Metal in Three Modes of Enmity: Political, Musical, Cosmic

Gerd Bayer ed. 2009. *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*. Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Steve Waksman. 2009. *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Nicola Masciandaro ed. 2010. *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Sympoisum 1*. Charleston: CreateSpace.

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Scholarship on metal always seems a little bewildered or put on the defensive by the genre's profoundly adversarial nature. Metal certainly opposes something, and to a large extent is defined by this opposition rather than by any obvious message of its own, but what exactly does it oppose? Certain political values? Certain kinds of music? Certain religions? Or does it represent a vague opposition to "things in general;" is it the music of rebellion without a cause? The short answer, judging by the academic treatments under review here as well as earlier attempts to censor it, is that it opposes whatever its interpreters want it to. Thus its critics site accusations of racism, sexism, and homophobia, while supporters praise its supposed opposition to capitalism, strict gender roles, and even the concept of order itself. Many of these metal partisans, especially those whose primary concern is the rehabilitation of an art form often perceived as ethically problematic, spend so much time explaining away its disturbing features that they ignore the possibility that disturbance is precisely the point. Even those who do recognize disturbance as a fundamental aim of metal and call attention to the specific forms that that disturbance takes, such as expressions of animosity toward certain groups of people, often fail to explain why listeners are attracted to these sounds. That the appeal doesn't lie only in bigotry is clear from the growing number of fans who come from the very groups that have been the most stigmatized in metal—women, ethnic minorities, religiously observant people, and queer women and men.

The following essay will not fully explain either the genre's lust for enmity in all forms or the perverse attraction that this spirit of antagonism holds for fans, but it will at least review current scholarly thought on these subjects and suggest some possible avenues for future exploration. I will

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provide a brief overview of the scholarship that first legitimized the study of metal and consider three recent books that each turn the notion of metal's enmity toward other things into an analytical methodology; that is, they attempt to define it by what it is not and by what it opposes. The books cast metal in opposition to certain political values, kinds of music, and religious/philosophical worldviews. Out of our discussion—imbued with the recognition that metal exists only in opposition, enmity, and negativity toward something else—will emerge a sense of the elusiveness of this art form as a subject of inquiry and the difficulty of finding a methodological approach that fully captures its strangeness, darkness, and hostility toward analysis.

Metal's transmission from the stage to the page began with lurid biographies and autobiographies of performers, which continue to be churned out by both mainstream and, increasingly, vanity presses. Like other popular music genres, it entered the academy under the aegis of sociology rather than musicology, since the validation of a set of sounds as music worthy of study cannot occur until the people who create and consume them are taken seriously. The early work of sociologists Donna Gaines and Deena Weinstein in *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids* (1991) and *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (1991) thus painted a sympathetic portrait of the typical disaffected, middle-to-lower class, white teenage male fan who had so alarmed adult elites that in 1985 a bipartisan committee founded the infamous Parents Music Resource Center in an attempt to censor metal (as well as hip hop and some pop) for their supposedly damaging effect on the morals of American youth. These works represent the beginning of a sustained sociological and ethnographic interest in metal, an interest that so far has outstripped that of musicologists.

The first and still definitive musicological treatment, Robert Walser's *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993), walked the line between justification and critique as gracefully as was possible in the charged rhetorical climate that surrounded metal in the early nineties. Walser accomplished this by analyzing metal with the then-fashionable and still effective "new musicology" approach, which postulates that ideology is encoded in the very structure of the music. Although Walser at times makes overly definitive pronouncements about the "meaning" of tiny musical gestures, his basic claims remain compelling: high volume and distortion reflect a general preoccupation with power and intensity; the virtuosic guitar solos that explode out of conventional verse-chorus structure reflect general values of assertiveness and rebellion; the reliance on the Aeolian and Phrygian modes reflect a focus on negative emotion. The book also raised the crucial issue of metal performers' and fans' masculinity,

calling attention to the genre's curious combination of macho swagger and effeminate visuals. Eighties glam metal, he argues, engaged in a subversion of traditional gender roles whereby male musicians adopted traits of sexually provocative women's dress and performance (such as long teased hair, elaborate makeup, and sinuous dance moves) in order to question conventional masculine norms.

Yet though his argument has merit, I would contend that this aesthetic wasn't as androgynous and benign as Walser makes it sound. In some ways, it deconstructed masculinity only to reconstruct it more solidly than ever: it was not a wholesale rejection of masculine values or an espousal of feminine ones, but an adoption of the superficial trappings of sexualized femininity as a means of dramatizing a preference for a certain kind of objectified woman (the stripper or groupie, endlessly celebrated by Mötley Crüe, Guns N' Roses, and others). Though Walser is sensitive to the ways in which metal musicians recapitulate broader sexist discourses, the book's gender-deconstruction argument risks casting metal in a "progressive" light, as a force that was on what academics tend to consider the good side of the culture wars. Walser generally reined in the impulse to whitewash, but his successors have not always been so nuanced.

Whatever claims to progressiveness attributed to metal during its glam phase were negated with the rise of extreme metal (an umbrella term that includes abrasive subgenres such as thrash metal, death metal, and black metal). When death metal bands such as Cannibal Corpse began singing about the pleasures of torture and the early 1990s Norwegian black metal scene exploded in real-life murderous violence, it seemed that Walser's book had come along at exactly the wrong time: just when he, along with Gaines and Weinstein, had validated metal within the academy, the genre found new ways to appall. As earlier heavy metal became assimilated into the musical and intellectual mainstream, extreme metal arose as a defiant response to such co-option and began its perpetual quest for what Georges Bataille called the "extreme limit," a state of such intensity, irrationality, and unacceptability that no conventional discourse could ever hope to pin it down.

