manchester as a city that is 'quite a musical place to be' (Charlotte) and has 'got a lovely Village' (John): Manchester

¹³ Italics in quotations indicate emphasis placed by the speaker.

‘grounds’ the Chorus both figuratively and literally. Taking Charlotte’s and John’s statements as a starting point, therefore, I will explore how Manchester provided and continues to provide the MLGC with both a musical ‘grounding’ and a gay and lesbian ‘grounding’.

In early 2000, the MLGC began as a small group of Manchester-based LGBT singers who met at the St Peter’s Chaplaincy building in the University of Manchester on an informal basis, with no formalised structure in place (no scheduled or regular rehearsals, no mission statement, and no Musical Director (MD)). However, by early 2001, the group had decided to become a constituted organisation with a specific mission statement: ‘to provide a safe environment for the LGBT community to participate in music’ (MLGC, Mission Statement, 2004).¹⁴ The name ‘Manchester Lesbian & Gay Chorus’ was formally adopted in the same year, and membership was open to anyone identifying with the mission statement. A professional Musical Director was hired to lead the musical formation, but the MLGC collapsed nearly twice between 2001 and 2002 due to the MD’s sudden departure and a lack of members. It was not until Chongwei decided to promote the MLGC on BBC Radio Manchester and distribute posters that members slowly increased. Furthermore, as the result of a successful funding application to Awards for All (a National Lottery fund) the MLGC suddenly found it had the financial means to hire another MD and cover administrative costs, such as photocopying song sheets for the members.

In his study of Manchester and its local musicians, Manchester music-historian Christopher Lee writes ‘over the years, a musical infrastructure has been built up, one that

¹⁴ This was handed out to members on paper at the time, but I no longer have a copy.

is capable of nurturing and sustaining an indigenous sub-culture of musicians, engineers, designers, promoters, etc[.,] all of these elements combining to create the right atmosphere for new talent to emerge and thrive'.¹⁵ As this short account of the origins of MLGC suggests, the Chorus was able to establish and maintain itself at the onset because there were existing social, cultural, economic, and physical means – the 'right atmosphere' as Lee states – in Manchester to support such local music-making activities: not only is Manchester part of a strong Northern choral tradition and culture of music-making, its existing musical infra-structure (including the Royal Northern College of Music and the Hallé Orchestra) provides the musical resources and skills needed for a Choir such as MLGC to emerge and blossom. John's statement below demonstrates the importance of Manchester's preceding musical activities and the impact of the city's existing musical culture on the MLGC:

Well, I would've loved to have been in Manchester in '91 and my friends were telling me and I was married and there was nothing I could do and it was buzzing wasn't it? You looked and....have you seen *24 hour Party People*?
(John)

John was discussing how he wanted to incorporate more 'Manchester songs' into the MLGC repertoire, and how he would like the Choir to sing songs by the Inspiral Carpets, Stone Roses, and Happy Mondays. The selection of the songs that would become part of the Choir's repertoire was a matter of intense debate – sometimes deep rifts – at the time. At

¹⁵ C.P. Lee, *Shake, Rattle and Rain: Popular Music Making in Manchester 1950–1995* (Ottery St Mary, 2002), 3.

least some members thought the Choir should sing music from each of the following repertoires (ultimately the Choir would draw from all of them): a) songs by LGBT composers/singers, such as Labi Siffre (for example, ‘Something Inside So Strong’); b) songs that held significant cultural meaning for the LGBT community, such as ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’, sung by Judi Garland in the film-musical *The Wizard of Oz*; c) inspirational songs that reflected LGBT issues, such as being in the closet, or social isolation, hence ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ from Rogers and Hammerstein’s stage-musical *Carousel*; d) political songs, such as ‘Step by Step’, a nineteenth-century Miners’ Union song; e) and songs chosen by members who just wanted to sing what they liked, which in itself was regarded as being ‘political’. In this light, John’s statement of wanting to include ‘Manchester songs’ can be read as an attempt to pay attention to the location of the Choir as a means of differentiation from other queer choirs, for whom, for example, ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’ would have had equal resonance.

