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# Accessing Canal Pride: The Intersection of Identities for LGBT People with Physical Disabilities at a Global Event

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**Accessing Canal Pride: The Intersection of Identities  
for LGBT People with Physical Disabilities at a Global Event**

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Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam  
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SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2014

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**Abstract**

This research is the study of the intersection between queerness and disability within the context of Amsterdam Gay Pride, specifically the Canal Parade. The study examines the intersection between LGBT identity and physical disability at the event and in surrounding organization and events within the Amsterdam LGBT community. The primary research question was: how does Amsterdam Canal Pride's accessibility affect both the positioning of the LGBT and disabled identifying community in Amsterdam and the relevance of the event as a place of activism and celebration? Five interviewees identifying as lesbian or gay, possessing a physical disability, participating in activism within the field of LGBT and disability, or some combination thereof participated in oral history interviews to discuss their experiences with Canal Pride. Key themes of accessibility (physical, social, and emotional) of the event, identity formation and representation, organization of community, and normalization were analyzed. Results of the study concluded that the claiming of multiple marginalized identities and navigation of those identities is highly personal and can affect the organization of communities. Amsterdam Canal Pride shows variance in its social accessibility, and it is deemed necessary for improvements to be made in physical accessibility.

**Key Words:**

Regional Studies: Europe, Gender Studies, Social Studies, Health Sciences

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## I. Introduction

The intersection between queerness and disability is a rapidly expanding topic in Western academia, as both theoretically and practically, scholars, activists, and academics have recognized the marginalization of these two separate identity groups and also the multiple, unique overlaps and commonalities that they share. In both the Netherlands and the rest of the world, persons who identify as disabled or as queer are marginalized and oppressed, and those who identify as queer *and* disabled are marginalized and oppressed for the social embodiment of both of these identities separately and in conjunction.

These two intersecting identities, queer and disabled, are often seen with paradoxical stereotypes regarding sexuality: queer is seen as hyper-sexualized, and disabled is seen as desexualized, or even asexual. As a result, this can lead to a lack of accessibility for and promotion of disabled queers in community spaces and an absence of representation of disabled queers in the media. There have been great advances in both post-millennial academia and activism regarding the intersection between queer and disabled identity, including the emergence of queer, disabled (or “crip,” the reclaiming of the derogatory term “cripple”) pornography and work by many activist scholars. I have focused my studies upon these intersections specifically in a Dutch context. In the Netherlands, there has been policy reform aimed towards the rights of those with disabilities, including the Social Support Act of 2006, which is to provide local support in care, transportation, and residency for those with disabilities, and the prediction is that by 2015, 70% of bus and train transportation should be accessible to those with disabilities (Academic Network of European Disability Experts, 2011). However, *Angloinfo* describes the

phenomenon that, “Over recent years much effort has been made to improve accessibility ... However, in older cities, such as the capital Amsterdam, access for people using a wheelchair is still complicated” (AngloInfo, 2014). The rights and access for peoples with disabilities are still in need of analysis and reform, particularly in the Netherlands.

My research is specifically focused around the culmination of queer and disabled identity in one specific Dutch event, Amsterdam Gay Pride and its Canal Parade. This event is annual and global; it is one of many LGBT Pride parades worldwide. While there are many events, locations, and spaces in which to analyze the intersection between queerness and disability in a Dutch context, I chose Amsterdam’s Canal Pride for two reasons: its visibility and its shifting global reception. Pride parades have become an international phenomenon, and despite controversy surrounding their declining position as a space for radical queerness due to their capitalization and commodification (Kołeczek, Buschlüter, Henley, 2007), they are still a prominent space of visibility for the LGBT community. My research centers specifically on the LGBT and disabled community in the Netherlands and their experiences in and around Amsterdam Canal Pride.

My focus of this project can be divided into a study of the accessibility of Canal Pride and the resulting implications of this accessibility on Canal Pride’s position within the lives of LGBT and disabled individuals in the Netherlands. My research of the accessibility is broken into three parts: the physical, the social, and the emotional. An analysis of the physical accessibility of the event and the simultaneous/resulting emotional and social accessibility of the event will lead into a discussion of identity, marginalization, and normalization. This brings me to my primary research question: How does Amsterdam Canal Pride’s accessibility affect both the positioning of the LGBT and disabled identifying community in Amsterdam and the



relevance of the event as a place of activism and celebration? I have carefully tried in this research to create an outlet for LGBT identifying persons with physical disabilities to voice their opinions, experiences, and reflections of Canal Pride to critically look at the way disability and queer identities manifest themselves in this Dutch event.

## II. Literature Review

In reviewing literature, I have looked into both more abstract intersections between queerness and disability - primarily through the work of academic Robert McRuer - and works focusing on the practical experiences and realities of those who identify as queer and possess disability. To begin, I will address the intersection between queerness and disability before shifting into an analysis of multiple marginalized identities, specifically in a Dutch context, before finally exploring accessibility and the current status of literature published on the accessibility of Amsterdam.

### *a. Constructing Queerness and Disability*

In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, McRuer (2006) discusses the ways in which queerness and disability are linked; specifically, he speaks of the normalization of both the body by society and the normalization of the LGBT movement. He claims that heterosexuality was only constructed in opposition to the homosexual identity, allowing for the normalization of the gay movement (pg. 7). Furthermore, he links heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, claiming that the identity of able-bodiedness was only constructed from disability, especially disability to work, a standard created and normalized by capitalist society (pg. 8). Therefore, I summarize that homosexuality and disability share similar historical narratives in their construction.

Furthermore, McRuer (2006) discusses the rejection of rehabilitation and glorification of 'functionality' in society in conjunction with the concept of actively claiming disabled identity

(pp.103-145). In terms of my research, this point is in contention; the distinction between the embodiment of a social category and the active ownership of an identity is still murky. I theorize that if one has a disability, there is agency in whether or not they identify as disabled *and* with how they incorporate their disability into their daily lives. I explain this point further in my Definition of Terms, page 17-18. However, his discussion does coincide with Gayle Rubin's (1984) concept of the sexual politics that emerge from non-normative sexuality and sexual practices, whether or not we choose to openly engage in discourse surrounding those politics (pg. 171). I theorize that similar to the way in which rejection of rehabilitation of disabled body for the purpose of joining in 'productive' work in society translates into a rejection of normalcy, so does a rejection of normalized sexual practice, specifically including heterosexual sexual practice.