Perhaps because extreme metal still bears this aura of incomprehensibility and bad taste, the majority of recent scholarship has continued to focus on music from the '70s and '80s, which has lost much of its shock value and can readily be assimilated through conventional approaches. The first book under review, Gerd Bayer's edited collection of essays *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, focuses on the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM), which arose in the wake of Black Sabbath and included bands such as Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Motörhead, Def Leppard, and Venom. The tremendous problem facing anyone who wants to write a book about the NWOBHM is

that the genre encompassed too many different musical styles and lyrical preoccupations to allow for many valid generalizations about it on the whole (though some of these writers go ahead and generalize anyway). The bands that are grouped under the NWOBHM umbrella today share little more than their emergence in the late 1970s, their British working-class background, and their visual aesthetic of long hair and a denim and leather wardrobe. Otherwise, they range from the Satanist proto-black metal of Venom to the glam party-rock of Def Leppard. Given the diffuse nature of the movement's music and lyrical concerns, almost the only thing that can be generalized about is its politics—and indeed, many of the contributors focus on that topic, trying their best to position metal as politically progressive by placing it in opposition to misogyny and working-class oppression. These essays portray metal in what might be called the "political" mode of enmity, and illustrate the first of the three methodological approaches reviewed here.

One valuable as well as problematic essay that exemplifies the book's strong desire to rehabilitate metal comes from Deena Weinstein, who in "The Empowering Masculinity of British Heavy Metal" pursues the theme of constructed masculinity, arguing that the NWOBHM (narrowly represented by Iron Maiden and Judas Priest) was no more misogynistic than mainstream rock, despite metal's unsavory reputation. As a backdrop to her argument, I would point out that British metal does share certain masculinist attitudes that inform much rock music production, such as the belief that rock expresses a male sensibility and should be confrontational in a specifically masculine way. "Rock music should be gross: that's the fun of it and its attraction," says Bruce Dickinson of Iron Maiden. "It gets up and drops its trousers. Not everybody wants to be Sinéad O'Connor all the time" (in Jeffries 1991). In keeping with the stereotype of confrontation as a male behavioral strategy and conciliation as a female one, those who adhere to rock's code of authenticity shun the euphonious, soothing sounds associated with pop music written by or at least for women and instead cultivate a harsh, raucous style. Insofar as British metal musicians embrace Dickinson's belligerent definition of rock, they support the dominant narrative of popular music, which champions rock and its subgenres as a male discursive space.

But, with this aside, the most striking thing about the NWOBHM's attempts to construct masculinity, as Weinstein points out, is how little its conception of masculinity is predicated on the overt sexism of denigrating or objectifying women, in contrast to many American bands from the same period such as Mötley Crüe and Guns N' Roses. Rather, it more or less ignores women and attempts instead to depict and impart a type of power that valorizes certain characteristics that happen to be widely perceived as

masculine, such as strength, boldness, and energy. Weinstein doesn't sufficiently consider the negative implications of this erasure of women from metal discourse, and her argument would have been more complete if she had explored the few but salient instances of disparagement of women in these bands' back catalogs. Her approving mention of Nietzsche as the philosophical precursor of British heavy metal is particularly troubling, since his entire edifice was explicitly predicated on contempt for women (much more so than British metal, in fact). Nevertheless, the essay is groundbreaking because it advances the overdue thesis that the NWOBHM's preoccupation with a masculine-derived ideal of athletic physical power is not in and of itself pernicious to women; indeed, female fans may even experience it as empowering. After all, many women share the common male desire to feel powerful in the culturally masculine sense of having athletic prowess. Although heavy metal's celebration of adrenaline-infused power is derived from an ideal of masculine physicality, this power, once translated into music, can be appropriated by female as well as male fans.

But why, one might ask, is heavy metal obsessed with feeling powerful in the first place? Many of the essays in this book argue that the feeling of potency is sought as a tool with which to overcome the economic oppression that lurks around the corner in this music, created as it was by men who identified strongly with the working class. The authors do not, however, anticipate the dark side of this quest for power, which would only become obvious with the rise of extreme metal: power can also be used to assert mastery over others and engage in oppression oneself. The NWOBHM gives us a foretaste of this trend in songs like Judas Priest's "Electric Eye," in which the narrator takes on the identity of an omnipotent governmental entity that is watching its victims' every move. Depiction of, and perhaps identification with, the imagination of the oppressor would henceforth become one of metal's most common tropes.

The theme of oppression gets more sustained treatment in Ryan H. Moore's excellent essay "The Unmaking of the English Working Class: Deindustrialization, Reification and the Origins of Heavy Metal," a downbeat look at the ways in which British metal's fantastic and supposedly escapist lyrics express working-class frustration—but failed to mobilize its fans to political action. Drawing on Lukács' development of Marx's concept of reification, he argues that the decline of the British manufacturing sector in the 1970s and '80s left the working class with a sense that they were at the mercy of impersonal social forces beyond their comprehension or control: "They knew they were screwed, but it was hard to articulate why" (156). Heavy metal reifies these forces into mysterious, supernatural beings that perpetrate violence and cannot be resisted through conventional (i.e.

political) means. Instead, metal seeks to empower its fans through the ritual evocation of magical energies that can be used to resist these "superhuman" oppressors. The indirectness (and, for Moore, ineffectiveness) of this strategy "expresses a mystification of power relations, a general sense of confusion about how social power subjugates young people and the working-class and how exploited peoples can take power and resist their exploiters" (148).

Other contributors to this volume, including Magnus Nilsson and Laura Wiebe Taylor, see more potential for real resistance, but given that the major NWOBHM bands have all spread far beyond their initial working-class fanbase and are near the end of their careers with no successors who particularly identify with the working class, it seems unlikely that this musical culture will play a major role in any revitalization of the labor movement. If anything, the worldwide success of bands such as Iron Maiden and Black Sabbath, which cuts across all class boundaries, suggests that their visions of dystopia and magical resistance are appealing primarily for other reasons besides that of class- consciousness. Instead of trying to mobilize the music of thirty-year-old bands for current political causes, it might be worthwhile to explore why else fans are drawn to occult imagery and representations of violence.