All the bands he listed were those that emerged out of the Madchester era,¹⁶ which is also signalled by his reference to *24 hour Party People* (2002, directed by Michael Winterbottom), a film based on Manchester’s rave and subcultural music scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What is also significant in John’s statement is that he refers to his pre-coming out self (‘I was married and there was nothing I could do’).¹⁷ The manner in

¹⁶ Developing around Manchester-based Factory Records and the Hacienda nightclub, ‘Madchester’ refers to a period between 1988 and 1999 – sometimes called the ‘Summer of Love’ – when local bands emerged and formed part of the city’s subcultural rave scene, fuelled by drugs and dancing.

¹⁷ The term ‘coming out’ refers to the process whereby a member of the LGBT community

which his heterosexual life is juxtaposed with the ‘buzzing’ gay life suggests how John regards his sexual identity as a gay man being linked to gay, musical, subcultural life, particularly within an urban context.

In *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (1990), queer sociologist Jeffrey Weeks discusses how in the UK (mainly London), the arrival of mega-discos during the mid-70s created, in effect, a gay subculture in Britain. Weeks argues that these mega-discos symbolised a ‘new hedonism, where sexual pleasure was placed at the heart of the new gay identity’, and consequently, the gay community experienced an ‘increasingly overt sexualisation of the gay male subculture’.¹⁸ Yet for John, London ‘didn’t count’, and in this light, his year of choice (1991) is significant – it is after the height of Madchester/Summer of Love and coincides with the opening of a new gay night at the Hacienda, called *Flesh*.¹⁹ John’s remarks suggest there is a connection

discloses their sexual identity, whether to family members, friends, or at work. Because of the persecution and stigma surrounding homosexuality, ‘coming out’ is often considered a political and personal process relating to being ‘proud’ and unashamed of one’s sexual identity. The term ‘coming out’ had been used from the Regency and early Victorian period onwards for the presentation at court of debutantes – young, unmarried aristocratic women who were just about to embark on their first London social season.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, 1990), 323.

¹⁹ The Hacienda started *Flesh* in response to a financial decline caused by fewer people consuming alcohol (instead, people were taking drugs) and the club having fines imposed as a result of gun-

between the emergence of Manchester's localised music scene and the localised gay subculture. Within this context, *Flesh* created a new gay consciousness in Manchester, a more corporeal and visible mode of being 'out', defined specifically through the body's relationship to music: to embody dance music was to embody a more 'out' gay identity. Although I wish to move away from the conceptualisation of music and sexuality through the idea of eroticism, it is clear that *Flesh* nonetheless was important in the process of demarcating a more visible geo-cultural space for the changing LGBT community in Manchester at the time, particularly for gay men.

In her study of the 'Liverpool sound', Sara Cohen argues that 'locality can be seen as a political strategy within a global, plural system', and observes how, 'within this strategy, music exercises territorialising power, framing public and private spaces and domains'.²⁰ *Flesh* as a local music scene became part of a politics of visibility, one where music and space had 'territorialising power' to open up a new spatial possibility for gay men; this was vital to the eventual demarcation of the Gay Village as a separate area in the city, a geographical closet.²¹ Politically, socio-culturally, and economically speaking, such a

related crimes.

²⁰ Sara Cohen, 'Mapping the Sound: Identity, Place, and the "Liverpool Sound"', in *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford, 1994), 117–34 (p. 133).

²¹ Michael P. Brown's study of Christchurch's gay area demonstrates how the material and geographical closet enables queers to be safely 'in' within public spaces of the city; see his *Closet Space* (London, 2000), 70–83. Similarly, Dennis Altman argues in *Global Sex* (2001) that the

private ‘out’ place was and remains significant not just for the local LGBT community in terms of increasing safety and visibility, but more broadly for Manchester and its other communities: the Gay Village becomes part of the overall branding and promotion of Manchester as a diverse and cultural city alongside other communities’ areas (for example, China Town), which in turn feeds the localised, general, and pink tourism/economy (from stag/hen nights in the Gay Village, to businesses targeting LGBT tourists).

