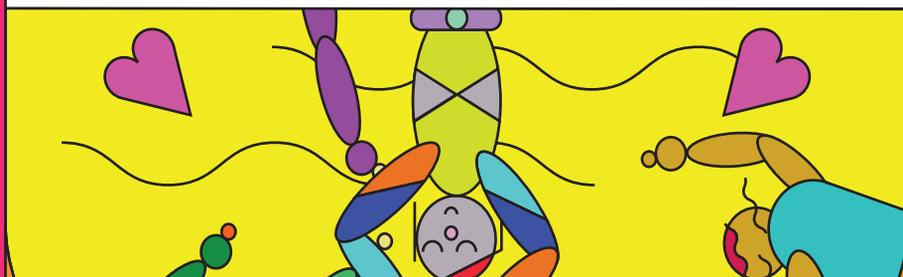


"And I don't know who we really are to each other"

Queers doing close relationships in Estonia

Raili Uibo



SÖDERTÖRN DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS



"And I don't know who we really are to each other"

Queers doing close relationships in Estonia

Raili Uibo

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the ways in which queers understand and practice close relationships in the political, economic and cultural circumstances of contemporary Estonia. The study draws on qualitative methods from sociology and anthropology and is situated at the intersection of queer studies, de/post-colonial studies, family and kinship studies.

The starting point is the Estonian emic term *lähedased* (close ones) and the related term *lähedased suhted* (close relationships). Closeness refers to proximity, both in the physical and emotional sense, and comes not with the equally loaded baggage of ‘family’. The focus on close relationships helps to decentre the typical primary focus on sexual or romantic coupledom, thereby opening up for the possibility of including various kinds of relationships that the study’s participants find significant in their lives.

The thesis is organised around three main analytical themes. Firstly, it engages with how close relationships by queers are made, maintained, transformed or broken in contemporary Estonia. Secondly, it explores the role that queerness plays in the construction of close relationships. Thirdly, the thesis investigates how practices of care are negotiated in relation to various temporalities.

Empirically, the study draws mainly on interviews and ethnographic engagements with non-heterosexual and non-gender conforming people who lived in Estonia between 2016 and 2017. The interviews were complemented with a methodological device called close relationship maps. Additionally, responses (302) from a qualitative online survey conducted in summer 2017 are used to further contextualise the results from the study.

The results show that a focus on close relationships allows one to account for a myriad of interpersonal relations that were central in people’s lives, even though many were difficult to fit in existing relationship categories. Yet the concept of the family could not be dismissed entirely either, since it played a role for a considerable number of participants in the study. All relationships were to a large degree shaped by widespread economic precarity. This accounts for why my thesis decisively distances itself from the voluntarist discourse on choice.

The thesis also challenges a common understanding of the closet that juxtaposes visibility and invisibility, silence and speech. Rather than “coming out” or “living openly”, research participants in this study engaged in various everyday practices of opacity with regard to their own queerness. Instead of hiding or separating their queer lives, they often incorporated queerness into their lives in an opaque manner. While this precarious balancing act was

conditioned by silences and willed ignorance, it nonetheless satisfied the purpose of maintaining bonds without ever challenging them.

Finally, in this study, queers in Estonia not only shared a sense of vulnerability related to their queer positionality, they were subject to the everyday precarity prevalent in the neoliberal, patriarchal and heteronormative state. Both the lacking welfare state and individualist tendencies privileged care along kinship lines, further contributing to the need to compromise between emotions, obligations and dependency. Negotiating various intersecting temporalities was central when engaging in care practices, as chrononormativity, queer/crip/curative time exercised pulls in different directions.

Keywords: Queer, kinship, closeness, intimacy, care practices, Estonia, post-socialism, opacity, precarity, temporality.

Sammanfattning

Denna avhandling utforskar hur queera personer förstår och utövar nära relationer i de samtida politiska, ekonomiska och kulturella förhållandena i Estland. Studien bygger på kvalitativa metoder från sociologi och antropologi och ligger i skärningspunkten mellan queerstudier, de/post-koloniala studier, familje- och släktskapsstudier.

Utgångspunkten är den estniska emic-termen *lähedased* (nära och kära) och den relaterade termen *lähedased suhted* (nära relationer). Närhet innefattar både fysiska och emotionella dimensioner och har inte lika mycket baggage som ordet ”familj”. Fokus på nära relationer möjliggör en bredare analys än det typiska fokuset på sexuell eller romantisk tvåsamhet och öppnar därmed för möjligheten att inkludera olika typer av relationer som deltagarna i studien tycker är betydelsefulla i deras liv.

Avhandlingen är organiserad kring tre huvudteman. För det första handlar den om hur queera personers nära relationer skapas, underhålls, förvandlas eller bryts i det samtida Estland. För det andra granskar den queerhetens roll i konstruerandet av nära relationer. För det tredje undersöker avhandlingen hur omsorgspraktiker förhandlas fram i förhållande till olika temporaliteter.

Empiriskt bygger studien huvudsakligen på intervjuer och etnografiska möten med icke-heterosexuella och könsöverskridande personer som bodde i Estland mellan 2016 och 2017. Intervjuerna kompletterades med en metod där deltagare ombads att rita en karta över sina nära relationer. Dessutom används svar (302) från en kvalitativ enkätundersökning som genomfördes online sommaren 2017, för att ytterligare kontextualisera resultaten från studien.

Resultaten visar att fokus på nära relationer gjorde det möjligt att redogöra för en myriad av relationer som var centrala i människors liv, även om många var svåra att passa in i befintliga relationskategorier. Familjebegreppet kunde dock inte avfärdas helt, eftersom det spelade en roll för ett stort antal deltagare i studien. Alla relationer formades till stor del av en utbredd ekonomisk otrygghet, varför min avhandling tar avstånd från den voluntaristiska diskursen om valfrihet.

Avhandlingen utmanar också vanliga föreställningar om garderoben som något som motsätter synlighet och osynlighet, tystnad och tal. I stället för att ”komma ut” eller ”leva öppet”, utövade forskningsdeltagare i denna studie olika dagliga praktiker av opacitet i relation till sin egen queerhet. Istället för att gömma eller avskilja sina queera liv, inkorporerade de ofta queerhet i sina liv på ett ogenomskinligt sätt. Medan denna osäkra balans-

gång var villkorad av tystnader och medveten ignorans, uppfyllde den ändå syftet att upprätthålla band utan att utmana dem.

Queera personer i Estland delade i studien inte bara en känsla av sårbarhet relaterad till deras queera positionalitet, utan de var också föremål för den vardagliga otryggheten som rådde i den nyliberala, patriarkala och heteronormativa staten. Både den bristfälliga välfärdsstaten och individualistiska tendenser privilegierade omsorg längs släktskapslinjer, vilket ytterligare bidrog till behovet av att kompromissa mellan känslor, plikter och beroende. Att förhandla om olika korsande temporaliteter var centralt när queera personer ägnade sig åt omsorgspraktiker, eftersom temporala aspekter som krononormativitet, queer/crip/kurativ tid utövade dragningskraft i olika och ibland motsatta riktningar.

Nyckelord: Queer, släktskap, närhet, intimitet, omsorgspraktiker, Estland, postsocialism, opacitet, otrygghet, temporalitet.

Kokkuvõte

Käesolev väitekiri uurib kuidas kväärid mõistavad ja praktiseerivad lähedasi suhteid tänapäeva Eesti poliitilistes, majanduslikes ja kultuurilistes oludes. Uuring tugineb sotsioloogia ja antropoloogia kvalitatiivsetele meetoditele ning asub kväär-uuringute, de/postkoloniaalsete uuringute, perekonna- ja sugulusuuringute ristumispunktis.

Lähtepunktiks on eesti emic-mõiste *lähedased* ja sellega seotud mõiste *lähedased suhted*. Lähedastele suhetele keskendumine võimaldab laiemat analüüsi kui tavapärase keskendumine perekonnale, seksuaalsetele või romantilistele paarisuhetele ja avab seega võimaluse kaasata erinevat tüüpi suhteid, mida uuringus osalejad oma elus oluliseks peavad.

Lõputöö käsitleb kolme peamist analüütilist teemat. Esiteks uurib väitekiri kuidas kvääride lähedasi suhteid tänapäevases Eestis luuakse, hoitakse või kuidas need muutuvad või purunevad. Teiseks analüüsitakse, millist rolli mängib kvääriks olemine lähedaste suhete konstrueerimisel. Kolmandaks uuritakse erinevate ajalikkuse aspektide ja hoolepraktikate omavahelist suhet.

Empiirilisel põhineb uuring peamiselt intervjuudel ja etnograafilistel sidemetel mitte-heteroseksuaalsete ja transsooliste inimestega, kes elasid Eestis ajavahemikul 2016–2017. Intervjuusid täiendati meetodiga, kus osalejatel paluti joonistada oma lähedaste suhete kaart. Lisaks kasutatakse 2017. aasta suvel läbi viidud kvalitatiivse veebiküsitluse vastuseid (302), et uuringu tulemusi veelgi kontekstualiseerida.

Tulemused näitavad, et lähisuhetele keskendumine võimaldas arvestada hulga suhetega, mis olid inimeste elus kesksed, kuigi mitmeid neist oli raske olemasolevatesse suhtekategooriatesse sobitada. Sellegipoolest ei saanud ka perekonna mõistet täielikult maha kanda, kuna see mängis rolli paljudele uuringus osalejatele. Kõiki suhteid kujundas suurel määral laialdane majanduslik ebakindlus. See on põhjuseks, miks minu väitekiri eemaldub voluntaristlikust valikuvabaduse diskursusest.

Uurimistöö seab kahtluse alla ka levinud arusaamad kapist kui millestki, mis vastandab nähtavuse ja nähtamatuse, vaikuse ja kõne. Selle asemel, et “välja tulla” või “avalikult” elada, kasutasid uuringus osalejad mitmesuguseid igapäevaseid katseid oma suhteid ja identiteeti hägustada. Oma kvääri elu varjamise või lahutamise asemel kaasasid uuringus osalejad kvääre aspekte oma ellu hägusal viisil. Kuigi hägususe saavutamise tingimusteks olid vaikus ja tahtlik teadmatus, täitis see praktika sidemete säilitamise eesmärki.

Lõpuks, uuringus osalevaid kvääre ühendas mitte ainult oma kvääriks-olemise positsioonist tulenev haavatavus, vaid ka neoliberaalses, patriarhaalses ja heteronormatiivses riigis valitsev igapäevane ebakindlus. Nii

puudulik heaoluriik kui ka kalduvus individualismile soodustab hoolepraktikate keskendumist sugulussuhtesse, mis suurendab veelgi vajadust teha kompromisse oma tunnete, kohustuste ja sõltuvussuhete vahel. Erinevad ristuvad ajalikkuse aspektid nagu krononormatiivsus, queer/crip/kuratiivne aeg, olid kesksed lähedastes suhetes asetleidvate hoolepraktikate läbiviimisel.

Märksõnad: Kväär, sugulus, lähedus, hoolepraktikad, Eesti, postsotsialism, hägusus, prekaarsus, ajalikkus.

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Prologue: My journey from and (back) to Estonia

Upon hearing that I was moving to Estonia for a few months to do fieldwork for my PhD thesis, my mother responded with a mixture of disbelief and disapproval. “Do you really want to spend several months here? Couldn’t you go somewhere more interesting?” Her deflationary reaction caught me so much off guard that I failed to ask her why she was not happy about the prospect of me being close at hand. To comfort myself for the unexpected absence of her joy over my return, I briefly entertained myself with a mock-application of postcolonial theories (e.g. Chakrabarty, 1992; Spivak, 1988). “Ah, hers is such a typical othering move, considering only ‘other’ countries exotic enough to do research on, doubled with a self-colonised understanding of Estonia as not worth much...” But that was a short-lived way of distracting myself from the hard knot in my stomach that had tightened a few more loops. I knew very well that the source of her distrust was based on a concern for my wellbeing.

And she was right to be worried. She remembered well my despair and depression during the few years before leaving for Sweden in 2010. Having returned from exchange studies in Germany and “discovered” gender studies/feminism/queer, I had acquired the tools required for analysing social injustices. Those newfound tools made me regard Estonian society with renewed criticism. Like a picture book example of an alienated queer, I was no stranger to any well-worn metaphors – feeling strangled by walls, drowning, suffocated by the colourful palette of naturalised racism, homophobia and sexism to which I so recently had opened my eyes. With a goal in sight – Sweden and Gender Studies was to save me – I survived the years that have later crystallised into this irritable hard knot in my innards. That emotional turmoil has necessarily influenced the analysis of the dissertation research, both by making me negatively attuned towards Estonian public policy and at the same time, perhaps, all too positive and uncritical towards my research participants.

Although on my arrival to Sweden I was quick to discover that Swedish society has equally much to be critical about. Social problems such as the rise of the extreme right, rampant everyday and institutional racism, the dismantling of the welfare state, among others, quickly replaced the image of Sweden as a social-democratic paradise I had created in my head. But those bitter discoveries did not manage to darken my overall sense of having found a long-sought-after home. Becoming a part of a small transnational queer circle in Lund/Malmö, and by extension an imagined Nordic/Western world of values, could compensate for anything.

Rehashing the common narrative of oppressive East (in terms of gender and sexuality) vs the liberated West did not trouble me. Vice versa, I thoroughly embraced the “lag discourse” (Koobak, 2013; Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011), according to which the Central Eastern European spaces are lagging behind temporally and needing to catch up with Western Europe. Fixating Estonia in this way helped me to become mobile as a subject, allowing me to become queer and embracing my identity as a migrant. In retrospect, I can relate to the danger of idealising the queer diasporic subject as always necessarily transgressing the categories of nation, home and family, since it misses out on critically interrogating the processes of globalisation that are at play in the production of sexual subjects (Wesling, 2008). Equally insightful has been the feminist anthropologist Kath Weston’s (1995) argument that the social imaginaries about urban spaces as beacons of liberation have played a central role in constituting Western gay and lesbian subjects. The institution of clear boundaries between urban and rural, East and West, are productive of particular kinds of subjects and make possible only certain modes of transgression.

Indeed, I had to move, so that both Sweden and Estonia as territorialised entities could remain in place. And once in Sweden, I felt compelled to cultivate that distance in order for the distinction to become real. Prior to starting my PhD research, I would visit Estonia once a year, but only ever for a short period. Staying away fulfilled a purpose, as any proper engagement with something would complicate clear-cut divisions and thus endanger a self-contained identity.

But even though I was physically away, this absence did not translate into emotional detachment. It was as if I could not let go picking at the scabs with which I had been left, whether in part self-inflicted or not. I kept on following the news and discussions through print- and social media, refuelling my anguish at the state of affairs and thus reconfirming the righteousness of my position. Having worked up a sufficient level of anger, I

discharged it in opinion pieces in Estonian media with some regularity. I was yearning to be a part of a rising tide of feminist and queer activism (that I had missed) yet unwilling to even consider moving back in order to participate for real.

What is closest to you, seems to hurt you the most. Somehow, I bear the actual political blows in Sweden better than this monster trope of Estonia that I have created in my head. Is this a sign of attachment after all, a more intimate one that I would prefer not to acknowledge? Can a rejection be a sign of love, an act of care? I can claim so with certainty about my mother's discontent at my return. But can my utter rejection of (the construct of) Estonia also signify love? I still do not know the answer, but in this thesis, I try to confront my own fantasies about Estonia, a (queer) community and my place within them.

1. Introduction

Ellis and I were hanging out in a park in Tallinn, a little gem hidden away in the central part of the capital that is home to around 400 000 people. The park is a little oasis of greenery placed amid an eclectic mix of grey Soviet architecture, on the one side, and high-modern glass skyscrapers towering over the picturesque but touristy Old town, on the other. We were momentarily removed from the slow buzz of this otherwise car-friendly city and instead enjoyed the midday heat on freshly cut grass, with the distant background noise of lawn-mowers and ecstatic birds. It was July and I was delighted to see Ellis again after several months. I had missed the queer circles to which I had felt lucky to be a part during my fieldwork in winter 2016/17. This was when I had gotten to know Ellis and many other queers that lived their lives in Estonia.

During those first four winter months I spent back in Estonia, I met Ellis on numerous occasions, during discussion nights, at queer parties, smaller or bigger dinners or hang-outs, and among different constellations of people. This time, however, we had a very concrete agenda for meeting up. On this summer's day, the tape recorder's red button was flickering rhythmically, indicating that it was marking down our exchange of words. She was not there just to soak up some sun and catch up with me, but to share a story of how she lived her life and her relationships. Ellis, a cis¹-woman herself, was in a relationship with a trans man.² Being highly educated and well-read in queer and feminist literature, she said with an air of matter-of-factness,

¹ Cis-gendered means that "one's gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth. For example, a person assigned female at birth identifies with a feminine/woman/female identity" (Sawyer, 2013, p. 34). The opposite of being cis-gendered is being transgendered.

² More detailed overview of participants' social characteristics can be found in Appendix 1.

My brother helps me with renovation and moving and practical things, and if he needs something, I will help. That is part of the family. That's what I think of as family. Mother, sister and brother. If I say that I have an event with my family, I do not mean some kind of family of choice. I do not use this in my everyday language. Family I associate with blood relatives. But of course, if you ask if Alex [Ellis's partner] is not part of my family, then of course he is. But just in my head, the connections to my family... Of course, I have read all kinds of theories and I know all that. But just in my head I link family with blood relatives and others are *lähedased* [close ones]. And *lähedased*, those are the people who I do not imagine my life without. Whom I see as part of my everyday life. Well, not every day, I don't have to see them every day. And I would like to hope that it is the other way around. But relationships are difficult. Love can be one-sided but *lähedased suhted* [close relationships] cannot be one-sided. It does not work like that.

While telling me this, she drew a map that represented her close ones, where she placed herself in the middle and various people around her, like rays of the sun. Those whom she saw as her family – her mother, her sister and brother were there, but so were various other people, like her partner Alex, many friends and even some people that she had lost, due to death or break-up. For Ellis, the very term “family” was only reserved for blood relatives. Blood ties, however, did not tell the whole story of how she defined family. She had, for example, omitted her father altogether, since she did not have good contact with him. At the same time, there were other bonds and relations with people on the map who fell out of her family definition, but who were significantly more important in her everyday life than her family of origin. Although Ellis's particular way of defining and delineating close people in her life was one of many ways I encountered during my research, it pointed to the importance of the category of “close ones” (*lähedased* in Estonian). In the queer geography of intimacies I explored, that term turned out to be much more malleable than the concept of family.

Lähedane (singular) is defined as “a dear and loved person with whom one is in kinship or other tight relations”, according to the Estonian Language Explanatory Dictionary (EKKS, 2009 my translation). I understand “closeness” in notions such as *close ones* and *close relationships* to refer to spatial and emotional proximity. As such, it is not necessarily related to heterosexual love or kinship constellations in the way the cultural understanding of family often is. Mapping close relationships immediately brings up issues of time, dependency (economic, social, emotional), and care, but also of intimacy. Intimacy in the widest possible sense of the term captures the relations that I am after. In the words of queer theorist Lauren Berlant

(1998, p. 284), it is “the kinds of connections that *impact*³ on people, and on which they depend for living (if not ‘a life’).” Nevertheless, I refrain from using the term intimacy, as it is often considered synonymous with romance and sex; my aim, on the contrary, is to also include relationships that de-centre the cultural significance of sexual and romantic partnerships (Roseneil, 2004).

However, translating that term to English is not an easy task. In this thesis I use the phrase “close ones” as a proxy for the Estonian emic term *lähedased*, even though I do not take close ones to have a fixed meaning. Rather, I understand it as a practice in constant motion and negotiation. In this sense I follow in the footsteps of a long history of family research that in recent decades has come to understand the family as a set of practices, as something that you “do” rather than something that you “are”. While the sociologist David Morgan (1996) speaks of “family practices”, it parallels my understanding of closeness as something that is a doing, a set of practices. However, as pointed out in the recent research undertaken by the feminist sociologist Petra Nordqvist (2017), the move towards everyday activities and habits should not exist at the cost of losing the discursive aspects of family-making. She argues that a focus on doing family must be accompanied with attention to “thinking family” – the various processes through which (often normative) assumptions and ideas shape the practice of family. I follow her lead and intend to tease out the nuances of both thinking close relationships and doing close relationships – practices which may not only be highly contradictory in practice but also build on each other in a cyclical manner.

Exploring the field through the flexibility of the term “close ones” has allowed me to move out of a conundrum that I had encountered during my early days of fieldwork in Estonia. I had started my PhD project as part of a research project entitled “Queer(y)ing kinship in the Baltic region”.⁴ I was thus heavily inspired by research that explored queer kinship and family making, and so I went to Estonia with the goal of undertaking research on queer families. But when I explained the topic of my research to people I met during the early stages of my project, it was met with confusion. “Queer

³ Emphasis in the original.

⁴ The Project Leader was Ulrika Dahl (Uppsala University, Sweden), other participants were Joanna Mizielińska (Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland) and Antu Sorainen (Helsinki University, Finland). While each of the project participants worked on their individual research projects, we had regular meetings, attended conferences and organised an international seminar together.

families? Do you mean my parents?” Or the other way around, “Oh but I do not have children/I don’t have a partner, so I do not really have a family”. After a while of going around in a vicious circle of misunderstandings, I realised that my questions had been shaped by previous research in which the concept of “family” was used also to encompass practices of intimacy. The concept of family turned out not to be quite as malleable and relatable to my interviewees and how they lived queer lives in Estonia. In Estonia, the term family seems to mean intergenerational relations based on heterosexual reproduction and not a group of people who care for each other.

After continued conversations with participants I eventually moved away from “family”⁵ and during the actual phase of recruiting people for interviews, I used the less loaded term *lähedased* (close ones) and *lähedased suhted* (close relationships) as a trigger for conversation. A whole new arena of queer kinship making opened up in front of me, as the participants were no longer bound by the more normative concept of family and could reflect on various constellations of care, dependency and intimacy that relationships with their close ones were comprised.

1.1 Aim and research questions

Using *lähedased* as my starting point, this thesis investigates queer relationship and kinship practices in the local political, economic, cultural and social circumstances of contemporary Estonia. As the quote in the title, “And I don’t know who we really are to each other” suggests, the thesis grapples with questions of relationality and how it is lived and named. Thus, the overarching aim is to explore and analyse different ways in which queers in Estonia understand and practice close relationships, and how these relationships are shaped by culturally and historically contextual understandings of family, closeness and kinship, as well as legal, material and economic conditions.

Through a qualitative mixed-methods approach, I answer the following thematic sub-questions in the analytical chapters of my thesis:

⁵ This is not to say that the term family would not be used, but it has a rather limited definition in Estonian public discourse, which explains the incomprehension I was met with during my attempts to seek multiple and varied meanings of the term. Family is sometimes included in the understanding of close ones, whereas some other participants preferred to think of their family outside of the frame of their closest ones.

- How are close relationships made, maintained, transformed or broken by queers in contemporary Estonia?
- How do queers in Estonia relate to their close ones in terms of their queerness?
- How do queers in Estonia negotiate practices of care in relation to various temporalities?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted five months of ethnographic fieldwork, held nineteen interviews with queers in Estonia, who also drew close relationship maps during the interview. I also carried out a qualitative online survey to which 302 queers responded. My research methods and material are thoroughly discussed in Chapter Two.

1.2 *Lähedased* through the lens of theory

In the following sections I unpack the theoretical approaches that allow me to analyse the complex set of close relationships that queers in Estonia navigate in their daily lives. I begin by outlining some grounding theories for understanding gender and sexuality on which my thesis stands. Thereafter, I move on to discuss the perils and upsides of using queer as a bridging concept. Next, I explain my understanding of close relationships in relation to kinship theory. Thereafter, I discuss care as a central way of doing kinship that is applicable on both interpersonal and state levels, especially considering the widespread precarity in the context of Estonia. Finally, I discuss failure and affect as relevant aspects for understanding close relationships in Estonia. A few additional theoretical tools will be introduced in the empirical chapters, as and when they are relevant to particular analytical discussions.

1.2.1 A queer approach to gender and sexuality

This is a thesis in Gender studies and more specifically, in interdisciplinary Queer studies. At its broadest, this means that I draw on poststructuralist ideas about the self and power. I thereby understand there to be no innate, essential core to identities but rather that identities are constituted through discursive forces of power (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978). Moreover, following Michel Foucault's (1978) theorising, I understand power not as some all-encompassing repressive force but as a disciplinary network consisting of various *loci* of power. Power is also productive, in the sense that it

produces both certain types of subjectivities and simultaneously allows for resistance (Foucault, 1978).

Foucault's theorising around the invention of the homosexual subject was also useful for my understanding of sexuality and the self. Foucault (1978) has shown that the social category of the homosexual (and accordingly, heterosexual) emerged as part of the general multiplication of discourses concerning sex that occurred in the Western world at the end of the 19th century. This psycho-medical category of the homosexual was introduced to refer to fundamental (and also all-encompassing) aspects of the individual, rather than a forbidden sexual practice (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). However, it is important to note that while the cultural understanding of homosexuality was created at a specific temporo-spatial location, for particular purposes, people have always practiced same-sex acts.⁶

Equally informative for my research has been queer theorist Judith Butler's (1990) work in demonstrating the constructed character of gender and sexual identities. She argues that gender identity is not based on pre-discursive biological realities of sex, but rather the very act of dividing human bodies into two separate and opposing sexes is always already informed by cultural interpretations (Butler, 1990, p. 8). This illusion of binary gender is produced and maintained by constant stylisation of bodies and is thus performative in nature. But it is not only binary gender that is compulsory for being culturally intelligible; appropriate sexual desire to the "opposite" sex is also a prerequisite. So both gender and sexuality are simultaneously regulated, since desire is supposed to be naturally structured along the lines of binary gender division (Butler, 1990, p. 23). Butler thus challenges the existence of a true and autonomous self that would remain static over periods of time and emerge from within, rather than it being culturally produced.

This heavily regulated order of gender and sexuality produces the expectation that everyone is heterosexual and cis-gendered. The fluidity and plurality of gender and sexuality is hidden from view and only one way of being intelligible in the world is highlighted as natural. The appropriate term to summarise such social order is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity, as defined by the gender and sexuality scholar Janet Jakobsen

⁶ The term "same-sex" still operates within a binary gender model which is in itself a product of history rather than a biological given (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Needing to rely on such reductive categories in order to be intelligible refers to the impossibility of operating outside of the current discourse on gender and sexuality.

(1998, p. 518), “normalises heterosexuality, making heterosex the normal term, the commonsensical position, unremarkable and everyday, in relation to which nonheterosex is queer, odd, to be commented on and policed”. When those who live up to heteronormative expectations are unmarked and taken for granted, then the others who deviate from the heteronorm are rendered unintelligible. In order to become intelligible in this system of discourses, they are compelled to declare their particular gender or sexual identity and through that enter into the binary systems of hetero/homosexuality and cis/transgender (Kopelson, 2002). The need to come out of the closet exists because there is the cultural expectation about the coherence of gender, sex and sexuality. Such heteronormative expectations and compulsions are heavily criticised by Queer studies, a point I shall return in the coming section.

1.2.2 Queer (bonds)

I understand “queer” in “Queer studies” to pertain to both practices and identities. Queer is both a verb and a noun. It is an active verb, insofar that *queering* is about opening up and calling into question various norms. But, also, queer is a noun designating queer subjects, that is, it operates as an umbrella term for those who do not live heteronormative lives. Queer theory is known to critically deconstruct heterosexuality and heteronormativity, thus constituting a dissent from hegemonic meanings of gender and sexuality (Duggan, 1992, p. 225).

Historically, in the English-speaking worlds in which the term emerged, queer did not demarcate an identity as such, rather, it crucially signalled a critique towards fixed identity positions, including those of gay and lesbian. Queer was thus understood as more of a fleeting positionality, a way of relating to the norm, while trying to avoid being tied down to particular object choices (Halperin, 1997, p. 62). Standing in opposition to the heteronorm and refusing to comply with the dominant logics of power was something that especially demarcated the queer negativity stream within Queer theory. Theorists such as literary scholar Lee Edelman (2004) and queer scholar Jack Halberstam (2011) have in different ways insisted on embracing the negative potentiality and thereby embodying a critical position in opposition to the heteronormative social order. However, this has led to the understanding that queer necessarily always stands in resistance to norms and normativity (Epstein, 1996; Halperin, 1997; Jakobsen, 1998). Simply prescribing radical subversiveness as a norm in itself (see Zanghellini,

2009) is a dead-end, and in this spirit it has recently been argued that queer should be defined beyond anti-normativity (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015).

Whereas originally the term queer was used to mark the very deconstruction of steady and coherent identities (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990), it has increasingly been used as another identity category alongside the terms such as lesbian and gay. Even as such, it aims to challenge simple gender and sexual dichotomies. To complicate things further, the concept has migrated considerably between different contexts, such as activism and academia, along various axes of difference such as race and class, as well as along various transnational routes (Hall, 2003; Jagose, 1996). Starting out from Anglo-American contexts, the concept has also journeyed to other locations, including Estonia. In this thesis, drawing on the multifaceted and creative usage of the term and its rich history, I use the term as a bridging concept, a way of gathering various individuals and practices that fall out of cis- and/or the heteronorm.

Given this complex background, deciding on this terminology for the purposes of the present research was not easy or self-evident, especially considering its various and contradictory uses and the fact that the term is not very established in everyday use in Estonia. Whereas this thesis is written in English and thus uses the English term queer largely as an analytical tool, it must be noted that in Estonian language, the term queer has been modified into the term *kväär*. *Kväär* not only resembles the English word “queer”, but it also contains the word *väär*, which in Estonian means wrong or false, thus keeping the connotation towards non-normative positions (Kalkun, 2018, p. 167). Nevertheless, *kväär* has only had a limited popularity and is most commonly used in academic contexts, especially when discussing art practices (e.g. Põldsam, 2014, 2020), while other researchers (e.g. Kalkun, 2018) have used the English term when writing in Estonian. The usage of *kväär* in the Estonian context can thus arguably be tied to certain forms of material and intellectual privilege, insofar as it is mainly used in the rather inaccessible space of academia.

Importantly, with my use of the term queer, I do not wish to suggest that all participants are gender non-conforming, engaged in radically subversive sexual or gender politics or that they necessarily live their lives and relationships in particularly anti-normative ways. Rather, the ways of doing closeness, intimacy and kinship discussed in this thesis varied widely and sometimes both contradicted and opposed each other politically. Certainly, this may pose the question that if there is such diversity in the term's application then what do such lives have in common with one another?

And, moreover, what do they have to do with queer(ing) kinship and gender? Along similar lines, queer scholars Damon Young and Joshua J. Weiner (2011, p. 228) have asked provokingly, “What is the queer bond between the urban ‘assimilationist’ lesbian housewife and the radical queer outside the charmed circle of sexual normativity?” Such a rhetorically charged question nonetheless points to the fact that creating and maintaining binaries is rather untenable when it comes to people’s lived realities. In the current cis-heteronormative social order (of which Estonia is itself a part), even the more normative positions inhabited by some queers contain elements of opposition, while equally – truly subversive positions that remain untouched by established norms are themselves an impossibility (Weiner & Young, 2011, pp. 230-231).

In other words, however far from each other the particular lived realities and political standpoints seem to be, there are certain tentative (queer) bonds that bind these positions together. The bond that augments linkages between different positions does not manifest itself simply through a shared identity or commonalities, owing to the fact that people are not only subject to different levels of normative constraint, but they also take up different positions along the axes of difference. What then makes possible the augmentation of the queer bond between these different positions are the more tangential ties: “a laterally constituted togetherness that persists in the face of homophobia, sustains us, and allows queer life to go on” (Weiner & Young, 2011, p. 228).

Such are the kinds of queer bonds that fragmentarily and contingently connect the participants of the present study. Their wildly differing ways of understanding and doing close relationships separate them as much as their own divergent ways of living. Irrespective of these rich differences, all struggled to live and sustain themselves and their close ones in the neo-liberal heteronormative and nationalist context of Estonia. Using the concept of queer is my way of speaking about people with opposing politics, life stories and relationships with the help of a common term.

That being said, I do recognise the significant body of critical literature on the careless application of queer and feminist theory in Central Eastern European contexts (see Blagojević, 2009; Koobak, 2013; Kulpa, 2014; Mizelińska & Kulpa, 2011). The central argument by those critics is that Anglo-American queer and feminist theory (as well as activism) has achieved such a hegemonic position that all other knowledge production is measured against its standards. Central Eastern Europe’s sexual politics is considered to be lagging behind, while it is expected to necessarily follow

the steps of progress that the (supposed monolith of the) West has already taken. Considering the different historical development of these contexts, such expectations are both unfruitful and violent (Koobak, 2013; Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011).

Recognising the geo-temporal struggles in knowledge production must be balanced with caution against essentialising the supposed “difference”. In my dissertation, the aim is not to explore or argue for some pure difference inherent in the Estonian context, whose supposedly special and authentic character would need to be thought within a cultural vacuum. Quite the opposite, drawing on gender scholar Ulrika Dahl’s work (2011, pp. 153-155), I question the “territorialisation of ideas”. With that she means that, through the process of telling unified stories, the multiple genealogies of some ideas (such as queer) have been forgotten, which in turn means that ideas get homogenised and some locations become fixed as the true loci of those ideas – such as Anglo-American contexts for queer. Instead, I subscribe to the transculturation model, according to which ideas are not only in circulation but always transformed and reshaped in different cultural contexts (Cerwonka, 2008). Any challenge to existing theoretical paradigms can thus be posed not by aiming to create a space of difference that would be “outside” the hegemonic sphere but by offering counter-hegemonic narratives that complicate and nuance current frameworks (Cerwonka, 2008; Navickaitė, 2016).

1.2.3 *Lāhedased* and kinning practices

When approaching the issue of queer *lāhedased* as it is lived in contemporary Estonia, I understand the phenomenon as a form of kinship, or more precisely – as a set of kinning practices (Howell, 2003). Kinning is a process through which a person is connected to other person(s) and into a respective network of kinship (Howell, 2003, p. 465). In this section I provide an overview of theories that have been influential for analysing the kinning (and de-kinning) practices of close ones in Estonia. To that end, I mainly draw on theoretical accounts by, among others, Judith Butler, Juana Maria Rodriguez, and Elisabeth Freeman, in order to outline the key points of departure for my own understanding of kinship, namely ideas of care and interdependency.

First of all, kinship is a classificatory technology – a way of drawing boundaries of belonging (Franklin & McKinnon, 2001, p. 15). It captures both positions and relations that develop through kinning practices. Building on anthropologists Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (2001) and

Latinx queer theorist Juana Maria Rodriguez (2014), I understand kinship as a way of signifying both specific kinds of connection as well as disconnection, inclusion and exclusion. Even though the performative effect of kinship practices is a certain commonality and belonging, the connection and relatedness is achieved through drawing a boundary between the ones who are included and those who are not. This is why kinship in itself is fundamentally exclusionary, since it is based on the practice of distinguishing between kin and not kin (Freeman, 2007, p. 297). Moreover, like all acts of classification, kinship is imbued with power, participating in the mutual construction (as well as naturalisation) of “other categories of relationality – including genders, sexualities, races, species, machines, nature and culture” (Franklin & McKinnon, 2001, p. 15). Kinship thus tends to naturalise heterosexuality.

For the purpose of my thesis it is especially important to move beyond any binaries and think beyond the dichotomic logic of “in/out”. I thus take heed of Franklin and McKinnon (2001, p. 15), who explain that kinship can also be mobilised to signify “the boundary-crossing trickster movements that confound such classifications”. While strangers can be made into kin, kin can be transformed into strangers. In between kinning and de-kinning processes there are fuzzy areas of in-betweenness and shifting landscapes of kinship-borderlands. Following this, thinking *lähedased* by way of kinning practices helps me to make visible both the drawing of boundaries (between those who belong and those who do not) as well as the constant blurring of such boundaries.

Specifically related to *queer* kinship and relationships, the blurring of kinship boundaries has been intensified in the context of new family arrangements, assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs) and the global circulation of people (Butler, 2002). Butler (2002) has even suggested that it is becoming increasingly difficult to isolate kinship from other communal and affiliative ties. As biological and sexual relationships no longer have *the* central place in kinship relations, sexuality can sometimes be separated from kinship ties. At the same time, kinship ties can be thought outside of the institutionalised practices of marriage and family, with a legion of (ex)-lovers, friends and other relevant people forming a varied mix of important and close relations (Butler, 2002, p. 37). As will be evident in Chapters four, five and six of the present study, some people’s close relations disrupted previous normative boundaries, while for others the lines between kinship and community remained intact.

In order to approach the boundary-making practices of kinning and de-kinning more concretely, I also draw on the notion of kinship grammars developed by feminist ethnologist Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2016). Kinship grammars, Gunnarsson Payne has argued, function as a set of rules for determining what “counts” as kinship: “[k]inship grammars are mobilised and rearticulated differently in different contexts to form and re-form relatedness between people through processes of connection and disconnection, and processes of inclusion and exclusion” (Gunnarsson Payne, 2016, p. 488). Inspired by Gunnarsson Payne’s work, I have identified two central grammars: first, a kinship grammar of biological relatedness (i.e. the thought that biology “counts” most in determining relational ties) and second, the kinship grammar of choice (i.e. that what “counts” the most in defining kin relations is choice). As will be shown in Chapter Four, these grammars were sometimes understood as mutually exclusive, and thereby considered in tension with one another, while at other times participants drew on both of those grammars simultaneously, in order to make sense of closeness, relatedness and family.

1.2.4 Kinship as a limit of care

What structures the boundary-drawings of kinship? And, more concretely, what is the real-life outcome of the more abstract division, separating out kin from non-kin? Based on my research, care is an important category around which close relationships are built. When conversing about their close ones, participants would often bring up the topic of who they care *about* and who they are taking care *of*. This inspired me to draw on some ideas from Rodriguez (2014). Rodriguez argues that the act of dividing up people between those who are familiar/familial and those who are deemed strange/foreign functions constitutes the *limit of care*. With kinship follows the expectation to love our family and by extension – our nation – over those who remain outside. “That love, evidenced through sacrifice of our own desires, serves as the boundary of what is outside of our domain of care. It is through this repeated performative gesture of affective ownership, ownership that defines who we care about and who we don’t, that we come to be validated as parents as well as citizens of the nation” (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 47). Simply put, kinship functions as a limit towards who we care about and take care of.

However, human relations are complex, and thus any tentative limit of care is never hermetically sealed but functions more as a porous and flexible boundary. Kinship is not defined by static levels of commitment and love

but by constantly changing arrangements of obligation and dependence. People do not always care out of love or from a sense of belonging; there can be a “duty” or obligation to care that can also signal a lack of choice. Or, seen from the other perspective, changing care needs and practices can redefine the level and type of belonging. The messiness of lived reality thus corresponds to a messiness in kinship arrangements, disrupting the fictions of cohesion and of linear temporality that surround us (Rodriguez, 2014).

Certainly, not all care is carried out by kin or close ones, nor do all those close to us even care. Therefore, care and kinship are not irreducible to one another. I thus understand care work as a central kinning practice; it is a way of creating and maintaining a bond. The practice functions in a circular fashion – close bonds can be an effect of care, but equally care can be an effect of an already existing bond.

While I find the above definitions of kinship by Rodriguez and McKinnon useful in stressing the aspects of inclusion and exclusion, my understanding of kinship is further enhanced by accounting also for facets of human interdependency and vulnerability, especially as these experiences by the queer theorists Judith Butler and Elizabeth Freeman.

The focus on kinship practices as a way of addressing human dependency and vulnerability was introduced by Butler’s (2002) ground-breaking article “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”. For her, kinship is a way of organising and tending to the needs of human life from its inception until the end and is thus entangled with friendships, community and state. Literature and queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman (2007) has furthered this understanding by bringing together the focus on forms of care that sustain us in the face of human interdependency with added emphasis on the corporeal sphere. She defines kinship as “a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being’s body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilising all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another” (Freeman, 2007, p. 298). Freeman thus builds on the premise of relational interdependence that Butler established but she adds further reference to the corporeal practices of care. This is an important addition for the purpose of my thesis, because the participants’ close relationships were deeply entangled with various caretaking activities undertaken on a very material level.

Our existence and wellbeing is dependent on others, which is why I also rely on Freeman’s (2007) understanding of kinship as a technique of renewal. Both the very bodily reproduction of labour power as well as the

emotional attachments participate in the microsocal practices of *renewal*, which she distinguishes from state-level *recognition*. Recognition is tied to identity; in order to have one's needs met within the system, one must become a subject in the web of legal and institutional structures of the state. Renewal, on the other hand, relies on the actual practice of responding to the needs related to our physical and emotional sustenance over time. It thus tends to the bodily aspect of extending people's lives rather than focusing on the identity through which claims are made (Freeman, 2007, p. 299). The thesis pays much attention to the practices of renewal that emerge in everyday struggles for survival, while people's everyday lives were less focused on gaining recognition from the state.

A perhaps more commonly known term for extending human survival into the future through care is social reproduction. Social reproduction is the affective and material labour that "[...] forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus*⁷ and the cultural ethos in which they move" (Fraser, 2016, p. 101). Social reproduction has been analysed as a form of labour, thanks to feminist efforts in redefining political economy (see Rubin, 1975). There is also a recent surge in academic interest for care work and social reproduction (e.g. Armenia, 2018; Fraser, 2016; Hester, 2018). Social reproduction has over time been differently (and unequally) distributed along various axes of difference. It has been intimately associated with women and also in a further exploitative manner with women of colour, who have been used as a labour force carrying out care work that more privileged people do not wish to engage in (Armenia, 2018).

For the purpose of this thesis, I use social reproduction/renewal synonymously, while the slightly larger umbrella term "care" is used to encompass both of those terms in order to denote the labour of maintaining and reproducing human beings and their relationships.

1.2.5 Neoliberal precarity vs state responsibility for care

While the everyday care work of renewal and reproduction is central in our lives, it does not diminish the actual responsibility of the state for the realm of care.⁸ Seeking state-sanctioned protection through recognition of iden-

⁷ Emphasis in the original.

⁸ A more detailed discussion on the particularities of the Estonian context of state involvement can be found in Chapter Three. Presently, though, I am focusing on theoretical arguments.

tities or relationships is not the only way for the state to be involved in facilitating care. Instead, as Rodriguez (2014, p. 51) argues, we need to emphasise the role of the state in providing material resources in support of the people who try to nurture social bonds within various communities of belonging beyond the nuclear family. Focussing on the state's responsibility in facilitating care is especially important during times of welfare state erosion through the punitive enactment of neoliberal policies. By neoliberal I mean the ideology of free markets and minimal state intervention that involves policies such as diminishing the welfare state, supporting global capital and most of all, emphasising privatisation and personal responsibility both in the economy and in culture (Duggan, 2003).

Considering the impact of neoliberal policies is central in a country that has applied austerity measures more vigorously than most in the world (Sommers, Woolfson, & Juska, 2014). In fully embracing neoliberal ideology as the appropriate way of moving forward after state socialism, austerity measures have not been resisted but welcomed with open arms (Marling & Koobak, 2017). The harsh neoliberal reality that has emerged as a condition of post-socialism drives people to struggle for survival, compounded by the fact that state welfare provision is meagre in Estonia. Therefore, I choose to refer to people in Estonia as living in a condition of precarity. While precarity in the more narrow sense has been used to refer to the situation of lacking stable and secure work and steady income (Standing, 2011), I choose to apply the term in a slightly broader sense. Here I follow queer theorist Jasbir Puar's (2012, p. 170) wider understanding of precarity, according to which precarity is "dependent upon the organisation of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions" (Puar, 2012, p. 170). I therefore use the term precarity to refer to the state of existing without security, both in terms of the labour market but also due to the lack of a state support network. Job security is certainly a pressing issue in Estonia, especially because the position of labour unions to secure rights and proper remuneration is weak. However, due to the highly neoliberal tax system and low welfare provision, even those who are in the enviable position of having a secure job are far from being guaranteed an adequate standard of living. In fact, due to widespread precarity, there is a segment of

people who are struggling with in-work poverty.⁹ Precarity is thus a far-reaching condition that affects a large part of Estonian society.

Like most neoliberal capitalist states, Estonia is affected by the “crisis of care” (see Fraser, 2016). Feminist thinker Nancy Fraser argues that while capitalist economy relies on care work to produce and maintain people and their social bonds, capitalism not only takes that work for granted but actively undermines and undervalues it. By neglecting the possibilities for people to carry out care work, capitalism simultaneously jeopardises its own conditions of possibility (Fraser, 2016). Apart from that central contradiction between capitalism and care, there are other problems related to this impasse. Namely, neoliberal policies, which attempt to cut the costs of caring labour by relegating it into the private sphere, end up re-instating the division between public and private (Jakobsen, 2015). Displacing care from institutions to domestic settings both reinforces the gendered/racialised/sexualised status of care work(ers), while it simultaneously hides the actual intertwining of policy and intimate lives through that very same move (Jakobsen, 2015, pp. 82-83). Moreover, when public services are increasingly privatised, the expectation is that the “family” will take care of the care work that welfare-state institutions such as hospitals, kindergartens used to provide. As I will show in the empirical chapters four and six, this forces many people to continue to live in relations of dependency and obligation.

While the expectations to carry the burden of care work is certainly a strain on those who live in state-recognised normative family constellations, they might completely overwhelm others who are supported by a network of alternative relations. As neoliberal precarity does not provide enough support for most people, concomitantly it lacks interest in sustaining queer livelihoods that are outside of heteronormative bounds. Therefore the question, paraphrasing Jakobsen (2015), is not so much the recognition of those relations, so that they could resemble a family, but rather it is about the wider survival of everyone in society. A form of caring queerly, would thus address neoliberal precarity as a general condition of existence today, taking non-normative lives, rather than nuclear families, as a starting point for designing policies (Jakobsen, 2015, pp. 91-92).

⁹ In-work poverty means that despite having employment, the employees' salary is too low to help them out of poverty (Roosalu, 2013, p. 108). In contrast with many other European countries, in-work poverty is also on the rise among highly educated people in Estonia (Toots, Terk, Kasearu, & Trumm, 2015, p. 18).

1.2.6 Lessons from failure and affect

Active practices of boundary-drawing are involved also in the negotiations of legal and cultural norms that surround kinship. There is an ample body of queer critique directed towards queers who ascribe to the normative ideals of kinship arrangements, marriage equality and domestic family life. These critics argue that strengthening the monogamous couple norm and supporting the institution of marriage along with linear reproduction erases in this process other variations of kinship (e.g. Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2002; Halberstam, 2011). Moreover, hierarchies between “good” and “bad” gays are constructed, depending on how well they fit within the current heteronormative boundaries of legitimacy – e.g. being healthy, monogamous familial subjects, worthy of partnership and reproduction (Butler, 2002).

To counter the wish of living up to such normative ideals, some queer scholars have thus embraced the failure of adhering to norms as a form of critique and disruption of gender and sexuality norms in wider society (Halberstam, 2011). According to Halberstam, it is possible to rebel against norms by “failing”. However, as was evident in my research material, forgetting (or wilfully failing at) family and reproduction of established kinship practices were not readily available choices for many queers in Estonia. Therefore, the critical act of failing did not translate well into the Estonian context, where precisely failure meant something different. Failure, we can say, lacked critico-emancipatory potential, denoting instead failed relationships, failure to live up to expectations or failure to connect. In the context of neoliberal precarity and subsequent dependency and obligations, many kinship relations had to prevail despite the lack of emotional connection or closeness.

In order to make sense of this, Dahl’s (2014) work on failure (of queer love) has been helpful. Following Weston (1991), Dahl argues that due to the shift in focus from the deviant sexual practices of sexual minorities and towards an emphasis on the universality of love and family that accompanied social movements for recognition, studies of queer kinship have also tended to depart from love as a naturalised and unexamined starting point. Whether we are talking about the more “conventional” gay marriage and childrearing or families of choice and queer community, the underlying cultural assumption is that (romantic) love is assumed to be the central and organising affect for connection and belonging. Dahl asks what would happen to our understandings of kinship if we did not begin from the “idealisation of kinship as constituted through love” (Dahl, 2014, p. 153) but rather attended to how negative affects, including anger, resentment or

disappointment, also shape the making and breaking of kinship ties in meaningful ways. Attending to negative affects makes it necessary to account for disconnection and failure when making sense of intimacy and kinship. To that end, I rely on feminist media scholar Jenny Sundén's (2018) argument that even though disconnection is usually considered to be the opposite of relationality, it is in many ways productive of relationality and connectedness. Therefore, thinking through disconnection and failure as central to relationships provides us with important and fruitful ways of making sense of intimacy and kinship as a practice. Approaching my material with these theoretical tools will help me to analyse how negative affects, such as shame and guilt, as well as failures in care keep people together as much as love and connection.

In a broader sense, this means that I follow feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's (2014) interest in the cultural politics of emotion and more specifically, her proposal that we attend to what affects do rather than what they are. According to Ahmed, affects¹⁰ are social and circulate between individual and collective bodies, sticking to certain objects and bodies and making us in turn get stuck in places. Affects align some subjects with others, and this attachment creates the effect of "natural" communities or collectives, such as the nation (Ahmed, 2014). Affects are also attributed to objects, in the sense that some objects become associated with happiness, while others come to be connected with its opposite (Ahmed, 2010b). The appropriate objects of happiness are those culturally valued and expected, such as heterosexuality and even more importantly, family. Those objects entail a promise – i.e. that once attained, happiness will follow. Affects orientate us and thus keep us in line, since we are expected to align our bodies and desires according to cultural expectations (Ahmed, 2010b).

This approach is especially helpful in making sense of the normative understandings of kinship. Kinship relations are not only about practices; they are secured through inheritance, that is, through passing on "blood", values and property from one generation to another. Ahmed (2006) cautions that such inheritances are not neutral; rather they are normative

¹⁰ Ever since the so-called "affective turn" (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Koivunen, 2010), there has been extensive debate about the potential differences between affects and emotions (e.g. Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). While this is an important and interesting debate, delving into those discussions is beyond the scope of this thesis. Here I use the terms affect and emotions interchangeably, because, following Ahmed (2004), I am more concerned with what affects/emotions *do*, rather than with defining what they *are* or what the distinction between them might be.

insofar as there is always an expectation to reproduce the “lines” that we are given. The continuation of a family or cultural line is not automatic, but rather is the effect of continued orientations and social pressures which hold any possible refusers accountable. Ahmed thus describes heterosexuality as something that is passed on as an idealised social gift, a socially binding inheritance that carries within it a requirement of repayment as a condition of familial and social love. Cultural discourses have thus been inseparably ingrained into our embodiment, constantly guiding us and structuring our lives at every step.

All in all, these theoretical tools inform the analysis of my research material and moreover, help to outline the relevant previous research on the themes addressed in this thesis, which is the subject of the next section.

1.3 Building on previous research

This dissertation in Gender studies focuses on the way queers in Estonia practice their close relationships. As the theoretical framework discussed above indicates, it is located at the intersection of three major research fields. First and foremost, from its inception as part of a larger research project on “Queer(y)ing kinship in the Baltic Region”, it clearly aims to make a contribution to queer kinship studies. Secondly, and as a result of the particular findings, it also contributes to the wider research field dealing with queer intimacies. Since those fields in part overlap, I have chosen to discuss them in relation to one another rather than separately. Thirdly, and again as evident in the topic and overall research project, this thesis is a contribution to the field of area studies, more particularly to Central Eastern European and Baltic Studies. Since this is a vast and multi-disciplinary field of scholarship, my focus here is on a much smaller and still quite under-studied dimension of this field, namely queer research and research on queers in the Central Eastern European and Estonian context.

1.3.1. Queer kinship and intimacy research

Kinship is a topic that has been at the heart of anthropology since its very inception (Franklin & McKinnon, 2001, p. 1). However, after being governed by heteronormative bias for a long time, kinship studies have embraced queer lives as a fruitful focus for study. Moreover, queer studies with its insistence on deconstructing various norms have elevated the focus from queers being mere objects of research to *queering* kinship and deeply engaging with politics of belonging.

Queer kinship as a more specific subfield is arguably in the middle of a research boom at least in Northern Europe (Björklund & Dahl, 2019). For example, there have been several special journal issues dedicated to queer kinship matters in recent years (Björklund & Dahl, 2019; Dahl & Gunnarsson Payne, 2014; Mizielińska, Gabb, & Stasińska, 2018). My research contributes to this recent wave by building on many of the insights from previous research. At the same time, my research also treads unknown paths insofar as queer kinship in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and in Estonia, in particular, is less researched than in Western and Anglo-American contexts.

Certainly, it must be mentioned that much research on family, kinship and intimacy within Social Sciences already exists. For example, some prominent sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim have argued that ongoing processes of individualisation and transformation of gender roles have brought with them a weakening of traditional kinship constellations and thus have put questions surrounding love and intimacy at the centre of relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). But their own theoretical and analytical frameworks are often somewhat problematic, since they either lack any critical intersectional analyses or are fundamentally heteronormative. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, for instance, relate their discussion only to heterosexual relations (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), thereby making their research not relevant for my research, which specifically investigates queer relations. While Giddens (1992) does acknowledge (and even praise) the existence of non-heterosexual identities and practices, he at the same time over-emphasises the possibility to conduct relationships free of both gender roles and other traditional constraints, thus ignoring the structural inequalities that to a great degree determine people's relationships (Jamieson, 1999). I thus choose to rely on previous research that is informed by feminist and queer sensibilities; which is to say, work that is critical of heteronormativity and other oppressive regimes.

Research on queer kinship and families

Pioneering research on queer lives such as “Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship” (Weston, 1991), “We Are Family: Testimonies of Lesbian and Gay Parents” (Ali, 1996), “No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life among Lesbians and Gay Men” (Carrington, 1999) have opened up a refreshing rethinking of what doing family and doing kinship entails.

These works have contributed to political change by providing evidence that queer families not only exist but do so in a whole variety of forms.

For example, feminist anthropologist Ellen Lewin's (1993) research on lesbian mothers was partly motivated by proving that lesbian mothers were equally good mothers as heterosexuals; a motivation that must be contextualised with the fact that lesbian mothers in the US at that time were losing rights to custody due to discrimination. With the passage of time and owing to much political effort, other issues regarding queer kinship have emerged or intensified, depending on where in the world one is located. Recognition (of same sex partnership, though not all possible queer kinship forms) is no longer the main issue in some parts of the world, thus making it possible to pose the question of what happens to queer kinship after legal equality has been achieved (Leckey, 2015). As will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three, post-legal equality is hardly a reality in Estonia. However, lack of legal equality does not mean that other questions, such as those of precarity and the demise of the welfare state, social justice for different ethnic/racialised groups, social and cultural disenfranchisement of those not fitting in the bounds of the normative family, etc., could or should not be asked.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the "family" has been the most important framework within which much of the research on queer kinship is situated. Starting with Weston's (1991) research on gay and lesbian families of choice in San Francisco, and ranging to various other contexts, the family has been a central way of making sense of these relational ties (e.g. Croghan, Moone, & Olson, 2014; Mizielińska, Abramovicz, & Stasińska, 2015; Nardi, 1992). However, what exactly the term family denotes can vary greatly. For example, the term family can refer to rainbow families (Streib-Brzic & Quadflieg, 2011), that is, simply families where children are raised by non-heterosexual parents. At the same time, it can denote some more heterogeneous constellations of people. Without trying to pose these research foci as necessarily mutually excluding one another, it can nonetheless be said that there is a whole continuum of research ranging from merely studying relations that queers happen to have, to ways of queering those very same bonds and relationships.

The attraction of the term "family" is understandable, considering how much the family as a cultural construct is bound up with the promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010b; Nay, 2015). In fact, happiness along with other affects in relation to (queer) kinship have been the focus of some recent and highly relevant research endeavours. The turn to affect in Cultural studies

has not left kinship and intimacy studies untouched. For example, in her research on queers in Sweden, Ulrika Dahl has focused on the affective dimensions of defining and practicing kinship (Dahl, 2014, 2017). Moreover, in their recently edited book, queer scholar Tuula Juvonen and sociologist Marjo Kolehmainen (2018) take affective inequalities as a point of departure, in order to discuss the ambivalences and power relations embedded in intimate relationships.

Additional complications and nuances are added to queer kinship research by considering the possibilities that the digital realm opens up. Connections, desires, bonds and communities are increasingly enacted upon in digital spaces and ways of connecting. While separation between digital and “real” life is untenable, research still shows that some queers in hostile environments attempt to keep those spheres of their lives apart in order to explore their queer lives online and maintain a straight face elsewhere (Liliequist, 2020; Tudor, 2018). However, in many other cases the relations and bonds are initiated either online or offline, and then carried on and continued in the other realms, which leads to the blurring of online and offline spaces (Andreassen, 2017; Sundén, 2012; Yang & Bao, 2012).

Research shows that digital and other technological advances thus refashion the feeling and practice of kinship. While the interplay between social and biological substances has always been central in people’s construction and practices of kinship, it becomes further complicated with the introduction of various Assisted Reproductive Technologies. The social and the biological are called upon in ways that are novel and yet also maintain certain traditions, as well as refashioning them (Gunnarsson Payne, 2016; Mamo, 2007). While there is extensive research into queer kinship and reproduction, it is not directly relevant to reflect on these issues further here, since they exist more in the periphery of this thesis.

