

# “I Am The Dark And The Dark Can’t Bring Me Down”: Community, Agency and Discourse in the New York City Metal Scene

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## **Abstract**

Metal is a genre that has permeated across national and cultural boundaries, becoming embedded in a multitude of localised meanings and practices through the emergence of local metal scenes. With a dedicated and loyal fan base that has lasted over four decades, metal has become a global genre. This thesis provides an analytical examination of one such locality, that of New York City. This thesis aims to illuminate the role that the metal scene plays in forging a highly integrated, interconnected and interdependent community. The metal scene of New York City is imperative in constructing a sense of self and a sense of being in this world for my informants. It is a community that lies at the forefront of agency and discourse, socialising scene members into particular modes of being, acting and thinking. By analysing the production of meaning in this scene, the relationships between macro and micro processes, and the interactions between the metanarratives and myths of metal and the socio-political climate of the United States, I emphasise the distinct way that local scenes manifest themselves in the context of broader cultural forces. This study is guided by three primary goals: to investigate the construction of the self in a highly fractured contemporary cosmopolitan context; to contribute to the dissolution of binary notions of egocentric/sociocentric societies; and, to examine the role that music plays in forging coherent and meaningful life worlds.

### **Statement of Originality**

I, the candidate, affirm that this thesis is truly and entirely my original work. External materials used throughout the thesis have been referenced accordingly. For the purposes of this research I have obtained ethics approval (5201600888R). This thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other university or institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'E. Young', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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Signed: Erin Young

Date: 9/10/2017

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I would like to offer my eternal gratitude to my informants in the metal scene of New York City, for allowing me into your lives and homes and lending me your time. Thank you for inviting me to shows and events, and for always treating me with kindness. But most of all, thank you for your friendship. Without you, this project would not be possible.

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## **Introduction**

*“Metal has always had that passionate motivation. You have to be motivated to listen to metal otherwise you don't have any excuse in soaking your ear, deftuning you ear in unstoppable, noisy instruments that are squeaking in your brain from dawn till dusk. You have no excuse, but like always with a glaze in your eye, you'll be like I love it.” – Phyzel, Acrassicauda*

Metal is a genre which has persevered through over four decades of rising and falling popularity, maintaining a dedicated and loyal fan base throughout this time. At the height of metals commercial popularity in the 1980's, the genre was spread across the globe, and certain tropes and discourses were cemented in the imaginations of fans. This movement of metal across the globe, and the interaction between metal and local cultural landscapes, led to the emergence of localised scenes which connected with and embodied the music, including both its performance and listening practices, in distinct ways (Wallach 2011). Symbolisms, imagery, soundscapes and discourse become bound in localised meaning in this process of global flow. This study focuses on one such local context of the metal scene, that of the vibrant urban environment of New York City. The New York City metal scene (hereafter NYCMS) is a small, tight-knit community with a deeply integrated peer group. While my thesis addresses predominantly fans, New York City is home to a great number of amateur, emergent and established metal bands and artists, meaning that the boundaries between the producers and consumers are often blurred and fluid.

Two main audience constituencies make up the metal scene which this ethnographic project examines. On the one hand, there is a core group of committed listeners who consistently and actively engage with the community through frequent gig attendance, visits to metal bars after work and on weekends, and through participating in casual social events with scene members outside of these institutionally organised social spaces. A second group of audience – one that we might refer to as ‘the periphery’ – involves those who engage with the scene in a more casual manner, only participating on occasion and limiting their involvement with the community to special events. There is, of course, no simple line that divides these two groups. Fans exist along a spectrum of engagement, involvement and loyalty. Individuals will move within this spectrum, shifting back and forth as time, preferences and priorities allow. Yet for the sake of simplicity this division can be used to

identify, at a particular temporal moment, a closely interconnected and intertwined group of people who share communal values, interests, desires and close personal bonds. The analytical discussion in this thesis primarily focuses on the members of this core group of fans. At the time of my fieldwork, this core group consisted of approximately 40-50 people.

This thesis aims to explore the dynamics and relationships between the individual and community, and how the community contributes to the construction of self in a cosmopolitan urban context. Drawing from anthropological research conducted in New York City, I address the local metal scene as a case study to examine the complex interplay of subcultural, local and national forces that intertwine in the making of a dynamic musical community of practitioners and audiences and help to forge coherent and meaningful life worlds for my informants. An interrogation of the relationship between the metanarratives and myths of the metal scene, the socio-political environment of New York City, and the distinctly cosmopolitan features of the community (e.g. high levels of immigration, patterns of work, home and leisure, etc.) allows critical insights into the ways in which this community produces systems of meaning and value, and provide members with a sense of place, agency and belonging. As such, this project is guided by three main goals: to further understandings of how individuals develop a sense of self and community in a highly fractured, cosmopolitan context; to contribute to the dissolution of the binary notion of egocentric/sociocentric societies; and, to highlight the integral role that styles of music plays in the construction of place, agency, subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

The NYCMS represents a diverse cross-section of society. The ages of the majority of members range between 21 to 65, with a median age of around 30 to 35 years. The community is male dominated with a ratio of approximately 70:30 between male and female. About half of my informants were born in the United States, with about half of those growing up in New York City. Thus a majority of them were immigrants to the city. Those born outside of the United States were predominantly from South and Central American countries including Mexico, Colombia or Nicaragua. There were also others from a diverse range of countries, including France, Indonesia, Russia and Iraq. This diversity in cultural background is representative of the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity and multiculturalism of New York City in a broader sense, a city that has one of the highest percentages of immigrants of any locality in the US (Baker and Lee 2014). My informants shared a great deal of pride and admiration for their home of New York City, describing it as distinct from the 'rest' of the United States. A strong sense of homely belonging to the city was evident in their

biographical narratives. They perceive the city as accommodating of diverse and flourishing culture, one with an expressive and socially inclusive character, and as being representative of a certain kind of urban ideal cosmopolitanism: grand, bustling, and opportunistic. Anna, a 24-year-old informant, who lived in Russia most of her life until moving to New York City only two years ago, expressed how she just could not imagine living anywhere else in the future. “This is my home,” she said.

In my fieldwork context, the subgenres of ‘sludge’, ‘doom’, ‘death’, ‘black’ and ‘thrash’ metal are currently the most unanimously popular aesthetic and artistic forms of metal. Sociologist Nicola Allett (2011) describes these genres as “extreme metal”, stating that they “are stylistically diverse, but united in the artists’ pursuit of extremity, intensity and dissonance in music.” According to her, “Extreme metal retains the heavy metal characteristics of distorted electric guitar and strong bass rhythms, while pushing those genre sounds to ‘extremities’” (2011: 165-166). Allett also notes that extreme metal scenes “draw upon the notion that extreme metal is an ‘underground’ musical form and movement situated against the ‘mainstream’” (2011: 166). Low-tuned guitars, heavy distortion, harsh vocals, sudden key and time signature changes, dissonance, and heavy, driving drum beats define the soundscape of these subgenres, while transgressive, melancholy, taboo and denunciatory themes are emblematic of the lyrical content. This distinction between ‘underground’ and ‘mainstream’ metal is prominent in the NYCMS, with mainstream referring to bands which have greater commercial success, often due to the more formulaic<sup>1</sup> song composition and ‘safe’ aesthetic strategies, yet although my informants primarily celebrated underground subgenres and bands, many mainstream bands were also acclaimed and respected.

### *Literature: Music and Culture*

In recent decades, the relationship between music and culture, and the ways that music is both reflective and constitutive of social life, has received increasing attention. Shepherd states that musical styles are “directionally charged fields of meaning and experience that speak to our sense of identity and existence... timbre, the tactile core of sound, encodes and articulates the logics through which individuals creatively embrace the social world and construct a unified and manageable experiential core of personality and reality”, (1991: 91). There are intrinsic links between the sonic qualities of different musical

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<sup>1</sup> 4/4 time, verse/chorus/verse/bridge/chorus structure, standard instrumental line-up



forms and our own understandings of social and cultural worlds. Certain sounds, tones, timbres and rhythms evoke in us our social and cultural backgrounds, life experiences, emotions and memories. As Frith (1996) notes, the reason that music is so compelling in our identity formation and understandings of the self is because of the interaction between the individual and the social, and the integral role that music plays in both our personal and communal lives. Frith relates music to our sociocultural worlds “through the direct experience it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (1996: 124). He emphasises the role that music has in not only reflecting the values, beliefs and ideals of a social group, but also in shaping and constructing those values. That is, “music is not just a thing which happens ‘in society’; society also happens ‘in music’” (Stokes 1994: 2).

DeNora (2000), on the other hand, discusses how music is often an important resource through which agency and identity are produced, and in the constitution and navigation of our experiences. She notes that musical scenes afford different forms of agency and being, and that music is an inherent part of the structuring of our social worlds. Rice (2003) proposes a three dimensional model of analysing musical experience, which integrates location, time and musical metaphors to come to an understanding of how a group of people use and interpret meaning, and how they endow it with social significance. What these authors point to is the role that music plays not only in constructing and defining our social world, but also in socialising listeners into certain modes of perception, behaviour, agency and action. Audiences construct meanings in music that may be different from artists’ original intentions, but in doing so they contextualise it in a way that is significant to them.

Metal music, and the socio-cultural and political landscapes in which local scenes emerge, are also being analysed with increasing regularity. The early 1990’s saw the publication of three ground breaking, seminal works towards metal studies – *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia’s Dead End Kids* (Donna Gaines 1990), *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* (Deena Weinstein 1991), and *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Robert Walser 1993). Since then, the study of metal music, and scholarly analysis of the local scenes engendered by the genre have flourished particularly in musicological, ethnomusicological, anthropological and sociological studies. Some examples of recent studies include *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Kahn-Harris 2006), *Metal Rules the Globe* (Berger et al., 2011), and *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies* (Brown et al., 2016). It is my hope that my

own work here will contribute to the growing corpus of work which examines the relationship between individual lives, metal music, and the community, facilitating new avenues of analysis and thought.

### Fieldwork

My primary research was undertaken in New York City between the months of February and April of 2017. My main methodology was participant observation carried out through attending social events such as gigs, visiting bars during busy hours and attending social gatherings. In these contexts I was able to observe my informants in a casual setting, enabling an understanding of how symbols and ideologies are used on a day to day basis, and how they are integrated into the overall worldviews of scene members. The conversations I engaged in illuminated me to the particular concerns and values which my informants considered significant. These observations were supported by 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews and two focus groups. Through these interviews and focus groups I was able to come to a deeper understanding of how individuals used and interpreted specific symbols and ideologies, explore autobiographical narratives and discern how fans connect to the community.

Through these data collection methods I was offered insight as to how my informants utilise the genre of metal to construct and inform their worldviews, how it is used as a tool for positioning and navigating the self, and how the community, which is held in high regard to my informants, creates a feedback loop into which these ideologies, beliefs and perceptions are developed and reinforced. I was able to immerse myself in the social and cultural world of my informants, and come to a close understanding of the symbols, language, perceptions and interpretive frameworks that guide and inform their everyday lived experiences.

While my short time in the field limited me in how much data I could collect, this limitation was partially mitigated by my own knowledge of metal, and my involvement in the metal scene of my home in Sydney, Australia. I was able to immediately connect with members of the NYCMS through discussing bands, subgenres and the politics of the broader world of metal. Because of my knowledge of metal and my bodily appearance (i.e. green hair and band t-shirts), I did not face many barriers in gaining the acceptance and trust of my

informants. I believe that this in itself is illustrative of the transcendent power of metal in facilitating community.