LGBT Grounding: ‘Manchester’s the Queer Capital of the North’

Probably early 1990s, which was sort of the start of the Village. It was kind of Manto’s really, it started the Village, the Gay Village. The move from pubs where you couldn’t see through the windows and all the bars were empty, and you know it was a lesbian and gay bar. But I think we all fantasise about the Village and I never was sure whether it ever was that cosy [...] But I suppose it’s better than (*pause*) like when I first moved to Manchester there were lots of isolated bars you know, and I think it’s probably better than that. You don’t get beaten up, you know.

American model of using the ‘ghettoization’ of queer communities as a basis for their political activism has dominated and been replicated throughout the world (p. 87). In Manchester, this model has been replicated to a certain extent both in name and culture, ‘The Gay Village’ being a direct reference to New York’s gay area. See also David Bell and Gill Valentine’s collection of essays on spatiality and sexuality, *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (London, 1995).

(Charlotte)

[INSERT Figs 10.1a and b NEAR HERE:

Caption: Fig.10.1a and b, Cover and map section, Manchester Gay Village Guide, free leaflet produced by Healthy Gay Manchester and Manchester City Council, 1996]

As Charlotte states, Manto was the ‘start of the Village, the Gay Village’. With clear windows, the venue was one of the first to bring gay bar life out into the public and onto Canal Street for all to see. In 1991, the city-planners formally named the area around Canal Street the ‘The Gay Village’ – its name borrowed from New York’s Greenwich Village – as a separate planning area (see Figs 10.1a and b for the area thus demarcated by 1996). In Charlotte’s account, life before Manto is presented in a negative light: ‘couldn’t see through windows’, ‘bars were empty’, ‘lots of isolated bars’ (Charlotte). With the newly and formally defined Gay Village, policing of the area around Canal Street increased (‘you don’t get beaten up’). What was once an area heavily policed and unsafe for the LGBT community (gay men in particular) became what is now considered the safest area for queers:²² there is even special policing for the *protection* of queers. Indeed, according to

²² I have been using the term *LGBT* so far: a) to signal the historical specificity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans identities before Queer activism; and b) to be in tune with the MLGC’s name (Lesbian and Gay) and mission statement (‘to provide a safe environment for the LGBT community to participate in music’). I use the term *queer* to reflect Manchester’s common use of the term (for example, the *Queer up North* festival, which was described thus by the BBC: ‘featuring a

Chongwei, the relative safety of the Village was one of the main reasons he decided to move the MLGC from rehearsing at the Church, to a venue on Canal Street in 2001.

Furthermore, as queer urban geographer Manuel Castells's study of the Castro district in San Francisco demonstrates, a gay neighbourhood is inseparable from the development of the gay community as a social movement.²³ The existence of the Gay Village may partly be a result of the local and subcultural music scene, as explored earlier; but it is also partly due to the longstanding history of local LGBT activism and networking in the North of England, from the campaign for LGBT rights by the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee in 1967 (later, the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE)), which held its first public and key meetings in Manchester, to The North West Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Equality (NWCLGE), which lobbied against Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, and organised one of the largest national rallies in

staggering array of queer stars, be them local, national, or international, the festival has highlights a-plenty and something for every taste' [2 May 2006]). 'Manchester, the Queer Capital of the North' is an advertisement slogan that appeared in both the LGBT and non-LGBT street press. 'Queer', therefore, refers to Queer activism and theory during the 1990s, where the term signalled a politics of opposition, and functioned as an umbrella term for identities between and beyond LGBT labels. 'Queer' is also used (by Charlotte, for example) more generally as shorthand for a member of LGBT community.

²³ Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley Calif., 1983).

Manchester's Albert Square in 1988.²⁴ It is clear that Northern England's history of LGBT activism is an integral part of Manchester, and the city, in turn, could provide a strong foundation to support a local LGBT group's music-making activities. The existence of Manchester's strong LGBT community is partly due to the city's involvement with this Northern English LGBT activism, particularly during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and early 90s, when the LGBT community mobilised itself along Canal St and what would become the Gay Village (see Figs 10a and b): this same localised engagement with LGBT activism is reflected and continued in the MLGC's overall ethos and their musical practices. For example, the events my interviewees referred to as being meaningful were usually those concerned directly with political and civil issues surrounding LGBT lives: AIDS Vigils, memorial and funeral services, private performances for Body Positive (a charity and home set up for those who are HIV positive), and civil partnership/christening ceremonies. In particular, all of those I spoke to stated that singing at the AIDS Vigils was one of the most 'important and meaningful' activities undertaken by the MLGC (David).