Thus, if I apply this discourse to my research on LGBT and disabled identity and Amsterdam Canal Pride, I want to expand upon this concept of normalization. As mentioned in my Introduction, Pride is currently contested as a space of queer activism due to its capitalization. In *As Good As It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability*, McRuer (2003) analyzes the 1997 James Brooks film As Good As It Gets in an effort to shed light upon complicit heterosexuality and able-bodiedness in a modern context. He says that modern film and media such as As Good As It Gets, "... simply [suggest] that there are various types of people in this multicultural world and that difference is a good thing that should be (at best) celebrated or (at worst) tolerated" (pg. 97). He realizes that queerness and disability are, and should be, more intricately connected than simply being similarly 'othered' by society. Instead, McRuer (2003) says that, "Queer theory and critical disability ... would demand not simply literal, physical access to already existing cultural spaces and institutions but access to the

always shifting locations where identities, communities, and publics are both shaped and contested” (pg. 99). Thus, it is problematic for spaces to be inaccessible for people with marginalized identities, specifically disabilities, but it is uniquely exclusionary for spaces of identity formation to be inaccessible. That is to say, places such as Pride or LGBT spaces, where LGBT identities are the forefront of discussion, must be accessible. However, is Canal Pride a place where queer (including disabled) identities are formed and shaped, or is antiquated? How do we determine the relevance of an event to a movement? How do individual’s interpretations of the accessibility of Canal Pride shape the relevance of the event? It was with these questions that I approached my research and shaped the questions that I asked my subjects in our interviews.

*b. Navigation of Multiple Marginalized Identities: LGBT and Disabled*

As my research on the intersection of LGBT and disabled identities at Amsterdam Canal Pride is regarding specifically the social embodiment of two marginalized identities, I have drawn upon previously existing theoretical approaches to identity politics. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) names intersectionality as perhaps, “... useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics” (pg.1296) in her work “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” Her position is that people who socially embody multiple marginalized identities are at a unique position; multiple marginalized identities are not just layered upon one another, and the persons who possess the identities are positioned at the cross, or intersection, of those identities. To apply intersectionality to my research, I approach LGBT and disability not as two singular

identities that individuals may possess, but instead, two social categories that may simultaneously clash and intertwine.

Specifically, I have drawn upon Dragonsani Renteria's poem, "Rejection," as cited by Jenny Corbett (1994), to demonstrate what Corbett titles "dual oppression," or the navigation of two marginalized identities:

SOCIETY REJECTS ME for being Deaf.

The Deaf community reject me for being a Lesbian.

The Lesbian community reject me for not being able to hear them.

The Deaf-Lesbian community rejects me for being into S&M.

The S&M community reject me for being Deaf.

Society rejects me for being Chicana.

The Hispanic community reject me for being a Lesbian.

The Gay Hispanic community rejects me for being Deaf.

Patriarchal society rejects me for being a woman.

I am rejected and oppressed,

Even by those who cry out readily

Against rejection, oppression, and discrimination.

When will it end? (pg. 350)

As Renteria highlights in her poem, living with multiple marginalized identities can lead to compartmentalization, or the invisibility of certain identities in certain spaces, and even stigmatization or rejection.

In an interview conducted by Mariska de Swart representing Roze Wielen, a previously existing safe space group specifically for the LGBT disabled community in Amsterdam, a

woman named Ellen who identifies as a lesbian with a visual impairment discusses her discomfort at Amsterdam Canal Pride as she felt it made her choose with which part of herself she identifies: lesbian, woman, or visually impaired (Roze Wielen, 2011). Ellen's brief insight became an inspiration for this research as she illuminates the way in which identities are formed and navigated and the ways in which certain events or spaces can test such identity formation.

*c. Accessibility in Amsterdam*

Accessibility, even in regards to just physicality as opposed to emotional or social accessibility, is an extremely important topic for the intersection between queer and disabled persons. The physical accessibility of a space most literally dictates a person's possibility of inclusion. A lack of physical accessibility, or varying degrees of physical accessibility, can change the social or emotional accessibility of a space as well; negative attitudes from able-bodied people also serve as barriers to inclusion (Minister Duguid, 2008). These varying degrees of physical accessibility thus affect the experiences one may have with others in the space, the activities they are able to participate in, and the attitude that they bring and others bring towards them in the space.

In regards to physical accessibility in Amsterdam, Toegankelijk Amsterdam [Accessible Amsterdam] provides an extremely detailed guide of the accessibility of Amsterdam's shops, restaurants, bars, attractions, etc. It explains, through a rating guide, the accessibility of parking, public transportation to and from, bathrooms, audio or visual services, movement within the building (including vertical movement between floors if necessary), and whether or not it permits smoking (Clïentenbalang Amsterdam, 2014). This extensive guide does demonstrate how

accessible some of the spaces are in Amsterdam, but it does not feature (even close to) every public space in Amsterdam, and there is no specialized section for LGBT spaces.

*d. Summary*

The literature reviewed on queerness and disability, as mentioned, shows a disparity between the theoretical and the practical; while there is ample literature on the theoretical links between the fluidity of sexuality to the fluidity of bodies and ability, there is slightly less so on the lived experiences of those who identify as LGBTQ and disabled. Renteria's poem provides one of the most potent justifications for further research on the intersection between non-normative sexuality and disability, as it explicitly states the struggle of possessing multiple marginalized identities. I hope that this research will add to the literature I have analyzed with the specific quality of allowing ample room for people who identify as LGBT and have a disability to share their experiences.

### **III. Definition of Terms**

The following terms, phrases, or concepts are used in my research. In an effort to contextualize the methods, limits, and scope of my research, I have included my working definitions in the proceeding text. Perhaps unlike a traditional Definition of Terms section in qualitative research, this section aims to provide full justification for the stylistic linguistic choices that I have made in this project.