### *Conceptual Frameworks*

I distinguish between ‘identity’ and ‘self’, following Sokefeld (1999). To Sokefeld, identity refers to the multitude of social positions that one takes on throughout their lives. He notes that they are fluid and dynamic, dictated by social and cultural roles and structures, and that an individual may hold many different and varied identities at one time, shifting between them depending on the particular context. The self, on the other hand, is defined as the experiential whole, which links these identities. It is through the self that we may manage our different identities. The self integrates identity roles into coherent whole, allowing us to understand experiences, emotions, memories and dispositions in a way that informs and guides our behaviours. In the self we find agency through the ability to orientate and navigate our way through the particular socio-cultural boundaries, rules and expectations, which are imposed upon us by our various identity roles. Sokefeld notes that “this conceptualisation of the self has to be developed from heightened attention to the human capacity and necessity for action” (1999: 430), thus drawing attention to the ways in which the self may manoeuvre through particular social situations, and how these manoeuvres may be restrained, facilitated and influenced based on our identity roles. This is not to imply that the self is static or stable - the self is just as fluid and dynamic as identities are, subject to variation, growth or dissolution across time. The self supplies a logical reasoning and a background of emotion, memory, agency and connectivity. While this background will change over the course of one’s life, at any temporally bound moment it is likely to seem stable and follow some form of internal logic.

Where my understanding of the concepts self and identity differs from Sokefeld is in my observation that particular identity roles may take precedence in informing the self. Csordas (1994) endorses a similar understanding of the self, interpreting it as a processual engagement with the world, in which one orientates themselves, linking it directly to embodied knowledge and worldly interaction. To the core members of the NYCMS their affiliation with the metal community is emphasised above other identity roles, and it is believed that metal offers a reflection of their ‘true self’. My goal in this thesis is not to affirm or deny the existence of a ‘true self’, yet the belief amongst my informants that metal

represents an inherent part of their selves is significant as it highlights how imperative the music and its associated community are in their own understandings of their personal and social lives and how music helps to construct their being in this world. Part of this prioritisation of the metal scene over other social identities and groups is related to the nature of choice. Unlike identities which are dictated by ethnicity, kinship relations, gender or class, the metal scene is not a group into which one is born: participation is entirely voluntary and not necessarily predicated by any particular characteristics.

Throughout this thesis I use the concept of ‘scene’ rather than the conceptual framework of ‘subculture’, which is often utilised in analysis of social groupings bound by music (see: Hebdige 1979; Willis 1978; Shildrick, A & MacDonald, R 2006). The concept of ‘scene’ encapsulates “social formations open to specific discursive pathways and conforming to specific cultural logics... [they are] loosely bounded functional units” (Levine & Wallach 2011: 119). ‘Scene’ refers to a localised group that share common stylistic and ideological traits with a broader culture, usually relating to arts or media, and invokes a multitude of institutions, producers, consumers and individuals that interact with one another to create a meaningful whole. There are several reasons for this conceptual choice. Firstly, this is in keeping with how my informants refer to and describe the musical world that they inhabit. The concept of scene has more fluidity in its potential connotations compared to ‘subculture’, allowing for a broader framing of elements, which include but are not limited to, social spaces, interactions between micro and macro socio-cultural and economic forces that shape the art world, as well as the specific understandings of the role that musical consumption (and other consumption practices) plays in the everyday lives of scene members. Levine and Wallach (2011) bring to our attention the ambiguity of the term scene, and the subsequent challenges that this ambiguity may pose in scholarship. Yet subculture, as a concept, is not free of challenges for our analysis either. Bennett, among others, criticise this conceptual framing for imposing “rigid lines of division over forms of sociation” (Bennett 1990, pg. 603). Subcultures are often viewed as distinct, bounded entities, determined by the individuals involved, and as existing as a form of youth resistance against a dominant parent culture. In contrast, the concept of scene facilitates an understanding which views the interconnecting factors of a musical genre to be seen as a social network. This network is supported by a series of institutions, communities, and generational divides that are constantly interacting with one another, and with broader, unrelated institutions on a number of different levels.

## Chapter Summary

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one explores the role that metal has played in the lives of my informants in shaping their narrative self, and how they relate their personal identity and autobiographies to both the genre and the community which has developed around metal. Chapter two then turns to examine the powerful role that the community plays to individuals in the scene, including the production of a hegemonic discourse, and the development of a social safety net. Chapter three is an analysis of the lyrical and symbolic content of metal songs. This chapter examines the production of meaning, exposing the ways in which my informants interpret metal as being reflective of their own socio-political landscapes, and how the shared meanings which are developed help to cultivate stronger community bonds and collective beliefs and values. Finally, chapter four will provide a phenomenological exploration of metal gigs, emphasising the importance of this ritualistic element of the community, and the heightened consciousness which is engendered at gigs.

## **Chapter One: The Narratives of Metal and the Narrative Self**

Mary is an avid black metal fan and at 34-years-old never misses a chance to see a black metal band perform live, whether they are an established favourite or new and upcoming. When she was 13 years old she started hanging out with the skater kids. Most of them were a few years older than her, and the group was made up predominantly of boys who she thought were cool and cute. But that's not the reason she sought their friendship. Mary found it difficult to develop close and meaningful bonds with those in her own class at school and often felt like an outsider. She explained: "You'd wear scrunchies and those checked skirts because that's what the teenagers were doing, and every little girl wants to be a teenager, but it always felt so superficial and I could make myself look like everyone in my class but I didn't have any close friends". She found the skater kids to be more relaxed, less concerned with buying the most fashionable clothes and keeping up with the latest trends: they were people she felt she could relate to more. On weekends the group would go to the local skate park to hang out, bringing along a battery-powered cassette player which they'd use to blast bands such as Metallica, Iron Maiden and Guns N' Roses while they enjoyed time away from school and family responsibilities. It was here, during those sunny carefree weekends, that Mary was first exposed to metal. She quickly developed an affinity for the music, and started to seek out more bands and different styles.

Mary and her friend Elaine, one of the few other girls in the group, developed the habit of going to the record store after school and checking out the latest releases. Through their afterschool ritual, they quickly became regulars at the record store and were on friendly terms with the owner, benefiting from discounts and the occasional freebie through this relationship. One day the owner gave Elaine an Amorphis cassette, which had been damaged in transit. But Elaine, being more of a punk girl herself, wasn't a huge fan of the low tuning, extended guitar solos and mostly unintelligible, growling vocals, so she gave it to Mary saying "I think you might really like it." Amorphis wasn't like the bands Mary was used to hearing when she was out with the skater crew: it was heavier, and there seemed to be more anger and emotion in the music. On the cassette there was a label, prompting the owner to send \$1 in an envelope to an address if they wished to receive a lyrics pamphlet in the mail. But the package Mary received one week later didn't just contain the lyrics pamphlet for Amorphis. It came with a plethora of other paraphernalia: stickers, demo cassettes, patches and lyric pamphlets for both Amorphis and other bands filled the parcel. She began to go

through the items, researching the new bands and listening to their music as she went. This was where Mary diverged away from the mainstream metal, and developed her love for the underground, metal which had a darker, more sinister tone. Mary described her introduction into the ‘underground’ with the following:

At first it was kind of scary because I’m dumping all these things out and getting all this gore and whatever and I got this weird feeling like ‘oh shit, this is evil’. But I started to go through it and I started to work it all out and it’s kind of evil to a point, its messy and gory, but you’re taking everything that you shouldn’t be doing in life that you wanna do and you’re getting it out in a solid art form. And the community with metal is just so, I dunno, like we all get it! It’s like we all have the same virus, you know, we’re all in this together buddy, cheers! And not to sound negative about it, but once you hear it it’s kind of like an addiction.

Here, I will be exploring how those in the NYCMS envision their own autobiographical histories as being intrinsically linked to their involvement in the metal scene, and how metal has been a formative aspect of the narrative self. As individuals further embed themselves within the metal scene they begin to perceive the narrative of their life in the framework of metanarratives that are present in the macro metal culture. Mary’s story of her introduction to metal is a familiar one amongst those in the NYCMS. Many of the main themes – feelings of being an outsider, a shift from the ‘mainstream’ to the ‘underground’, and the development of an emotional connection with both the music and the metal community – can be found in the recounts of many of my informants.

### *Becoming a Metalhead*

Early teenage years, between 12 and 14, mark the typical age of induction into the world of metal. Exposed by older siblings, friends or radio stations, my informants found the music strange and abrasive at first, but something about it clicked - the disordered, chaotic soundscape had something to offer. As Joanna explained, "At first I just wanted to piss off my mum, you know, and I found the most obnoxious [radio] station I could find and just blasted it. But then I realised, hey, I kinda actually like this. And so I started buying tapes and magazines, and down the rabbit hole I went." For Allan, his first taste of metal was at age 13,

when his older half-sister came to visit one summer. During her visit she would play Metallica, and after hearing it Allan “searched for things that were heavier, something faster”. Exposure to metal is a defining moment in the lives of my informants. These memories mark the beginning of a life-long journey of discovery and devotion. Initial exposure quickly avalanches as people begin to accumulate more music and expand their repertoire of knowledge through magazines, inter-personal relationships and, later on, through the internet. Common to these stories is juxtaposition between childhood memories of being an outsider and having few close peer bonds, and a sense of belonging and security after embedding one’s self in the metal community. In the NYCMS it is widely believed that, as in the words of Dean, “the misfit comes before the metal.”

Memories of childhood are overwhelmingly entrenched in recollections of dissociation, dissatisfaction and turbulence. The reasons for these tumultuous memories are highly varied. Some, such as Luke and Max, relate it to being second-generation immigrants. “My parents are immigrants,” Max said, “and so that made me an outsider from the start.” Raised by family to adhere to certain cultural ideologies and behaviours, yet pressured through peer socialisation to behave and believe in other ways, they felt caught between cultures, never truly fitting in with either. A difficult family life may be to blame as was the situation with Damien. Damien’s mother was an alcoholic, so he felt he was thrust into responsibilities and a maturity level well beyond those of his peers as he and his father faced his mother’s addiction on a daily basis. Or perhaps it wasn’t the home that was in a perpetual state of chaos, but the whole of society. Phyzel, growing up in Baghdad during the Gulf and Iraq wars was subjected to a turbulent, chaotic and potentially fatal childhood, and was constantly seeking an escape route. When unable to physically escape the violence and instability, Phyzel used music as a psychological refuge. But just as frequently fans could pin down no specific reason. They just remembered feeling different. “I remember as a kid always feeling... angrier? Not to say I wasn’t happy, but I was different,” recalled Dean. “I was just kind of, you know, I didn’t really have a place. I was one of those people who wasn’t anything, I was undefined,” Mary similarly described. In some cases my informants understood mental illness as being the reason for these social and cultural discrepancies, or as working in conjunction with other reasons. For example, Adrien’s depression would interfere significantly with his social life as a teenager and he found it difficult to relate to many of his peers in high school. These were the kids who had fallen through the cracks of social life, not



necessarily because they were disadvantaged economically, racially or socially, but because they felt a disconnection from their peers.

This disconnection between the individual and their peer group is an often repeated narrative within the NYCMS, whether referring to their own personal experiences or those of others. According to my informants “normal”, well-adjusted people do not become metalheads – they believe that a degree of disjunction and unease between the individual and their social setting is a necessary precursor to fully embracing the metal lifestyle. Metal is understood as a genre which attracts those on the fringes of social life, those who have not felt at home with the ‘mainstream’. “It yields itself to people who have a lot of unanswered questions,” Dean told me. “Like a kid who’s having a lot of problems at home, or a kid who wants to rebel or who doesn’t recognise the mainstream. I feel like they have a welcoming embrace from extreme genres.” Or, as Allan claimed, “you couldn’t have grown up with that much of an easy life. You might have had a lot of home trouble, emotional abuse. If you never really fit in, it gave you a place to fit in. If you were bullied at school and never fit in, it opens the gates to those people first.” The language which fans use to describe metal is expressive of the emotional attitudes and perceptions of the genre: “welcoming embrace” and “opens the gates” are not terms used to describe something which people do to or gain by their own vocation. Rather, language such as this implies a visualisation of metal as endowed with agency, as an entity that has the power to accept or deny people. It also conjures up imagery which offers comfort, acceptance and safety to those who cannot find it elsewhere.