The MLGC has been performing at AIDS Vigils – held yearly during both

²⁴ Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 – entitled 'Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material' – stated that local authorities should 'not promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (see <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28> for more information <accessed 11 June 2017>). Especially during the era of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, this silencing of LGBT issues led to the mobilisation of many UK-based LGBT activist groups

Manchester Pride events and World AIDS Days – since 2003.²⁵ There is a landmark in Sackville Park (at the heart of the Gay Village) called the ‘Beacon of Hope’, which commemorates all those who died from or lost families and friends to AIDS, and during the Vigil the MLGC sing around the Beacon. The MLGC has now become an expected part of the Vigil to a point where the organiser of the event itself – also the head of the George House Trust, an organisation that provides services to people living with and affected by HIV – addressed the MLGC backstage at the 2005 Vigil, saying ‘I can’t imagine the Vigil without you guys any more, you’re such a part of it now’ (Milla). Inasmuch as Manchester’s existing musical and lesbian and gay culture laid the physical and social groundwork for the MLGC, Milla’s statement suggests that, by the same token, the MLGC grounded themselves in Manchester, to become the city’s own ‘local queer choir’ both currently and at the time, in relation to and even in competition with other national queer choirs.

The importance of *Manchester* as a ground for identity within the context of the local LGBT community and its AIDS activism was evident, for example, at the 2005 Vigil, which used ‘Manchester’ as its main theme.²⁶ Poems and appeals were delivered with

²⁵ ‘Pride’ is a British term for ‘Mardi Gras’ – San Francisco, New York, and Sydney all hold famous Mardi Gras events, which are festivals celebrating gay pride. Although it is now called Manchester Pride again, there was a period between the mid-1990s to the early 2000s when the event was renamed Manchester Mardi Gras. Depending on the size of the city and the level of activity in the LGBT community, Pride/Mardi Gras events can be anything from a single parade to a week-long event. Manchester’s Pride events are one of the biggest and longest in the UK.

²⁶ Each year, the theme of the Vigil changes, as do the speakers (usually there is a council

passion by those involved in AIDS activism, and all of the speakers expressed their pride at being connected to Manchester. Towards the end of the Vigil, the compère shouted the following question-and-answer chant to the crowds who responded enthusiastically:

Where are you?!

Manchester!

What are you!?

Queer!

How do you feel?!

Proud!

The word ‘proud’ appears in a number of the choristers’ accounts with two different associations, as is the case in the above chant: it can refer to LGBT pride; it can also refer to Mancunian pride. Identifying with one usually meant identifying with the other. A further example, reinforcing this point, can be identified in an email that was circulated by the committee to the members of the MLGC prior to their musical participation at *Europride* in London (2006) and read as follows: ‘This is a high-profile event – be there and show Europe how proud we are to be Mancunians and representing the UK at the World OutGames’. Manchester as a place is providing the MLGC with a sense of identity within what has perhaps become a homogenous queer and globalised event.

It is because of Manchester’s existing LGBT neighbourhood and its community as a social movement – primarily born out of its subcultural music scene, LGBT activism, and representative, an AIDS charity representative, an external (non-Manchester) AIDS activist, and nearly always some speakers giving personal accounts).

the city's own promotion of its 'queer quarter' – that the MLGC was able to establish itself and grow in numbers to exist as a musical *and* lesbian and gay social group. From the provision of a physical space in the Village to practise in (rooms above certain bars like Manto, Hollywood Showbar, Taurus), financial support from LGBT charities like Operation Fundraiser,²⁷ and funding from the Council to cover running costs (for example, printing T-shirts with the MLGC logo and booking transport), and opportunities to obtain skills, raise awareness and funds, and organise events, to all the opportunities to perform and represent the LGBT community in Manchester during national events like the AIDS Vigil, we can begin to understand the reasons behind John's desire to be grounded as a Manchester choir ('it would locate us'), and furthermore why he and others of the MLGC are 'really proud to live in Manchester' (John). Manchester is a place that brings together the MLGC's localised music-making practices and localised LGBT activism together.