#### *a. Queer vs. LGBT*

Until this point, I have used the terms LGBT and queer seemingly interchangeably. However, I want to draw the distinction between these two terms and identify my reasoning for using the terms that I use. First and foremost, while I do not have any trans\* or bisexual identified interviewees in this research, I have chosen to say “LGBT” as opposed to “LG” in my project as LGBT is the commonly used acronym at Pride parades globally. See Methodology, page 21 for more information on interviewee selection. Furthermore, my use of the term queer is to reference non-normative sexual orientation. Queer, the reclaiming of the derogatory slur aimed at homosexuals, can be seen as an umbrella term for these non-normative (non straight, non binary) sexualities (Killermann, 2014). Thus, it is arguable that LGBT, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, fits into this category of queer, yet their distinction lies in the concept of homonormativity. The term, coined by Lisa Duggan, describes the normalization of same-sex attraction in society, aligning it to pre-existing patriarchal structures (Duggan, 2003). This



homonormativity has run both parallel to and in conjunction with the capitalization and commodification of Pride parades worldwide, as I will discuss below. Therefore, I want to acknowledge this distinction in my research, as my focus on LGBT identities and the event of Canal Pride is not meant to silence queerness with normativity, but instead call into question this normativity and the different ways in which these identities and boundaries are navigated.

*b. Amsterdam Canal Pride*

The actual event of Amsterdam Canal Pride lasts officially for two weeks and includes many different components. There are events with different functions targeted at specific audiences throughout Pride, and the culmination of these two weeks finishes in a large parade with floats that go through the canals of Amsterdam, witnessed by spectators on the surrounding bridges and streets (Foundation AGP, 2014). I have chosen to focus my research upon this parade, as it is one of the best-attended events, symbolically represents the visibility of LGBT identity as the parade is a sight of spectatorship, and presents many different avenues for the analysis of accessibility, as there multiple ways to participate in this parade as a participant and viewer.

As *Ecosprinter*, a magazine for European green party youths, has opined, “Not unexpectedly, Pride Parades have not been able to escape the wave of ultra-commercialization that has swept almost all public manifestations ... The end-result is that being queer becomes associated with a certain lifestyle that is characterized primarily by a specific consumption pattern” (Kołeczek, Buschlüter, Henley, 2007). This is the manifestation of, and contribution towards, the division between LGBT and queer. I hypothesize that if queerness by definition eschews the mainstream, including capitalism and consumption, then LGBT becomes symbolic

of this commodified sexual deviancy. This research attempts to recognize how Pride, specifically Amsterdam Canal Pride, fits into this larger picture of commodification (and therefore normalization) of queer identities through their overlap with other marginalized identities.

*c. Disability*

For this research, when I use the term disability, it is solely to reference physical disability. While the World Health Organization defines disability to be “an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions” (World Health Organization, 2014), thus including mental disability, I am restricting my research to physical disability. This decision is composed of ethical, practical, and stylistic considerations. When I use the term disability in my research, it is not to exclude or ignore mental disability in the realm of disability studies, but instead concisely outline the scope of my work.

My research has had constraints of both time and resources due to the short nature of my time in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Due to these constraints, I have had to limit the realm of my research to very finite constraints, in this case physical disability as opposed to other disability considerations. This choice was made in part because of the ethical guidelines set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). While it would have been both possible and valuable to conduct research on the intersection between queerness and mental disability, the month in which I had to conduct my research would not have allowed for enough time to do the work ethically (i.e. gaining approval from the IRB, finding a large group of participants within the target community, ethically gaining consent from participants). For further discussion on the concept of IRB ethical guidelines and disability, see Methodology, page 19.

Disability is a flexible and transient concept, thus making it pertinent that I not only recognize this fact but also contextualize my definition within my research. I recognize that even researching just physical disability has many different manifestations. From simply what I can hypothesize, disability could be chronic illness, injury, trauma, birth complications, age-related, et al. I clearly cannot and do not cover all manifestations of physical disability through my research and recognize that different types of physical disability could alter my research outcomes. As mentioned in my Literature Review, page 9, in his introduction to his book *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer (2006) analyzes how our definitions of able-bodiedness only exist in conjunction with disability; able-bodiedness, while compulsory, is only in existence because of its opposition to a *lack* of able-bodiedness. It is also highly situated within capitalist society, as its definition is dependent upon a human being's 'ability' to work (2006:7-8). So if disability and able-bodiedness are fundamentally dependant upon one another, then disability is contingent upon other external factors, such as what we deem to be valuable work in society, participation in events, and functionality in daily life. Another contributing factor to the transience of disability as a concept is the fluctuating and ever-changing aspects to the body. If disability is dependent upon the body, then I have to acknowledge the ways in which the body is not stable. We age, are privy to accidents and traumas, and acquire illness as time passes. Is old age a disability? Is temporary disability through injury, one that then heals, a disability? And what of mental disability, as the body and its processes are intricately intertwined with the brain?

While my definition of disability will not attempt to answer these fundamental questions entirely, I will attempt to use as non-generalizing and fluid of a definition as possible for the purposes of this research. First and foremost, I believe that should someone claim a disabled identity. There is power in self-identification, and I will expand more on identity in proceeding

text. However, I am also defining disability for the purposes of this research to be dependent upon accessibility. Any person who has experienced a difficulty of physical accessibility to public or private spaces, be they LGBT-focused or not, would qualify as a member of my target community and disabled in this research. This could be a wide range of different disabilities stemming from a variety of causes, including but not limited to chronic illness, age, accident-related trauma, temporary injury, etc.

*d. Identity*

My research fundamentally probes self-identification and identity politics, yet I recognize the unstable nature of identity. If someone possesses a characteristic of an identity, they may not necessarily claim the identity. As I strive to define identity in the context of this research, I want to give the utmost respect to people's agency in self-identifying. I find it to be both unethical to research subjects and discrediting to the validity of my research to assert identities upon subjects or assume such identities for them. Thus, while identity politics and the navigation of multiple non-normalized identities is a feature to my theoretical basis, they are not meant to be in any way a totalizing aspect of the experiences of the people within my target community. In my research, the term 'identity' is only used when the subject actively claims the identity in question to avoid conflation, confusion, and appropriation.