The preordained position of misfit and the subsequent coming into being through metal is deeply influential in structuring and informing significant aspects of people’s understandings of their past horizons and social interactions. After gaining acceptance and belonging in the metal scene, my informants are able to contextualise memories of loneliness within a framework which celebrates the labels of ‘outcast’ and ‘misfit’, thus enabling them to recontextualise negative memories into positive ones. Metal, as an artistic form and as a community (on a local and global level), is seen as an anchoring point in the construction of the self for those who have been unable to orientate themselves within other social and cultural groupings. Autobiographies overwhelmingly follow similar themes, patterns and formative movements amongst individual people within the scene. The individual biographies are intrinsically linked to music, and participation in the metal community allows fans to engage and identify more deeply with the genre.

Once the full indoctrination is complete, once metal has been embraced not only as a form of music, but as a source of knowledge, moral guidance and emotional assistance, then the members of the community described how perceptions of their selves were transformed. This is how Allan, for example, described this transition:

Your whole life you're an outcast, and you finally have people you can relate to and bond with. For me, I remember finally having confidence in myself. It gave me a place to connect with people, make a good group of friends, learn new skills to get by in the world out there.

As my informants further entrenched themselves within the community a sense of belonging and identity was developed, foregrounding the importance and significance of metal in these stories. Being a part of the metal scene positions memories of uncertainty and exclusion which are remembered as defining childhood in a particular context, restructuring them and giving them meaning and purpose. The anxieties of the past, though not erased or cured, are anchored in a particular perspective which locates these negative feelings as a precursor for belonging and acceptance in the metal community. The metal community is then placed in the centre of a nexus of identities, taking on the role of representing the 'inner-self'. As my informants embedded themselves more deeply into the metal subculture by increasing their knowledge of the genre and engaging with social networks, the tumultuous memories of childhood became coherent within this broader context: it is these temporal moments in which they began to construct their own narrative self. What these stories inform us of is that a large portion of those in the NYCMS see themselves and others in the scene as being 'different' and 'other' from their own native culture, and from the classed, racial and gendered social groups into which they were born.

### *The Narrative Self*

Ochs and Capps note that "narrative is an essential resource in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness" (1996: 21). The narrative self is a concept which explores the notion that autobiographical histories are ordered through the foregrounding of particular memories and events in our lives which we endow with ontological significance, thus making them integral in our development and growth and our present perceptions of our selves (Ochs & Capps 1996; Ricoeur 1992; Quinn 2006; Savage 2010). We understand our

selves through the narratives we make of our lives, and we tell these narratives through connecting distinct, unrelated events into an ordered and coherent whole. We piece together memories, experiences, emotions and interpretations through a lens of one ongoing story, and it is through this story that we understand our own being in this world and who we are. Berger describes the self as “a concrete element of experience that emerges from a person’s engagement with the world” (2004: 71), and it is through this process of engagement, and subsequent reflection on engagement, that the narrative self is developed. The narrative self is fluid – we do not retain the same narrative over time, and different elements of our experiential being will ebb and flow along with our prioritisations, and our conscious and reflective awareness. Yet in any temporally bound moment, the narrative self as currently perceived is imperative in our own understandings of who we are, and in informing our behaviour, actions and beliefs. By extension, the narrative self will influence emotional responses and how we chose/what options we have available in navigating our social landscape as individual agency mingles with cultural resources to guide actions (Quinn 2006). As one looks back upon their life, disparate and seemingly disconnected events, behaviours or responses will be positioned within the narrative we tell ourselves, and thus gain significance within particular frameworks.

This processual understanding of the self is immediately apparent in the ways that those in the NYCMS tell stories about their lives, and in the ways they organise and conceptualise their autobiographical past. Metal becomes an imperative aspect of these autobiographies, taking precedence over other identities such as those relating to gender, religion, kinship, culture or class. They become framed within the dominant myths and metanarratives of metal, following almost expected trajectories and formations. The events which align with these dominant myths are foregrounded, whereas those which do not fit are moved to the background. As such, these stories are laden with the values, ontologies and expectations which are circulated throughout the scene. Narratives which are provided by a specific socio-cultural context, such as the state, or, in this case, the scene, become cultural tools in how individual members of the community remember the past (Wertsch 2008). Additionally, Birth states that “the relationship of history and memory plays a significant role in constituting culture, power, and subjectivity” (2006: 169), suggesting that the connections between the individual and the social group are significant in shaping and producing cultural knowledge, agency and experience.

## Conclusion

Frith draws attention to the ways in which music facilitates our interaction with “imagined cultural narratives” (2012: 124), highlighting how our engagement with musical worlds conflates and complicates the divisions between our subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Music is not simply representational; it also comes to define life worlds as complex interplay between production, consumption, and broader socio-political fields to shape how music is understood and used by audiences. Berger, in his analysis of the metal scene of Akron, Ohio, describes a very similar trajectory of his informants, from the “pivotal moment” of being introduced to metal, to the subsequent journey of discovering harder and heavier music “Like a drug addiction”, indicating that metal scenes across diverse locations endorse similar metanarratives (1999: 59). As the self is taken here to be the experiential whole which shifts between and navigates identity categories through the broader social and cultural world, the definitive association with metal, and the use of metal to inform one’s own narrative self, is significant. It designates metal as more than just one among many different identity roles which one may inhabit. Rather, metal is what binds and defines the experiential whole – it is the navigator, the aspect of the individual which people consider to be, or be reflective of, their stable ‘core’, their ‘inner-self’.

My informants experienced a greater connection with the social group of metal than they do to any of those which have been inherited. They felt a distinct difference between themselves and their peers, family and workmates, usually originating from perceived psychological differences. Those in the NYCMS are endowed with the subjective knowledge that they are social outcasts, misfits. These feelings of social and cultural dissonance are in no way restricted to this community – one does not have to be a metalhead to lack a sense of connection and belonging. What is significant here though is that disconnection and difference act as defining features of the community, representing an experiential position which almost all can relate to in one way or another. Metal offers a space where people begin to construct a coherent self-narrative. This progression to acceptance and belonging is surely more fragmentary than expressed. In memory one frequently finds patterns and connections which, when played out in life, were seen as arbitrary and dissonant (Ricoeur 1992). It is often only once one looks back upon their life experiences that the truly significant moments, the ones which came to shape the current self, are discerned. Those in the metal scene find

these moments in relation to their musical growth, in finding and discovering new songs and artists, learning musical instruments, imitating their heroes and developing their own styles, and, most importantly, in the social connections and relationships which develop from common musical interest.

## **Chapter Two: Social Bonds and Discourse in Community**

The energy in the crowd was palpably electric. The band headlining the gig, NAILS, are known for their short and punchy compositions. Songs generally don't last longer than 2 minutes, and the band creates a discordant, chaotic soundscape through screeching, highly distorted guitars, relentless drum beats and harsh, guttural vocals. The subgenre of metal performed by NAILS is a mix between 'powerviolence' and 'grindcore', subgenres distinguished by their implacable tempo and anarchic timbre. I had arrived at the gig with Allan, Luke and Jess, but as we moved between the bar and the stage area during the opening acts more people joined our entourage as we encountered more friends and acquaintances, and it wasn't long before I lost track of new names and faces. As the lights dimmed and the intermission music began to play over the speakers the attendees loitering around the bar and merch stand quickly made their way to the stage area so as to claim the best positions, as close to the front as possible.

The space was quickly filled, bodies pressed up against one another, voices clattering over each other as the crowd impatiently waited for the show to begin. Abruptly, and with no introduction, the band started to play. Almost immediately a space was forced open for the mosh pit, a large circle about three rows back from the front. Fans ran from one end of the pit to the other, crashing into one another, spinning and kicking their legs out as they moved. The scene was chaotic, turbulent and potentially dangerous, yet a huge grin was plastered on every face that flew past me. The stench of sweat hung heavy in the air, though no one seemed concerned about neither the nasal assault, nor their increasingly damp, sticky clothes. NAILS ruthlessly punched through songs, giving those people in the mosh pit just a brief moment to catch their breath, recollect their energy, and check their increasingly battered bodies for any injuries they may have obtained, before jumping into the next number. The title track of the most recent album, 'You Will Never Be One of Us', began to play, and was instantly recognisable as a crowd favourite by the surge of movement and cheering as the audience tapped into reserves of energy and adrenalin. For the entirety of the song the cries of the audience could be heard screaming along to the lyrics underneath the band. As the last note rang out on the guitar the audience continued to chant out the last line of the song – "you will never be one of us! You will never be one of us! You will never be one of us!" As the instruments faded away in a cacophony of feedback and punctuated drum beats the crowd

continued to chant, hundreds of voices echoing through the dim, heavy air of the hall, slowly blending into cheers and whistles.

Following on from previous chapter's discussion on the individual, the metanarratives of the metal scene and the narrative self, here I examine the role that the community plays in creating distinct discourses, in guiding bodily and behavioural dispositions, and the tangible impact on fans lives. The NYCMS provides the community with a social safety net, forming a support network in times of emotional or economic need. Yet scene members are also socialised into a hegemonic discourse in which dominant ideologies come to shape actions and perceptions. The surge of energy which arrived with 'You Will Never Be One of Us' was largely dictated by the lyrical content of the song, which expresses a division between metalheads and the rest of society. Structurally and sonically, there is not a great range of variation in NAILS songs, and the appreciation of the band is largely derived from their musical intensity and lyrical themes.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, those in the NYCMS often feel alienated from other social and cultural groups which, in turn leads to greater connectivity and camaraderie within the metal community. This self-'othering', the distancing of the metal community from 'mainstream' society, has been one of the hallmarks of metal scenes across many locations since the genre's inception (Brown 2015). This in-group/out-group distinction is a point of pride within metal scenes, as is the belief that metal facilitates the emergence of social bonds which transcend others. Weinstein distinguishes metal as being transcultural, rather than cross-cultural, noting that "metal is not a music tied to a particular culture, which people happen to enjoy in other cultures; rather, metal is the music of a group of people that transcends other, pre-existing cultural and national boundaries" (2011: 46).

### *Global Metal*

Metal is a genre which has undergone significant deterritorialization and reterritorialization since its inception in the late 1960's/early 1970's. Emerging in working class towns in the UK, and later in the US (Cope 2010), by the late 1980's/early 1990's local metal scenes could be found in places such as Bali (Baulch 2007), Istanbul (Hecker 2012), Japan (Dunn 2007), Brazil (Kahn-Harris 2000), among rural Aboriginal Australian communities (Mansfield 2014) and all across Europe (Graham 2016). In the process of metals

reterritorialization into new localities, it becomes bound in localised meanings and social practices. For example, Mansfield (2014) observes how in the Aboriginal community in Wadeye metal bands are integrated with symbolisms of clan, kin and heritage, and that the aggressive music has become entwined with notions of subversion and empowerment in relation to power dynamics and perspectives of “whitefella” and “blackfella”. Similarly, Spracklen et al., (2014) note how metal in northern England is used as a way of exploring and reinvigorating ancestry through utilising histories, myths and ideologies in a political climate where national pride is stigmatised and equated with racism.

That metal is able to transcend geographical, ethnic and language boundaries, bestowing the genre with a global community, is a pervasive notion amongst those in the NYCMS. Daniel, who travels around the US and Europe regularly for his photography work, has observed that he could be “anywhere in the world, and if I’m wearing a [metal] band shirt and someone recognises that band, then we’re friends. It’s as simple as that”. The global metal community is an example of Anderson’s “imagined community” (1983) in that a connection between people, spanning across time and space, is developed based off common myths, values, beliefs and history. It is a socially constructed community which has power over the imagination of people, engendering feelings of connectivity and communality with strangers. But, although this global community is revered, it is not an immediate part of the daily lived experience of metal fans. The existence of a local community helps to reinforce and solidify the ideals of camaraderie in a way which is more significant for those in the scene. Additionally, the political, social, economic and cultural landscapes in which local metal scenes emerge are highly influential in their manifestation, shaping the development and direction of the scene as fans navigate and interact with the broader forces of society (Berger 1999). In turn, the attitudes, dispositions, ideals and discourses which are produced and reproduced in the metal scenes of specific localities have a socialising effect on scene members, privileging certain beliefs, behaviours and actions over others.