One thing that fans might be getting out of this sinister music is the rare opportunity to fantasize about an unacceptable scenario and find a perverse delight in it. (See Iron Maiden's "The Number Of The Beast," in which the narrator dreads being possessed by the devil but gradually succumbs, against his will, to the attractiveness of the idea and ends by singing as the devil.) None of the contributors to this book explore such dark psychological terrain, though at least the topic of dystopian fantasy gets treated in Taylor's "Images of Human-Wrought Despair and Destruction: social critique in British apocalyptic and dystopian metal," which links the genre with the culture of sci-fi dystopian literature and movies. Bands such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest critique various aspects of modern society, including surveillance, war, mechanization, social conformity, and totalitarianism: they create visions of despair and destruction, pointing out problems but rarely offering solutions. This has frequently led to the charge that their music is nihilistic; however, the depiction of dystopia is useful in that it may motivate people to change what they don't like about the world. Furthermore, within the overall narrative of nihilism, there are counter-messages of "defiance and hope" (93) such as the guitar solos that Walser analyzed as a rebellion against the claustrophobic confines and depressing lyrics of the verses and refrains. Again, working-class frustration is an unspoken motivator for these dystopian fantasies, but for this reviewer the essay still tries too hard to cast metal as a progressive force, as a genre that critiques violence and

oppression rather than reveling in them as sources of intense sensation. I can't help thinking, for example, that the infectious refrain of "Electric Eye" and Rob Halford's masterful performance of it, which sets him up as a rock star/government surveillance agent observing and manipulating an adoring crowd, expresses as much a gleeful fascination with totalitarian power as disapproval of it.

Because none of the contributors to *Heavy Metal* are music scholars, they generally locate a given song's ideas or "message" in the lyrics and avoid engaging with the actual sound of the music as a locus of meaning. This book is symptomatic of the reality that metal has drawn much more attention from fields outside of music scholarship. Scholars from a variety of disciplines are interested in metal culture, lyrical tropes, political content, and philosophical ideas, but few musicologists have taken it upon themselves to contribute their expertise to these discussions. That is what makes Steve Waksman's *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* so refreshing, as it is full of lucid and lively descriptions of musical sound and structure. Although Walser and other formally trained musicologists such as Esa Lilja have discussed metal's harmony, melody, and form, and Glenn Pillsbury has tackled its rhythm, the field has only begun to explore metal's most striking feature—timbre. Waksman has already explored timbre in the more general context of rock in *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (1999), a critical organology of the electric guitar that deals with technology, industrial practice, marketing, and musicians as part of the evolution of the instrument. In *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, his concise and not excessively technical analysis sheds light on particular types and degrees of sonic distortion. For example, on doom metal band Trouble's "Psychotic Reaction" he writes, "The opening riff is a rather stock pentatonic figure in F-sharp, played in the lower midrange of the guitar, that derives its propulsion from the sharp, treble-laden quality of the fuzz" (61). This timbre-centric approach holds exciting possibilities for the study of all metal, especially extreme metal (though Waksman's book doesn't go deep into that territory, ending as it does with Metallica, Venom and the alt-rock revolution), because as guitars became increasingly downtuned and/or lo-fi in the 1990s, melody and harmony and pitch itself became increasingly difficult to detect through the registral extremes and sheer timbral complexity of the music. Traditional melodic and harmonic analysis of this more distorted music would probably be less useful than an analysis that emphasized timbre.

This Ain't The Summer of Love is also innovative in its approach to the idea of metal as a genre. Rather than seeing it as simply an outgrowth of hard rock with a sprinkling of Baroque sequences and Romantic virtuosity

(the Walser narrative, which is true as far as it goes), Waksman portrays it as being defined at almost every stage of its development through its conflict with punk (and vice versa). The book captures metal in what might be called the "musical" mode of enmity and provides a more balanced and historically aware approach than the strained efforts of Bayer et al. to reclaim metal for the current political left. Entire books remain to be written about metal's antagonistic relationship with other musical genres, such as pop and especially African American-derived musics. The violence of the metal-punk conflict is brilliantly captured in the opening of the *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, which details an exchange between fans of each genre that was published in the Letters to the Editor section of several issues of *Creem* magazine in 1980, in which each side repeatedly hurled homophobic slurs at the other. Waksman is sensitive to the ways in which this conflict of genres intersected with a contest over "authentic" masculinity: at stake was not simply musical style, but male fans' sense of how their musical preferences reflected and established their own masculine identity. The heavy investment of both of these genres in the performance of masculinity has tended to result in the marginalization of female performers—a marginalization replicated in genre histories. Given the lack of scholarship on these performers, the extensive discussion of the all-female band the Runaways in chapter three is particularly welcome. Like much of metal, theirs is a story of disintegration and irreconcilable opposing forces: caught between Joan Jett's stripped-down, punk-style rhythm guitar and Lita Ford's virtuosic metal lead guitar, between the demand to embody a heretofore masculine brand of rebellious self-assertion and the opposing demand to embody feminine sexual tractability, the Runaways' career demonstrates the pitfalls of blurring genre and gender roles. Neither fish nor fowl, they fizzled.