Kinship, intimacies and care

There are extensive overlaps between queer kinship and queer intimacy studies. Sometimes there is a slight shift of focus implied with these terms, but on other occasions they can be, and are in fact, used interchangeably. For example in an influential scientific work “Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments” by sociologists Catherine Donovan, Brian Heaphy, and Jeffrey Weeks (2001), the controversy is embedded in

the very title of their work.¹¹ Paying homage to Weston's classic of queer kinship at the same time as framing their own work as focusing on intimacies, their work thus covers many of the issues in one go. I argue, though, that very little would change if "same sex intimacies" would be replaced with "queer kinship". For the purpose of my own research, I think of intimacies more in terms of focusing on the grayscale of relations, while I see kinship as concentrating slightly more on various levels of belonging.¹²

Both queer intimacies and kinship research find that the boundaries between relationships increasingly blur. Indeed, it is not always straightforward to delineate friendships from family or from other forms of intimate/close relations, as will become obvious in my study and as has been argued by others before me. For example, already sociologist Peter M. Nardi's (1992) research shows that forming close bonds with friends can entail a political component, especially for gay male friendships. In his research, men's friendships frequently involved a sexual dimension, thus queering the meanings of sexuality and friendship in society and blurring the lines of normative intimacies.

Even research on friendship which does not involve any sexual relations, has the possibility of informing queer intimacy/kinship studies. For example, gender scholar Klara Goedecke's (2018) recent research on friendship between straight Swedish men demonstrates how the heteronormative expectations on what an "adult life" entails, forces friendship to take second place after romantic and/or familial relationships. Such privileging of monogamous, cohabiting, sexual relationships over other forms of intimacy has been tirelessly critiqued by the feminist sociologist Sasha Roseneil, in particular.

Roseneil, together with sociologist Shelley Budgeon, argue that despite a long history of different ways of doing family, the main focus of social research has been on the family as *the* place where intimacy and care occurs (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). In their research they have concluded that

¹¹ Other examples could entail for example the following: "Researching Intimacy in Families" (Gabb, 2008), "New kinships, new family formations and negotiations of intimacy via social media sites" (Andreassen, 2017); "Cultures of Intimacy and Care beyond 'the Family': Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century" (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004).

¹² This is not a categorical statement, but perhaps a tendency. As discussed previously, the lines between kinship and community are becoming increasingly blurred (Butler, 2002), which indicates that there need not be a major gap between queer kinship and queer intimacy studies at all.

many of those practices actually take place outside of the constellation named family – e.g. between friends or people not living together. Furthermore, they argue that queer research also participates in perpetuating the heteronormative gaze insofar as it mainly focuses on couple relationships, albeit non-heterosexual ones. This work has been developed further in a recent comprehensive investigation of the couple norm across various European contexts (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, & Stoilova, 2020). Inspired by this work as well as that of queer sociologist Ana Cristina Santos (2013, 2019),¹³ I have explicitly opted not to take the monogamous couple-unit as the initial focus. Instead, I take close relationships as a point of departure, thus allowing other forms of intimacies to appear in the present study.

Widening the scope from families to intimacies also entails a re-imagining of care. Roseneil (2004) argues that taking alternative intimacies seriously forces us to recognise the practices of care taking place outside of couples and families. Nevertheless, there are wide discrepancies as to who can resort to alternative networks outside of their family of origin due to issues of race and class (Carrington, 1999), urban/rural location (Sorainen, 2014), age and gender (Croghan et al., 2014). Intimacy and care among queers thus necessitates an intersectional¹⁴ approach to attend to the ways queer lives may differ from heterosexual paths. For example, a study on relationship patterns among elderly queers has found that especially elderly gay cis-gendered men were less likely to have access to the traditional sources of caregiving, such as from a spouse or adult children (Croghan et al., 2014). At the same time, queers were more likely to serve as caregiver for

¹³ Based on her work that de-centers monogamy and makes visible relational diversity, Santos (2019) has proposed the new and promising concept of relational citizenship. In her words, “[...] relational citizenship describes the ways in which one self-perceives and is perceived by others as being partnered” (Santos, 2019, p. 719). The concept thus engages with both the state and sociocultural levels and focuses on the possibilities or obstacles people meet regarding their relations. Since this framework takes significant relationships, rather than monogamous coupledness as the starting point, it resonates very much with arguments that I develop in this thesis. However, since I wish to foreground the specificity of the Estonian case, I have chosen to develop my arguments around the emic concept of *lähedased*, and therefore do not engage with the concept of relational citizenship explicitly here.

¹⁴ Intersectionality is a framework that recognizes the intersecting of multiple systems of oppression. In the words of the sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 205), “the point is to analyse the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identities.”

someone to whom they were not biologically related, friends and neighbours who formed their chosen family. However, non-kin caregiving circles had less resources available, resulting in additional levels of stress (Croghan et al., 2014). Inspired by this and various other carefully intersectional analyses, in my own research I have paid attention to the various intersecting obstacles as well as openings that queers in Estonia face when forming their close relationships.

Beyond mundane practices of everyday reproductive care, care of and for those to whom we are close can extend to the grave and beyond. In her research on queer wills, gender and law scholar Antu Sorainen (2018) has demonstrated how the act of writing a will can and should be considered a final act of care for their loved ones, thus extending their relationship beyond death. Queer kinship relations are also extended into afterlife through various practices of remembrance and rituals of memorialising (Alasuutari, 2020). Intimate relations to whoever we consider our kin thus continue to affect us all throughout our life, death and beyond.

1.3.2 Queer research in/on Central Eastern Europe

There is a growing body of knowledge on queer kinship in the Central Eastern European (CEE) region. Not only is this a sign of an expanding empirical field, but the localisation of results can help to displace current theoretical accounts. Research on queer kinship in CEE, to which my thesis contributes, provides not just new empirical settings for the investigation of queer lives but seeks to challenge existing theoretical frameworks and suppositions (see Mizelińska et al., 2018).

General strands in CEE queer research

Much attention in the region's literature on queer topics has cohered around activist practices and their societal visibility (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014; Bilić, 2016c; O'Dwyer, 2018). Pride parades, in particular, have been considered a central object of analysis in teasing out the local meaning-making around events in Lithuania (Davydova, 2012; Mazyliis, Rakutiene, & Unikaite-Jakuntaviciene, 2014), Russia (Stella, 2013), Serbia (Bilić, 2016a), and Estonia (Uibo, 2020), among others. Many of those aforementioned researchers also problematise their own interest in Prides; the Pride parade has become a litmus test of progress, marking a country's successful integration into the European liberal value sphere, thus "catching up" with the

region's geopolitical core (Bilić, 2016b; Mizelińska & Kulpa, 2011; Navickaitė, 2014).¹⁵

There is another important strand of queer research being undertaken in Central Eastern Europe that engages in critically interrogating epistemic power imbalances portray the region's queer lives and politics as lagging behind the west (Koobak, 2013; Kulpa, 2014; Kulpa & Mizelińska, 2011; Navickaitė, 2014, 2016). Their research challenges the totalising geo-temporal imaginaries that condemn the region's queer lives (along with other aspects of its societies) as trapped in an endless struggle with Western standards of development.

Much of the Central Eastern European research on queer realities demonstrates the agency of queers to negotiate their lives in post-socialist settings. For example, the majority of research conducted on Russia (e.g. Kondakov, 2019; Stella, 2012, 2013; Tudor, 2018) has found that the Western division into public and private spheres does not hold. Queers in Russia (along with many other countries in the CEE) compartmentalise their lives in order to navigate heteronormative pressures. At the same time, they create alternative queer spaces in public that, while not universally recognisable as such, are nonetheless local ways of queering the division between private and public (Waitt, 2005).

Queer kinship and intimacy research in/on the CEE region

My dissertation teases out the local ways of making queer kinship and intimacies in Estonia. My research therefore participates in the growing array of empirical research on queer kinship being conducted in the Central Eastern Europe region.

In reviewing existing literature about queer kinship and intimacy research within the region, two major trends can be identified. First of all, existing research often portrays cis-identified lesbians negotiating parenthood or partnership. Second, the majority of research seems to be conducted on various aspects of familial relationships – either sexual and romantic partnerships or queer people's relationships with their own parents. In the following sections I turn to each of these two trends in turn and develop my own research's position in relation to these tendencies.

¹⁵ Certainly, there are other forms of queer activism beyond Pride that have caught the attention of researchers, such as the Czech lesbian fight for the rights to adopt and bear children (see Fojtová, 2011).

Lesbian lives in various generations

While lesbian relationships, whether with or without children, only formed a part of my study, research on lesbian families in other CEE contexts has nonetheless contributed in grounding my research.

In earlier research on lesbian families in the CEE, what has been in focus are the rather general experiences and practices of parenting by lesbian women. Attempts to chart the diversity of family arrangements, identifying and naming particular strategies, ascertaining the division of parenting roles between parents, all facilitated reaching the political goal of simply arguing for the existence of queer families as a minority in various CEE contexts (e.g. Béres-Deák, 2011; Polášková, 2007; Sobočan, 2011, 2013). Research has also focused on the intricacies of constructing gender in lesbian families. Sociologist Kateřina Nedbálková (2011) found that lesbian families, who are surrounded by heteronormative expectations about gender and sexuality, often aim to counter any perceived inadequacy by stressing their femininity, focusing on the familial sphere, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the queer community. However, Nedbálková notes, similar to her Western colleagues (see Mamo, 2007), that lesbian families in the Czech Republic are neither fully complicit in current gender and sexuality regimes (e.g. the constellation of two women forming a family still countered the conventional normative ideal) nor fully subversive, or somehow above governing norms. These conclusions are not only confined to lesbian parenting, but, as my research shows, are invaluable in understanding how queers do close relationships, more generally. In my research I demonstrate how queers in Estonia adhere to (heteronormative) kinship rules, while simultaneously re-working them.

Moreover, previous research has helped me to take note of the importance of generations when battling queer relations and reproduction. Particular choices to which queers resort mirror the norms and possibilities circumscribed by society at large. After rapid societal changes marking the end of socialist regimes in the CEE, it is possible to identify very different practices corresponding to changes and shifts in norms. As demonstrated, for example, by sociologist Alisa Zhabenko (2015), reproductive choices among different generational cohorts of lesbians in Russia varied widely, depending on both societal attitudes and the availability of certain techno-

logies.¹⁶ While my research material does not allow any clear way of dividing my participants into such cohorts, I nonetheless pay attention to how generational shifts in norms bring with them changes in practices.

Practices in the (invisible) familial lives

Even though much of the queer kinship research about the region concerns lesbian romantic/sexual relationships and their offspring, there are some studies that have a somewhat larger scope. These particular studies focus on family practices that lay outside of immediate couple-relationships, even tangentially touching upon issues of intimacy.

A seminal study on everyday negotiations of queer kinship is the Polish sociologists Joanna Mizielińska and Agata Stasińska's project "Families of Choice in Poland" (Mizielińska et al., 2015). Based on a quantitative study, individual and focus group interviews, as well as on ethnographic observations, Mizielińska and Stasińska have written numerous articles about various aspects of those families of choice (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2017a, 2017b, 2019b). While they have chosen to retain the concept of "families of choice", which originated from the work of Weston, they complicate the term by placing it within a local context. In their research, participants made active use of the notion *family* because it signified a political act; what they yearned for was recognition. However, their definition of the family was much broader and less hierarchical than the heteronormative expectation that a family consists of heterosexual married couple with children (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2017a, pp. 4-5). Moreover, they found that even though participants often included, on a theoretical level, family of origin in their family constellation, practically, whether by habit or norms, the everyday lives of their families differed from the idealised norm. Similarly, I also found various discrepancies between people's definitions of family practices, on the one hand, and their actual lived realities, on the other. Nevertheless, my research differs markedly from my Polish colleagues, on account of my decision to de-centre the term family by instead exploring the more wide-ranging practices of close relationships.

A further highly valuable point made by Mizielińska and Stasińska (2019b) relevant to my own research, is that while a lot of conceptual work

¹⁶ There is a whole research field looking into queers in the CEE accessing and using Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) (e.g. Hašková & Sloboda, 2018; Leibetseder & Griffin, 2018, 2020; Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2019a; Takács, 2018). This topic is, however, beyond the scope of my thesis.

has been carried around queer kinship, it is not equally balanced by research into the mundane and ordinary practices of queer kinning. For example, in their own article they fill that gap by demonstrating how focusing on practices around food and feeding helps to understand the relationality of queer kinship-making. Inspired by the detailed analysis of such practices, my thesis contributes by paying close attention to the everyday practices of doing closeness and intimacy, which, even in the queer kinship literature, is an area that has been generally neglected.

Finally, another important result arising from previous research on queer family practices is that “a ‘good family’ also means an ‘invisible family’” (Nedbálková, 2011, p. 145). There are many facets to this phenomenon – not only does it mean that not attracting attention is a preferable way of going about one’s relationship, but queers in many post-socialist contexts can relate to the metaphor of living in a *transparent closet*, a concept introduced by sociologists Alenka Švab and Roman Kuhar (2014). They use the notion of a transparent closet to describe instances when a person’s family of origin acknowledges that a family member has shared information about their gender or sexuality, but refuses to discuss this information further or deal with what it means (Švab & Kuhar, 2014, p. 19).

The combination of not drawing attention to queer aspects of one’s life and making (un)conscious effort not to recognise traces of queerness, allows/forces queers in many CEE contexts to be in a liminal state of non-recognition (Mizielnińska & Stasińska, 2017a; Stasińska, 2020; Zhabenko, 2019). As is further discussed in Chapter Five, existing in such a liminal space enhances the possibility of not severing ties with one’s family of origin. Separation from families of origin is indeed no easy task in the CEE, since people are bound by bonds of material as well as emotional dependency (Mizielnińska & Stasińska, 2017a). In Poland, much like in my own research on Estonia, queers make an effort to be included in their families of origin and vice versa – for example, parents’ dependence on their children for elderly care makes it harder for them to sever ties with their queer offspring.

After having discussed the major trends in queer kinship research in the CEE region, I now turn to the small yet expanding field of queer research in Estonia.

Queer research in/on Estonia

My dissertation on queers doing close relationships in Estonia offers a significant contribution to a deeply under-researched area of study in

Estonia. Research on queer livelihoods in the context of Estonia is still very limited. As indicated by a review study that has sought to map previous research on queer topics in Estonia, gender and sexuality issues has seemed to garner little interest and have low status in Estonian academia (Papp & Kütt, 2011). A decade after this particular literature survey was first published, a slightly more hopeful trend of a growing interest in queer topics can be noted.

In the beginning of the 1990s, when the Soviet Union was collapsing, issues surrounding gender and sexuality gained a first surge in popularity within Estonia. The international conference “Sexual minorities and Society in the 20th Century Europe”, which took place in Tallinn in May 1990, was the very first such conference to be held in the CEE region (Kotter, 1995). The first studies were concerned with offering an overview of the legal and social context concerning homosexuality (Veispak, 1991), probing for attitudes towards homosexuality (Nögel, 1991), as well as representations of homosexuality in print media (Kurvinen, 2007).

Despite the initial interest in queer topics, no actual research settings for any sustained engagement with sexuality and gender studies developed. Queer related issues were only tangentially explored in some small-scale research projects by Bachelor and Master students, who formed the majority of previous queer research in Estonia. Senior researchers were mainly involved in non-academic research, such as compiling policy reports (Aavik et al., 2016; Strömpl et al., 2008), though there are some notable exceptions (Allaste, 2014; Tiidenberg & Allaste, 2020). Academics and activists together collaborated in an essay collection “Opening the closet doors: Discussions about homo-, bi- and transsexuality” (EGN, 2010). These essays were ground-breaking in their attempt to touch upon a wide array of aspects of queer life in Estonia.

The second decade of the 2000s has brought with it more research on queer topics in academic contexts, the most prominent research of which have been conducted in the form of two PhD theses defended in the 2010s. Firstly, there is Redi Koobak’s work on the role of visual arts in conceiving and reconfiguring post-socialist feminist imaginaries, focusing on the work of an Estonian contemporary feminist and lesbian artist Anna-Stina Treumund (Koobak, 2013). Secondly, Riikka Taavetti’s thesis in Political History, addressing both Finnish and Estonian personal and cultural memories of queer and undisciplined sexualities, touches upon fragments of

same-sex sexuality from a historical perspective (Taavetti, 2018).¹⁷ There is also an upward trend in exciting archival research that tries to find and interpret traces of queer desires and lives from glimpses found within public and literary archives (Kalkun, 2018, 2020; Põldsam, 2020). However, their research questions have not approached the topic of how queers in contemporary Estonia navigate their close relationships.

All in all, by writing this thesis I seek to contribute to the limited research on Estonian queer lives. Furthermore, my thesis also serves as a contribution to wider discussions within queer kinship and intimacies studies, both in general and in the CEE region specifically.

1.4 Outline of the dissertation

After having introduced the impetus of the study, presented my research questions, outlined my theoretical framework and provided an overview of previous research, I will now sketch the outline for the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two, “Methods, materials and research strategies”, outlines the research methods that have been used to both collect and analyse the material for this research. My ways of using the qualitative methods that I have applied herein – ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, close relationship maps and qualitative online survey – are discussed each in turn. Ethical concerns are discussed in combination with the analytical approaches adopted, and the end of the chapter is dedicated to discussing the multiple border positions that I inhabit as a researcher.

Chapter Three, “Estonian queer lives in time and place”, provides background information necessary for understanding the context within which queers in Estonia practice their close relationships. The chapter starts with a general contextual overview of the country, touching upon historical, socio-cultural and economic settings that have shaped Estonia into its current state. The second part of the chapter discusses the history and present of queer organising in Estonia, and also outlines the mobilisation around

¹⁷ I am aware of three other PhD theses being currently written on queer-related topics in Estonia. Firstly, Jaanus Samma’s thesis in Arts and Design carries the title “Mapping Gay Narratives in Soviet Estonia”. Secondly, sociologist Eveliis Padar is writing on the topic “Raising Children in LGBT Families – Accounts by Parents, Children and Specialists”. Finally, art historian and ethnologist Rebeka Põldsam is working on the thesis entitled “Sexual and Gender Minorities in Estonia: An Oral History”. It can therefore be said that an important breakthrough will be made in mapping Estonian queer histories and contemporary lives in the coming years.

legalising civil partnerships. The final section of the chapter digs deeper into the cultural and social practices regarding the institution of the family.

Chapter Four, “The close ones: making and breaking closeness in precarity”, is the first out of three analytical chapters. It is a core chapter in many ways, because it takes a close look at the meanings and practices of close relationships. It starts out with analysing the different ways of envisioning close relationships that participants draw upon when creating their close relationship maps. The chapter moves on to discuss the relationships that only became visible thanks to a shift in focus from families to close relationships. The chapter does not dismiss the notion of the family altogether but rather explores the different ways of negotiating families. The chapter ends by discussing the role of precarity in making and breaking different relationship constellations, while also paying attention to the contesting grammars of choice and biology on which people draw when making sense of both their families and close relationships.

Chapter Five, “Queer opacity and its conditions”, focuses on the role that queerness plays in constructing close relationships. Relying on the concept of *queer opacity*, it discusses the multiple ways in which queerness is something that both is and is not visible, that is and is not known about. The first section refers to ways in which participants negotiate ways of (not) speaking about their queerness. The second section investigates another aspect of queer opacity – that of knowledge (or rather the lack of it, insofar as a great deal of willed ignorance is required to maintain the balance of queer opacity). The third section discusses concrete ways in which queer opacity is involved in participants’ everyday lives – navigating spaces, touch, being located in between closet and confession. The final section of this chapter explores a specific type of queer opacity that emerges through conscious managing of queer leakages by posing as a queer ally.

Chapter Six, “Care – times and lines that bind”, investigates the practices of care that are involved in making and breaking close relationships and the temporal aspects that are involved in those practices. The first part of the chapter discusses ways of negotiating the temporal norms of success that are prevalent in the context of neoliberal (and precarious) Estonia. The second part of the chapter delves deeper into further temporal aspects of everyday practices of care, exploring the ways of navigating those complex and intersecting temporal drives that emerge in the midst of everyday reproduction. The chapter ends by discussing various negative aspects such as failure, control, and dependency, all of which become especially central in the context of increasing precarisation and low levels of state provision.

Chapter Seven, the final chapter in this thesis, consists of concluding discussions. It both summarises the findings from previous analytical chapters, gives an account of how this thesis contributes to queer kinship studies, while also pointing to possibilities for future research.

In between chapters there are sections that I call interludes. These are short ethnographical reflections that relate to the chapter they precede. It is a way of grounding the research even further in ethnographic data.¹⁸

¹⁸ I was inspired by migration scholar Sara Ahlstedt's (2016) dissertation on queer partner migration that included ethnographical interludes between its own analytical chapters.

Interlude: Early steps towards connecting

OMA keskus, the LGBT Centre's headquarters in Tallinn celebrated its 5th birthday on September 23rd, 2016 and I had flown there from Sweden to make some connections before my fieldwork was due to start in November of that year. I was on my way to the party with a box of Aladdin pralines in my bag. Since the party was both a celebration and a fundraiser, guests had been asked to contribute not only with as much as they could afford to donate, but also to bring some snacks or drinks along to the festivities. Travelling to the event from Sweden, I got the urge to bring something "Swedish" but lacked the appropriate level of cultural knowledge about what that could be. I ended up with a box of Aladdin pralines partly because it was my projection of something classically Swedish and partly because this was what the character Rasmus brought along to his first queer Christmas celebration in the Swedish TV-Series "Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves".¹⁹ Naturally, the symbolic reference to a series based on the novels of Sweden's number one gay author Jonas Gardell about the AIDS epidemic, was never aimed to be registered by the recipient of the actual box of confectionaries. It was rather me who found consolation in thinking that there is a lineage of queers, attempting their awkward entry into a community. Holding a lame box of rubbery chocolates in their sweaty hands before taking a deep breath and knocking on the door to a birthday party, to Christmas celebrations, or some other form of ritual bringing people together – is this, I thought, what it takes to start making kin?

¹⁹ "Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves" (Swedish: Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar) is a three-part Swedish TV drama that aired in 2012. Based on Jonas Gardell's trilogy of novels, bearing the same name, it dramatised the spread of AIDS in Stockholm's gay community in the 1980s. The movie centres around the love of two young men Rasmus and Benjamin, both of whom break their ties with their families of origin and instead build their families of choice with other gay men in Stockholm.

In the end, I was probably luckier than Rasmus, who after all went alone to his party. Some people who I knew from before were keen to introduce me to various others and a group quiz about the OMA centre also helped to shuffle people around. But I could recognise and sympathise with some lone figures, standing hunched in a corner, not finding a place in the crowd that at its height reached about 40–50 people. Since OMA keskus is housed in a small 3-room apartment in Tallinn, the event had much of a house-party feel to it, with people lying on pillows on the floor, squeezing past each other in the corridors, and with too many getting stuck in the kitchen, as is usual at house parties. Even though it was a public event, nominally open for all, most of the people seemed to gather in small groups of what appeared to be old-time relationships and the brave new-comers did not necessarily have an easy time joining. Chocolate might be what gets you past the door, but connections are needed, and I was luckily equipped with both.

While I write “people” here, what I actually mean is mostly female-presenting people between the ages of 16 and 45. In the context of Estonia, unlike in contemporary Sweden, there was nothing unusual about the fact that everyone present was white. Given the assumptions folded into the acronym LGBT (Association), the gender imbalance was so obvious that even the organisers felt compelled to address it, and they jokingly told me, “don’t know why most gay men are too afraid to show up at the centre; bears are the only ones who dare to come.” The peculiar reference to gay men’s fears aside, what was to become clear during my research was how this was an oft-repeated story of a certain absence. Another participant had told me about her hunch about how Russian-speaking people did not show up that night, or ever: “Russians don’t come because they are even more closeted than Estonians. I know of some guy who is out among his friends and colleagues, but as soon his sister came to visit, his boyfriend needed to move out for that time. Because there cannot be such a thing in Russian families.” Mythical figures of closeted Russians were toppled with anecdotes about a missing trans* community. Another researcher had come to Estonia with the sole purpose of researching on the trans* community and was in their words devastated to discover that none could be found. Not at least in the way that they had expected it to – mobilising politically and desiring visibility.

That night was thus illuminating in many ways. Not only did it mark my first steps towards getting to know (a small segment) of queers in Tallinn, it also marked the beginning of hearing stories and fantasies that circulated about certain absences and presences in the location. It was very obvious how both the people I met and myself included, actively drew upon various

AND I DON'T KNOW WHO WE REALLY ARE...

expectations, projections and explanations in order to try to make sense of their surroundings. In my research I have had to constantly battle both, as will also become evident in the next chapter.

2. Methods, materials and research strategies

The thesis draws on a mix of methods in order to grasp a multifaceted issue that has not been researched before. I build my analysis on ethnographic accounts gathered during my 5-month fieldwork in Estonia, during the winter of 2016/17 and on 19 interviews that partially draw on the Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM). The interviews conducted were with queers living in Estonia at the time, including migrants. In order to contextualise the qualitative study, I undertook a qualitative online survey with 302 participants, along with close relationship maps drawn by interview participants.²⁰

Ethnography and interviews are the central methods used in the thesis, while the close relationship maps and survey results were useful in triangulating data. The triangulation of data, i.e. contrasting the results obtained with the help of different methods, has helped me to deepen my research findings by both investigating my initial findings further and contributing to a more complex analysis (see Barbour, 1998; Denzin, 2012; Konecki, 2008).

2.1 Ethnographic engagements

I take ethnography to be more than a ground-level method, seeing it rather as a general sensibility for research. This sensibility implies commitments beyond the more traditional understanding of ethnography as participant observation. When understood as a sensibility, ethnography extends beyond

²⁰ I have chosen to use the term *participants* to refer to people who took part in my research. Unlike other terms, such as *subjects*, *respondents* or *informants*, *participants* suits better with the premises of qualitative research, since it refers to higher levels of involvement in research (Morse, 1991). Participants are not passive objects but construct their own interpretations (Haritaworn, 2008). Nevertheless, using the term *participants* does not mean that it is possible to gloss over power imbalances entailed by research situation. This I discuss in more detail in section 2.2.

the process of on-site data collection, and thus defies the binaries between fieldwork as research carried out at a specific site and deskwork as the work that happens prior and after the collection of data at another site (Schatz, 2009, p. 6). Being careful, mindful, engaged and accountable were what I took to be the central components of that sensibility which I embraced throughout the whole research process. The following sections summarise the steps taken in conducting the ethnographic part of my research.

Logi(sti)cs of exposure

Time spent in a particular space could, in ethnographic terms, be understood as *exposure* (Yanow, 2009, p. 285), and such exposure is easier to measure than the whole field/work that has more fuzzy boundaries. My exposure consisted of moving to Tallinn for four months and living there consistently between November 2016 and February 2017. Before that, in August 2016, I had spent two weeks in Estonia, making initial contacts and mapping potentially interesting networks and spaces. I also made additional shorter trips to Estonia before and after the winter in order to attend some notable events such as the LGBT Association's fifth Birthday, a feminist/queer festival Ladyfest and a conference on Post-socialist LGBT histories. During the summer of 2017, I spent another three weeks in Estonia, on another intensive period of fieldwork in relation to Baltic Pride 2017 and Tallinn Pride 2017, as well as travelling around for interviewing.

I had my base in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia, where around one third of the country's population lives. This is where most of the organised queer-related events take place, while some other scattered events were located in the second biggest town of Tartu. While I spent most of the time in Tallinn, I followed my connections to various other smaller towns in different parts of the country for further fieldwork and interviews.

Crafting relations

Ethnography, while being a highly interpretative affair, is always about making relationships (Coffey, 1999, p. 57). How did I go about making these relationships? With much information spread online on websites, social media pages and groups, the distance in space did not entirely stop me from engaging with some feminist and queer circles in Estonia even before the start of my fieldwork. I had access to some more mainstream platforms and community groups, along with some other more closed groups with carefully selected members, to which I gained access through

certain contacts. Such virtual and parallel presence did, in fact, translate into relatively easy access to certain people during my stay.

After making first contact, the question was not *whether* to be involved but *how* to do it; how to most ethically structure the relationships with other participants in my research? (Shdaimah, Stahl, & Schram, 2009, p. 255) When meeting people for the first time, I informed them about my research, giving a casual introduction of myself. However, because I was not constantly reminding people about my research in every social situation, I settled for more of a semi-overt role during the research; participants were therefore informed about my position without not always actively thinking about it (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 9).

While not so surprised that many of the people I encountered were known to me before undertaking the research, I was nonetheless taken aback when I appeared to be a familiar figure for some. "Oh, so it is you who is Raili Uiibo" was sometimes a response after having been introduced, followed by them expressing appreciation for some of the opinion pieces on gender and sexuality I had published in Estonian media over the years (Uiibo, 2010, June 18; 2012, April 18; 2013, April 1; 2016, July 25; 2018, March 20). Such tangential knowledge of each other, which did not necessarily amount to proper previous contact, eased my way into the conversation on various occasions. I will discuss the dilemmas of researching one's "own" community at the end of this chapter.

Initially I followed up on a few previous contacts of mine, those known to me either before moving to Sweden or through online contact. Thereafter I started out by attending the more formally arranged events advertised online. These took place in two very distinct social centres. The first was the official LGBT Association's information and culture centre in the centre of Tallinn while the other was an anarchist-related social centre "Ülase 12", which often hosted queer/feminist events and social gatherings.²¹ These spaces were initially relevant for me to engage with, both in terms of their own events and political messages but also because they housed people with very different politics and understandings of relationships. From there I moved on to private networks, friendship circles, or individual contacts that were scattered around localities other than Tallinn.

²¹ There is no reason to anonymise those spaces, since they are the only two known (non-commercial) social spaces for queers in Tallinn that are also registered as NGOs. Any other more fleeting social spaces or communities I do not call by name.

There were many different communities that did not necessarily cross each other's paths or, more extreme, actively avoided each other. I thus frequented spaces that were not a snug fit neither in terms of attendants, activities nor their general politics. I could go from a Gay Christian tea night to an anarcho-queer workshop, or from an esoteric evening with angel cards and meditation to a queer/feminist reading group, etc. Not to mention non-official hangouts in people's homes, in town or on route walking or biking through freezing Tallinn. Some of the participants commented on my somewhat promiscuous approach to social spaces by saying, "Oh but you are getting along and hanging out with everyone, how do you manage that?" The silent expectation was rather that one would stick to the social spheres they had aligned themselves with, while my few attempts of mixing people from different settings did not bring any successful results. People with different interests and political views preferred to spend their time with like-minded people, which is why the smaller communities did not necessarily mix. On top of that there were relationship dramas, disappointments, heartbreaks and deceit that equally kept some people from interacting with others.

Navigating the different communities can be like dancing on a minefield, but I had set my mind on at least attempting to do it. Being genuinely curious facilitated that dance, but only partly; being a researcher as well as somebody who just recently "arrived from abroad" also saved me from needing to take clear sides between the various small communities. This is not to say that I did not have any sympathies nor that I did not let them show, I certainly did. But if I had not been on "fieldwork", I would have been much more consequent in my choices regarding with whom to socialise. Though obviously, fieldwork is not only about choosing but also about "being chosen"; after all, participants have agency in crafting relationships (or not) (Davies, 2008, p. 88). I am thus very thankful for having been chosen by various people and a variety of circles that thereby constitute the ground for the thesis.

The people with whom I engaged in Estonia reflect a certain fraction of the entire queer population. My main network consisted of mainly Estonian- (or English-) speaking, 16–45 years old, white, rather highly educated lesbians, queer, trans and non-binary people. Russian-speakers²² were more or less fluent in both languages.

²² Estonia has a large Russian-speaking minority, as will be explained in Chapter Three.

Those with whom I became acquainted resulted from my particular research questions and my general approach to the topic; my own background as an Estonian-speaking highly educated youngish cis-woman, and also my regular attendance at public events. Not everyone, though, was drawn to the various community events and spaces, preferring to socialise in other ways and forms. For example, I came to know and eventually interviewed people with children through the snowballing method (Bryman, 2012). The same goes for cis gay men, who were more on the outskirts of my circles. People older than their mid-40s I met for an interview through the snowballing method, while people older than 60 were contacted through Gay Christian meetings. (However, I was not the only one to struggle making contact with queers older than 60. Some local community activists told me of their difficulties finding senior citizens who would be willing to share their story for a project on queer histories).

Finally, my own personal preferences and habits in part determined the spaces within which I was more at ease negotiating. Crudely put: navigating nightlife posed a greater difficulty for me than participating in small intimate social gatherings or in activist events. Ultimately, it was my own presence or absence in certain spaces that defined who I encountered, and, by extension, who ended up participating in my research.

2.2 Interview encounters

The messiness of research is greater than the conventions of academic writing allow for. By writing first about my ethnographic practice and thereafter about conducting interviews, I am involuntarily inflicting a separation between research methods, which are in fact complementary and entangled within the field. Throughout my fieldwork, I often resorted to informal interviewing, while any subsequent interviews conducted with participants would have been incomplete without being attentive to the wider context within which the interview interactions took place. Even though an interview is often taken as a distinct and discrete encounter, the “incidental ethnographic encounters” that occur around the interview blur the deceptive distinction between participant observation and interviews (Pinsky, 2015).

Despite being aware of the abovementioned concerns, for the sake of clarity I have decided to present my methodological account of interviews and ethnography separately. In addition, since much of my fieldwork was exploratory, the research question I pursued had changed by the time I conducted my interviews. As stated already, there can be no neat separation

between the two methods deployed in this study, and this applies equally to the participants themselves. Far from all the people with whom I engaged during my fieldwork were interviewed, while not everyone I interviewed had been part of the ethnographic study. All the same, in the following sections I explain my ways of producing interview data together with those participating in my research.

Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method

I have used elements of a method developed by sociologist Tom Wengraf – Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001). BNIM is a method that lies somewhere on the continuum between unstructured and semi-structured interviews, by providing a different level of structure in various parts of the interview process. Moreover, I found BNIM useful because of its double emphasis on individual lives as well as social and cultural processes. What BNIM focuses on is “not an individual but relations, which are at the same time interpersonal relations and socio-structural relationships” (Bertaux & Delcroix, 2000, pp. 73-74). This double focus on lived experience embedded in both interpersonal and wider socio-historical contexts was highly useful for my research.

BNIM helped to elicit an (initially) rather undisturbed narrative with the help of a Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN)²³. The participant was thus offered the opportunity to tell their story with minimum further interruption until they had exhausted what they wanted to say (Roseneil, 2012, p. 130). This was a way of working against the temptation of immediately taking control over the interview by suggesting both content and direction (Wengraf, 2001, p. 113). However, the undisturbed narrative is only the first part of BNIM. The second part consists in following up on the notes taken during the initial narration, by asking to elaborate on particular incidents or experiences previously referred to. This is also where the more interactive and dialogical nature of the interview returns. A significant difference from semi-structured interviews is that participants initially have the opportunity to decide about what to speak, on the basis of which I prompt for further details on matters they themselves first raised (Roseneil, 2012, p. 130).

All this said, it is important to state that my focus was not on the participants' whole life story. Rather, I used the more restricted version of

²³ My SQUIN can be found in Appendix 2.

BNIM – *partial* biographical narratives (Wengraf, 2001, p. 121). Partiality in the method meant in practice that the initial question was thematically focused on close relationships. Following Wengraf, I formulated the temporal focus in a fuzzy pro-subjective way, allowing the participant to decide when and where their narrative took off and when it ended (Wengraf, 2001, p. 121).

Approaches to “interviews” and “conversations”

My approach to interviews participates in the longstanding attempts to democratise the interview interaction by stressing the co-construction of knowledge and by redressing power imbalances occurring during the process (Dahl, 2010; Egeberg Holmgren, 2011; Frankenberg, 1993). I draw specifically on the “dialogical” approach to interviews, introduced by the feminist sociologist Ruth Frankenberg (1993). It entails making an explicit effort to be involved in the discussions and sharing personal information, as well as parts of the analysis, when relevant, and thus distancing from the traditional “distant, apparently objective, and so-called blank-faced research persona” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 30). This approach certainly felt more natural with those I had already established an ongoing relationship. However, I tried my best to extend this practice of sharing some personal thoughts and stories with participants I had not met before.

However, despite the conversational tone and lack of clear structure, interviews are not like any other conversations. An interview is still a constructed situation that I, as interviewer, initiated by prompting the participant to speak on a particular topic of my own interest, while participants did their best to provide replies they hoped would be appropriate (Dingwall, 1997, pp. 58-59). That does not necessarily mean that the power asymmetries are absolute or that participants have no agency within the interviewing situation. During the interviewing process power flows between participants and is not located in one specific position (Egeberg Holmgren, 2011, p. 374). For example, although all participants I interviewed were present voluntarily, there were still occasions where some of them provided extremely short replies, refusing to elaborate or being frustrated with the outline of the research – all ways of resisting the power of the interviewer.

Generally speaking, interviews are spaces for mutual learning; it is not only the one prompting the narrative who learns something, but the opportunity to reflect on or verbalise thoughts and feelings can also be an eye-opening experience for the other participant (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 31). Many participants in fact acknowledged that talking to me had been an informative and for some even a therapeutic experience. Those

shared emotions, insights, conversations and mutual learning thus form the base for my analysis in the later empirical chapters.

Composition of interviews and the participant group

The networks (both on-and offline), within which I already had contacts, served as a starting point for both recruiting people for interviews and for snowballing for further participants. In total, I conducted 19 interviews, seven of which were with people who volunteered without any previous connection to me; two of my participants were found through snowballing while the remaining ten had various levels of contact with me during the fieldwork period. Those seven who volunteered without any connection to me most likely responded to announcements I had posted on social media (more on that in section 2.4).

The interviews usually lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, the longest extended to about 3.5 hours while the shortest was less than an hour. All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and were later transcribed.²⁴ Apart from the recorded interviews, the innumerable hours of non-recorded conversations and informal interviews with various other participants form the basis of my ethnographic data, on which I rely heavily in my analysis.

To ensure maximum comfort and safety for all participants, I encouraged everyone to choose a suitable time and location that worked best for them (my only criteria was that it needed to be a relatively quiet place to be able to record our conversation). If people had no preferred location in mind, I offered at least a few options, which I considered relatively neutral, such as a café, park, or a bookable office space in a public library.²⁵

No summary of a group of people can ever do justice to their complex lived realities. Moreover, although I acknowledge that participants' subjectivities are in flux (Browne & Nash, 2010), I resort to identity categories when describing the general social characteristics of the participants I interviewed. As will be evident in the following overview, while they shared

²⁴ Further notes on transcription can be found in section 2.5 entitled "Analytical approach".

²⁵ Depending on the level of our previous connection, the locations chosen differed somewhat. The people that had volunteered for an interview without previous contact to me were more likely to choose the public library or their workplace, while people I knew better would be sometimes interviewed after a shared meal in the comfort of their homes. There was no hard and fast rule, however, since I was also invited home to people I did not know, while some other familiar participants preferred to be interviewed at the LGBT Centre, for example. Nevertheless, it seemed that the varied level of closeness to participants roughly corresponded to the varied level of entry I had to their homes and lives.

certain commonalities, they differed wildly among some other axes. The following descriptions are intended to give some indication about who these people were at the time of being interviewed. The following is a general overview of the research participants, although a short portrait of each participant can be found in the Appendix 1.

The majority of participants were young adults. There was, however, some variety in age within the group. Eight participants were in their 20s, four in their 30s, four in their 40s, two in their 50s and one in their 60s. 12 people lived in Tallinn, while many of them had spent their childhood or previous parts of their life in other regions of the country. Five participants lived in smaller towns, and two on the countryside.

I did not specifically ask for gender and sexual identities at the time of the interview, but people often mentioned it at some point. Most of the participants were cis- women, but I also talked to four trans and/or non-binary people, as well as to two gay men. Sexual identifications were even more diverse. Some participants identified with certain labels while others preferred not to define themselves, feeling uncomfortable with labels and identity categories. Beyond lesbian, gay, bi and queer there were also four people who identified as pansexual²⁶ and one as asexual.²⁷ Moreover, some people's interest in BDSM or polyamorous practices added other dimensions to sexuality.

Obviously, this was just a moment frozen in time; people's identifications tend to change over time. There were individuals who had identified as non-straight as long as they remembered, while others had heterosexual marriages with kids behind them before any queer desires began to arise in their lives. Some were trying, in that very moment, to figure out if and what identity categories would describe them best. Another fleeting and context-based characteristic was race. All of the participants interviewed would be understood as white in the Estonian context, perhaps with the exception of one. This person did not position themselves as a person of colour, but they certainly had come across experiences in which they had been racialised and treated as non-white. Which is to say, before moving to Estonia, they had not interpreted themselves as non-white, but they became non-white in the

²⁶ Pansexual people are understood as being attracted to all genders, thereby rendering obsolete the binary division into attraction towards either "opposite" or "same" gender (Belous & Bauman, 2017, p. 60).

²⁷ The Asexual Visibility and Education Network defines asexuality in the following way, "An asexual person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way" (AVEN, n.d.).

local racialised system, where having darker hair and eyes is enough to cast a person as non-white.

Locally, an even more important mechanism for maintaining racialised ethnonational boundaries is differentiation and exclusion through the hierarchisation of languages (Zakharov, Law, & Harjo, 2017, p. 27). A few of my interview participants spoke Estonian with a Russian accent, and while they were relatively fluent, they would not “pass” as Estonian in the strictly mono-lingual construction of nation. One participant with a Russian-speaking background struggled slightly with the Estonian language, though all the same preferred to speak Estonian, with the use of some English terms and sentences.

One of the participants was deaf. This interview was conducted with the help of an official interpreter I paid for, to achieve a smoother level of communication. Since I did not speak sign language, we had previously interacted through very rudimentary mimes (on my part), as well as taking turns writing messages on phones or computers. I suggested this option for them, but they preferred to communicate with the help of an interpreter, with whom they had a very good working relationship. While an everyday occurrence for the participant, this way of communicating threw me slightly off balance and, as a consequence, I struggled somewhat to maintain focus on the content of the interview rather than its form.²⁸ Since it took time both to pose and receive answers, it was more difficult to keep going the flow of the interview in the way I was used to. Because this was nothing for which I had planned or accounted, it points to hidden ableism built into the research design and its methods.

Most of the participants were employed in either the private or the public sector; one person was retired, some were students (and part-time employed), while others were freelancing or had their own company. One participant was currently on parental leave. Despite the high level of employment, and a relatively high level of education, many were nevertheless living in precarious situations. In terms of social capital, most of the participants could be said to share a middle-class background. But the widespread economic distress and precarity in Estonian society makes defining class background no easy matter. Even such otherwise prestigious positions

²⁸ There is an ongoing debate whether deafness is a disability or a minority language. However, engaging in that debate is beyond the current scope of this thesis. But it can be said that none of the participants had any visual disabilities while several were struggling with mental health problems to various degrees of severity.

as a cultural worker or teacher are relatively lowly remunerated, which means that social capital and material conditions do not necessarily match. As discussed in Chapter One, in-work poverty can equally affect people of both low and high educational attainment (Roosalu, 2013). Conditions of precarity are something I discuss in greater detail in the analytical chapters of my thesis (Chapters Four, Five, Six).

The final characteristic relevant to mention is involvement in queer community life. Not unexpectedly, participants articulated diverse attitudes and expressed varying levels of engagement. Some were very much involved in activist practices, while others were on the margins of the community. There were also people who actively opposed queer activism, stating that they mostly moved within straight circles.

2.3 Close relationship maps

At the start of each interview, the participant was provided with A3-sized papers, colourful pencils and pens and were asked to map their close relations in whichever way they pleased. Previous research, especially that of Mizielińska and Stasińska (2017a), had inspired me to use mapping as a method to complement qualitative interviews. Whereas Mizielińska & Stasińska had asked their research participants to first draw a map of all the people they considered family and then interviewed the participants about their maps, I used the two methods simultaneously; which is to say, the map emerged during the conversation, not before it.

Asking the participants to map their close relationships in this way became valuable both as a way of facilitating the interview process and as a source of data in itself. First, it helped participants to access and represent other levels of experience that are not easily expressed in words (see Bagnoli, 2009). Moreover, providing a concrete physical task functioned as an ice-breaker and decreased the potential anxiety about the interview process (see Bagnoli, 2009). Another benefit that I noticed in my research was that having a visual map emerging in front of us during the interview helped us both to concentrate. It was also easier to refer back to some previously accounted relations with the help of a visual representation, which gave rise to further questions or details.

An important aspect of graphic and visual methods is also their usefulness in engaging with emotions (Copeland & Agosto, 2012, p. 517). As they help generate data on personal and sensitive topics, such methods have been especially valuable in researching families, (extended) kinship and

other networks of intimacy (Gabb, 2009, p. 39). These were further reasons why I incorporated a mapping technique among my methods.

Since my research interest in close relations was about trying to avoid hegemonic ways of thinking about relationships, I also made a concerted effort not to pre-structure the participants' ways of visually representing their experiences.²⁹ I was therefore keen to avoid pushing them towards representing their relationships in one particular way, even though many participants drew on a variety of culturally available visualisations, such as the family tree. The various ways in which participants envisioned their close relationships with the help of maps are analysed in Chapter Four.

When combined with interviews, I found that visual data contributed with disclosing both the multiplicity of experiences as well as offering further contextualisation. I could in my analysis later compare the visual representation and narrative and find overlaps as well as interesting mismatches.

2.4 Qualitative online survey

In the following section I first discuss my reasons for carrying out an online qualitative survey among queers in Estonia and offer some reflections on the ways of measuring the quality of such research. Thereafter I describe the steps that I took in designing and disseminating the survey. Finally, I offer a general overview of responses to the survey in demographical terms.

Survey design and quality

Surveys about queers in Estonia are limited. The main source of information is Europe-wide surveys, such as the one conducted by European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). Within Estonia there are regular

²⁹ Most relationship mapping methods I encountered were pre-structured by the researcher. For example, participants in Roseneil's (2006, p. 14) study had to place significant people within a series of concentric circles and indicate the closeness through proximity to the centre, as well as describe the nature of their relationship by using different colours. Sociologist Anna Bagnoli (2009) asked her research participants to follow the planetary model of the planets revolving around the sun.

Certainly, pre-structured tasks in mapping *can* be highly beneficial for relationship research, as demonstrated by feminist sociologist Jacqui Gabb and psychologist Renee Singh (2015). Wanting to literally map emotions that are related to the spatial arrangement of people's everyday relations, they asked participants to use emoticon stickers on their floor plan. In such cases a high level of structure is justified and does not unduly deny participant agency in developing their visual representation (Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005, p. 190).

opinion surveys that monitor where the general population stands on various questions related to sexual minorities (Albrant, Haruoja, Käsper, Kübar, & Meior, 2010; ERR, 2016, February 22), but the focus of those surveys is on respondents' level of approval or disapproval of non-straight and non-cis people, rather than the experiences of queers themselves.

Therefore, even though it is not a randomised and representative quantitative study, I argue that the qualitative online survey is an important first step towards mapping the realities of queer lives in Estonia. Moreover, because the survey offers greater anonymity, it could be perceived as a safer option than giving an interview (Jackson & Trochim, 2002, p. 307). This is particularly relevant in a small country like Estonia, where many people might be worried about sharing information about their lives and relationships. Furthermore, survey results serve as background information to which I could add nuance and/or alternative explanations, by relating them to my fieldwork and interview material.

Online surveys offer an efficient way of getting a high number of responses in a relatively short time-frame (Bryman, 2012, p. 658). However, a self-selective Internet survey like mine has also numerous limitations. Firstly, participation in an online survey is by its very definition limited to people who have access to Internet (Bryman, 2012). Secondly, it is clearly biased towards people who are somehow connected to various queer community sites and/or those who noticed my announcement. It is by no means a representative, but highly self-selective, sample with various biases. Thirdly, there is an additional complication arising from the specificity of the queer community. This is to say, there is no possibility of knowing the exact size of the general population, out of which a representative sample could be drawn (even if the resources were available). Sexuality and gender are not stable, and identity categories and community affiliations are constantly changing. Capturing queer instability in concrete numbers and measures is not a feasible task, neither politically nor methodologically.

Criteria of reliability and validity of quantitative surveys do not apply to my study because my survey follows the logic of a qualitative one. Qualitative surveys aim to capture the *diversity* of the topic at hand rather than focusing on numerical distribution and means (Jansen, 2010). It was a survey with mostly open-ended questions, guided by research questions of a qualitative character. In the end, it is not the method of data collection itself but the data that emerges out of the methods deployed that can be either qualitative or quantitative (Behr 2015, O'Cathain & Thomas 2004). Since I used the survey in order to assist me in finding answers to my general

research question of how queers in Estonia are making close relations, I have followed the quality criteria that applies to qualitative research.

Overview of the survey

I devised the online survey with the help of Södertörn University's in-house survey tool called Sunet. The survey included the following thematic sections: living arrangements; closeness and support; family of origin; LGBTQ community; children; romantic relationships as well as background info. (The list of survey questions can be seen in Appendix 3). The survey consisted of 72 questions and was expected to take around 25 minutes to fill in.

I announced the survey in various online channels, mostly through queer community websites on Facebook (e.g. a site for Russian-speaking LGBTQ people, Tallinn Pride, Tartu queer community, Gay Christian community, etc.) but also through several feminist and straight ally groups. The widest reach of my announcement was probably achieved through the LGBTQ Association's newsletter. I also asked my own contacts to spread the word about the survey to people who might not have a Facebook account.

The survey was available in three languages – Estonian, English and Russian. This was because it was highly important to receive responses from queers who lived or had lived in Estonia, irrespective of their ethnic or language background. The survey was launched in the beginning of June 2017 and it stayed open until the end of July, resulting in 302 responses. Below I have provided a summary of the social background of those 302 responses. I have chosen to present the summary in written form as opposed to tables, because the qualitative design of the survey allowed for much richer responses that cannot be represented in tabular form.

Age

Most of the responses came from younger generations; almost 80% of the respondents were younger than 35 years. 12.3% were younger than 18 years, while young adults formed the largest part of the respondents – 33.4% were 18-25 years old and 33.8% 26-35. Middle aged people were scarcer, with those aged 36-45 constituting 13.9% of the responses, and only 14 people (4.6%) between 46 and 55 years old responding. Altogether, eight people older than 56 filled in the survey, making up just 2.7% of the dataset.

Gender

People who identified as women were the most active category of respondents (57,6%).³⁰ This is also characteristic of the queer community life in Estonia, more generally, where women tend to be more active (Allaste 2014). 22.2% identified as men, while non-binary (7.9%), queer (7.3%) and “I use no words for specifying my gender identity” (7.0%) were almost equally popular. 19 people (6.3%) identified as a transgender person. Under the option “other” people specified their identity as agender, androgynous, hybrid, everything and nothing or stated that gender identity is irrelevant to them as opposed to being human.

Sexual identity

It is noteworthy that a high number of people used the term bisexual for describing their sexual identity (33.4%). It was the most popular category chosen, before gay (30.1%) and lesbian (26.5%). Of those who used the term bisexual, 75% were women. Many of them commented that they were reluctant to use the word “lesbian” and preferred to refer to themselves as gay or a gay woman, which they considered to be more neutral. For example, one respondent answered “Gay sounds neutral to me. But to upset my mom I say LESBIAN. For her especially bad aura is attached to it”. Homosexual was a word used mainly by people who were older than 25, while queer and pansexual were both more popular among younger people. Out of the 473 different responses, 54 people (17.9%) used the term homosexual, while 15.2% (46 people) chose to identify as pansexual and 28 (9.3%) as queer. Almost equally many people – around 7% – used no words to specify their sexual identity or chose the term heterosexual. But also less common identifications were used, such as asexual, sapiosexual, demisexual, polysexual, “pede” (Estonian for fag), sexually fluid, neutral, partner’s name+phile etc. Whichever term was used was also highly context dependent. One respondent admitted “In English I would say both gay and queer, in Estonian I would not use those words. The word “lesbian” does not cross my lips very easily either, even though it is technically correct”. A way of going about one’s everyday life was just to say things indirectly or allowing

³⁰ In the question about gender and sexual identity it was possible to choose several applicable terms, so the percentages will not add up to 100% but will show a general tendency.

people to assume them to be either straight or gay, in order to avoid explaining the meaning of pansexuality or bisexuality.

Language

Around 15% of the respondents stated that Russian was their first language, while in the general population Russian-speakers make up around 30% of the population of Estonia. The rest had Estonian as their first language, whereas a handful of other languages were also mentioned, such as French, German, Croatian, Polish, Swedish, Finnish.

Residence

More than half of the respondents lived in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia and where about one third of the country's population is gathered. Another 20 percent of the people who responded resided in the second biggest town Tartu. Around 10 percent of respondents lived abroad while another 10 percent in places that had less than 5 000 inhabitants. Those who had emigrated lived often in Scandinavian and Western European countries, such as Finland, Sweden, UK and Germany, while migration to Estonia happened mainly from Russian-speaking countries.

2.5 Analytical approach

Making sense of data is not an entirely distinct stage of research but happens in an iterative and cyclical fashion (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 159). My initial research questions were already highly informed by theoretical discussions occurring in feminist, queer, post-socialist fields, and these theoretical frameworks helped me to further contextualise the material I had collected. At the same time, the results that I received from the online survey and initial fieldwork caused me to re-think my questions, inviting me to read further on about other theories I had not initially considered necessary. Nevertheless, in this section I outline some of the issues more directly related to the analytical processes.

Language, translations and transcriptions

Multiple layers of translations occurred in the research process; from spoken and body language to fieldnotes, from Estonian to English, from sign language to spoken language, from audio recordings to written transcriptions, from messy speech to readable quotes. Participants also translated their experiences, thoughts and feelings into a narrative and a map that they

shared with me. Some levels of meaning certainly went missing throughout those translations, while other levels were added along the way.

Transcribing the interviews was an important step on the way towards translating participants' stories into an analytical text. At first sight the process of transcribing may seem to be a mundane task carried out mechanically, but in fact it involves a series of complex ethical and analytical decisions (Klein, 1990, p. 41). My interview recordings were transcribed mostly word for word, while some parts were merely summarised after weighing their relevance for the dissertation. Due to the nature of speech, the original transcriptions featured many incoherencies, lost threads, repetitions and grammatical mistakes. Presenting such raw transcripts in written form would give an unfair image of the participants as less competent than they were. I have therefore decided to slightly edit those transcripts where mistakes inhibit readability. I did however still include the analytically relevant "hiccups" of conversation – pauses, laughter or other expression of emotions, hesitations, changes of tone, etc. So that the quotes retain a good flow and cadence, the following system of transcription has been used:

Sounds or movements	(*laughter)
Short pause	...
Word or passage that is cut out	[...]
Insertion	[inserted text]

Practical procedures

Much of my analysis of the ethnographic material is based on fieldnotes. My fieldnotes consist of descriptions and reflections which were written down after having spent time with people or at various events. For the interview data, I used elements of a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, e.g. initial, focused and theoretical coding, creation of categories, analytical memos etc (Charmaz, 2006). During the process of initial coding, I inductively coded all the interviews with as many codes as possible. Thereafter, in the focussed coding process, I organised the codes that had emerged from the data into central code categories and their subsets. The theoretical coding stage helped me to relate the categories to each other, and which thus formed the groundwork of my analysis. I used the analytical software NVivo for facilitating the coding process.

I worked with interview transcriptions while looking at the participant-produced maps in order to follow the ways they made sense of their close

relationships. I have provided quotes from participants on those occasions when I wish to make visible a certain way of reasoning, on other occasions I have summarised the stories that participants have shared in my own words, so as to convey their point in more condensed form. The latter inevitably points to how qualitative research is an interpretive practice; as a researcher, I have taken the liberty of summarising and highlighting certain dimensions of my participants' stories. Here, the survey data has helped to provide important background information to help contextualise the interview and ethnographic material at the centre of my research. I have therefore drawn on only small sections of the survey data, to either contrast or illuminate further issues that emerged through ethnographic engagements or interviews.

Material that has been produced without any of my own direct interference – such as websites, legal and policy documents, media or social media, etc., has been used as background information. I have skimmed that material based on those questions arising from my own theoretical interests as well as questions emerging from the empirical data. This material has principally been used in writing Chapter Three, though it has also indirectly informed my empirical chapters (Chapters Four, Five and Six).

Ethical Considerations

My methodological approach is inspired by feminist and queer approaches to methodology (Haritaworn, 2008; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002), which means that I understand research as a political undertaking, and which I conduct in the hope of influencing social change. There are no innocent methodologies, methods or positions (Haraway, 1988), which is why every step in the process of the research involves various ethical considerations. I have carefully followed the research ethics guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2017). I informed the participants of the purpose of the research, negotiated their consent on multiple occasions and emphasised also during and after the interview that they had the right to withdraw their contribution to the research at any moment.

When informing the participants about my study, I promised to secure their integrity by not attaching identifiable information to particular quotes. In a small community context, this is not such an easy and straightforward task, something I also confessed to the participants. Even though pseudonyms are used instead of real names throughout the study, a few of the participants' stories are especially unique and could lead to being recognised by members of the community itself. Apart from using pseudonyms, I

have also changed various details in order to provide greater anonymity: such as changing the name of a country to which a participant had moved or the name of a place from which their close one had travelled, etc. I have also reproduced the relationship maps with made-up names and locations, as well as translated the maps from Estonian to English. Recordings and transcripts have been kept in different (locked) locations. My field notes and the maps that participants produced have also been kept in a safe place to which nobody except me has had access.

Moreover, being guided by feminist and queer theories and politics adds further levels of awareness about ethical concerns, which are not necessarily covered by expectations from “straight science”. As research ethics require constant relational negotiation, they cannot be separated from other methodological considerations. This is why I have weaved discussions about my ethical dilemmas and choices into the entire thesis, to more accurately reflect the omnipresence of ethical choices.

2.6 Research reflexivity and the researcher’s position

As a diasporic scholar with partial community entanglements, I am writing from multiple border positions. Within the space of in-betweenness, certain epistemic ambivalences arise. In the following section I explore what straddling between the various border positions means in terms of the knowledge I produce. My approach draws heavily upon the feminist thinker Donna Haraway’s (1988) discussion on partial perspectives of situated knowledges. I do not claim to be a neutral observer; the knowledge I produce is always already embedded in my particular location. Because my perspective is embodied and structured by my position in the world, I have tried to critically confront how my background affects the research process, both in relation to participants as well as the lenses through which I interpret the data (see also Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; O’Reilly, 2009; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 2012).