### *The Metal Scene of New York City*

In New York City gig attendance serves as one method of developing social networks within the metal scene, but it is in the two most popular metal bars of the city, Saint Vitus and Duffs that the community flourishes. Apart from the music played, both Saint Vitus and Duffs are clearly marked as institutions of the metal scene through their aesthetics and décor.



Although the décor of Duffs is more excessive than that of Saint Vitus, with its collage of album covers, flags, memorabilia and photos of famous metal musicians and bands covering every inch of every wall, both bars utilise similar symbolisms, colour schemes and iconographies. The bars are both innocuously hidden on the street, with the outside wall painted black and no obvious signs or markers: unless you know where you are going, they are easy to miss. Occult and religious paraphernalia are placed amongst the alcohol bottles behind the bar, ranging from pentagrams to Catholic figurines of Jesus nailed to the cross, inverted and uninverted crosses, skulls, and images of the devil. On the ceiling of Saint Vitus there is a large, stained glass image of Jesus' crucifixion, similar in design to those found in Catholic churches. Bare red incandescent lightbulbs dimly illuminate both bars, casting shadows through the spaces. The walls of Saint Vitus' bar area are lined with large white candles, burnt down so that the wax forms heavy drips, creating an atmosphere of gothic nostalgia. Both sell their own range of merchandise, including clothing, patches and beanies, which are often worn by regular patrons. On t-shirts and hoodies, the Duffs clothing proclaims "Duff's Alcohol Abuse Centre", while the Saint Vitus merchandise display slogans such as "Satan is Great, Whiskey is Super". Black and red dominate the space, the gloomy visuals contrasting with the jovial atmosphere created by the patrons.

Although members of the NYCMS hold closer affiliations to one bar or the other, and each bar has a primary group of regulars, cross-over exists between these groups and the boundaries between them are fluid. For many, the bars simply serve different purposes. Saint Vitus holds live performances, whereas Duffs does not, marking for some "Vitus as the home for shows and Duffs as the after party", as Daniel explained. These bars are held in the highest regard to the regular patrons, and are an integral part of fans social and emotional lives. "Look at us, look at where we are. We are at Duffs, Brooklyn, New York," Jahmir said to me one night. "Why did we choose this place? Because it gave us joy, it brought us peace. I have the money to go anywhere, but I come here because it brings me joy. It's where I really want to be." Expressing similar sentiments, Adrien related his experiences of Saint Vitus to those of church: "The reason I like going to Saint Vitus so much is because it reminds me of going to church when I was younger. Everyone knows each other, and everyone there will look out for you."

These social spaces allow for the emergence and perpetuation of social networks which not only facilitate friendship groups, but which also act as safety nets and emotional support to people who have been unable to find these things in family, neighbourhood or

religious communities. For example, Jackson, a regular at Duffs and singer in a local band, was experiencing difficulties with prescription pain medication and had a habit he needed to kick. A rehabilitation centre was his answer, but a lack of healthcare insurance and savings meant that, by his own funding, this was impossible. In response another of the band members started a Kickstarter campaign to raise money to cover the centre's fees, and two months' rent while Jackson was away. The campaign was circulated through Facebook, but it was also common knowledge throughout the regular patrons of Duffs, with many people donating personally in cash to either Jackson, or another of the band members to pass on. Everyone who was in a position to donate to this campaign did so, and with the help of the metal community, Jackson was able to cover the costs to seek the help he felt he needed.

Levine and Wallach (2001) note the importance of institutions in maintaining a scene over time, as it is in institutions where social bonds are maintained in a context which specifically relates to the scene, therefore giving members continuous interaction with both one another and with the broader subculture. Though they identify record stores and all-age social spaces as institutions of significance as they are inclusive of all scene members, New York City has seen a decline in metal-specific record stores over the past decade, resulting in the foregrounding of Duffs and Saint Vitus bars as the institutions where the scene is embodied and perpetuated.

Within these social spaces the transgressive language and imagery of the metal subculture is normalised, reducing the shock value to scene members and embedding it within their everyday lives as something completely unremarkable. Language and bodily dispositions associated with the metal scene are integrated into realms of my informants' lives in an unreflexive, unconscious manner. This is most clearly illustrated in the prominence of band shirts which, through years of collecting shirts purchased at concerts, come to dominate wardrobes. When Luke, a 38 year old born in Queens, moved to a new neighbourhood, he had noticed there were a great number of churches in his new locality. Having not attended church since he was a teenager, on a whim he decided to enter one when he saw a group of people congregated, having a barbeque. But immediately, he felt he was being watched, and noticed the churchgoers giving him looks of disapproval. Feeling uncomfortable, he quickly left the church without speaking to anyone. It was only later in the day that he realised he was wearing a black t-shirt with the words "OPEN THE GATES TO HELL" printed in white, gothic style script across the front. "Man, they probably thought I

was some devil-worshipper come to ruin their nice day,” he recounted, laughing at the memory.

Certain conditions of modernity, which include rapid shifts in employment, housing, living arrangements, social and cultural institutions, and social structure, have been noted as a cause of considerable anxiety and alienation by a multitude of authors (see: Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M 1944; Bauman 1989; Delanty 2007; Sullivan 2012). For instance, Delanty argues that “modernity concerns the loss of certainty and the realization that certainty can never be established,” (2009: 71). In this view, the dissolution of traditional social networks which centred around family, religion and local community in the contemporary Western world, along with rapid changes in social and economic structure, have led to the destabilisation and disorientation of individuals. This process of dissolution is visible amongst my informants. Factors which have contributed to this dissolution of traditional support networks include increased migration, which displaces people from their extended family networks, a decline in organised religion, and the metropolitan tendency to distance one’s self from neighbours. Yet rather than this resulting in a collapse of community values and connectedness, the community has shifted elsewhere – in the case of my informants, the community which primarily acts as a social and emotional safety net is the metal scene. As Kiel reminds us, “participation is the opposite of alienation” (2005: 98), and the participation of individuals in the metal scene works to ensconce them within social worlds which provide comfort, friendship and selfhood.

Stokes (1994) notes that music plays a vital role in informing our sense of place and self. In the NYCMS, the community which has formed around music leads not only to a greater sense of economic, social and emotional security, it also helps to foster a dominant cultural attitude which members are socialised into and adhere to in order to maintain social acceptance and status. As such, a hegemonic discourse is produced and perpetuated throughout the community.

### *Hegemonic Discourse*

Certain attitudes and ideologies dominate the socio-political outlook of the NYCMS. Juxtaposing to the transgressive, deviant and aggressive imagery common in metal music, the discourse promoted by the NYCMS is one which valorises notions of kindness, respect, and

support and welfare to disadvantaged groups and the environment. Conversation consistently turned to the US government, and its perceived failure to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens and natural landscapes. Often these conversations would turn to lamentations as my informants despaired over the future which would be left for younger generations. At the forefront of these lamentations were concerns relating to the possible threats to the American Care Act (ACA, i.e. Obamacare) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) posed by President Trump. Anti-neoliberal sentiments were often expressed within the NYCMS as people made complaints regarding the rising power that corporations hold in US society, privatisation of public services and systems, and growing economic gaps between the wealthy and the poor caused by decreases, or lack of, government-funded social welfare services. Personal expression and freedom was also highly revered. Metal as an art form was idolised for facilitating diversity in style, instrumentation, and incorporation of other genres. Other forms of popular music and media in general, were denounced by many scene members for being too commercialised or restricted in terms of artistic expression. While many of my informants enjoyed other genres of music, they did not believe that they held the same artistic or virtuosic integrity of metal. In addition to these dominant political outlooks and artistic values, there were also sanctions and codes surrounding behaviour. Open violence, aggression and hostility were vehemently opposed.

When these ideals were not followed, the ostracization of the offending individual was subtle and quite passive. John was an occasional visitor of Duffs, and would move between conversations and groups, often standing timidly on the edge of the circle and never quite being fully immersed. I had had a few conversations with him on his own, and couldn't figure out why he was always seen floating around and on the outskirts – he seemed a nice enough guy. One night whilst I was talking to Luke John came to join us. Luke's tone shifted slightly, becoming more formal and less friendly upon John's intrusion. Although Luke was polite and engaged with all that John said, he acted more reserved, quieter than when it had just been him and I speaking. When John left to get another drink Luke rolled his eyes and muttered, "Man, I hate that guy." I was shocked – this was the first open admission of hate towards an individual I had heard from anyone in the scene. I asked why, and was told "No one here likes him. He punched one of my friends once, and he's always that asshole at shows starting fights. He's just an aggressive little asshole and everyone knows it." John had acted in a way which broke the expectations and rules of the social group. As a result he was treated by everyone else in the scene not with open hostility or aggression, but with a

coldness that prevented him from developing close social bonds or being fully accepted. This was his punishment for straying from the hegemonic discourse. This is not to imply that everyone in the NYCMS is entirely against violence: many people expressed the need for violence in certain situations, most commonly when dealing with intoxicated ‘assholes’. But John’s use of violence occurred outside of socially sanctioned boundaries: a punch which was not adequately provoked enough to entail a violent response, and at shows when one is never expected to intentionally harm someone.

In another example of the power of the hegemonic discourse in this space, people with dissenting beliefs or opinions will likely keep quiet in order to maintain their acceptance within the community. Barry explained to me:

You get Trump supporters, you get racists and white supremacists and nationalists here. You get them everywhere, you know. It’s just they aren’t open about it. Why would you be? You’re just going to get shut down; maybe you’ll lose some friends and respect. So they keep quiet. I know one guy, he’s not a bad guy, but he thinks the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement is bullshit. He’s one of those older guys, you know, who says, well all lives matter, what makes black lives so special? He doesn’t really get it. I’ve heard him and this other guy going on about it one night at Red Dog [bar], but you’ll never hear him say anything like that in here.

These behavioural and ideological boundaries are specific to the metal scene of New York City, and fans describe different experiences in different areas. Dean grew up in New Hampshire, later relocating to Boston for college before moving to New York City three years ago for work. The experiences of his engagement with these different metal scenes highlight the dramatic differences which can exist in geographically bound localities, even ones which are quite close. He described to me the right wing political ideologies of his high school friends, stating that the metal crowd in New Hampshire is inclined towards beliefs which reject the notion of increasing government funded welfare services and taxes in favour of decreased government interference and the free market. He is careful though to distinguish this from isolationism, nationalism and racism, stating that “centre-right” is a better descriptor than “alt-right” or “far-right”. He also differentiated between Boston and New York City regarding the acceptance and aptitude for violence in each scene:

In Boston when you go out to a show you can always expect to get into a scuffle or something. But when you come to New York that's very different. There's a great article by these guys in Boston, they made these shirts that said Yankees Sucks. Those guys made a killing off these shirts, they're kind of like emblazoned in the lore of Boston. And then anyways they moved here after that, and that was a lesson they had learned. They get here and no one cares about the shirts and so they were like 'wait, so you can go around here and not everyone's an asshole, and not everyone's going to fight you?'

## Conclusion

Groups of people come to know themselves as a collective through their participation in and sharing of cultural resources, symbols and activities (Frith 1996). Stokes argues that a significant part of music's social power and meaning is due to its role in providing "means by which people recognize identities and place, and the boundaries which separate them" (1994: 5). The metal scene provides a space where people are affirmed into one particular group, bestowed with a sense of belonging and identity. Yet it also creates boundaries between communities, distinguishing the 'us' from the 'others'. An "aesthetic reflexivity" (DeNora 2000: 51) is developed which serves to preserve and maintain boundaries between the self and the other in the context of modernity, where these boundaries lack the rigid differentiation of the past.