If other bands more successfully navigated the no-man's-land (and certainly no-woman's-land) between punk and metal, many of them have nevertheless largely been excluded from scholarly treatments of either genre because they don't quite fit either one. This book sets out to reclaim them. What emerges is an alternate history of an altogether new genre, punk-metal crossover, which has its own canon: Grand Funk Railroad instead of Led Zeppelin, the Dictators and the Runaways instead of the Sex Pistols, Mötorhead and Venom instead of Judas Priest. This approach also forces the reader to rethink assumptions about bands that are widely thought of today as more or less definitively metal or punk (or something else): the Stooges, Iron Maiden, Black Flag, Metallica, and Nirvana are here re-conceptualized as punk-metal crossovers—as indeed they were perceived at certain points in their careers, according to the numerous rock journalism primary sources that Waksman cites. The book superbly illustrates the limitations

of conventional genre histories and the opportunities that arise when one deconstructs them. The fact that new paradigms and genre designations emerge from this process should be no deterrent.

If these bands initially occupied a middle ground between punk and metal, who decided to classify them definitively as one or the other? Not the artists themselves. As many writers have observed, generic designations are more useful to the music industry than to performers. In this case, the distinction between metal and punk was largely created by music critics and marketing by independent record labels such as SST, Metal Blade, and Sub Pop. All of these labels produced music that could be heard as either metal or punk but would come to be characterized by the press and listening publics as completely different genres. SST was associated with early hardcore acts such as Black Flag; Metal Blade supplied hardcore-influenced thrash and speed metal such as Metallica and Slayer; Sub Pop purveyed the "Seattle sound" of bands such as Soundgarden. Though these independent labels were more dependent on the mainstream music industry than their founders would likely admit, they played a crucial role in marketing regional "sounds" that were initially ignored by the larger industry, and would later crystallize into widely popular genres: for example, the "Seattle sound," which became grunge. This kind of attention to record labels and their role as tastemakers is long overdue in musicology, which has tended to focus on metal musicians and fans but not on the industry that mediates between them.

The book unfolds chronologically as a series of focused case studies of bands and labels ranging from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. (One can only hope that Waksman will write a follow up book about the 1990s and 2000s flourishing of punk-metal crossover genres such as grindcore and metalcore). Each case study discusses not only musical style, but also reception by critics and the experience of live concerts. The focus on live concerts is particularly gratifying insofar as metal and punk foreground the live show as the most immediate way of experiencing the music and the community associated with it. Several of the bands featured here fundamentally changed the dynamics of performance and interaction with the audience, as well as audience expectations about performers' images. Thus we read about how Grand Funk Railroad rejected the highbrow, virtuosic tendencies of '70s rock and created their own brand of lowest-common-denominator arena rock, in which the performers are seen less as "shamans" and more as "pals" (46), how Alice Cooper and especially the Stooges reacted against GFR's feel-good ethos with their antagonistic stage personas, how the Runaways tapped into nostalgia for a more youth-centered rock culture and in doing so created a new rocker image of the teenage girl gone bad, how Metallica's faster and more percussive style led to the culture of head-banging, and how peripheral

exposure to metal and punk shaped consumer tastes so as to facilitate the commercial explosion of grunge, which "was at once inviting and exclusive; it generated a sense of mass belonging that hinged on its capacity for highlighting the expressive force of anger and introspection" (301).

These discussions reveal the tension in both genres between the desire for individuality, as expressed through virtuosity and flamboyant stage personas, and the desire for loss of self within the collective, as expressed through the communal nature of live performance, the stripping away of virtuosity, and the phenomenon of noise itself. Waksman rather philosophically describes it as a "simultaneous drive toward differentiation and unity . . . The desire for belonging in rock has continually been set against the longing to be set apart" (307). The conflict between these desires would only sharpen with extreme metal; it is one of the main themes of the final book reviewed here, Nicola Masciandaro's volume of edited essays, *Hideous Gnosis*, the product of a whimsical conference/ritual that took place—with me in attendance—in Brooklyn's frosty, dark bar, Public Assembly, in November 2009.

It was a small gathering of black-clad academics, many of them from the UK, who knew each other already from the English department circuit and previous metal conferences. They had a bashful and eager air, as though they felt the whole business was a little harebrained but nevertheless happy occasion, a meeting of minds. I made the acquaintance of one of the few non-academics there, a fiction writer who had seen a flyer and thought that something called "Hideous Gnosis" might provide good material for a story.

The history of black metal is stranger than fiction. An obscure subgenre of extreme metal that began mostly in Scandinavia in the late 1980s, it was launched into the wider metal community and briefly into public consciousness in the early 1990s after a spate of suicides, church burnings, and murders within the scene. The most notorious of these musicians is Varg Vikernes, of the one-man band Burzum, who was convicted of arson and murder and became something of a martyr figure, which in turn inspired many others to take up his brand of lo-fi, despairing, misanthropic music. His racist statements made from within prison have aroused even more ire than his crimes, but in the end they too are part of his appeal for some fans, and the genre that arose in his wake has continued to traffic in themes of nationalism, fascism, and racism. Black metal is thus forbidding even by the standards of extreme metal, and those who expect to walk away from reading *Hideous Gnosis* with a tidy summary of the genre's great issues will likely be disappointed. The goal (and effect) of the essays is not so much to shed light on their subject as to plunge it into even greater darkness; that is, to suggest that black metal is far more complex, conflicted, and philosophi-

cally rich than many of its detractors—and, more importantly, its fans and creators—realize. The purpose is not to "'address' or 'solve' [these puzzles], but to intensify and exacerbate [them] . . . to bask in the speculative glory of the problematic" (267). One result of this desire to problematize rather than solve is that the essays themselves read more like lyrical perorations or choleric manifestos than typical examples of contemporary scholarship. Yet somehow, more than most other academic treatments of metal, this artfully messy volume finds a discourse that productively engages with a genre that resists discourse.