Having grown up in Estonia, but after having spent more than a decade in different Northern and Western European countries, I now inhabit a rather ambivalent position between the geo-temporal binary of the “East” and the “West”. Of course, neither should be seen as monoliths, and my own journeys between different locations in the “West” and “East” have made this evident in a quite material sense. Having lived in a peripheral Estonian small-town, as well as Estonia’s capital Tallinn; in a small university town on the German side of the border to Switzerland; in an Arabic region of the European Union capital Brussels; in a poverty stricken post-

industrial town in North-East England; before landing first in a Southern Swedish university town and thereafter in the capital of Sweden, I have crossed multiple borders and been part of multiple communities. When we take into account not only how different national contexts are shaped by different gender and welfare regimes, but also various other dividing lines, including those between rural and urban, rich and poor, religious and secular, homogenous and cosmopolitan, it becomes clear that the main dividing line of difference is not always between “East” and “West.”

Nevertheless, after years abroad, I am no longer counted as fully “local” in Estonia (in terms of not sharing the everyday lived realities) while never being fully Western. That leaves me, like most other diasporic people, with various degrees of (non)belonging to different places. Having noted this, the privileges of being white, highly educated and having European citizenship allow me nonetheless to negotiate in a much smoother way the boundaries of belonging and concrete borders, which violently reject and persecute others who lack those privileges.

Nevertheless, I believe that my diasporic condition is acutely relevant in my position as a researcher in Sweden producing knowledge about my country of origin. Having been educated in the “North/West” through “Western” theories constitutes a somewhat problematic position of knowing.³¹ As several post- and decolonial scholars have long argued, it matters who produces knowledge, and from where, (see Blagojević, 2009; Chakrabarty, 1992; Spivak, 1988/2006; Tlostanova, 2010). Many researchers have pointed to various epistemic imbalances between the “West” and “the rest”, with the East being treated as an exotic place from which empirical knowledge can be excavated, while the West provides universally applicable theoretical knowledge (Blagojević, 2009; Koobak, 2013; Kulawik, 2020; Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011; Tlostanova, 2010).

The internalisation of Western epistemic standards is something about which diasporic researchers need to be aware and struggle against, as gender scholar Redi Koobak (2013) has shown in her research. She rightfully points out that the metanarrative of (“Eastern”) copies and (“Western”) originals assumes an irreversible temporality and impossibility for dialogue. Therefore, any knowledge produced in the post-socialist sphere is denied the capacity to speak for itself or engage in a conversation with other work,

³¹ Gender scholar Redi Koobak (2013) has written in depth of her similar experience of being disoriented after having received her education in “Western” academia and trying to match that with her experience and knowledge of Estonia.

as it is already fixated onto a teleological timeline that has the West as its destination (Koobak, 2013, p. 179). Carving out a space for alternative interpretations requires constant work of dis-identifying with Western hegemonies. This process has constituted one of the constant challenges in my work.

However, distinctions between the seeming monoliths of “East” and “West” are not tenable, especially in the case of borderland spaces like Estonia.³² It is hardly feasible to argue for a space of absolute difference, when ideas are not only in constant circulation but always transformed and reshaped in different cultural contexts (Cerwonka, 2008). As postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (1998) has pointed out, there is a need to straddle between the double pitfalls of both exoticism as well as Eurocentrism. Following Chakrabarty, I simultaneously take issue with the Eurocentric and masculinist bias in research, while at the same time I seek to avoid treating non-Western spaces as so exotic that they necessarily cannot be studied with the same tools and methods. While there is certainly value in reflecting on the differences my diasporic background does make in the research process, I am also wary of reproducing the geopolitical categories in the course of the research story I tell (see Dahl, 2011).

Community entanglements

Neither nomad nor native (see Braidotti, 1994; Pels, 1999) is a state that could describe my ambiguous sense of belonging in relation to queer circles in Estonia. While in Estonia and when afar, I have yearned to be part of creating a queer community in Estonia. The affective entanglements of “desiring” a community (see Carter, 2016) have brought me partially closer to my object of study, while, like any scholar researching their “own” community (e.g. Dahl, 2010; Nash, 2010), I attempt to straddle between insider and outsider positions in different contexts.

What is this “own” community of mine? Identifying as a queer feminist somewhere on the asexual spectrum does not give me an automatic ticket to Estonian queer circles, especially as the idea of any universal transnational feminist/queer community is problematic. While I indeed shared the same first language with some of the research participants, most other aspects needed to be negotiated anew in each particular case, leaving me once again in an ambivalent starting position of (non)belonging.

³² This is discussed in detail in Chapter Three, section 3.1.

Moreover, researching “one’s own community” stretches the untenability of the insider/outsider binary to its utmost logical degree, since multiple belongings and entanglements thoroughly queer the expectations for objectivity that still lurk underneath the norms of “straight science” (Dahl, 2010). The boundaries that are drawn between insider/outsider (as well as – subject/object) are certainly constructed; they are thus blurry and contingent rather than natural, everlasting and coherent. But as human beings, most of us seek clarity, like also Ellis, who asked me towards the end of the interview with her, “But who are you, are you a researcher or a friend? How does that work?”

My answer to her was a very long way of saying, “Both, or sometimes one, and sometimes the other”. During my own process of making sense of my roles, I have found value in the strategic use of enacting temporary and fleeting boundaries in the process of making sense of those seeming contradictions. Destabilising the naturalised distinction between research subject and object is among the central goals of queer methodologies, but temporary boundary-drawings are necessary for the sake of contextualising the research (Lykke, 2008). Acknowledging in that moment that I was also in the position of researching queers doing close relationships did not mean that other subject positions did not ever intermesh or intervene in it.

Finally, political-personal-cultural alignments with the community that one is researching help to engage with it in a self-critical way and approach it from the position of a critical friend, as demonstrated by Dahl (2010). She points out that being invested in the community “enables *both* affirmation *and* self-critical scrutiny” (Dahl, 2010, p. 147). Similarly, I believe that my alignments and affiliations with Estonian queer circles allow me to lend a (self)-critical eye in this thesis to their partial involvement in nationalism, racism, capitalism and other forms of oppression, while my (self-)critical approach does not diminish my emotional investment and support for that community.

In these sections I have accounted for my multiple hybrid positions and the various levels of belonging to spaces and communities they entail. This was not meant as a linear mode of becoming but more of a simultaneous circulating between different spheres. I believe that the liminality of in-betweenness has been a productive force during my research process and that those pulsating traces of “no longer” and “not quite” can be a source for producing accountable knowledge, so long as my various ambivalent and negotiated positions were approached attentively and with care.

Interlude: Beyond hegemonic narratives

On my way to an art exhibition about gay lives in Soviet Estonia at the end of February in 2017, in a crisp snowy Tallinn, I decided to take a shortcut via my least favourite square in the heart of the city – Freedom Square. The 28-meter high phallic Freedom-cross that looms over the square, commemorating the men fallen in the War for Independence (1918–1920), is a steady reminder of the hegemonic discourse on freedom. But this time something was up, I could see people gathering and heard some distant singing... Quickening my pace, I turned around the corner and there it was: a massive blue-black-white striped national flag covering a whole façade of a building, a choir of hundreds of people singing “Isamaa ilu hoieldes” (“Holding fatherland’s beauty”), and posters inviting me to the next day’s event entitled “Freedom is a feeling”. How could I have forgotten? The 25th anniversary of regaining independence was to be celebrated as I remembered it from before – with military parades, receptions and most importantly – collective performances of nationalist songs. Independence Day on the 24th of February and Restoration Independence Day on the 20th of August are only a few of many occasions when nationalist feelings are mobilised in Estonia. In between, various song and dance festivals take turns in creating this feeling of togetherness, one that always builds on an exclusion of ethnic minorities. These monocultural events are based on ritualistic performance of national identity through joint singing, bringing into being the “singing nation” that sang themselves free (Pawłusz, 2016; Yatsyk, 2017).

On that snowy day, I read through the pamphlet: “Freedom is a feeling, Freedom is a choice, Freedom is a right, Freedom is a responsibility, Freedom is in the heart, in the voice and in the game”.³³ Equipped with the critical questions of a researcher and a migrant, I wondered whose freedom?

³³ My translation.

What kind of promises does it give, and what does it ask in return? Above all, I wondered, why I seemingly felt so crushed under the weight of this particular version of freedom? The pounding thought that “this is exactly what I escaped from” was triggering an all-too-familiar feeling of being trapped. The only way to shake myself out of the growing anxiety attack was to remind myself that this time there was somewhere to go. Not only was I in fact on my way to Jaanus Samma’s exhibition about Soviet gay histories just a few minutes’ walk from the square but across the road was the LGBT Association’s headquarters and a bit further away was X-bar, a queer bar at the heart of Tallinn. The symbolic presence of those markers had a pacifying effect. Instead of feeling alone, swimming upstream, being swallowed up by this celebration of common descent and shared history, I could imagine a presence of difference. Not least significant was the fact that the exhibition was hosted by the Museum of Occupations. History did not only have to entail a narrative about 800 years of oppression overturned by glorious liberation from evil, but it could speak of a gay chairman of a collective farm. If different pasts are possible, then perhaps, I thought to myself, these can also signal an openness for different present(s) as well as futures?

3. Estonian queer lives in time and place

This chapter provides a sketch of the historical developments I take to be relevant for understanding contemporary meanings of queer kinship and closeness in the context of Estonia. It is important to note that the particular story I tell is one out of many possible ways of constructing history, and each version (including mine) is dependent on the narrator's political positioning. Moreover, the complexities of history are bound to escape us when constructing a coherent narrative, especially when relying on the narrative constructs that are traditional in a particular field, such as feminist research (Hemmings, 2011).

Since this thesis is located in feminist Gender/Queer Studies, my approach to history and to any material is always already imbued by feminist and queer approaches to methodology. While there are no specific techniques or ontological and epistemological positions that would be distinctively feminist or queer, what does distinguish feminist and methodologies is that they are grounded in feminist/queer theory and politics and thus aim to influence social change by criticising oppressive structures and forms of injustice (Haritaworn, 2008, p. 1.5 ; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 147).

Therefore, even though this chapter is not analytical in the sense that it does not rely on collected empirical material, I have made certain choices about which research to rely on and cite in order to compile this historical overview. Informed by feminist and queer methodologies, I have looked for power structures and taken a critical stance towards heteronormativity, nationalism, neoliberalism, among others. My investment in such political stakes have necessarily shaped my understanding of Estonian history and the contemporary context I present below.

The chapter consists of three parts. Firstly, I situate the discussion about historical developments in an overview of Estonia's various identity struggles over shifting borderland statuses. Secondly, I briefly outline the documented history of queer community-building in Estonia, along with its

fight for the partnership law. Thirdly, I discuss the various changes to the meanings and practices of family-making in Estonia.

3.1 Estonia as a borderland between East and West

The Central Eastern European region in general has been theorised as a space (and time) of in-betweenness, a semi-periphery that is characterised by hybridity and in a constant process of transition (Blagojević, 2009). As noted above, it can also be understood as a borderland – “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 25).³⁴ The space in the Baltic borderlands, today known as Estonia, has experienced multiple turns and shifts of border identities in relation to different modernities, as well as its imaginary positions towards various centres. The (re-)drawing of boundaries and concurrent shifting in identities are central to understanding the current context of Estonia.

3.1.1 Politics of past and future in contemporary Estonia

Choosing a starting point for the “contemporary” is always a political act, as it is a question about what would remain within or outside of history. Narratives about contemporary Estonia usually start with the year 1991, which marks the re-gaining of independence from the Soviet Union and the year in which Estonia became one in the array of post-socialist/post-communist countries. Such strategic positioning in history certainly participates in the regular fixing of post-socialist spaces in time and place and the constant rehearsal of divisions between East and West (Koobak, 2013, p. 91).

Moreover, Baltic scholars have insisted that any contemplations on whether or not the region can be seen as postcolonial should be discussed in relation to a wider historical perspective than the short period of Soviet rule and its aftermath (Jirgens, 2006; Kalnačs, 2015; Salumets, 2006). The area that makes up the contemporary nation of Estonia has been under foreign rule for almost 800 years, so only accounting for the 50 years of Soviet rule and dismissing the cultural influences from other invading powers such as Germany, Sweden, Russia, Poland and Denmark would yield a rather narrow perspective. Thus, as literary scholar Karl Jirgens (2006, p. 65) claims in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, “if one wishes to consider

³⁴ Borderland has also been a useful concept in the recent critical analysis of Europe as borderland (Kulawik, 2020).

the ‘post’ in Baltic postcolonial, then one should be aware of the number and diversity of ‘posts’ that can be addressed”.

However, the year 1991 is undoubtedly incredibly important for Estonian identity, along with 1918, when Estonia as a state first emerged from under the Russian and Baltic-German rule. But those two processes of decolonisation (post-German and post-Soviet in nature) were qualitatively different, argues literary scholar Piret Peiker (2006). While ethnic identity construction at the end of the 19th century was fraught with insecurity, by the time of Soviet occupation Estonia had established a strong national identity and a sense of belonging to the European mainstream, as will be specified below.

Germany, with its political power until the beginning of the 18th century, along with its economic and ideological dominance until the end of the 19th century, has been the source of the most persistent cultural influence in Estonia (Kalnačs, 2015, p. 54).³⁵ Estonia’s nation-building process at the end of the 19th century drew heavily on the German model, while simultaneously relying on a form of self-colonisation to achieve the appropriate form of modernity (Salumets, 2006). Indigenous culture was considered inferior; it constituted a lack that needed to be filled with European traditions and values. Self-colonisation thus resulted in a highly conflicted consciousness: on the one hand, it helped to form Estonian identity as an independent and unquestionably *European* nation but, on the other, this identity was built on the denial of its indigenous past (Salumets, 2006, p. 430).

In contrast, Soviet occupants were instead considered to be the despicable “other” rather than serving as a source of cultural inspiration and prestige, as the Baltic German culture had done previously (Peiker, 2006, p. 126). Owing to the view that the Baltic republics were among the most industrialised and modernised parts of the Soviet Union, with glimpses of “Western” consumer culture with a Soviet flavour (Gorsuch, 2011), a narrative surrounding the Baltics as the developed West of the Soviet Union took hold (Annus, 2012). Estonia was in particular imagined to be a Western oasis in the middle of Soviet misery. Estonia was even referred to as the “Soviet abroad”, which marked a transition from previous ideologically and geographically marginalised territory to a re-imagined dream destination of

³⁵ The transference of Estonia from the Swedish to the Russian Empire in 1710 established a special legislation called the Baltic Special Order, which granted the Baltic German gentry de facto control over all spheres of life. For this reason, German influence was central even under Russian Empire (Biin & Albi, 2012, p. 111).

a new type of Soviet life (Gorsuch, 2011, p. 50). Being positioned high on the hierarchical ladder of modernity internal to the Soviet Union served as a kind of consolation prize and helped Estonia maintain a sense of self-worth, they had gained through the process of nation-state building. In summary, then, it was not towards Russia that Estonia turned in search of its identity after regaining independence, something that has to do with the mutually constitutive racialised processes of rejecting Russia and yearning for “Europe”.³⁶

3.1.2 Yearning for (neoliberal) Europe

While enjoying elevated self-esteem in relation to their occupiers, a fair section of the Baltic peoples had at the same time created a phantasmatic ideal of the Western world that loomed as the epitome of freedom and bliss (Annus, 2012, p. 39). Therefore, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia has actively nurtured the ideal of “returning to the West”, at least at the level of hegemonic discourse. This yearning entails the wish to be read as belonging to Western modernity. However, those wishes are not necessarily met with equal eagerness from the Western core of “old” EU countries. While Estonia has a strong historical claim to Western modernity, from a position within the European core, Estonia is considered as “different, but not different enough”; a semi-periphery in other words (Blagojević, 2009, p. 37). Estonia, along with post-socialist region as a whole, is perceived to be temporarily lagging behind and thus in need of catching up with the Western standards that serve as universal yardstick of development (Blagojević, 2009; Koobak, 2013).

On a national political level, Estonia has rather successfully internalised the lag discourse and has done its utmost to be accepted as a suitable candidate for European “integration”. The necessity to catch-up has been the main discursive framework in politics, economy, culture, academia etc. A (neoliberal) success story has been told about Estonia’s rapid economic transition. Estonia’s quick privatisation, openness to foreign business expansion, advances in information technology etc., have marked the country as a post-Soviet role model for successful transformation from a command to a market economy (Norkus, 2007; Pavkovic, 2006). The hard-line neoliberal policies have continued, and Estonia’s recent vehement austerity measures

³⁶ Certainly, this is not a purely Estonian phenomenon; various other post-socialist contexts such as Poland (Lindelöf Söderholm, 2006), have gone through similar identity processes in relation to Europe.

are considered exemplary in relation to the whole Eurozone. In other words, in terms of liberal economic policies Estonia is no longer just compensating for the Soviet legacy but is even surpassing the European core in the competition to become the smallest state (see Koobak & Marling, 2014).

Casting off the borderland status is in fact among the major concerns of contemporary Estonia. As sociologist Mikko Lagerspetz (2003) describes, there have been active attempts of redefining Estonia's geopolitical position as Nordic and thus Western by extension. Estonia is at the same time making an effort to disassociate with the "baggage" of Baltic States and the rest of Eastern Europe. But these efforts are only made on the discursive level, as Estonia's economic model is much closer to the neoliberal model of the US than that of the Nordic countries (Lagerspetz, 2003). "The Estonian welfare system is regarded as a neoliberal model based on factors such as macroeconomic indicators of low welfare spending, high income inequality, a low minimum wage and a low degree of recommodification" (Fröhlig, Saar, & Runfors, 2019, p. 184).

Moreover, there is considerable reluctance to admit to problems with racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., since these issues are perceived to be Western impositions that interfere with local traditions and customs. Such selective choice about which Western policies to appropriate as one's own and which are to be rejected as foreign serve as an example of social hybridity characteristic of the semi-periphery: being caught up in the tension between "the effort to *catch up with the core*, on the one hand, and *to resist the integration into the core*, so not to lose its cultural characteristics"³⁷ (Blagojević, 2009, pp. 33-34).

On the other hand, resistance to change and to liberal values participates in the global trend of right wing populism and anti-gender campaigns (Korolczuk & Gunnarsson Payne, 2018, January 24; Trumm, 2018). Right wing populism appeals to people in Estonia who are "socially conservative, mistrust politicians, in limited employment, consider Estonian as their primary identity, and male" (Trumm, 2018, p. 340). The Estonian right-wing populist party EKRE (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond/Estonian Conservative People's Party) has become the third most popular party in Estonia, despite having been established as late as 2012. After the April 2019 elections, EKRE became part of the coalition government, which gave them a platform to promote their ideas and dominate the political debate. The

³⁷ Emphasis in the original.

central narratives that EKRE draws upon include: their anti-Russian stance; Euroscepticism; promotion of family values and an anti-refugee discourse (Kasekamp, Madisson, & Wierenga, 2019). The openly nationalist and socially conservative party uses the “pre-existing frame of Estonian restoration and ‘decolonisation’ nationalism”³⁸ (Petsinis, 2019, p. 211) in order to spread fear about immigration and social liberal ideas. This means that EKRE appeals to painful collective memories of Soviet colonisation in order to trigger anxieties about potential future colonisation (Petsinis, 2019). This threat of colonisation may be said to come from immigration (like in Petsinis analysis) but the same political technique applies to EKREs fearmongering about “European” values such as gender equality or queer rights. Considering the constant Estonian anxiety about independence and preservation of the nation, the psychological manipulation meets rather fertile ground.

This causes the case of Estonia’s discursive positioning to be rather paradoxical. It is both constructed as *already* European and thus *returning* to its rightful place in history, while at the same time rejecting certain values that have become territorialised as (Western) European.

3.1.3 The multiple boundaries between and within

The decolonial researcher Madina Tlostanova (2010, p. 106) argues that 20th century modernity was implemented in two forms – liberal/capitalist and socialist/statist, both of them possessing its own coloniality. It is evident that Estonia became disillusioned with the socialist/statist form of modernity while embracing the liberal/capitalist version without willing to confront its complicity with its darker sides.

In fact, Estonians are used to making sense of themselves through a victim narrative, often referring to “800 years of slavery” to which the peoples of the region have been subjected. Due to such a binary understanding of history it becomes impossible to think one’s own complicity within colonial structures or even worse – close to becoming a perpetrator. This is very much evident from Estonia’s current discourse in relation to the ongoing refugee crisis in the world. Rather than offering help and solidarity, Estonia is fulfilling its racialised imaginaries of being a white, European nation by reluctantly accepting to receive an extremely limited number of carefully selected, mainly Christian refugees. Estonia’s experience resonates well with American studies scholar Grażyna Zygałdo’s (2011, pp. 30-31)

³⁸ Quotation marks in the original.

reflections on the Polish context of turning from a source of “illegal” economic migrants to being a Schengen country that in its turn is fully engaged in keeping the “illegals” out, while exploiting the ones who manage to find a way in. Estonia is thus a willing participant in the neoliberal and racist governance of borders, now that it is finally on the “right” side of that division line between legal and illegal people.

This may, then, account for how moving border zones define insiders and outsiders *between* bigger units such as countries or unions of countries. But it is also important to think in terms of even smaller divisions; ripples that geopolitical changes cause *within* the imagined communities that countries in fact are.

Everyone in Estonia knows where the invisible borders run within the country, so acute is the divide between Russian- and Estonian-speaking populations.³⁹ One third of the Estonian population are Russian-speakers – most of them descendants of enforced migration during Soviet period. Not only are there imaginary ethnic and cultural borders separating the ethnic communities, there is also an actual geographical segregation. North-Eastern Estonia’s defunct industrial regions and certain areas of bigger towns are home to Russian-speaking diaspora, while Estonian-speakers live their parallel lives elsewhere. Even the capital of Tallinn is largely segregated along ethnic lines. In fact, the ethno-linguistic segregation that dates back to Soviet times has not only failed to improve but has deteriorated through the years, as reported in the 2017 Estonian Human Development report. Spatial segregation has increased, as the Russian-speaking neighbourhoods in Tallinn have become more Russian while Estonian-speaking areas are now more Estonian. Other research confirms this view, stating that “[t]he persistent ethnically based networks, for example – school systems separated by language lines [...] as well as labour market segregation, and the differences in economic opportunities of households extend the spatial distance of two ethno-linguistic groups even more” (Leetmaa, 2017).

But this is far from a co-existence of equals; the Russian-speaking diaspora is subject to social, political and economic exclusion within the ethnic nation state. The change of geopolitical borders has resulted in an

³⁹ For example, political scientists Joakim Ekman and Kjetil Duvold (2018) argue that there is a significant ethnic cleavage in contemporary Estonia, with Russian-speaking people being much more dissatisfied with and distrustful of the political system and the way democracy functions. Moreover, social scientist Külliki Korts (2009, pp. 134-135) has found that the majority of inter-ethnic contacts remain in the public sphere (work or casual contacts in the service sector or public transport), while private contacts are few.

inversion of power relations and a drastic reshaping of identities. The diaspora has experienced a shift from being highly-rated industrial workers migrating within the borders of Soviet Union, only to find themselves as second-rate citizens in a de-industrialised nation state that labels them and their offspring as belonging to the wrong time and place.

(Non)-belonging to the national body has of course various facets but a very concrete and tangible aspect that differentiates people's mobility is citizenship. The newly independent Estonia defined citizenship in terms of ethnicity, which left a large number of country's permanent residents stateless (Shevel, 2009). With the 1992 Citizenship Act, Estonia granted citizenship to people who were citizens before June 16, 1940 and their descendants. The rest could obtain citizenship through a difficult process of naturalisation – passing the Estonian language test and a test about the Constitution and Citizenship Act (Shevel, 2009). There were 77 268 recognised non-citizens⁴⁰ as of January 2018, according to the Ministry of Interior (Siseministeerium, 2018), which is a rather high rate considering Estonia's population of 1.3 million. These people possess a travel document called an Alien's Passport which, on account of its colour, is colloquially called the "grey passport".

The state has the power of both including and excluding people, deciding who will be bestowed privileges and who will be stripped of them (Butler & Spivak, 2007). They argue further that producing non-belonging gives biopolitical leverage to the state as it strengthens the myth of a unitary nation at the cost of purging the other. Certainly, the Alien passport is an extreme measure, but it is part of the more wide-ranging approach to constructing an ethnically pure nation. No matter their citizenship, the Russian-speaking inhabitants are considered to be immigrants, even though the migration process took place at the time when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, thereby turning them into an ethnic minority (Schulze, Nimmerfeldt, & Taru, 2011). Even the Estonian policy vocabulary bears witness to this approach. Here, the unique term, "new immigrants", is used in Estonia. The term refers to "a person that arrived to the destination country up to five years ago" (Ubakivi-Hadachi, 2015, p. 126). While there is no official corresponding terminology such as "old immigrants", the term

⁴⁰ "A recognised non-citizen is a person who is neither a citizen of the reporting country nor of any other country, and who has established links to the reporting country which include some but not all rights and obligations of full citizenship" (European Commission, 2015, p. 27).

“new immigrant” is used to distinguish between the people who have arrived in Estonia after 1991 or during the Soviet occupation.

Indeed, there are various others who fall out of history in contemporary Estonia, for example those who have paid the social cost of aggressive economic liberalisation, cast as “losers” or “second Estonia” (Lauristin, 2003). The widespread patriarchal and heteronormative dimensions of Estonian society also create strict boundaries between those who belong to the ideal of the nation and those who are actively rejected from it. In fact, the long Baltic German influence on Estonian national identity which has led to the Estonian elite adopting the Baltic-German conservative gender order (Annuk, 2014). The ideal of the heterosexual family with a wife focusing on the private sphere of home and family, and the husband being active in the public sphere, remained an ideal even during Soviet time when everybody actually participated in the workforce. Regaining independence triggered not only the discursive turn back towards Europe, but also an affective turn towards the conservative gender ideology that had been part and parcel of the nation-state building in the first half of the 20th century (Allaste, 2014). The gender order in Estonia along with many other CEE countries is thus contradictory. It bears elements of formal gender equality ideology from the Soviet period, along with high employment rates of women, while at the same time it is characterised by essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality and low enthusiasm for gender equality among women (Koobak & Marling, 2014, p. 334). Such ambivalent in-betweenness is explained by the fact that the traces of different eras with its diverging gender orders are simultaneously present.

Moreover, in the Baltic context, patriarchal and homophobic discourse has become an important part of asserting national identity in the post-Soviet period. “Returning” to the imaginary golden age of the inter-war period, where heterosexuality and traditional gender roles prevail, is as much about rejecting the “[...] liberal, secular and supra-national agenda of the EU and other international organisations as it was about invoking values and traditions banned or suppressed during the communist period” (Mole, 2011, p. 554).

Such affective directionality in terms of both space and time is central in the construction of Estonian identity. I have discussed the ambivalent status of Estonia as a borderland territory between “East” and “West” (while also trying to demonstrate the instability of those categories through that very same ambivalence and constant shifting in between and beyond). I have argued that during different times in history, and in relation to different

hegemons, the ideological value that has been attached to Estonia's borderland identity has varied vastly. In an attempt to position itself, Estonia's recent history can be characterised by a desire to pull away from socialist Russia/Soviet, towards neoliberal Europe. Those spatial and temporal pulls have recently been complicated by the rise of right-wing populist powers, who are critical of the European integration project and instead wish to return to a mythical traditional era where conservative ideas about gender, sexuality and ethnicity prevail.

3.2 Queer history in Estonia

In order to understand contemporary practices of queer kinship and intimacy in Estonia it is necessary to provide a historical context of queer lives in Estonia. The following sections describe the particular development of Estonian queer movement, which both differs from the Anglo-American narrative of queer politics and development that so often is repeated in research and builds on and interacts with different influences. Such careful engagement with a local context contributes to the process of "de-centring Western sexualities" (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011), of which my own dissertation is a contributing part.

3.2.1 A short history of queer organising in Estonia

Some queer activists in Estonia have taken pride in the fact that homosexuality has never been criminalised in the Republic of Estonia (e.g. Talalaev, 2010, p. 112). Archival research has, however, shown that this is not entirely true. When Estonia achieved national independence in 1918, most of the laws that were implemented in Imperial Russia were kept in place, including one that criminalised intercourse between men (Kalkun, 2018). The new penal code of independent Estonia, which did not include any reference to the criminalisation of homosexuality, was adopted first in 1929 and implemented in 1935 (Kalkun, 2018). Even after the positive legal changes, social discrimination and pathologisation was widespread for both gay men, lesbians and trans people also over the first period of Estonian independence (1918–1941).

Queer ethnologist Rebeka Põldsam (2020) has done archival research on the representation of gender and sexual minorities in Estonian print media in the 1920s and 30s. She notes that people living outside of sexual and gender norms were written about in sensationalist terms; they were seen as a medical problem and a perversion. In written media the term for queer

women in those days was *garçonne*, which was mainly used for modern androgynous women who nowadays could have been known as lesbians, bisexual women and/or feminists. There was an overlap between terms *naismees* (female man), *naispois* (female boy) and *meesnaine* (male woman), which could either refer to a transman or a lesbian woman (Põldsam, 2020, p. 105). Nevertheless, thanks to the influence of the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who supported the decriminalization of homosexuality, the 1930s was a rather liberal period regarding the depictions of gender and sexuality within Estonian print media. Due to political changes in the continent and its repercussions in Estonia, the articles after 1933 became fewer and increasingly more conservative (Põldsam, 2020, p. 108). What this suggests is that not only were the actual legal status of gender non-conforming people over the different periods of the 20th century much less clear-cut than that of sexual minorities, but also they were subject to criminal persecution throughout modernity.

After the Soviet occupation in 1941, Estonia implemented most of Soviet legislation, among others §118 that made anal intercourse between men punishable with 2 years in prison (Talalaev, 2010). After the fall of the Soviet Union, Estonia did not include any similar paragraph in its constitution, thus giving base to the claim that homosexuality had not been criminalised under Estonian national rule.

In light of this legal development regarding the first post-Soviet same-sex partnership law (which will be discussed later in this chapter), one can easily fall into the trap of presenting Estonia as on the path towards liberation and progress, extricating itself from Soviet doom and confinement. In fact, this is often the narrative used when mapping queer life and activism in Estonia, reinforced by the lack of documentation from previous eras. Not many documented records remain from most of the Soviet period, since queer networks, due to criminalisation, existed underground (Allaste, 2014).⁴¹ Even though informal queer networks must have always existed, it became possible to establish queer contact more publicly through private advertisements in newspapers from 1980s onwards (Talalaev, 2010, p. 112). From the 1990s, the institutional organisation of queers began to emerge – first by the Estonian Lesbian Union (Eesti Lesbiliit) in 1990, followed by

⁴¹ Nevertheless, there is an artist project about a Soviet chairman by the queer artist and PhD student Jaanus Samma. Moreover, a PhD student Rebeka Põldsam is also working on collecting oral histories of lesbian lives in Soviet Estonia.

Estonian Gay Union (Eesti Gayliit) in 1992 (Kotter, 2006, p. 299)⁴². In 1993, Estonia saw its first gender affirmation surgery and in the same year the transgender organisation Gendy was formed (Sander & Samma, 2011). Thereafter several other organisations were formed and subsequently disappeared, without little continuity and limited political success. Activist burn-out, lack of money and a general lack of interest in community-building have been blamed for what is claimed to be a rather low level of political mobilisation (Allaste, 2014; Talalaev, 2010).

The few previous accounts of Estonian queer activism provide different explanations as to why queers are seemingly lukewarm to politics. Whether the culprit is believed to be the “national” trait of being individualist (LaSala & Revere, 2011) or being traumatised by forced collective mobilisation during Soviet times (Allaste, 2014), the prevailing argument is that engagement in political mobilisation is problematically low. However, as I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Uibo, 2020), it is this particular tendency of expecting a certain pathway for activism by measuring the “lack” of Estonian political mobilisation against the Western pattern of organising through identity-based communities, which instead requires problematisation. Claims such as “[t]he LGBT movement in Estonia is partly reminiscent of the Western gay and lesbian movements in the 1960s or 1970s” (Tiidenberg & Allaste, 2020, p. 320) are problematic because they participate in fixating Estonian context in the perpetual mode of lack and lag, and instate a teleological expectation to catch up with the seemingly desirable model of “Western” community developments (see Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011; Koobak, 2013).

Local activists have been reflexive about the potential translation of different strategies for community-building. One example could be the Pride parades that were organised between 2004 and 2007, though later discontinued. These Pride events were met with various levels of outrage and disapproval from the general society, culminating with violent neo-Nazi attacks. But critical voices about the form and purpose of Pride were also heard from within queer circles. Helen Talalaev, one of the leading queer activists in Estonia,⁴³ reflected on the experience of having tried to introduce

⁴² A more detailed overview of the history of queer organisation in Estonia can be found in my article “Prides in Estonia: Struggling in the Centrifugal Pulls of Nationalism and Transnational Leveraged Pedagogy” (Uibo, 2020).

⁴³ She has held various positions within the LGBT Association and has actively participated in media debates and public education.

Prides as a cultural institution in Estonian society: “It can be said that we cannot adopt all behavioural patterns from the West because they do not fit with our political or cultural environment. Apparently we need to find methods that work for us”⁴⁴ (Talalaev, 2010, p. 114). Since then the politics of visibility has changed, and more emphasis has been placed on educational and awareness-raising events, such as the OMA festival (Oma Maailma Avardamine – Expand Your World), which took place in 2011 and 2014 within the framework of Baltic Pride (Talalaev, 2010). However, after a 10-year break, a very well attended and peaceful Pride parade took place in July 2017.

Moreover, it must be noted that with the help of Internet forums and other tools, people participate in both transnational and national community-building online, though they are not as visible as the more public attempts towards community-building. Special mention is often made to the Estonian Trans Forum and Mea Culpa (no longer in existence) as influential online spaces. Indeed, it is on these sites that participants in this research often found social contacts and information.

When it comes to legal development, much focus has been on the rights of sexual minorities, such as same-sex partnerships. Transgender issues have been unexamined both in societal and academic debates (Meiorg & Grossthal, 2012a). Legislation regarding trans-people in Estonia dates back to 1999. However, it is very cis-normative and medicalised. The legal and medical processes are intertwined, which means that it is not possible to change one’s legal details (name or gender marker) without starting hormonal treatment. Gender affirmation itself is often a long process that involves experts from genetics, endocrinology, psychiatry and culminates with a decision by an official medical committee (Meiorg & Grossthal, 2012a).

3.2.2 Community on the rise

Discourses of individualism seem to be rather pervasive in Estonia. Previous research shows that queer participants mainly emphasise personal agency in making the right kind of choices within the confines of heteronormative structures (Aavik et al., 2016). Navigating everyday life in order to meet heteronormative standards is presented as a recipe for success and securing the road to such success is everybody’s personal responsibility. Structural injustices are often downplayed or obscured and there is a general reluctance to consider affirmative action as a possible strategy in relation to any

⁴⁴ My translation.

marginalised groups (Aavik et al., 2016). Moreover, social work professionals LaSala and Revere (2011, p. 433) interpret the focus on nightlife and on other newly found opportunities for socialising as another example of the individualist and depoliticised approach towards living a queer life in Estonia. But I argue that frequenting public spaces in an otherwise hostile environment can be transgressive in itself. Moreover, nightlife in particular, along with social networking sites, seem to be among the few spaces where the usual ethnic segregation is less prominent (Aavik et al., 2016, p. 82).

In 2006, lesbian activist Lilian Kotter identified two specific traits about the Estonian queer movement – (i) that there is a vibrant lesbian movement and (ii) that a high level of fragmentation has impeded establishing an umbrella organisation (Kotter, 2006). This holds true to some extent also a decade and a half later. Even though the biggest queer organisation is in fact an umbrella organisation, the “Estonian LGBT Association” (Eesti LGBT Ühing), queer activism in Estonia (as well as other social movements) is, according to sociologist Airi-Alina Allaste (2014, p. 20) largely dominated by women. Allaste also points to another dimension of fragmentation – the wide-ranging language-based divide that has not been bridged within the queer community (Allaste, 2014, p. 9). In the 2016 report commissioned by the Office of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, the ethnic power imbalance became rather clear. Estonian-speaking participants, blind to their privilege, did not even bring up relations to Russian-speaking community, while Russian-speaking participants always reflected upon it as an issue of concern. They were highly critical of the queer movement’s incapacity to integrate the Russian-speaking community within their own work and thereby not providing information and support in Russian (Aavik et al., 2016, p. 94).

However, if previous research has argued that the Estonian queer movement is weak and lacking collective identity, then there are recent signs of change (Aavik et al., 2016; Tiidenberg & Allaste, 2020). For example, there has been a significant mobilisation around the partnership law, discussed in the next section.

3.2.3 The bumpy legislative road to civil partnership

Discussions on queer lives are few and far between in the media, apart from debates surrounding legislating queer partnerships, which has brought the topic of queer people’s place in the country to the forefront. This policy issue has been strongly advocated by the Estonian LGBT Association, but

also by a few independent queer voices, who have dared to express their voices in public.

The first wave of public debate in the newspapers and other media was initiated in 2005 when the draft of the Family Law Act specifically defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Public discussions surrounding queer partnership was re-invigorated in 2008 when the Ministry of Justice admitted to the need to regulate queer relationships and started working towards drafting a relevant law (Albrant et al., 2010, p. 36).

At the same time of admitting the necessity to regulate the lives that do not fit into heterosexual marriage, a parallel yet much more conservative legal development regarding family law was put in motion. The Family Law Act, which became law in 2010, continued to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman (§1 Article 1). Moreover, and significantly, it introduced a further specification according to which marriage is void if persons of the same sex are married (§10 Article 1). This framing puts the Family Law Act at variance with both the Estonian Constitution and the European Union directives, because it impinges on the rights of EU citizens to have their marriage recognised when moving within the EU (Mets, 2010, p. 86). Furthermore, the 2014 amendment of the Family Law Act introduced a further stipulation – marriage is void in cases where spouses are of the same sex due to sex reassignment during marriage (§9 Article 7).⁴⁵ Hence, parallel to the waves of debate about regulating queer partnerships, there has been a chain of subsequent law changes that attempt to secure the Family Law Act as only applicable to heterosexual subjects, thus reproducing the heteronormative image of a family.

After years of rigorous public and institutional debate, the Estonian civil partnership law called the Registered Partnership Act (hereafter shortened as RPA), was finally passed in the autumn of 2014, but without the force of implementation. The bill itself extends the rights and obligations that are considered applicable to members of a family, such as the obligation of mutual financial support or the right to visit one's partner in hospital. Moreover, it regulates inheritance and proprietary relations and provides access to adoption. The law specifies that a registered partner may only adopt the child of the other registered partner, while adopting a child of a third person is only permitted in cases where the restrictions would be “extremely unfair to the

⁴⁵ However, marriage between one trans* and one cis-person or even between two trans* persons is legal, as long as they are registered as a man and a woman. Suffice it to say, that trans* related legislation in general is rather unclear and incoherent.

registered partners” (§15 Article 4). Decisions about justifiable degrees of fairness are made by the courts, but to date, the only examples given in the media have referred to infertile heterosexual couples.

Even though the passing of RPA was reported as a great success, making Estonia the first ex-Soviet republic to have passed such a law, this by no means marked the end of the protracted legal drama. Even though the RPA entered into force in the beginning of 2016, the conservative government had made it impossible to pass the implementing acts required for changes to be made to related laws. In practice this means that the RPA does not provide the legal safety and regulation to people’s lives it had aimed to do. Between 2016 and 2020, debates about RPA were pushed out of mainstream public discourse by other sources of heated debate, such as migration, the economy, the rise of the populist right.

It was, however, due to the populist right that the heated debate about regulation of non-heterosexual lives resurfaced in October 2020, albeit in a slightly altered form. On the initiative of the right-wing populist party EKRE, the governing coalition proposed to hold a referendum in April 2021 to confirm and strengthen marriage as a heterosexual institution. The plan was to hold a referendum with the question: “Should marriage in Estonia remain a union between a man and a woman?” In the case that “yes” prevailed, further legal steps were to be taken to secure marriage as an exclusively heterosexual act. Yet, the inverse was not true. Should the “no” side have won, it would have had no political or legal implications, such as, for example, opening up marriage for queers. Once again, the symbolic question of organising kinship matters caused high mobilisation and polarisation in the Estonian public over a matter of months. Social movements on both sides collected money and prepared for advocating campaigns, while the political opposition planned to obstruct the bill with thousands of amendments. Since this happened during the middle of the covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, it was hardly in the interests of the population in Estonia, but yet another example of a populist publicity stunt.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ During autumn/winter 2020 homophobic statements by heads of EKRE caused several governmental crises. On one occasion, the Minister of Interior Mart Helme expressed his homophobic views in an interview to Deutsche Welle, saying that Estonian gays should move to Sweden, where they are treated better (Laugen, 2020, October 16). At the same time, in an opinion poll conducted in November 2020, 58% of all respondents said that the marriage referendum was not an important question with which the state should be engaged. Interestingly there was a large ethnic difference in responses – 60% of Estonian-

In opposition to the referendum, the Green Party started a competing petition for changing the Family Law Act in order to include same-sex couples within the institution of marriage. The petition has collected more than 35 000 votes and will therefore be taken up for discussion in Parliament. Both the liberal right party, the Reform Party and the Social Democrat party, initially refused to participate in the petition, due to not wanting to lose voters. They claimed that attacking the institution of marriage would only be in the interest of EKRE, as it would polarise society even more, especially in the context of a political reality when even the implementation acts surrounding the Registered Partnership Law are yet to be passed (Kiisler, 2020). In the end, the draft referendum about securing marriage as an exclusive heterosexual right did not find sufficient support in Parliament and was dropped. At the same time, the government itself collapsed due to a corruption scandal in January 2021. Nevertheless, there remains hardly any consensus or closure about either the marriage (in)equality nor partnership debate; discussions are thus bound to flare up again.

In sum, the intense public debates and long legal and institutional discussions over the significance of marriage and cohabitation over the past fifteen years signify the relevance of kinship arrangements in the country. It seems that the construct of a family, and by extension marriage-like arrangements, mobilise the passions of people to a high degree. This can be seen as controversial, given the actual sociological affecting the status and state of nuclear families in Estonian society. This I will discuss in the next section.

3.3 Changes in family and kinship patterns in Estonia

My dissertation explores the meanings and practices that queer kinship and closeness-making entail. The changing legal status of queer relationships is likely to challenge some and yet reproduce other ideas about what the family is in the context of Estonia. There is a range of other processes that influence patterns of change and continuity in terms of family-making. In the following sections I discuss some of those social, political and legal processes that affect the changing meanings and practices of family-making in contemporary Estonia.

speakers said the topic was not relevant, whereas 54% of Russian-speakers thought it was (Poom, 2020).

3.3.1 De-institutionalisation of family

The rapid changes that Estonian society went through after the collapse of Soviet Union took its toll on its citizens. Changing from an extensive state-based social protection system to a thin or non-existent welfare state governed by market forces marked a new focus on an individual's responsibility for their own welfare. Restructuring the economy had the side-effects of high unemployment, low salaries, high suicide rates and other social problems that are still referred to as necessary birth pains of a true liberal democracy.

Sociologists Dagmar Kutsar and Ene-Margit Tiit (2003) hold that one of the consequences of the radical social and political changes has been the de-institutionalisation of family. If community interests used to be an important argument for marriage, then individual interests and aspirations have an increasingly important influence for family behaviour. While the post-war trend of high and early marriage rates discontinued in the early 1970s in Western countries, then in Estonia and other Communist countries the trend continued into the late 1980s (Kutsar & Tiit, 2003, p. 70). But in the beginning of 1990s – after national independence was regained – the patterns of family formation changed drastically. Moreover, demographers Kalev Katus, Allan Puur and Luule Sakkeus (2008) point out that non-marital cohabitation increased in duration, compared to its Soviet-time status as a short-term phase at the beginning of a relationship.⁴⁷

According to Katus et al. (2008), the main structural factor that initiated a break from Soviet-time family patterns was the disappearance of Soviet housing policy, where housing was only provided to married couples. Dwelling density was another assessment criterion when allocating housing in the context of huge shortages, thereby further encouraging early child-bearing and the subsequent conversion of cohabitation into marriage (Katus et al., 2008, p. 143). All these factors potentially encouraged people to adopt family and reproduction patterns that departed from pre-war trends.

As a result, the popularity of marriage in contemporary Estonia has sunk drastically. According to data from the 2011 Civil Census,⁴⁸ Estonia was reported to have the lowest rate of marriage in Europe, with only 39% of

⁴⁷ This needs to be further complicated. As Katus et al. (2008, p. 142) have pointed out, some of the demographic processes, such as a shift from direct marriage to premarital cohabitation started well before the collapse of USSR.

⁴⁸ Most of the following reports have analysed the 2011 Civil Census data and are therefore somewhat dated. The next Civil Census will be held on 31st December 2021.

people older than 15 married (Statistikaamet, 2015, January 21). The low rates of marriage is offset by high rates of cohabitation. By the late 2000s, the prevalence of cohabitation without marriage had risen to among the highest in Europe, with 60 percent of people having entered cohabitation in the age group of 18–45, as demonstrated in an European comparison of cohabitation patterns in 2004–2008 (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011, p. 315). Between 2007 and 2017 Estonia and Bulgaria had the highest increase in cohabitation in Europe, positioning Estonia in fourth place, below France, Sweden and Finland (Eurofound, 2019, p. 15). Many marriages end in divorce, with Estonia having the second highest divorce rate in Europe, after Latvia (Statistikaamet, 2015, January 21).

A high number of cohabiting couples also have children – 60 percent in the age group of 26–35, placing Estonia at the top of the list along with France (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011, p. 318). Moreover, Estonia does not seem to fit the East-European pattern, whereby cohabiting couples get married before childbirth in order to legitimise their relationship (Perelli-Harris et al., 2009). Instead, Estonia has one of the highest rates of extramarital births in Europe, with 58.1 percent children born out of wedlock (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011, p. 318). This is a considerable increase, as the rate of extramarital births in Estonia was only 18.3 percent in 1980 (Kutsar & Tiit, 2003, p. 70). Moreover, a comparatively large number of children live with a single parent. According to the 2011 census, 20 percent of all children grow up in a single-parent family, the second highest-rate in Europe (Statistikaamet, 2015, January 21). Unsurprisingly, considering the conservative gender patterns in Estonia, most of the single parents are mothers (92%). However, becoming a single mother is seldom an initial choice but most frequently a result of a broken relationship or the death of a partner (Statistikaamet, 2014, January 30).

It could be argued that most families in Estonia live outside of the idealised heterosexual nuclear family norm and are thus somewhat “queer”. All the single mothers, divorcees, cohabiting non-married people who are reproducing outside of marriage make their lives and families in ways that transgress the conventional norms. But against the backdrop of such shifting family patterns it becomes especially important to ask why it is that same-sex families and their childbearing become perceived as a threat to the nation.

3.3.2 Cultural specificities

As sociologist Hana Havelková (1993) has noted, the family and the private sphere fulfilled an important function in the countries affected by Soviet

occupation; it provided a refuge at times of suppression of public subjectivity. The family therefore compensated for the censored public sphere and served as a locus for agency and collective support (Havelková, 1993, p. 68).

In the context of Estonia, the ethnologist Anu Kannike (2006) has argued that creating and maintaining privacy has been central for Estonians as a way of securing cultural continuity. As I discussed at length in the beginning of this chapter, Estonian pre-war nation-building was based on the German model in its aim to be part of “European” modernity. Consequently, also the middle-class values of domestic privacy and respectability were adopted as aesthetic, moral and emotional categories in pre-war times (Kannike, 2006, p. 217). However, during the Soviet period, it was the domestic arena that became the carrier of a counter-culture, the only space where cultural continuity of those previous values, symbols and traditions could exist. “The customs and taste characteristic of a middle-class Western civil society acquired the function of a cultural weapon” (Kannike, 2006, p. 220). In other words, Kannike argues that restoring and maintaining privacy was a way of coping with the cultural trauma of Soviet occupation. Cultural processes are slow and cultural memory strong, which means that three decades after the end of occupation, privacy is still greatly valued by people.

The importance of privacy and other institutional factors mentioned in previous sections have been shared between Baltic countries, since they were the effect of centralised governance of the Soviet regime. But there are divergences in family practices that can only be explained with cultural factors, according to Katus et al. (2008). The fact that the shift from marriage to cohabitation is prevalent in Estonia (and to a lesser degree in Latvia) but not in Lithuania, can partly be explained in terms of religion. Estonia is among the most secularised countries in the world, after the suppression of religious belief during Soviet times, but also due to a relative indifference to the Lutheran church during the 1920s and 30s. At the same time, the Roman Catholic church in Lithuania managed to maintain an important position in Lithuanian society, and traditional religious values play a greater role in terms of family formation (Katus et al., 2008, pp. 145-146).

3.3.3 Imperfect match between policy and reality

Despite changes in family and cohabitation patterns, no legal recognition of cohabiting relations existed before January 2016 when the Registered Partnership Act came into force. This meant that there was a great discrepancy between lived reality and legal frameworks. The reluctance to recog-

nise that cohabitation was much more widespread than marriage, also made collecting valid statistical data more difficult, since marriage was the only statistically measurable unit in the Civil Census. As a result of the Estonian LGBT Association's address to the Statistics Office, the categories "official" and "actual" marital status were introduced in the Civil Census design in the year 2011 (Meiorg & Grossthal, 2012b, p. 49). Moreover, due to heated debates about the status of same-sex partnerships, the 2011 census underwent changes so that it became possible to count people living in same-sex relationships (Statistikaamet, 2013, April 24).

The Estonian state has thus been slow to cope with the fact that a large part of its population lives and reproduces outside of the institution of marriage. In general, the state sends contradictory messages in terms of family policy, by combining paternalistic and liberal trends (see Borozdina, Rotkirch, Temkina, & Zdravomyslova, 2014 about a similar pattern in Russia). Soviet family policy was designed to support working mothers by securing public childcare (while still preventing women to choose between work and home) (Kutsar & Tiit, 2003, p. 69). In contrast, independent Estonia has combined liberal economic policy with greater familialism. What this means in practice is that the state expects the family to provide childcare with the help of generous parental leave policies,⁴⁹ while public childcare for children aged 0-3 is extremely limited. This contributes to socially conservative gendered patterns of childcare, where women have great gaps in their employment history due to care work (e.g. Javornik, 2014).

Nevertheless, the state has been slow and reluctant in recognising the need to consider the reality of vast and growing cohabitation rates and extra-marital births. It was the proponents of the Registered Partnership Act who actively argued for the necessity to secure the legal situation for not only cohabiting partners but also their children. As mentioned above, a large array of families in Estonia do not easily fit the policy frameworks that are grounded in marriage. At the same time, it is also true that the legal and financial state of families, which do consist of same-sex parents and their children, has been even more insecure than those heterosexual "queer" families that also suffer from the mismatch between policy and reality.

⁴⁹ There is a parental leave benefit that covers 100% of one parent's salary for 18 months (with an upper limit of three times the average salary from the year before last, which in 2016 was 2724.36€ per month). First 70 days are reserved for the mother (Sotsiaalkindlustusamet, n/d).

3.3.4 The meaning and status of the (heterosexual) family

Although questions about the potential challenges and possibilities that queer close relationships could pose have not yet entered into Estonian family-sociological debates, discussions about the meaning and status of (implicitly heterosexual) family are ongoing. There are competing interpretations about whether trends towards cohabitation and extramarital births have changed the symbolic status of the (nuclear heterosexual) family. Sociologists Dagmar Kutsar, Kairi Kasearu and Triin Kurrikoff (2012, p. 186) conclude in their overview of family trends in Estonia that “[t]he family as a symbolic value has maintained its importance and [...] the family model with two biological parents keeps the highest value” as well as “the so-called traditional nuclear family remains the ideal environment” in terms of childrearing.⁵⁰ In contrast, Kasearu (2009) had argued in an earlier paper that the practical value of marriage has weakened to the extent that there is hardly any difference between marriage and cohabitation on the level of people’s everyday life.

However, media scholar Katrin Tiidenberg (2013) disagrees with such arguments about the practical equivalence of marriage and cohabitation. She argues in the 2013 Gender Equality report that cohabitation in Estonia does not actually refer to a preference for “fluid” relationships and progressive attitude towards gender, as cohabiting partners were even found to have even more unequal division of housework than married couples. Her data seems to suggest that the widespread trend of cohabitation signifies an absence of suitable partners, with whom one could establish a more equal relationship. Irrespective of the explanation, her main argument is that the lines between marriage and cohabitation might not be as blurred as expected (Tiidenberg, 2013, p. 45).

When attempting to widen the gaze from the immediate heterosexual nuclear family to at least extended family and kinship relations, equally ambivalent results appear. Katus et al. (2008) argue that, on the one hand, not only was the private sphere important during Soviet times as described before, but kinship networks continued to play a major role in survival strategies after the demise of the Soviet Union, that is, in times of economic hardship which were reinforced through the dismantling of the welfare

⁵⁰ This however is just one example of the heteronormative bias that runs through their text. They also refer to post-divorce households as “fragile family contexts” (Kutsar et al., 2012, p. 177) and refer to people moving in and out of different relationships as unstable and expect this to “affect the quality of parenting style” (Kutsar et al., 2012, p. 185).

state. On the other hand, a few decades after the immediate restructuring of economic and social life, a new (albeit heavily reduced) welfare state has been established, where informal support networks have become more individualised. If in 1994, people were engaged in at least twofold support networks – giving and receiving help to both relatives and non-relatives – by 2004 the support networks had split, so that supporting ties were built either with relatives or with other networks (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2010, p. 64). I speculate that this could either point to a possible opening towards less instrumental and more affective relations, potentially widening kinship beyond family, or to a highly individualised patterns of social life.

In conclusion, considering the patterns of family-making in Estonia it seems likely that the institution of marriage is losing, or has lost some of its practical importance in society. However, that would not necessarily mean that reproducing heterosexuality and traditional gender patterns would be less relevant on a symbolic level. On the contrary, the passionate and divisive debates about extending the definition of family to include queer families seem to show that the fantasy about heterosexual families still lies at the heart of the nation.

This is especially acute in the context of Estonia where there is a constant fear(mongering) about looming national extinction. A country with its population the size of a small European capital is highly sensitive to any demographic changes, especially when changes in the 20th and the first part of the 21st century have not been favourable to its future prosperity. Still struggling to come to terms with losses left by Soviet occupation, inflicting new ones with harsh economic policies that have triggered low birth-rates and the emigration of hundreds of thousands of people, demography is not the pastime of a few obscure scientists in Estonia but an issue that is overly present in public discourse. The only way out of the “demographical toilet” – a term introduced by a social scientist Rein Taagepera (2005, August 29) to illustrate the downward trend in demographics – is to reproduce the nation not only symbolically but literally. Nevertheless, it is not by embracing immigration and/or any potential queer baby boom that will restore the nation’s former glory. Instead, “proper” heterosexual reproduction is the magic recipe that should lead the nation out of the extinction towards which it is presently heading. This is why the very decline of traditional family practices seems to only fuel the backlash against the potential inclusion of queers in the legal and cultural definition of family, rather than encouraging it.

AND I DON'T KNOW WHO WE REALLY ARE...

After having provided a comprehensive overview of the background knowledge relevant for understanding the analysis of my material, I now turn to the empirical chapters of my thesis.

Interlude: Closeness in the making

Svetlana stepped off the bus in the bright evening sunshine of July, gave me a warm bearhug and rushed us off to meet her close friend Ella. Ella was there to pick us up and to drive us to Svetlana's small two-room apartment, where the latter lived with her teenage adopted daughter. We had previously met at a Gay Christian Christmas gathering and agreed to meet for an interview once I could visit the smaller town where she lived. Now I was suddenly in her living room, which doubled as her bedroom, with two lukewarm pizzas in my hands. I had brought them along as we were meeting at dinnertime after Svetlana's long bus trip to the Eastern part of Estonia to drop off her daughter at her parents; the coming days were for her to be spent at a Gay Christian summer convention.

Despite meeting her for only the second time, I felt very comfortable and relaxed chatting with her over dinner as if we were just catching up after a short break. With her curious bright eyes, endless bubbling energy and overflowing warmth, it was very easy to forget the expected distance between two almost strangers. I let myself be embraced by that ease, but caught myself wondering afterwards why it had been so easy to skip the steps of awkwardness and make each other comfortable? While the mutual emotional work certainly helped us cross some boundaries more easily, which other ones did it set up? Those questions did not cross my mind at the time of our interview, though without me realising, it certainly coloured my experiences. I discussed ethnographic fieldwork and intimacy in great depth in Chapter Two of this study, where I outlined my multiple boundary-positions. But in the moment of my actual meeting with Svetlana, all theories failed, and it felt as if I was left to fend for myself.

The purpose of me visiting Svetlana in her apartment was not starting to build a frail bond of closeness between us, but to hear her story about those closest in her life. After cleaning up the plates, we settled comfortably at the table over steaming teacups to do just that.

Svetlana was in a polyamorous relationship with her partner,⁵¹ Nadja, with whom she had been together for more than 18 years. After a first meeting at the university dormitory as young women, several years of not knowing the status of their relationship followed. They had been extremely drawn to each other and had established a bond both through writing letters and visiting each other in their respective towns. They were at the same time left with confusion about what the attraction could or would mean. Svetlana recalled: “We really had strong mental defences. We were already very close, but we still thought it was something else. (*laughing)”. Not daring to talk about their relationship, each of them was playing the game of being friends, but with a strong and ever-present sense that they would eventually keep away from each other in order to “do the right thing”. As discussed in Chapter One, the boundary between wrong and right is strongly governed by the naturalisation of heterosexuality (e.g. Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; A. Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1985). Heteronormativity equates being on the right path and being normal with being straight. Deviating from that path is something that requires the effort of not only turning away from the expected object of desire but also turning towards the queer one (Ahmed, 2006). The automatic pull that Svetlana and Nadja felt towards each other was not initially enough to make them take that turn.