Despite the highly individualistic values of the NYCMS, and of the United States more broadly, the community plays an integral role in constructing notions of moral value, socialising scene members into particular modes of being, believing and acting, thus shaping agency and ideology. This socialisation highlights the redundancy of binary notions of egocentrism and sociocentrism, bringing attention to the interaction between the individual and the social in the construction of the self. Specific discourses relating to values and politics are perpetuated throughout the metal scene, as dominant ideas permeate between scene members in conversation, positioning certain ideological beliefs above others. Ideological beliefs are accompanied by restrictions and guidelines regarding actions and behaviours, reinforced by ostracization or silencing of those who dissent. The result is a hegemonic discourse which shapes the collective consciousness of the group, socialising

members in to particular modes of being, acting and perceiving. The hegemonic discourse that is perpetuated throughout the NYCMS is highly influenced by the political and cultural landscape of New York City, in that it leans towards ideals of left-wing politics and intertwines notions of individualism with community or government support and welfare. Yet the discourse is also distinct in its normalisation and celebration of transgressive and deviant imagery, symbolism and language. Through the metal scenes utilisation of transgressive symbols it sets itself apart from the broader social landscape, marking itself as a distinct and bounded entity.

The institutions of Duffs and Saint Vitus bars provide social spaces where the values of the community are continually reaffirmed and reinforced. The bars play an integral role in the lives of individual scene members, and are imbued with emotional significance. They allow spatial affordances where scene members congregate to spend their leisure time. Continuous attendance results in the maintenance and strengthening of social bonds which benefit the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of my informants, and provide them with a social safety net. The décor of the bars facilitates a setting where transgressive and deviant imagery is normalised, codified as a part of the standard symbolism of the group. This normalisation also helps to foster an area in which the symbolism is removed from original meanings and ascribed new significances which are specific to and reflective of the metal scene of New York City as a geographically bound entity. A tribal sense of brotherhood and camaraderie permeates the space, which confirms to scene members that ‘you are one of us’.

### **Chapter Three: Lyrics and Ideological Frameworks**

*They want to kill the rest of the youth*

*They think we're weak*

*But we are much stronger*

*They start the war and we pay the dues*

*No we won't fight any longer*

...

*They've got the power to control my fate*

*I'd rather die than disintegrate*

*And I will fight until the end of this*

*Just set me free and let me breath*

“Massacre”, *Only the Dead see the End of War*, Acrassicuada (2010)

Music, as with all forms of media, involves processes of communication between creators and consumers, and between consumers and other consumers. Feld describes communication as an interactive activity, whereby meaning is produced through ongoing engagement and interpretation between individual agents, social processes and broader, historical and contextual forces. “Communication,” he notes, “is a socially interactive and intersubjective process of reality construction” (2005: 79). As music traverses cultural boundaries, it becomes embedded in local histories, dynamics and interpretations, and the communicative process is bound within localised meanings (Savage 2010). My aim in this chapter is to illustrate how the lyrical content of metal is contextualised by my informants in a way that reflects their socio-political landscape, and how the messages communicated become interpreted through the everyday realities of those in the scene. Despite the unintelligibility of many metal songs vocal lines, learning lyrics is important social capital. In the NYCMS lyrical phrases will often be used to highlight or reinforce a conversation point and are integrated into everyday speech patterns. My informants derive allegories and metaphors from metal songs and position them in relation to their own life experiences, or use lyrics as a way of gaining new knowledge and perspectives.

Metal is a genre which is known for its lyrical exploration of themes such as chaos, suffering, destruction and loss (Berger 1999; Halnon 2006; Moberg 2009). Grotesque,



apocalyptic or satanic references are commonplace, as well as themes of melancholic hopelessness. Yet, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, these themes are contextualised in the NYCMS in a way which speaks to the unique social realities which my informants interact with and navigate through on a daily basis. Walser highlights that metal is an art form which facilitates a critique of the social and political landscape, but also points out that “music does not simply inflict meaning upon helpless fans; texts become popular when people find them meaningful in the contexts of their own lives,” (1993: 150). The communicative process and production of meaning is intrinsically and intimately tied to socio-cultural experiences, personal and collective histories, and political and economic pressures. In the context of the NYCMS, apocalyptic and satanic themes, or references to suicide, madness and violence are not understood as endorsing what is being explicitly said: lyrics are not meant to be taken literally. Instead, my informants derive allegories and metaphors from lyrics, which they apply to their own life worlds, using metal to inform or reinforce their values, and frame their experiences. While the productions of meaning for individual scene members are myriad and diverse, in relation to interpretive processes which run through the community as a whole I have identified two broad fields of analysis: political criticism and spiritual exploration.

### *Political Criticism*

Local metal band Maniac Rise, fronted by 46 year-old Queens born Rob Castoria, released an EP titled *No Lives Matter* in February of 2017. The album title is a play on ‘Black Lives Matter’, a movement which emerged after multiple cases of violence against African-Americans by police officers to draw attention to continuing discrimination. The title is not intended to dismiss or downplay the movement. Rather, Rob tells me that the title is satirical and refers to the growing disparities between wealthy and poor and the bipartisan political climate of the contemporary US. He told me:

It’s not that we don’t give a shit about anybody, it’s just that people worry too much about what the next person is thinking or what they’re doing... and no matter who wins or who gets elected there’s gonna be somebody protesting. And meanwhile the billionaires who are making all these decisions which affect people’s livelihoods, they don’t care, they don’t care

about you. It's based on how much goes in their bank account. So - no lives matter.

Through the album, Rob is expressing a sense of hopelessness and despondency engendered by the diminishing power of the middle and lower classes as wealthy individuals and corporations obtain disproportionate amounts of power and influence. In Rob's view, politicians and the elite classes in the US care more about who will "line their pockets" than the overall wellbeing of society, thereby pursuing actions that will lead to the greatest personal profit and gain. To these wealthy individuals and corporate entities, it is not lives that matter, it is profit, and profit comes at the expense of lives.

The NYCMS is a community that predominantly consists of economically-stable and prosperous individuals. Successful or rising careers in the media industry are prevalent, with a number of scene members working for companies such as Vice or Spotify, and many more working in freelancing positions as photographers, camera operators, band managers/consultants, or writers for magazines and other publications. About half of the scene has a university education, and overwhelmingly people self-describe as middle-class, or, in the case of some of the younger members, as lower-middle class. Yet despite this relative prosperity a pervasive sense of dread and despair dominates their perceptions of the economic and political climate of the US. My informants view their current positions of economic stability as precarious, often citing the widening gap between wealthy and poor as a major cause of concern. "The tallest building built in New York last year was a residential building," Mark, a 30-year old audio engineer said to me. "It's a physical symbol of the growing inequality. Inequality is being exacerbated, and it's going to take nothing short of a revolution to change that."

In addition to anxieties over growing economic disparities, many of my informants expressed concern over what they believed to be a sharp increase in racist, nationalist and isolationist sentiments throughout the population of the United States. When discussing rhetoric surrounding the travel ban enacted by President Trump, which restricted individuals from certain nations entry to the US 27-year-old Alex lamented "I feel bad for us! We keep saying how great we are, but this is what we do? There's going to be a lot of strong forces pushing back against positive change." Brian, a 62-year old metalhead who has been deeply embedded within both the punk and metal scenes since he first moved to New York City

from Wisconsin in his early teenage years framed these shifting power dynamics in an exclusively anti-Christian sentiment:

I thought we were starting to come around, liberating the gay community, things like that. But now we're taking two steps back. The Christians are back on top and they're pushing their agenda. Now Middle Eastern people are getting beat up for no reason, they're trying to tell women they can't have an abortion. They focus on all these things for religious belief, but they don't give a fuck how factory farm animals are treated!

Following the 2016 presidential election the predominantly left-leaning, Democratically aligned demographic of the metal scene (and of New York City more broadly) viewed President Trump's victory as epitomising the culmination of oppressive, nationalist, racist and neoliberal pressures which my informants believe have been building in American society. Brian told me "It really pulled the rug out from under us. I've been through a lot of shitty presidents, but I've never seen anything like this." But despite apprehension at the current political landscape, many of my informants still expressed faith in the overall political system of the US. As Barry stated, "There's a ton of fucking problems in the government, but you can't just tear it down and start from scratch. The foundations are good, there's just a lot of mess in the attic. And you don't tear down a whole house just to fix the attic."

Apocalyptic, chaotic and destructive themes in metal songs become an allegory for what my informants believe to be the decay and degradation of the modern socio-political and economic climate. Those in the NYCMS impose politically charged meaning into songs and believe that artists are attempting to make political statements with their music. Max expressed this when he said, "Why do you think musicians aren't talking about politics on the internet? It's because they're saying it in their music. They don't need to get into arguments online; they have a better vessel to send out their message. Their art is already doing that." Adrien conveyed a similar sentiment when we were listening to Saint Vitus (a doom metal band, the namesake of Saint Vitus Bar). Whilst listening to the 1995 song Trail of Pestilence, following the lyrics 'Poisoned clouds/Ruptured skies/They enjoy progress/While your children die', Adrien made the comment "Man, I wonder how depressed these guys are now knowing it's just gotten worse."

Apocalyptic and satanic lyrical themes in metal music also have the benefit of retaining a certain longevity of relevance. As these themes are often quite ambiguous, being expressive

of despondency, despair or anger in general, they are able to maintain significance and power across time and space, regardless of the artists' original context or intentions. In comparing metal and punk Brian said: "When metal is political it tends to be less obvious, more apocalyptic. You can listen to these songs ten, twenty years later and they're still relevant. Punk isn't like that. You don't have to know who Ronald Reagan is for metal to be relevant."

In addition to the lyrical content, it is also worth briefly noting that my informants also gain a sense of invigorating fortitude when listening to metal. The sonic characteristics of metal, such as the intensity of volume, speed and distortion engender feelings of empowerment in fans. In a context where people feel as though their life is dictated by forces beyond their control, in which despair and anxiety in the socio-political climate is the norm, metal bestows upon fans feelings of strength and control. The energy in the music elates listeners, momentarily empowering them and inducing a sense of domination over their own lives in an otherwise despairing world. As Allan expressed, "It's the whole feeling powerful. Cause in a lot of situations you feel powerless, like you're just a little ant and the governments just a giant hopper jumping around. But with metal you feel like you can do anything, you feel like you can break a wall!" Noelle shared a similar sentiment when she said:

You know, so often you just get trapped by all the shitty things in life, you get beaten down again and again and you feel helpless. But metal gets you out of that, it helps you realise that you *can* do this, that you got this! It makes you angry, but it focuses you too.

Here we see metal used not only as a vessel for political criticism, but also as a way of finding empowerment and agency in a context where people feel powerless against the direction and stability of their own lives. Willis (1990) uses the term "symbolic work" to describe the ways in which social groups use images and language as a form of communication, noting that through shared symbolic resources a social group may gain agency, self-control and perspective which helps them to understand, navigate and reflect upon their socio-cultural world. My informants draw from a number of symbolic resources found in metal, and use these to make sense of a rapidly changing and precarious political landscape which they feel threatens their values, beliefs and way of life, from Rob's satirical use of *No Lives Matter*, to apocalyptic song lyrics and harsh, abrasive soundscapes.

Wallach notes that the aggression in metal should be equated with fighting back, rather than fighting, stating that metal “is music that resonates for the embattled and disempowered, *not* the already powerful” (2011: 266). While some may argue that it is hardly fair to equate middle-class New Yorkers with the disempowered, the use of metal as a medium for expressing and framing political and economic anxieties illustrates how my informants feel an increasing lack of control over the landscape which they must navigate in their everyday lives. While my informants may enjoy stability now, they see this position as inherently precarious as the broader social, economic and political forces that they encounter become increasingly adverse. They use the lyrics of metal to provide allegories and metaphors through which they may frame these fears and anxieties, and listening to metal helps to alleviate feelings of insecurity and doubt, engendering positive emotions of strength, motivation and vigour.

