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Title

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5624k78q>

Journal

react/review: a responsive journal for art & architecture, 2(0)

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/R52056636

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Black Metal, White Supremacy, and Fraught Masculinity

a response by Taylor Van Doorne

i.

In a political moment when extreme right ideology seems to proliferate in pockets of the United States and Europe, it is timely to consider how an underground subculture like black metal could be susceptible for appropriation by white supremacists. Jillian Fischer's article in this issue of *react/review* examines the ethnoracial symbolism of National Socialist black metal (NSBM) vis-à-vis early black metal and Nazi propaganda. However, her iconographical and lyric analysis should also be considered within the broader constellation of identity that undergirds these identitarian-based politics.

The adoption of mythological references from early black metal music by post-1990 NSBM bands may be partly attributed to the genre's historical development. Black metal acquired a distinctly white supremacist leaning during the genre's second wave in early 1990s Norway amongst the Black Circle bands that gathered at the infamous Oslo record shop Helvete, owned by Euronymous of Mayhem and frequented by his bandmate and eventual murderer Varg Vikernes of Burzum.¹ Between 1991 and 1993, members of the Black Circle allegedly engaged in a series of escalating heinous acts that expressed black metal's boorishly literal Satanism, including encouraging others to commit suicide, partaking in cannibalism, murdering other musicians, committing church arsons, and publicly endorsing neo-Nazi

¹ Kirsten Dyck, *Reichsrock: The International Web of White-Power and Neo-Nazi Hate Music* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 58.

ideologies. Such violent acts were the stuff of nefarious legends. Much has been written about the veracity of these stories and subsequent hysteria in the press decrying Satan-worshipping musicians who eat brains and burn down churches. Nevertheless, the early 1990s Norwegian black metal scene and the notoriety of figures like Vikernes cemented the affiliations between the music, pagan iconography, and white supremacist ideology that would be ripe for exploration by later NSBM bands.

Perhaps we should also consider the demographics of who participates in this music. It is axiomatic, and rarely stated outright, that most NSBM musicians are white men. In fact, white men dominate the broader metal and hard rock music scenes as both fans and musicians, a phenomenon frequently reported anecdotally in popular music journalism.² This popular perception of gender has been confirmed by sociologists Anna S. Rogers and Mathieu Deflem, who observe that despite the growing number of women in the metal scene, community members describe the genre as hypermasculine in terms of demographics, culture, and musicality.³ In terms of musical production, sociologists Karl Spracklen, Caroline Lucas, and Mark Deeks have written about the ways an exaggerated mode of hegemonic white masculinity is constituted and performed in Northern European extreme and folk metal music.⁴ They

² For example, see: Laina Dawes, "Heavy Metal Feminism," *Hazlit*, August 17, 2015, <https://hazlitt.net/blog/heavy-metal-feminism>; Eleanor Goodman, "Does metal have a sexism problem?" *Louder Sound*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.louderound.com/features/does-metal-have-a-sexism-problem>; Kim Kelly, "The Never-Ending Debate Over Women in Metal and Hard Rock," *The Atlantic*, November 3, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/11/the-never-ending-debate-over-women-in-metal-and-hard-rock/247795/>; Kayla Phillips, "What do Hardcore, Ferguson, and the 'Angry Black Woman' Trope All Have in Common?" *Vice*, November 30, 2014, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/6x8qkw/hardcore-ferguson-and-the-angry-black-woman-essay>; Beth Winegarner, "Smashing Through the Boundaries: Heavy Metal's Racism and Sexism Problem—and How It Can Change," *Bitch Media*, May 17, 2016, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/smashing-through-boundaries-heavy-metal%E2%80%99s-racism-and-sexism-problem%E2%80%94and-how-it-can-change-hearken>; and Rhian Wilkinson, "Venom Prison: 'You Can See That Women have a Place in Metal,'" *Punktastic*, July 25, 2017 <http://www.punktastic.com/radar/venom-prison-you-can-see-that-women-have-a-place-in-metal/>.

³ Anna S. Rogers and Mathieu Deflem, *Doing Gender in Heavy Metal: Perceptions of Women in a Hypermasculine Subculture* (London: Anthem Press, 2022), 4.