But, as I learned in the course of the interview, they were not as much concerned about society’s potential judgement. They were more afraid of ruining each other’s lives by their insistent connection to each other. Svetlana spoke, “I had the fear that it is some kind of sick dependency. This person has her own life. She is my friend, but she has her own life.” They were each silently willing to let go of each other so that the other could marry a man. Each of them negotiated the life expectations that were governed by reproductive temporality – a life sequenced with milestones gearing us towards reproductivity (Halberstam, 2005). The much stranger temporality, the queer time that would disrupt such a teleological life-course necessarily heading towards heterosexuality and marriage (Halberstam, 2005), felt impossible in its own self-indulgence. Less worried about foregoing their own middle-class respectability, they each wished the other to have “her own life” – that life being oriented towards a futurity of hetero-

⁵¹ Since relationships and identities might have changed since the moment of fieldwork, I choose to write about participants in past tense, in order to mark the fact that I am narrating events retroactively. But I use present tense when providing my own analysis/interpretations and when referring to other research or theory.

sexuality. They were thus each ready to sacrifice their own attraction and happiness so that the other would end up with the proper happy object (Ahmed, 2010b). It took them around four whole years to negotiate their relationship to its current state of shared love, realising that no sacrifices are necessary, their feelings were mutual.

While they had given up the heterosexual future for which they had each wished for each other, neither had they settled for monogamous cohabiting coupledness. They were polyamorous, which means that they both consented to the other person having partner(s) outside of their own relationship. Moreover, they were *living apart together*⁵² according to the choice of Nadja. The interview was conducted in Estonian, which Svetlana was fluent in, even if she was not a native speaker, and yet, in this case, she used an English term. The use of an English term pointed to the lack of words to describe relationships in Estonian. Unlike Swedish, where there are several neologisms such as *sambo* (co-habiting), *särbo* (living apart together), *mambo* (living with your mother/parents), Estonian lacks such neologisms. The term that could be used for LAT is *külalisiabielu* or *visiitabielu* – both translate as “visiting marriage”. But this word is rather clumsy and refers to marriage rather than co-habitation.

Nadja, who according to Svetlana was socially drawn back and with a very low threshold for social interaction, chose to live separately in a small community on the countryside. She placed high importance on the environment that she was in. Living together with Svetlana in that small village of hers would rub the equilibrium for which Svetlana’s occasional visits allowed. A permanent presence of their relationship in that village would be too much of a boundary-crossing, while a fleeting presence was something that could be ignored or explained away. Such opaque ways of

⁵² The expression *living apart together* (LAT), while also used in research contexts (e.g. Duncan, Phillips, Roseneil, Carter, & Stoilova, 2013), was the term that Svetlana herself used to describe their living arrangement. The LAT concept has recently been problematised and broadened by analysing the complexity of different LAT relationships as either chosen, temporary, transitional, undecided or unrecognisable (Stoilova, Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, & Santos, 2014).

In a recent comparative study on incidence of relationships in which partners are not living together in the same household it was found that of all the registered relationships, 10% of relationships qualified as LAT in Belgium, France, Norway, and Russia, 5% in Bulgaria, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Norway and less than 2 % in Estonia and Georgia (Pasteels, Lyssens-Danneboom, & Mortelmans, 2017, p. 808). While LAT relationships thus seem to be less prevalent in Estonia than the European average, at the same time long-standing LAT relationships are more common in Estonia (and Georgia) than in the rest of European countries (Pasteels et al., 2017, p. 812).

conducting a relationship is something that I will discuss in detail in Chapter Five.

While living together-apart was nothing Svetlana initially had dreamt of, she had grown used to it after two decades, and found it that it worked very well. She explained, “Nadja wants to be alone, she wants to have one person at a time. I am the one who has parties and guests (*laughing).” But while talking about it light-heartedly, she also made a passing remark that it would not be easy to live together on the countryside, since they would not fit in there. Such fleeting remarks point to well understood heteronormative constraints which, while taken for granted and thus not paid too much attention to, nevertheless structure people’s lives.

Those brief hours in Svetlana’s company brought so many different encounters with various forms of boundary-work – the emotional work of a researcher and participant getting close to each other, the transition from taken-for-granted heterosexual future to a queer temporality, but also the ways in which different social dispositions or rural/urban environments structure our most intimate relationships. It is a rich archive to be unearthed not just in her specific case but in the lives of queers in Estonia in general. This is the work I will now turn to in the analytical chapters on various aspects of queers doing close relationships.

4. *Lähedased*: making and breaking closeness in conditions of precarity

In this chapter I explore the various forms of close relationships that queers in Estonia actively create, dismantle or negotiate. I draw on interviews, close relationship maps, ethnographic research and some survey data. The main focus of the chapter is on what makes and breaks different bonds, and how closeness is negotiated in relation to various existing norms. To this end, I explore the participants' use of some kinship metaphors and technologies, both in relation to family and alternative ways of relating to others. I approach these various bonds with the help of the more open term *lähedased* (close ones), in order to capture the kinds of relations that would otherwise remain invisible.

In the first part of the chapter I explore the ways in which the participants mapped their close relationships during the interviews. Secondly, I introduce various struggles with negotiating close relationships that do not fit the standard relationship categories. Thirdly, I explore cases where the concept of family does play a significant role. Finally, I discuss how different grammars of kinship are at work when negotiating the differences between family and close ones, while also paying attention to how economic precarity influences those processes. All of these sections pertain to various ways of understanding and doing close relationships in the context of neoliberal precarity.

4.1 Mapping closeness

As discussed in Chapter Two, I have used close relationship maps as one of the methods with which to approach the topic of close relationships. The participants were handed an A3 sheet of paper, colourful pencils and asked to map out their close ones while participating in the interview. The maps thus emerged gradually, as the interviews progressed. Maps helped to

describe relations and explain how each participant envisioned relations in terms of emotions and space.

This practice resulted in a variety of ways to map one's close relationships, featuring both creative ways of visualising one's life and relations, as well as making visible various norms and constraints that govern our visions. Despite this variety, however, certain patterns of organising the maps emerged. I will discuss these further in this first section of the chapter. Some of the maps are analysed here in detail, while others have contributed to shaping the analysis and thereby serve as a background to support the evidence. The analysis is a result of synthesising the most common or remarkable traits of the maps that the participants produced. The qualities I explore in depth are the following: the governing force of the *family tree*; *chronological* ways of visualising one's relations; the different ways of displaying the *quality of close relations* and finally the role that *queerness* plays in the production of maps.

4.1.1 The pull of the family tree

Many participants started out with mapping their relationships in the form of a family tree – locating themselves in a diagram that displays several generations of their family of origin. Even though other people, apart from the family of origin, were added to the map in parallel or alongside the family tree, it was the family tree that quite often functioned as the origin of their story. This is not necessarily surprising, considering that visualisation of a tree is a classical metaphor of kinship. The genealogy of this metaphor has in some European contexts been traced back as far as the 16th century (Klapisch-Zuber, 1991). Moreover, tasking children with drawing their family portrait or later mapping their own family tree is a common practice in the Estonian education system. People are socialised into this kind of visualisation of their bonds from an early age, which means that the discourses that are available about significant relationships are rather limited. Even when given free hands to design a map of one's relationships, the normative way of visualising one's relationships are drawn upon.

Nevertheless, what seemed as a rather normative way of organising one's relationships on the map depicting a family tree, was at a closer glance not necessarily consistent with the practices of closeness that emerged during the interview. Similar discrepancies between drawn maps and the lived reality were found in research on families of choice in Poland (Mizelińska & Stasińska, 2017a). Therefore, as the interview progressed, it was thus sometimes possible to nuance the image that emerged from the map. One

example of such discrepancies between the drawn map and the personal narrative occurred with Keiu, whose close relationship map can be seen in the figure 1.

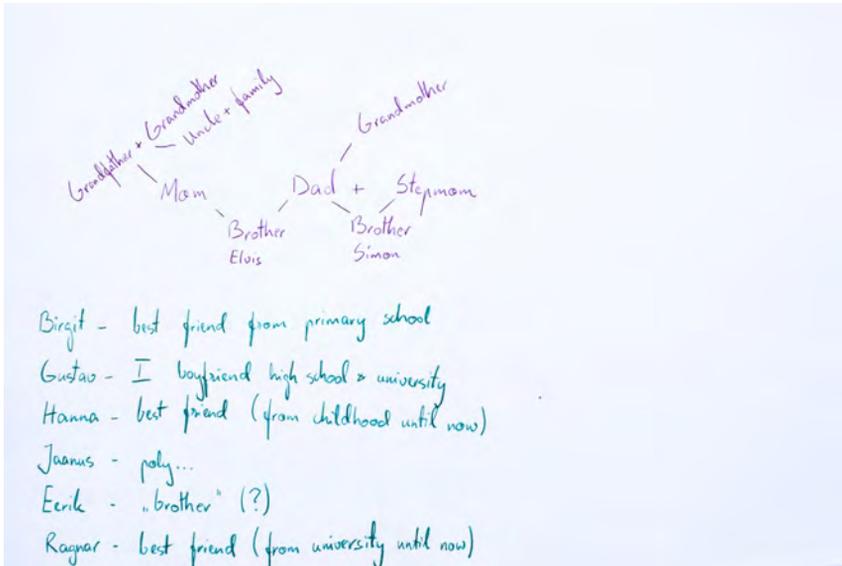


Figure 1. Keiu's close relationship map.

Keiu was a young pansexual and Estonian-speaking cis-woman that first started out with mapping her family tree in the upper part of the empty page. She commented while drawing the well-known family tree, “the ones that I am connected through bloodline – my mother and father, my step-mother who lives with my father”. After finishing the family tree, she switched her pencil to a different colour and listed other people in a column on the lower half of the paper.⁵³ Her relationships to those comprising that list were much harder to define, as is discussed in greater detail in the later parts of this chapter.

Relevant to know at this point is that those “other” people were the ones that, in practice, she was close to in her everyday life. Even though she started her discussion of her close ones by mapping out her family tree, the

⁵³ Space limitations prevent me from describing the maps in all their richness and complexity and discussing all the close relationships noted on Keiu's or other participants' maps. Departing from my research questions, and from the interviews, I have thus chosen to focus on particular aspects or relationships that I find particularly illuminating for the overall arguments of the thesis.

lived reality differed vastly from that map. The only mentions of her family of origin throughout the interview were distancing ones – she explained that she hardly ever visited, that her values were all too different, that it was more of an obligation than a pleasure to meet them. Despite that reality, she had anchored her story of her close ones in that very same family of origin from which she was very much estranged. The governing force of the discourse of the family (tree) was strong.

Keiu herself did not reflect about the compulsion of including her family of origin on the map of her close ones, despite her obvious distance to them. Annabel, however, realised the discrepancy between the expectation to include one's family of origin and her actual lived experience, pointing it out laughingly. She reflected on her feelings in the following way: "I feel a kind of obligation that I should also put my brother here. But I am really not close to him at all". After a moment of hesitation, she left him out of the map, thereby resisting the pull of the family tree.

My point is not to argue that the participants who started by drawing up a family tree did so out of obligation. Some did it out of a great sense of warmth and closeness, reflected in the many occasions of enjoying each other's company. Nevertheless, the point is that even those participants who did not share any close relations to their family of origin, still could not escape the governing pull of the family tree when visualising their relations.

4.1.2 Chronology as a driving force

Although the family tree was one common way of organising one's relations on a map, the other common way of mapping one's close ones was by ordering them chronologically as they had occurred in one's life. Learning to visualise time in the shape of a linear progression is also something we are taught in our early years of education. The actual design of the chronological maps could differ, anything from a line from the left side of the paper to the right, to complicated spiralling maps that included more complex side-track relations, to several sheets of paper, organising the relations both by chronology and location where those relations were practiced. What was common among them was that the passage of time was the main ordering principle for making sense of the relationships that participants had in their lives.

In some cases, there were also overlaps between the chronological and family tree systems, as can be seen on Reelika's close relationship map (Figure 2). Reelika started out with drawing a regular family tree, with herself as a starting point and her sister, her parents and their parents each

connected to her in little bubbles. But while her family of origin took up almost half of the page, she only briefly mentioned them as a point of departure. Her mother and sister have always been there for her, but her father she characterised as “peripheral”; he was more involved with alcohol than family life.

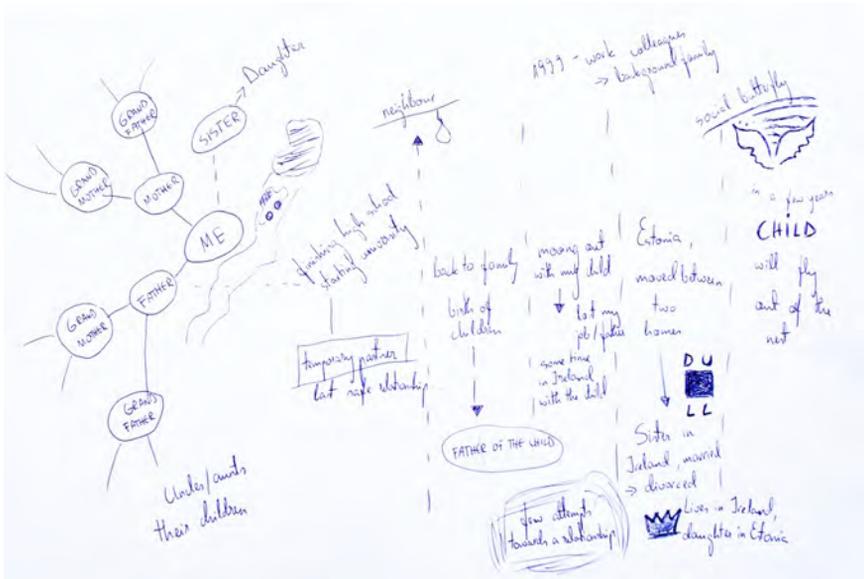


Figure 2. Reelika's close relationship map.

But once the family of origin was depicted, she moved on to mark different milestones in her life in writing, in chronological order from left to right. It was thus not only the closest people in her life who found a place on the map but also people who happened to be connected to some influential phase in her life. For example, the father of her child was mentioned even though they had never been in a close relationship. They had broken up even before the child was born; he had problems with alcohol and participated only sporadically in his son's life. But as he had been a participant in that milestone of her life, he ended up on the map more as an afterthought, rather than the centre of her attention.

The central strand of the chronological part of the map was made up of various moves between different homes (abroad, her childhood home, a separate apartment) together with her son. Her son was the focus of her life as well as the map, but he was simultaneously the source of her fears and hopes for the future. The very final section on the right side of the paper

referred to the future – the time when her “child will fly out of the nest”. That is something that Reelika was both looking forward to and fearing would not happen. Her child was currently investigated for possible special needs, which intensified her fears that he would not be able to live independently of her. She commented,

I don't want it to be like... An old gray-haired mother, whose son is with her on the bus, a plastic bag in hand. Middle aged. (*sighs). Well, all families are beautiful and nice, but I want independence for him, and I also want to be independent.

This yearning for independence for both herself and her son can at first glance be interpreted as being invested in a normative understanding of time, according to which one's life-course and the relationships it consists of, are expected to be linear and gradually leading to further maturity (Halberstam, 2011). Continuing to live as the unit of mother and son into old age, with her son middle aged, was seen as a clear deviation from the ideal – i.e. her son moving on to maturity and independence. A break from such linear progression of time would cast both her and her son as “stuck” in time.

At the same time, wishing for independence for herself signalled the weight of the care burden that Reelika currently carried on her own. Playing an active role in taking care of the needs of one's child is expected to last a limited period of one's life course. The prospect of not being relieved from the care burden was as frightening to Reelika as the stigma of her and her son being stuck in time. (The complexities in the temporality of care is something I will discuss in close detail in Chapter Six).

She also wrote “few attempts towards a relationship” on the map without mentioning anybody in particular. This way it became even clearer that she mapped her life story, where both the presence and absence of close people in her life were intricately bound up with different events of her life chronology. Most of her relationships were drawn from that central strand of she and her son. One such peripheral relation that was commented upon was to her work colleagues, which she called her background family. Another constellation that she noted down was a group of four LGBT people with whom she chatted daily in a Facebook group. They called their small network with the nickname Dull, which was an inside joke. She qualified the constellation in the following way, “It is not a family... But if there is something to share, we share it with each other”.

All in all, chronological maps just like hers focused on the passage of time and important events in one's life. Participants often reported both

classical (and normative) ‘lifecycle events’, such as marriages, births of children, relationships to romantic partners but also moves (between countries, cities) as central milestones. The actual content or quality of their relationship to those people were in those cases less in focus than narrating a coherent life history.

4.1.3 Quality of the relationship

Apart from focusing on the family of origin or on chronologically mapping milestones in one’s life, I identified a third common type of map – one that focussed on the quality of their relationships. Several participants started by placing themselves in the centre and positioning their relationships around that centre. Those closer to the centre were also considered to have a closer relationship to the participant. That was a way of illustrating the quality of the relationship on a flat sheet of paper.

For example, Ellis drew a map reminiscent of the Sun, with herself in the centre and rays of differing lengths extending outwards (Figure 3).

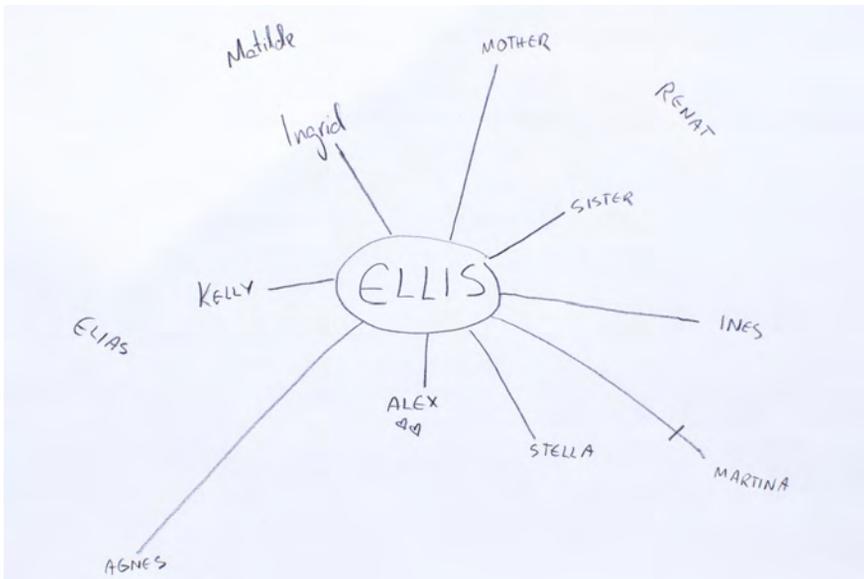


Figure 3. Ellis’s close relationship map.

Ellis did not differentiate between her close ones and family of origin on her map: members of her family found their place alongside current lover(s), friends, ex-partners and other close ones. Her way of differentiating between the quality of her relationship was through drawing different

lengths of rays that marked the relationship. Those who were placed closer to the centre of the map were the ones with whom she considered having a stronger relationship. The people to whom she did not have as strong a relationship (even if it had once been the case, as in case of ex-partners), were placed further away from the centre, connected with a longer “ray”.

Moreover, there were people on her map and in her life that she wanted to include, but due to their more peripheral role in their life were placed on the edges of the map, without any connecting line to the centre (herself). There was also one relationship “ray” that is crossed over with a small vertical line, signifying a definite break in the relationship. That was Ellis’s way of keeping her beloved Martina among the list of her close ones, even though Martina was no longer among the living; a way of marking the continued significance of a person and a relationship in her life, albeit beyond the grave. Other people were marked with similar breaks on their map, when the relationship had broken off for other reasons than death.

In general, maps like those of Ellis were ways of clearly focusing on themselves as the origin of their own relationships. They were the central point to which each relationship was connected, whether in a close, more distant or disconnected way. Instead of focussing on the societal norms that valorised the family of origin (such is the case when starting with a family tree) or depicting the relationships as something collateral to the actual chronology of one’s life, the Sun-type maps focussed directly on the person itself and the differentiated quality of their relationships.

There was also a case that managed to visualise the level of closeness as well as the passage of time on the very same map (Figure 4). That participant was Dimitri, a young gay cis-man who had moved to Estonia from Russia.



Figure 4. Dimitri's close relationship map.

Instead of starting with himself at the centre of the map, he drew x and y axis on the whole sheet. The x-axis marked time and the y-axis marked importance. In this way, he managed to capture the passage of time, mark people who had died or relationships that had broken. At the same time, he managed to designate the hierarchies of closeness. He started out with crossing out the upper right corner of the page – “let’s say this is now and this will be the most important and beautiful thing that I do not have”. That was a way of expressing that he did not consider any relationship in his current moment close to his ideal model of closeness. He started out with his parents, who he referred to as “half-good”. His father was placed rather low on the importance scale and placed back in the historical timeline; he died when Dimitri was 24. His mother was placed higher on the axis of importance. He placed his sister close to her mother, and marked it with rainbow colours, indicating that she was lesbian. He was not as close to his other sister, which is why she was listed much lower down on the importance scale.

His best friend Natalya was placed second closest to the upper right “ideal” corner, since “the only thing we didn’t share was sex (*laughs). And we kept saying that if it was possible, it would be perfect marriage, for life”. However, he had lost Natalya to cancer a few years ago, and was still struggling with the loss. The one closest to the ideal corner was Martin, his ex-boyfriend. Dimitri said, “I will put him higher because he was a full

package. Best friend and a boyfriend”. They were together for several years but broke up because Martin would not leave his husband. Dimitri then spread some other friends in the middle sections of the importance scale, most of whom lived in different European countries or back in Russia.

In sum, some participants went a long way in their attempts to visualise the qualitative difference among their close relationships. That not all relationships are equal in their intensity or quality is rather self-evident. But when tasked with mapping one’s relationships, the hierarchies can often be hidden in the map and only revealed when examining the lived practices, as was the case with both chronological and family tree-based maps. Maps focussing on the quality of the relationship managed to bring those hierarchies into visibility, whereas, like most maps, they lack the possibility of bringing nuance and complexities into the foreground. That is why, later in the chapter, I focus more on the interview material as a way of interpreting the participants’ relationships.

4.1.4 Queerness as break (or not)

The final aspect I would like to pay attention to in this section is the extent to which participants brought up anything related to their sexual or gender identity while drawing their maps. Even though queerness did play a role in their lives and shaped the way in which they interacted with their close ones in everyday life, it did not usually figure in their way of drawing the maps. Very few people made an effort to separate out queer circles from the rest of their close ones. As is later discussed in Chapter Five, the participants were used to navigating both their families of origin and queer relations, without necessarily signifying any direct break between them.

However, one fairly gloomy exception to that common practice was Natasha, a young lesbian cis-woman. In her case queerness constituted a clear and definite break in her relations to her close ones (Figure 5). That break was illustrated with a line that divided the paper into two halves. On the first half of the page she wrote “Before” as the title and marked down eight people. The second half she entitled “Now”, where only three of those people were left on that second half. The dividing line in her life and her relationships, then, represented her coming out as lesbian.

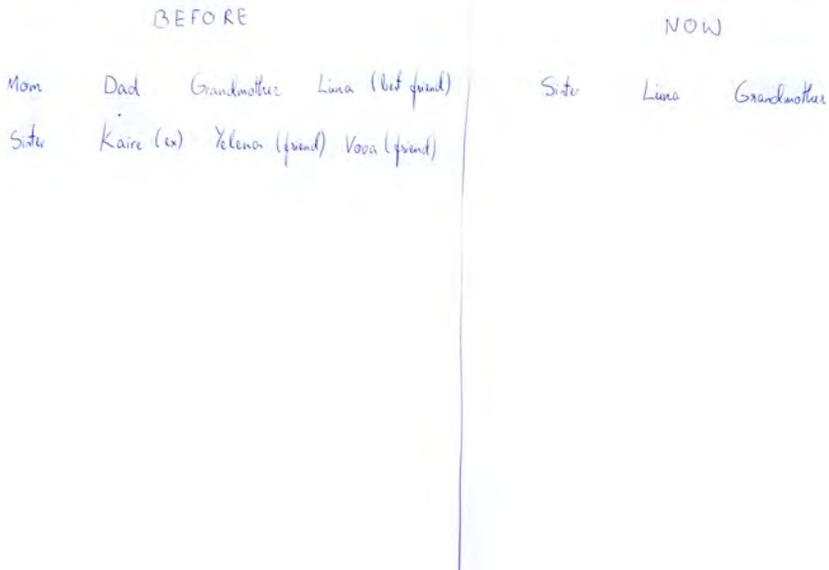


Figure 5. Natasha's close relationship map

First, she wrote down her mother and her father, with whom she used to have a good relationship, and her grandmother, who looked after her when she was young. Next in line was her best friend Magda who lived in Lithuania and her sister, two people in whom she confided. (She considered herself very reserved and preferred not to talk about her problems with anybody). Other important people for her were Irina, who helped her realise that she was attracted to girls, and her ex-partner Kaire whom she had met on Tinder. However, Irina lived in Russia and their relationship faded, while the romance with Kaire ended due to Natasha's parents' invasiveness. Referring to her parents, she said, "They are still my parents" without commenting what she meant by that. But the relationship to her parents had suffered immensely and they no longer found a place among the closest people on her map. Those who remained on the second half of the paper, which represented the current situation were her sister, her grandmother and her best friend Magda.

In fact, not all of those relationships had disappeared due to her coming out; some people she had lost contact with for other reasons. Nevertheless, Natasha experienced her coming out as the decisive moment that shattered her previous constellation of relationships. That breaking line that ran from the top of the page to the bottom was a clear mark of her pain and loss. As is discussed later in Chapter Five, she was optimistic about her future and continued to create new relations by being active in queer circles. But that

current moment, frozen in time with the help of the map, was a sad testimony to how fragile any relationship can be.

The close relationship maps have been very valuable in finding out both how queers in Estonia structure their relationships when given the task of visualising them rather than just talking about them. The close relationship maps helped to render visible the emotional, temporal and spatial dimensions of closeness. Both the variety and the patterns I could identify form a ground for further analysis, to which I turn in the following sections.

4.2 The close ones that would never appear

As discussed previously, the shift from asking people about their (queer) families to asking them about their close ones, made a significant difference in my research. It opened up the possibility to talk about the kinds of bonds that were central in people's lives and wellbeing, while not necessarily fitting into the more constricted concept of the family. In the following sections I explore some examples of close relationships in more detail.

Kim's life and understanding of kinship provided an interesting example of accounting for the close ones that would not have found space in a research on family as typically understood. Kim was a bisexual cis-man in his early 20s. At the age of 18, he had considered his close ones to be his grandmother, his mother and his friend, Anton, whom he jokingly called his Norwegian boyfriend. When he was 19, he met his current fiancée Elin, with whom he had been together for the past three years and who now also had her own spot on the map. However, it was his Norwegian friend, who would have been likely left out if Kim had been asked only to describe his family.

The label "boyfriend" was given to Anton in a joking manner by Kim and his girlfriend. It referred to the significance and level of closeness between Anton and Kim. They were not romantically involved and in fact, they had not even managed to meet offline, since Anton lived in Norway, and Kim lacked the money to fly over for a visit. It must be noted that the widespread precarity that characterises Estonian queer life could prevent people from being mobile and connecting in ways they would otherwise wish. At the same time, the internet facilitated their close relationship, since they were in daily contact, either playing video games together or talking on

Skype for hours. As the field of internet studies shows,⁵⁴ affective relations are built and maintained in internet communities to an increasing degree (Borcsa & Pomini, 2017; Tang, 2010; Yang & Bao, 2012).

Kim and Anton had extended their relationship offline by sending each other packages. Such keepsakes formed not only a tangible link between them but sometimes functioned as a literal lifeline for Anton, who was said to suffer from chronic depression. Kim spoke of Anton in the following way:

He is also slightly mentally ill. We all are, turns out, all close ones. That's why I send him the packages, it keeps him.... He does not have such good friends at home. He does have friends there, but nobody that he would speak as freely with. He'd rather come to me than go to his neighbour.

According to Kim, Anton's absolute favourites were Anneke chocolate and Viru White vodka, both known brands from Estonia. Kim told me with both warmth and pride in his voice, that Anton only consumed them sparingly and kept them dear, as they were also reminders of Kim's care. While I did not interview Anton and can therefore only provide Kim's interpretation of this gift-exchange, it is still an example of their continuous mutual acts of care that take place both on and offline. A key argument here is that (also transnational) links of care and closeness literally keep people alive, a topic I discuss further in Chapter Six. Here I continue with further narratives about the participants' close ones who do not readily fit into available kinship categories.

Keiu was the only interviewee out of 19 who permanently lived in the countryside. Two other participants lived either close to a big city where they worked, or sought to balance between living in two homes, one in the city and the other in more rural surroundings. Keiu came to a small-town café to meet me; she was on her way to her hobby group meeting, although she lived and worked in a town of 5 000 inhabitants. Originally from Tallinn, Keiu had moved to this part of the country when she started high school. The reason for moving had been that neither her mother nor her father could afford to support her living expenses after their divorce. Moving to her grandparents was a relief, since her mother's depression had been taking a toll on her.

⁵⁴ Research on digital intimacies is vast (e.g. Andreassen, Nebeling Petersen, Harrison, & Raun, 2018; Dobson, Robards, & Carah, 2018; Liliequist, 2020; Tudor, 2018), and exceeds the scope of my thesis.

For Keiu, her current closest person was Eerik, and she referred to their relationship as a “kind of family”, with a qualifier. She had met him four or five years ago and felt an instant connection. She was somewhat spiritually minded and thus believed that she and Eerik must have had a connection in a previous life; their current level of closeness was experienced by her as beyond this world.

Keiu fell in love with Eerik at first sight, at an event she attended with her best friend Ragnar. Ragnar’s relatives at that event assumed that Keiu and Ragnar were a couple, making it impossible for Keiu to approach Eerik. The heteronormative gaze straightened them in the eyes of the others, because even though Ragnar was actually gay and Keiu pansexual and non-mono-gamous, they were assumed to be in a heterosexual exclusive relationship. The straight lines to which our bodies are expected to align themselves can normalise the queerest of constellations, as Ahmed (2006) has convincingly explained. The reproduction of heterosexuality functions by such invisible straight lines; Keiu encountered their imposing limits the night she would have wished to approach Eerik. Thinking with Ahmed, we can note how certain objects are in reach and others not, and how deviating from the desired orientation can make the person seem out of line. That night, more than any other, Keiu experienced the governing and punitive lines that structure our desires and lives; she only dared to look at Eerik from afar not to transgress the invisible yet strong heteronormative boundaries.

Despite the normative structures, Keiu found a way to invite Eerik to a professional event, through which they established further contact. Eerik, Keiu and Ragnar were all in the same field of work, and when they all met, it dawned on Eerik that Keiu knew his secret through Ragnar, his relative. Namely, Eerik was a trans* man whose previous experiences of coming out had been painful. But with Keiu, it was different, and their shared vulnerability was a source of further trust and closeness, as Keiu reflected,

A wall came down from between us thanks to me approaching him as a regular person from the time that I know his big secret. By now he has told me that when he ever did tell someone, it always became a big complication. But when he saw that in our case it makes no difference, it sowed the first seed of trust. [---] I think he has also needed to be able to be entirely honest and open and close with someone and at the same time he sees that I respect his boundaries, even though I push them from time to time or try to nudge them. And he nudges mine.

The boundaries to which she referred had to do mainly with the layout of their relationship. Keiu was very much in love with Eerik and wished to

enter into a romantic and sexual relationship with him. However, Eerik was waiting for someone else to return to Estonia, someone with whom they had met only once but were in contact with online. Moreover, Eerik was somewhere on the asexual spectrum, while Keiu was decidedly not. But since Keiu was used to living non-monogamously, she had some other “sympathies”, as she called them. Eerik, however, was her main emotional point of focus. They were thus building closeness with certain restrictions, as Keiu recounted,

For the moment it is enough for me that I can love him from a distance. I can be with him and I can be close to him. And it is just emotional closeness, there is nothing physical. And there have been periods when I am frustrated about that, would want to touch him. But at the same time, I do value it more that he trusts me and that I can also talk to him about it.

Keiu’s description of her relationship to Eerik evinces certain conflictual feelings she had about it. Although she craved for physical intimacy beyond the emotionally close relationship they had, she also respected Eerik’s boundaries and valued their current way of navigating it all. Their relationship certainly broke with the precepts of heteronormative relations, which require strict differentiation between monogamous romantic coupledness and other forms. But as will be evident in the coming section, defining such non-normative relationships is not an easy task for anyone involved.

4.2.1 Friends, siblings, lovers, family? The difficulties of defining

Eerik’s and Keiu’s relationship existed not just on the level of emotional closeness, but they shared their everyday struggles. At times of economic hardship, they had taken turns in supporting each other. When Keiu was in hospital, Eerik was the one who took care of her home and cats, despite the 20 km distance between them. The bond between them grew and strengthened through practices of care and support. It is the everyday reproductive labour or practices of corporeal “renewal” as Freeman (2007) calls it, that help to strengthen the sense of belonging. Things can also be put the other way around – the existing bonds mandate the arrangements of obligation and care.

Somewhere in spring he discovered that we are functioning as a family; that it is possible without being together. [---] Sometimes we are like sister and brother and sometimes we function as each other’s lovers, as we are supporting each other and helping each other. He had some

troubles with his car for a while, so I was helping him, buying him food, without thinking that I would want that money back. It just is like that, if that person that I love needs help, I will help him. And it is the same with him. But it is difficult. Actually, I should say that he is my friend, although none of my other friends knows me like he does.

Keiu struggled to name the type of close relationship she and Eerik had. Together they formed some kind of unit, functioning as each other's significant others. But defining the unit became complicated. If it was a family, was it of the conjugal type – “lovers” – or more like “sister and brother”? The way Keiu marked down Eerik on her relationship map was “brother”, followed by a question mark to express her confusion. None of those descriptions were entirely appropriate. Keiu was also reluctant to call Eerik her friend, even though she felt societal pressure to do so. The level of closeness they shared did not fit with the available kinship categories. Kinship terms are used to describe relations, but the content needs to be tweaked and re-imagined in order to convey emotional complexities.

Nikita, a pansexual queer person, who lived in Estonia at the time of the interview, was struggling with similar problems. They⁵⁵ reflected about relationships that they found important to date (despite having fallen out with two of the three people in this group). Nikita called that group their family, to signify the intense closeness they shared. In response to the question why this had been a family and not a group of friends, they said:

I struggle to use these words because I have two options. Either I can use friendship and then explain. Because if I use friendship people understand something else. What people consider friendship – ‘Yeah, you have few friends’. But the word friend and how it is used, it is different. If I use family, then people... At least they ask. They might not understand, and they ask. And then I have the chance to tell. It is not that I undervalue the word friend. I would not say, ‘It is not just friends’. But what I would say that is very close intimate relationship. Of course, it can break, and it can stop, as it has happened. But when you live there, it is part of what structures your life.

Both Keiu and Nikita seemed to struggle with the binary between friends and family, or between kith and kin, in other words. As heteronormative understandings position the (nuclear) family as the central institution for organising sexuality and care, “being a family” becomes the highest com-

⁵⁵ Nikita preferred the gender-neutral pronoun “they”, which is what I will use throughout the text when referring to them in the third person.

pliment one could give in order to convey the value of a relationship. However, as Roseneil and Budgeon (2004, p. 135) note, a large part of people's affective investments and engagements in intimacy and care are located beyond the "family", between networks of friends or other non-normative constellations. Friendship does not enjoy as high a social status as family, something that Nikita also referred to by refusing to say "just friends". In order to become intelligible in the social setting, they relied on the available cultural constructs, while also struggling with them.

Similarly, Nikita relied on the term "wife" when referring to Julia – the person that had a very special place in their life. They had been close since high school and had maintained a close relationship despite living in different parts of the world. However, they were not married, neither had they exchanged any other official or unofficial vows of commitment. Nikita described their relationship in the following way,

That's the funny thing, it is unconditional. At the same time, I know it could end. Once it almost ended but then again, I know there is nothing I can do that's going to break it. It just has got closer and closer and better and better in a way. We used to have more conflicts, now we basically don't. I'm not scared of disagreeing, I'm not afraid of when she is breaking down or crying. I know how to comfort her very easily and she knows how to comfort me. And when you read the messages, it actually sounds like we are in love. But in a way we are. But at the same time, we are not. (*Sighs). I don't know, it is weird. We don't have a good word. We are not romantic partners. But in a way we are. Ok we don't have sex. But then again, is that the main difference?

Nikita's rhetorical question whether having sex was the main qualifier of a romantic relationship cut to the core of the issue – that the strict boundaries between relationships were not tenable. As explained by Roseneil and Budgeon (2004, p. 138), such non-normative intimacies that do not fit the friend/lover binary "decentre the primary significance that is commonly granted to sexual partnerships and mount a challenge to the privileging of conjugal relationships in research on intimacy". Such blurring of boundaries between various forms of bonds between people has brought Butler (2002, pp. 37-38) to suggest that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish kinship from community. If sexuality and biology need not have the central role in kinship, but durable bonds can be established without either, then sexuality can at the same time be thought outside of kinship relations. It was exactly this type of rethinking and renegotiating kinship relations, friend-

ship and community, that Keiu and Nikita were struggling with in their daily lives.

4.2.2 Plans for future as the binding agent

When everything is in flux, and when changes and renegotiations are abundant, there is nonetheless still need for some continuity and security. Among the research participants, the grounding factor seemed to be a commitment to some form of future together, often expressed more in practice than by making concrete vows.

Nikita, for example, differentiated between the different types of common plans with his wife Julia in the following way:

I think the actual main difference is that we don't make our short-term or midterm plans so we can live together. In the same city. Although it is an idea that is always around. And we always joke, yeah maybe in the future we will live together. I guess because of other interests we have and other things, it has not become this main person. She was married and she was in a long-term relationship with a guy. But she could also not imagine our relationship ending. At the same time for me, I knew this relationship is going to be constant regardless of other romantic and other friendships and other things. It is just there. She is the one.

Nikita considered Julia their life partner. Julia was the one they were planning to leave their belongings to in case of inheritance, and Nikita would trust her with the care of their children, in case Nikita should have any. It was thus the very long-term plans that they valued with Julia, as their relationship had a place of permanence in their otherwise changing sexual and romantic interests. They did not structure their everyday life and shorter future around that particular relationship, rather it existed more in the background (without at the same time losing its relevance, as the term "background" could suggest). Their relationship was in one way still an investment in futurity and longevity – aspects of normative temporality that Halberstam (2011) has criticised. But at the same time, their future plans were not linear in the way the norm of the nuclear family would mandate. Their plans were diffuse, flexible and accommodated many other romantic and sexual relationships simultaneously with their own. By not prioritising that relationship over other potential ones, they were twisting the temporality that otherwise could be considered normative.

Plans, no matter how diffuse, functioned as an agent of closeness and helped to strengthen the bond in the making. Keiu and Eerik, despite it being unclear whether they would ever initiate a romantic relationship,

were making concrete plans for some kind of future together. In the spring before the interview, they had planted tomatoes together, a practice that formed an immediate link to the near future. Those tomato plants contained a promise and a dream of a future together. This promise was sealed through the labour of planting and taking care of the plants, in order to enjoy the fruits (of both their labour and connection) at a later point in time. Through their common labour, also their emotional attachment was extended into the future. As was discussed previously, such microsocial practices of extending bonds and lives beyond the current moment are part of the process of *renewal*, as opposed to *recognition* (Freeman, 2007). It was their common lives and future plans that bound them together, rather than any official recognition of their relationship by the state.

Moreover, I argue that such mundane everyday activities like planting tomatoes helped to form a kind of material commitment without the need to define or redefine their relationship, a task that Eerik was unsure about tackling. Similarly, when working in Eerik's garden, Eerik showed Keiu an empty house across the road from his house and asked whether she would like to move there. This was an invitation to intensify the bond they had. Becoming neighbours would add physical proximity to the emotional closeness they already shared and would make it easier to share their everyday life, which they already did rather frequently.

Keiu found the idea of living close to Eerik attractive, also because it would fit with the reproductive plans she had made together with her gay best friend Ragnar. She referred to the idea of buying the house close to Eerik as "almost ideal":

I have been thinking that it would be an option, it would be great. This feeling is sustainable. And me and Ragnar have been discussing having children together because he cannot do that with his partner and pansexuality is not possible for him. And I feel that I cannot be in a hetero-mono relationship. So this feels like the most hopeful option, and I would want to have children, it would be great. [...] And that place that is nearby Eerik, it is almost an ideal place. It even has a well!

Due to financial issues, Keiu had to put on hold her plan of living with children in a house next to Eerik. Both Keiu and Ragnar dreamt of having some financial stability before having children, so that one of them would have a home in which the other, with their partner(s), could either visit or live. In the remote area where all of them lived and worked, it was possible to buy in 2016 a somewhat dilapidated house with the minimum amount of 5 000-10 000 EUR. However, with her lower middle-class salary, even that

price forced her to put these plans on hold. As discussed in Chapter One, in-work poverty is common in Estonia, even among highly educated people. Ragnar and Keiu, who were both employed in the educational sector, thus focussed their energy on achieving some economic security before they could carry out their reproductive plans. Those fantasies of a common future served to strengthen their already existing bond and were thus central in making and maintaining closeness.

Keiu and Ragnar hoped to have three children together and planned to live and take care of them, at least until the youngest reached around two years old. Later living arrangements, they assumed, would depend on the future context. But they felt confident that they would manage a life together, as they had already succeeded with an extreme form of cohabiting – half a year spent together in Keiu's 16 sqm flat, after Ragnar moved to work in the same town as Keiu. The challenge of close quarters convinced Keiu of the feasibility of their common reproductive plans. She recalled this intense time in the following way,

Cannot get closer than that! It was great! I don't know how... I cannot imagine living like that with anyone else, in that small space and with my two cats. And we made it! Even before we lived there, we had theoretically talked about having children. But then we realised that we can do it.

Precarity puts people in close physical proximity with others. In the case of Ragnar and Keiu, the emotional closeness they shared was only enhanced by that physical proximity. But as I discuss at the end of this chapter, this is not necessarily always the case.

In conclusion, it was evident from my material that participants had strong bonds to people who were not so easily mapped onto rather limited relationship categories. Be it the living-apart-together Gay Christian poly-amorous couple Svetlana and Nadja; the online "boyfriend" Anton, with whom Kim was not sexually involved (nor even met offline); Nikita's "wife" and "family", neither term of which adequately captured the lived and concrete realities of Nikita's close relations; Keiu wishing to have children with her best friend, while building a "kind of family" of mutual support and care with her difficult-to-define love object – none of these people could ever be accounted for in research that only looks into the idea of the family in the strictest sense. Thus, one contribution my research is seeking to make here is to show the complex and creative ways people are building

bonds of support, love and care with an array of people that much more neatly fit under the umbrella of close ones rather than family.

4.3 Not forgetting family

Despite various alternative forms of making closeness, the family as a concept was still meaningful and relevant to some people. Reelika, for example, felt strongly that a constellation resembling a family was not sufficient for her own happiness. There had been a time about a decade ago when she had lost her job and moved to Ireland with her son, who was then at primary school. Struggling to make a living there for a year, she shared an apartment with an Estonian friend who had moved there long before. Her friend helped with childcare, making the difficulties of negotiating everyday life in a foreign country easier. Precarious situations, like, for example, being between jobs, which could otherwise have been extremely trying, were made easier thanks to having a place to stay and mutual support. The work of caring for each other bound them together, as Reelika reflected: “She was a friend, but family at the same time. She was not just a flatmate, she took more responsibility. Just like a family”. But despite sharing the joys and worries of everyday life, Reelika started feeling that this way of sharing each other’s life would be a hindrance for both her and her friend. Deep down she distinguished between a “real family” (which would be romantically involved people) and “just a friend”.

Having a friend is great but she is just a friend. And needs to play family with me. I cannot find a person apart from this to create a real family with. And she cannot find a person to create a real family with. Because there is some momma with some child, to whom she devotes a lot of her attention and caring. And it would be difficult to explain to somebody why she has such a creature at home that requires all this attention and care. Love is truly a big and great thing, but it will not be enough for everyone in everyday life. You need to work, you have a home and a lot to do. And when you start dividing yourself then it gets too much. Purely emotionally, in the sense of binding, it is messy and difficult in the end.

Struggling with everyday life under conditions of precarity made her feel that love was a scarce resource that would be wasted (on the wrong object). Being a single mother, working, keeping a job and managing a house was a burden she felt she would want to share with someone with whom she was romantically involved. The reproductive labour that brought for example

Keiu and Eerik closer together, felt in Reelika's case pointless, unless it was to be shared in a "real" family constellation.

In other words, many people organised their close relations according to more traditional understandings of the family, with smaller or bigger changes in their particular ways of "doing" family. My focus on close relations does not exclude people who focus on their family of origin or the family they create with their partner and children. While, for some, family as a concept was a stopping point in the initial stages of conversation, many still used the concept in either a more conventional or creative sense. That simply shows that there is a high level of complexity of closeness in a range of different ways and registers. In the following sections I explore some examples where "family" was indeed central in understanding close relationships.

4.3.1 Extending and choosing

Triin relied on scientific knowledge when talking about her close ones and when placing them on the close relationship map (Figure 6). The map, along with the simultaneous comments on her drawing, was an attempt of visualising her way of defining and classifying her close relationships. She starts out with saying, "The closest ones are my current family. Which means me, my wife⁵⁶ and three children. It is a kind of, not sure how to say it scientifically, nuclear family or current family". She drew them as figurines in a big bubble in the centre of the paper. She and her wife were bigger, the children smaller, while also their cat and dog found a place in that central bubble. They were a middle-aged monogamous lesbian couple, who had been together for eleven years, and for the past five they had also been registered partners. The (partial) legal recognition through registered partnership was evidently of high importance to Triin's lived reality, since she and her wife had three children. The need for the legal protection and regulation is especially acute when children are involved in the family constellation.

Thanks to her job in the educational field, she was well aware of the literature that defines constellations like "nuclear family" and identifies with it strongly. This was a clear example of how our kinship language is inflected by various knowledge regimes, among them the social sciences.

⁵⁶ Triin used the term "naine", which in Estonian has a double meaning. It can be used to refer to both "woman" and "wife". While Triin could potentially have preferred to refer to her partner as "my woman", I have chosen to translate it as "my wife", as they were in registered partnership.

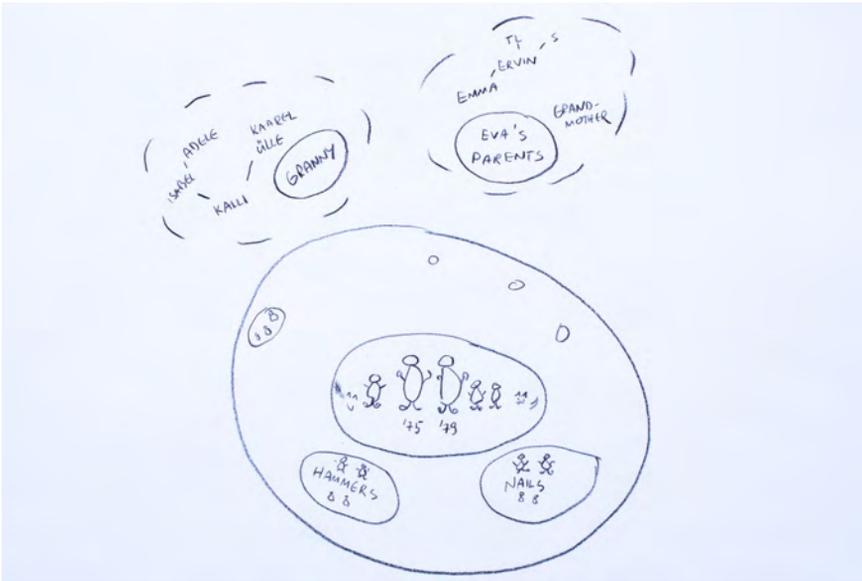


Figure 6. Triin's close relationship map.

While the hierarchical position of the nucleus was strong, Triin added further nuances to it, both on the map and in her discussion. The small circle in the middle that consisted of their nuclear family was surrounded by a bigger circle, in which three other small bubbles were located. Those designated some other “constellations” as she called them. Two of those constellations were pictorially depicted as larger than the others, designated as two heterosexual couples with their respective children; these families were named Hammers and Nails respectively. The adults from the three families had at one point been colleagues and had since started sharing their life outside of work too. “They are our family, I would say our extended family”. They were each other’s godparents, one of the mothers was a preschool teacher for all their children, they helped each other with practical or emotional matters. Triin spoke of her extended family in the following manner, “I wouldn’t say that we are together very often, but when we are, it is like a gathering of an Italian family.”⁵⁷ The whole family gathers, and we are together.”

⁵⁷ “Italian family” is a racialized metaphor, used in Estonia to refer to a loud, lively and big gathering of family members, often around food. It is rather used as a compliment, to refer to the intensity and warmth of relations (that people in Southern Europe would have, according to stereotypes).

Within this second circle of the extended family was another smaller circle, including names that were set apart from the two bigger circles. This area designated a further couple which, however, she characterised as more distant. Three even smaller circles did not have any names ascribed to them. All of those constellations were still located in the central outer circle that marked the extended family. Triin spoke of them in the following way:

Then there are such smaller and more distant, who come and go and are and disappear. Let's make some small satellites here, but I wouldn't even mention them, let's say a circle of friends who are sometimes in our lives or are somehow connected.

In short, Triin's understanding of closeness was rather spatial and hierarchical, as the distance and perspective of the drawings on the map reflected the real-life emotional closeness or distance. Spatial proximity and importance were thus intertwined in her understanding; those not in the central core of the family were categorised as more distant or would fall outside of the family altogether, as will be discussed shortly.

When asked who she would turn to for help in case of sickness, Triin brought up further constellations that she marked with the help of two circles, placing them above the central sphere within which her nuclear and extended family were included. While those central circles were drawn with a steady line, the two satellites were marked with unconnected lines, as if to characterise the fragmented nature of those relations. The jotted lines formed a contrast to the strong and steady line she had drawn around her closest ones, thus indicating the partial relations with mixed feelings towards the "satellites", as she called them.

In one of those fragmentary circles she noted down her wife's parents, who helped them with babysitting. However, their relationships were not very close; Triin's father-in-law did not accept Triin and their relationship. Triin had thus learned to distance herself from them. She also marked her wife's other relatives, such as aunt and grandmother, since they were more supportive of their relationship. In another jotted circle Triin placed her own relatives. First, she noted down her mother, who was also helpful with babysitting. However, Triin mentioned that her wife arranged most communication with Triin's mother, as Triin has had a difficult relationship with her since her childhood that had been tainted with her father's alcohol abuse. She added to that: "When I think of my family, family is determined not by genetic basis but the people that we have chosen in our life".

Triin's way of constructing her family was thus somewhat similar to some of the results of Weston's (1991) research on gays and lesbians forming "families of choice" in San Francisco. As Weston's research shows, albeit in a different setting and time, people have different degrees of agency when negotiating relationships, and relations to family of origin are "selectively perpetuated rather than 'naturally given'" (Weston, 1991, p. 73). Nevertheless, there are significant differences between my own research and Weston's. Even though both demonstrate the flexibility of relationships, the participants in my research were not always keen to categorise their relationships to people outside of their family of origin as "family". They did not necessarily divide their lives according to their straight "families of origin" and their queer "family of choice". They also exercised agency by selecting or de-selecting people they considered close. This said it was also evident in my research that their choices were to a great degree constrained by both economic precarity and obligations to their family of origin.⁵⁸

Moreover, homophobia was the main reason in Weston's (1991) work for building alternative kinship networks outside of one's family of origin. It must be remembered that homophobia need not be the only reason for severing a bond; there are a myriad of other factors why queers may not keep a bond to their close one. For example, Triin's reasons for de-selecting certain members of her family of origin were not always homophobia, but other complicated family histories such as her mother's co-dependency with her father's alcohol abuse. The possibility of choosing her own family was also Triin's main explanation as to why she had chosen not to interact with her brother for many years.

We did not like each other as people for a while. [---]. Why should those two people interact with each other, even if they are relatives? We both agreed and did not interact. There is no closeness.

However, she regained respect for him when he stood up for queer rights in the partnership law debate by publishing a supportive opinion piece in the media. Triin was overjoyed by this act, saying that she felt her big brother protected her, just as he had during their childhood. I interpret this as a re-kinning practice. As discussed previously, kinning is the process by which a person (usually a child) is brought into a significant relationship with their

⁵⁸ For another angle on how "choice" is not a particularly feasible framework for queers in CEE, see Mizielińska (2020), who argues that local legal, institutional and cultural regulations highly limit the choices available for queer family-making in Poland.

kin (Howell, 2003). Because Triin and her brother were adults in an estranged sibling relationship, the process of them recognising each other as family (again) can therefore be considered a re-kinning practice; their old bonds were now re-activated. Their relationships improved greatly after Triin's brother's sudden involvement in queer issues. Triin spoke of his political engagement in the following way:

At some point he just stepped into the partnership debate, when he felt that the LGBT community is crying. He had a reaction that he needs to protect his sister and he did.

Interestingly, in their case, the pull of the family was bound up with activism. Triin and her brother's old way of relating to each other as a protective older brother and a younger sister in need became re-activated in the context of activism. Triin herself was not only a member of the queer community but she had been extremely active in the first half of the 2000s. That her brother became vocal in the debate was thus doubly meaningful for her – she found respect for his support through activism, as well as once more enjoying the position of being protected. The strong gendered vibes of such protegee/protector relationship were experienced as positive. In this instance, it meant that they could enjoy re-connecting in their recognizable pattern of being brother and sister.

As discussed before, kinship relationships are flexible; inclusion and exclusion, as well as closeness and distance in various constellations can be renegotiated. Moreover, as is further argued in Chapter Six, the various obligations and forms of dependency with which participants were bound, did not always allow one entirely to de-activate relationships at will. Also, Triin and her wife relied on their parents for childcare. Despite rather strained relationships with their parents, a complete cut was not feasible.

4.3.2 Grandmother figures – the importance of generations

When discussing their close ones, the grandmother emerged as very important for many participants. Many participants were partly raised or greatly influenced by their grandmothers, who often maintained an important place in their lives or on the close relationship map.

It is important to note that grandmothers hold a very special place in Russian culture, *babushka* retained a highly symbolic and necessary role in Soviet life. The “working mother contract” was central in Soviet Union, meaning that women were both expected to be involved in paid labour as well as be the epitome of motherhood (Rotkirch & Temkina, 1996). The

Soviet women's triple burden of paid work, housekeeping and childcare was alleviated by grandmothers, who thanks to early retirement ages for women took on a large part of caregiving duties (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2013, p. 728; Tiaynen, 2013 p. 77). This gender contract applied in Estonia as well, equally governed by the institutional arrangements widespread in the Soviet Union (Vöörmann & Helemäe, 2017 p. 106). Grandmothers were thus highly important there too, but without the cultural glorification that the babushka enjoys.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a slight trend towards "traditional" family values – i.e. the male breadwinner model among Estonians. This has been explained as a reaction against the gender contract that was applied in the Soviet Union (Hansson, 2011). However, re-traditionalisation was very short-lived. As sociologist Leeni Hansson comments, due to "democratisation, debates about gender equality and the influence of trends characteristic of Western countries, the return of the male breadwinner family model has not taken place" (Hansson, 2011, p. 199). But the same study shows that longing for normative gender roles is present in the attitudes of the younger generations of Russian-speaking population⁵⁹ living in Estonia. Hansson interprets this as a reaction against the disadvantaged position of Russian-speakers in the labour market, which started soon after the fall of the Soviet Union. While normative gender roles remain popular among Russian-speakers in Estonia, the expectations on grandmothers have changed among this section of the population as well. The role of grandparents has changed due to individualisation, better provision of institutionalised childcare and a widening of the housing market. As pedagogy scholar Inna Järva (2014) has argued, the expectation to participate in childcare or other reproductive labour is no longer common among Russians living in Estonia. The role of grandparents is thus rather similar to that of grandparents in Northern Europe (Järva, 2014, pp. 182-183).

With this in mind, it is noteworthy that grandmothers were relevant figures in my material. In fact, women from previous generations had not only played a role in the participants' childhood, they also had a role to fulfil in their adult lives. For example, Svetlana referred to the parents of one of the women she considered to comprise her extended family. "They are

⁵⁹ In the study they used the term "second generation immigrants", which is a very common way of referring to the Russian-speaking population in Estonia. It constructs them as alien to the country and deems them as immigrants even though they have been born in the country.

highly relevant because they are in our parent's age and supportive. Who stand next to us and are normal (*laughs)."⁶⁰ Support from people who are older than her parents was heartfelt, because her own parents were not accepting of her and Nadja's relationship. She thus leaned towards finding other people who have supported her in a parental way. Some of those grandmother figures were located in Russia, others in Estonia, but no matter where they were based, she found consolation, advice, and acceptance from them. She could not find intergenerational support from her own parents, and so looked elsewhere to find it. For example, she tells me with warmth in her voice,

The Gay Christian crowd, they are my other family. And especially Karl from there has been a sort of replacement parent there. When I have been going crazy about the child or about the mother of the child, then Karl tells me, 'Look, time will pass, in two years things will be different.' And I appreciate this perspective, I think the perspectives of older people are important.

I interpret Svetlana's reference to the Gay Christian circles as her additional family as evidence of how the borders between kinship and community can in some cases become indistinguishable (Butler, 2002). Svetlana's own grandmother had been extremely violent, and Svetlana had broken off relations with her long ago. But she was keen on finding other figures who would fill that void. Even people who were long gone, she held dear as someone important. Svetlana explained,

I have for example Ksenia. She is dead for 14 years already. But she was to me, how would I say it... in Russian I say 'named grandmother'. The one I would name as grandmother, she would become it.