*e. Community*

In conjunction with my discussion of identity, I feel that community must also be discussed in the context of my research. For my working definition of community in this research, I want to note the fact that communities serve a multitude of purposes, some not

exactly directly relating to identities, and some communities are not created or formulated to 'serve' any purpose at all. In other words, my subjects have different experiences in the communities in which they are a part, and they may or may not claim certain identities while still participating in communities corresponding to those identities. For this research, my definition of a community is when multiple people who socially embody different marginalized categories gather, either virtually or physically, to provide support, events, or networking to other members. I will discuss further specific community interactions in my methodology.

#### **IV. Methodology**

As the methods that I used to gather data for this research were dynamic and had to be adapted over the course of the project, I will first present a basic summary of my methods before justifying them with an explanation of their use in my project.

I conducted five interviews that were comprised of a mix of oral history and narrative interviews with opinion-finding interviews and fact-finding interviews. My target community was people identifying as LGBT in Amsterdam and the surrounding region who have a physical disability and are over the age of 18. Interviewees could have any range of experience in participation with Amsterdam Gay Pride. Other interviewees outside of my target community were activists for LGBT and disability rights and inclusion. All of my interviewees identified as gay or lesbian. I recognize that inclusion of bisexual or trans\* identified participants could yield different results, but this was not purposefully exclusionary and was simply a matter of finding participants who were available in the one month research period. Interviews were conducted in person or via Skype video calling. Participants in my study were notified that interviews would be recorded, and they were offered access to the recordings or transcripts and a copy of the final research paper.

As I conducted (at least partially) oral history interviews, I did not transcribe all of my interviews in full after their completion. I listened to each interview that I conducted after the data collection process was finished, and I transcribed sections, roughly 5-10 minutes at a time, for possible use in my interviews. The sections which were transcribed included discussion of key concepts for my research, including accessibility, identity, community, and normalization.

I had initially chosen oral history interviews to be my primary method in gathering data in this research. Ethically, I found oral history interviews to be the best suited for my project; I wanted an opportunity for members of my target community to tell their stories, experiences, and memories with as little obstruction as possible. The in-depth and personal nature of oral history interviews would provide that, although not without linguistic conflict two-fold. First, my interviews are conducted in English in Amsterdam, as I do not speak Dutch. This means that I was not only restricted to finding research subjects who spoke English, but it also meant that there was a very large possibility that English would be the second language of my subjects. While the language barrier could be small if interviewees are fluent in English, it is still worth noting that these interviews were not conducted in the interviewees' first language. Secondly, oral history interviews, no matter their language, are not 'pure.' They are contextualized through the researcher, as Katherine Borland says in her chapter "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research" of *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. She says:

To refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves seems to me an unsatisfactory if not illusory solution. For the very fact that we constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories, and our later interpretation of these stories ... will influence the way in which prospective readers will interpret the texts (Borland 1991:64).

I recognized that when choosing a method with which to gather data, regardless of which I chose, I was be constructing an interpretation of a narrative that I received from someone who lived it firsthand. Thus, I would be navigating my own positionality (as discussed in Assumptions, page 23), throughout.

Through my data collection process, I realized that oral history interviews were, as previously thought, very well suited for my research as they allowed ample space for participants to share their thoughts. However, constraints on time and location caused me to adapt my methods as I proceeded. As my research had a time limit of one month, there was limited availability of research subjects, including a lack of availability for very long meetings or multiple meetings. Oral history interviews can take quite a bit of time, even three hours to conduct, and the majority of my interviewees only had a shorter amount of time (roughly 1-2 hours) to meet with me. In addition, as my research is specifically about physical disability and my target community possesses physical disability, this posed guidelines and constraints on the length and location of interviews. Thus, some interviews were limited to one hour or less, and two of the interviews were conducted over Skype.

I constrained my research specifically to LGBT-identified individuals with physical disabilities living in or around Amsterdam, Netherlands. This was done for practicality, as I was based in Amsterdam and only had a limited amount of time to complete the study, and centrality to the event, as Amsterdam's Canal Pride takes place in the heart of the city. My method in finding subjects was to begin with the network of SIT Netherlands and then use the snowball method to find more subjects in the LGBT and/or disabled community. The snowball method entailed asking participants if they had any contacts, friends, or suggestions that they felt comfortable recommending to be interviewed.

Thus, with my methodology shifting throughout the course of my research, I had to have flexibility when constructing and updating a working interview guide. I have included the interview guide with this research, see Appendix, pg. 40. While I have included two different interview guides, the one for members of my target community and one for activists, there was



quite a bit of merging and overlap of the questions in practice. This is because, as is expected, each interviewee has a very personal experience, and some of my two subject 'groups' had overlap with members of the LGBT and disabled community engaging in activism. To address key concepts of accessibility, identity, community, and normalization through the interview process, I focused questions directly around lived experiences. I asked specific questions about how interviewees identify and how they felt in particular community events. I also asked questions about the experiences that interviewees have had in Canal Pride, whether or not they felt more comfortable spending time with other people with disabilities or integrated into an able-bodied crowd. Questions such as these paved the way for discussion on identity salience and normalization. Given the flexible nature of interviewing, I want to acknowledge that I asked some questions during the interviews that did not in any way coincide with the guides and were entirely situational.

## **V. Assumptions**

First and foremost, my position as a lesbian yet non-physically disabled woman has affected the way in which I have conducted my research. It is not only respectful, but also ethical to recognize who I am as a researcher and what role I play in my data collection and analysis. To use the framework of intersectionality to contextualize what it means for me to identify as a member of the LGBTQ community but not the disabled community, I can explain the biases that I brought to this study and have tried to deconstruct in addition to uncovering my own interest in the topic and why I pursued this research.