Perhaps even more than other metal subgenres, black metal is predicated on an opposition to whatever its practitioners see as the prevailing order or worldview of the day as articulated by public institutions such as governments and churches. But because opposition works through inversion and reversal, this means that black metal remains formally dependent on that which it is opposing, much as a Satanist Black Mass of the nineteenth century inversely replicated the Catholic mass in all particulars. The prevailing order that black metal most famously combated in its early stages was that of Christianity, but although the genre earned a reputation for being satanic, in many ways it remained dependent on Christian thought, ritual, aesthetics, and strategies. Thus Erik Butler's "The Counter-Reformation in Stone and Metal: Spiritual Substances" calls attention to various morphological similarities between black metal and Reformation-era Roman Catholicism, including the genre's revival of what its practitioners saw as the purity, rigor, asceticism, and orthodoxy of early metal in the face of the perceived heresy of commodified, mainstream '80s metal.

Butler raises many points that would benefit from further exploration. For instance, how and why did this morphologically Catholic art form arise in Scandinavia, which is overwhelmingly secular/Protestant? The appeal of Catholicism for black metal musicians certainly doesn't lie in its doctrines. Might it lie in the Catholic Church's "irrational" taste for mysticism and elaborate, grisly rituals of sacrifice, which contrast sharply with both institutionalized Protestantism and the post-Enlightenment rational worldview that together undergird modern European society? A metal concert is nothing if not a gory ritual, and it may be that black metal musicians find the Church—one of the most uncompromisingly old-fashioned institutions of our time—a treasure trove of aesthetic strategies for their own revolt against modern society. Even while decrying its beliefs and praising the devil, they have embraced its trappings, positioning themselves in opposition to rational, secular modernity through a ritual, Satanist appropriation of Catholicism. In this connection, can other aspects of black metal be related to Catholic praxis? For example, can black metal's aestheticization of pain as

a means of giving the listener a sense of communion with cosmic forces be linked to the Catholic tradition of meditation on intense pain as a means of communing with God? Finally, to what extent is black metal still dependent on Catholic or broader Christian modes of thought? Many of the essays, including Aspasia Stephanou's "Playing Wolves and Red Riding Hoods in Black Metal" and Niall Scott's "Black Confessions and Absu-lution," suggest that Christianity is still a primary force that the genre opposes and relies on, while others, such as Joseph Russo's "Perpetue Putesco—Perpetually I Putrefy" argue that some black metal has outgrown both its opposition to and aesthetic dependence on Christianity.

If Christianity represents (or represented) a prevailing order that must be combated and exploited, another prevailing order that black metal often opposes yet benefits from is political: the modern democratic nation-state. This book's discussion of what, for many, is the hot-button issue of black metal—its fixation on fascism—raises more questions than it answers. No one has ever explained to the satisfaction of outsiders exactly why black metallers are so drawn to fascism and, in some cases, racism, and why the genre rose to prominence in Norway, a country whose socialist trappings, in the form of generous unemployment benefits, are precisely what gave these musicians the leisure to create their music in the first place. In this sense, National Socialist black metal is often also an unacknowledged Social Democratic black metal, as sociologist Asbjørn Dyrendal has quipped (in Kahn-Harris 2007:2). Certainly many Norwegians (and not just black metallers) are angered at the growing number of ethnically diverse immigrants, but fascism would seem a poor solution for these musicians, if only because a fascist regime would likely have less tolerance than the current democratic one for their unpopular art form.

Scholarly discussion of this puzzlingly self-destructive fascist impulse, when it appears at all, often merely describes the far-right rhetoric of individual musicians without exploring its connection to their music, its relevance to the scene as a whole, or its links to larger social forces. The first trade book on black metal, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998), features several interviews on the subject but provides little in the way of critical perspective or explanation. Early scholarship might be forgiven for not addressing every factor in black metal's emergence and every facet of its ideological underpinnings, but the inability or reluctance to engage with the genre's politics continues to this day. See, for example, *Until the Light Takes Us* (2009), a documentary which features numerous interviews with black metal's founding fathers, including Varg Vikernes. The film pointedly avoids difficult questions, instead allowing Vikernes to

hold forth on less incendiary subjects such as the evils of globalism and his interest in Nordic paganism.

Hideous Gnosis makes a more sustained attempt to explain the appeal of fascism. Most of the contributions touch on the ways in which black metal represents a rejection of modern life, including mass consumption and the apparent leveling of social hierarchies that together have resulted in what black metallers see as a culture of undifferentiated mass mediocrity. Benjamin Noys in "Remain True to the Earth: Remarks on the Politics of Black Metal" relates black metal's fascist tendencies to Nietzsche's grand politics, which some have interpreted as championing dominance by an aristocracy of supermen, and Carl Schmitt's theory of the partisan or insurgent, which champions a type of fighter who fights not for one abstract ideology against another abstract ideology, but for his land against those who would take his land (in Nietzsche 1968 and Schmitt 2007). This type of fighter remains "grounded"; he knows exactly what he stands for and what his enemy stands for. Black metallers, according to Noys, are drawn to the romantic nationalism of the warrior fighting for his land because this imagery gives them a way to define their nebulous enemy, which, for Noys, is mainly advanced capitalism (but depending on the band one might also suggest the modern liberal-democratic state, Christianity, multiculturalism, and cosmic order) as clear-cut opponents—as Others; in turn, defining their enemies gives them a clearer sense of their own selves.

The fascination with such an anachronistic theme and the idealization of the ancient past at the expense of the (disappointing) present suggests that black metal is a form of reactionary cultural expression akin to many strains of political conservatism which, dismissive of the liberal attitudes toward economics and social questions that gained traction in the late twentieth century, seek inspiration for future policies in a distant, idealized past. In this regard, I would add that black metal is only an extreme instance of a more general turn to a mythologized past in metal. Most subgenres of metal contain significant conservative proclivities despite their origins in the working class. This would explain why British heavy metal didn't inspire its fans to progressive political action, to the dismay of the contributors to *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*. It is no coincidence that metal arose in the era of deindustrialization and affirmative action, when many working-class white men, who along with other white men had been relatively dominant in their professions, began to feel increasingly imperiled by the need to compete with more contenders from other demographics for fewer and fewer jobs. The heroic representative of a dying tradition who fights various Others could seem an appealing if misguided metaphor for people in this position.