Even though they directly had not talked about Svetlana's sexual identity, Ksenia knew that Svetlana was in a relationship with Nadja. They shared a rather opaque sense of Svetlana's queer life, something that I discuss in the Chapter Five.

⁶⁰ In Estonian, "normal" is very often used to mark something positive, in slang usage it refers to something good or fine. Example: *Kuidas läheb? Normaalselt* ("How are you doing? Fine"). In that case it is not used in a directly normative sense (as normal/abnormal) but designates an appreciation. Example: *Kuidas see pidu on? Väga normaalne!* ("How is that party? Very cool!")

Ksenia was important to her not only as an accepting grandmother figure, but also as someone who had been very liberal for her age and context. Ksenia had once been in a long fictive epistolary relationship with a Russian gay man. The man could have suffered consequences if his relationships with men had been discovered, so having a distant lover to whom to write letters had provided him with an alibi. This kind of courage and liberal mind in the first half of the last century was inspiring to Svetlana and also provided a certain link between Ksenia and her. The queer traces that could be found through history made it possible for an important sense of continuity to be maintained, especially in hostile environments.

Svetlana and many others had to find other mother and grandmother figures to fill the void caused by either silence or rejection from older people in their lives. This points to both change and continuity in kinship relations. There was the continuity of tradition, through the revering of older generations, with respect to their advice, support and their presence. At the same time, this continuity was mixed with change. Now there appeared high flexibility regarding who could take up the role of their parents and/or grandparents. Using traditional kinship terms, though filling them with different meanings, was a way of constructing one's particular set of close ones.

4.4 Choice and biology in the midst of precarity

In the previous sections I have presented different ways of valuing family as a concept as well as building on it through establishing alternative relationships. Both are common practices, and I do not wish to dismiss either in favour of the other. What needs to be investigated more closely is the various ways in which the grammars of both biology and choice are drawn upon when constructing those relationships, taking into account the context of precarity common to many in Estonia. I draw on two central grammars of kinship – a kinship grammar of “biological relatedness” and kinship grammar of “choice”, inspired by Jenny Gunnarsson Payne's (2016) work. As we shall see below, these two grammars, or ways of understanding and practicing kinship, were sometimes in tension with one another and thus understood as mutually exclusive. At other times, though, participants drew on both grammars simultaneously

In this section I draw extensively on an interview with one particular participant – Kim, who was very vocal on these matters. Other research material supports my analysis, especially when further investigating the role of precarity in the tension between biology and choice.

Unlike some of the interviewees with whom I had prior contact before, Kim emailed me after having seen my announcement about the research project. He welcomed me to his small apartment in Tallinn, which he and his girlfriend shared together with a cat. Sipping tea in his kitchen, the conversation flowed easily; he was eager to share rather difficult details of his relationships in the past. He started out by establishing that for him, close ones were a qualitatively different from “family”. He spoke of his close ones as:

All the people that I feel myself comfortable with. Common interests; will not get mad at each other. When the worldviews are different, we don't judge, can manage without problems. I haven't really had a family directly. It does not work by blood.

In the interview, Kim brought up blood as a possible way of binding people to one another, albeit one that he did not believe to work in his own relationships. The supposition that blood and other biological substances have significance in kinship relationships belongs to the traditional Western way of understanding kinship (Franklin & McKinnon, 2001).

The kinship grammar of biology was activated and deactivated frequently in Kim's narrative of his close ones. In his view, closeness was something that was achieved through negotiating differences and similarities in people, rather than being passed on through blood. He, we can say, Kim was relying heavily on the kinship grammar of choice. He drew a line of separation between closeness and blood relations by claiming that he had no family to speak of. He understood family as equal to blood relations and opposed that to those he considered his close ones. He explained his view in the following excerpt,

Raili: What does it mean – that you haven't had a family directly?

Kim: I grew up with my grandmother and step-grandfather, as my mother was at work in Finland. She was trying to keep me alive, since she became a mother when she was very young. So I grew up there. There were not many relatives on my grandmother's side. [---] On my grandfather's side nobody liked us, because we were from a different *suguvõsa* (*side of the family tree). Like in Estonia all the time, that two *suguvõsa* from two different parts of Estonia, not getting along. We lived in this house that all the relatives wanted. One of the step-grandfather's children drove my grandmother crazy. It is rather easy, I also have mental problems. My old aunt is in an asylum and another one is on the way. So, my grandmother went into an asylum, step-grandfather that I

called my grandfather dumped her and his daughter inherited the house. I would have gotten it otherwise, but I am not real flesh and blood.

Before unpacking the quote by Kim, it is important to translate the Estonian term he made use of – *suguvõsa*. *Suguvõsa* is a difficult term to translate, referring to a collection of relatives. It is a metaphorical term, that consists of two words – *sugu* + *võsa*. The Estonian etymological dictionary defines “*sugu*” as “the duality of reproductive cells, organs and persons; persons descended from common ancestors; generation, sort” (ETY, n.d. my translation) and “*võsa*” as “vegetation of bushes that appears on uncultivated grasslands” (ETY, n.d. my translation). It is thus a metaphor remotely related to the family tree, even though the metaphor of the tree leaves a more organised image than that of the vegetation of bushes. “*Suguvõsa*” can be roughly translated as relatives, whereas “*sugulus*” denotes kinship – (literally: of being related).

In Kim’s story, it became evident how biology both did and did not play a role in his way of viewing kinship and closeness. Kim seemed to draw on both the grammar of biology and the grammar of choice when making sense of his belonging, using them to sometimes stress the importance of biology and other times to dismiss it. On the one hand, he claimed that, for him, blood did not play a role in forging close relations. Evidently, this would make it seem as if he mainly drew upon the kinship grammar of choice. On the other hand, blood had a very high significance in both the symbolic and material dimensions of his kinship relations, thus simultaneously articulating the kinship grammar of biology, as will be specified below.

Kim took for granted that two *suguvõsa*, from different geographical locations, could end up in an antagonistic relation towards one another. This included the assumption that there would be an essential difference between the two sides of the family tree, simply by virtue of not sharing the same biological make-up. Moreover, the main reason he gives for not inheriting his grandmother’s (and step-grandfather’s) house is that he belonged not to the right *suguvõsa* – “I am not real flesh and blood”, he remarked. No matter the weight he placed on biological determinations of kinship relations, the real-life consequences of such institutions were tangible either way.

Even if, in Kim’s case, the failure to inherit had nothing to do with his queerness, for many other queers this is the case, since their relationships are not recognised by the law. Existing legal frameworks privilege relations predicated on bloodline and/or marriage, and thereby fail to recognise the complex lived realities of many queers, who lack the right to inherit given

that their relations do not fit into heteronormative legal frameworks (Sorainen, 2014, 2018).

Moreover, I interpret Kim's reference to mental illness as running in the family as a way of mobilising the kinship grammar of biology; mental illnesses are thought to have some genetic origin or can be triggered if exposed to certain stressors. The point here is that while people are not necessarily consistent in the ways of either mobilising or not mobilising biology in their kinning practices, biology does have an undeniable importance in the imaginaries.

4.4.1 Precarity's role in making and breaking relations

When Kim drew his close relationship map on the tiny kitchen table at which we were sitting, he started on the left of the paper by writing names from his childhood, running chronologically towards the right. His grandmother and grandfather were the dearest and closest to him during the first stage of his life and were thus the first to be drawn on the map. Kim's grandparents raised him until he was four years old. His mother had left Kim with his grandparents in order to finish school, while his father had left the family around his birth. Kim's mother studied full time and worked first at a gas station in Estonia, only to later move to Finland in order to finance his upkeep. First, when Kim was around four years old, he started to realise that this person who had sometimes visited him and brought him large amounts of candy was his mother. She eventually started to take him along with her for shorter visits and in the end, Kim moved in with his mother and later his stepfather.

This was rather similar to Pauliina's story: she was raised by her grandmother until she turned four. Her parents were very poor during the first years of her life and lacked the resources to raise both her and her twin brother. The twins were thus separated; while her brother remained with her mother and father in their one-room apartment, Pauliina lived with her grandmother and visited the rest of her family on weekends. Once her parents were in a position to buy a bigger flat, she moved back to live with her sibling and parents. As a permanent reminder from the time spent with her grandmother as a child, Pauliina still had problems with her back. Pauliina's grandmother worked in a district heating plant, which involved working night shifts. Since she had nowhere to leave Pauliina, she often went along to her grandmother's workplace and slept on a makeshift bed, while her grandmother was working. That bed had thus caused the back

problems from which she still suffered – a bodily and mental scar, reminding her what it meant to exist under conditions of precarity.

The precarity that both Pauliina and Kim had experienced since their early years was not an effect of their queerness as such. Rather, their precarity was because of a lack of social infrastructure and organisation of socio-economic relationships (Puar, 2012, p. 170). Pauliina and Kim had both been born roughly at the time when Estonia regained independence. As I outlined in Chapter Four, the years that followed involved a harsh economic hardship for the whole country and its people. The economic reforms of the so-called transition, which was a euphemism for extreme neoliberalism, were the most radical among the post-socialist CEE countries. The social cost of such “success” was enormous, a principal outcome of which was that a large number of the population became immiserated (Lauristin, 2003). This painful transition was hardly questioned, however; economic liberalism was tied with nationalism and with the wish to “return” to Europe and to turn away from Russia (Helemäe & Saar, 2011, p. 18).

The wellbeing of people like Pauliina’s parents and Kim’s mother were considered a small sacrifice for the greater goal. Emigration was one response to the widespread desperations of precarity. During the beginning of the 90s, when Kim’s mother worked in Finland, there was the first big wave of emigration (Kaska, 2013). Kim’s mother, specifically, was a part of a global care chain, which today continues to grow. A result being that parents go to work abroad, while leaving their children home. While this phenomenon was facilitated through newly regained independence, women from various contexts have long been involved in wide-ranging global care chains that see them leave their children in the care of others in order to work as carers in more affluent settings (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

A study based on the 2011 census shows that there were 656 households in Estonia where either both parents or a single parent works abroad (Espenberg, Lees, Arrak, Aksen, & Vahaste-Pruul, 2014). Indeed, the largest proportion of parents working abroad were in fact single-mothered households. 358 single mothers as well as 132 single fathers left their child alone or in someone else’s care while working abroad in 2011.⁶¹ However, because these are statistics based on the 2011 census, numbers can easily be higher, because parents are not required to notify any authorities when they move

⁶¹ As was discussed in Chapter Three, Estonia has one of the highest rates of single mothers in Europe.

abroad for work. Moreover, households in which at least one parent works abroad is up to 9 000 (Espenberg et al., 2014).

One can wonder, what kind of bonds are unmade and what others are made as a consequence of these conditions of precarity? For example, both Kim and Pauliina were reluctant to move back to their parents' homes, since they considered their grandparents as "home". But there are to this date generations of children who are left either in the care of others or without care altogether, left to fend for themselves as their parents struggle to make ends meet with jobs abroad. In that case one cannot even speak of a care chain, but more of a vacuum of care, or a care drain (see Kaelin, 2011), caused by a lack of state support for people (especially single mothers) in dire need.

Even though Kim moved from his grandmother to his mother, his mother continued to be exhausted with work and, according to Kim, did not manage to be there for Kim. Due to being gravely bullied in school, and also because of a lack of support from his mother and stepfather, he eventually moved back to his grandparents to finish the fourth grade of school. When he eventually returned to his mother, he started in a new school, one that was infamously referred to as a "school for criminals". He became involved in underage drinking, drug use, fights and other illegal activities, until the word got around that Kim was also attracted to boys. Being frozen out from the gang helped him to get back to lawful ways. But despite living together, Kim had sparse contact with his mother and did not feel particularly close to her. Retroactively he could understand that his mother was struggling with the precarious condition of trying to support him as a single mother. Kim explained,

At the time between me being 13 and 15 my mother basically only worked, days and nights. She was not at home. She was a manager of a casino. To keep a roof over my head, she was struggling throughout the day and working nights.

When Kim's mother wanted to move to Tallinn when he was in the ninth grade, he refused to accompany her. He had had been very independent and taken much responsibility from a very young age, not least because, since the age of 12, he had been working in order to contribute to the household. Moving to Tartu alone as a teenager and renting a room at a remote relative's apartment was thus the choice that seemed reasonable to everyone involved. However, working full time and going to evening school was too big a bur-

den, which led to him prioritising work as a means of survival. The precarity that had shaped his childhood, continued to structure his life choices.

After moving to Tallinn at 18, for the first time he started connecting with his mother. He had been alienated from her during most of his childhood, but as adults they found a more successful way of relating to each other. Their small age difference of 18 years contributed to them developing a kind of adult relationship, where the constrained roles of mother and son could be redefined. Due to their precarious situation, Kim had been forced to grow up at an early age, while his mother had been preoccupied with work to dedicate much care work to him as a child. But as adults and equals, each providing, they found a way of relating to one another.

Kim: We were like (female) friend and (male) friend.⁶² We have never directly had a mother and son relationship. Now that she is in Finland, she has money to throw around. So she has thrown money to me and bought things because she wants to support me. She has not been able to do it since I was a child. So now she is trying to support me and my life partner retroactively.

Raili: What is the difference between being a mother and son or being friends?

Kim: We talk about absolutely everything. There is no topic that we could not discuss. She talks about her sex life, she talks about her men. I talk about my men and women. We went drinking together. She was not directly my mother. I didn't see her as my mother. Our relationship was not like a mother and son relationship. There was not such cuddling or big worrying... It is like being best friends.

Kim imagined a “real” mother to be someone who provided physical comfort and took care of a child emotionally and physically. This is a strong cultural norm in Estonia and thus any deviations are noticed immediately. To be fair, the norm for what constitutes a “good” mother is perhaps unattainable even to women who are not working day and night and it was definitely unavailable to Kim's mother, who, because she was busy working to cater for their basic needs, had been absent for much of his life. While it was impossible for Kim and his mother to fit into the rather strict normative boundaries of mother-son relationship, they managed to transgress those boundaries by redefining their relationship as that of friends and to build closeness on their own terms.

⁶² In Estonian the word “friend” can be gendered. The general form *sõber* can be used to refer to either genders, but *sõbranna* only refers to a female friend.

While the cultural expectations placed on the role of a mother are high, fathers get away with much less stigmatisation when they are absent, busy or uninterested (Peterson, 2014). In fact, in many of the participants' lives, fathers had been peripheral figures who either disappeared, were engaged in some form of substance abuse or both. Kim had never known his father, who had left when he was born. Not only did his father disappear, he also removed Kim's older brother from Kim's mother's care. According to Kim,

Father took him and ran when I was born, a few months later, so that he wouldn't have to pay alimonies. Technically stole the child, but Estonia was so young, at that time there was no court system developed. And then it just stayed like that. He went to his parents, left his son there and went to Sweden himself. And since his parents did not like my mother, they wouldn't let my mother close to her son.

Kim's brother, just like himself, is another example of a child who grew up in the care of others, while his father emigrated to Sweden and his mother had no access to him. Sweden and Finland as destination countries for Kim's biological parents was no coincidence; the Nordic countries are the main destination for Estonian-speakers looking to improve their life standard, though Russian-speakers also choose Russia (Espenberg et al., 2014). Estonia as a borderland was very strongly present in the relationships people had to one another; they needed to negotiate geographical and emotional proximity while trying to make their everyday lives work transnationally.

Connections could, of course, be severed or hampered even within the borders of the same country. Kim first met his brother when he was twelve, when his mother drove to Kim's paternal grandparents and demanded to see him. But the environments in which they grew up had been so different, as Kim told me, him and his biological brother never developed any closeness. They had only met twice in their lives and did not stay in touch. Kim included neither his brother nor his father on the map of his close ones. Kim referred to his brother as,

A stranger. We don't consider each other brothers, but just like remote acquaintance. We don't talk at all. As if it was not the same blood, even though the parents are exactly the same.

Here again we see how Kim drew on the grammar of biology, even though he did so in order to demonstrate that he did not believe in its power. By stressing that they shared the same parents, he drew on a certain expectation that the blood link was significant. However, he found that promise

to be unfulfilled, and the father and brother with whom Kim shared biological material were as absent from his life as they were from his close relationship map.⁶³

In some ways, all the above stories are partial answers to age-old questions of identity: what drives belonging, connection, relatedness, closeness? The point is not to argue that either choice or biology would be the ultimate answer, but to show how both of those grammars are creatively drawn upon in order to make sense of one's relations. There is a strong cultural expectation that biology should generate closeness, but the ways to negotiate this expectation can differ a great deal. For example, the grammar of biology can be activated not only to argue for biological relatedness as the source of connection but vice versa – it can be drawn upon in order to signify difference and the importance of choice.

Apart from the tensions between biology and choice, my material reveals the importance of precarity in conditioning relationships. While strict gendered expectations to (especially parental) relationships are also significant, it is the context of precarity that defines whether one even has the possibility to develop a close relationship under the pressure of survival. As can be seen in the next section, precarity also plays a central role in structuring people's living arrangements, determining the physical proximity to their close ones.

⁶³ This forms an interesting contrast to recent work undertaken in relation to Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs). There is a growing number of research on “donor siblings”, that is, people who share some genetic material due to having the same sperm donor (e.g. Andreassen, 2017; Hertz, Nelson, & Kramer, 2017; Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, & Golombok, 2010). Much of that research shows that the donor siblings actively build intimate kinship relations by cultivating likeness to compensate for the lack of shared upbringing. Their high emotional investment in establishing closeness functions like a kinship glue. Whereas donor siblings with similar genetic material actively construct closeness, Kim, who shared both genetic parents with his sibling, insisted on their decisive disconnect. Moreover, even though gender and media scholar Rikke Andreassen's (2017) study on donor conceived families has shown that some people considered donor siblings as a threat to the nuclear family that people had already established before getting to know the donor sibling, this did not seem to be the case with Kim. The additional biological connection in his life constituted no threat to him but left him rather indifferent. It is likely that Kim had already been a victim of neglect so many times by people with whom he shared a biological connection – his father, his mother, his relatives on the mother's side, his paternal grandparents – that he was reluctant to start investing his emotions in biological connections.

4.4.2 Physical proximity but not closeness through precarity

When approaching queers' close relationships through the survey, I was interested in their actual as well as ideal living arrangements. Physical proximity to people can be anything between a desired choice and a cursed imprisonment, and can thus tell us something about the fantasies of the "good life"⁶⁴ in which people invest. But most importantly, investigating physical proximity provides the possibility of telling stories that differ from the usual feel-good stories of familiarity, comfort and attachment that are usually associated with intimacy. The flip side of intimacy, "the unavoidable troubles, the directions and disruptions that make things turn out in unpredicted scenarios" as queer theorist Lauren Berlant (1998, p. 281) has put it, is equally revealed when people live together, whether voluntarily or not.

Most people who replied to my survey stated that they lived with other people (78,5%), often with partners, children and families of origin, and less often with friends or housemates. Sharing living quarters was consistent among respondents who were younger than 45, while older people reported living alone more often. While there were certainly people who despised living alone, and while people who lived together with their partner(s) were generally satisfied with their living situation, there was also a strong sense of stress and dissatisfaction that comes from living together with other people. Among young people living with their family of origin there were many who were unhappy about needing to hide their gender or sexual preferences. For example, a person in the age category of 18–25 years commented in the survey comments section:

My grandmother does not like LGBT people and Asians and black people and basically anyone who's different. She does not know about my sexuality and I will not tell her either at least until I've moved out and don't have to see her so often.

Being dissatisfied with lack of privacy and independence was not only a problem of underage people. It was notable how many young and also older adults were miserable about needing to share their living quarters with their parents or other people. Many would like to live alone or with a partner in a

⁶⁴ Such fantasies of the good life can be understood as "a collectively invested form of life" (Berlant, 2011, p. 11). This is a fantasy in the sense that it doesn't have to have a direct relation to how people actually can and do live.

separate place but remain in a financially weak situation to do so. Another person in the age category of 36–45 years wrote,

I have been in a relationship ca 1.5 years and would like to move out [from the family home], but I cannot afford paying for two places. My mother dislikes my partner – the reason is that they are a transgender person

Some are in such a precarious situation that they cannot even consider entering a relationship, not to speak of living together, as is evident from a comment by a person in the age category of 56–65 years:

Since I'm raising my children alone and have to work such a large part of my day, it would take a toll on a [potential] relationship.

Such precarity is highly characteristic of Estonia's "success story" as a country that has transformed itself into a fiercely neoliberal society where a middle-class background does not necessarily translate into having a high standard of living. Many of the respondents could indeed be called middle class or higher. More than half had a university degree of some kind (or were studying towards it) and/or were very tightly integrated in the labour force. Only four people of those older than 26 years – that is, four out of 138 people – reported being unemployed. The rest were busy in some way, whether employed, freelancers or entrepreneurs, and less often on parental or sick leave. Without going into the gendered and aged inequalities in salaries, only roughly 30% of respondents received a lower than median salary (750 EUR), while the income of a whole 38% was higher than the national average (1100 EUR)⁶⁵.

This is not to say that most queers in Estonia are poor or are forced to live with their parents due to economic distress. Instead, I argue that since many of the middle-class queers in Estonia struggle under highly precarious economic conditions perpetuated by the neoliberal fantasy of (market) freedom, this precariousness is also reflected in their forms of making relationships, families, kinship. We know that physical closeness does not necessarily translate into emotional closeness or vice versa. What is clear from this research, however, is that the freedom for queers in Estonia to entirely choose their bonds, with whom and how close they would wish these connections to be, is far from unconstrained.

⁶⁵ The reported national medium and median salaries date back to the year 2017.

4.5 Conclusion

Considering that the media image of queers in Estonia is very limited, as it either features cis-lesbian monogamous couples with children or Pride participants depicted as extravagant sexual deviants, my research serves the purpose of nuancing that image and providing an analysis of a much wider variety of queers living different lives and relationships.

This variety was firstly reflected in the close relationship maps that the participants drew. Some included only a handful of people in their constellation of close ones, while others filled the whole page with complex networks of relationships; some included their family of origin, while others actively discarded them, to mention but these differences. The main ways of structuring the close relationship maps were either focused on chronology, on the family of origin or on the quality of their relationships. On occasions, the maps and the real-life practices contradicted one another, thus revealing the extent to which norms structure our narratives and visions of our relationships.

Combining the close relationship maps with other research methods has allowed me to be more confident in my results, helping me to demonstrate the complexity of constructing close relationships. Here, then, I want to stress the advantage of combining both maps and interviews as methodological devices. A map is a way of fixating a relation in that very moment, while practices and change are harder to pin down on a sheet of paper. The relationships that ended up on the map were further elaborated on during the interview, and the ties that seem straightforward on a map become multidimensional and much more flexible. Moreover, the discrepancies between the maps and interviews once more stress the importance of this thesis – namely, the need to re-frame the discussion away from the notion of “family” to that of “close ones”. Asking about relations to one’s close ones rather than to one’s family has revealed not only a greater diversity of stories, it is also very likely that the maps themselves helped to facilitate the inclusion of relations that would have otherwise been omitted.

The variety of close relationships that emerged in both the maps and the interviews was a result of me having changed my research question, after some confusing and hopeless enquiries about queer families, as reflected in the introduction of the thesis. The focus on close relationships allowed me to present a variety of relationships that were difficult to name and define even for the participants themselves. This is because they did not always readily fit in the available relationship categories. But that did not make them any less significant in the lives of participants. Vice versa, many of the

participants spoke at length on the daily support and love for people we might otherwise not even have heard about.

Despite the prevalence of various alternative forms of close relationships, my material shows that the family still operates as an important concept for a range of participants. My goal of widening the conceptual scope by discussing close relationships is not to dismiss the idea of the family, but rather to make space for both family and other ways of understanding relationships. Nevertheless, the ways that participants defined their family was often rather creative. On the one hand, they extended the family concept to people who, according to the heteronormative view, would not have been included, and at the same time closed off some members of their family of origin. Grandmothers especially, whether named or biologically related ones, played an important role in participants lives, due to both the history of the post-socialist gender order and the conditions of social and economic precarity.

Regarding the family of origin, participants made creative use of grammars of biology and choice in order to negotiate their sense of belonging. These processes did not happen in a vacuum but rather in the context of long historical genealogies of kinship as well as economic precarity, stretching further back than the years of independence. Precarity thus shapes the relationships in which queers in Estonia are involved, both breaking them apart and forcing them together. For example, precarity can deprive a person of the possibility to develop a close relationship to one's parent when that parent cannot afford to bring up the child. Precarity can equally force a person to live together with a queerphobic family member, thus driving one into a situation of close physical proximity without any necessary intimacy or love being the binding agent. Therefore, the final argument I advanced in this chapter is that precarity plays a greater role in shaping queers' relations to their close ones than might otherwise have been expected. For this reason, to solely focus on the discourse of choice in making and maintaining relationships is both limiting and problematic.

Interlude: Historical traces of queerness

Queer history is often spoken of in terms of lack: lack of knowledge; lack of visibility and lack of community. On the one hand, the narrative of lack is taken for granted, on the other hand, it is increasingly questioned. My aim is not to engage with queer historiography and assess the actual degrees of presence and absence of queer communities in different times. Instead, what I want to reflect upon is the affective dimensions of being disoriented; the *sense* of being alone, no matter the actual reality. The sense of living in a void has also been depicted in the Estonian queer artist Anna-Stina Treumund's work, and has been poignantly analysed by Koobak (2013). Koobak writes of Treumund in the following way: "Due to the lack of visual representations of lesbians or of non-heteronormative female sexuality, she feels utterly alone with her feelings of not fitting in, without a sense of community or belonging" (Koobak, 2013, p. 28). This resonated with many participants of my research.

In conversations with participants, I was on various occasions struck by similar stories that spoke of a lack of positive queer examples in one's life, a lack of people to relate to or aspire to be like. Certainly, the lonely queer is a figure, a position to be inhabited. But that does not diminish the feeling of melancholy that was obvious in the rather lengthy quotes I share below.

Since Katrin was in her 60s at the time of the interview, she had lived experience from the Soviet period, as opposed to the more distant sense of horror that has been instilled in the younger generation through collective memory and the education system. In Katrin's experience of Soviet times, queer examples only existed as peripheral deviant figures. She explained,

It is obvious that during Soviet times it was such a marginal crowd. We did not know anything about them. I knew there were some kind of... My mom told me at some point that there are some singers and actors, that they have such deviances. She explained it that way – that they were so tired of having so many women, that they tried something else (*laughs).

Different historical periods have carried varied legal and social repercussions for queer desires. During the era of Soviet criminalisation of same-sex desire, any proper references to queer lives were expunged from cultural knowledge, at least as it seems from Katrin's story. Instead, knowledge of *actual* queers was replaced with urban legends that explained any traces of queer desire in ways that were consistent with the heteronormative social order, such as, for example, that popular men, becoming so sated with women, turned to a different object of desire.

With the arrival of state independence, no radical breakthrough in acceptance and spread of knowledge happened overnight. Triin, was in her late 40s, and her main point of reference was not to the Soviet time but to the period around the new millennium, when she was active as an early lesbian activist. Not unlike many other locations, queers were at that early stage both exoticised and stigmatised in the media landscape. But Triin also remembered the feeling of not finding other people to whom to relate in everyday life. She said that the growing spread of internet and online communities was the main way of finding a queer community, as has been reported in other studies (Liliequist, 2020; Tudor, 2018). Triin spoke of her experience in the following way:

In the media, there was no such thing. Homosexuality had recently been removed from the list of deviations. And that was a topic that was spoken about. In people's consciousness, there was this idea that there are some weirdos and then those weirdos came to the streets with flags. All of it, it didn't exist. Neither was there the crowd who felt or defined themselves differently in terms of sexual identity. You had no-one to relate to. There was only *Mea Culpa*, this online community.

Despite the existence of online spaces, where queers could meet other queers, the level of knowledge was unevenly spread. The urban and rural divide played a role in the spread of information as well, which was something that became evident in Kim's story. He lived on an island far away from the main cities and he not only felt like an outsider but ended up taking direct damage from the lack of appropriate knowledge about queers. When he discovered his desire for men in his teenage years, he was referred to the medical establishment. He recollected,

I went to a psychiatrist who gave me tranquilisers. But only for half a year, because then the knowledge came that it is not a psychological disease. That this knowledge also came to [the island Kim lived on]. So the psychiatrist couldn't prescribe those anymore. But he said that he could diagnose another illness, so he could prescribe me the drugs

anyway. So, for him I was crazy anyway, he still wanted to give me tranquilisers.

Even though homosexuality had been removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a mental illness already back in 1973 (Conrad & Angell, 2004, p. 33), that knowledge was not as readily accepted and applied by the medical professionals in Estonia. Homosexuality apparently continued to be treated as a psychopathology long after, especially considering that Kim was in his early 20s during the interview in 2017. Moreover, up to and including the present, trans lives continue to be medicalised in Estonia, as is the case in many other places; trans people are subject to a complex set of medical, genetic and psychiatric assessments for gender affirmation (Meiorg & Grossthal, 2012a).

What the above stories, all from different generations, have in common, is the shared lack of concrete queer role models. The lack of knowledge of how to be a queer subject was something that seems to have defined generations of people in Estonia. Discrimination and stigmatisation aside, this does not only have to be understood in negative terms. The lack of a clear model for queer subjectivity also opens for different ways of being queer and incorporating queerness in heteronormative surroundings. This is something I will turn to in greater detail in the next chapter on queer opacity.

5. Queer opacity and its conditions

While in the previous chapter I discussed the numerous ways of making and breaking close relationships, there were only occasional references to the place that queerness had in the negotiation of those relationships. This chapter takes a closer look at how the research participants related to their close ones in terms of their queerness. In particular, I discuss the participants' rather vague and elusive way of speaking of their romantic or sexual relationships with close people in their life – with friends, colleagues, family of origin, etc.

My material has made me question the feasibility of the metaphor of the closet in the Estonian context, resulting in a shift of focus towards other ways of understanding the reluctance to explicit self-labelling and visibility. This is especially relevant, since there is a cultural tendency to value privacy in Estonia, on account that the ideas of “privacy” and the “private sphere” functioned as counter-space against the oppressive public during Soviet times (Kannike, 2006).

This is not to say that the metaphor of the closet does not exist in Estonia. Indeed, the cultural power of the closet is strong, and cannot be simply discarded. Queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's declaration in 1990 that “[the closet] is still the fundamental feature of social life; and that there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (p. 68), holds true to some extent, even in Estonia. The confessional discourse identified by Foucault (1978) is useful in making sense how the effects of a “true self” are produced with the help of the technique of truth-telling through confession.

Nevertheless, as I discuss in this chapter, many participants managed to navigate their everyday lives and relationships with their close ones without very often sensing the need to explicitly come out of the closet through a certain speech act or by displaying a bodily act of intimacy. Often a refusal to do so has generally been associated with internalised homophobia and as

indication of having been subjected to the regime of the closet. In this framework, choosing not to evoke one's sexual identity is equal to being closeted. According to Sedgwick (1990), "‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (p. 3).

In her analysis, Sedgwick deconstructed the binary of being in/out of the closet and thus inspired further researchers to question the value and salience of the "coming out" narrative, which only strengthens the illusion of a stable and innate identity, while providing a very limited range of visibility and representation (e.g. Bravmann, 1996; Kopelson, 2002; Patton, 2004). Various scholars have also argued that the trope "coming out of the closet" is a privilege, and not an option that is available or feasible for many who are doubly marginalised in terms of race, class, religion, distance from metropolis, etc. (Brown, 2011; Horton, 2018; Mezey, 2008; Stasińska, 2020; Stella, 2012). Retaining the concept of closet, albeit deconstructed, was not suitable for my research data, since few participants directly used such vocabulary, or, for that matter, organised their life in that way. Instead, film and queer studies scholar Nicholas de Villiers's (2012) concept of queer opacity offers an alternative tool for making sense of both the varied pressures to speak one's identity and the reasons not to do so.

I understand opacity as a kind of obscurity through blockage and unintelligibility. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines opaque in the following ways: "preventing light from travelling through, and therefore not transparent or translucent" as well as "opaque writing or speech is difficult to understand". Opacity, then, has to do with both unintelligibility and non-transparency. In the context of queerness, the metaphor helps to illuminate the lack of direct transparency common in Estonia and the non-verbal practices that people resort to in that context. Thus, it must be noted that opacity relates to in/visibility (insofar as it is concerned with the un/transparency of queerness) as well as to the notion of silence (insofar as queerness can or cannot be the object of discourse). Already Foucault (1978, p. 27) argued that silence is not the opposite of discourse but simply constitutes a different regime of discourses. There are various forms of silence and those silences are not void, but productive of meaning.

Indeed, opacity exceeds the binaries of visibility and invisibility and by extension, that of silence and discourse. When considering the choice of not openly claiming one's queerness, dismissing it as closetedness and equating it with denying or hiding one's queerness forecloses various other grey

zones. Instead of resorting to binaries, I take guidance from De Villiers (2012, p. 2) provocative question: “But what if we were to take seriously these ‘intolerable’ and ‘suspect’ behaviours and consider them distinctly queer strategies, strategies of *opacity*, not necessarily of silence or invisibility?” He advocates for opacity as an alternative strategy that would go beyond the craving to know the supposedly concealed inner truth of a person.

De Villiers reminds us that any strategy, opacity included, is specific to the historical and cultural context at hand. De Villiers (2012, p. 7) also states that “[i]t may well be that a strategy’s ‘motivation’ is part and parcel of a homophobic logic of shame, self-loathing, and a petit-bourgeois concern for privacy. But this does not prohibit its *effects*⁶⁶ from being productively queer”. He thus encourages to shift the focus from what may seem as the restrictive implications of opacity to what it may enable and allow for – ways of being that are not necessarily read in terms of the closet.

Inspired by De Villiers, I thus argue that by paying attention to the strategies of queer opacity rather than foreclosing any analysis through assuming invisibility and (oppressive) silence, new ways of understanding queers in Estonia are afforded. The ways that participants do or do not speak of or “demonstrate” their queerness is the central theme of this chapter, which I analyse mainly with the help of interview and ethnographic material, as well as survey results. I unpack some of the silences and in/visibilities in order to show that they speak volumes of the ways Estonian queers relate with their close ones.

More concretely, I have divided the chapter into four different parts, relating to different aspects of opacity, most importantly those of speech, knowledge and practices. After having discussed how the participants do (not) speak of their queerness, how the knowledge of their queerness is (not) spread and how engaging in practices of opacity regulate their spatial and bodily boundaries, I finally discuss the specific way that queer allyship is commonly used as a specific form of queer opacity.

5.1 Speech: “I did not have the words really”

As indicated through the quote used as a subtitle of this sub-section, the focus here is on the experienced lack of appropriate discourse about queerness that many participants reported. They simply did not know how to bring up the issue, or how to discuss it with their close ones. While in this

⁶⁶ Emphasis in the original.

section, I rely heavily on the account of Andres, his experience serves as an example of a more general tendency present in my material.

Andres contacted me after having seen my announcement about possible interviews and volunteered to meet me. Andres was one of the very few gay men I interviewed, and in fact even one of the very few cis men I met during my fieldwork. Few cis-men frequented the spaces within which I moved, an indication of the gendered separation of queer spaces in Estonia. We had agreed to meet in the public library, where I had booked a room for the us to sit in. On the day of our meeting, I had joined Silvia and Katrin on a short car trip outside of town to look after Silvia's grandchild. On the way back, she was doing her best in her small car to take me back to town in time. I arrived a little late and flustered to meet a very calm and composed Andres. He had an air of being both shy and friendly at the same time, and very open with his reflections on his relations with his close ones. The location of the interview, a bookable office space in the public library, did not initially call for such open discussions, much unlike some other interview situations that took place in the comfort of the participants' home. But the levels of closeness I shared in relation to the participants varied highly, which is why the meeting spaces varied accordingly. Considering that it was the first time I ever met Andres, meeting in the public library was in line with his level of comfort with me.

Andres used the opportunity to put into words some of his everyday practices, which, while defining his way of living for a long time, had not been reflected upon very much in his daily life. Much of that had to do with a certain level of silence about the fact that he was gay in his family of origin. He said that even though his family was aware of him being gay, they had never actually talked about it. Andres had brought different boyfriends along to socialise with his family of origin, and they, in their turn, had paid visits to Andres and his boyfriend in their home. Andres reflected:

In some way I had a principle that I never hide anything at the table. So if there were some people who were more close (*referring to his romantic partners) I brought them along. They (*referring to his family of origin) saw them and we did some stuff together. And when there were none, there were none. When I was living with my partner for a year, they visited and back-and forth.

What can be learned from this case is that it cannot be assumed that queer visibility is necessarily absent even if the person does not directly speak of their gender or sexual identity. The lack of direct proclamations about sexual

identity did, in other words, not necessarily cause a lack of visibility, rather, as partners often participated in social contacts with the families of origin, they were at least partially visible as a queer couple. Complete lack of visibility can more readily be spoken about when people go to great lengths to hide any queer traces of their lives from their close ones (see Tudor, 2018).

This was rarely the case in the stories shared in my research. However, it was also evident that despite this very material visibility (of having queer traces very much present in one's life) it was at the same time possible to be silent on the matter. An issue or a person (such as Andres' boyfriend) could be in plain sight and participating in the family's activities and yet not be any direct object of conversation. Such opaque moments have also been described in Mizielińska's and Stasińska's (2017a) research on families of choice in Poland. They used the concept of *nepantla*⁶⁷ in order to discuss the liminal moments of people being neither out as a couple nor entirely closeted. Also in their research, since couples were included in the circle of care and support, there existed some form of recognition and acceptance of partners and their relationships. But despite these integrations, the type of bond was not named or spoken about (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2017a, p. 990). There could very well be geopolitical similarities between these cases, considering that both Estonia and Poland are post-socialist countries, although further comparative research would be necessary to confidently argue that this is the case.

Andres reflected further about the matter of opacity in his own family, by taking up something a friend had once said about his own family:

And then this woman said that the problem of your family is that you don't talk about issues, you don't call things by their names. You all just try to do it like that, but you don't actually talk about them. You don't call the things... If there is a problem, you just walk around the problem. That we all do it, we have learned it somewhere. And that is also one of the reasons why none of us sees a problem in me having a partner and friends. But maybe the problem is the concept, or something, what it means. What it entails.

While visibility was not itself the problem, the truly sensitive issue was what could or could not be *said* about what was in view. There was a silent

⁶⁷ *Nepantla* is a term used in Chicana feminism, especially after the Chicana feminist/queer scholar and poet Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) adopted the term from Nahuatl language. Anzaldúa used it to describe a place of in-betweenness, a site of transformation between different worlds, worldviews and identities.

collective agreement about tackling any issues indirectly, avoiding naming the issue at hand. Noticeable in the stories that most of the research participants shared was their sense of a lack of words, a lack of ways to talk about or even approach the topic. Andres tried to explain why he struggled with talking to his parents about him being gay. Shame played a strong part in it – not any shame about his own identity, but more about breaking the regular balance that was established in the family. Andres said,

I'm ashamed of... that I will cause a situation that will ruin our balance our relationship. I feel bad on the one hand because of what they are thinking and on the other hand because of what kind of feelings it will cause in me. It is not just about them, but also in me, that I don't want to ruin it. So, I don't feel ashamed of myself but I feel ashamed because... whether I behave in the right way. Whether I know how to behave in the right way. And I feel that I don't, I don't know how to.

Andres appeared to feel the affect of shame quite strongly. He stressed that he was not ashamed of his own sexuality but rather of the way it would make his parents feel, and how these feelings would, in turn, affect his own emotional state. As Ahmed (2010b, 2014) argues, affects have the characteristic of being sticky. Shame can circulate between different subjects and objects and can be transferred from one to another. The shame that Andres felt did not originate from himself, but it was passed on to him. He assumed that his parents felt bad because he deviated from the heteronorm, and was thus considered a failure in a culture where one is expected to make one's parents happy by, to borrow Ahmed's (2010a) expression, following the straight line. Andres broke with the promise of happiness, which is why the shame associated with his deviation was passed around his parents and then internalised by him.

Overwhelmed with his emotions, Andres also struggled with the lack of an appropriate discourse. Consider the following quote:

How to talk to them about it so that it would be OK and normal. Not to explain, there is nothing to explain. I do not feel any need to explain something to them, but how to talk about it, so that it would be normal. So that it would not be with graphs and artificial and contrived, but that it would be part of the conversation.

In order to unpack the complexity of Andres' way of attempting to relate to his parents as a queer man, it is first necessary to pursue the management of negative affects. I am inspired by Dahl's (2014) proposal that we move beyond love as the only starting point for thinking the bonds that bind a

family and instead focus on failure and loss as equally central in making kinship. The extrapolation of Dahl's theorising for the purposes of my own research material helps to account for the complex mix of both love and loss that Andres felt when trying to relate to his family through his queerness. In many ways, it was not only love but a whole range of negative affects that bound Andres to his family of origin.

In my interpretation, in order to retain the ties to his family, Andres felt the need to manage the conflicting impulses of being at the same time at peace with his own identity as a gay man and realising his deviation from the norm. I therefore argue that Andres tried to have the best of both worlds – he wanted to live his life queerly amid the background hum of heteronormativity. He did not want to unsettle the relationship to his parents, and neither was he willing to hide his lovers from his family of origin. It can thus be said that practices of opacity became necessary to avoid disrupting networks of kinship, as will be discussed more thoroughly throughout this chapter.

5.1.1 “Don't ask, don't tell” on many levels

The willingness to accept queerness without it being spoken about led some participants to refer to the (in)famous “Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue” policy that was in effect in the US Army. The policy, which was in effect between 1994 and 2011 stipulated that a person may neither be engaged in a homosexual act, state one's identity to be homo- or bisexual nor marry a person of their own sex. Openly gay men in particular were considered a threat to the US military's vision of soldiers being hegemonically hypermasculine and thus necessarily straight (C. Rich, Schutten, & Rogers, 2012). In order to retain the heteronormative organisation of the military institution, the serving queer soldiers were accepted as long as they kept both their sexual identity and possible sexual acts in a hyper-private sphere.

What, though, has this got to do with someone's life in Estonia? Svetlana recognised her own personal experience with her family members to be somewhat similar. Acceptance into her family of origin was equally conditional – so long as she did not talk directly about her own identity or the relationship that she and her partner Nadja had created together, she was a valued member of the family. However, while in the US the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy was official policy, there was no explicit guidance of conduct in Svetlana's life. There was not only an assumption that her sexuality should not be talked about, but even that the very existence of any such (however unspoken) agreement could not be addressed.

Moreover, since the very relationship that Nadja and Svetlana had to each other was governed by an agreement that delegated silence, it caused a domino-effect of kinship trouble. Relations form a network, as they depend and are built on other relationships. But if the grounding relationship cannot be defined, lots of kinship trouble will follow.

For example, Svetlana described a very telling moment of visiting Nadja's mother with whom they had a friendly relationship. After an evening together, both Svetlana and her daughter Vera, along with Nadja and Nadja's daughter Dina, were about to leave, when an interesting situation ensued. Svetlana describes in the following way

Nadja's mother kisses Vera goodbye. Then Dina asks, are you Vera's grandmother too? So she [Nadja's mother] started thinking. 'It is a difficult question somehow. I would say that I'm Vera's sister's grandmother.' And then Dina says, 'But then you are Vera's grandmother!' Nadja's mother says, 'Well I guess I am'.

Because Nadja's and Svetlana's relationship was acknowledged in practice but not through any concrete speech acts, definitions of other related relationships became equally diffuse. Nadja's mother saw herself as the grandmother of Nadja's adoptive daughter Dina. But with the unclear link between Nadja and Svetlana, it turned out that she neither knew exactly how to relate to Svetlana's daughter Vera nor to Svetlana herself. Svetlana told me about this memorable moment,

And then we all are leaving, there is not much time. And then Nadja's mother hugs me, Dina is looking at us but not asking anything yet. And Nadja's mother who has drunk half a bottle starts laughing hard and says to me, 'And I don't know who we really are to each other?' (*laughs). I also start laughing from embarrassment somehow. It is a taboo topic, about which we don't talk. But I somehow feel that she understands, that it is this 'don't ask, don't do (*sic) system'.

Only in the extraordinary moment of having drunk alcohol, the unthinkable could be approached – raising the question of who Nadja's mother was to Svetlana. Nadja's mother's relationship to Svetlana and to Svetlana's daughter only gained meaning through the relationship that Nadja and Svetlana had. Who belonged (or not) to the particular kinship constellation was up for negotiation. As argued previously, kinship is about managing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection (Franklin & McKinnon, 2001; Rodriguez, 2014). The question "And I don't know who we really are to each other?" was never meant to receive an actual

answer. While the question left undefined the bond they shared, at the same time it recognised that there *was* a bond between them. The condition of that bond was their shared understanding of not posing certain questions.

5.1.2 If silence is broken...

The carefully maintained balance of queer opacity needs to be maintained by all participants. It seems that the unspoken rules of accepting partners in the family of origin are rather conditional. Once the condition of silence is no longer kept, a whole range of negative affects are released, with the consequence of an unleashing of trauma for everyone involved.

For example, Svetlana had assumed that her parents understood that she was in a romantic relationship with her partner Nadja. After all, by that time Nadja had been in Svetlana's life for ten years and the couple had been visiting Svetlana's parents each summer. When asked whether Nadja had for all these years shared the pretence of being a best friend, or whether there was some other explanation, Svetlana recounted how she would talk enigmatically about their relationship: "We didn't say it out loud directly. I said some other things. I thought that they understand. So when I was doing coming out (*sic),⁶⁸ I thought they would understand. But not at all". Her parents had seemingly not understood or wanted to understand what kind of role Nadja played in Svetlana's life. Svetlana did not mention what were the cues that her parents should have followed – whether they displayed any affection in the presence of her parents or whether they shared a bed during their visits to parents, etc.

However, breaking the existing balance had difficult consequences. After years of living her life opaquely, Svetlana finally decided to come out to her parents. Svetlana's and Nadja's relationship to Svetlana's parents, which until that point had been friendly and accommodating, shifted entirely from the very moment of Svetlana's "coming out". Svetlana recounted,

It was all so awful. Mom yelled at me, 'Tell dad that it is not true, does not matter, just tell him that it is not true. He has a weak heart, you will kill him'. He started smoking again, all of that. She was guilt-tripping me immensely.

⁶⁸ Even though the expression "coming out (of the closet)" does exist in Estonian – "kapist välja tulema", Svetlana used the English term "coming out" as something that can be done – "I was doing coming out", which stressed even more the performative nature of that action.

Svetlana's father stopped talking to Nadja, so the couple stopped the common visits to Svetlana's parents. At the time of the interview, almost a decade had passed from that painful incident, and yet, still, wounds had not healed. Their relationship was conducted mainly through Svetlana's adopted child, Vera, who the grandparents sometimes looked after.

While Svetlana's parents were shocked at the moment of revelation, the university student Natasha's parents had feared it in silence. They suspected Natasha having a relationship, but they never spoke about it; they feared the existence of the topic. As Natasha said, "My parents are not stupid, they understood with whom I was". They had not met the young woman with whom Natasha had spent a lot of her daytime and an increasing number of nights, but they tried to discourage her from meeting up with her. But once Natasha confirmed their wildest fears by stating that the woman was her girlfriend, drama ensued. The revelation was followed by crying, expressions of disbelief, and a four-hour long conversation that Natasha herself compared to a police investigation.

I argue that in these cases *silence* was the kinship glue that helped maintain peace and stability in the family of origin. Natasha's parents were peripherally aware of Natasha's relationships with women, and until she had actually spoken of the fact, peace was undisturbed. In the case of Svetlana, there was acceptance and support of their bonds until the very moment of naming their relationship. It is thus the very speech act that resulted in the severance of kinship, not the practices of queerness in themselves.

In some cases, participants mentioned that their attempts to introduce the topic of their queerness were met with active silence. Liina, for example, was very vocal and active as a representative of deaf queers. However, at home with her parents she has resorted to not bringing up the topic out of concern for her parents. She told me:

Mother and father are a bit of a different story. I cannot really talk to them on LGBTQ topics. They respect my decision, they respect my orientation and what I am, but we don't talk about it very much. In recent times I feel that it can already be talked about it, that I'm slowly starting to talk. But my brother is also gay. That's why the topic is very big and important in our family. But for mum it is OK, but dad is very sensitive about it. That it is not a problem, they don't make it into a problem. They don't undermine us, nothing like that. But I understand that dad is sensitive.

Liina's experience can be understood with the help of the term "transparent closet" (Švab & Kuhar, 2014). The transparent closet describes the situation

when people, often family members, refuse to deal with the fact that somebody has come out as queer. Even though a person has declared themselves to have come out of the closet, they are soon placed back into it again, because the information they have shared is ignored. The transparent closet thus highlights that coming out is a relational process rather than a linear mode of transitioning from one stage to another.

Liina sensed her father's unwillingness to engage with the topic and acted accordingly – negotiating the levels of opacity and transparency was her way of managing kinship bonds without severing them. There are different levels of transparent closets and the conditions of them are negotiated in each family. While Liina found that support for her and her gay brother was present so long as she was not vocal about her queer life, Natasha was subjected to what she herself referred to as “emotional manipulation”, as will be discussed next.

When Natasha disclosed that she was lesbian, her parents were very upset. In particular, her father who treated her as if she had betrayed him personally. Her father wished her a life with a man and children, and thus required her to follow what Ahmed (2006, 2010b) has called “the line that binds”. Trying to cope with the pressure of being stuck in a transparent closet is often a heavy emotional burden to bear. Natasha thus attempted to avoid direct confrontation by appeasing her father,

I said to him, ‘I don’t know what will happen in the future, but my current priority is the university. I did not say that there will be no man and children in the future, I just wanted them to let go of the topic.

Recent research in the context of the UK has shown the intensity of emotional work that queer youth must do in order to navigate family heteronormativity (McDermott, Gabb, Eastham, & Hanbury, 2019). The research found that young queers often feel the need to withdraw or keep silent about their emotions and needs in order to keep up the pretence of a happy family or even worse – to retain access to food, shelter and love. Such emotional work detrimentally affected the mental health of these young people, even if it was their way of enacting agency in precarious situations (McDermott et al., 2019).

Similarly, Natasha's strategy of escaping the issue seemed at first to suit her parents; the atmosphere at home became more relaxed. However, this peace was fragile and fleeting. Maybe a month after their initial conversation, when Natasha mentioned something about her interest in women, a very dramatic situation developed:

My parents started yelling at me, asking why I am talking about it at all. (*sighs). Then I called my sister. She lives in the same house with us, just three floors higher. But my parents did not want her to know what I am. So then they suddenly shut up and said, 'Don't tell her anything!'. And then my mom started crying again. My sister arrived and was very confused about what is happening.

Even though Natasha's sister was not told anything, she drew her own conclusions and sent a supportive text message to Natasha, saying "Whatever happened there, I will accept you anyways". When Natasha replied that she could not tell her anything, her sister replied supportively that she had already suspected "it", without naming what that "it" actually was. But despite the secret support from Natasha's sister, the only way that Natasha could find peace and quiet in her family home, where she lived as a university student, was by accepting her position in the transparent closet – acting as if she had never come out in the first place.

In the worst of cases, violence and threat of violence can be involved. This was the case for Dimitri. While he grew up in the Caucasus, his mother's side of the family originated from Estonia. Now living in Estonia, Dimitri told me about his childhood in the Caucasus. He remembered the traumatic occasion when his father made clear the conditions of his acceptance:

When he picked up my phone and my boyfriend called, and he understood everything. I was 18 and he was really scary. You know when a person goes without yelling or anything, just so angry that you can just feel that... We didn't talk, he just gave me the phone, which is really nice because he did not tell me anything, just gave me the phone and looked at me with bright eyes. And said that when you finish, come by, I need to talk to you... And I was like aaeeeeeghhhh... (*acts flustered). And then when I came by, he said that I will just tell you this. That you can do whatever you want but if it gets public, in this house there will be two shots. One for you, one for me. And he was a hunter, he had some guns in the home. And I mean, he was very convincing.

Dimitri's own interpretation of this event was based on his racialised understanding of Russian mentality at that time. He compared his father's reaction to the discrepancy between the restrictive laws and lived reality in the country, explaining that "[i]t is the Russian thing, it is the Asian way. To put things on paper is one thing and in real life..." According to Dimitri, such a disjunction between speech and practice could be localised to this particular point in time and space – Russia, or Asia more generally. It is evident that the

geo-temporal imaginaries of non-European modernities as corrupt and lagging-behind make their way in various layman interpretations.

However, I argue that by stopping at the racialised explanations, we risk ignoring the ways in which a conservative gender regime, homophobia and the construction of normative masculinity structured the relationship between Dimitri and his father (see e.g. Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1997). Realising that his son had a boyfriend can be interpreted as constituting a major cognitive dissonance for the father, who had been inducted into a rather conservative understanding of gender roles. Dimitri spoke of the advantages and disadvantages of his father's rule in the household,

In a good way: he was very protective and strong but for the same reason he was too tough sometimes. He was really like a king and we were all like, "OK" (*says it in a soft voice while hunching his shoulders).

However, after years of having been bitter about his father's reaction, with the help of a therapist, he eventually made peace with things. He chose to focus on the fact that his father had kept providing for him and supporting him despite the clash of perspectives. He chose to focus less on the conditions that were placed on the support, and more on the support itself, which gave him peace of mind and in his words, "gave me my father back". Living in conditions of extreme opacity – that is, within the transparent closet – was thus a way of retaining kinship bonds.

5.1.3 Negotiating the conditions of opacity

While participants reported various attempts by parents and other relatives to push them either towards opacity or back into the (transparent) closet, they did not consider themselves as powerless victims. Rather, they could exercise a certain amount of agency in negotiating the conditions of opacity in their lives.

For example, Svetlana noted that her parents became visibly tense whenever Svetlana mentioned her partner, her partner's home in the countryside or her partner's daughter. At the same time, Svetlana was adamant on not excluding her closest ones from the conversations with her parents. She said, "[b]ut I try to mention it, so that I don't oblige by your rules". Even eight years after Svetlana's parents were told that she and Nadja were not just friends, they had not become any more lenient. On the day of the interview, for example, Svetlana's mother had been upset by the fact that Svetlana and Nadja were present on some pictures given to her mother. From the pictures, by no means could it be ascertained that they were more

than friends. However, the mere knowledge that the mother held caused her to consider the situation to be unbearable. Svetlana's attempts to change the constraints of the transparent closet were thus met with an unrelentless wish to keep it intact. This suggests that the transparent closet was a certain form of violence to which participants subjected themselves, in order to retain peaceful relations with their family. At the same time, they exercised agency and negotiated the conditions of the transparent closet, by refusing to adhere to it fully.

Moreover, Svetlana was also constrained by her partner, Nadja, who did not wish to come out in any context. Svetlana was thus unable to share the polyamorous side of her life, because those relationships were mainly with women. Since she and Nadja were so close, by association such information would be by implication "out" even Nadja. Svetlana herself was tired of being forced into the "half-closet" as she called it.

However, even though Svetlana was in the confines of the transparent closet, she negotiated the conditions of it. She started a life journal online, where she shared issues from their life together with some chosen community. In the beginning Nadja protested, but Svetlana consequently said, "Listen, if I cannot write either, I will go crazy. (*laughing). Cannot talk, cannot write". The agreement with which Nadja would eventually be comfortable was not to read the journal posts, thereby allowing Svetlana the possibility of expressing herself in some form. In fact, much of Svetlana's social life with her close ones was with people online anyway, since interacting with people in the small town in which she lived increased the risk of outing her relationship with Nadja.

Liina was less ready for compromises and did not wish to live in semi-transparency. At the time of the interview, she was dating a woman who identified as straight and wished not to be seen to be in a relationship with Liina. Very hesitant towards the potentiality of their future together, Liina said:

How can I be together with someone if they don't make it public? Everyone knows what I am, you cannot hide yourself when you are with me. [---] I don't feel comfortable in such a relationship. If I have a hickey on my neck and people ask who it is from. I cannot lie. Being double-faced is not me. I don't want this kind of life.

While Liina was clear about not wanting to live in hiding when it came to her romantic relationship, she accepted the conditions of the transparent closet in which her family of origin put her. Svetlana, on the other hand, tried to shift and change the boundaries within which both her family of

origin and her partner placed her life. It is thus evident that the transparent closet is not a stable state but involves the constant (re)-negotiation of practices of opacity and transparency.

5.2 Knowledge: “They know, and they don’t know”

“They know and don’t know” is the start of a participant’s comment from the survey. Among other things I asked about the level of knowledge various members of the participants’ families of origin had of their queer identities. With reference to their parents, this anonymous participant wrote,

They know, and they don’t know. They know that I belong to the Estonian LGBT group and am active there, but I do not know whether they assume or know what my identity is at the end of the day.

Knowledge in the context of opacity is thus both elusive and indefinite. It is possible to see something yet not understand, or to know a fact and yet choose or fail to draw any conclusions, as I argue throughout this chapter. This kind of opacity, however, is difficult to get a handle on with just the help of a survey tool. As described in Chapter Two, even an extended array of answers provided in the survey are bound to leave the lived reality inaccessible. Affording respondents, the opportunity to provide longer written answers, rather than choosing between multiple-choice options, may have helped to nuance the picture to a certain degree. Since I was interested in wider patterns among the queer community, I collected survey responses to questions about the extent of different family members’ knowledge of their sexual/gender identity. The possible answers available to participants were: *Yes*, *No*, *I don’t know*, *Not Applicable* (in case one did not have this particular person in their lives – be it mother, father, cousin, grandmother or other relative).

The survey results varied significantly in relation to gender. Respondents were most likely to share information about their identities with their mothers. 53% of participants answered that their mother knew of their identity, with around 22% stating their mothers did not know. Fathers were less likely to be informed; around 34% fathers were aware of the participant’s queerness and 31% were not. While sisters and brothers were equally informed – around 30% were familiar with the knowledge and less than 20% were not – gendered differences continued with respect to further relatives – uncles, aunts, grandparents. Female relatives were always more likely to be informed than male family members.