What does it mean that I possess one identity being discussed in my research but not the other? I acknowledge, and also lived through the experiences of conducting interviews, that being a lesbian, an identity that I shared with my interviewees, created a shared connection when speaking of LGBT issues and events. However, being an able-bodied woman also meant that I held a certain amount of privilege in my data collection (and in the rest of my life). There are many factors that construct the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee, and these two aspects, queerness and disability, were particularly potent in their relation to my topic. I found through data collection that one of the most useful ways to respectfully acknowledge my able-bodied identity was to listen very closely to interviewees and not assume that my research was there to 'fix' anything or uncover a grave injustice. Not only is claiming a disabled identity a contestable phenomenon, but I also had a perception of Canal Pride and its (in)accessibility before I began to carry out my data collection and research which I carefully need to deconstruct. As an able-bodied person, I can recognize that the accessibility of Amsterdam for people with

disabilities is not perfect, yet I believe that quantifying that accessibility is nearly impossible and absolutely appropriate for someone who is not disabled.

As I attempt to understand my own interest in the topic, I am drawn to an experience that I had the summer when I was 19 years old. I tore my anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in my left knee and was rendered temporarily disabled for nearly five months. I was unable to walk without the use of a wheelchair or crutches for three months, and for another two months I had limited mobility and needed a large metal brace to assist in walking. I do not claim a disabled identity because of this experience, nor do I attempt to claim knowledge of an identity that I do not possess. While I believe that I could have chosen to claim a disabled identity at the time of my injury, and can even today understand the ways in which the body does not ever ‘go back to normal,’ even after temporary injury, I still choose not to claim that. However, I will highlight the experience to further explain why I am interested in the intersection between queerness and disability. As Nancy Hirschmann (2013) says, “... disability can and often does happen suddenly ... the rapidity and suddenness of ... bodily changes remind us that our bodies are not essentially given to us but rather are in states of flux...” (pg.142). I had previously thought of my able-bodied and lesbian identities as both fixed aspects of myself, but just as this experience challenged that belief, I would like to address in my research the different ways in which people find fluidity and salience in their multiple identities.

## **VI. Data Analysis**

### *a. Interviewee Background*

To provide context for my interviewees and their responses, I have included a brief background to each subject. Some names are changed, not fully disclosed, or kept anonymous for the sake of interviewees' privacy.

1. Mariska de Swart is an activist and engaged community member in the LGBT and disabled communities of Amsterdam. She identifies as a lesbian, is middle-aged, and is in a wheelchair. She had an injury as a 26-year-old that made her require the use of the chair. Mariska worked with the COC (see page 28 for explanation of COC) prior to her injury, and afterwards was asked by the COC and personally motivated to create Roze Wielen. She was in charge of the project until it suffered a governmental funding issue and had to terminate.
2. Rijkjan Sikkell is an activist in the LGBT community with the COC. He identifies as gay and is over 50 years old. He works with Café Oké, a group within the COC that organizes monthly meetings for LGBT people with mental disabilities.
3. Irene Hemelaar is the Head of LGBTI Emancipation (former title Director of Content) with Amsterdam Gay Pride. She identifies as lesbian and is middle-aged.
4. E.B. identifies as gay and is disabled. He acquired a disability later in his life and he now uses a wheelchair. He is a member of Rainbow Wheels, an online group for people who are LGBT and disabled.

5. Maarten Dertien identifies as gay and is disabled. He had a spinal cord injury that has made him immobile, and he uses a wheelchair. He is a member of Rainbow Wheels.

To provide a brief context for the groups and community projects within Amsterdam specifically focused around disability and LGBT: the COC, *Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum, Nederlands* is the national organization in the Netherlands specifically planning and organizing for LGBT people, and the COC Amsterdam (local branch) has many special groups, including what was once known as Roze Wielen, Pink Wheels (COC Amsterdam, 2014). Roze Wielen was a group for LGBT people with physical disabilities but has since stopped organizing (Mariska, 2014). I have also found through personal exploration on the internet that there is a group in existence for LGBT people with physical disabilities in Amsterdam on Facebook called “Rainbow Wheels.” The group has no other official website (Facebook, 2014).

*b. Experiences of the LGBT and Disabled Community in Amsterdam*

With the prior knowledge through literature investigation and interview planning that Roze Wielen is now inactive and that Rainbow Wheels is an online support group with no physical meetings, I have sought multiple testimonies about the existence and behaviors of the LGBT-disabled community in Amsterdam. The following are interpretations of the state of this community in Amsterdam. Through my interview with Rijkjan, he talked of the COC Amsterdam, Café Oké, and the former Roze Wielen:

The idea from the COC is that the people out of the group, that they themselves should become active. That is not an organization to do things for other people; they organize people who are doing it themselves. That gives power to the people. I met a number of

people that wanted to become active, but most times you had one meeting and then after that there was some reason they had to stop. They were always very busy with keeping their life; to have a disability, to have work, children - and there were a number of women with children - they had a lot of things to do. The reason they became involved was because of their own problems, that there was no room to see or to work on the problems for other people. Well that is a pity. We were thinking about having a meeting once a month in a place where you can very easily come by public transport or with a car, to have a measure of people with disabilities, their friends, other people, and a more interesting social neighborhood, but until now we didn't have enough people to do that (Sikkel, 2014).

Although Rijkjan similarly holds an activist perspective, contestable as 'outsider' to the community, he describes here the way in which the community must organize itself.

Furthermore, he highlights a key point to the LGBT-disabled community here in Amsterdam: that it is very strong and enthusiastic, yet hard to organize. This, in some ways, is synonymous with the information that I gathered from Mariska, the former organizer of Roze Wielen, yet she had a slightly different take on the situation. When I asked her about the beginning and ending of Roze Wielen, she said:

[When you are disabled] you can't meet other people. And when you are with handicapped people and you can't talk about being lesbian. And when you're with lesbian people, your disability doesn't exist. You're living in separated worlds. I didn't know other people dealing with it. I knew a friend of mine was doing a project like this for gay people with mental disabilities [Café Oké] ... this is how I came with the project. And they said it needs to be more supported, more professional, so I made a project plan

and went to the COC to get the money for it. So it became in the beginning more professional; we went to the ministry to get money. In the end, there were some problems with the money, but I will not talk about that anymore. In the end, it did not roll out the way it was supposed to be, but that was something with the government (de Swart, 2014).