So far, I have explored how Manchester, as a musical and queer city, is a location that 'grounds' local music-making practices and the local LGBT community's social practices. What I want to discuss now is how the MLGC itself brings these two aspects of Manchester together as a queer musical place itself within the city.

MLGC: A Musical and Queer Place

²⁷ Operation Fundraiser is a joint venture between the George House Trust and the Lesbian and Gay Foundation, both of which are based in Manchester. Their aim is primarily to benefit AIDS/HIV charities, but their funds are also used for other purposes within the LGBT community in Manchester. For example, the MLGC's overhead projector was bought with some of their funds.

How then does space become place? Place is a space to which meaning has been ascribed.²⁸

If, as according to Carter *et al*, a space becomes a place when meaning has been ascribed to it, how can we understand this process in relation to the Choir? An alto named Eleanor states how ‘the Choir’s there, obviously people want to sing, but it *is* a way to get to know other people (*pause*) it’s a place that’s welcoming’. Eleanor uses the word *place* to describe the Choir as both a musical space (‘people want to sing’) and a queer social space (‘a way to get to know other people’; Charlotte concurred with that, referring to the Choir as an ‘instant social network’). Similarly, a soprano called Clara states the MLGC is ‘my main *place*’ where she feels most like herself. How did the MLGC become a meaningful queer musical place, when originally it had begun as a small group of lesbians and gay men meeting in a Church? I want to answer these questions by examining some of the difficulties the MLGC faced in being ‘grounded as a Manchester choir’ with ‘lesbian and gay notions’ (John). By analysing how the Choir attempts to overcome these problems through their music-making, I aim to achieve two things: first, to highlight problems that are of continuing relevance to queer urban lives today despite the social changes in contemporary Britain; second, to understand how music-making is related to queer place-making and Northern identity within the city of Manchester.

As well as singing formally for charities and events strongly associated with the LGBT community, the Choir sometimes sings for members’ own social events. One such

²⁸ Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, ‘Introduction’, in *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, eds Carter, Donald, and Squires (London, 1993), vii–xv (p. xxi).

occasion was when we sang in a city-centre venue, for a member called Paul's 50th Birthday Party. Because Paul is a very prominent member of many communities around Manchester, the guests were from a variety of backgrounds. During the course of the evening, it transpired that one of the members was absent because he was in hospital, having suffered a homophobic attack outside his house the night before. This news caused grave concern and anxiety, and suddenly the colourful revelling was touched by a tone of solemnity. After we sang for Paul, the chair of the choir (Jed) publicly announced this piece of news. Reflecting upon the homophobic attack, Jed argued that we must not be lulled into a false sense of security; if such incidents can occur '*even in a city like Manchester*', then the attack should pose as a reminder that despite having 'come a long way', the LGBT community's 'work is yet to be done'. Jed emphasised the political importance of being out *outside* of the Village and beyond: he concluded the speech by stating the Choir would strive to perform outside of the Village as much as within, to raise awareness of homophobia, and most importantly *to be seen*, to create gay visibility.

As the founders of the MLGC had experienced before, such moments remind us of the difficulties in maintaining queer spaces outside of the centralised area and network of Village. 'Outness' is a negotiated state, and whilst queers in Manchester can be out within the geographical and spatial closet of the Village,²⁹ to *really* step out of the Village means to risk your own safety or loss of social support. But as queer theorists such as Diana Fuss (1991) and Jeffrey Weeks (1990) have taught us, what lies 'outside' is as much part of lesbian and gay identity politics as how it is to be 'in': in the words of Fuss, 'to be out is

²⁹ See Brown, *Closet Space*, and Bell and Valentine, eds, *Mapping Desire*.