⁴ Karl Spracklen, Caroline Lucas, and Mark Deeks, "The Construction of Heavy Metal Identity through Heritage Narratives: A Case Study of Extreme Metal Bands in the North of England," *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 1 (2014): 48-64. See also: Karl Spracklen, "'To Holmgard. . . and Beyond:' Folk Metal Fantasies and Hegemonic White Masculinities," *Metal Music Studies* 1, no. 3 (2015): 354-77.

correlate the hegemonic masculinity expressed in extreme metal with the Norse pagan Viking heroic archetype that is frequently evoked in the lyrics and album art of these bands.⁵

Only recently have sociologists turned their attention to how masculinity is conceptualized and expressed by white supremacist and extreme right groups. Michael Kimmel points out in his study of domestic terrorism and extremist politics that media reports and political messaging following the aftermath of a mass attack by a male assailant foreground topics like psychology, political disenfranchisement, and religion as explanations. Kimmel argues that masculinity is hardly examined in these cases, and gender is only addressed on the rare occasion that the perpetrator is a woman.⁶ In a state-of-the-field essay on gender and the far right, Kathleen Blee explains the connection between masculinity as ideological expression and as demographical constitution: “Many far-right parties, movements and virtual spaces are male-dominated, promising a homosocial brotherhood of male belonging. Many are also intensely masculinist in their support of stereotypical, hegemonic male expressions of anger and rebellion.”⁷ Some scholars have characterized this type of excessive and overly-articulated masculinity as *hypermasculinity*—a term sometimes evoked in literature on metal music and its subgenres.⁸

Given the prominence of masculinity in the perceived gender expression of metal communities and the identity formation of extreme right movements, masculinity is a privileged site for examining the identitarianism of NSBM, which is located at the convergence of both groups. Thus, I posit that undergirding the iconographic, racial, and ideological link between the black metal scene and radical right extremist groups is also a fraught notion of hypermasculinity. In other words, black metal, nationalist socialist or not, has a gender problem.

⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁶ Michel Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—and Out of—Violent Extremism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 3-4.

⁷ This does not necessarily mean that women are excluded from these movements or do not participate in extreme hate groups. On the contrary, research on gender and the far right finds that women have been active in the formation and success of these movements, as demonstrated by political figures on the far right like Marine Le Pen. See: Kathleen Blee, “Where Do We Go from Here? Positioning Gender in Studies of the Far Right,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 4 (2020): 417.

⁸ For example, see Samantha Kutner, “Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2020).

ii.

Could we imagine black metal without this tint of hypermasculinity? Could such a version of black metal exist, or is this particular gender expression central to its sound and aesthetic? Would pulling at the threads of masculinist power and dominance unravel the entire genre? Would it still be black metal?

In the experimental novel *Girls Against God*, author Jenny Hval speculates, “Maybe we could turn back time and create a black metal movement where only girls hate?”⁹ Hval’s novel highlights black metal’s gender problem while imagining its feminist potential. The text follows the narrator from her provincial adolescence in 1997 as a wannabe black metalhead in corpse makeup to her adult life in Oslo living with members of her band and witch coven. The loose narrative is interjected by surreal screenplays scripted in real time, monologues of art and film criticism, and feverish episodes of digital witchcraft and rituals using food and human excrement. Woven through an intertextual potpourri of disparate topics and themes, the narrator considers black metal’s potential to critique and subvert normative Norwegian society, yet she also recognizes the limitations of genre’s historical trajectory. Hval writes,

Black metal hated too; it dug itself further in as the ‘90s progressed, and opened up to the underground to reveal something difficult and dangerous, but with the metallers’ blind, boyish mythological fascination it grew pale and paler, whiter and whiter. The epic drama, the hierarchy, the gender segregation, the authoritarianism, the xenophobia, the silence, become its defining elements – all the things that already define society. In college in 1997 black metallers don’t look different from neo-Nazis, and neo-Nazis don’t look different from black metallers, and no one knows exactly who to beat up. The only people who keep their heads on straight are the brightly coloured Jesus kids, who spend all their time praying for everyone, since upside-down crosses and Nazi violence are the same in their dramatic staging of the fight between God and hell. The battle unifies them, Nazism and black metal and Jesus Revolution, so that everyone is a player in the eternal battle between good and evil, in which individuals dominate thanks to their faith or their race, or their misanthropy, and look down on the sheeple who accept so-called secular social democracy.¹⁰