When I followed up to ask if the ending of Roze Wielen was due to financial and organizational issues as opposed to other additional factors, she clarified that a lack of participation or interest was not an issue for the program, and that there were plenty of active members. She said:

Yes, of course [there was interest]. I tried ways to find other people with a disability, and who are gay. There are a lot of them. Especially women... It's obvious that in the lesbian world, a lot of women have a disability. A big part of them became lesbian, well let's not say became lesbian, but got a lesbian life, once they had a handicap ... I don't know what it is. It's obvious it's a lot of women. Gay men are very hard to find. They will exist but are hard to find (de Swart, 2014).

This distinction between men and women aside, Mariska very clearly here states that there was active and enthusiastic interest in starting, if not maintaining, LGBT-disabled community work here in Amsterdam. The LGBT-disabled community exists here in Amsterdam, and furthermore, it formerly did, and continues to, want to keep a presence in lives of members and allies.

### *c. Navigation of Identity*

The existing community of LGBT-identified people who have disabilities in Amsterdam is partially contingent upon questions of identity; if one does not identify as disabled while still

possessing a disability, they may respond in a variety of ways to participating in the LGBT-disabled community. Thus, each interviewee had a personal opinion about identifying as disabled even though all identified as lesbian or gay, and I explore here the ways that these identities intersect. When I asked Mariska if she identified as disabled:

No, I'm against it. And when I see - and this is stupid to say - when I see too many people with a disability, I think, "*Ok, it's not me. Stay there, and I will be here.*" I avoid it. But this project [Roze Wielen]; I love to do the project. But as a person, I'd never go there. Something's different for me, to do it as a professional, or to do it as a member ... Of course, I am connected [to the community]. But I keep it far away. I know the problems, I know what they are going through, I know all the things, and I know what's going wrong in the communities, but it's not me. I'm not really one of them (de Swart, 2014).

Her embodiment of homosexuality and disability clearly involves different identity formations; she does not identify as disabled while she does identify as lesbian. However, her reluctance to align herself with the disabled community juxtaposed with her enthusiasm and drive to complete activist work in the same community highlights the way in which bodies are fluid (she developed her disability later in life) and identities are fluid. E.B. had a different take on his identity as disabled:

I have it [my disability], but because I have also had it for a long time, I am it. I am it, but a lot of people say to me that, "The first time I saw you, I saw the chair, but now I see you. I don't see the chair anymore, I see you" (E.B. 2014).

E.B. simultaneously speaks of the internal and external navigation of identity; he draws attention to the fact that identities are assumed by others as much as they are personally claimed.



Further analysis does question the concept of ally-ship. All of these interviewees identified as lesbian or gay, so they had an ‘insider’ connection to the LGBT community. For example, however, if Mariska identifies as lesbian but not disabled, although she may possess a disability, does that make her an ally to the disabled community with her activism? I analyzed through her interview responses that her possession of a disability gives her a unique insight to the disabled community. Thus, identity, community, and activism are not mutually exclusive concepts. One does not have to identify as disabled to be a member of the disabled (regardless of LGBT orientation) community, and one does not have to identify as disabled to be an activist.

*d. Modes of Participation and Accessibility*

As I have researched one singular event, Amsterdam Canal Pride, I have to recognize that this is only one example, one access point from which to assess the LGBT-disabled community.

This event has widespread popularity, even global popularity, and is in its 19th year of participation (Foundation AGP, 2014). Thus, the attitude of participants and attendees of the Canal Parade and the accessibility of the event will be specifically adapted to its popularity.

Irene Hemelaar of Amsterdam Gay Pride claims on the current state of accessibility at Pride that:

Well the Amsterdam Gay Pride isn’t very accessible ... There isn’t a special area for people in wheelchairs [at the closing party on Rembrandt Square] and of course you are that much lower. A friend of mine who is in a wheelchair, she really experienced people throwing beer over her, ignoring her, just not seeing her. And so the progress we made was to create at the Canal Parade a special area for people in wheelchairs, so people who contacted us and said “I’m coming in a wheelchair is there a special area?” We could say, “Yes.” Next year we want to put it in our newspaper: “There is a special wheelchair

area, it's not that big, but if you want to, please contact us so we can arrange to have space for you in that particular area." It is on the Prinsengracht, it's very nice. So that's the first step. So this year we are going to invite all kinds of people with disabilities regarding being able to walk ... we are going to gather all these people and ask them what they need. Because we can think of anything [to make it accessible], but then we can make mistakes (Hemelaar, 2014).

While Irene is speaking in this case of the multiple different events of Amsterdam's Gay Pride week, and as previously mentioned my focus is the Canal Parade itself, she highlights two main points of the currently existing accessibility of pride: the first, that the accessibility is not suited for some people, and second, that there are changes currently being made. Maarten distinguishes between the accessibility of watching the event versus attending the event, also speaking of the set aside place for people with physical disability that Irene mentioned, saying:

Last year, I tried to get on a boat, the boat for [age] 50+ people. But they didn't want to take me, because once they had had an experience with somebody in a wheelchair, and they think it's dangerous. I was shocked. What kind of discrimination is this ... Then, in the days before the Gay Pride, they said, "We have special place for only people with the wheelchairs, so you can sit and have a good place. So I've been there. That was great" (Dertien, 2014).

Thus, Maarten had a positive experience with some of the physical accessibility, but felt discrimination on other aspects. Irene continues on to discuss the changes being made to the parade, specifically the ways in which they are inspired and implemented:

They [disabled people] know, we don't. Unless we are going to sit in a wheelchair and ride around Amsterdam for a day, which wouldn't be a bad idea anyway ... We set our

standards really high ... Well, with everything that happens during Pride, it's the community that has to raise their voices. But, if the community is that small - let's say if we have, within our direct circle, we have about 4 or 5 people who have difficulties walking, then we have to support these 5 people to be the voice of a larger group ... I think if we pay attention to it in press, in blogs, on our website, these gayborhoods with bars won't change their accessibility for one weekend ... But we have this committee, and it has all these people in it, and maybe they will come up with ideas on how to make changes in that respect (Hemelaar, 2014).