Here I have argued that by approaching queer livelihoods through the notion of opacity, we are in a position, analytically, to free ourselves from the binary of either being out (of the closet) or not. This also corresponded to the survey results. A significant proportion of people answered "I don't know" to whether the various members of their family of origin knew of their queer identity. Indeed, if there has not been a clear and open proclamation about one's own identity and practices, then having any definite knowledge becomes impossible.

Interestingly, the further away the relationship was on the official kinship line, the more likely the research participant was to know whether this relative had any knowledge of their queerness or not. In other words, around 10% of the respondents replied that they did not know whether their further relatives (grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles etc) knew of their identity. In contrast, the percentage of those who replied they did not know whether their mother or father was informed of their identity was closer to 20%.

At first blush, this seems like a perplexing result. One could perhaps expect that the closer one's position on the family tree, the more likely one is aware of what the relative knows or does not know about oneself. But, in reality, the result was the reverse, thus prompting further speculation. Perhaps the explanation depended on the level of exposure to certain people. In another question I asked how often the participants met with different members of their family of origin. Overall, participants were in touch mostly with their mothers (33% several times a week, another 25% several times a month), slightly less with their fathers. Around 11% were in weekly contact with their siblings, around 6% with their grandmothers. But when it comes to meeting other relatives, such as uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews, the most prevalent result was several times a year.

Those numbers merely identify exposure to the people, without indicating anything about the content or quality of the relationship. It is fully possible to be in frequent contact with somebody out of necessity rather than volition. For example, perhaps one is in frequent contact with one's parent because one is financially dependent on them or because the parent is in need of care, even though the relationship itself may not be particularly warm or close? But irrespective of the content or quality of the relationship, the fact is that participants spent more time around their mothers, fathers and siblings, than with more distant relatives. Such everyday contact gave more reason to employ practices of opacity. Crudely put, on account of only seeing an uncle once a year, it was more likely that one knew what kind of

information they had openly shared about their identity. At the same time, when living together or being in close contact with one's parents, there was much more space for interpretation and a greater zone of indiscernibility. As the results of my research show, it was not common to come out through a particular speech act, rather, participants chose other ways of negotiating their queerness. Therefore, spending more time around certain relatives did not necessarily contribute to more "knowledge" and "illumination" but, on the contrary, to more opacity.

There are, however, many exceptions, for instance consider the following comment by another survey participant:

My younger brother knows and is very happy about me. I haven't spoken with my older brother about it, but it is possible that my parents have mentioned something to him (I have not asked them). Aunts-uncles-cousins-grandmothers is the same – I don't know if parents have mentioned something to them, but I have not directly come out of the closet for them. But several of them have met my partner and know that we live together, so I believe that they understand that we have a romantic relationship and not friendship.

Knowledge of one's queerness was not spread equally, and the participants themselves were not always in control surrounding how this information was being shared by others. Choosing to talk to some members of the family could easily mean that this information circulated further, but it could equally mean that it stayed contained. As it was not common to enquire further on the matter, the level of uncertainty and opacity remained common with regards to the question "who knows and how much?" Moreover, there seemed to be a lack of interest in controlling the spread of the information, dissimilar in this regard to Tudor's (2018) research. The participants were rather comfortable with the general level of opacity that surrounded them and did not seem to care too deeply about the potential of queer traces leaking further and the knowledge of their queerness spreading.

5.2.1 Willed ignorance

Anne was around 50 years old and had at the time of the interview lived with her younger female partner for the past three years. Anne's aging mother who lived next door had not been told any details about Anne and her partner's relationship. "She does not know about our romantic relationship, but she knows that we are sharing an apartment. And well, that we form a family at this point", said Anne. It was thus fully possible to

constitute a legitimate family in the eyes of close ones, while willingly disconnecting any romantic or sexual potential from a family of two co-habiting women. A somewhat active and willed ignorance must therefore be practiced in order to keep up appearances of heteronormativity. There are probably people who do go to great lengths to hide who they are living with, though they did not volunteer to participate in the research. However, in cases where people did not deliberately hide their partners from their close ones, I assume that it must take some effort to turn a blind eye to the queer practices at hand.

Not only did Anne's mother participate in the willed ignorance of not wanting to know or explore further the question of what kind of relationship Anne and her partner had, both Anne and her partner helped to perpetuate this veil of ignorance. Anne said of her mother,

Well, we think that she does not know. But that's the generation that does not talk directly, does not ask directly. She is not stupid, she is a rather intelligent person. I believe she has her own doubts and suspicions but that is not a topic that we would discuss.

Anne believed that her mother must have her suspicions, but Anne did not want to actually know the true opinions of her mother. She seemed partly relieved to be able to rationalise her mother's unwillingness to discuss the matter as a generational issue rather than a cultural one in which she was also participating. What once more holds true here is the fact that maintaining a relationship to one's family of origin was so important that it often influenced what could or could not be shared.

While Anne considered her mother's unwillingness to inquire about her potential queerness a generational issue, Annabel justified it as a national trait. Annabel had told her mother that, since she was pansexual, gender did not matter to her in relationships. But her mother had ignored that information because there was a possibility of her ending up in a relationship with a man. Annabel was ironic about her mother's unwillingness to engage with the matter:

She has this Estonian approach, that if I ignore it then maybe it will disappear. A bit this approach that she does not dare to ask about it.

The high importance placed on privacy, which, for historical reasons, is culturally widespread in Estonia and in many other post-Soviet spaces (see Kannike, 2006), found its way into discourses surrounding sexuality. Many

generations have grown up with the private sphere as the only semi-safe space from the all-encompassing Soviet-dominated public sphere during the occupation years. The semi-safety of the private realm could, however, easily be disturbed through reports or accusations made to the state; one's political opinions (or equally sexual behaviour) could then become objects of state persecution. Even long after the recommencement of democratic statehood, a culture of fear and silence remains prevalent in Estonia in general and in family lives in particular. Despite Annabel's attempts to create a space for her mother where she could ask questions about her and her partner's gender and sexual identities, her mother refused to engage further in the discussion.

Other research participants also described how they had tried to approach the topic of sexuality, and how the combination of trying to be careful in how they broached the issue and how listeners were not very receptive, kept the balance of opacity in place. For example, Siret's closest one, Kelly, has not talked to her mother about being attracted to women, even though she had been in relationships with women all her life. In her description of Kelly, Siret said:

She has hinted to her mother, very vaguely. And also her brother has hinted to the mother, that, 'Look, Kelly is so cool, she is so great. Knowing her, she wouldn't take anybody less than great next to her. So what could we have against two Kellys?' So her mother is very slightly informed, but she is definitely not aware of it or just locks it up.

As I have discussed through the various examples above, a certain kind of mutual effort is required to maintain the status quo in the family of origin. Many described a strong ambivalence towards changing or severing their existing relations. Various kinds of silences and a great deal of willed ignorance was necessary in order to maintain the balance. Not only did the queers I interviewed avoid discussing any details about their own personal lives, members of their families also seemed to actively ignore certain facts or circumstances. This suggests that silence might work as a kind of kinship glue, insofar as relations with family members were dependent on the existence of that mutual silence. I argue that rather than simply understanding silence around sexual orientation as problematic, it can also be interpreted as productive. That is, silence also helps to maintain and protect meaningful relationships.

Enquiries without questions

The silences discussed above are not unidirectional. On the one hand, it can be taboo for close ones to ask about the nature or definition of a person's relationship. On the other hand, as I will argue next, it also can be equally difficult for a person to enquire about the level of knowledge or attitude that their close ones would have of their relationship or identity.

As a young adult, Sam lived at their⁶⁹ mother's place together with their younger brother. They had talked to their mother about their pansexuality and about their trans* identity. However, their brother had not been involved in the conversations, much to Sam's frustration. Moreover, their mother had the habit of starting to whisper when queer topics were discussed, something Sam had refused to participate in during the year before the interview. Sam and their brother's rooms lied next to each other, so Sam speculated on the possibility of their brother having heard some of the conversations: "He should know something, but I don't know what he knows. And of course, I don't know what he thinks".

However, since they did not have the habit of talking about such issues, it proved difficult for Sam to simply ask. Instead, it was through indirect measures that Sam tried to find out their brother's attitude towards queer matters. For example, when Sam's brother used the word "faggot", Sam asked him not to use this word in their presence and he complied. Sam's brother, along with their mother, also went along to watch the Pride parade where Sam worked as a volunteer. Those were some of the signs that Sam considered to be meaningful when they tried to figure out their brother's attitude. Sam also remembered an occurrence on the way to the cinema the year before,

And we were talking about an actor and my brother made a comment that was slightly transphobic. And I looked at him. And he looked at me. And I had this feeling that he is testing me. Because I am transgender. And last year I already knew it and I started talking about it a little bit in the community. So, then I was thinking, 'Does he feel that it is somehow important to me, what is happening now?' (*referring to the transphobic quote). But I never answered him. And we have never talked about it again. And now I do not know if it was his attitude or not.

Here it seemed that verbal silence (e.g. lack of directly posed questions), did not foreclose other ways of trying to make sense of their relationship. Both

⁶⁹ Sam identified as non-binary and preferred gender-neutral pronouns.

Sam and their brother tried to test each other with different means available to them, in the context of a lack of words.

In fact, it could even be the non-verbal cues that were emotionally most difficult to bear. Before meeting Barbara's parents, Barbara's partner, Sandra, spoke of her fear of the "fish gaze" – an Estonian metaphor that refers to a cold, stale and unaffected look in somebody's eyes. Sandra reflected on her initial fear in the following way:

I understand that they know it all, but it is the gaze. You are afraid of the gaze. Yes, they invite you over, but you are afraid of the fish gaze that they would give you. That they would pretend it to be fine, but it is not.

In the context where verbal enquiries or utterances were not common – neither from queers themselves nor their close ones – increased attention was paid to non-verbal cues. There was a heightened awareness to body language and gazes especially were thought to contain the information that could not be attained through verbal communication.

5.2.2 When everyone knows...

Estonia is a small country with a population of barely 1.3 million people, out of which queers make up a minor part. Obviously, queers do not form some kind of uniform community; people have different levels of privilege and disadvantages, interests and experiences, depending on their position in the intersecting relations of power. Furthermore, the more specific the minority group, the smaller the possibility for anonymity.

For example, being both lesbian and deaf, Liina lived as a double minority, in her own words, The deaf community was small and tightly knit, which left her in a specific position when it came to her queerness. She reflected on this in the following way:

I still haven't spoken the sentence, that I like women, to my mom and dad. Or that I love women. I have not said that out loud to mom and dad until now. I have just lived together with my partner. I call them my friends all the time. But to go to somebody and say that I like women. I have never. Everybody knows. For deaf people my life is public in this sense, the community is so small. Everybody knows that I am living with a woman. If anybody asks if this is the case, I say yes. I don't need to say anything, as everybody knows anyway. It is not that I must now inform everyone about coming out of the closet. It was never necessary.

Liina felt that she did not have much of a choice in the level of transparency within the deaf community. The small size of the community made the necessity for discourse obsolete, since the details of who people lived with were widely shared. However, she contradicted herself when she claimed that she was aware of deaf women in Estonia who were not willing either openly or privately to admit to liking women. While she wished to use her position as a role model for more queer deaf women, it seems that there were people who did manage to navigate the double minority with even larger level of opacity.⁷⁰

Since they are geographically spread out over the entire country, deaf people form a community only nominally. But in areas where only a handful of people live, the actual physical proximity to people is what endangers the possibility of remaining anonymous. Keiu worked in a very small town in the countryside and spoke of the local “quiet tolerance”:

We have this piano teacher, a woman, and her life partner is also a woman. And they are middle-aged, and everyone knows that they are together, nobody has not taken their jobs from them. Since it is such a small community then everyone knows everyone, and you just know some things.

It seems that the conditional acceptance of queers on the condition of silence applies in constellations that extend beyond the immediate family of origin. In contexts where people are rather aware of each other's comings and goings (such as small communities), opacity allows queers to live their lives without much interference. However, as already discussed, the conditions of inclusion in a specified community or family are stricter.

5.2.3 If people would ask...

Another aspect of the opaque way of dealing with queerness was pointing to a hypothetical willingness to share details if their lives were the object of direct interrogation. Participants described how they did not volunteer such information, but rather awaited potential questions. Considering the general attitude of silent acceptance or willed ignorance, people were rather

⁷⁰ It must also be noted that already by participating in this study, Liina took on a rather visible role. Even though Liina is a pseudonym, she may be recognizable to the members of both the deaf community and queer community, because there are few people who fit her characteristics.

seldom subjected to any questions. That allowed participants to remain in the borderlands, regarding their sexual and gender identity.

For example, Siret spoke of a talkative colleague who enjoyed gossiping about the lives of others. This colleague, she said, had pointed out others to Siret, asking whether she thought they were lesbian. Siret, though, had not directly spoken to her colleague about her own new relationship with a woman; she instead mentioned going to different events and doing different activities with a female friend. She thus realised that her colleague may very well have had her suspicions about Siret's sexuality, but Siret was unwilling to take the first step. She nevertheless claimed to be willing to tell the truth if asked. Siret commented,

If she would ask, I am right away ready to talk. For God's sake, what do I have to hide? Even though she opposes, she has said so and she is also a racist and all that.

Pauliina, on the other hand, said that she regretted she had not told her co-workers or schoolmates of her transition right when she first met them; she felt that it was much more difficult for her to approach the topic of her gender identity once she was already a part of those circles. Even if Pauliina felt somewhat stuck with the opaque strategies with which she had started out, she had chosen to continue with them and planned to do so until she could manage to change her job. She explained,

For example, with my co-workers I am not very close. I do not directly hide that I am trans. But I also do not ever bring it up. I think that many people do not even know it. If they asked, I would tell for sure. But as nobody has ever asked, maybe many people from work or school do not know. My clothing style is somewhat tomboyish, so...

The crux of queer opacity is here hidden in Pauliina's words: she did not directly hide, but also opted not to volunteer any information so long as she was not directly asked. In other words, queer opacity can be seen as an attempt to find a third way between the compulsion to confess and the oppression of the closet. Thus, I argue that people do not nurture opacity out of direct fear of facing oppression or stigma but more out of comfort and habit and a desire not to stand out in heteronormative settings.

5.3 Practices of opacity

Next, I will turn to discussing different practices of opacity that emerged from the interview material. I found that research participants creatively balanced between the boundaries of knowing/not knowing, saying/not saying, in closet/out and I describe those practices in detail below. Moreover, I will argue, this balancing act was not only about speech and knowledge, it also involved bodily and spatial practices, which are discussed in the second half of this section.

5.3.1 Between closet and confession

As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, the metaphor of the closet is used in Estonia to some extent. Ideas and cultural concepts do travel, without necessarily carrying the same meaning or function (Cerwonka, 2008). This means that concepts that originate and circulate in Western spaces must be re-examined rather than assumed when they emerge in other settings. The idea of proudly coming out of the closet, as marking the advent of gay liberation in (some parts of the) West, does not fit or mean the same thing in the context of Estonia where many queers seem to prefer vague and opaque ways of relating to their queerness. Instead, it was obvious that many participants preferred to invent and use different strategies that moved beyond the seemingly binary choices of either proudly bursting out of the closet or hiding all their life. At the same time, it must be stressed that the binary idea of either coming out or staying hidden, is a somewhat reductive trope that does not necessarily correspond to the complexity of lived realities anywhere. Coming out is not always associated with pride in various Western contexts either, indeed, there are people everywhere who experience pressure to come out or who may even be violently outed against their will.

Jaana, a lesbian woman in her mid-40s, related the performative event of coming out of the closet mainly through pop culture, but she also took a clear distance from the practice. She explained that she did not introduce queer people to her family of origin by way of orchestrating a spectacular moment of confession but rather did so in a matter-of-fact way, and by simply incorporating queer people in her everyday life without offering much commentary on the matter.

I was not much in a closet. I did not really say something big, it was not like in the movies, that let's all sit down at the table and now I will come out. Just smoothly, someone was living with me or was visiting more.

And since my parents lived close by and visited, then they started wondering what is happening. Or why those women come here back and forth. And I said that I like it that way. Then my mother made a proposal that maybe you can meet with them somehow that nobody would see. And would continue living your normal life.

As I discussed above, attempts to push a person back into transparent closets was a common recollection; members of the family of origin would often try to pretend that the queerness they had been told about did not exist (Švab & Kuhar, 2014). Jaana's mother's wish that she would continue living a "normal" life was to mean continuing the marriage with the father of Jaana's son. Jaana's parents thus separated out a "normal" life of marriage to a man, on the one hand, and her new queer life with many women, on the other. However, Jaana did not agree with this kind of a temporality. She did not break up with the father of her son because she suddenly discovered that she wanted to be with women, but rather, argued they had simply grown apart. Introducing women in her life was therefore a gradual continuation, not a specific turning point; there was no clear and distinct moment of coming out as a lesbian.

Ellis, on the other hand, explained that there had been a turning point in her life when she started relationships with women, but at the same time did not describe it in terms of coming out. She said that after many years of monogamous relationships with men, she became a lesbian before turning 30. She was very adamant about the political implications of her journey, stressing,

And then I BECAME⁷¹ a lesbian. I just became a lesbian. And then I became a feminist. And this plays a very large role, that I first became lesbian and then feminist. The mainstream feminist phase never existed for me. I was a queer feminist from the start.

She was well versed in queer-feminist politics and also a valued activist in the local scene. Steeped in both queer and feminist theory and practice, Ellis has reflected much on the issue of coming out (or not). She reasoned in the following way,

⁷¹ She uses the word "hakkama", a word difficult to define. While the English "become" indicates more of a process, "hakkama" involves a lot of agency, it refers to someone initiating something.

I have never been in the closet. I have been in the news, I have quite purposefully... But neither have I come out of the closet for someone, but I have always been out. I have wanted that my relatives and all my close ones would know. That's why I have been out of the closet in the media and internet. That they would find out from there, so that I would not have to call each and everyone to the side and confess.

Similarly to Jaana, Ellis has wanted to avoid the moment of confession. However, it has been important to her to be publicly visible with her queerness, turning it into a political statement. She thus distinguished between "being out" and "coming out". Being out for her meant a matter-of-fact approach to her queerness, including it in her life without constantly explaining it to others. For example, when she recalled the time that she introduced the fact that her girlfriend would start living with her, she did not focus on her identity. As she explains,

When I became a lesbian or decided that I will try those relations then I just told her... Or actually, I told that I will start living together with Laura. And there will be a car parking in front of the house and that is Laura's car. And I just put that fact in our life.

Ellis's mother did not ask for any explanation or did not react in any particular way. After extricating herself from an emotionally violent marriage to Ellis's father, her mother valued happiness and peace above the gender of her child's partner, or at least this was Ellis's own interpretation. However, Ellis slightly suspected that her mother's lack of reaction towards her becoming lesbian could be due to it conforming to the general image of her being the black sheep of the family. How queerness fits into the Estonian cultural understanding of success or failure is something I will discuss in detail in Chapter Six.

To conclude, it is clear that Jaana and Ellis, albeit from two different generations, have both tried to avoid both the closet *and* confession (which is considered the opposite of the closet). Opacity is about neither fully affirming or entirely negating one's non-normative identity, it is instead an act of resistance against the paradigm that seeks to establish a regime of truth through binary identities (De Villiers, 2012, pp. 6-7). Ellis's and Jaana's focus was less on claiming truths about their particular identities, but more on the actual practices of including their close ones in their lives – be it their lovers or their family of origin.

Finally, after having discussed different practices of opacity between a person or a couple and a third party, it must be stressed that opacity also

applies to what occurs within a relationship. This is the case, for example, with Siret and Kelly. Siret's date Kelly refused to define her relationship with Siret. Questions from others about the nature of their relationship, even in the friendly context of a queer party only scared her and made her shut down her emotions. In fact, Siret and Kelly did not even discuss their relationship among themselves. As Siret explained,

We don't talk about it, there is no such moment that we are sitting at a café and now we are together. That is not so important [---] Last time when we went out with the gang, they were just quietly accepting. We came together, we left together, it was all very clear, there is no question. And that is fine. Such defining, we have other things to do, other things to say. It is not so important, to attach a label. We don't have to exchange rings on the beach. It could of course be very chill, but that is not what defines us. Instead, what defines is when you say that you are coming to my son's birthday and asking what to bring as a present. That is what is important!

The quote above reflected Siret's way of dealing with Kelly's reluctance to define their relationship. Siret tried to find other means of building confidence in their relationship, when precisely an actual definition was lacking. She searched for signs of acknowledgement from outside – noting, for example, how their friends considered them a couple without need for further questions. But the most important indication for her were the actual practices of care that Kelly was involved in – the fact that she was present for her and her son. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter Six, caring for and taking care of close ones is what re-produces closeness, no matter the verbal definition of the relationship.

5.3.2 Opacity in space

Opacity is a way of dealing with one's queerness, which also involves dealing with boundaries for organising bodies and space. In the research material, a myriad of unspoken rules about the organisation of space could be detected. The rules were taken for granted up until the moment when somebody unknowingly transgressed. This was especially evident in Reelika's reflections on conflicting expectations about space.

Reelika self-identified as pansexual or sapiosexual, with a stronger preference for women. Much like many others of the other participants, she had not spoken about this with her family of origin, but rather engaged in practices of opacity. This had been especially easy, because she had mainly devoted herself to her son, and had very infrequently dated someone during

the previous fifteen years. When she had a partner, they had participated in her life by spending time with Reelika's son, visiting Reelika's family of origin. All of this happened without any comment about her own sexual identity. However, the rules of privacy and space in her family were turned on their head when Reelika's girlfriend tried to interact with Reelika's family of origin. Reelika remembered a very telling story about conflicting expectations surrounding how her girlfriend expected to become close to Reelika's family of origin while Reelika was herself struggling with this possibility.

It was very funny (*laughs) when my mummy who is a true loner and has abandoned her friends a long time ago because people annoy her... We were visiting and I thought that I left my girlfriend sitting in the living room and waiting for me (laughs). I went to my mom to say a quick hi over the door and suddenly she stands there behind me. And comes physically INSIDE the room and, "Ooooooooooh cats and oooooh how cute! (*in a high-pitched tone). I felt like, help, it even took ME some courage to enter my mom's SPACE and now suddenly there is somebody here that she does not even know. And she is in a nightgown and with cats. What is happening, it is a bit too much (*laughing), let's get away from here!

The disposition of Reelika's girlfriend had been to interact with whoever and whatever populated the home. The problem was that it went straight against the unspoken rules to which Reelika had adhered, without ever before reflecting on the existence of those norms. Reelika had taken her mother's wish for privacy for granted but could instinctively sense the breach of this wish once her girlfriend physically entered her mother's room, especially since her mother was in a state of relative undress. But even though that level of intimacy was overwhelming for Reelika, (and she assumed that to be the case for her mother also), she did not confront the issue openly. Again, a certain sense of opacity could be felt in dealing with the matter, when a whole range of different emotions were out in the open, yet not spoken about. Those occasions of shared awkwardness, which everyone refused to approach, were plentiful. This can be seen in another memorable moment that Reelika recounted,

It was so funny that it was Christmas and she was suddenly sitting with us on the same sofa and eating with us. Everyone had a strange face, like 'What is happening now?' But we all finished eating and all departed in a friendly manner. Very odd.

Here, the presence of Reelika's girlfriend at Christmas dinner was alien to Reelika's small family which consisted of her mother, her sister and each of their children. Her partner had an ambiguous place; she was neither unwelcome nor welcome in that constellation. As I understand it, she was neither a stranger nor family, but most importantly, she was the elephant in the room that nobody dared to address.

5.3.3 Turning a(n) (Estonian) straight eye to the (Russian) queer touch

Being scrutinised for displays of queerness is often in conflict with yearning for touch and connection (or connection through touch). In the context of opacity, touching is often imagined to be the equivalent of speech and therefore limited. Wishing for physical intimacy but fearing its denial once their queerness was explicitly spoken of, was something that structured the lives of some participants more than others. Svetlana recounted her desperation when coming out to her university roommate, with whom she shared a room for six years.

I had for some reason imagined that she will never touch me again. But people's touch is really important to me, hugs and these kinds of things. There is not much of that in Estonia...

Crying inconsolably on her bed, Svetlana was utterly surprised that this Estonian woman who she had always perceived as extremely reserved and proud, suddenly sat next to her on the bed and stroked her back in support. Feeling this very touch that she had already figured she would lose after revealing she was in a relationship with Nadja, made her feel whole. Although Svetlana had not embraced any queer identity or sought out any form of community, she intuitively experienced a stark fear of being rejected, untouchable in both word and deed. The history of queer rejection, which deems queer subjects unworthy of touch and out of bounds for common care and love, was haunting her from the start.

But sometimes ignorance (whether willed or not) impedes rejection. Out of those six years of sharing student lodgings with her roommate, Svetlana's partner Nadja visited her during three of them. On those visits, Svetlana and her roommate had the habit of pushing the two single beds together to form one big bed. With Svetlana in the middle, and Nadja and the roommate on either side, even in this confined space of three bodies in close proximity, Svetlana and Nadja always gravitated towards each other. Svetlana thus believed that the roommate had drawn her conclusions from that fact. She told me,

And I asked her, 'How come you didn't understand?' One time, for example, she walked into the room and Nadja was kissing my belly. Well... (*laughing). And then she [the roommate] said, 'I'm a dull Estonian, I didn't get it at all. I figured that this is how it works for you Russians.'

Stereotypes about Estonians and Russians are commonplace in Estonia, a fact that might, at least in part, be explained by the high level of segregation. Considering that there are very few spaces where closer contact could emerge, stereotypes can circulate and flourish, and seldom need to be proved wrong. Here, I want to stress the significant role that segregation played in the case of Svetlana's Estonian roommate's claim to be oblivious of Svetlana's queerness.⁷² University housing is one of few spaces where the paths of segregated communities could cross, as it had for Svetlana, for example.

But holding on to the stereotypes about people of different ethnic background can simultaneously help to turn a blind eye towards any queer expression. Svetlana's Estonian roommate had insisted on retaining the boundary of a clear difference between them. She had adhered to the stereotype of being, in her own words, the "dull Estonian", which meant being stoic and somewhat slow to grasp things. At the same time, by referring to Svetlana and Nadja as "you Russians", she participated in othering them as weird and different. The erotic potentiality took second place and found a plausible explanation in ethnically coded practices. The "other" was already by necessity a little queer, a little off, and weird (Ahmed, 2006), but simultaneously straightened up in this othering move, since any deviant behaviour might have been attributed to Svetlana's Russianness. The assumptions about ethnic difference thus worked to mask the queer traces. Interpreting the unusual physical intimacy between the young women through the lens of ethnicity rather than sexuality helped to eliminate the possible threat of homosexuality that was allegedly greater than the ethnic "other".

Another aspect speaking for the ease of glossing over queer potentialities and straightening out the practices of intimacy, is the general habituatedness of close physical proximity. People in Estonia are often used to small and crowded living spaces. Sharing a room with one or several other people is not uncommon, and indeed even sharing a bed is hardly an unimaginable curiosity. Since it is precarity that puts people in the condition of physical

⁷² Whether she truly was as oblivious as she claimed or whether she used it as an excuse is less interesting to me, since I am not investigating the "truth" but the various discourses and practices that emerge therefrom.

proximity, it becomes an additional straightening device that helps people in Estonia ignore any potentiality for queer closeness.

Certainly, this encounter in the student dormitory took place several decades ago. Therefore, it is not entirely certain that the signs of queer desire could have gone ignored to the same extent if the same situation had happened today, given the greater availability of cultural knowledge about queers. But when this example is considered in light of a general sense of opacity, what we see is how the straight gaze can easily level the difference and straighten up the queerest of moments.

5.3.4 Public displays of intimacy

Drawing upon ethnicity-based explanations was common also when several of the participants discussed their reluctance towards displaying public intimacy with their partners. This was a topic, for example, that caused some heightened emotions on the side of Barbara and her partner Sandra. I had been invited to their home in one of the biggest towns in Estonia for an interview with Barbara. She had seen my advertisement and volunteered for an interview without having known me previously. While both were young professionals, Barbara was currently on parental leave. Sandra had a full-time job. At the time of the interview, Sandra, unsuccessfully, tried to put the baby to sleep and joined in with the conversations towards the end. She became animated and defensive when the discussion turned towards walking hand in hand in public:

Sandra: Especially now that we have a child too... But if you actually look at the street then you don't see straight couples holding hands either. Why should we show off? Well, I don't feel we should.

Barbara: This is also where the Estonianness comes to play a little. Modest, it is nobody's business how we here... (*in a playfully subdued voice). [...]

Sandra: We already differ from others with our family model and then to start stressing it, straight couples don't hold hands, we do! We don't want that attention

Barbara: Straight couples do hold hands, but the ones who do are high school students and a little older. Or like pensioners. They are cute to look at. But somewhere in between, it is more like, well, let's go grocery shopping.

Some of Barbara's and Sandra's arguments for not displaying public intimacy were hardly surprising or different from what we might expect from

other contexts in the world. Wishing not to deviate from the norm – from the respectable middle-aged heterosexual couple who supposedly does not hold hands, is not an uncommon phenomenon. Anglo-American queer scholars have been writing about the assimilating impulses propelled by mainstream LGB politics, criticising them for complying with the heteronormative demands for privacy (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Duggan, 2003; Richardson, 2005). Such queer critique is directed against the way homosexuality has been depoliticised, how it has been stabilised into the domestic and private sphere. By adding a comment by Anne here, it can seem as if the critique of homonormativity could easily be applied to Estonia. Anne claimed authoritatively that

We are not this kind of people who make out publicly. We don't walk hand in hand and don't cause great questions to anybody. [...] We don't need to keep ourselves back in the public, but there are things that [should] remain indoors.

However, in order to avoid overstating the similarities between the Western contexts studied in the aforementioned literature, I argue that we need to consider the specific meanings of “public” versus “private” in the post-Soviet Estonian cultural context. As discussed in Chapter Three, privacy has, axiologically, had a central and venerated position for Estonians in ways that partly differ from the Western counterparts. Becoming part of European modernity around the end of the 19th century did entail the installing of middle-class values, such as domestic privacy and respectability (Kannike, 2006). But during the Soviet occupation, retaining such values became a strategy of coping with the cultural trauma of occupation.

Adding this kind of post-soviet lens to the stories of Sandra, Barbara and Anne points to the tension between these two meanings of privacy. On the one hand, achieving middle-class respectability through retreating into the private is highly valued in Estonia and participates in the naturalisation of heterosexual norms. On the other hand, because of these complex and shifting historical circumstances, privacy also, simultaneously, carries a different meaning in Estonian cultural memory.

Moreover, I agree with Stasińska (2020) who argues that it is relevant to focus on the agency of the individuals who navigate the heteronormative public, instead of evaluating them in terms of normativity and subversion. Cautiousness towards public displays of intimacy may in fact be a strategy developed in response to fear of violence, according to Stasińska. This was certainly the case for Triin, a woman in her mid-forties. She had been an

activist in the first wave of Pride parades in Estonia in the mid-2000s, which were subject to violent reactions from the public.⁷³ She and her fellow activists had received death threats due to their engagement in Pride parades, something that not only scared them but slowly became a part of everyday life. After 2006's Pride, which was met with violence, Triin gave up activism. In that year her and her partner's first of three children was born. She and her partner became used to avoiding any public physical intimacy such as holding hands, in order to provide safety for their children. Their fear of negative reactions towards displays of public intimacy was rooted in their direct experience and threats of violence. Therefore, I argue, similarly to Stasińska (2020), that opting out of certain displays of intimacy should not be interpreted as simply a deprivation of their own agency. Instead this led them to display their intimacy in a different way – through their joint children, who in a way became the extension of their own intimate bond. Triin reasoned in the following way:

We go to the store with one stroller and mind the children together. And talk about what we will be having for dinner. So it is clear that these people live together. It is impossible not to understand that we are together. But here it is the same thing, a person sees what she wants to see. What she is used to seeing. If I think of my previous relationship and that we lived together for six years and her parents still didn't understand that we have something more than being friends.

Appealing to the mundaneness of reproductive labour (both in terms of giving birth to children and the domestic work that keeps the workforce going) was a way of constructing sameness with all the other (imagined) heterosexual couples, who have a watchful eye on their children on trips to the supermarket. Triin pointed out that while their difference as a family with two mothers was visible for all those who were willing to interpret them that way, it was also highly irrelevant. But much like Svetlana's Estonian roommate who managed not to see queer physical intimacy when it was being displayed, Triin mentioned the active unwillingness to notice signs of queerness as something rather commonplace in Estonia. As these everyday examples demonstrate, opacity is ever-present on various levels of society, starting from families of origin and extending outwards onto the streets and beyond.

⁷³ For a closer examination of the history and politics of Pride parades in Estonia, see Uibo (2020).

5.4 Queer leakages of allyship

Although the participants often lacked both the words and opportunities for talking about their queer lives, some people used forms of allyship as one way of introducing queer topics to people in their lives. On multiple occasions, this was achieved not in any direct manner but more by leaving behind traces or leakages of some form of queerness, thereby addressing the issues without any direct proclamation of identity. Thus, the very practice of relying on allyship as a way of approaching being queer without completely outing oneself is an additional form of queer opacity.

I use the concept of queer leakages as a way of making sense of that phenomenon. Media scholar Matilda Tudor (2018) has introduced the concept of queer digital leakage⁷⁴ in her discussion of Russian gay men's digital media use. Queer digital leakage refers to the fact that traces of queer digital lives will necessarily be visible to the rest of their social contacts. In Tudor's research, gay men in Russia were very self-conscious about their own online behaviour (who they would accept as friends, what content they would "like", etc.) and they were equally anxious about potential exposure through other people (comments or photos that could raise suspicion) (Tudor, 2018, p. 182). In the context of increasing connectivity, managing different levels of privacy in on and offline spaces required painstaking strategies, while, as Tudor writes, concealment was not equally accessible strategy for all.

While Tudor specifically focuses on queers' interactions with digital media, the participants of my research spoke of their lives both on and offline, making the conceptualisation of queer leakages relevant also outside of internet usage. In contrast to Tudor's interviewees, the participants of my research did not talk about putting any great efforts into trying to contain and conceal the queer leakages that occurred. Instead, they were either neutral or positive about the traces they would leave behind, actively liking or sharing queer-related content or participating in various offline activist contexts, all the while being obscure about their own identities and prac-

⁷⁴ Queer scholar Tiina Rosenberg (2002) has written about queer leakages as the necessary biproduct of heteronormativity, in the sense that even in the most heteronormative contexts it is possible to find cracks through which traces of queerness become visible. Such understanding of queer leakages is central for conducting queer readings, for example. However, because I do not engage in general cultural analysis but focus my analysis on lived realities of Estonian queers, it is more useful to rely on Tudor's (2018) discussion of queer leakages in relation to my own research.

tices. Managing queer leakages through allyship was one particular way of simultaneously speaking/not speaking about queer issues and being visible/invisible at the same time. In other words – it was one particular expression of queer opacity. In the following section I examine not only the various ways of navigating the queer leakages that participants left behind but also the wanted and unwanted consequences that those leakages had.

5.4.1 Change triggered by queer leakages

Reelika had a long history with the company for which she had been working during several years. She first worked there at the end of the 90s, and despite working elsewhere afterwards, she had maintained close relationships with her colleagues. They had been present in her life all along, visiting, celebrating each other's successes and helping out in times of need. She thus referred to her colleagues as "not a far-family but more as a background family". Not only was she valued among her colleagues, she was also on good terms with her manager, whose husband and children were common visitors at her place when she needed handy help such as renovations.

Given the strong bonds of both emotional and material care, I asked if she had mentioned her relationships with women to her colleagues. In response Reelika gave rather vague and diffuse answers, an example of which is the following:

Actually, in some way they do know. I have sometimes said something between the lines. For example, I always get busted with my CV, so I have to bring that topic up in new places. It says that I've been active in the LGBT Union, so they will ask what I did there. And once you're active there, you are LGBT and that's it.

She relied on her proximity to queer issues as a pointer, without needing to say anything about her own identity. The way I interpret this practice is that Reelika expected the queer leakages on her CV to do all the talking, so that she would not have to. If she had actively wanted to hide that information, she would not have included her queer activism in her CV, as was the case with many participants in Tudor's (2018) research, who actively concealed various pieces of queer information. Instead, she was indifferent to the fact that her manager or her colleagues most likely would draw the conclusion that she herself was queer.

Reelika's activities in the queer community were thus visible for her colleagues. She was an active member in the LGBT Union and volunteered in local schools, giving talks on queer matters. She had thus needed to

adjust her working schedule according to some of those talks. Also, one of her manager's children had been in the audience for one of her talks, which meant that knowledge of her political activities was widespread. However, there were hardly any direct conversations about her activism or about the potential connotations that this could have about her own identity. Even though the queer leakages were quite visibly in the open, she had not ended up in a situation at work where she had needed to either deny or confirm her own identity through any speech act. Instead, it was through her actions and practices that she assumed the position of a queer.

Moreover, her presence in the company and friendship with the manager had contributed to some significant changes in the atmosphere of the company. She sensed how her previously rather right-wing conservative manager had changed her attitude and political views, both in words and in action. When women's rights or other topics came up at work, the manager had become supportive and had even announced that she no longer voted for the conservative party. At the company they worked for, several clients were often vocal about their conservative views. Some of them were strong supporters of EKRE (the populist far right party that has gained much popularity in recent years) and often expressed support for the party's politics, including during business communication. During those situations, Reelika also received some vague support from the manager, as she reported:

And then (*laughs) I see how she is trying to cope with them gently. And she sees that I'm helping the client, but am shutting my ears, don't want to communicate, lose eye contact and do this (*covers her eyes with one hand, in an avoiding gesture). Because sometimes I do respond between the lines. Not just agreeing that 'Oh, so amazing that we have such protectors and sons of fatherland' (*ironically). I say something to bring in another perspective. But generally, at work I do try to just remove myself from such interactions, I try to phase it out.

Here we see how exchanged gazes, observances and other forms of body language became an important part of communication when discourse was not readily available. While words were not exchanged, what certainly did circulate were the affects with which the room was saturated. With Sara Ahmed's (2010b) formulation, we can see how affects are both mobile and sticky. When Reelika was trying to manage the dilemma of expressing her discomfort with clients who readily shared their extreme right-wing opinions, while at the same time trying to avoid direct confrontation with them, she was put in the position of an "affect alien". She was alienated, as she did not "experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attri-

buted as being good” (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 126). While she did not share the extreme political views becoming increasingly mainstream in Estonia and the rest of the world, neither could she fully inhabit the position of what Ahmed refers to as a killjoy. At work she was bound by the service-rules of her profession, so her space for openly questioning the values of her clients was greatly restricted.

She found courage and consolation from the fact that her manager had come to partly share her discomfort. Once again Ahmed’s (2010a) argument concerning the social dimensions of affect is useful to make sense of the situation. Ahmed argues that “some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness” (p. 127). It is the person in question that becomes the source of the problem; the bad feeling gets stuck to their bodies. Without a manager who understood and shared Reelika’s discomfort, it would have been Reelika herself who had been considered the source of bad feelings. Instead of that happening, she could ease her discomfort with the knowledge that her manager was on her side, ready to exchange a quick glance with her. As there was no clear policy for dealing with clients with oppressive or offensive views at Reelika’s work, the affective solidarity allowed for some limited resistance.

With all of this in mind, I argue that queer opacity was at play in those settings on many levels. First, Reelika’s presence in the company was rather opaque – she both was known for being active on queer matters, but her own identity was never directly addressed. It was also through such queer leakages that the atmosphere in the company started to change – the ambiguous presence of her visible-yet-invisible queerness gave way to silent support and solidarity. The key to opacity is that matters are not discussed directly, but rather a sense of shared agreement is communicated among the ones involved. Similarly, any support to queerness is not addressed directly either. There is not a statement or public acknowledgement, but both queerness and its support are conducted beyond speech.

5.4.2 The protective cloak of an ally

I started the previous section by describing Reelika’s conviction that her activism towards queer issues was a tell-tale way for people to draw their own conclusions about her sexual identity. In contrast, many other research participants explained that being engaged in queer activism allowed them to express their political views, while remaining somewhat anonymous.

Natasha, for example, was in her own words “not officially out”. Nonetheless, on her Instagram account she spoke of the specific material that

could let others assume she was not straight. Natasha was thus not worried about the queer leakages from online spaces with which she interacted. At the same time, she did not talk about queer matters with her friends, not because she would directly hide it, but rather because, as she put it, “nobody cares one way or another”. Having said this, she was very vocal about social justice issues more generally and was known for being “liberal”, as she put it. When discussions on queer topics arose or when any homophobic language or act took place, she always actively voiced her support.

In a similar manner, Sam used the strategy of letting some of their friends think that they were a social justice warrior.⁷⁵ They readily spoke of volunteering at Pride and of their support towards queer rights without mentioning that they themselves were part of the community. This kind of strategy of publicly aligning oneself with the community became very obvious in Svetlana’s self-reflexive words:

Look, I re-post things addressing political reform. I play an ally. Even though my friends tell me that you are as much of an ally as a cat who steals something from the table and then hides its head, thinking that nobody will see it. (*laughs). But for me the “don’t ask, don’t do” situation works for now.

For Svetlana, posing as an ally was not a strategy of direct concealment, but it was more about shifting the focus of the gaze. Participants did not mind being associated with queer issues, vice versa, they rather actively participated in consciousness raising through debates and content-sharing both off and online. However, their own gender or sexual identity was downplayed in their social justice activism. In other words, they did not announce that they supported queer rights because they were themselves queer. They were aware that people might “connect the dots” between their activism and personal practices – something that Svetlana admitted through the metaphor of acting like a cat who failed to be inconspicuous despite its best efforts. But as long as they were required neither to confirm nor deny (which they seldom were), navigating those layers of vagueness and opacity worked well for them.

⁷⁵ Sam used the term “social justice warrior” in English, while the conversation took place in Estonian. It is unclear whether they used it because they could not find a similar appropriate term in Estonian or whether they wanted to draw on the disparaging discourse among right-wing circles that uses “social justice warrior” as a negative term.

The local context where Svetlana, Natasha and others made their choices must be considered. More than half of Estonia's population considers homosexuality completely or somewhat unacceptable, according to the bi-annual survey on attitudes towards LGBT people in Estonia (Human Rights Centre 2019). There had been hardly any change in those numbers in comparison to the previous report from 2017. However, one interesting result from the report was that people presumed society to be less accepting than it actually was. Those responding to the survey guessed that only 27% of society would accept homosexuality, while at least among the survey respondents the respective percentage was 41%. In short, assumptions about widespread homophobia in Estonia are bleaker than the measurable reality. If this was the general perception of society, then we might assume that participants in my own research were influenced by perceived attitudes, no matter how closely these opinions correspond to everyday life.

Moreover, Svetlana, Sam and Natasha were all Russian native speakers. This may have been an additional explanation for how the strategy of posing as allies had developed. The Human Rights Centre survey found that attitudes and opinions of Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking people have polarised greatly over time (Human Rights Centre 2019). While the most prevalent opinion among Estonian-speakers in the 2019 survey was that homosexuality is, to some extent, accepted in society (29% held that view), a whole 42% of Russian-speakers believed that society would not accept queers. Obviously, language and ethnic belonging are not the only markers that decide one's attitudes towards minorities. Age, education and rural/urban location are also important factors. At the same time, the ethnic divide in Estonia runs through several sectors, so people with Russian as their native language are more often marginalised in terms of income and education (Leetmaa, 2017).

In sum, posing as a queer ally was an available strategy for queers who preferred to express their queer-positive political views, while remaining rather opaque about their own particular identities. This seemed to be an especially useful strategy for participants who had some experience of living among Russian-speaking communities.

5.4.3 From ally to queer

While putting on the "protective coat" of an ally was one way of relating to their own queerness, some participants had rather unusual routes through queer allyship. Katrin and Silvia – the only elderly people to have been interviewed for this study – had been forced to rethink their position on the

continuum of queer and ally on several occasions of their lives. I had met Katrin and Silvia on various occasions at the Gay Christian gatherings that took place in the LGBT Association premises. In the form of a tea night, a handful of regulars and occasional visitors gathered around the table for some tea and conversation. It was a very welcoming and open space where – crudely put, not everyone was gay or even necessarily Christian. It was an emotionally warm place where people either dropped by to get some warm words of advice or came to share the hardships or joys of their life every other week. The sense of community and warmth was strongly felt, and if it had not been for the short common readings of Bible verses, I had the feeling that the events could have been taken for any communal meeting.

While at the time of conducting my research, Katrin and Silvia were central figures in the Gay Christian circles, this had not always been the case. Katrin and her partner Silvia first found their way in queer circles as allies – as parents of gay children. They attended queer events and participated in discussion circles, where they shared their experience as parents of gay children. For a long time, they did not mention that they themselves were in a lesbian relationship.

When compared to a normative coming out narrative, according to which one often comes out as a young adult, their life had actually been the inverse. They had to first come to terms with their sons being gay, and a long while after that with the fact that they themselves had fallen for persons of their own gender. Having lived a heteronormative life with marriage and several children and being a devout Christian, Katrin had been horrified to find out that one of her sons was gay. She was afraid of him going to hell and doubted whether she herself even was suitable to work for a church when her son was gay. Because of guilt and worry she joined in prayers with her colleague, Silvia, who was also the caretaker of a young gay man. At that time, Katrin met her son with a complete inability to understand that his feelings for men could be anything else but lust. She was not angry or did not threaten him in any way, but she tried to convince him of the error of his ways.

To much shock and surprise, soon after starting to work together in one parish, Katrin and Silvia fell in love with each other. They were both in their 50s and had not expected neither to fall for a woman, nor to fall so heavily in love again. Their emotional qualms were thus doubled – the intensity of their conflicted emotions was so high that they compared it to electrical short-circuit or even mourning. Of the love and attraction towards each other, Silvia reminisced, “It was so heavy that I would not want to bear it

one more time. I wouldn't be able to take it, I just cannot. It is too deep to bear". The electricity was still present and almost tangible when around them. But Katrin also attributed higher meaning to their own experience,

I would say it was not of this Earth, it was so strong. Maybe it happened so that we would understand people who are gay. God has a sense of humour, he did it to us so that we would not start explaining stoically, 'This is how normal people...' (*ironically). So that you understand through the movements in your own core that you let other people be.

The irony here of having been homophobic to their sons, only to later develop feelings for each other, they interpreted as a divine lesson from God. They spoke of their love as at the same time supernatural – coming from God, and truly corporeal, shaking them to the very bottom of their flesh. That ground-breaking experience shifted their position from parents and allies to themselves being queers who sought allies on their way. Along with their position, the story they had to share with listeners in the discussion groups had shifted. They no longer only spoke of what it was to have a child come out to them, they shared their experience of coming out to their own grown children.

Moreover, their own practices of opacity changed. In certain contexts, such as the Gay Christian circles, they now shared the full reasons of aligning themselves with the queer community that originated both from their experience as caretakers of gay sons and from their own experience as queers. However, the biggest religious communities in Estonia – Protestants and Russian Orthodox Church are highly homophobic and conservative and openly persecute queers. Combining queerness with religious life was only possible in small alternative circles like the Gay Christian gatherings. In order to participate in bigger religious communities, they needed to align themselves with the strong heteronormative standards of the church.

5.5 Conclusion

The popular cultural narrative according to which confessing one's identity would be a relief to the person and their family, who would either welcome the new type of person into its circle (even though possibly reluctantly at first) or the homophobic family would be abandoned, is a narrative that does not seem to hold in the context of Estonia. Instead, the strict division between being in a closet and out of its confines is challenged through the complex network of silences, silent agreements and conditions in which the relations of queers and their close ones are embedded.

The prevalence of speech acts that stress the identity of persons is low. Confessions like “I’m gay/lesbian/trans*” or introductions of partners through which relational identity could be established – “This is my boyfriend/girlfriend” – are not particularly common. More often participants simply incorporated their partners into their lives in a matter-of-fact manner, living together or bringing them to family events rather unapologetically.

However, in my material, such incorporation of partners happens often without any mention of their status or role in the person’s life, thereby leaving the bonds unclear and undefined for everyone involved. This kind of opacity requires silence about the nature of the relationship, but at the same time allows for certain visibility, albeit without any accompanying comments.

The lack of commentary is an indication of not wanting to upset or unsettle the previous balance of relationships. The question that seems to occupy many queers in Estonia is the following: How to live your life so that it involves queer aspects, without severing relationships to close ones? Opacity seems to be the answer to that question; it becomes a way to create and maintain kinship – it functions as a type of kinship glue. Practices that signal kinship, such as affinity and care for their families of origin, do not in that case clash with living their queer lives. Instead, those lives co-exist, not in parallel worlds that are kept separate, but in their common everyday lives. This is not, however, an existence that is blissfully harmonious in its open acceptance, but it is conditioned by silences and willed ignorance. However, it is important to remember that relationality is always also augmented through disconnection and failure, not only through love and connection (Dahl, 2014). It is, therefore, worth focusing on those particular practices of opacity that make and maintain bonds between people, however conditional those may be.

Interlude: Who cares?

As I attempted to understand the interplay of closeness and care in Estonia, it was informative to follow Annabel and the rather intense forms of care relationship(s) surrounding her. Annabel was from Estonia and Nikita, Annabel's partner at the time, from another European country. They lived together and were engaged in an open relationship for little over a year. Annabel suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and was suicidal and depressed, while Nikita also had bouts of anxiety and depression. Soon after getting to know them, Annabel entered an especially low period, and I was in awe of what was a complex schedule of care for a person in need.

While public community centres as well as other queer community outlets played a role in the general sense of queer care in Estonia, community care was not a central way of living one's life and organising one's relationships. In the case of Annabel, friends tried to take turns in inviting her for walks or calling to check in on her. A queer couple who lived close by invited her to sleep over at their place to spend time with them and their cats. Friends and acquaintances came over to do their homework at Annabel's place, so that, among other things, she would not be alone. I remember feeling a sense of admiration at such coordinated efforts of care. A network of extended care relations beyond the original romantic couple was something that was perhaps bound to impress me, since I myself have strived to live and care outside of monogamous romantic relationships.

My initial reaction might, however, have been a form of wishful thinking. After becoming more closely acquainted with the couple, I discovered that much of the care work around Annabel had emerged in response of Nikita's desperate pleas to their common friends. Some frustration and disappointment could be heard in Nikita's voice when they reflected on the network of care around Annabel:

Viktor was saying the other day that you know the support network that is around [Annabel] is very impressive and all of this. And I'm like, 'OK,

this is the best it gets?' It is very sad. Because for me it is just a starting point. Of course, you invite someone over who is suicidal! I don't know, that's the starting point. Dalia, yesterday, before Annabel left, had asked her, 'Oh do you want to come for a tea?' Which I think people get like, 'Oh these things are happening!' But for me it is just basics of friendship. I don't know. (*laughs).

Nikita was exhausted from doing the care work alone and disappointed with friends for being rather slow at taking initiative for sharing the burden of caring. What I, along with several other people from Estonia, had considered to be an unusual network of close friends taking care of an ill person, was actually a source of disappointment for Nikita.

Certainly, it could very well be that it was Nikita's particular experience of having lived in close networks of care in some other countries that caused them to show further frustration. Standards of care are not universal; rather they are influenced by cultural and political determinations. Cultural contexts can be more or less individualist or collectivist, with further variations among people from different class or religious backgrounds. Apart from my own initial miscalculation about what could or should constitute sufficient care, I was even more surprised to learn that care also has much to do with appropriate timing, rhythm and temporality in general, a theme that runs through the whole chapter to come.

6. Care – times and lines that bind

In the course of my dissertation research, questions about close relationships tended to result in my interviewees sharing stories about the work involved in caring for and taking care of close ones. Care is a form of work that requires not only time, but energy and space in a person's life, in the very concrete physical sense but also emotionally. People's needs are multifaceted and so are the ways of meeting those needs. Care thus encompasses various practices, the different facets of which – discussed with the help of the research material – range from degrees of emotional support, everyday social reproduction, material or financial help, issues surrounding the institutionalised care system, as well as those forms of control and dependency that comprise the negative aspects of support and care. The motivations behind giving care differ widely. People care for a range of reasons, e.g. out of love, a sense of duty or obligation, because of monetary compensation, etc. Indeed, the line that binds one to (care for one's) close ones involves various social and emotional pressures. This is especially the case with the family line, which binds in various ways; the passing of blood, values and property from one generation to another is never a neutral act. There are expectations to reciprocate (Ahmed, 2006).

As discussed in Chapter One, I understand care work as a kinning practice. Creating and maintaining bonds can be an effect of care practices, but it can also work the other way around, i.e. an existing bond can either make a person want or force that person to take care of others. Care is enacted personally and corporeally, thus encompassing the reproductive labour in which humans engage as well as the care of the state that enacts biopolitical measures on its subjects (Butler, 2009; Freeman, 2007; Rodriguez, 2014). On both levels, kinship and care are intimately bound up with extending lives into the future, thus bringing temporality into focus.

My ethnographic research revealed that care has much to do with time, temporality and rhythms of care. The rhythm of care needs, as well as the rhythm of care provided to meet those needs, could be experienced either as

too intense or too weak. Sometimes the rhythms of each can be completely out of synch. The timing of care, but also the time of being in care (or the lack thereof) were intimately bound up with affective dimensions. Moreover, care had much to do with the various temporal dimensions of everyday life, both when it came to the everyday cyclical rhythm of care and social reproduction but also a more general timeline of our lives.

In short, the ways in which we organise our everyday lives and our relations to each other are ridden with societal expectations about time. For example, conceptualising life as both linear and uninterrupted progress towards further maturity is one normative idea of temporality criticised by queer theorists (Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005, 2011). I use the term *chrononormativity*, coined by Freeman (2010), to account for the process of temporal regulation of people's lives. When the maximisation of productivity and capital are posited as the ultimate goals, then the normative sequence of life events involves acts such as education, career, marriage, reproduction, and parenting. Conscripting subjects into the capitalist, heteronormative and patriarchal orders is a way to organise both individuals and entire populations into productive and respectable units (Freeman, 2010).

By imagining alternative temporalities that would be uncoupled from heteropatriarchy, family and reproduction, Halberstam (2005) seeks to de-centre notions of middle-class respectability and normality. Halberstam thus introduced *queer time* as a counter-concept to the reproductive and family time by which societies are governed. In Halberstam's understanding, *queer time* refers to temporality that would be outside of the governing forces of "reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6).⁷⁶ I thus view *chrononormativity* and *queer time* as oppositional modes of figuring time and lives, both concepts of which are especially relevant with respect to relationships and care.

⁷⁶ Certainly, other aspects of temporality could be evoked, especially considering the valuable work carried out by sociologists Joanna Mizelińska and Roberto Kulpa (2011) on geo-temporal imaginaries. In criticising the epistemological imbalances, they have used the term "queer time" for CEE context in order to show how breaking free from behind the Iron Curtain caused a variety of different discourses on sexuality to emerge simultaneously. They have contrasted that to the "straight time" of the West, which arguably followed a more linear path in the development of non-straight positionalities. They argue that because those geo-temporal modalities differ, it is not feasible to apply the assumptions and temporal expectation that emanate from Anglo-American contexts to CEE contexts. While it is a valid argument, I argue that my use of certain "Western" concepts such as *chrononormativity*, *queer time*, *crip time* etc. in order to make sense of temporal aspects of care in Estonia is not the same as comparing Estonia (unfavourably) to, say, Anglo-American contexts.

In this chapter I argue that queers in Estonia negotiate various aspects of temporality – chrononormativity (which is closely linked to reproductive time, family time, straight time), queer, crip and curative time – when they engage in caring for and taking care of their close ones. What sets my contribution apart from various other accounts that rethink care and intimacy (see Croghan et al., 2014; Roseneil, 2004; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), is that I focus specifically on the context of neoliberal precarity in Estonia, thus locating the discussion on queers and care in a very particular time and space.

In what follows, I explore the different ways in which kinship and care are interlinked with various temporal norms and structures. Firstly, I discuss those chrononormative pressures to succeed that queers have to negotiate in the context of neoliberal Estonia. Either embracing norms, resisting them or engaging with them introduces various temporal ways of relating to others. Secondly, I explore the expectations and temporal norms that queers encounter in their everyday practices of relating to each other and taking care of one another. Finally, I discuss the various clashes and mismatches of temporalities that hurt both people and their bonds.

6.1 Chrononormative pressures to succeed

The post-socialist and neoliberal society of Estonia offers a precarious arena for queers to practice their close relationships. As discussed in Chapter One, care and neoliberal capitalist systems are already by definition contradictory in nature (Fraser, 2016). Further, the chrononormative expectations on life dictate who counts as a productive member of society. Both the order and timing of achieving certain milestones in life can cast one as either successful or failing, something that to a great degree shaped the lives of participants. As I will analyse in the following section of this chapter, success and failure are carefully weighed in everyday life in Estonia, subjecting queers to multiple levels of scrutiny. With the help of interweaving stories from various queers I illuminate the effects of societal expectations and personal circumstances.

Despite all the loss of human capital due to harsh economic reforms and austerity, economic success (and the social status that follows therefrom) is highly valued in Estonia. After the brutal decade of economic reforms in the 1990s, the gap between those who could take advantage of the new neoliberal order and those who did not have the means quickly to adapt, accelerated enormously. Social theorists have even argued that neo-liberalisation has divided Estonia into two – the *first* (successful, upper-class and

urban Estonia) and *second* Estonia (failing, lower-class and rural Estonia) (Lauristin, 2003).

One person who belonged to the disparaged “second Estonia” was Katrin. During the early 2000s Katrin lived in the countryside, raising several children as a single mother. She seemed visibly pained by the memory when recalling her experiences, as we sat in the back room of the house, which belonged to her partner Silvia’s son, and took a moment for an interview in between playing with Silvia’s grandchild.