For Hval’s narrator, 90s black metalheads may have proclaimed to subvert religion and society through murder and arson, but they never questioned the nature of institutional

⁹ Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God*, trans. Marjam Idriss (London: Verso Books, 2020), 31. The novel was first published in Norwegian as *Å hate Gud* (Oslo: Forlaget Oktober, 2018).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 68-9.

authority. Black metal harnessed the hegemonic values of power, strength, dominance, and control to unleash them back upon society.¹¹ But such an act only inflamed the rhetoric of power and domination rather than undermined the socio-religious structures it resented. She explains that the early black metalheads rooted themselves in the existing patriarchal dichotomy of good-versus-evil. Later NSBM bands sought to replace religion with racialized hierarchies and totalitarianism. Such a theoretical formulation constitutes a dichotomy of black metal and Nazism on the one hand, and Norwegian Protestantism on the other. Each faction engages in a power struggle within the domain of masculinity seeking supremacy over the other in an epic eschatological battle. The narrator understands black metal as nothing more than a dark reiteration of the same social paradigms, not a negation of it. In short, "From the beginning black metal is just a blackened and dirty version of pre-existing society."¹²

If 90s Norwegian black metal is not a subversion of authority but its dark mirror, the narrator locates other binary oppositions that destabilize the phallogocentric pair: those of God/witch and power/threat. She claims that power had historically belonged to the domain of God, and therefore, the witch was articulated in apposition as his threat. In this formulation, the antithesis of God/power is not black metal or fascism, but the witch who is "a container for everything that has threatened the church, God, Christianity's domination, the establishment, emperors, kings, barons, Freemasons, medical science, philosophy, logic, brute strength."¹³ She describes the witch as that which "defies God." She is a figure against hierarchy, grounded in community-based praxis, and openly defiant of purity fetishism. Thus, the narrator locates in the witch a potential archetype for a feminist strain of black metal. This speculative employment of the witch figure as a foil to masculinist black metal articulates the contours of gender performance in the latter, which is so often commented upon in anecdotal and sociological reports yet undertheorized.

The witch is not unlike the Norse Viking heroes of early 90s black metal music. She is also endowed with ancient pagan origins that predate Christianity in Europe. Yet the witch's abstracted origins in this novel are located outside spatio-temporal and ethnonational bounds. The narrator becomes the witch archetype by undergoing a series of abject rituals. She and her coven smear feces on their bodies, ravenously slurp up spaghetti demons, and pipe their band's music through the sewers. These rituals are a dirty business and make no particular historical claims, and thus, they may be read as an anathema to NSBM's emphasis on pure ariosophic origins.

At the same time, the narrator embraces black metal's ethos of hatred. Throughout the text, she reiterates "I hate God," which comes to not only signify the

¹¹ Ibid, 68.

¹² Ibid, 70.

¹³ Ibid, 56.

divine Father, but a slew of institutional antagonists—Norway’s Christian Democratic Party, Protestantism, the nation-state, the patriarchy, capitalism, structural sexism and racism, and the atomic bomb. Thus, Hval’s narrator imbues hatred with methodological potential. She reimagines black metal’s hatred through a feminist lens by considering if its practitioners had only adopted hatred as a method of critique rather than a lust for dominance and power. Her hatred of God does not deny his existence or seek to usurp him, but rather, is a rejection and resistance of all patriarchal and hierarchical authority. Her feminist methodology reflects the central problem of the second wave of black metal: it never sought to be critical regardless of its potential. Black metal hates for its own sake; or in Fischer’s terms, it seeks “power through music.”¹⁴

Hval’s exercise in imagining “a black metal movement where only girls hate” works to expose some of the phallogentric presuppositions of the genre, like the perpetuation of hierarchical thinking and performance of traditional gendered roles. She demonstrates how this fraught masculinity seeks not to subvert and overturn the social orders it hates, but rather to rebuild them in its image. Through fiction, Hval achieves a theoretical reading of the history of gender performance in second wave black metal inaccessible in the current sociological scholarship, yet which is critical to understanding the identity formation of the subgenre.

¹⁴ Fischer, this volume.

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