But, Noys argues, black metal doesn't just define and attempt to vanquish its enemy; it also attempts, through combat with the enemy, an ambitious redefinition or transformation of the self. (After all, one can't become a glorious superman-warrior without an opponent.) This strategy is ultimately self-defeating, since the genre's enemies are ideological and thus always changing. Constantly evolving past tidy definitions, these elusively abstract opponents refuse to give black metallers the sure sense of self that they crave. Yet the musicians (or rather their fictional avatars in their songs) fight on, with no sign of victory, as their enemies will not disappear any time soon. It is as though the most important thing for them were the struggle itself, not victory as such. In fact, they know they are doomed; albums frequently end with the implied death or subjection of the narrator at the hands of undefined cosmic forces. For Noys, the futility of this struggle does not detract from the aesthetic power of black metal, but rather enhances it by dramatizing its core principles of opposition for its own sake and willingness to put the self as well as others at risk. The extent to which black metal violence is directed against the self has not been so remarked upon in the press, which has focused on musicians' crimes against other people, but I should note that the movement has been associated as much with its practitioners' self-mutilation and suicide as with assaults on others (Moynihan and Søderlind, 45–62).

A similar logic of aesthetically enriching failure emerges from Aspasia Stephanou's "Playing Wolves and Red Riding Hoods in Black Metal," which considers the efforts of female black metal musicians to carve out a space for themselves in the genre and concludes that in their opposition they succumb, willy-nilly, to the dictates of masculine discourse: they must adopt their male counterparts' masculine behavior (which for Stephanou is a capitulation, not a victorious annexation of masculinity à la Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*), over-sexualize themselves, or retreat behind masks into inaccessibility. Yet these tactics do not lessen their artistic achievement. Rather, as with black metal created by men, it is precisely the distortion or loss of the self in the face of overwhelming forces that is the source of the genre's appeal. Stephanou's essay can usefully be compared with Waksman's discussion of the Runaways; both imply that women's sense of self is constantly undermined by the conflict between the demand to compete with men on male terms and the demand to be feminine, where femininity, too, is defined by men. What is peculiarly fascinating about black metal is that its male performers willingly submit to a similar disintegration of the self.

Evan Calder Williams also considers the implications of dismantling the self in "The Headless Horsemen of the Apocalypse," but his reading emphasizes less the loss implicit in this sacrifice than the possibility of

reincarnation in new, different, more interesting forms. Contra Noys, who views black metal as basically an egocentric enterprise, Calder Williams explores the equally strong collectivist strain in black metal, which continually evokes hordes, armies, and packs of wolves but rarely a leader. Insofar as there are leaders, they seem to be mysterious, collective beings drawn from the essences of many different individuals, as in the title of Emperor's song "I Am The Black Wizards." Though Williams avoids drawing any definite political conclusions from this, he clearly sees black metal as embodying a desire for intense, continuous transformation of the self and the community, too unstable to endorse a leader or harden into a well-defined fascism or indeed any political program. This notion is borne out, or at least superficially supported, by leading black metal figures' frequent claims that they don't care about politics and their tendency to undercut their own pro-fascist rhetoric, as when Vikernes said years later of his bigoted prison manifesto that it "was written in anger, while I was young and on isolation [sic]" (Vikernes 2004).

However, the fact that black metal doesn't endorse a specific political program should not lull fans into dismissing this coy, self-subverting, fascist-leaning political apathy as innocuous. Claims of political detachment on the part of cultural elites are misleading insofar as they function as part of the performance of power: it's easy to declare your indifference to politics if the status quo benefits you. Because certain dominant groups, such as white men, are better served by the status quo than other groups, they have the privilege of not caring (or seeming not to care) about politics. And even if black metal musicians are as politically apathetic or amorphous as they claim, not all of their fans are and promoters are: for example, the American label Resistance Records, owned by the white separatist National Alliance, produces and sells black metal along with more overtly neo-Nazi music. Williams' argument is reminiscent of other attempts to reclaim metal for the left—not for labor as in the case of *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, but perhaps for anarchism. It is not altogether compelling as a frame for thinking about Scandinavian black metal, but, as we will see below, it may be more accurate if applied to black metal in America.

What remains unaddressed in the collection is racism, and this is symptomatic of metal studies as a whole. Scholars' avoidance of the topic of racism is a particularly grave oversight in the case of black metal, considering such clear indicators as Vikernes' vocal support of eugenics and racial separatism and the inflammatory statement on the cover of the foundational band Darkthrone's album *Transilvanian Hunger*, which translates as "Norwegian Aryan Black Metal." Given current xenophobic tendencies in many black metal scenes around the world (perhaps most openly on display in the

jingoist lyrics of French band Peste Noire's album *Ballade cuntre lo Anemi Francor*), which indicate that the problem is not limited to a small cabal of Norwegian musicians, it is important that future scholarship in this nascent field address the issue. Questions that need to be answered include: To what extent do the genre's notoriously abstruse lyrics camouflage racist sentiments, and can the average fan hear them through the screaming and language barriers? Why do many fans shrug at the imputations of racism and brush them off as irrelevant to their experience of the music? How do black metal's non-white fans relate to and contextualize this music? Where are, and how powerful are, the voices within the scene that oppose racism? To what extent is racist posturing a marketing ploy designed to capitalize on shock value, and has it aided or hindered the commercial success of this music among its target audience? Given that black metal musicians frequently dismiss all of humanity (including their own countrymen and sometimes even their own fans) as worthless, to what extent are their racist statements part of a bigger misanthropic puzzle? Vikernes recently implied something of the sort:

> I am a narrow-minded ultra-conservative anti-religious misanthropic and arrogant bigot, alright, and I have a problem with just about everything and everyone in this world, but I am not demented, and if those who are not like me are able to enjoy my music that is all fine by me. Be a Christian-born black gay feminist converted to Judaism for all I care, or worse; a Muslim. Just stay off my lawn. Oh, and I may add that I have a problem with most Nordic heterosexuals with a Pagan ideology as well. (Stosuy 2010)

As a caveat to Vikernes' statement, it is necessary to point out that even misanthropes usually hate some people more than others rather than subscribing to equal-opportunity misanthropy. There are no recorded instances of racially motivated crimes—although this may merely be a matter of lack of opportunity—by black metal musicians, as far as I am aware, but a plethora of crimes against churches, fellow musicians, gay men, and the perpetrators themselves (Moynihan and Søderlind, 45-62, 81–144). This raises the question: what group, if any, is the main target of black metal hatred?

Perhaps because such questions are so difficult to answer, and perhaps because the contributors to *Hideous Gnosis* are more interested in the genre's esoterically mystical possibilities for the lone individual than its observable social manifestations, most of the essays avoid political discussions and focus instead on the intensely introverted and private experiences that some black metal conjures up. One experience that is commonly evoked in songs is the sense of dismantlement and transformation of the individual self by natural or supernatural forces such as decay and demonic possession. The lyrics often describe experiences of extreme cold, heat, or pain which the

human self cannot endure. Anthony Sciscione in the Victor Turner-inflected "*Goatsteps Behind My Steps . . .*Black Metal and Ritual Renewal" suggests that black metal's interest in unbearable physical experiences and in the consequent breakdown of the self is:

> motivated by a dissatisfaction with medial states and a manifest lust for the intensity of transitions, of ceding . . . to a radical alterity that reconfigures identity by destroying and overtaking . . . [The black metaller] undergoes a sacrificial demise in order to open himself up as a habitat for and an expression of the power of the demon. (176)

The theme of demonic possession gets further treatment in Eugene Thacker's "Three Questions on Demonology," which argues that the demon in black metal, while sometimes a stand-in for Satan or pagan deities, is primarily a symbol of impersonal cosmic forces which act on humans but can never really be understood by them. Songs about demonic possession, then, allow us to imagine a state of being at the limits of rational knowledge, or even being overtaken by a non-human point of view. This is the most fundamental theme of the book: black metal is concerned with the extreme limits of human experience and thought; it attempts a topography of the unknowable, an anatomy of the non-human.

If black metal is all about destruction—of traditional religion, of modern civilization, of rational thought, of the human, of the self—then where do you go after you have destroyed everything? One answer is offered in "Transcendental Black Metal: A Vision of Apocalyptic Humanism" by Hunter Hunt-Hendrix, frontman of the New York-based band Liturgy and graduate of Columbia University. Hendrix believes that Scandinavian black metal was only the first, primitive phase of the genre, and he wishes to inaugurate the second phase, American black metal, which he also terms "transcendental" in a nod to Emerson and Thoreau. In contrast to the nihilistic, nocturnal, hermetic, depraved, and misanthropic Scandinavian black metal, the new black metal is to be affirmative, solar, courageous, open, and loving (or at least non-hateful). Lest anyone mistake this for a hippie manifesto, Hendrix makes it clear that the optimism and joy he advocates are not simply there for the taking, but rather have to be earned through arduous struggle. His good cheer is the light at the end of a very long tunnel: He writes, "Transcendental Black Metal is in fact nihilism, however it is a double nihilism and a final nihilism, a once and for all negation of the entire series of negations. With this final 'No' we arrive at a sort of vertiginous Affirmation, an affirmation that is white-knuckled, terrified, unsentimental, and courageous" (61).

This manifesto has provoked a furor in the blogosphere, where it has been ridiculed in the online forum Nuclear War Now! Productions as, "a

weird and obnoxious hybrid of verbal diarrhea and empowered hipster ignorance" (Blackmagoon 2011). More thoughtful and substantive than these taunts, which merely object to the jargon and do not engage with the subject matter, is Andrew White's critique of Hendrix in the postscript to *Hideous Gnosis*: "[Black metal] is dark—bleak, angry, violent. This new form of black metal [Hendrix] proposes sounds like something different altogether" (280). The whole point of black metal as traditionally practiced is its uncompromisingly negative and oppositional energy; for some, Hendrix's worldview is simply too happy to qualify as black metal. The reception of his work underscores the fact that black metal isn't just a sound, but a discourse, and anyone who dares to critique that discourse is ostracized. His unusual background as a Columbia philosophy major attracts resentment as well, since it fosters the image of an affluent, pretentious outsider—though why such markers of elitism would disqualify him from the scene is unclear, given the much more blatant arrogance and social contempt that prevailed among the genre's founding fathers, who were also outsiders and rebels against the metal community of their time. It remains to be seen whether Liturgy will ultimately be perceived as a black metal band, and whether the claims of this essay will hold up over time, since the genre is continuously redefined by musicians and audiences. So far, the young American scene does seem significantly less hostile and angry than the Scandinavian scene, and more interested in carrying on the legacy of '60s countercultural projects like radical environmentalism and peaceful anarchism than in burning churches, worshiping ancestors, and fantasizing about battles in the north.