really to be in inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible.’³⁰ In what way does music enable queers to negotiate their position in relation to the urban closet? In September 2005, the MLGC performed in St Anne’s Square, which is situated in the heart of the shopping district in Manchester’s city centre. On this particular occasion, the performance was to coincide with a football match and an email was sent around warning members of the potential for ‘queer bashing’. Many members pulled out, but for those who sang, the performance marked a moment when they felt they had ‘done something for the community’ (Kristen) and had experienced a ‘sense of pride because of all that crap’ (Tinny); ‘we were all supporting each other’ (Kristen); ‘pulling together’ (Katya); it ‘made it more special, we were there’ (Jed). Clearly, the event was memorable to many members despite the low attendance. Because we were wearing the Choir’s rainbow-themed T-shirts, we had been very obviously present in the face of potential danger.

In her book, *In a Queer Time and Space*, queer theorist Judith Halberstam discusses the notion of ‘place-making practices’ within a postmodern context in which new understandings of space are enabled by the ‘production of queer counterpublics’.³¹ In this light, the performance in St Anne’s Square demonstrates how music-making practices are tied to queer place-making practices and the production of queer counterpublics. Music

³⁰ Diana Fuss, ‘Inside/Out’, in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London, 1991), 1–10 (p. 4). Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, rev edn (London, 1990).

³¹ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, 2005), 6.

organised time and space for who were thus able to adopt a different spatio-temporality to the rest of the pedestrians and occupants of St Anne's Square. Therefore, for that moment in time and space, the MLGC produced a queer place, somewhere that acted as a defiant and counteractive space within the public space, outside of the Village.

Jed's promise to ensure the MLGC performed publicly outside of the Village suggests that for the Choir, music-making represents a queer use of time-space, a counterpublic practice that redraws and extends the boundaries that demarcate the urban closet whilst challenging overtly heterosexist spaces. Jed's and John's comments below point towards the importance of music in enabling queers to become more visible in public through singing:

Jed: Are we not actually saying something in a political fashion *by being* a Lesbian and Gay choir?

Es: Sure, I think so.

Jed: Yeah I think we are. I think we're going, we are who we are, we are here, we ain't going and get used to it

So not only were we suddenly visible and vocal, we were *vocal* as well. So it's a *vocal group!* (*laughs*) Suddenly, we're refusing to be silent, you know, so we're not just walking down the street you know, with our partner. We're standing in the street, which we have done, we're standing on stage saying, we're lesbian and gay, and we're being vocal

(John).

For Jed, being political lies in *being* a lesbian and gay choir, a sentiment that is echoed by another member, Katya, who states: ‘You know what makes something gay? Well it’s made gay because we’re gay in it’. Within this context, the process of music-making and vocal production enables the kind of embodied political presence.³² For John, the voice is *both* a metaphor *and* a physical entity and he keeps emphasising the importance of the latter by referring to material things (street, partner, stage) and actions (walking, standing).³³ Social theorist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre argues that ‘ideologies relate to space in a most significant way, because they intervene in space in the form of *strategies*’.³⁴ John’s use of words like ‘vocal’ and ‘silence’ in both figurative and literal terms can thus be understood as a description of a moment when the Choir’s ‘lesbian and gay kind of notions’ become grounded upon the material, intervening in space in the form of a queer strategy. Recall John’s earlier statement: ‘it was to *mean* something, it was to *ground* us, you know. So we’ve got the meaning with our lesbian and gay kind of notions, but we’re also grounded as a Manchester choir, it would locate us’. If Manchester’s musical and queer infrastructures

³² See Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York, 1995), and Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York, 1994).

³³ See John Urry, ‘Social Relations, Space and Time’, in *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, eds David Gregory and John Urry (Basingstoke, 1985), 20–48.

³⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991), 105.

ground the Choir, then it is the MLGC's music-making processes that in turn anchor their queer politics and situate them within the city. The singing voice makes queer bodies present in space through the literal breaking of silence (as John states, 'we're suddenly visible and vocal, we're vocal as well. So, it's a vocal group! (laughs) Suddenly, we're refusing to be silent'³⁵). Singing is part of a queer politics of counterpublics, a form of spatial intervention that arises from the presence of the queer voice.