### *Spiritual Exploration*

Mary’s mother and father were devout Catholics, and the religious rituals of attending mass weekly, saying grace before a meal, and learning the stories of the bible were an integral part of her childhood. Yet at about age 15 she began to develop an interest in other spiritual beliefs and philosophies, and today, although she doesn’t identify with any particular religious tradition, she considers herself to be a highly spiritual person. Mostly, Mary likes to explore beliefs and practices from ancient cultures, and believes that understanding and studying the personification of natural phenomena from various pagan traditions is a way of rejuvenating the soul and reconnecting with the natural world in an industrialised, urban environment. Her interest in these ancient, foreign philosophies was initially piqued through the lyrics of metal songs. She explained to me:

Bands like Iron Maiden but not only Iron Maiden, there will be a bunch of songs based off spiritual beliefs of Ancient Egypt, metaphysical stuff...

What I’m saying is they do their research, and they might elaborate for the sake of making it darker and more brutal, but they have the facts, they treat you with intelligence. When you hear the song you go off and do your own research, it gives you food for thought, and then maybe you’ll learn something, maybe it will inspire you.

For Mary, the lyrics of metal songs are important as they allow her to add to her own repertoire of knowledge. Songs and artists introduce her to new ideas surrounding religiosity and spirituality, offering other ways of understanding metaphysics, incorporeality and the human psyche in a bricolage manner. In this sense the lyrics are important in that they say something about the human condition, something which might not be available or apparent to Mary in contemporary US culture. Metal provides a counterpoint the culture into which she was born, an opportunity to explore other ways of living and believing.

Within the NYCMS, identification with organised, institutional religion is rare. This reflects more of a turn away from organised religion than a rejection or denial of spirituality. Organised religion, predominantly Catholicism, played a large role in many of my informants' childhoods. My informants do not necessarily recall or describe their childhood religious experiences as being traumatic or distressing. In fact, some have quite fond memories of their times at their Church. For instance, Adrien recalled his teenage years spent as a Sunday School teacher fondly. "It was amazing," he reminisced, "I would be so hungover every time but the parents loved me and the kids were great." Typically, when my informants were children they would attend church with their parents and families, until their early teenage years. During this time, as their independence grew, their attendance would slowly decline.

In this context, then, resistance to organised religion is not marked by any particular events that might have shattered faith or by any grievous experiences with people involved with the church. Rather, it is linked to the perceived emptiness of rituals. My informants described coming to view the ritual and routine of church as indulging in tradition whilst being disconnected and alienating from their everyday lives, lacking in the spiritual fulfilment which they sought. Those in the NYCMS often explain the movement away from the religious followings of their parents as "needing more" than what they were being given. As Max said, "Everyone will have a different answer, but for me it was wanting more than what everyone around me was happy with. I was raised Christian but I try to see the big picture of things, and you can't really get that through only looking at things from one angle." Similarly, Joan described her understanding of the Catholic Church as "Pandering to some guy at a podium, who's just pandering to some other guy over in Italy [the Pope] and none of them care about your soul, they just wanna save their own". Some members of the NYCMS express a strong opposition to organised religion. Brian, with his critical view of Christianity's role in politics expressed above, is one such person. Similarly, when I 'thanked

god' for the warming of the weather, my colloquial phrase was taken quite literally by Tom, one of the younger members of the scene, who took the opportunity to repudiate me with "Thank God? What the hell has the imagination of idiots ever done for you?" Yet the strong stance taken by scene members such as Brian and Tom was a minority view. A majority of my informants did not care for other peoples' personal faith, and many would abstain from discussing religion with friends so as to avoid any interpersonal conflict or offense.

Tied in to the perception of organised religion as alienating, many in the NYCMS also believe that organised religion does not offer space for genuine emotional expression, or emotional support. This belief is intrinsically linked with the Christian ethos of the US, which valorises individual responsibility and determination over community. My informants believe that this has resulted in a social landscape in which the expression of negative emotions is highly restricted and controlled, for fear of seeming weak. For example, when discussing the topic of death I was told by Pablo, a 35 year old who has lived in the US for 15 years but was born in Colombia:

We're not allowed to deal with death properly! Take a few days off work, have a cry, and that's it. We, in America, are so afraid of breaching a topic which impacts us all. It's crazy! We're all going to die, it's something we all experience, yet we're not offered a chance to properly mourn, to deal with what has happened. And we're all so afraid that we don't want to talk about it. So we don't. And it sucks.

Adrien believed there to be an enduring link between the restriction of emotional expression in Christian communities and a turn to metal for communicating negative feelings. As well as describing melancholy metal lyrics as helping him normalise and come to terms with his own depression, he also firmly believed that many metal artists used their music therapeutically. "Look at Brett from Pallbearer<sup>2</sup>" Adrien said to me, "He grew up in the Bible Belt, singing about how Jesus will solve all your woes in a church choir. Now he's in a doom metal band singing being sad and lost all his faith in God. That's saying something, right?"

Turning away from the religion they were born into, yet not satisfied with identifying as atheist and endorsing a secularised, wholly scientific worldview, my informants sought

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<sup>2</sup> Pallbearer are a doom metal band formed in Little Rock, Arkansas, who Adrien does regular consultant work for. Brett is the lead vocalist and guitarist in Pallbearer.

opportunities for spiritual exploration and growth elsewhere. For some, this spiritual fulfilment comes in the form of definitive identification of a religious or philosophical tradition from another culture, as in the case of Allan who identifies with Laoism. For others, it is enough to learn about different religions, from the present and past, taking certain ideals, values and actions and applying them to their own worldviews in a bricolage manner, as with Mary. What metal offers in this scenario is a gateway to knowledge, a starting point where my informants may be exposed to new ideas, ideologies and belief systems. Certain bands will thematically frame many of their songs from the mythologies, histories and heritage from their own countries. This is common in European or East Asian metal bands, adopting imagery and symbolism from Medieval, Nordic, or Celtic cultures and using their music as a way of reinvigorating and exploring the past (see: Lucas et al., 2014; Lucas et al., 2011; Granholm 2011). Yet certain bands also utilise imagery and symbolism that are in no way connected to their own cultural past. They take tales, characters and ideas from cultural traditions foreign to them, basing songs or albums off those themes that are appealing or enlightening (Moberg 2009).

These narratives resonate with the assertions of Partridge (2005), Moberg (2009) and Lynch (2006) of the impact of popular culture, and in particular of metal, in facilitating ‘alternative spiritual beliefs’. These authors draw attention to the ways in which popular culture and music is able to circulate, promote and endorse spiritual beliefs that diverge from traditional Western religious institutions. ‘Alternative spiritual beliefs’ involve a turn in secularised Western societies towards embracing a bricolage of beliefs and philosophies relating to esoteric, satanic, occult and pagan ideologies. These beliefs are usually embraced in an individualistic manner, with a strong focus on self-growth, self-exploration and self-discovery. They also emphasise dissolution of the boundaries between the human and natural world, advocating a lifestyle of harmony with nature, which contrasts to the highly urbanised environments in which alternative spiritual beliefs are likely to flourish. The increased attention that these traditions have received is part of the “re-enchantment” of the West described by Partridge (2005). Reflective of a strong shift towards individual, personal spirituality as opposed to the communal rituals engendered by much of institutional religion, my informants use metal as a way of reinvigorating their spirituality through a bricolage of ideologies and philosophies. In this process, bands and songs take on the role of teachers and mentors, acting as an introduction to philosophies, myths and beliefs which my informants then further research.



Knowledge of the themes and lyrics of bands and songs is important cultural capital in the NYCMS, and an understanding of the intended meaning of the artist and where they have drawn their inspiration is paramount in this context of eclectic spirituality. Following the increased knowledge pertaining to the music itself, metalheads will then use this information to research philosophies, doctrines and mythological stories. This process is highly personalised. The journey, which begins with research and leads to continuous self-growth and renegotiations of spirituality, is an individualised process very rarely shared amongst scene members. Yet it is a process within which the results are highly homogenised and standardised. Philosophies focus strongly on the dissolution of barriers between the human and the natural world, of understanding humanity as an inherent part of nature. Practices which endorse these philosophies often impact decisions which fans make as they navigate their social and personal lives. For example, many people in the NYCMS are vegetarian. If not, they are acutely aware of where they buy their animal products and how much they consume. Furthermore, mindfulness exercises such as meditation, self-reflection and activities such as nature walks and hiking are highly valued and encouraged. My informants did not express concern regarding the possibility of cultural appropriation, so long as the artists using foreign themes perform adequate research and are sensitive in their representation. The diversity of cultural traditions is largely seen as a positive aspect of metal as it facilitates an eclectic collection of knowledge, questions, sentiments and frameworks which allow people to see beyond their native cultural and spiritual lenses.

## Conclusion

Music, along with other forms of media, does not simply imprint values and impressions on the audience (Frith 1996; DeNora 2000; Long 2013). Rather, the audience takes the symbolisms, themes and ideas from media and apply them to their own lives in a way which is meaningful, significant and immediate. The lyrical themes of metal songs are decontextualized by my informants and then recontextualised. They are taken from the field of meaning in which they were generated and utilised in new ways. Meaning is produced and attached to music in a way which is significant to the audience, reflective of context specific socio-political, cultural and economic landscapes. There is thus no necessary precursor for music to be locally produced in order for it to hold cultural significance. A discourse is developed which promotes certain values above others, encouraging particular kinds of

behaviours and understandings. For my informants metal plays a significant role in providing a framework through which they may understand and organise their life experiences, helping them to navigate politics and personal spirituality.

DeNora notes that “musical affect is constituted reflexively, in and through the practice of articulating or connecting music with other things” (2000: 33). The NYCMS connects metal to their broader social worlds, and in doing so imbue aspects of music with meaning. The lyrical and sonic aspects of a song act, to my informants, as an abstract way of criticising modernity, and of questioning the contemporary condition. This production of meaning is an inherently social practice. The significances and interpretations attached to metal songs are closely tied to the socio-political and economic landscape of my informants, and are reflective of dominant values and ideologies of the metal scene as a community. Yet in turn, these interpretations help to reinforce and affirm certain values as they are circulated through the community and disseminated through the group, becoming a part of the hegemonic discourse. They are indicative of the broader social pressures which those in the NYCMS feel they are most exposed and vulnerable to, and help my informants to position themselves within the broader social landscape.

The recontextualisation of themes and symbols used in metal also works to reaffirm and strengthen the community. It facilitates a set of beliefs and ideologies which can be mutually agreed upon and celebrated. This recontextualisation helps to reinforce and perpetuate the values and ideologies which are endorsed by the group, and by celebrating these values and ideologies individuals are announcing their allegiance to the NYCMS. In this way, the meanings which are produced and shared throughout the NYCMS based off the transgressive or melancholy themes of metal songs help to affirm the group as a defined community. The relationship between the macro context of the United States, particularly in relation to the socio-political and religious climates, and the micro context of the metal scene, become clear from an examination of lyrical themes and meaning production. This analysis shows how community helps to contribute to the construction of the self in a diverse and fractured cosmopolitan context. By endorsing certain themes as being reflective of aspects of my informant’s everyday realities and using metal as a gateway to knowledge and self-growth, they are constructing a particular kind of knowledge that is embodied in the music they share, then celebrated and perpetuated in the social spaces and discourse of the scene.

## **Chapter Four: Transcendence, Collective Effervescence and Gigs**

Low murmurs echo through the small stage area of Saint Vitus Bar, the dim conversation punctuated by a laugh or a cry as the attendees eagerly await the arrival of SubRosa, an experimental sludge metal group. As more people enter the tiny space we are pushed closer together, until arms are touching and the brisk, frozen chill of New York's winter night that had seeped into our bones is replaced with the dense, stifling warmth of crowded bodies. Those who can, begin to shed their layers, awkwardly holding heavy coats designed to keep out sleet and snow as the crowd is packed in further. Carrying over the monotonous hum of the crowd, the twangs of tuning instruments – electric guitars, bass and violins – call back and forth with the sound engineer at the back of the room. Once satisfied, the tuners put down the instruments and walk off stage. The shadowy light fades to black, and on cue the murmur of the crowd hushes to a deep, heavy silence as all eyes move to the invisible stage.