Katrin remembered struggling economically, but she was also subject to many prejudices, owing to her low social status as a poor single mother. She had been forced to quit her university studies because of having to take care of her children, first with her subsequent husbands and thereafter alone. Taking up her studies again allowed her to feel a sense of self-worth amidst prejudice and judgement, as she recalled below:

I started feeling a bit more dignified as a person. Otherwise I was this poor mother of several children who was looked down upon. (*laughs). Like one woman said there, ‘Oh those by the railway, where there are many children, father left them, and they are so poor’. That was the status.

The sense of judgement and stigmatisation that Katrin experienced was hardly exceptional. Recent research on single mothers in the similar precarious post-socialist setting of Lithuania shows that single mothers experience multi-layered marginalisation (Lapinske, 2018). Not only are they particularly affected by neoliberal practices and a limited welfare state, thereby keeping them in poverty, they are also socially stigmatised as failures and blamed for their own vulnerable positions (Lapinske, 2018).

As could also be seen in Katrin’s statement above, it was the unfair prejudice and stigmatisation with which she took most issue, while the lack of institutional support and absent care from the children’s father was taken for granted. Expectations for state involvement in care practices are generally low in Estonia. In more affluent welfare states, with higher state provisions, people can rely on the state to provide to a greater extent. Estonia dedicates only 14.8 percent of its GDP to social provision, in contrast to the EU average of 28.6 (Buhr et al., 2017). The result is a very meagre provision for people in need of care. With little hope of relying on care from the state, queers and the rest of the population try to survive the best they can with their own means and resources, while being stigmatised as failures if they cannot not do so.

6.1.1 Queerness associated with failure

At the time Katrin experienced judgment due to her economic and social status as a single mother; the prejudice she experienced was not related to her queerness. She had not yet met Silvia, her later female partner, so at that time she still met the conditions of heteronormative legitimacy, while at the same time living an economically precarious life. But as will be evident in this following section, queerness and class prejudice are intimately related and reinforce stigmatisation on multiple levels.

In many a context, including Estonia, where heterosexuality is associated with success, deviating from heteronormativity is associated with its opposite – failure and doom (see Halberstam, 2011). Meeting heteronormative standards is a very conditional status, and it is easy to fall out from the privileged category of successful and respectable subjects and be cast as a failure, as was evident in the case of Siret.

After years of heterosexual relationships and after having raised her son, Siret became attracted to women. Eventually confiding in her mother, she found her mother's response rather odd. Siret recalled,

Her reaction was that now the downward spiral of my life will start. My son will be neglected. [---] I will lose my job for sure, cannot pay the loan back. That those are the things that will start happening.

While Siret was very much surprised at such dreary expectations, a representative from the LGBT Association to whom she mentioned this, was not. Instead, they had suggested that expecting doom and both an economic and social downward spiral due to signs of queerness was a very common reaction from one's family of origin.

I interpret the experience of Siret, and others from whom she had heard similar things, as evidence of the dual working of heteronormativity and chrononormativity. As long as Siret was dating men, parenting her son and being a productive member of the workforce, she was cast as being successful, trustworthy and “on time”. As soon as she lost her heterosexual credibility, the rest of her life was expected to suffer a downfall. I argue that the break with heterosexuality was at the same time a temporal break, from now on her time was supposed to go backwards or downwards, but, in contrast to any (idealised) successful subject, certainly not forwards.

Moreover, the heteronormative and chrononormative expectation from Siret's mother was masked as concern and care for Siret's wellbeing. Such conditional care that actually seeks to reassert the forceful lineage of

heterosexual respectability indicates the negative aspects of care that I discuss in a later section of this chapter.

In other words, it seems that heteronormativity and chrononormativity are dependent on and reinforce each other in a circular fashion. I argue that when it is certain that a person deviates from heteronormative standards due to their sexuality, they are perceived to be incapable of reaching a normative future in other aspects of their life too.

In Siret's case, this realisation caused the circulation of negative affects both regarding her and her mother. But that was not always the case. Annabel's story shows that giving up heteronormative futurity could also provide a sense of closure and peace, as was suggested in Annabel's reflections about the time she introduced her partner Nikita to her mother. Nikita identified as queer and had a rather androgynous gender appearance, which made Annabel feel compelled to explain to her mother that Annabel was attracted to various genders. Annabel recounted her mother's reaction to meeting Nikita and hearing Annabel's explanation about her pansexuality in the following way:

And then she said to me, 'I always knew you were weird, now you are just completely weird' (*laughs). That to me was quite OK. OK in the sense that, maybe that she accepts completely me being queer. Not just that I am with this person, but that I am different and weird and think in a different way. And that does not mean that she would not listen to me or take my opinions seriously.

What prevailed in her reasoning above was a sense of closure – both with respect to Annabel's own account and her mother's. Annabel had always had the sense of being rendered deviant or queer, since she had failed to comply to the social norms and expectations of her mother. Now that her mother had met her partner, this image of queerness she had of her daughter was complete and even self-explanatory. Annabel's mother could dismiss her as "queer beyond repair", because there was no longer hope regarding her future "recovery" or any question about the extent to which she was queer. At the same time, this allowed Annabel to stop feeling the pressure of maybe complying with established norms in the future. The ambiguity was over, the straight potentiality and futurity had been cut, and embracing failure provided a sense of closure.

Therefore, depending on how invested a person is in maintaining an image of respectability and normality, "falling out of time" can be experienced either as a loss or a gain.

6.1.2 Resisting the norm of success

Although the participants spoke of heavy pressure to perform successfully, by being a (re)productive straight citizen and offspring, not everyone yielded to that pressure. In the study's material, I have identified two main strategies of resisting the pressure to perform. I shall now discuss each in turn.

The first strategy was about distancing oneself from the normative frame of success widespread in society. It was a subtle way of negotiating the pressures from one's surroundings, since it stopped short of being confrontational in its approach. This strategy was more about living an alternative life despite the pressures to adhere to a normative lifestyle.

For example, Keiu was highly aware that her life choices did not fit with the widespread fantasy of the good life shared by her family of origin. In fact, when compared to the expectations of her family of origin, she failed on several accounts. She reflected in the following way:

My father and my stepmother, for them it is very important to be ambitious and that your profession would be prestigious. And in some sense, they have this *nouveu-riche* approach, that you need to earn a lot of money and then show it.

Keiu's wish to live on the countryside and work in the educational sector was a far cry from the parental dream of material success and prestige. But she insisted on leading that life, thus rebelling against the constraints her parents had put on her by expecting her to follow societal norms. In contrast to her parents, who she found to be governed by the neoliberal drive for capital, she did not mind being a failure.

On the other hand, she was also somewhat conflicted about openly advocating for queerness and resorted to practices of opacity regarding her love life. The last partner, that Keiu had introduced to her family of origin around six years ago, was a male partner. To her horror, her partner struck up a good rapport with her father, from whom Keiu preferred to distance herself. She started to fear that she would end up leading the life that her parents approved of and expected from her. She became very uncomfortable with fitting in the heteronormative expectations of her family of origin and so chose to end the relationship and continue explorations with her sexuality and relationship styles.

However, Keiu has neither mentioned her female partners, pansexual identity nor her non-monogamous lifestyle to her family. Nor has she introduced any other partners in the past six years. Because she has not

shared any such details with her parents, her father became worried about her being single, as Keiu recollected in the following quote:

He likes being normal and he wants everyone else to be normal. And living alone is not normal for him. I think it has to do with prestige too, that if nobody has chosen you, what are you worth?

Examples such as these suggested that among queers in Estonia, chrononormativity dictated the progression of one's life, according to which one part of being a successful adult is having a partner. Both being desired by someone and living a coupled life were clear markers of success. Once again, the expressed care and concern from Keiu's family of origin about her single status was a hidden attempt at keeping her on, so to say, the straight and narrow line. There is always an expectation to reproduce the "lines" that we are given, as Ahmed (2006) argues. She describes heterosexuality as something that is passed on as a socially binding inheritance, always including the expectation to repay that gift, or lose the love and affection from one's family (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 85-86). Familial love is conditional, as can be seen from Keiu's father's concern for Keiu's assumedly single status. He held a clear expectation for Keiu to continue in his own footsteps of living a heteronormative life – to settle down in a couple relationship with a member of the "opposite" sex.

Keiu's strategy of engaging with heteronormative and chrononormative pressures was thus rather ambivalent. First of all, she clearly resisted certain norms openly (such as living in the capital, being wealthy, having a romantic partner), yet some other norms (such as monogamy, heterosexuality) she preferred to condemn only in the presence of her close ones. Finally, she remained opaque about her investment in pansexuality and polyamory around her family of origin.

The second strategy of resistance emerging from the material was somewhat different though not in contradiction to the first one. Since the first strategy was about distancing from any normative definition of success, the second strategy extended even further. The additional twist of the second strategy was actively redefining success and thus offering a clear and outspoken alternative to heteronormative and chrononormative expectations.

One example of a person carrying out such a strategy was Ellis, who was very politically outspoken. In relation to her family of origin, Ellis called herself "problematic". When speaking about this, she displayed a dry awareness of not fitting in. Having been a bad student at school, and not having a steady work contract (since she was freelancing), she realised that she did not

meet the societal standards of success or the expectations from her family of origin. While she was aware of the pressures to perform in normative ways, she refused to attribute value to heteronormative standards and instead tried to reclaim success in her own way. She stated the following:

I would say I am successful in my own sense but not in the societal sense. I do not buy summer houses like some of my lesbian friends. I don't do such things and maybe my mom would expect me to.

I interpret the reference to buying summer houses to be especially relevant; it shows how she consciously distances from capital accumulation she attributed to some other lesbians. Not only would it have gone against her political values that questioned inequality and consumerist culture, but she felt that participating in the pressure to perform would restrain her freedom. She said she valued the relative freedom that freelancing entailed, even though she was aware that the freedom was partly imaginary. Sometimes overburdened with work and not able to share her workload, she was at the same time overjoyed at not having to be a part of a hierarchical working collective. It could be said that Ellis was trying to live a life of resistance against chrononormativity and thus carve out an alternative temporality, a queer one, such as Halberstam (2005) envisioned. However, refusing to value normative standards of success came at the cost of becoming vulnerable in a society where not only respectability, but also security and safety, are provided to those who invest in longevity. Something that a steady job is said to make possible.

Nevertheless, while deemed a failure by others, there were thus ways in which some participants reclaimed the purported failure, reclaiming it as a critique of neoliberal pressures to perform, to be productive, and to own.

6.1.3 Embracing cruel optimism

In the previous sections I discussed ways of resisting the chrono- and heteronormative ideas of success and failure, but not all participants engaged in or subscribed to those practices. Instead, several were deeply invested in the societally accepted norms of aspiring towards both financial success and reproduction. Affirming their proximity to norms was simultaneously a way of rejecting the societal mark of difference that came along with being queer.

One example of how some queers placed high value in embracing norms was the relationship between Barbara and Sandra, a couple who lived together in a smaller town a few hundred kilometres from Tallinn. They had recently become parents to a little baby and were planning to have more

children together. Unlike some other participants discussed above, they were adamant on stating their similarity to the general heterosexual public:

Barbara: But in principle we do not differ from anybody. At least I myself feel that we don't differ from any average family in Estonia. We are highly educated, earning our own salary, bringing bread to the table, plus raising a child, even though the Estonian state cannot really accept that very well yet. I do not find myself to be better or worse than my neighbour. Even though they might think so. And probably that is why also our parents find it easier to accept. Because they see that we can make it on our own. We have our own home, own car, own family. We can buy food and pay the bills. That we don't have to go borrow [money].

Barbara's partner Sandra: ... that we are normal people. If you think about it how media covers homosexuals (*sic) ... There is a constant *baila*.⁷⁷ A rainbow is up in the air all the time, and there is a parade all the time.

I argue that there are two central threads in their reasoning – one focussing on their own social and financial standing and the other one critiquing media representations of queers. Both of those threads are used to validate their own normality, both in relation to the imaginary of the (heterosexual) “good life” but also in opposition to the equally imaginary life of the highly visible and festive queer.

While they distanced themselves from queer notions, they simultaneously contributed to the establishment of hierarchies between “good gays” and “bad queers” (see Butler, 2002). Through constructing their own normality, i.e. being productive members of society with an education, career and financial success, they fully subscribed to and justified the pull of chrononormativity. At the same time, they participated in stigmatising queers (however imaginary) who refused to have respectability and productivity as their guiding principles.

At first glance, it might be tempting to look at their practices through the lens of homonormativity. Homonormativity, as defined by queer scholar Lisa Duggan (2003) is a type of politics that is invested in heteronormative standards and institutions instead of seeking to challenge them, and are intermeshed with domestic privacy and consumption. Homonormativity being the (often white male) gay version of heteronormativity, is thus bound up with chrononormativity, since its horizon of expectation mirrors

⁷⁷ Barbara used the word *baila*, which in Spanish means dance, but in Estonian slang translates into a big party or festivity.

the very same sequence of life events as heteronormativity. Nevertheless, I argue that in the context of the Estonian state and society – which in the worst case is viciously homophobic and in the best of cases routinely heteronormative – it makes no sense to talk about homonormativity as a fitting analytical concept.

More than a superficial glance is necessary to discover contradictions that would otherwise go unnoticed. Barbara and Sandra made an effort to aspire towards normativity, but those attempts were not always met with recognition or acceptance. For example, although Barbara and Sandra distanced themselves from activism, which focused on a particular kind of visibility (e.g. Prides), they nonetheless invested in an alternative kind of visibility through “showing that we are normal”, in their words. Constant consciousness raising through going to parental meetings in school, greeting the neighbours loud and proud, even after those neighbours had stopped saying hello to them – those were the everyday practices that Barbara and Sandra found suitable and effective in their circumstances. This shows that even though they claimed not to be different from any heterosexual couples, they felt the need to counter ongoing stigmatisation. Aspiring towards normativity was like fighting an uphill battle, with a litany of failures and struggles on the way.

Barbara’s and Sandra’s way of dealing with the situation could be read as their investment in what Lauren Berlant has called cruel optimism, that is, the condition of being attached to something that one believes will bring happiness, while this very object of desire is in fact what makes one’s happiness impossible (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). In valuing and desiring normality, respectability and financial success, Barbara and Sandra believed they had found a way to crack the code of success and belonging. For example, Barbara had a theory that their parents had been more eager to accept them because they were recognised as financially successful. This meant that they succumbed to the socially valued conditions of acceptance. Their way of making sense of their position was understandable in the setting where financial success was highly valued and desired by many, but also where its opposite meant struggling for survival. They found themselves validated in their life choices, even though this did not eliminate the fact that their conditional success was part of the neoliberal and heteronormative machinery that deemed queers to be failures.

6.2 Temporal facets of everyday care

As argued before, a chrono-and heteronormative understanding of time expects a linear sequence of milestones in one's life-course, which is geared towards progress, unity and longevity (Freeman, 2007; Halberstam, 2005, 2011). In a similar vein, the heteronormative image of care involves an expectation towards a rather stable and constant way of relating between a rather static group of people, however unrealistic that standard may be for anybody involved. But care is in fact something that fluctuates in intensity and kind, depending on the changing needs and levels of vulnerability. Moreover, as Rodriguez (2014, p. 53) reminds us, the ongoing re-negotiation of care relationships also leads to redefining ways of belonging. The real-life messiness of kinship and care arrangements do not fit with expectations towards linear temporality, whether for queers or others.

For example, relationships that have grown to be very care-intensive, may need to be renegotiated. Commitment to care can simply become too exhausting over time, as was the case in Ellis's and Alex's relationship. Ellis identified strongly as a lesbian and was in a long-term relationship with her partner Alex, who afterwards came out as a trans*man. They had, at the time of the interview, lived together in an exclusive relationship, but recently decided to open their relationship to non-monogamy and move into separate apartments. When I asked her whether the physical separation of living spaces and turning towards polyamory were consequences of each other, she shrugged and brushed the question off as irrelevant by saying that she took the decisions simultaneously. Instead, she foregrounded the experience of having been exhausted with care-work for Alex, who struggled with frequent depression. Ellis herself had recovered from a depressive episode of her own and felt the need to renegotiate the terms of their relationship in order to manage her own mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.

Ellis: I just feel like I cannot do this care work⁷⁸ as much everyday

Raili: What kind? What did it look like?

Ellis: Well, yes, it is not a nice thing to say out loud. That I don't have the energy to take care of my partner. But this kind of self-... I see him as intelligent and sensitive and smart and he perceives himself in the complete opposite way very often. And this causes such deep depression and those waves for which I put all of my things aside on daily basis and

⁷⁸ Ellis herself used the term "care work", which is another example of participants also making use of terms found in academic discourse.

deal with it, that he would feel better. And now I see that it is a place where he could practice independence. And also to strive towards others. Reach out his hand towards others a little bit. [...] For example, sometimes I have deadlines. I have such deadlines that if I don't meet them, I will be fined. And then I just... I haven't been fined directly but then I'm just staying up all night again. Comforting him or we do something together or...

Mundane everyday care work and heavy sacrifices can take a toll on both persons involved as well as their relationship. This could be seen from Ellis's and Alex's example. My research shows that being vulnerable and dependent on each other can bring people closer together but the care work that such interdependency may involve, can also become overwhelming. It is therefore relevant to remember that both negative and positive affects shape the ways one engages in and feels about doing care work. Depending on the situation, care can be emotionally, mentally, bodily exhausting (or all of them combined) and thus become a halting point for the relationship or even a point of no return, as I will show in the following examples.

The context of precarity in which many of the informants found themselves, intensified the burden of care, since available resources were exploited on various fronts. Ellis was a freelancer in the cultural sector and her survival depended on meeting deadlines for the project work she received. The obligation that she felt towards her partner Alex, to care for him at frequent yet irregular intervals, clashed with the expectations to deliver her project results to her employers. The flexible time-management of project work was difficult to combine with the urgency of Alex's depressive episodes. At such periods, all of Ellis's other tasks became less of a priority when compared with providing care for her partner. Responding to Alex's care needs took much of Ellis's time and energy, thereby contributing to a worsening of her own mental health. In the long run, Alex's irregular but constant care needs became irreconcilable with Ellis's own professional life, and both their relationship as well as living arrangements needed to be renegotiated.

Admitting that caring for a partner was beyond her own capacities was not without a sense of guilt and shame. Ellis saying "Well, yes, it is not a nice thing to say out loud. That I don't have the energy to take care of my partner", can be interpreted, I think, as a reaction to the cultural norm of having the partnership as the central locus of care. Ellis struggled somewhat with speaking about her own misgivings about the care relationship and seemed to find relief in emphasising the political importance of sharing the burden of care. Indeed, the prevalent norm for romantic couples does not

only involve cohabitation and monogamy but also committing oneself fully to the care of “the other half” (and common children), which is something that Ellis wanted to resist. Finding a way to exist further from that norm was for her also connected to political convictions. Ellis had thus for a long while wished to break out from the couple norm not only in terms of opening up for other people for fulfilling her sexual and romantic needs but also sharing the care responsibilities with other people.

Shifting responsibility from Ellis as the live-in romantic partner to both Alex himself as well as other people in their circle, was a way of both acting on her feminist queer politics as well as renegotiating a relationship that was overwhelming. To some extent she freed up her own time by taking a lesser part in caring for her partner, as well as literally freeing up space by moving into separate apartments. Ellis managed to lessen the gravitational pull in which the very urgent temporality of care manifested itself.

It can be argued that Ellis was privileged enough to be able to manage that – they could afford living in separate apartments and that her flexible working schedule allowed for caring for her partner. But this was a rather relative privilege. After all, it was this very same flexible working arrangement that caused her to be seemingly available for her partner any time the need arose. Moreover, freelancing as a cultural sector worker was hardly a very lucrative business opportunity. Such were the paradoxes of precarity, forming the context in which queers in Estonia tried to negotiate relations with their close ones and engage in caretaking practices.

6.2.1 Emergency as everyday

Further temporal aspects of care that emerged from my research were that of continuity and urgency. It could be seen that while regular care work was what everybody was involved in daily, an urgent care situation rewrote entire understandings of what was sufficient care or what a regular day could look like. What is considered a normal or exceptional state could become radically redefined by certain extreme situations, as will be evident in the next story.

During a very difficult period, Annabel suffered from frequent panic attacks and resorted to high levels of self-harm, bordering on suicide attempts. Her live-in partner Nikita, who was also her main source of care, experienced this period as extremely emotionally demanding. Moreover, since the crisis was not just a one-off event but turned into a prolonged period defining their shared reality, the possibility of an “emergency” became an everyday routine. The everydayness of emergency at the same

time skewed the “regular” temporality of acute care. Acute care is usually expected to be finite, either solved with an intervention or something that recurs cyclically. When the acute situation became a constant, Nikita lost track of time completely and even needed to remind themselves of the actual exceptionality of the situation:

With Annabel it was an emergency, exceptional state so often... That you had to redefine emergency. Because some of the things that have happened to Annabel. If I imagined something like that happening to me, Julia would be here within two days. The thing is that for Annabel it is not so exceptional, so you need to redefine it. But that’s a problem. Because it is still a problem.

What I could see in the material was that not only did the boundaries between what constituted an emergency or normality shift along the temporal axis but also, in that time of emergency, the very standards for what was considered a good (enough) life were altered. Priorities became redefined in ways that they never had before; all the different care needs that could otherwise be present boiled down to one and only one overarching goal: keeping the other person alive. Nikita’s own needs for care surrounding their own depression were de-prioritised due to the urgency, just as Ellis’s need to work was side-lined when taking care of Alex during his depression. Also, Annabel’s other possible needs could not be taken into consideration when much time and effort was dedicated to keeping her from committing suicide. Nikita described in the following way:

In a crisis where she would stay home, I would stay home to support her while I actually needed support then. After one of her suicidal crises... Of course, she needed support. It just terrifies me, and I just go into survival mode. The only thing that matters is to keep you alive. I even care less about the quality. Ok, you have a bad day? OK. (*Laughs)

The question for Nikita was no longer, “What is a good life and how to achieve it?” but the only issue that remained important was how to keep that life going at all. The burden of care lied heavy on them as the main carer, and their life became structured around the care of the person who was in need. Daily decisions about how or where to spend their time are for most people bound up with other people. But in times of everyday crisis, like that of taking care of Annabel, care needs took priority over everything and even determined the possibility of spending time separately. Nikita recalled:

You wake up with someone who is suicidal you have to decide if you go to university or not. If you go to meet with a friend you find an SMS and OK, is she bad or not, is she going kill herself, should I call the hospital, should I stay out for another drink...". (*voice breaks and they start to cry)

The burden of responsibility was immense in this situation, as is evident in the quote above. Even though it became somewhat of a daily routine for Nikita, in order to manage the stress, it nevertheless permeated the whole life situation, creating a temporality of urgency which de-prioritised all other matters in life – quality of life, the carer's own needs, etc.

It was clear from Nikita's desperation that a life where emergency was an everyday reality did not seem sustainable to them. It was emotionally demanding and exhausting to the utmost degree, since the care need became an uninterrupted process. If the rhythm of care had been more versatile, with highs and lows and/or with a swapping of roles, the burden of care would have been more manageable. If care and support was needed in irregular bursts, Nikita could imagine providing it for Annabel long into the future. It was the exhausting status of the constant emergency that tested their bond, even if it did not break it completely. Nikita's care relationship with Annabel became renegotiated after their break-up. Nikita explained:

That unconditional support, she does not have it... And I know that it sucks because I have offered it and now I'm kind of taking it away. That's what she feels... Funny enough, now it is easier for me to offer that than before. Because it was getting very overwhelming. Now it is actually going to get easier and easier, also because it is not going to be an everyday thing but going to become more realistically an emergency thing. So if we still keep in contact in two years and Annabel has a breakup again and is horrible and says, 'Nikita, can you come for two weeks?' I want to be... I would actually ideally like to get into a situation where that's possible.

Such an intense fluctuation of emotions raised another matter of care and responsibility – that of my own involvement in the research process. It was my questions that triggered this emotional upheaval in Nikita, and even though we had discussed these matters many times before, often over a cup of tea curled up in a sofa, it was the interviewing situation that caused me to feel more responsible for de-escalating the situation. I had come to consider Nikita my friend, so at the moment they started to cry, I leaned over and hugged them, at a loss for what to say or do. Offering to stop the interview felt like a very insufficient response to the pain that they were obviously going through due to reminiscing on that difficult period of their life.

Without wanting to capitalise on their emotions, I strongly wish something productive to come out of that pain with the help of me reflecting on their story. I take consolation in Nikita's further reflections on their care relationship with Annabel:

But you know, one day she just was calling people, and nobody was picking up and she was very suicidal, and she called me. And the next day we were talking, and she said it that it was the last call... (5). I don't want to hear that. (*cries). Because how do I decide next time to pick up a call or not... and I don't want to feel... It is hard to feel pressure... And I know she does not say it to manipulate and she just sharing how she feels. And I know the only way... The horrible or good thing as well... [---]. That I also had to come to terms. There is no way to avoid it. It is going to happen. I cannot just... It does not depend on what I do. Even if it looks like it.

Care is a daily struggle and there are no guarantees on whether we will succeed. Care can indeed require absolute responsibility, but it is not the same as absolute control. The care that follows from ethnographical presence and sensibility is, of course, of a different nature. Put in the words of Schatz (2009, p. 5), “[i]t is an approach that cares – with the possible emotional engagement that implies – to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality”. Perhaps ethnography in itself can or should be considered a form of care work – a way of paying careful attention to people's vulnerable situations, treating them with respect and helping to process the situations not so much individually but communally through the act of writing.

6.2.2 Daily social reproduction

It is important to remember that relying on others for everyday sustenance is usually not a unidirectional phenomenon. As Freeman (2007) reminds us, we are all located within various networks of care and kinship, which are necessary for our survival both in physical and emotional terms. While that fact in itself is potentially universal, individual needs and capabilities are never equal. Reproduction in terms of sustenance of everyday life requires effort from everybody, even if historically it has been disproportionately carried out by women.

Both Nikita and Annabel had very fluctuating levels of mental health. However, as discussed above, Annabel's own frailty was not only constant but also at times extremely acute. The care that Nikita would have wished to

receive was relegated, given that the state of emergency would require their full and undivided attention on Annabel's survival.

But taking care of each other also involves social reproduction in terms of sustaining everyday life. While it is a bone of contention for most people living together, negotiating household work becomes an even greater struggle once bound up with care work. Nikita reflected on their experience of caring for both Annabel and their home:

It is so funny because we would have arguments or conflicts about very small things. Doing the dishes or things like that. But actually, things for me were important because I felt that it was also about... I don't know how she sees it, but I was basically taking care of the house on my own. Not that she didn't do things. But this kind of female – 'I'm doing it and you are helping according to your capabilities....' Which is true she was bad. But there would never for sure be food when I come home. She would cook once a month. And of course, I didn't want her to feel the pressure that she has to. And she had said, 'and now it is going to be so much easier than in [the previous living arrangement where the kitchen was not inside the living space]. But it never happened. And it is not bad, but I guess, I was trying to be for very long time, still actually, not to be unfair. Of course, I'm not ableist. Or this is this how it should be! But it is true that it is very far from my idea...

In this rather lengthy quote, Nikita's internal conflict was excruciating and their desperation about the contradictory feelings was almost physical when we had the talk on their living room sofa. On the one hand, they were trying to be understanding of the limitations that Annabel's mental health posed. On the other hand, they felt rather frustrated about carrying out most of the household burden on their own. Identifying strongly as a feminist made them also wary of the different levels of effort they put in reproduction work.

Nikita felt that they were falling into the trap of being the main homemaker, a role commonly associated with women in heterosexual relationships. One of the longstanding points of feminist critique of heterosexual arrangements is that women take on an unequal share of the house and care work (Berk, 1985; Hochschild, 1989). This is certainly the case in Estonia, where surveys continuously show that divisions in roles and household chores follow "traditional" (i.e. heteronormative and patriarchal) patterns,⁷⁹

⁷⁹ The most recent 2016 monitoring report however shows that, apart from the so-called breadwinner role, men are becoming more active in such chores like cleaning and gardening, as well as becoming more active in childcare (Sotsiaalministeerium, 2016b, pp. 118-119).

as reported in the Gender Equality Monitoring report from 2016. However, these surveys only measure heterosexual households, so it is impossible to know anything about the division of labour within queer constellations.

As a non-binary person living together with a cis-woman, Nikita did not fit into the heteronormative model described above. However, there are also silent norms and expectations about non-heterosexual relationships. One such cultural expectation is that gender equality within queer arrangements should emerge by default, since partners are imagined to be similar and same (already referred to in the term “same-sex relationship”) (see e.g. Dahl, 2017). But this expectation of sameness completely ignores the actual variety of embodiments within queer relationships. Nikita and Annabel could certainly not be said to have cultivated gendered sameness, as Nikita had an androgynous gender presentation with masculine traits in their appearance, while Annabel appeared more feminine in fashion and style. But while their gendered embodiments differed, the expectation of equality in household chores emanated more from their feminist consciousness than from any imagined sameness in gender.

However, the dream of an “equal” relationship could not be achieved for a different reason – namely their differential levels of crip⁸⁰ embodiment. In their case, gender and disability intersected in the negotiation of care (with respect to both the household and each other). Therefore, crip embodiment complicated the division of labour. I will examine this matter in further detail in the following section.

6.2.3 Crip, queer and straight temporalities

The unmet expectations about common care of the home caused disappointment and emotional distance in the relationship of Annabel and Nikita. As was discussed in Chapter Four, common plans for the future often served as a potential binding agent for close ones. My research shows that also the inverse was true. Therefore, any failure of such plans weighed heavily on the existing bond and levels of closeness. This was the case for Nikita, who felt increasing levels of disappointment, the more their common plans and dreams failed to materialise due to Annabel’s health condition. Nikita shared their painful memories in the following quote:

⁸⁰ Crip, as short for cripple, is a reclaimed term by people with disabilities (physical, mental, cognitive). Crip (theory) functions as a way of dismantling binaries and demonstrating the norm of ability (McRuer, 2006).

I was also depressed. But still, when I was depressed, the rate of activities that I wanted to do – they were not nothing. I would like to do things at home and travel... I proposed to her in April 2016 to design a tattoo for me. An armsleeve. About feelings actually. Because I like the abstract stuff she does. But she never found the time. Or she has never said, 'OK now I will do it'. This is wallpaper that you can paint on (*points to a section on the wall). The idea was that she would paint that wall. Never happened. We bought that (*points to a decoration), you see in the corner, to put there on in the ceiling. I disagreed and said it is not necessary. She said, 'Yeah-yeah-yeah!' (*makes an enthusiastic voice). I said, 'OK, but you put it'. It is there. And I know... It is very sad because of course it makes her really sad not to be able to carry these things out.

In this example, unmet expectations or dreams emerged as almost material in their very absence. Parts of the apartment or one's own body could carry that weight of neglect and thus function as constant physical reminders of the experienced lack. Moreover, those artefacts were also reminders of a different futurity, a temporality wrapped up in crip time.

Crip time refers to a specific temporality through which people with disabilities navigate their lives (Kafer, 2013). It goes beyond the normative timeline that is guided by the capitalist values of efficiency, productivity and linearity. People with non-normative embodiments might take longer time for carrying out certain activities or for arriving somewhere, often due to ableist barriers in infrastructure (Kafer, 2013, p. 26). But as Kafer reminds us, crip time is not just about accommodating difference, but it questions the whole normative timeframe that everybody is expected to operate in. "Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires re-imagining our notions of what can and should happen in time or recognising how expectations of "how long things take" are based on very particular minds and bodies" (Kafer, 2013, p. 27).

Moreover, crip time does not hold the promise of a better future and is thus in stark contrast with normative ideas about disability that Kafer calls "curative time". Curative time invests in futurity, wherein the current moment of ability variation is seen as temporary and something that needs to be improved upon. The future holds a promise of a cure, intervention and improvement, anything beyond that cannot be imagined or comprehended (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). This is very much a developmental and progressive understanding of time, somewhat parallel with Halberstam's (2011) critique of the prevailing normative understanding of time. However, as will become obvious from further analysis, participants struggled deeply with tensions between crip and curative time.

Here, I will propose that Nikita's and Annabel's relationship was affected by the entanglement of queer, crip and curative time. As a queer couple, they were not directly bound by linear reproductive imaginaries of straight time/chrononormativity, but while the reproductive futurity was disrupted by their queerness, their relationship was simultaneously built on promises of future improvement governed by curative time. There was the hope of Annabel taking a greater share of everyday reproduction (such as cooking and cleaning), or her participation in a common future by decorating their joint home, for instance. At the same time, there was always already an awareness of and space for different ways of being in their relationship. Not only had they been open with each other about their mental health constraints, they were also both very vocal about it in semi-public settings. When meeting Annabel for the first time at a queer community event, she named some of her diagnoses already in the very first minutes of talking to her.⁸¹ Without necessarily using the term "crip" herself, Annabel was open with her crip embodiment and made sure that people around her knew her triggers and limits.

But knowledge of someone struggling is not the same as the reality of living side by side with somebody who needs much care and support. Looking at me with a mixture of sadness and desperation, Nikita continued their reflection on their life with Annabel:

She had just had too many things that she liked but she could not do.
But that for me was a lot of sense of unpredictability that I don't like.
And saying all these things you cannot manage, are you lying or just you

⁸¹ It must be said that such openness about one's mental health troubles is rare in the context of Estonia, where mental health is rather silenced matter, despite it being a widespread problem. According to the 2016 study "Awareness, stances and attitudes on mental health" commissioned by the Ministry of Social affairs (Sotsiaalministeerium, 2016a), every fourth adult and every fifth child in Estonia reports having problems with mental health. Even though the rate of suicides has steadily decreased during state independence, the suicide rate is still 1.5 times higher than the EU average (Rooväli et al., 2018). But despite the breadth of the problem, speaking of mental health issues remains a taboo that dates back to Soviet times. In the report commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs, 62% of people reported that they would not want others to know about their mental health problems (Sotsiaalministeerium, 2016a). There is much fear and misinformation, since 35% of Estonian population agreed with the statement that a lack of self-discipline and willpower was among the main reasons for developing mental health problems, while another 21% believed that people with mental health issues were dangerous (Sotsiaalministeerium, 2016a). There is thus a dangerous combination of individualist self-blame and Soviet time taboos that inhibit discourses about mental health.

don't know how to assess it? Plus, it is true, I'm very used to high efficacy. I'm very productive. I come with a lot of things when I'm OK. Even when I'm not OK. It is just this thing of all the plans and the wall and the tattoo and the language and all these things and you are not doing none of it. And I know it is not because you are lazy. I know it is not but still... I would not let myself have the right to be disappointed or angry at these things. Because I would find this unfair. At the same time... (*sighs)

Since they were periodically stricken by depressive episodes, Nikita had also experienced crip time. They were highly reflexive of the differences in pace and capabilities that people could have. But at the same time Nikita's life routine was not as highly affected by their mental health as Annabel's; from the outside, they remained rather active in queer community life, even during their lowest ebbs. In conversation with me they struggled to accommodate the cognitive dissonance between realising Annabel's constraints and dreaming of an active life. There was a sense of shame when they admitted that they could not cope with the pace of life that living with Annabel provided.

As Ahmed (2014) has argued, shame is a powerful affect that makes us question our own subjectivity. Shame binds us to other people, insofar as we aim to live up to the social norms that apply to certain communities. "Through love, an ideal self is produced as a self that belongs to a community; the ideal is a proximate 'we'. If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate 'an ideal' that has been given to us through the practices of love.*"⁸² What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love." (Ahmed, 2014, p. 106).

In the background of Nikita's narrative was a constant sense of shame for failing to fully adapt to Annabel's needs, and guilt for not being a "good enough" partner. They felt as if they had failed Annabel due to not being patient and adaptable "enough" (despite trying their best). Moreover, they had the sense of not only having failed as a person and as a lover but as someone highly informed by feminism and crip activism. They knew all too well that the normative pace of life was tailored according to ableist and sexist norms. They realised that crip temporality involved an accommodation of Annabel's needs and they were willing to (and did) compromise to a certain extent. But fully succumbing to Annabel's particular crip time did not match with their own preferred way of life (or fantasies of "the good

⁸² Emphasis in the original.

life”) and that in itself made them experience a sense of shame. All in all, they started to question their own subjectivity, sensing that they did not fully live up to the ideal self they had created of themselves in their mind.

However, they also tried to negotiate those feelings of shame and guilt in order to find a way out of the feeling of failure, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

And I don't know, maybe if it had been clearer for me what can be... I never have felt completely shitty... But now I think I need those things, I like those things. A different pace of doing things. If I cannot have that, it does not mean we cannot fit together. It means... It makes very clear for me I need other people in my life. Then again – someone is depressed. I cannot follow your pace, then you just go other people to... Yes and no...

Nikita thus made peace with themselves with the help of renewed self-knowledge. They came to a greater awareness and acceptance of their own needs, which helped them to partly balance the shame they felt for what they felt as a failure to care for Annabel in a sufficient way. Once again it helps to turn to Ahmed to make sense of Nikita's plight. Ahmed writes, “[s]hame may be restorative only when the shamed other can ‘show’ that its failure to measure up to a social ideal is temporary” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 107). This means that once a reasonable explanation or a self-justification can be found, the emotional distress that feelings of shame entails, can be relieved. That also helps to return from the temporary state of not being worthy of belonging to the community (by failing to live up to what is defined as good in that community).

Both in feeling shame and when finding a way out of the shame, Nikita was bound to the imaginary community of others, and not least to Annabel. The contradictory affects that were at work in Nikita's negotiation related not only to the question of how best to care for somebody but also were motivated about ideas and ideals regarding what love and relationships should be about.

However, Nikita was still somewhat hesitant to fully admit that they needed other people in their life in order to fulfil their needs and to achieve their preferred pace of life. This shows that while Annabel and Nikita were an openly non-monogamous couple, chrononormativity and straight time shaped their understanding of fulfilling care needs. Halberstam (2005) has argued that the linear logic of straight time includes achieving the middle-class ideal of respectability through permanence and duration. Compulsory monogamy is an important component in performing this respectability;

settling down with a partner is a sign of maturity according to heteronormative standards (Carlström & Andersson, 2019). The culturally sanctioned fantasies of the good (heteronormative) life do not leave queers untouched but are powerful enough to affect everybody.

While Annabel and Nikita lived in an open relationship, they mainly resorted to each other when they needed help and support. This was further strengthened by the fact that they lived together in one apartment. They tried to debunk the myth that couple ought to be a self-sufficient unit, by admitting the need for other people to satisfy different needs, be it sexual or social. But I argue that when it came to organising care, the two-person couple operated as a strong norm out of which it was difficult to break free without guilt and shame. Despite their attempts to break with the norm, in practice they lived as a dyad – a carer and one being cared for. Violating the norm of needing to take care of your partner made Nikita feel as insufficient and irresponsible, which showed that queer temporalities can be brought in line or straightened when they intersect with crip temporalities and with the rhythms of care.

To conclude this section, I have shown above that various temporalities are involved in the organisation of everyday reproduction, and that not only norms (or the wish to break with them) but also concrete needs, pull us in various (and sometimes opposing) directions.

6.3 The negative aspects of care

My research suggests that negotiating the balance between the rhythm of appropriate care and perceived neglect is highly complex. There was no specific rule that could be applied when care was experienced to either suffice or fail, the outcome depends on mutual expectations and on the affects that motivate the care. What the person in need expects and what kind of affects they connected with those expectations did often not match with what the person who could provide care considered as the necessary thing to do. As a result, when it came to care practices, multiple failures were more of a given than an exception.

In the final section of this chapter I therefore discuss the multiple troubles and mismatches that occurred when care practices took place. While a substantial part of the chapter has discussed temporal aspects of care, the next section starts out by discussing aspects of temporality, turning then to the institutional and emotional obligations that also shape care practices.

6.3.1 The failed timing and direction of care

Mismatching expectations about *what* constituted appropriate care were common in my interview material. At the same time, *when* and *how* acts of care should be introduced was an equally difficult and emotionally loaded question.

For example, there was the burning question about when someone's care need was acute enough that a close person should get involved. Apart from cultural differences and the quality of the relationship itself, those expectations were also gendered, insofar as women were expected to react faster to a person in need. Moreover, what was deemed to be an appropriate timing for care to occur was also shaped by expectations about family lineage. For example, when reflecting on one of the most recent, and toughest, periods of mental illness that Annabel had been going through, Nikita directed a part of their disappointment at Annabel's mother, whom they considered not engaged enough:

Nikita: Her mom, when is her mom coming to Tallinn? When is the situation emergency enough? Like when? (*Whispering. Voice breaking)

Raili: She told Annabel to come to [name of the hometown], right?

Nikita: What the fuck? She has been suicidal! She has been to a hospital, she has been cutting all her body. Her mom does not know but still... When? She has been through... like when?

It is possible here that Nikita's own very close and loving relationship with their family of origin affected their expectations towards Annabel's mother. Annabel, on the other hand, had explained that she had a complicated relationship with her mother, while assuring that it was not related to her pansexual identity. Interestingly, Annabel frequently contradicted herself when she reflected on her relationship to her mother. She said that during periods she had considered her mother among her close ones. At the same time, Annabel also noted that she could never fully get the kind of support from her she was hoping to receive.

According to Annabel, what to this day had hindered their relationship was that Annabel's mother had failed her in her childhood for ignoring the abuse to which she was subjected by a family member. As a child, Annabel was both hiding the truth, as well as the resulting acts of self-harm, because she tried to protect her mother from the reality. I interpret this as a double burden to carry: not being cared for appropriately and at the same time taking care of the very person who has been the cause of neglect. Annabel said:

My first scars that she saw or when I was anorectic, she actually turned a blind eye... In front of the abuse as well. She turned a blind eye. And for years I was just silent. I was hiding everything from her, because I partly felt that she would not cope with it herself. That she is not mentally strong enough to cope with the knowledge of what has happened to me.

For years she lived with intense shame and bottled up negative emotions she planned to bring with her to the grave. Her mother first found out about Annabel's suffering when she ended up in a mental hospital for being suicidal in her young adulthood. However, after the first shock had passed, her mother took on the role of the victim, blaming herself and also taking Annabel's coping mechanisms (such as cutting her body) personally. When Annabel tried to share some of her difficulties the conversation would quickly turn towards her mother, who would blame herself and recount her own hardships. By forcing Annabel to take on the role of the listener and consoler, she kept on failing to give Annabel support, receiving care instead from Annabel.

Despite being used to such turns, Annabel was still annoyed and disappointed with this relationship pattern. The expectation and norm that a mother was someone who should be there to take on the caring role made itself heard at the precise moment when such a norm was *not* fulfilled. With kinship norms come expectations for a certain directionality or lineage of care, especially in parental relationships. Annabel's case was the inverse; she had taken most of the care responsibility in their relationship, and had tried to protect and help her mother, despite her own precarious situation.

Somewhat similar stories of reversing the lineage of care came up also among other participants, who reflected on their experience of growing up with parents who suffered from substance abuse and/or mental health problems.

For example, now a young adult herself, Keiu's childhood was marked by anxiety and stress after her parents divorced and her mother fell into severe depression. Keiu lived with her mother, but her mother could not manage to cook, clean, nor could she take care of either herself or Keiu. The roles of responsibility and care were inverted. Keiu reflected that "she was like a child at times. It was me who had to get her up from bed in the mornings". Being nothing but a child herself, Keiu was forced to take on the role of a carer for her adult mother. Keiu's wellbeing was very much dependent on whether she could get her mother to keep her jobs. "I realised that my welfare depended on her income, so I tried to get her on her feet. But I didn't succeed very well". Keiu remembered that when she eventually

moved to her grandparents, who took over the responsibility of raising her, the main emotion was relief that she would be taken care of instead of needing to bear the burden of anxiety on her meagre shoulders.

However, sometimes the patterns that are set in childhood remain set, even when a child have turned into an adult. Having reached middle age herself, Triin reflected on the emotional work it took in order to manage a childhood filled with complications that emerged from her father's alcohol addiction.

Maybe it was Tommy Elström⁸³ who has developed that theory. It goes like this – one parent is dominant, the alcoholic. And the other parent will take on the role of the victim. [...] And then at some point it is so that the children get in between those two and start protecting that victim. And this is how she is still, she has lived her life like that.

Notably, not only did Triin carefully reflect on her and her brother taking over the parental roles, but she used academic discourse for making sense of it. She was well versed in psychological theories, since she used them in her work when giving workshops all over the country. However, she had more or less severed her ties with her mother, owing to the fact that the pattern of reversed lineage of care, which was familiar from her childhood, was now even more intolerable to her in adulthood. She remarked bitterly:

As soon as her children appear, me and my brother, she is incapable. She cannot manage anything. It is better if I just keep away. She manages better in life if I am not there. Because otherwise she will take the role of 'come and help and save me'.

What is common to Annabel's, Keiu's and Triin's stories is the early lesson they all learned: members of the family of origin may not at all be the ones to trust, rely on and receive support from, but rather the contrary. Already in their young age, queers from fragile families took on the responsibility of negotiating the tense relationships between their parents and finding a way in the insecure life of abuse and addiction. In that case the normative lineage of care was reversed – it was not the adult taking care of the child but the child taking care of the adult. Rather than positively queering tem-

⁸³ It is unclear if that was the name to which she was referring, since it was difficult to hear from the recording.

porality and providing an alternative way of life, it often caused much hurt and trauma, which the children would then carry into their own adult lives.

Moreover, the expectation that one's parents should take care of their offspring is further complicated for people in non-normative positions. The kinship bonds that are supposed to be activated according to the normative imagination of a good life, do not necessarily kick in at the moment of crisis, because many people have already been alienated from their families of origin or, at least, have kept minimal contact with them. On the level of the community, it is thus not just an expectation but arises analytically from accumulated experience – the family of origin may not always be the first one to help and support.

6.3.2 Beyond choice – control and dependency

Since family of origin can be a source of pain, rejection and violence, there have been scholarly efforts to look for feminist and queer alternatives to normative conceptions of family and kinship. Among them, Halberstam (2011) is known for proposing the rejecting or forgetting family as a form of social organisation. According to Halberstam, family is always reactionary; it refers to the transmission between generations and thus draws on a normative understanding of time organised by progress and succession. Potential difference in non-heterosexual lives would go missing if it were embraced in the form of social organisation that the family projects.

Instead, Halberstam (2011) proposes that “failure” to succeed according to the standards of the heteronormative social order could be redefined as a form of critique, a refusal to comply with the dominant logics of power. Halberstam thus proclaims: “We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition and usable pasts” (p. 70).

My research begs the question of whether at all, and if so for whom, such a radical break would be possible? First, forgetting the family might be feasible for only privileged queers. In her pioneering ethnography, Weston (1991, p. 110) herself pointed to a major flaw that her paradigm of family of choice contains within itself – namely that choice is a very individualist term. Queer critics have picked up on this ambivalence, and have accordingly argued that the notion of family of choice might be comfortably applicable to bourgeois lesbians and gays, who are privileged in terms of race, gender, class or national belonging and are thus able to exercise their

privilege in terms of choice (Freeman, 2007, p. 304). Queers who lack the appropriate resources in terms of money, networks and time are found to rely to a high degree on their birth relatives (Carrington, 1999; Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2017a). People are connected to their families of origin for various reasons, including that of dependency, scarcity of resources or being under their control, as was also evident in my material.

Living in the parental home and being financially and emotionally dependent on one's parents is one such situation of vulnerability, as has been also demonstrated in the recent research on queer youth in the UK (McDermott et al., 2019). Natasha, a lesbian, who at the time of the interview was in her early 20s, recounted how her first romantic relationship failed due to her parents' controlling behaviour. Natasha was 18 when she started dating a woman who lived independently from her own family of origin. Natasha kept their relationship secret from her parents because she was aware of their homophobic attitudes. However, even meeting in secret became too overwhelming, as Natasha's parents tended to control Natasha's every move. They demanded reports of her whereabouts, called her continually and became increasingly worried if Natasha was not at home by 10 pm. While trying to make it work in the beginning, Natasha's girlfriend found this type of parental care/control overbearing and the quarrels took its toll on their relationship. The final blow to the relationship was delivered when Natasha came out to her parents, who realised that Natasha had been sleeping over at her girlfriend's apartment. They were highly upset and threatened to confront Natasha's girlfriend and to ask her to keep away from their daughter. While it did not come to threatening Kaire, Natasha's parents directed their controlling efforts towards Natasha instead.

They told me to leave work and do everything that they tell me and not what I want to do. They wanted to control everything I do. That was the year I was supposed to enter university. They wanted me to study what they wanted, they wanted to keep me under control, but it didn't work.

Entering university became Natasha's way out of the endless apparatuses of control. She entered into a bigger social circle with more people close to her. "They cannot track everybody", she shrugged with a smile. Her parents were forced to give her more space, with the condition that they knew her location and contact information.

However, it is not only throughout the period of being a young adult and living in one's childhood home that one could be subjected to the control that comes along with being in the parental realm of care. According to the

individualist imaginary, adulthood is meant to be a period of being free from parental constraints or at least being able to negotiate their involvement. However, the possibility of removing themselves from emotionally and/or physically harmful relations with their family of origin may be rather restricted even for adults, as was evident in Svetlana's case.

Svetlana was in her mid-40s and had in many ways built up a network of care around her, not only in the sense that she was in a relationship with Nadja but, more precisely, in the way she carried out care work. On almost a daily basis, she shared responsibilities and support with another lesbian couple. They helped each other out with errands, took care of each other's children and were there for one another. However, both Svetlana and her partner Nadja each raised their respective children on the meagre salaries with which the educational sector provided, which meant that Svetlana needed the financial assistance that her parents could offer. Choosing to completely end her rather strained relationship with her parents was not an option for her, despite the fact that Svetlana's parents refused to acknowledge Nadja as Svetlana's partner and even dismissed Nadja's child. Financial support from Svetlana's parents came, however, with certain conditions. As she recalled:

You know with my mother and father it is the thing that they definitely think that they are supporting me. Because their support is material support. They help me to pay the apartment. (*sighs). And they have separation issues... All kinds of problems a la... Now they haven't done it for a while, as I also resisted. But it was that they used to come and for example replace the furniture. (*laughs). Or bring something here and hang it up somewhere. A new cupboard or whatever. 'We ordered a table for you!' (*laughs). Whatever... So they are convinced that they are supporting as hard as they can. This is their understanding of things. And my understanding is that it is actually me supporting them. Because they are telling me about their difficulties or successes. And I listen to them and help to find some solutions.

In short, in order to secure the wellbeing of her daughter, Svetlana relied partly on financial support from her parents. What Svetlana or her parents expected of kinship ties varied widely. While Svetlana's parents seemed to assume that financial support was enough in order to fulfil their parental role, the actual closeness that would be built through emotional care was lacking. One way or another, the ties that bound Svetlana to her parents were not by any means either unconditional or without harm. It is thus important to acknowledge that the widespread precarity in Estonia leaves many queers in

situations of partial or full dependence from families of origin and thus without an ability to freely opt to having them in their lives or not.

Nevertheless, Svetlana also had agency within her situation – she negotiated the terms and stood up for her integrity by refusing to let her parents make changes in her apartment without her consent. She even framed the situation of receiving financial help as a moment of mutual exchange; she considered the emotional support that she had offered in return to be of greater value than the money she received. But choosing to entirely opt out of the relationship was not feasible or, in fact, even considered, both in her and in many other cases.

6.3.3 Mandating care for kin

The expectation of caretaking through kinship lines is regulated not only through societal expectations but by legal predicaments in Estonia. Parents are supposed to take care of their (underage) children but equally children are responsible for their aging parents (and their grandparents). § 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia states that “the family is required to provide for its members who are in need”. As discussed in Chapter Three, family is defined through marriage, and marriage is a heterosexual union in Estonia. While some countries, like Sweden, have freed family members from the responsibility of providing for adults in the family, Estonia has not followed that example (Annus-Anijärv, 2014, p. 34). § 96 of The Family Law Act thus maintains that “adult ascendants and descendants related in the first and second degree are required to provide maintenance”. Regardless of the actual degree of emotional or physical closeness of the relationship, one is required to provide care for one’s parents.

One of the research participants, who was involved daily in taking care of her mother, was Anne. Anne was in her 50s and she had been caring for her mother for the past ten years after her mother’s heart failure. While Anne and her partner lived together in an apartment in a semi-sized town, Anne’s mother lived in the house next door. Both Anne and her partner were engaged in daily caretaking for Anne’s mother. Anne described her daily routine in the following way:

At 7 in the morning I call her and ask how she is, if she has managed to sleep, how much pain she has. What she reckons that her health is like, whether she can get coffee on her own. She cannot get out of bed very well every day. Some days she needs help, some days not. If not, we visit her right away; if she can, we go to work. Later, during the day I will call her and if necessary, will go shopping in the evening and will go to her

place. We will stay there a half an hour or an hour. Sometimes I need to come again in the evening, sometimes in the night.

As her daughter, the burden of care fell principally on her shoulders. They had a cleaner and a neighbour who picked up the newspaper, although the latter functioned more as a form of social contact than a direct measure of care. Anne claimed that the only institutional help that was available from the local community was the opportunity to officially register Anne as a caretaker, which according to her would have brought the financial support of only a few dozen EUR a month.⁸⁴ If the care needs of her mother would increase, Anne planned to personally hire a carer with her own financial means. During her travels she had arranged for some friends of hers to take care of her mother, but she claimed it was not such a feasible solution. "These friends are not very trustworthy, as they don't really perceive the need for care very well". Neither did Anne see a care home as an option, claiming resolutely that her mother would die there within a few days.

While needing to arrange care for elderly parents is a common problem, Anne's solution of paying for caring and household duties is not available to many other people with lesser means. Anne was not exceedingly wealthy, but could be considered culturally upper class, on point of fact that she worked in a high status (but medium pay) environment. Displaying class status seemed to be important also for her mother, as she explained:

As long as my mother is mentally alert, she is very picky about company. The political views of the person who fetches her newspaper for her don't suit her. Nothing to talk about, toenails are too red. Too tanned.

Anne certainly was privileged to some extent, because she was able to dismiss a care home as an alternative and had the means to pay for private care. But like many others, she was still responsible for the daily emotional and mental care of a family member, whether she liked it or not. For her it was a fact of life, just like any other, and one she did not seem to express much resentment over, at least not to an ethnographer whom she had met for only the first time.

In either way, the option of resorting to choice with regards to family of origin can sound more of an offense than a realistic way of making sense of bonds in the context of Estonia. In Estonia the institutional care oppor-

⁸⁴ The amount of caretaking allowance is different in each county and depends on the gravity of one's disability. By 2019 it had risen to around 50 EUR a month.

tunities are insufficient, and most of the burden lies on family members. The paucity of the welfare state provision is an effect of the hyper-capitalist and value-conservative policies that Estonia has applied for decades (Espinoza, 2015). Moreover, the heteronormative and patriarchal vision of the family is considered to be the cornerstone of the state, as the § 27 of the Constitution states: “The family, which is fundamental to the preservation and growth of the nation and which constitutes the foundation of society, enjoys the protection of the government”. The heteropatriarchal reproductive family is thus authorised by the highest of laws, and widespread conditions of precarity circumscribe the options for choice even further.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed practices of care as central kinning practices. Through practices of care queers extended both their lives and relationships into the future. However, futurity was only one of the various temporal aspects with which care was bound up in everyday lives of queers in Estonia.

In the neoliberal and precarious context of Estonia, where low welfare provision and recurring austerity measures mark the priorities of the state, it can easily be argued that the state is not particularly *caring*. Moreover, the care of the state is conditional, benefitting those that adhere to heteronormativity and chrononormativity, that is, normatively productive members of society who are heterosexually married and reproducing at a steady rate (an ideal which, to be fair, very few individuals regardless of gender and sexuality, manage to live up to). As discussed in depth in Chapter Three, the common low rate of marriages, high rate of divorces and of children born out of wedlock speaks to the fact that lived reality is a far cry from the ideal image that the state projects.

The results of my research show that queers in Estonia were nevertheless positioned as a double failure – failing both to live up to heteronormativity and to chrononormativity. The participants in my research had various ways of grappling with those aspects of failure. Depending on their particular fantasies of the good life, they either developed different strategies of resistance or chose to embrace the norms that divide people into hierarchies according to how well they succeed. Whichever way their particular fantasies of the good life leaned, queers in Estonia, along with all other people, were all ensnared in neoliberal whirlwinds, albeit differently structured along the axes of difference.

With minimal and peripheral care provided by the welfare state, people's everyday practices of care constituted most of the care work. The results of my research show that a range of temporalities were central when queers in Estonia carried out the work of caring for and taking care of close ones. There was much focus on the potential rhythms of this burdensome, mundane and continuous work that care entails. If someone's care needs extended over a very long period of time, or if those needs were so intense that the emergency literally became an everyday occurrence, the linear expectation that care work would one day lead to betterment, failed. Moreover, expectations about the good life, bound up with norms about gender and ability, were constantly negotiated in the battle surrounding what constituted sufficient care.

Even though care was usually perceived to be bound up with positive affects, there were a range of significant negative aspects of care that governed the bonds that people had to each other. My results show that queers in Estonia can be bound to others through obligations and dependency, forcing them either to take care of others or be subjected to their care – for a place to live, for financial support etc. Under conditions of widespread precarity, such (partially) forced care also changed the meaning of intimacy. The unchosen closeness/intimacy that followed from obliged care, or the negative affects that emerged from failed care, thus constituted the negative aspects of care as such. Moreover, some care relationships that started out from love and closeness may have ended up becoming a matter of duty, which further complicated the relationships between care and kinship. All in all, it must be said that *choice* about both bonds to close ones and the care of/for them is far from self-evident in precarious contexts like Estonia.