This perspective, coming from a woman who has a long, and currently existing, employment history with Amsterdam Gay Pride and acts as a spokeswoman for the event, openly claims both that the event is not accessible and that the voices to narrate what is adequate accessibility must come from those with the disability, not from able-bodied people. This connects to the analysis in *Navigation of Identity*, pp. 28-29, of Mariska's activism despite her hesitation to claim a disabled identity. Regardless of whether Mariska 'identifies' as disabled, her experiences in her wheelchair give her knowledge as to what may be necessary to adapt accessibility for Pride, as Irene recognizes. As a disclaimer, if a group cannot easily attend the event, or has turbulent experiences with accessibility for the event, they may feel neither motivated nor able to organize a resistance. However, Mariska claimed that the attitude at Amsterdam Canal Pride in comparison to other LGBT events and spaces in Amsterdam is socially and emotionally inclusive, saying:

The Canal Pride, the gay pride, is something different. It's mostly outside... but it's accessible and people are very friendly. Just to compare it, when I go out, I get people

saying, “What are you doing out on Queen’s Day [a popular Dutch event] now? It’s too crowded, why are you coming out today? Why not a Sunday night?”

“Well, because it’s fun on Queensday, not on a Sunday night!”

But you know, you get those questions. But when I come out on Gay Pride, I get “Yay, nice you’re here,” because then you are one of them, and then you can go out. People say “Hey, I’m glad you’re out. You can’t go to the bar, I’ll get you a beer,” you know?

That’s going terrific. But when you go to a bar, it’s still not accessible. So that’s a real difference (de Swart, 2014).

Thus, again contextualizing Amsterdam Canal Pride as a globally popular event, it appears that the attitude is specifically celebratory. I would like to separate social and emotional with physical accessibility when analyzing this data collected from my interviewees. Irene here focuses on the physical accessibility of Amsterdam Canal Pride, although she does touch very briefly on the social results and byproducts. However, as an organizer, her focus does stay mainly with the physical limits of the event. Maarten discusses the ways in which the physical accessibility of certain aspects of the event affected his social inclusion. Mariska here discusses both the physical and the social accessibility, claiming that socially Amsterdam Canal Pride is quite accessible, a fact which she implies may even compensate or alleviate some of its physical accessibility.

*e. Being Normal(ized)*

Through discussions on the topic of accessibility at Amsterdam Canal Pride, I have gathered narratives on the ways in which LGBT people with disabilities can better experience the event, whether or not they would like to experience the event at all, and how normalization

factors into the experiences. In my interview with Mariska, she described improvement or progress for LGBT people with disabilities in Amsterdam as a process, which first starts with visibility and then shifts into integration:

It's about making a statement. That's what the boat [a float for LGBT disabled people in Amsterdam Canal Pride] is about. But in the end after two, three, four years, just to show we are there, to show we exist, we have to go into the normal boats. In the boats, two or three people are there with a disability, and you're one of us, you're one of the group. That's what I want to see, just in the end, that it's normal to be there. You don't have to be separated. First you have to be separated just because otherwise they won't see you. So in the end, it's normal that you go with a wheelchair to Vive Le Vie [lesbian bar in Amsterdam] or whatever ... First, you have to be seen. When you have a big boat, 80-90 women on it, and 1 person with handicap somewhere in the middle, it doesn't make a statement (de Swart 2014).

She elaborated to say that the separation of LGBT-identified people with disabilities might be a tool at first, but not the end goal:

All of the people I interviewed for the project [Roze Wielen], they don't want to be separate... You can only come if you are disabled and you are gay? That's no basis for having fun and meeting people ... So, people I talk to say "Okay sometimes we want to be with other gays with a handicap, just to talk about our own subjects." You know you can talk about having a problem ... It doesn't have to be negative, but you are understanding what I'm going through; that's more connection. But in the end you want to have a girlfriend, boyfriend. You want to have normal relationships. You don't find them in a special handicapped place. And then you want to go to the normal bar, to the

normal disco, cinema ... It's not so difficult [to make places accessible]. But people say, "Why should we do it? We don't see you disabled guys." No, of course you don't see them, because they can't go in ... Somewhere, it has to be broken. We are here, and we want to go in. And when you have that boat ... you say, "Okay we exist, you've seen us. We want to join the canal Pride. We want to join the events. We want to join at Vive La Vie. We want to go to the COC. We want to go wherever we want to. We exist and let us in." (de Swart, 2014).

Mariska's distinction here is that visibility is a means to an end, and thus Amsterdam Canal Pride participation is a means to an end as well. Maarten also spoke of the importance of Canal Pride as an event for visibility, saying "Gay Pride for me is important, because it has special boats. The special boats with meaning [such as the Moroccan and Turkish boats, et al]" (Dertien, 2014). He strictly speaks here of the political and activist importance of Amsterdam Gay Pride as an event. Mariska, however, even mentions the capitalist aspects to accessibility, claiming, "We want to go in, we want to join, we bring the money so you can sell your stuff, so you can sell beer, you know?" (de Swart, 2014). She simultaneously recognizes the way in which Amsterdam Canal Pride acts as a space of politics, such as the politics of disabled visibility, yet she integrates this into the reality of the event being focused around production of profit.

Thus, I analyze from my interviewees responses that inclusion is a strong goal in the continuation of Amsterdam Canal Pride. Inclusion both socially and physically was something that was stressed. E.B. said that, "I think I will want to go [to Amsterdam Canal Pride again when] it's acceptable for me, when people don't have to stand in front of me, but next to me. And when they do it of their own accord, without me asking it. Maybe that is the most important thing for me" (E.B., 2014). This implies a certain amount of hope; to aspire to be included

implies that Amsterdam Canal Pride is still an event ‘worth’ attending and that there are tangible changes that could be made.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Through my data collection and analysis, I have come to conclusions regarding my focus points of accessibility, identity, community, and normalization, yet simultaneously found points of weakness in my research and places for further exploration.

Interviewees, both LGBT and disabled community members and activists, expressed their displeasure with certain elements of the accessibility of Amsterdam Canal Pride, primarily physical. While there have been improvements made that have been useful, there is still much room for improvement, and there are plans in progress for improvements in physical accessibility to be made. In regards to social accessibility, Canal Pride appears to be an anomaly compared to most LGBT or other events in Amsterdam; while the parade has a relatively open social attitude towards people with disabilities, the majority of events for the LGBT community or other events in Amsterdam do not.