The crowd falls into a fixated stillness in anticipation. Red spotlights turn on, faintly illuminating the stage, and at the sight of the band the crowd erupts into a cheer, electrical energy consuming the atmosphere. The cheer continues to reverberate impatiently through the room until a thin, wailing guitar takes over, growing in strength and depth as the stretched note is joined by other instruments. The lead singer, a red-haired woman wearing a black dress trimmed with lace, opens her eyes and stares into the crowd as she begins to sing, her voice clear as a bell over the distorted yet ethereal instrumentation. Mesmerised, the audience is silent again, but this time the air is heavy with the vibrations of melodies moving in and out of one another, harmonies and rhythms overtaking the senses, capturing the entirety of our awareness and making the room seem smaller, heavier, more intimate. As I look around the space I see that, while half the crowd is staring at the stage with a calm intensity, the other half has their heads bowed and eyes closed as they lose themselves in the music, bodies captured by its movements and pulses, gently swaying.

In my final chapter I wish to illuminate the significance of gigs in fostering community by emphasising their transcendent, affective power. Attending live performances plays a significant role in affirming disparate fans as belonging to a group, sharing in the same values. This affirmation is forged by the emotional affect of the experience, yet it is also reinforced by the particular somatic knowledge which is embodied as individual scene

members incorporate bodily dispositions. Listening to music can be a powerful emotional experience (Hatten & Robinson 2012; Long 2013). Meanings are attached to particular pieces of music as fans relate the sonic elements of a band or song -the rhythms, melodies, techniques and timbres – to memories, emotions and symbolic associations. Those in the NYCMS use metal as a way of inducing or heightening emotional states. As described by Jess, “Let’s just say you’re upset about something, you can find metal that will pull you out of the negative mind frame, make you happy, but if you want to drown yourself in tears and self-pity, you’ll find something for that too”. Yet, while albums are thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated, the experience of listening to recordings is subordinate to the experience of seeing music performed live. Live performances induce emotional and affective states that are amplified by the immediacy and communality of the environment. The evanescent nature of the experience helps foster a sense of connection amongst attendees as the fleeting, temporally bound moment presents a unique atmosphere in which the flow of time is suspended and energy and emotion surge through the crowd of devoted fans. In gigs, a space and moment in time is created where the metal scene, and the community, is embodied.

Gigs facilitate a collective experience in which normal social rules are suspended, where behaviours, actions and bodily presentation which would usually be deviant become acceptable. A space is formed, away from the mundanity of the everyday, in which divergence and transgression may be embraced and celebrated. Energy is released through the crowd, emerging from the performers to move through the audience and impact each member in a way which is both highly personal yet incredibly communal.

### *Gigs as a Site of Congregation*

Live performances are paramount to the metal scene across many different localities, and attending gigs is one of the essential ritualistic elements of the community. It is not uncommon to find fans comparing and competing against how many and which bands they have seen live, how many times they have seen them, who they saw playing with whom, and so on. The live music scene of New York City is a bustling stream that never seems to end, with metal shows occupying almost every day of the calendar. Yet indulging in gigs is restricted by financial constraints, work and other responsibilities, meaning that fans must be selective with their gig attendance. Older members of the scene who have had the opportunity to see the classic, formative bands of metal are endowed with cultural capital for their

experiences. During an Arthur Brown concert Adrien and I engaged an older man in conversation. The man, who called himself Brother Bee, had shaggy, greying hair and was wearing an old, worn denim jacket decorated with patches. Adrien noticed a Black Sabbath patch and the two excitedly began to discuss the band. “Oh yeah, this is from when I saw them in 1978,” Brother Bee told us. Adrien’s eyes widened in amazement and, with his hands out in front of him he began to mock bow to the older man as though he was a deity. “My good man, I cannot tell you how jealous I am,” Adrien said, and the two dove into a conversation about what bands Brother Bee had seen in what years and at what venues. The admiration shown by Adrien here towards Brother Bee is typical of younger members of the scene, and highlights the integral role that seeing bands perform live has.

Although music, as with other sounds, is associated with hearing, music is able to engage the whole body, inducing affective, physiological changes in the listener (Krumhansl 2002). As DeNora states, “The aural is never distinct from the tactile as a sensuous domain” (2000: 86). Individual listening preferences and exposure can amplify these affective bodily impacts, as “musical cultures shape these [psychological principles of expectation] in unique ways” (Krumhansl 2002: 49). My informants assert that metal music has stronger physiological impacts than many other genres. They relate this to the sonic qualities of metal, which are described as tapping into a part of the brain which is ‘primal’, energetic, uninhibited. Barry described the sound of metal as “a little more primitive, you know, not quite constrained by the society that bears down on us.” Likewise, Jess related her experiences of metal gigs to “this great beast that gets into your head and forces you to let go, that lets you be free from all the bullshit of life for a bit.” A contrast is identifiable here between the bodily dispositions of contemporary society, in which self-control and self-constraint in the social sphere are required to maintain respectability and status, and the bodily dispositions of metal gigs, which offer a sense of freedom and release (Halnon 2006). As one enters the venue of a concert or festival, the *habitus* is shifted. Facial expressions, postures, movements, and the way one holds their body and interacts with the space shift to reflect the change in environment.

At gigs the amplification, acoustics and crowding of bodies intensifies the physiological impacts of the listening experience. The quintessential instrumental line up for metal bands is electric guitar, bass guitar, drums and vocals, but it is becoming increasingly commonplace for metal bands to include instruments such as keyboards, synthesisers, violins, woodwinds, horns, and a plethora of other instrumentation into their ensembles. Each

instrument plays a different role in creating a distinctive atmosphere of heavy, electric energy. Drums are the crucial driver of rhythm in a metal band, providing a constant, propulsive beat which reverberates beneath the other instruments. The drums guide the tempo of the music, which in metal will either sit above or below the tempo of many other genres. This relationship between drums and rhythm position the drums as one of the most integral factors in setting the intensity and atmosphere in the framework of a gig. In ritual settings rhythm plays a critical role in determining mood, pace and ambience, as external rhythms (i.e. those produced by instruments or vocals) have a strong impact on internal rhythms (i.e. the body's natural rhythms such as heartbeat, breathing, etc.) (Jackson 1968). The drums, then, play an important role in inducing energy levels and rhythmic movements in a live performance.

The bass guitar is the next most important instrument in setting and maintaining the tempo and rhythm in metal music. While the bass also has a melodic role and will provide riffs, fills and solos (particularly prominent in sludge and doom subgenres), any melodic role that bass guitar does have is intimately tied in with the key and time signatures of the song. As the bass guitar is typically the lowest of the tuned instruments it is not always the easiest to hear, especially under the cacophony of loud, amplified and distorted guitars, though at a gig the bass line can be felt rumbling through the body, vibrating in the chest, providing a low, deep hum reverberating beneath the guitars and vocals. Guitars can be dissonant and jarring, or soaring and melodic. Often an individual song will combine both of these sonic elements, sometimes at once with a distorted rhythm guitar and clean, ethereal lead playing a riff or solo. The role of clean sonic production can also be taken up by instruments such as the violin, keyboard, flutes, pipes, acoustic guitars, vocals etc. To the untrained ear it may seem as though a wall of noise, indistinguishable and cluttered, is assaulting the crowd. Yet to the familiar ear, the rhythms, melodies, layers and movements of the music are sought out, anticipated, and cause the crowd to swell at particular moments, constant movement ebbing and flowing as the music moves from the stage to the audience.

As the performers move through the set they control the tone, mood and atmosphere. Cult classics will elicit a different response than new songs never played before, as will songs of different timbres, tempos and tones. The level of energy is controlled through selected the songs. Typically, bands will start and end a set with songs that are highly energetic, placing more subdued, sombre songs in the middle. Different levels of energy are visible throughout

a crowd, depending on factors such as the size of the venue and the distance from the stage. The highest concentration of energy is always in the mosh pit.

### *Mosh Pits*

The mosh pit typically forms three to four rows back from the front of the stage. It is circular in shape and, depending on the size of the show, holds between 20 to 100 moshers at one time in most of New York City's venues. A pit emerges when a small group of people begin to throw their bodies against one another, causing a movement in the crowd as people either push their way inwards to join, or outwards to escape. In some shows an empty space will be prepared just before or as the music starts as a few people spread their arms and push people backwards. Then, moving with the ebbs and flows of the music, the moshers run from one side of the circle to another, spinning their bodies, banging their heads, and kicking their legs outwards. The result is a chaotic whirlwind as people enter the space from all sides and crash into one another, intentionally bumping into others with their shoulders and being thrown in all directions. Some moshers will be in the pit for the whole show, whereas others will jump in for a song or a run before removing themselves, though they often stay close to the edge so that they can re-enter. The people who make up the barrier of the pit act as a buffer between the moshers and the rest of the crowd. As someone comes flying towards them, they must be prepared to brace themselves and either push them back into the centre of the pit, or allow them to merge back with the rest of the crowd. Often those standing around the barriers will have their arms and one leg ready to rise to a defensive stance to avoid serious injury. They occupy a dangerous position, but the risks are known. And, as Rob said, "If you don't want to get hit, you stay away from the pit".

Mosh pits in shows create an environment where one must remain acutely aware of what is happening in one's immediate surroundings, developing highly attuned spatial awareness, whilst also being in a position where the control over one's own body is extremely limited. Moshing is an activity which engages all senses. Movement is dictated by cues in the music and the motions of the crowd. Vibrations from the music can be felt coming through the floor and filling the air, reverberating through the chest. Moshers are assaulted by bodies slamming into them, and feel the sudden sensation of fresh injuries which will ache and sting come the next morning. The darkened room, contrasting with flashing lights from the stage obstruct vision and, creating an atmosphere of confusion. One is overcome by the stench of sweaty

bodies and the clammy, sticky feeling of sweat. In this area people are throwing themselves around, jumping in from the sides, diving through, and throwing limbs around in an erratic and careless manner. It engenders a sense of helplessness as you lose control of your own movements, yet is highly empowering as you enter a space of chaotic danger and surging energy, determined to survive (relatively) unscathed. Spatial awareness of the direction of the crowd and its motion is imperative for avoiding injury in mosh pits. A sort of auto-pilot mode is engaged as you lose the ability to process and react to your surroundings in a conscious manner. Visual cues come in brief flashes, often in your periphery, or not at all as someone comes crashing into you from behind. Muscles respond to pressure, bracing where appropriate to handle a blow, elbows rising defensively at the sense of danger, feet dancing around obstacles which might trip you, and when you are tripped hands fly out, either seeking support or protecting the face. As people become more experienced in mosh pits these motions become instinctual survival methods, bypassing conscious thought as the body reacts to external stimulus. Adrenaline pumps through the body throughout the show, an electrical energy pulsing through the crowd, feeding between performer and fans, and when the show ends and the performers say goodbye, a blanket of exhaustion falls over the crowd. The senses which were heightened just moments ago become dulled, as ears start to ring and tired muscles become weak, jelly-like.

Despite the chaos there are strict regulations enforced in mosh pits, and following correct pit etiquette is paramount. When someone falls, a shower of arms follow the person to pull them up before the faller is met by a stray foot to the face or trampled on. A quick thumbs up or a head nod confirms that no serious injuries have been acquired; otherwise a passage is made through the crowd to assist the person out. If someone drops a phone, has their glasses knocked off, or needs to tie a shoelace then the people in the immediate area, upon seeing someone with their head down inspecting the floor, will create a barrier. With arms together they surround the person, legs apart and braced firmly into the ground, ready to take a punch or catch someone with their body until their fellow mosher is ready to re-join. Being intentionally violent or going in with the intention to hurt people is highly frowned upon, and can result in the offender being pulled from the pit or pointed out to the security guards so they can be removed. Despite the appearance of mindless violence, fights are rare in metal pits. Palmer (2005) calls moshing a ritual of trust as individuals are entrusting their fellow moshers with their safety, purposely placing themselves in a potentially dangerous situation yet retaining faith that they will be protected by others. Without this trust, without



believing that the community will look out for you, this ritual would not be possible. The pit is a ritual of live performance which not every fan will get involved in, but everyone in the crowd understands the rules surrounding this space and mostly everyone will work together to ensure that no one is seriously injured.