Whether one accepts Hendrix's vision or not, he at least deserves credit for bucking the narrow-minded hermeticism and misanthropy that gave the scene its impetus in the early 1990s but at this point risks leaving it to stagnate. Like the music of female black metallers and others who do not fit the conventions of the scene, his ideas and music represent an opportunity for fruitful cross-fertilization with other points of view. His position makes for a striking contrast with most of the other contributions: while they portray the genre as a force of decay and destruction, as something inextricably bound up with the decadent society it despises and doomed to go down with it, he thinks the art form can go beyond that; through a dialectical process it can become a theurgic and salvific force. His philosophical stance is reflected in Liturgy's performance style: he and fellow bandmates Bernard Gann, Tyler Dusenbury, and Greg Fox eschew the menacing theatrics that usually accompany black metal performance, such as horror movie-inspired costumes, corpse paint, demonic stage names, and antagonistic shock-rock tactics in favor of unremarkable street clothing and a modest, genial stage demeanor that belies their blogosphere reputation as pompous elitists.

Because of their indifference to the etiquette of black metal as well as their wide range of non-metal musical influences, they are not always accepted as a black metal band and are sometimes derided as interlopers who casually appropriate black metal's musical techniques without making a commitment to the scene. In New York, at least, they headline at rock events as often as metal ones. But if the band's appearance is casual and unassuming, the essay is not. High-flown and grandiloquent, it expresses a desire to change the world—one DIY venue at a time.

While Hendrix's contribution represents black metal theoretical discourse in an extroverted mode, Nicola Masciandaro's "Anti-Cosmosis: Black Mahapralaya" represents this discourse in a more introverted and mystical mode. He tries both to find a theoretical language to talk about black metal and to use the fundamental negativity of black metal itself as a way to enrich (or undercut) the way scholarship is practiced today. In other words, his meditative essay attempts both to theorize black metal and to make theoretical discourse more indeterminate with an admixture of black metal esotericism. The ensuing evasiveness is reminiscent of mid-twentieth-century critical theorists' efforts to deconstruct existing academic theory in order to make room for a different kind of scholarship, but it also draws on older and richer traditions of "unsaying" discourses, especially negative theology, which approaches the ultimate truth by saying what it is not rather than what it is. The result is indeed a different kind of scholarship from that which dominates academia today; this essay and the book as a whole are as much works of art as of erudition, full of fanciful illustrations and evocative, apparently candid photographs from the symposium. The essays, which at first glance read like impenetrable amalgams of creative writing and post-structuralist philosophy, indulge in a level of obscurantism that is only possible among members of a tiny occult sect who are unconcerned with courting a broader audience—in this case, a broader academic or scene audience. If this approach has elicited some unfortunate reactions from both the black metal scene (in the form of jeering, bigoted comments posted in the blog associated with the project that were then printed in the volume) and the academic press that refused to publish the book, well, that's inevitable, and probably in keeping with black metal's inscrutability.

The mystical/cosmological approach of the book inevitably results in a certain romanticization of black metal, albeit a more creative kind than that of most metal scholarship, which tends to read politically progressive attitudes into various metal subgenres. This volume romanticizes black metal not as a political force, but rather as a force for expanding the possibilities of human experience beyond the options afforded to us in everyday life. Using the common tactic of asserting the superiority of one's own aesthetic and

lifestyle preferences to those of the supposedly inane mainstream, Russo's "Perpetue Putesco," for example, hints that the genre may be an antidote to the casual consumerism of modern life (and, one assumes, to the Top 40 radio played in commercial centers). He even suggests that it might be a gateway to a more authentic, more obscene, and more sacred experience of reality. Rather than taking the usual academic approach of describing a musical genre as it has existed in the past and present, he and the other contributors primarily look toward the future: by selectively bringing out certain of black metal's latent philosophical tendencies, they attempt to reclaim the music for some still-to-be-defined, or never-to-be-defined, good.

This book, one of the most intriguingly ambivalent attempts to redeem metal of its sins, illustrates the fact that all metal scholarship is inevitably the product of a fandom, and a very specific and limited one at that—a community of scholars who want to burnish the intellectual credentials of this widely denigrated and often anti-intellectual genre. *Hideous Gnosis* gives a rich and layered account of what black metal represents for scholarly fans, but the field awaits more ethnography to uncover what it means for other listeners—not just the kindly left-leaning professor, but the frustrated skinhead; not just the person who listens to the "kvlt" or "authentic" bands that are the primary subject matter of this book (with the exception of the heterodox Liturgy), but also the person who listens to the more commercially successful bands that temper black metal with the despised conventions of pop.

The most urgent task of metal scholarship in the immediate future indeed lies in ethnography, because metal's audience has changed dramatically over the past twenty years. Gone are the days of the homogeneous audience described in early sociologies. Today, metal's fanbase includes people of many ethnicities and nationalities, classes, education levels, religious beliefs, and political views, and multiple genders and sexual orientations. These fans have been little studied, and attention to their experiences would shed light not only on them but also on metal culture in general, since scenes are defined largely by their margins (and many of these fans do remain marginal). This process has recently begun with great promise in Keith Kahn-Harris' *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (2007), which gives considerable attention to the Israeli scene, and Laina Dawes' forthcoming *What Are You Doing Here?: Black Women in Metal, Hardcore and Punk* (2012). Metal also needs more attention from musicologists, of whom few other than Waksman currently have the expertise to analyze a form of music so minimally notated and so reliant on under-theorized musical techniques such as distortion. Finally, metal is quite amenable to studies from other disciplines, even (or especially) those that inhabit the fringes of academia: the

speculative, philosophical approach of Masciandaro and his fellow maverick English scholars is a novel way of thinking about metal that opens up murky, alluring vistas of scholarship combined with creative enterprises. Whatever the approach—sociological, musicological, or philosophical—scholars need to suppress, or at least admit and temper, their impulse to justify the music. This whitewashing strategy was arguably defensible in the past when metal lacked sufficient prestige to be considered worthy of academic study, but that is not the case anymore. Scholars today need to acknowledge the fact that metal appeals because of its perversity, not in spite of it. The time has come to give metal's fascinating depravity its due.

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