The LGBT and disabled community in Amsterdam is strong but has faced many challenges in regards to organization. While there were no directly conflicting opinions about the reasoning behind the termination of Roze Wielen and the lack of a current community space set aside for LGBT and disabled people, it was unclear what the cause of the lack of unity was. It seemed to be a combination of funding and structural issues, not a complete dearth of interest from the community. I conclude that organizational and continuity struggles could also possibly be related to identity formation. As I explored in my analysis, not even all of my interviewees in my target group identified as disabled if they had a disability. This did not necessarily translate

into a lack of willingness to participate in the disabled community, but a hesitation to entirely align with the identity, which could be a possible deterrent to excessive community organizing.

Furthermore, this hesitation to identify coincides with themes of normalization.

Interviewees were almost unanimously clear about enthusiasm for participation in Pride and the greater LGBT community in Amsterdam, but there was still recognition of the capitalist undertones of Pride. The overwhelming sentiment was a desire for accessibility to LGBT spaces for the purpose of integration into the greater LGBT community. I cannot conclude from this a position on whether or not Amsterdam Canal Pride is a place of relevant queer activism; interviewees had many reasons for wanting to participate in Pride and other LGBT events, both social and political, and their desires to participate in the events were so personal and individual that I cannot claim that the event stands for one certain purpose. Regardless, the event has the possibility to be a place of activism, specifically for the LGBT and disabled community, should people organize as such.

Of course, limits to my research do contextualize these conclusions. As I completed five interviews and heard many different interpretations of identity, community, and accessibility, I recognized just how small my sample size of participants was and how many more perspectives there are on my research topic. As I have mentioned, my research also lacked the narratives of bisexual or trans\* individuals, which would be an important variable to include in further research. In addition, while I narrowed the scope of my research to physical disability, I did not place any limits on what type of physical disability I was researching. Further research could include insight into the different needs of accessibility for different disabilities. In addition, as Irene Hemelaar indicated that there are changes to be made to Canal Pride within the next two years regarding accessibility (Hemelaar 2014), a replication of this study could be valuable after the changes have taken place. My hope is that this research has adequately given space for



participants to voice their narrative and provided an in-depth analysis on this global event of Amsterdam Canal Pride while still proving the necessity of further research.

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## Appendix

### *Oral History for Members of Target Community Interview Guide Sample:*

- I. Where and when were you born/where did you grow up?
- II. With whom did you grow up? (family, etc.)
- III. Can you recall for me how your disability first manifested itself? *This question will depend on whether the disability was present from birth, acquired later in life, etc.*
- IV. Do you remember the moment you became aware of your disability? How did you feel?
- V. How did your surroundings (family, friends, school) respond to your disability?
- VI. How did you manage to come to terms with your disability? What helped you in this process? Was there anyone in your surroundings that was particularly supportive?
- VII. When did you first start to notice the role that your disability plays in your life? How would you describe the role that your disability plays in your life?
- VIII. Could you describe a typical day for me?
- IX. How frequently during your day do you notice the role that your disability plays in your life?
- X. Do you consider your disability to be a part of your identity?
- XI. Do you consider LGB or T to be a part of your identity?
- XII. Can you recall the first time you ever experienced really 'feeling' LGB or T? Either identifying as LGBT or in terms of just having same-sexual attraction feelings, etc.
- XIII. Have you attempted to Do you seek to be a part of an LGBT community?
- XIV. Have you ever been to an LGBT event?

- XV. Describing the event for me: how did your disability factor into any/all of your participation in the event?
- XVI. How did it feel to have a disability at the event?
- XVII. Could you tell me more about your attempts to get access, both physically and metaphorically, to the LGB and T community? What are the challenges that you have faced as a disabled person to connect to the LGB and T community?
- XVIII. How did it make you feel and how did you deal with it?
- XIX. Have you attempted to become part of the Disabled community?
- XX. Have you been to any events within the disabled community?
- XXI. How did you feel being an LGBT person at that event? (if you took notice of it)
- XXII. What are some of the challenges that you faced as an LGBT person to gain access to the disabled community?
- XXIII. How did it make you feel and how did you deal with it?
- XXIV. (Assuming that you have been to disabled and LGBT community events) How frequently do you attend events in these two different communities?
- XXV. Do you find yourself more comfortable at certain events than others?
- XXVI. Have you ever participated in or experienced Canal Pride? Why or why not?
- XXVII. (Assuming that they have attended Canal Pride in some form) How physically accessible do you find Canal Pride for disabled persons? Can you describe how you felt the first time you attended Canal Pride?
- XXVIII. Can you describe for me how (if at all) you noticed your disability at Canal Pride?
- XXIX. Did it stop you from participating in any activities?
- XXX. How did you handle that?

- XXXI. (If they have never attended) Do you feel as if you have to choose one part of your identity to be more prominent when you visit Canal Pride?
- XXXII. Would you ever like to participate attend in Canal Pride? Participate?
- XXXIII. Do you feel like Canal Pride is a safe place for your LGBT identity? Disabled identity?
- XXXIV. What suggestions would you make to improve Canal Pride specifically for LGBT people with disabilities?
- XXXV. And would you have any suggestions to make the LGBT scene in Amsterdam more accessible? Bars, dances, organizations such as the COC, etc.?
- XXXVI. Is there anything we did not touch upon and that you would like to discuss?

*Opinion-Seeking for Activists in LGBT and Disability Interview Guide Sample:*

- I. What work do you do in the LGBT and disabled communities?
- II. How do you position yourself in the LGBT and disabled community?
- III. What got you started in your work? What drew you to it?
- IV. How did you contribute to the field?
- V. What would you still like to see done in this field?
- VI. Have you ever visited Canal Pride? Participated?
- VII. What are your experiences, either directly or indirectly, with the physical accessibility of Canal Pride? And other places like bars, dancesings, etc.
- VIII. How socially accessible do you find Canal Pride to be? Do you find it to be a safe space?

- IX. What would you like to see done to improve Canal Pride specifically for LGBT people with disabilities?
- X. Do you find Canal Pride to be an important event for the LGBT and disabled communities in the greater Amsterdam area?
- XI. Is there anything we did not touch upon and that you would like to discuss?