### *Out of the Pit*

Not all audience members will join the mosh pit in a show, and not all metal shows create an atmosphere where pits will emerge. For some, the boundaries between a 'pit' or 'non-pit' show are highly guarded. On our way to an Alcest show, Damien said to me on the subway "If anyone tries to mosh in this show I'm going to gouge their eyes out till they bleed." He looked at me, smiling, waiting to see whether I was shocked or disgusted at the comment - "are you okay with that?" he asked, still smirking. The subgenres which do not facilitate mosh pits usually fall under doom/sludge. They have slower, dragging tempos with deep, down-tuned, heavy droning guitars; bass riffs that sometimes offer greater melodic function than the guitars; the vocals sit at a rumbling growl; rhythms which are slow, drawn out with notes that are held beyond the expectation of the listener and create a sombre, atmospheric mood. The SubRosa show described at the beginning of this chapter falls into this category. Yet despite careful boundary guarding by some, the boundaries between 'pit' and 'non-pit' genres are often blurred and ambiguous. Despite the difference in environment there is still an enormous amount of shared emotion and appreciation which is felt at these shows through the crowd.

The energy at these shows is more subdued and sombre. As opposed to the adrenaline fuelled frenzies of mosh pits, these shows capture atmospheres of mesmerised transcendence. Members of the audience are likely to have their eyes closed and heads down, gently moving their bodies with the pulse of the music as they sway from side to side or gently headbang. The air fills with deep, heavy amplified instruments, capturing the senses and sending the audience into a trance-like state. An ambient immersion is created by the droning wall of sound, patterns of vibrations coming up through the feet and felt in the chest as heavy, dragging melodies of riffs and solos intertwine with rhythmic movements. The clarity and sharpness of the music as heard and felt through these vibrations contrast with vision which is obscured by smoke machines, creating ghostly silhouettes. As opposed to mosh pits, where the immediacy of one's individual body and where it is in relation to others is heightened, in

this setting there is a sense of melting into your surroundings and the crowd as the barriers between audience members and artists are eroded by the sounds reverberating through the space. “It’s like if red hot lava oozing down the sides of a volcano had a sound,” Adrien said, “it would be what you get in a doom show.”

### *The Transcendent and Transformative Power of Gigs*

Gigs offer a space for the metal scene to congregate in celebration and admiration of music, the lifeblood of the community. Within this space a sense of camaraderie and connectivity is engendered throughout the audience as people share a moment of transcendent exaltation. By grace of sharing a temporally and spatially bound moment, an audience at a show join in an experience which is unique and revered. Dedication and devotion to the metal scene are affirmed, and the value of community is invigorated. Ritual experiences are transformative as they bind and connect a group of people to a common goal, celebrating the values of the community in a way which encourages exaltation and transcendence (Stokes 1994). The sensuous nature of music, and the embodied knowledge, interact with cognitive perceptions of metal music (Aldridge 1989), thus imbuing individuals with a heightened and collective consciousness.

Participation in gigs also reaffirms the importance of metal as an art form, and its role in the emotional and mental life of fans. Fans often describe the experience of attending live performances as enlightening and transcendent. For example, Noelle said, “If you really dive into it, it takes you to like a higher level of consciousness. Like the atmosphere has always taken me to this higher level, like spiritual enlightenment but also like spiritual agony... You’re kind of somewhere between life and death.” Daniel expressed his embodied experience using a different metaphor: “I’m not saying it’s a drug, it’s just a way of elevating yourself. Some people would argue that’s just an aesthetic emotion, but sometimes that’s what drives us.” Dean made a similar analogy between metal and drugs, stating:

Most people might like to do drugs together to feel connected, but when you’re in a place where your friend’s smashing one guy, a few are in a brawl, and in the end of it you’re not doing drugs. I guess I’m trying to comment on how successful the genre is at bringing people together, because you don’t need drugs to enjoy it.

Attending gigs provides a sharp contrast to the mundanity to the routine of everyday life. Metal gigs offer an oscillation between monotony and exaltation, engendering a collective effervescence through shared ritual and heightened consciousness. A space is formed, bound in time and space, of heightened energy and awareness, an infectious energy which pulses through a group and infuses it with vitality.

### Conclusion

Metal gigs provide an experience in which my informants transcend above the everyday, a moment in which the limitations and behavioural boundaries of the mundane social world are temporarily eroded. Following Turner, Gabrielle Riches (2011) describes how mosh pits act as a liminal space for fans of metal wherein the usual boundaries and restrictions of social life can be momentarily disregarded and inhibitions released. She makes the point that “metal backspaces are socially constructed and imagined spaces in which the engagement of community members in ritual practices functions to replicate shared norms and values” (2011: 325). I would draw on and extend this description of mosh pits as a liminal space to encompass the entire gig experience. As many of my informants expressed, the experience of seeing live performance is transcendent, relating them to drugs in their ability to induce a higher state of consciousness and awareness. Gigs reinforce a particular somatic knowledge of the body, imbued with sociocultural, intersubjective meaning (Samudra 2008). This knowledge requires embodied familiarity in order to maintain coherence throughout the kinaesthetic space. The atmosphere at gigs fosters a strong sense of connection amongst the attendees. This transcendent state of mind facilitates a space where the sensitivity and connectivity to those around you, and to one’s own body, is heightened. The amplification of the music, along with the low lighting, makes one particularly attuned to non-visual senses, and the movement of the music is felt throughout the body.

Cheering, headbanging and moshing visibly move throughout a crowd as the infectious, contagious exaltation is carried from performers to audience, and between attendees. In the act of listening, and participating in a gig, “we both express ourselves, our own sense of rightness, and suborn ourselves, lose ourselves, in an act of participation” (Frith 1996: 110). The ritual of gigs engenders a collective effervescence which heightens the feelings of community, and provides an experience which is intensely social and personal. The energy

and atmosphere which spreads through the crowd play a significant role in elating the individual. As Noelle described:

It just really helps you get in touch with pieces of your mentality that you don't normally hit. You can be so beyond it, you're kind of half way angry, half way driven, you're just at this cracking point. And you get in [the mosh pit] and it's almost like your third eye splits and you feel like you can do this. It's like I am the dark and the dark can't bring me down. It's very empowering. I go into this other realm when I'm listening to metal and I'm assuming the rest of us are the same.

## **Conclusion:**

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to illustrate the ways in which the metal scene of New York City plays an integral role in the construction and maintenance of my informants' life worlds. Feld tells us that "The presence of style indicates a strong community, an intense sociability that has been given shape through time, an assertion of control over collective feelings so powerful that any expressive innovator in the community will necessarily put his or her content into shaping that continuum and no other" (2005: 202). The community that has emerged around metal is reflective of Feld's assertion. As fans of metal become further embedded within the scene they come to embody it through their bodily and linguistic dispositions, interpretive frameworks and modes of agency. Metal is not just a musical style to be enjoyed. To my informants, metal provides a source of philosophical engagement, empowerment and connectivity.

Life has rapidly changed in the contemporary, modern world. Over half of the world's population, approximately 54%, live in an urban environment, and in the United States this number is even higher, at approximately 80% (United Nations 2014). While scholars such as Sullivan (2013) and Delanty (2009) have argued that the rapid changes in living conditions would lead to increased alienation and anxiety through a loss of community values and interconnectedness, the case I have presented here of the metal scene of New York City, one of the most densely populated and iconic cosmopolitan areas, presents a significant counter argument. My informants, despite living apart from family, removing themselves from religious and neighbourhood communities, have developed strong social bonds that facilitate emotional and mental wellbeing, whilst fostering a sense of belonging, identity and self. This case study highlights the resilience of individuals in such a context, illustrating how people come together to support one another, celebrate common values, and develop a sense of being in the world.

In sociological and musicological disciplines, musical genres and the social groupings that develop around them have primarily been analysed in relation to youth cultures (see: Hebdige 1979; Willis 1978; Williams 2007). While contemporary youth culture presents an important area of analysis, as it allows for an understanding of how identity and belonging are developed in a world of uncertainty, constantly in flux, I believe that it is imperative to extend this study beyond teenage years in order to fully comprehend and grasp how the

communities in which people embed themselves continue to provide an important source of security, meaning and value into adulthood. Additionally, the significance that music plays in an individuals' adolescent life may remain just as important and immediate well into adulthood.

Metal is a genre that has long celebrated the values of camaraderie and brotherhood. The strength of these values may result partially from the criticism the genre receives regarding the transgressive nature of lyrics, soundscape and visual imagery and symbolism utilised. Yet, as I hope to have shown, the individual scene members are not necessarily deviant individuals. Rather, the transgressive sonic and symbolic content of metal music acts to my informants as a way of framing and understanding their socio-political world, defining boundaries between in-group and out-group, and offering a source of empowerment through facilitating both individual agency and communal bonds.

To return to the goals stated at the beginning of this thesis, it is clear that the metal scene of New York City plays an imperative role in the social and emotional lives of my informants. The community that has been engendered around metal provides scene members with discourse, agency and community, thus constructing a sense of self and belonging. The relationship between the individual and community are deeply entwined as the community provides not only social, emotional and economic security, but also forms a hegemonic discourse which guides actions, behaviours and beliefs and provides an interpretive framework for navigating the social landscape.

The NYCMS is a vibrant and dedicated community. Unfortunately, the short length of this thesis has limited me in my range of discussion topics. I have been unable to fully explore or encapsulate the important role played by prominent themes such as gender, the ethnic and linguistic makeup of the scene, the intricacies of metals commercial production and dissemination, the relationship between generational divides, or how those in the metal scene interact with social groups and institutions outside of themselves. Nevertheless, I hope that I have taken the reader on a journey which illuminates the reader as to the intricacies of the NYCMS, highlighting the role that the socio-political landscape has in shaping the values and behaviours of the community, the impact that the community as a bounded entity has on individual members, and showing how individual members impart meaning and value into their lives because of the scene.

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Maniac Rise. *No Lives Matter*, Independent Release 2017

Nails. "You Will Never Be One of Us", *You Will Never Be One of Us*, Nuclear Blast Entertainment, 2016

Saint Vitus. "Trail of Pestilence", *Die Healing*, Hellhound Records 1995

### Filmography

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## **Appendix One: Human Research Ethics Committee Approval**

Ethics Application Ref: (5201600888) - Final Approval

Dear Professor Downey,

Re: ('Spirit of the Nomad: An Ethnographic Study of Mongolian Folk Metal and Identity')

Thank you for your recent correspondence. Your response has addressed the issues raised by the Faculty of Arts Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval of the above application has been granted, effective (14/12/2016). This email constitutes ethical approval only.

If you intend to conduct research out of Australia you may require extra insurance and/or local ethics approval. Please contact Maggie Feng, Tax and Insurance Officer from OFS Business Services, on x1683 to advise further.

This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following web site:

[http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/\\_files\\_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf).

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Ms Erin Lee Young  
Professor Greg Downey

**NB. STUDENTS: IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP A COPY OF THIS APPROVAL EMAIL TO SUBMIT WITH YOUR THESIS.**

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).
2. Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports.

Progress Report 1 Due: 14th December 2017  
Progress Report 2 Due: 14th December 2018  
Progress Report 3 Due: 14th December 2019  
Progress Report 4 Due: 14th December 2020  
Final Report Due: 14th December 2021

NB: If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a

Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website:  
[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/current\\_research\\_staff/human\\_research\\_ethics/resources](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/current_research_staff/human_research_ethics/resources)

3. If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

4. All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

5. Please notify the Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6. At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:

<http://www.mq.edu.au/policy/>

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/policy](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/policy)

If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University's Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have approval, please do not hesitate to contact the Faculty of Arts Research Office at [ArtsRO@mq.edu.au](mailto:ArtsRO@mq.edu.au)

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of ethics approval.

Yours sincerely

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