Choral Belonging: 'my main place where I can feel I'm expressing who I am'

It's become my main place where I can feel I'm expressing who I am 'cause my job is the same. I mean I've come out at home, at work, everywhere else but it doesn't actually affect what you do day-to-day, you get up, you get to work, you see your family, you go to the cinema. But to me, it's making a statement by being a member of the Choir and being proud to be member of the Choir. And it's an affirmation every two weeks that yes, I *am* gay and *because* I'm gay I'm mixed [*sic*] with these people.

(Clara)

Clara is a singing coordinator in schools in and around Manchester and she refers to being out in all areas of her life. Similarly, a fellow member called Tinny told me how when she

³⁵ In relation to queer politics, particularly during the 90s, 'silent' is a significant term: it relates to ACT UP's campaign in which 'Silence=Death' was written against a black background and a pink triangle (the symbol homosexuals were forced to wear in the Nazi concentration camps of World War II).

first moved to Manchester, ‘my mum was like, “well, you’re in Manchester now there should be really good choirs”, and it was like *Hallé* this and *Hallé* that and I’m thinking, “how would the *Hallé* like it if I turned up like this?” (laughs looking down at herself – she is wearing a torn pair of black jeans, Doc Marten boots, black T-shirt, and has multiple piercings in her ears and nose). They wouldn’t even let me fucking audition like this’. Tinny also sought the MLGC because she was avoiding the rest of the Village’s bar/club scene. Whilst Clara and Tinny *do* have the existing means for music-making and channels to express their sexual identities in Manchester, clearly there is something important and meaningful for them about the manner in which the MLGC brings music and their sense of queerness together.

In *Practice of Everyday Life* (1998) Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard discuss the idea of a neighbourhood in relation to everyday life and a sense of belonging: the authors argue that the feeling of being part of a neighbourhood requires ‘a progressive apprenticeship that grows with the repetition of the dweller’s body’s engagement in public space until it exercises a sort of appropriation of this space.’³⁶ Similarly, through the repeated vocal engagement of rehearsal and performance spaces in Manchester, the MLGC has thus carved out both a physical and a more imaginary place of belonging in the city. Through the process of singing in everyday life, the MLGC demonstrates how its localised music-making practices anchor the imaginary and figurative into very material grounds of existence. Within this context, the concept of voicing sexualities is no longer just about

³⁶ Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol II: Living and Cooking*, trans. T.J. Tomasik (Minneapolis Minn., 1998), 10–11.

coming out or about the articulation of desire, and pain/pleasure: vocal production is also a mechanism of musically appropriating, challenging, intervening and delineating existing queer spaces within the city whilst demarcating a place of belonging.

To conclude, I return to Charlotte's remarks on why she joined the MLGC, as something that encapsulates the relationship between the city, music-making, and queer urban life:

Manchester's been my home and it's characterised what I've done in my life for 20 odd years (*pause*) I suppose I've always been involved in music, for most of my life really, so it's kind of part of being a lesbian, living in Manchester, which is quite a musical place to be. I've been in a lesbian band before and stuff like that back in the 80s, so music's been quite a big part of my life.

(Charlotte)

Manchester has characterised what Charlotte has done during her 20 years of living there as a lesbian and musician. In Charlotte's statement, 'being a lesbian' is part of 'being a musician' and being Mancunian (she refers to herself as Mancunian). Within this context, sexuality is less about an essential identity but more about the spatialisation of belonging; or perhaps finding a space of belonging to various cultural conventions and arriving to a point where one feels 'at home', as Charlotte states. Through the very practice of singing together as an LGBT chorus, music can demarcate a spatio-temporal location of cultural and social belonging. That is, the process of music-making organises and defines the manner in which sexuality spatialises a queer sense of belonging. In this manner, the city is

an important ground from where music-making and queer practices emerge, which in turn, characterise the city itself – Manchester as both a ‘musical city’ and ‘Queer Capital of the North’. In bringing these two aspects of the city together, the MLGC’s music-making practices materially and symbolically ground the Choir as an interventional queer musical place of belonging. Most of all, it is on these grounds that Choir members are so proud: proud of being Mancunians, proud of being singers, and proud of being queer up North.