Interlude: The power of touch

As I frequented queer spaces in Estonia, I made connections with varying degrees of intensity. Some people I only met for an interview, while with others I shared meals, laughter and tears. What I had not necessarily expected to share and was delighted to experience was the sharing of touch.

My general experience “in the field” or while doing research, was that normative boundaries of physical intimacy remained intact – touching a person who was not your partner in ways beyond a friendly hug, was not permitted. This way of defining relationships through strict bodily boundaries in part resembled the general heteronormative understanding of how people in non-romantic relationships should interact with one another. However, queer boundaries for social interaction are not necessarily always similar to straight ones. Socially expected codes do not always apply in the same manner and the boundaries can be redrawn elsewhere. Intimacy and affectionate touch in queer spaces is therefore not uncommon, some of it erotic and some not.

The moments when I most strongly experienced the difference that fleeting bodily boundaries can make between normative and less normative places, were some small gatherings that with the advance of the night could sometimes turn into more or less spontaneous cuddle-parties. The occasions varied, it could be a gathering of some friends to get through a long and dark winter night together or a more purposeful meeting of feminist and/or queer activists (with partially overlapping presence of the same people). What those gatherings had in common, was that, during the late hours of night, as people were sated with food and perhaps with alcohol, the bodies started to gravitate towards each other. Sometimes lack of space was the necessary trigger. Squeezed in between the kitchen table and sink, in a space not bigger than a few square metres, 6–7 of us were once sitting/lying/kneeling/leaning towards each other. Body parts entangled, hands casually stroking another hand, leg, playing with hair, all the while chatting, laughing, exchanging stories and experiences, unaware that most

people had already left the party and thus there was no longer an actual need to be so huddled up in this tiny space. But nobody moved...

On that night an idea was born to organise a cuddle puddle or a cuddle party – a gathering with the purpose of more deliberately exploring non-sexual physical intimacy in a group. The originators were the same small circle of people who often met up together, initially in relation to organising some queer feminist events but slowly growing into a loose group of friends. All of them highly educated, white and able-bodied (but most of them struggling with various mental health issues), a mix of Estonians (some of them bilingual, but “passing” as Estonian), people from abroad – both East and West, both cis, trans and non-binary people, butches, pansexuals, queers.

The details of their embodiment both do and do not matter when accounting for the cuddle party itself. In one way it was not relevant because what mattered most was the shared energy of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to reach out to touch and to be touched. Of course, participation was not compulsory, and some (unspoken) boundaries remained, in terms of not touching genitals or other erogenous zones. But it cannot be said that the touch was devoid of any possible eroticism. For example, Karl asked Nikita if they could make out, as he would really like to know how it felt. Nikita hesitated and refused in the end, saying that they just preferred to cuddle. By the next morning, when meeting Karl again, Nikita enquired, “How are you feeling, now that all your wishes were not granted?” Checking in with each other’s emotions and boundaries was a common strategy. Moreover, only people that everyone was comfortable to be around were invited, while some people were crossed off the list. I had self-consciously asked whether I should drop off, considering that by that time I had only known the people for about a few months. Their protests and reassurances not only flattered but landed on the fertile ground of my willing curiosity.

While the title “cuddle party” may sound grand, it does not do justice to the calm and relaxed atmosphere in a living room, where people took turns casting their tops off in order to be lying on their front and get their backs massaged. At some point Annabel and I chatted on the couch while playing with the cat Tiiger; Nikita received a massage on the mattress on the floor, after having dimmed the lights. Karl slowly walked up to us and asked if he could join us on the couch and cuddle up in between us. Soon enough all three of us were entangled on the sofa, listening to Karl reminisce about his various adventures abroad. Then, just as on other occasions, I was struggling with opposing instincts – a part of me wanting to simply be engulfed by

the warm touch of bodies intermingling, and another part of me feeling discomfort, guilt and worry about how ethical it was to do so.

I had disclosed my purpose of staying in Estonia right at the beginning and all of them knew I was a researcher. However, I had not been invited to those hangouts as a researcher and in those moments, I was definitely leaning more towards the role of being someone in the group. Certainly, potentials for (and acting upon) desire and physical intimacy in the context of fieldwork has been increasingly discussed in feminist and queer body of research. After the seminal work of lesbian anthropologist Esther Newton (1993), others have followed to discuss romantic and/or sexual relationships with the participants of their research (Carter, 2016; Rooke, 2009; Sundén, 2012; Wekker, 2006). While I personally did not engage in any further physical or romantic relationships with any of the participants, apart from participating in those cuddle parties, it was a stark reminder that research is conducted by people of flesh and blood and that for connecting sometimes it is enough to reach out and touch.

7. Concluding discussion

In this dissertation I have examined the ways in which queers in Estonia practice close relationships. Drawing on a variety of qualitative methods ranging from ethnography, interviews, close relationship maps and a qualitative online survey, I have discussed the specificities of kinship, closeness and care in the particular historical, cultural and geopolitical context of contemporary Estonia. Located at the intersection of Gender and Queer studies, this research contributes with new knowledge about how practices of care are mutually constitutive of close relationships. It has focussed on the contextually determined ways in which neoliberal austerity and widespread precarity affect the lives of queers in Estonia, down to aspects of their most intimate lives.

In the coming sections I outline the main conclusions that can be drawn from this research. I first discuss how my research contributes to widening existing empirical research as well as theoretical approaches to queer kinship and family making. Thereafter, I discuss how focussing on close relationships contributes with narratives of queer lives that are not usually told elsewhere, such as in the mainstream media. In doing so, the study has sought to make visible marginalised sections of less privileged queers. I will then move on to discuss how, what I call, queer opacity both conditions and allows for relationships with others, by functioning as a kinship glue. Next, I discuss how material conditions structure the possibilities of both choosing and practicing close relationships and care. I extend this discussion by linking it to temporalities of care and how these must be understood as intrinsic to care practices. My analysis of care also opens up for methodological reflections: What kind of care practices may emerge as part of ethnographic fieldwork? Can we even think of ethnography as a form of care? Finally, before bringing this study to an end, I will focus on the future. I will do so first by proposing some areas for future research and lastly by suggesting how my research also points to the possibilities of carving out alternative queer futurities

7.1 Widening the current framework

Introducing the concepts of “close ones” (*lähedased*) and “close relationships” (*lähedased suhted*) is simultaneously the starting point and destination of this thesis. After realising that it did not make sense to ask about “queer families” in the context of Estonia, due to the overbearing connotations that the term family has with heterosexual reproduction, asking instead about close relationships provided the key that opened doors to participants and their lives. By using the concept of close relationships and close ones throughout the thesis I demonstrate how close relations include much more than just affinity or descent, which are the usual taken-for-granted frameworks in kinship studies.

As I have shown in this thesis, close relations may encompass members of family of origin and romantic partners (or not), but more importantly here, they also involve relations within the more indiscernible zone of friendship and romance. While in some other contexts, staking a claim on the notion of a *family* of choice (Mizielnińska et al., 2015; Mizielnińska & Stasińska, 2017a; Weston, 1991) has been politically and emotionally important for queers, this was less prevalent in Estonia. This is not to say that family as a concept was not important for queers, quite the contrary. Some used it in quite similar ways to how the notion of family of choice operates. However, because for many of my research participants, the concept of family was not extendable to relations outside of their family of origin, it did not make sense to enforce that framework in the analysis. Instead, I stayed close to the local use of concepts and widened the existing theoretical frameworks in a way that enabled me to investigate different understandings of close ones and families.

By focussing on how queers negotiate their close relationships in Estonia, I have sought to queer the concept of *lähedased*, which is used universally in Estonia. In other words, *lähedased* was not a term that queers had coined; the term was already in general circulation. Thus, the move I make here, is to bring the term into academic use, at the same time as I highlight how close relationships function within queer lives. Importantly, this sets my study apart from mainstream family sociology in Estonia, which while speaking of “families” actually tends to limit its object of study to heterosexual couples, thereby excluding both queers doing family as well as other constellations beyond the nuclear family. By using *lähedased* as an investigative tool, I both queer this concept, and describe the everyday realities of queers in Estonia more accurately.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to the tradition of decentring Western epistemic privileges that often govern knowledge production in and/or of the East (Kulawik, 2020; Kulpa, 2014; Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011). It has done so by introducing a local term and demonstrating the work it can do rather than simply imposing less suitable Anglo-American terminology. In having done so, I do not wish to argue for absolute difference from the (imaginary monolith of the) West. Rather, I draw on some Western theories, and rework them to analyse the particular context of Estonia. A major intervention of this thesis has been to introduce this empirically informed theoretical vocabulary that enables us to rethink intimacy, care and kinship in a more contextually sensitive manner.

7.2 Beyond only particular kinds of stories

While, during the time of my research, the Estonian public debate heavily emphasised legal rights, it was the negotiations of everyday regimes of closeness and care that were the main focus for most of the study's participants. Although legal regulations were indeed relevant, at least to some of them, I found that many of the participants' everyday lives were much more shaped by coping with economic precarity. Although legal regulations were especially important for those who had children, not least because they sensed a greater insecurity in terms of inheritance, custody, and everyday navigation of bureaucracy, there was a major discrepancy between what participants brought up as central issues for their relationships and the media's attention to the partnership law. This thesis has thus contributed to widening the scope of queer matters beyond the very narrow legal debate, no matter how symbolically important that debate may be.

Moreover, nuancing the picture of who queers are and what their relationships might be like, has been a further and important contribution, operating on another level. Some particular relationship constellations that resemble the heterosexual family more easily gain recognition and acceptance in heteronormative contexts. Of the queers I encountered, it was easier for middle-class cis-gendered lesbians to claim the right to building family and reproducing than for a trans* person with a migrant background living in non-monogamous relationships, for example. I have thus argued that some bodies and relationships have an easier access to the state structures and recognition and thereby have smoother passage, while others get stuck on the way. Multiple levels of marginalisation influence and position queers differently. My research has also, hopefully, shone a light on queers for whom reproduction is not the main focus, and who may be

struggling perhaps with other issues, such as access to housing, care of elderly parents, mental health, to name but a few. Different aspects of marginalisation and privilege have thus come into view, as opposed to only focusing on small reproducing nuclear families. By showing this complex array of relationship constellations, I have thus contributed to making visible the multiplicity of queer lives and relationships and the numerous levels of intersecting privileges and marginalisation that those lives entail.

Moreover, skewed media representation had also caused many queers to regard attempts to portray queer lives with a certain level of suspicion. When recruiting participants, I sometimes encountered implicit expectations about the type of information I was looking for. It seemed that some public discourses about queer lives had settled deep in the participants' minds and coloured their way of interpreting any research project. I had made a conscious effort to keep the call for participants neutral in the sense that I sought not to project what *kind* of relations or experiences people would need to have in order to participate. Despite those efforts, I sometimes received responses that were saturated with expectations about the aims of my study. One person assumed that I was "actually" after heart-wrenching narratives of loss and disconnection and was initially reluctant to participate because, as they put it, "nothing tragic has happened in my life". I also received the exact opposite response from others who stated, "I have no happy stories to tell", which indicated an underlying assumption that I only wanted to present a picture book image of happy and content queers.

These kinds of reactions remind us of participants' agency in that they have their own interpretations beyond the researcher's reach (Haritaworn, 2008, pp. n.p., section 2.4). At the same time, the directed anticipation in those responses poignantly points to a lack of nuance and repertoire in the ways queer lives and relationships are talked about in the context of Estonia.

7.3 Managing closeness through opacity

An important finding is that queer opacity is the constitutive dimension of queerness in Estonia. While in some other locations declaring one's identity and relationships through concrete speech acts of coming out might be important, this was not a prevalent theme in my research. That is, coming out to parents or close ones was not a central way of relating to others. Rather, through various practices of opacity, queer aspects were incorporated in participant's lives.

That is, participants described how people around them participated in both acts of willed ignorance and silent acceptance, as neither the queers

themselves nor those close to them were keen to bring up the topic. Certainly, violence or the threat of violence was present, which suggests that opacity should not simply be considered a fully positive strategy. Rather, my argument is that instances of connection and conditional acceptance contributed to maintaining bonds between close ones. Opacity, I argue, might be understood as a kinship glue, making sure that relationships continued, even if conditionally. While love, affection, children, maybe thought as what binds people to one another, this is a rather limited view of what kinship is about (see Dahl, 2014). Kinship also entails management of negative affects, as well as treading carefully not to sever or damage relationships. While reasons for why kinship is needed differed between participants, the fact is that queers in Estonia lived complicated lives and their need to retain good relations may often be greater than the need to make declarations about one's own identity. Because of a widespread sense of opacity regarding the participants' relationship status and content, defining other "related" relationships dependent on the original relationship was also complicated. The quote used in the title of the thesis, "And I don't know who we really are to each other?" was therefore a question that was on the minds and lips of many of the participants' close ones.

I have even argued that while a lack of any direct declarations about one's identity was a condition of opacity, it was not something that was necessarily experienced as overwhelmingly oppressive. Even if popular culture often represents queers who do not burst proudly out of the closet to be victims, this is by no means always the case (De Villiers, 2012; Sedgwick, 1990). Certainly, there were people who wished to be more open about their particular gender or sexual identity than they felt circumstances afforded. Many participants, though, did not perceive opacity as a source of lamentation. Therefore, the dichotomy between the unhappy closeted queer and the liberated queer breaking out of its confines did not hold true in the majority of cases. Participants did not place importance in needing to come out personally or state, for example, that the person they brought along for Christmas dinner was in fact their partner. The actual practices of sharing time and activities together was more important than the need to tell the "truth" by explicitly naming their relationships.

This is how opacity became a way to create and maintain kinship. The notion of opacity provides an interesting twist on how kinship and relationality are constructed, nuancing and complexifying the picture. In a sense, closeness itself required, or was predicated on opacity, rather than the other way around. In other words, while the common-sensical understand-

ding is that it would be impossible to achieve any proper closeness if one is, for one reason or another, unable to state certain aspects of one's identity, my results often showed the opposite. Importantly, in order to be close and continue to be close to people in their vicinity, participants left some things unsaid or, rather, allowed those details to be assumed, rather than address the issue directly through speech.

Practicing opacity was necessary for many participants to balance their queer lives while not jeopardising relationships to their parents, friends or colleagues. Queer opacity thus seemed to provide a different understanding of politics and public space and in this respect also contributes to a different kind of futurity.

7.4 Precarity circumscribes “choice”

Many of the queers in Estonia struggled in the context of an individualist society, since their interests were generally at odds with the heteronormative and neoliberal state and its almost non-existent welfare provision. It was precisely everyday precarity that was prevalent in the lives of queers, and of which I was given a glimpse during my time spent in Estonia.

Participants grappled with fantasies of the “good life” on various levels. On the one hand, the neoliberal and economic structure influenced their life choices and everyday realities. On the other hand, queerness was tied to imaginaries of failure, thereby adding a further layer of problems that needed to be negotiated, either through negating or embracing the prescribed failure. But while there was certainly a sense of vulnerability among them, which was related to their queer positionality (both personal and state-level neglect, rejection and violence), there was also a clear link to the widespread condition of precarity. It was not some specific frailness of queers causing participants' spirits and bodies to break, rather it was symptomatic of the dysfunction of capitalist neoliberal Estonia. The structure had made people vulnerable, while of course – differently positioned people navigated this vulnerability in a variety of ways.

I have argued that critical perspectives on queer embodiment in Estonia and how it intersects with care, must see beyond the particular queer identity of the persons (especially given that many people were reluctant to identify with it or downplayed it) and focus on the lived experiences of precarity. The state certainly does not care, especially not about queers, but neither about its straight population. Non-existent welfare provision and subsequent practice of outsourcing care work to families put multiply

marginalised queers under enormous pressure, sometimes binding them to their families against their will.

Against the backdrop of individualist tendencies in society, queers were both used to struggling on their own in order to get by as well as mindful of keeping a distance from other people. While there were certain resources and knowledge within wider queer community centres, many participants arranged their care relationships in smaller networks and did not engage very publicly with the bigger queer community. In the context of the state lacking any proper care provision, and a certain cultural suspicion towards reaching out, chains of care were not very extensive. But while there was much disappointment and hurt due to diverging expectations about what constituted sufficient care, there were also efforts to organise and make other forms of caring possible.

Under general conditions of precarity in Estonia, kinship was often not a question of choice for queers. Similarly, neither was care necessarily a question about voluntary emotional and practical support. More often than not it was instead a combination and compromise between emotions, obligations and dependency. “Choice” in terms of whether to interact with one’s family of origin was highly constrained in the context of neoliberal precarity. Both taking care of someone and/or a reliance on financial support from members of family were not necessarily *choices* resulting from any particular close relationship, but often a necessity. And yet, while one can mandate care along kinship lines, one certainly cannot command closeness.

Therefore, I have argued that we need to pay attention to the particular historical and sociocultural contexts in which choices and negotiations are made. Acknowledging the different investments and commitments with which people might be bound up means that we do not “make disorientation an obligation or a responsibility for those who identify as queer” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 177). People in different circumstances will make do in their own way and cannot necessarily live up to certain standards for anti-normativity, such as the call for “forgetting the family” or “choosing one’s family”.

Situating kinship economically, culturally and socially, within the specific case of neoliberal and nationalistic Estonia, has been an important contribution of my research. I started from the basic premise that presently people are living in various ties of obligation and force, and therefore need to relate to one another in order to get by in everyday life. I argued that, at least in the context of Estonia, this is the point from which it is necessary to start discussing how kinship and close relationships are made and how care practices are carried out, rather than presuming the freedom to choose freely.

7.5 Care and its discontents

I have argued throughout the thesis that, on the one hand, practices of care constitute an important dimension of close relationships, and on the other that care should be understood as a central kinning practice. Moreover, my results show that various temporalities played a significant role in those processes, since temporalities of care structured participants' everyday life and relationships. Care and everyday reproduction can therefore be thought in terms of ebbing rhythms or pulsating flows, which also entailed various normative expectations as well as mismatches with respect to the lived experiences of the study's participants.

My analysis has shown that the temporalities with which care and closeness were bound up were sometimes conflictual though always intersecting. For the purpose of analytical clarity, I separated out various temporal aspects of care, and have also demonstrated how different temporalities were deeply bound to each other. For example, while care in close relationships involved the expectation and obligation to (inter)act and get involved, the actual capacity for caring could be limited by other dimensions, such as different physical or psychological abilities and precarious working conditions. Those were directly related to issues of temporality, since intersecting temporalities – such as *crip time*, *curative time* and *queer time* – simultaneously pulled people in different directions. In *curative time*, care is supposed to result in future betterment of the cared one's condition, while *crip time* simultaneously questions the normative timeframe to which everyone is supposed to adhere and craves the acknowledgement of different speeds of doing things. *Curative time* invests in futurity, while *queer time* critically questions ideals of longevity and futurity. At the same time, the study's participants also had to negotiate the general pull of *chrononormativity* – that is, the social pressure to live according to a normative timeline geared towards productivity and wealth. I have in my analysis demonstrated the interconnectedness of temporalities and care, by analysing how participants had to negotiate various temporal drivers while attempting to take care of their close ones.

Nevertheless, while I have found care and its temporalities a useful tool through which to understand the making and breaking of close relationships, I would like to point to some potential dangers that may arise from analysing kinship through the lens of care. Firstly, one question that is important to pose is whether *care* can be used as a substitute for *love* as a major binding agent. Dahl (2014) has criticised the fact that *love*, rather than blood or law, has become the universal and taken-for-granted binding

agent of relations. I argue that there is a danger that *care* could come to fill a similar function – that there is the tendency to venerate care as a container for positive affects. I can, for example, see traces of such a tendency in anthropologist John Borneman’s (2001, p. 31) argument that anthropology should privilege the analysis of “caring and being cared for as processes of non-coercive, voluntary affiliation” instead of its focus on communal reproduction. In contrast, my research has shown that care is certainly not always “non-coercive and voluntary affiliation” but under some circumstances might be, or over time could become both coercive and an involuntary obligation. The practical and mundane work of taking care of somebody, especially in the context of precarity, can become an unbearable burden rather than a source of exclusively positive feelings; something that could be seen in many accounts by participants. In other words, care is not always a choice, and neither should it therefore be taken for granted as a positive binding agent.

Finally, another risk with overemphasising care at the expense of other dimensions of life is that it might contribute to desexualising queer relations and strengthening pressures towards achieving respectability. Indeed, Freeman (2007, p. 305) has asked the rhetorical question of whether doing kinship queerly can “be separated from hetero-procreation without losing sex, eroticism and other bodily modes of belonging, exchange and attachment”. Removing (queer) sex is often a precondition for becoming intelligible subjects of heteronormative kinship. The discourse of social legibility thus requires that queers discard any associations with bodily pleasure in order to be recognised as socially accepted parents and partners (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 53). Care could equally be instrumentalised as part of this machinery of producing properly docile subjects out of unruly queers.

However, while the danger of overly circumscribing the meaning of care is ever-present, it is by no means a necessary outcome. Indications of a more open and heterogeneous account of care were shown in this study by means of the various practices of care that take place outside and beyond the romantic nuclei.

7.6 Caring ethnography

As I have shown throughout the thesis, and especially through the occasional interludes, I have come to care a great deal for my research participants. Indeed, it seems to me that ethnography can be practiced as a form of care-work, both during fieldwork and through continued ethical engagements with participants. Involvement with the field does not finish after

gathering the data. Personal involvement in my case has, and likely will continue to extend into the foreseeable future; after all, I remain emotionally invested in queer matters in Estonia. It matters to me what happens with queers there, both the ones I know and those I do not. I follow debates in regular and social media just like I always have, and I also receive occasional updates from people I met throughout my time in Estonia. When I see a Facebook update about Gay Christian folks whose tea evenings I miss, my heart warms. When I hear from a person that they had broken up with their partner, I feel for them. When there is lament about my hometown's public Christmas tree being too gay, I don't know whether to laugh or cry.⁸⁵ My personal involvement is thus sustained on various levels, but it is often mediated through the interpersonal relationships I established and developed while in the field.

That said, not all of my social ties to the field were equally intense. Contacts with some people were more fleeting, while with others I developed a friendship that continues both virtually and physically. The difference in connection partially has to do with personal chemistry but also with proximity and a sense of resonance. The people to whom I was more exposed, I ended up liking more and the other way around – I sought the company of those to whom I already felt an initial connection. Connection and care are thus also related to proximity. However, there is considerably more effort and structure required for maintaining relationships, when no longer the same everyday social circles and spontaneous exchange of information are shared.

But there are also certain ethical involvements with the field as a researcher, or obligations towards it, as Stebbins (1991) calls them. A sense of obligation counter-acts the otherwise potentially exploitative character of extracting knowledge. Research participants took time and effort to share their realities and to facilitate access to spaces and people. The least one can do in return is to attempt to contribute in such a way that might be

⁸⁵ In December 2020 there was a public dispute about which values a Christmas tree should evoke. An actress Ülle Lichtfeldt had sold a Christmas tree to the Rakvere town government from her private forest. She donated the money to the local LGBT Film Festival FestHeart, the only queer film festival in the Baltics, organised since 2017. That the tree had been bought with money that supported a queer film festival did not sit well with the deputy mayor Andres Jaadla, who argued that the tree was therefore ideologically tainted. Instead, he erected an additional Christmas tree that would be more conservative and Christian (Tiks, 2020, November 30). The local government had before repeatedly discriminated against FestHeart when allocating public money.

beneficial to participants. I have tried to continue my practice of publishing opinion pieces on sexuality and gender in Estonian, both in daily newspapers and publications catering for feminist/queer media (Uibo, 2010, June 18; 2012, April 18; 2013, April 1; 2016, July 25; 2018, March 20). Thus, seeking to retranslate and recontextualise some of the insights from my research in an accessible language (albeit so far only in Estonian) is a further way of contributing to actual and meaningful public debates, beyond the often-restricted discourse of academia.

I do not see myself as a representative for the Estonian queer population, but someone who offers partial and situated perspectives on matters I have researched. I agree with Rutherford (2012, p. 465) who proposes that getting engaged in politically fraught arenas can sometimes “require us to write and speak authoritatively on issues that matter to the people we have studied”. I use the authority that comes from my privileged position as researcher at a “foreign” university to deliver critique and perhaps more controversial political solutions. Even though there is no direct legal danger for queers in Estonia, many fear the possible social stigma and indirect repercussions on their jobs, family lives and social status. The strategy of using my privilege of being free from those fears has seemed to at least reap some consequences. On several occasions I have received positive feedback for daring to express some critical views, such as providing queer critique of marriage, calling out public figures for misunderstanding the difference between gender neutrality and gender blindness etc. What I have heard in return is that such critique would not be so easy to express by those living there, who “have to go to work and to the street the next day”. The backlash with which queer feminist positions are met is easier to bear for a partial outsider. Nevertheless, I do not by any means claim to be the only one voicing positions that are considered radical in Estonia; I only act in support of the local and actively growing social movement.

However, it is difficult to ever satisfy my obligation to fieldwork participants. The time spent together, the shared stories and reflections are invaluable gifts I have received from the participants. What I give in return may not necessarily live up to the size of the debt. While ethnographers like me may feel compelled to do right, some debts that fieldwork generates may not be payable through the partial truths we generate in our attempts at ethical research practice. Despite that, I hope to continue my attempts at (re)connecting, hopefully through further research. Some suggestions towards such research I propose in the following section.

7.7 Limitations and further research

While this dissertation is published in 2021, much of the material was gathered in 2016–2017. This means that people's identifications, life conditions and relationships are likely to have changed, and the analysis thus refers to a fixed point in time that has now past. Some societal conditions such as neoliberal precarity has remained as acute, while other social phenomena such as the rise of the far right has emerged as a further complication to people's everyday lives. While mindful of the retroactive stance of this analysis, it can still be considered a valuable contribution to the scarce research on queer livelihoods in Estonia.

Inevitably, writing a thesis requires one to make some choices and one cannot fully cover all possible themes emerging from several years of research. In these closing remarks, I would therefore like to point to some aspects of how queers do close relationships in Estonia which I think are worth pursuing in future research.

One theme that has not been explored in depth in this thesis is how closeness and care is done and practiced through digital means. Several participants experienced insufficient local networks in Estonia and instead received significant support from close people at a geographical distance. For them, support through phone calls and internet from people who lived in other parts of Estonia or abroad was more consistent and emotionally relevant than care from people in their immediate surroundings.

Indeed, as I discussed various ways of doing closeness in Chapter Four, physical proximity does not necessarily translate to closeness and belonging, especially if the practices of care are not present or interpreted as sufficient. At the same time, digital care practices can nurture a strong sense of closeness and form bonds that surpass those that surround us in the non-digital realm (see Andreassen, 2017). Similarly, Milligan and Wiles (2010, p. 741) note that work on care has frequently overlooked the importance of alternative forms of closeness, writing that “though proximity is often used to imply physical closeness, it can equally refer to social or emotional closeness; physical distance does not necessarily equate to disembodied care”. Providing care and making (and breaking) relations through digital means is thus a fruitful area for future research, albeit only briefly discussed in this thesis.

While I point to some of the differences between Estonian and Russian speaking Estonians, there is much more to say about the interplay between ethnicity and close relationships. As discussed in Chapter Four, ethnicity is central to Estonian nation-making and marks a strong dividing line in

Estonian society. The ethnic and cultural borders translate into real-life geographical and social segregation, not least among queers (Aavik et al., 2016; Allaste, 2014). Although nightlife and social networking are possible arenas for the coalescence and intertwining of paths between different ethnic groups (Aavik et al., 2016), this was not the experience of Dimitri, a Russian-speaker that only recently had moved to Estonia. He compared his experience of a gay community in Tallinn and in Moscow with a voice filled with true wonder,

And it is amazing because it is a gay community in Estonia, which is tiny, and still people are not mixing really because they are... Like some Russians I know, born and raised here, they speak Estonian, they are not this kind of red-neckly aggressive.... But still they don't know them. I was thinking, 'Oh it is interesting, even in Moscow which is 16 million now, we would end up meeting the same people because it is a fraction of a fraction. It is weird.

Even though that account was one among many, it speaks of various levels of segregations present among queers in Estonia and also in my own research. Dimitri's account referred to the gay community in Estonia, something with which I had only fleeting contact. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, both my own positionality and the segregation of communities resulted in me mainly frequenting circles that primarily consisted of lesbians, queers and (to a lesser extent) trans people. Moreover, by referring to some other gays as "red-neckly aggressive", Dimitri invokes class differences that also run through queer communities in Estonia. While I have to some extent taken into account how differently classed participants navigated their close relationships, further attention to class issues would benefit future research.

Nevertheless, this research, which has explored queers doing close relationships in Estonia is the first of its kind and therefore discusses queers in more general terms – as people living outside of the hetero- or cis-norm. Further research, building on the groundwork I have sought to lay with this thesis, should pay more attention to teasing out the particularities of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class in order to understand the multiple and complex ways in which people practice close relationships and care.

7.8 Queers in Estonia be/long

As another pointer towards the future, I would like to return to the issue of whether it matters who participated in the "cuddle puddles" I described in

the interlude preceding the conclusion. I argue here that it was a small but important way of carving out a different queer future in Estonia.

Namely, while it did not matter who the particular individual bodies were participating in the intermingling of bodies, the very fact that this was a group of non-straight and partly non-cis bodies engaging in shared practices of physical intimacy together does. It matters because the ways in which bodies interact with each other and the space have social significance. Moreover, it also matters *which* bodies interact, not only the ways in which they do. Ahmed (2006) writing about the entanglement of bodily, spatial and social aspects, has made it clear that our bodies have already been directed or oriented in specific ways, and that bodies, which deviate from that familiar path or line, do not ease into the heteronormative environment with the same kind of effortlessness that more normative ones do. Considering Ahmed's insights, as well as the reported difficulty with physical intimacy in Estonia, we can consider the work that those intermingling queer bodies do. Queers who try to create a space for touch, negotiate the heteronormative boundaries that govern the ways people and their bodies can relate to each other.

I do not claim that such fleeting moments of group physical intimacy constitute a queer utopia. At the same time I do not want to dismiss the necessity to insist on the potentiality for different worlds, queer utopias to come, where relationality could be done and thought differently, along the lines of queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz (2009) work. It is, however, worth considering the potential that the cuddle puddle opened up, without resorting to romanticising the relationships. Several participants of the cuddle puddle admitted at some other occasions that they neither felt particular closeness to, nor support from, the others and stayed in the circle more due to the lack of better alternatives. But in those short hours at a time, the cuddle puddle carved out a small space where queer bodies could relate to each other in ways that's not necessarily possible everywhere. I would argue that it was pointing towards different futures and different "[...] ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call liveable or inhabitable space" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). A future in which the boundaries between bodies and their ways of relating to each other could be drawn in a wider variety of ways than now.

Or perhaps the evenings spent together, with or without touch were more important to me personally, as growing close (both physically but also emotionally) to this smaller circle of queers in Tallinn made me feel like I could possibly belong. This was a familiar but unexpected feeling, a sense

that I had experienced in a small queer group during my studies in Sweden, but that I could never imagine happening in Estonia. By growing closer to the people in Tallinn, I could visualise an extension back to the past, into the future but also beyond the geographical distance I had previously experienced as a cut. What I felt could be described as a form of queer belonging.

Freeman (2007, p. 298) has written of queer belonging in temporal terms, defining it as something “more than the longing to be, and be connected, as in being ‘at hand.’ It also names the longing to ‘be long’, to endure in corporeal form over time, beyond procreation.” Queer belonging thus extends the affective ties that queers form beyond the very present moment, connecting different temporalities – the ones that have been and the ones yet to come.

However, I would argue that spatiality is an equally important aspect of queer belonging. If we consider the flows of queer bodies that for some time were rather unidirectional – away from Estonia and towards a more hopeful future elsewhere, then Estonia becomes fixed as merely the source of queer exodus and (in many people’s imagination) cut away from the liveable queer lives elsewhere. However, those flows have multiplied and become much more complex – while some people leave for shorter or longer periods of time, others return, whether alone or with their foreign partners. Those returns cause considerable queer trouble for the state, where suddenly courts and officials have to deal with, for example, recognising gay marriages conducted abroad. Moreover, some others actively choose Estonia as a more queer-friendly place than their own home, as was the case with the participants from Russia.

Such multi-directional spatial and temporal flows are part of the queer longing to belong and being long, as the connections and flows exceed different geographical points and communities. It is the traces of queer belonging that connect different spaces and times, and that participate in the blurring and shifting of certain boundaries that organise such longings. With boundaries shifting, people circulating and intermingling, different presents and futures become possible for queers in Estonia. Those alternative presents and futures are bound to allow for further variations of doing close relationships and care to emerge, albeit bound by local contexts and circumstances.

Summary

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how queers understand and practice close relationships in the context of contemporary Estonia, while taking into consideration its social, economic and cultural specificities. The thesis is guided by three main research questions that are analysed in each of the analytical chapters. The first question to which I sought an answer was how close relationships were made, maintained, transformed or broken in contemporary Estonia? This was followed by a chapter that investigated the role of queerness with respect to relations with close ones. In my third chapter, I explored the various practices of care involved in the making and breaking of close relationships and its relation to various temporalities.

This thesis started out with the goal of investigating queer family constellations in Estonia. Asking queers about the family turned out to be difficult, insofar as the term family seemed to connote only relations of affinity and descent and was not extendable to various other significant relations. By shifting the framework to close relationships (*lähedased suhted* in Estonian), the research acquired a new form. Taking close relationships as an entry point allowed for a move beyond the usual focus on sexual coupledom and reproduction as sources of kinship. It instead brought attention to all possible relationships that were significant to participants in terms of providing care, support and emotional connection, sometimes encompassing family, sometimes surpassing it. While staying close to local circumstances, I also made use of a mix of theoretical tools that originated from queer studies, family and kinship studies and de/post-colonial studies.

The thesis draws on a mix of qualitative research methods, some of which are more central, while others serve to contextualise the study and to compare results. The principal source material consists of interviews and ethnographic engagements with queers in Estonia. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Estonia during the winter of 2016–2017, where I frequented very different settings, ranging from queer activist circles, Gay Christian gatherings, participants' homes, public or private parties and

events etc. In the spring/summer of 2017, I also distributed an online qualitative survey, to which I received 302 responses. The results of the survey were used to a lesser degree in the thesis, although they have shaped my understanding and form important background knowledge.

In the summer of 2017, I spent another three weeks in Estonia, following up on the previous contacts with interviews and also interviewing queers with whom I had never met before but who nevertheless had volunteered for an interview. During the interview I devised an additional research method that I chose to call close relationship maps. That is, the participants were asked to draw a map of their close relationships at the same time as they narrated their story. Altogether I conducted 19 interviews with queers who at this point lived in Estonia. Ethnographic fieldwork in the form of many informal meetings and conversations also inform the analysis. This mixture of methods has helped me gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issue surrounding the practicing of close relationships of queers in Estonia.

The results show the wide range of ways queers in Estonia understood and practiced close relationships. The close relationship maps that participants were asked to draw, immediately made evident that asking about close relationships as opposed to the idea of the family helped to provide a much more nuanced understanding of their lived realities. Many found it important to include their family of origin (albeit not necessarily including all members), partners and children, all of whom were connected to the strict understanding of family as a unit of heterosexual reproduction. However, most participants also included a number of other people, who would have most likely been left out if asked about families, even if they were central in their lives and structures of care. Using the notion of family turned out to be less helpful for understanding queer livelihoods in Estonia than it has been in other geopolitical contexts.

Moreover, when contrasting the participants' narratives with the maps that emerged, it was on many occasions possible to notice discrepancies between the more normative visions of whom one should have a close relationship to and the lived reality. This revealed both the extent to which norms structured the participants' narratives. At the same time, it helped make visible the relations that otherwise remained in the shadows. Relationships to people who would easily fall outside of the concept of the family were also difficult to classify according to existing relationships categories. The participants struggled sometimes to draw a line between a friend, and a life partner, and thus drew on existing kinship categories,

while modifying them to fit their personal circumstances. Despite the struggles surrounding definitions, those relationships had a high importance in participants' lives and constituted a vital support network.

All this said, family as a concept cannot be dismissed altogether. Instead I argue that close relationships as a concept has the potential to widen existing analytical frameworks by partially de-centring the family as the only available concept through which to think connection, belonging, care and dependency. This is especially relevant in the context of widespread precarity characteristic of Estonian society. Precarity, the state of living in insecurity in terms of work, livelihood and social support, shaped relationships to a high degree. Choosing one's family was not an available option for many, since precarity forced people to maintain connections to people to whom participants did not always share any positive connection. Therefore, my results show that focussing on choice is a rather limited and privileged way of making sense of kinship.

Taken together, my results provide a nuanced and multifaceted picture of queers' close relationships in Estonia, standing in stark contrast to the typical media image of queer lives in Estonia, one that is often limited to few portrayals of lesbian couples with children in the best of cases, and depictions of queers as corrupting both children, families and entire future of the nation, at worst.

Furthermore, this study shows that queerness played a rather opaque role in maintaining relationships. I argue that queer *opacity*, a way of bridging the binaries between visibility and invisibility, silence and speech, was a common way of approaching queerness in Estonia. The popular cultural narrative of coming out of the closet was thus not a central feature of most of the participants' lives; neither was being in the closet, in the sense of actively hiding one's queer dispositions and partners. On the contrary, participants did not go to painstaking lengths to hide queer leakages in their lives. Bringing partners home to families of origin, participating in queer events and advocating for queer rights were ways of rather openly living their queer lives.

What differed, however, was that clear proclamations about one's identity or relationship status were not as widespread. In other words, declaring that one is gay/lesbian/trans/queer or introducing one's partner with the words – "this is my boyfriend/girlfriend/partner" was not the usual way of going about things. Instead, partners were incorporated in one's life in a rather matter-of-fact manner, without detailed comments about their role or status. Instead the participants let other people draw conclusions,

which at the same time provided the opportunity to turn a blind eye, an opportunity which many members of the family of origin gratefully took. This is to say, practices of willed ignorance were necessary for the balance of queer opacity to remain intact.

It should be stressed that queer opacity was not a practice devoid of violence. The peace and acceptance of queers and relationships was often highly conditional, and the precarious harmony could easily be broken once the bonds between participants were named or an identity declared. Nevertheless, I argue that practices of opacity provided a third way between being in the closet and bursting out of it with pride. Opacity came with (unnamed) conditions, but it still worked towards maintaining the relationships between queers and their close ones. In other words, opacity provided a way for queers both to live aspects of their queer lives in plain sight (in the sense of not actively hiding their relationships), while at the same time not disrupting relationships to their close ones. The potential of disruption was the greatest with families of origin, but people resorted to opacity even at work and in queer activism. Thus, I propose that opacity functioned as a kinship glue – it allowed for relationships to continue, while at the same time allowing them to live their queer lives. Maintaining bonds, however conditional, seemed to be an important rationale behind engaging in queer opacity to balance their lives on the borders of visibility and invisibility, silence and speech.

Why would queers accept such conditional relationships? While this varies from case to case, one partial explanation that emerged from the study was that participants could not always fully choose to cut the ties that bind them to certain people. In a context of widespread neoliberal precarity and low welfare provision by the state, many people were tied to their families of origins for support and care. Ranging from help with childcare to needing a place to live, choosing to cut those ties was not a feasible alternative. Moreover, since the Estonian state mandates that children take care of their aging parents, many participants also found themselves bound to their family of origin due to obligation. Therefore, even though care can be understood as a central kinning practice, as bonds are created and strengthened through practices of care; care can in some other circumstances be bound up with dependency and a sense of duty. This is why it is relevant to stress that precarity has a determining role to play in the ways that queers navigate their relationships and care practices.

Interestingly, when exploring the way in which queers cared for and took care of their close ones, various aspects of temporality emerged as a central

issue. Care was closely bound up with temporality, and thus the participants needed to negotiate such temporal drivers as chrononormativity, queer/crip/curative time. Everyday care was a mundane and continuous form of work that could also easily intensify into an emergency, as care needs fluctuated over time. The ways of navigating the shifting rhythms of care depended highly on what participants imagined to constitute sufficient care, but also what their imaginaries of the good life were like. The pressures to fit within norms regarding gender and ability were further strengthened by the general neoliberal and heteronormative pressures to succeed. Cast as failures on various accounts, queers in Estonia needed to develop strategies of navigating those various pressures, while at the same time struggling to take care of themselves and their close ones amid situations of deepening and widening precarity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Overview of participants' social characteristics as of summer 2017

Andres was an Estonian cis gay man in his mid-30s. He was highly educated and working in the arts. He lived in a monogamous relationship with his partner.

Annabel was an Estonian cis woman that identified as pansexual. She was in the beginning of her 20s and was studying at the university and working to finance her studies. At the time of the fieldwork she lived together and was in an open relationship with Nikita, but by the time of conducting an interview they had broken up. She was a queer and disability activist.

Anne was an Estonian-speaking highly educated cis-woman in her 50s. She did not identify herself as lesbian, but said she just happened to fall in love with a woman. She was living a secluded life and, on her closeness map she drew only her mother, herself and her female partner. She and her partner were involved in caring for her ageing mother. It was also quite telling that when asked who she would turn to if she fell ill or needed money, she answered, "To the hospital and to the bank".

Barbara was a young lesbian cis-woman who lived together with her partner Sandra, they had recently had a baby and planned to have more children later. They were both Estonian and were living in a medium-sized town 200km from Tallinn.

Dimitri was a gay cis-man from Russia, who had settled in Estonia after living in many other countries. He had roots in Estonia through his mother's side, and his mother had moved to Estonia before him. He was in

his 30s and also had a lesbian sister. Since he was fairly new in Estonia most of the close people in his life lived abroad or he had lost them due to death and break-up. He was single but was looking specifically to date Estonian men, which he believed would help him settle in the country and learn the language.

Ellis – was a cis-woman in her mid-30s, Estonian. She was in an open relationship with a trans*man Alex and identified strongly as a lesbian and a feminist. She worked as a freelancer in the culture sector and a queer feminist activist. She had no contact with her father but received practical help from siblings and mother.

Jaana was an Estonian cis-woman in her mid-40s. She was working in counselling. She was lesbian and lived with her long-term partner, but they explored non-monogamy in the BDSM context. She had a son from a heterosexual marriage but afterwards had mainly relationships with women.

Katrin was an Estonian cis-woman in her 60s. She was retired and lived with her long-term partner Silvia. She had many children from previous heterosexual relationships and first fell in love with Silvia when in her 50s. One of her sons was gay. She had been working in the church and now continued being active in the Gay Christian circles.

Keiu identified as pansexual and preferred to practice non-monogamous relationships. She was cis-gendered but had formed a complicated “kind of family” with a trans* man Eerik, and she was making plans to have children with her gay best friend Ragnar. She was around 30, Estonian and working with children on the countryside where she also lived.

Kim was a bisexual man in the beginning of his 20s. While he did not identify as trans* and referred to himself as a man, he said that his gender expression was located somewhere between the opposites of the gender binary. He was an Estonian and lived together with a woman with whom he was in a monogamous relationship. Another important person in his life was his close friend in Norway; they participated in each other’s lives through the internet. At the time of the interview, Kim was working in an electronics store, but was soon to serve his 9 months in the compulsory conscription army.

Liina was an Estonian cis-woman who belonged to the deaf community. Since she was in her mid-20s she had recently graduated and was getting established in the labour market. She was lesbian and an activist on both queer issues and deafness. She was involved with both hearers and deaf people. Due to financial issues she lived with her mother who was separated. She also had a gay brother.

Natasha was a young cis-woman in her early 20s, who spoke Estonian with a Russian accent. Her life was strongly affected by coming out; out of eight close people on her closeness map, only three of them remained close after having come out. She lived with her parents who were very opposed to her identifying as a lesbian.

Nikita was around 30, they identified as non-binary and queer. At the time of the interview they had lived in Estonia for many years, but they originally came from a country further South. They were studying and working, as well as being a queer activist. They had a romantic non-monogamous relationship with Annabel (see above).

Pauliina was an Estonian trans* woman in her mid-20s. She worked while attending university in order to support herself; something she had to do because she came from a poor family. She considered moving home to her parents, who were positive of her journey, in order to save money for eventual surgery that she dreamt of. She wanted to eventually date men but was not comfortable doing so before the surgery.

Reelika was an Estonian cis-woman in her mid-30-s and was raising her teenage son alone. The father of the child had never been present in their lives. Even though she identified as a pansexual, she had very few romantic relationships attempts at all. She worked in a customer service field and did not have much of a social life, apart from her colleagues and sister. She used to be an activist in queer circles but withdrew due to a personal conflict. She focused mainly on her child and work.

Sam identified as trans* and pan- and demisexual and was getting close to 30. They worked with media and identified strongly with that work. They had Russian as their mother tongue, but they spent equal time in both language communities. They lived with their mother and brother, and had

become an active member of the queer community, attending parties, support groups for trans* people, volunteering for Pride etc.

Siret was an Estonian cis-woman in her mid-30s. She had a teenage son from a previous heterosexual relationship and first discovered her interest in women only a few years ago. Exploring her sexuality and falling in love with a woman had been so intense that she even called it a rebirth. She worked in a governmental job. Her relationship with her mother was not close before and became even more distant after her coming out. She was dating a woman at the time of the interview, but the relationship was not defined.

Svetlana was a cis-woman of 40. She had Russian as her mother tongue but spoke fluent Estonian. She was living apart together with her partner Nadja, while she shared much of the everyday care work with another lesbian couple. She had other relationships on the side of her romantic relationship with both men and women. She worked as a teacher and was very active among Gay Christian circles.

Triin was a cis-gendered lesbian woman who lived together with her partner of 11 years. They were both Estonian and they had three children together. She used to be an activist but felt the need to choose between being an activist and having children, owing to the fact that activism in the middle of 2000s was involved with threats and violence. Nowadays she was not much in touch with the queer community, since her closest friends were straight. She was in her 40s and well-established in her job in the educational field.

Appendix 2. Interview question (SQUIN)

Interviews were conducted with the use of the BNIM framework (Wengraf, 2001), which meant that I started the interviews with a SQUIN (Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative). The exact wording of the question differed from one time to another, but it included the same elements and largely involved the following:

“Can you please tell me about the close people in your life and the close relationships you have to them, how they became important to you and how the relationships developed up to now or until they stopped being relevant. Begin wherever you like. Take all the time you need. I will listen first, without interrupting, but I will be taking some notes for after when you have finished telling me about the experiences that have been important to you. While talking, please at the same time mark those close relations on the paper. There is no particular way to do this, you are welcome to use a pen or differently coloured pencils that I provide.”

Appendix 3

Survey call and questions

Survey on close relationships among LGBTQ people in Estonia

Dear participant,

My name is Raili Uibo and I'm a PhD student in Gender Studies at Södertörn University in Sweden. I'm part of an international research project called "Queer(y)ing kinship in the Baltic region", which focuses on LGBTQ people's families and kinship. My interest lies in studying how LGBTQ people in Estonia are making close relationships. There is no such study done in Estonia, so by taking your time to reply to the questions you will be helping to create new knowledge about this important topic.

Please answer as honestly and as openly as possible. The survey is anonymous, and your personal identity will not be disclosed in any way. Answering the survey will take around 20 minutes.

The survey can be filled in 3 different languages: English, Russian and Estonian. In order to display the survey in the respective languages please choose the following language options from the upper right corner:

For Estonian language - choose the option of "Français"

For Russian language - choose the option of "Español"

For English language- choose the option of "English"

(Due to technical limitations it was not possible to add the correct language buttons for Russian and Estonian. But the questions themselves are translated into the respective languages).

Should you have any further questions or concerns then please contact me at raili.uibo@sh.se

BACKGROUND INFO¹

1. How old are you?

- Younger than 18 years
- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 66-75
- 76 years or older

¹ All the questions, except for the ones with open-ended answers, included the possibility to add a comment in the form of written text. Some questions only appeared if a particular answer was provided, whereas some others were hidden due to the same reason. E.g. If a person answered that they did not have close contact with any children, they did not receive further questions on that matter.

2. Which word(s) do you use for describing your gender identity? Please choose all that apply.

- Transgender person (does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth)
- Cisgender person (does identify with the gender they were assigned at birth)
- Non-binary
- Intergender
- Queer
- Woman
- Man
- Other (please specify)
- I use no words for specifying my gender identity

3. Which word(s) do you use for describing your sexual identity? Please choose all that apply

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Pansexual
- Other (please specify)
- I use no words for specifying my sexual identity

4. What is your first language? (Write all that apply)

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

5. Who do you live with?

- With other people
- I live alone

6. What is your relationship to that person/these people you are living with? (E.g. roommate, partner, child)

7. Are you satisfied with your current living arrangement in terms of who you are living with? Why or why not?

8. In the coming 5 years, who would you ideally be living with?

CLOSENESS AND SUPPORT

9. Who do you consider to be the closest people to you? What is your relationship to them?

10. Who do you consider to be part of your family?

11. Who do you first turn to in the following situations?

	Friend(s)	Partner(s)	Mother(s)	Father(s)	Sibling(s)	Another person (Please specify)	Nobody
When you need care during sickness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>					
When you need financial help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>					
When you need practical help (e.g. DIY, moving)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>					
When you seek understanding and comfort	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>					
When you want to have fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>					

12. Who do you celebrate the following holidays with? Choose all that apply

	Friend(s)	Partner(s)	Mother(s)	Father(s)	Sibling(s)	Alone	Another person (please specify in the comments)	I don't celebrate this holiday
Birthday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Christmas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Midsummer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Independence Day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
New Year's Eve	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Valentine's Day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Shrove Tuesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Easter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Walpurgis Night	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
All Saints Day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						

13. If you found out that you had a terminable illness, who would you pass on your funds and belongings to?

14. Similarly, if you were to die tomorrow, who would entrust with taking care of your child(ren) or pet(s)? (If you have any)

15. Which of the following relationships would you call a family? Choose all that apply.

- Same-sex couple without children
- Same-sex couple with children
- Straight couple without children
- Straight couple with children
- More than 2 people raising children
- More than 2 people in a romantic relationship
- Single mother
- Single father
- Married woman and a man with children
- Married woman and a man without children

FAMILY OF ORIGIN

16. Are you in touch with your family of origin? (Family of origin is the collection of significant people who surrounded you when you were growing up)

- Yes
- No

17. What is your relation to them?

18. Why are you not in touch with them?

19. How often do you meet your family of origin? Provide answers for the family members you do have and choose not applicable in case there is no such member.

(If you have been raised by step-family, adoptive family, foster family, in an orphanage etc., please do also specify that below)

	Several times a week	Every week	Several times a month	Several times a year	One or less times a year	Not applicable
Mother(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Father(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Brother(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Sister(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Uncle(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Aunt(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Niece(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Nephew(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Grandmother(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Grandfather(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Cousin(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other (Please specify in comments)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				

20. What has meeting with those members of your family of origin added or taken away from your life?

21. Who in your family of origin knows of your LGBTQ identity? Provide answers for the family members you do have and choose not applicable in case there is no such member.

(If you have been raised by step-family, adoptive family, foster family, in an orphanage etc., please do also specify that below)

	Yes	No	I don't know	Not Applicable
Mother(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Father(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sister(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brother(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uncle(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Aunt(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grandmother(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grandfather(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Niece(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nephew(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cousin(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others (please specify in the comments)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

LGBTQ COMMUNITY

22. Have you sought contact with other LGBTQ people?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- I have thought about it but not acted upon it yet

23. Why did you seek such contact?

24. Why did you not seek such contact?

25. Where have you got to know other LGBTQ people? Choose all that apply

- Internet
- Bars/clubs/restaurants
- Through common acquaintances
- On the street/in public
- At a political event
- At an event organised for LGBTQ people
- Other (please specify)

26. Have you ever felt excluded among other LGBTQ people?

- Yes
- No

27. In which situations and how have you been excluded among other LGBTQ people?

28. Have you ever experienced anybody else being excluded among other LGBTQ people? How and in which situations?

29. Have you been active in the LGBTQ community?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- I have thought about it but not acted upon it yet

30. Have you been participating in any LGBTQ-themed organised events?

- Attended Pride
- Volunteering
- Signed a petition
- Donated money
- Other (please specify in the comments)

31. Why (or why not) is Pride important in Estonia?

32. What would be the most important problems to be solved in relation to LGBTQ people in Estonia?

CHILDREN

33. Are there any children that you care about and are close to?

- Yes
- No

34. Please describe your relation to these children (e.g. I am a grandfather, schoolteacher, friend of the parent, mother etc).

35. How often do you spend time with this child/these children?

- Every day
- Some days a week
- Some hours a week
- Every other week
- Regularly, but not every week (e.g. holidays, vacations, children of friends)
- I don't spend time with children very regularly

36. What kind of activities do you do together with them?

37. What has spending time with children added to your life?

38. Has spending time with children affected your health in any way? Positively or negatively?

39. Do you have any child(ren) for whom you are a parent? Choose all that apply

- I do not have any children
- I am a biological parent
- I am an adoptive parent
- I am a social parent (I don't have a biological bond with the child, but I am fulfilling the social role of a parent)
- Another situation (please specify)

40. Why do you have children?

41. When did you become a parent? Choose all that apply

- I had a child from my previous heterosexual relationship
- I had a child from my previous non-heterosexual relationship
- My current partner has a child from a previous relationship
- I became a parent during my current relationship
- Other (please specify in the comments)

42. How did you become a parent? Choose all that apply

- Artificial insemination in a clinic
- Artificial insemination at home
- Surrogacy
- Sexual intercourse
- Other (please specify)

43. Who else except for you is active in the child's upbringing?

44. Why have you preferred (or ended up) not having children?

45. Do you plan to have children in the future?

- No, I don't plan to have children
- Yes, in the coming 5 years
- Yes, in the coming 10-15 years
- I don't know

46. What are your future visions about parenthood? Choose all that apply

- I could imagine becoming a single parent voluntarily
- I can imagine sharing parenthood with another person
- I can imagine sharing parenthood with several other persons
- I can imagine my child having more than one home (e.g. alternating every other week)
- Some other solution (please specify)

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

47. How many romantic relationships have you had?

- None
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-7
- 8-10
- More than 10

48. What do you value most in your romantic relationships?

49. How important is it to have a romantic relationship?

- Very important
- Important
- Not so important
- Unimportant
- Very unimportant
- I don't know

50. What is your current relationship status

- Single
- I'm in an open relationship
- I'm in a monogamous relationship
- I have several relationships
- Widow/widower
- Other (please specify in the comments)

51. How happy are you with your relationship status? Please elaborate below

52. How long has your current relationship lasted?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 5-7 years
- 8-10 years
- More than 10 years

53. Have you legitimised your relationship with your partner in any formal or symbolic way? Choose all that apply

- No symbolic or formal legitimisation
- Individual symbolic act (proposal, exchange of rings, oath etc)
- Registered partnership
- Marriage abroad
- Symbolic social act (in presence of other people, humanist wedding etc)
- Another way (please specify)

54. Are you planning to enter into registered partnership in the future?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

55. What were the main reasons for entering registered partnership?

56. Why would you like to enter into registered partnership?

57. Why would you not want to enter into registered partnership?

58. Have you experienced any problems due to the fact that you are not in a legally recognised relationship such as registered partnership?

- Yes
- No

59. What kind of problems have you experienced?

BACKGROUND INFO

60. What is your current main place of residency?

- Tallinn
- Tartu
- Narva
- Town with 20000-40000 inhabitants
- Town with 5000-20000 inhabitants
- An area with less than 5000 inhabitants
- I don't live in Estonia (if you wish to specify your location, please write in the comments)

61. Have you or any close person migrated from Estonia?

	Yes	No
One or more of my parents migrated from Estonia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I migrated from Estonia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My partner(s) migrated from Estonia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some other close person migrated from Estonia (please specify in the comments)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

62. Where did you/they emigrate to?

63. What was the reason for emigration?

64. Have you or any close person migrated to Estonia?

Yes No

One or more of my parents migrated to Estonia

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I migrated to Estonia

My partner(s) migrated to Estonia

Some other close person (lähedane) migrated to Estonia (please specify in the comments)

65. Where did you/they emigrate from?

66. What has the migration experience been like?

67. What is your educational background?

- Elementary school
- High school
- Vocational school
- Bachelor
- Master
- PhD or equivalent

68. What is your current main occupational status? Please choose all that apply.

- Unemployed
- Employed (part-time or full-time)
- Student
- Retired
- On parental leave
- On sick leave
- Freelancer
- Entrepreneur
- Other (Please specify in the comments)

69. Which field are you working in?

- Arts and entertainment
- Administration & governance
- Agriculture & food
- Business & communication
- Education
- Industrial & manufacturing
- Law enforcement and armed forces
- Science & technology
- Healthcare & medicine
- Service industry
- Non-profit

70. What is your current monthly income before tax? (In other words, how much do you receive in salary or social benefits, such as pension, parental or sick leave benefits etc).

- Less than 470 EUR
- 470-750 EUR
- 750-1100 EUR
- 1100-1500 EUR
- 1500-2000 EUR
- 2000-2500 EUR
- More than 2500 EUR
- I don't have any income whatsoever

71. Which of the following statements would closest characterise your beliefs? Choose all that apply

- I don't believe in God
- I'm Protestant
- I'm Orthodox Christian
- I'm Catholic
- I'm Maausk (native faith) practitioner
- I believe in some form of higher being
- Other (please specify in the comments)

72. Is there anything else important that you would like to share about your close relationships that has not been asked?

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What if the starting point of investigating queer lives and relationships is not the “family” but a more broadly defined set of close relationships that queers themselves find central and meaningful in their life? This is the premise of this thesis that investigates queer relationship and kinship practices in contemporary Estonia. Drawing on qualitative material ranging from ethnographic engagements to interviews, close relationship maps and a qualitative online survey, the thesis provides a detailed investigation into the making and breaking of bonds, and into the opaque ways in which queerness is negotiated in this process. The study focuses on care practices that in many ways form the base of close relationships. It also explores the ways in which the social, economic and cultural circumstances of contemporary Estonia shape the construction of close relationships and practices of care.

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