'GETTING MY SOUL BACK': EMPOWERMENT NARRATIVES AMONG FEMALE-IDENTIFIED FANS OF DEATH METAL IN NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT

Jamie Patterson: 'Getting My Soul Back': Empowerment Narratives among Female-identified
Fans of Death Metal in North Carolina
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

This ethnographic study contributes to the recent global body of research that examines
how female-identifying fans interpret, challenge, temporarily escape, and/or play with gender in
their own terms within extreme metal scenes. Using folklore methodology, it expands upon this
research through situating participants in their broader socio-historical contexts. By examining
the life narratives of death metal participants in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, it offers a
critical framework that will enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of not only
women's involvement within the scene, but also how they interpret their own participation—
rather than simply conforming to masculinist norms—and specifically how they use the music to
gain empowerment and develop resilience in their everyday lives. Its findings are useful for
scholars studying fan engagement in music communities, extreme metal scenes, life narrative
and identity construction, gender, race, and class performance in the southern United States, and
structural violence and education.

To all those throughout this study who welcomed me into their lives, trusted me with their stories, and helped me understand. Thank you for your openness, courage, and candidness. And to the late metal studies scholar Sonia Vasan, whose passion and research inspired me to engage in the conversation.

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CHAPTER 1: FINDING THE FOLK IN DEATH METAL

Introduction

It had been almost a decade since I had heard anyone outside of my circle of friends mention death metal. I was sitting in the first day of a graduate school seminar in Folklore at the University of North Carolina and the topic of discussion was "What is art?" As we began discussing issues of intention, community standards, and complications related to personal preference, one member of my cohort spoke up:

"I mean, if I walked into a local bar downtown, say The Cave, and a death metal band was playing, I may not like it, may not even consider it to be music, but who am I to say it's not art?" he said.

My first reaction was surprise, "Would there be a death metal band playing nearby after all these years?"

Growing up in the mostly rural coastal plain town of Wilson, North Carolina, in the early 1990s, my small group of white, male, working class friends and I had traveled regularly one hour west to the Triangle area (a semi-urban area of the state comprising the capital city of Raleigh, along with Chapel Hill and Durham) to catch touring shows of small national and international death metal acts. But in the late 1990s, the shows had become sparse. I had moved away from the region in 2001, lost touch with my death metal friends, and—though I had continued listening to the music—thought the scene had died. To hear that there could be shows in the area intrigued me.

But as my fellow student continued, I also recognized some of the discourse that had pervaded most outsiders to the music. Why had he used death metal as the boundary of what is to be defined as music or art? Certainly, the genres of music called "noise" and subsets of electronic and avant-garde music more readily press those boundaries. So why was death metal, and extreme metal in general, the go-to example of music that challenges common definitions of art?

His remark left me to assume three things. First, that he may not be familiar with those genres of music. Second, that death metal had achieved enough commercial success over the years that he could use it as an example with which others would be familiar. Third, that perhaps the local scene which he knew about, having attended UNC as an undergraduate, had enough of a following that he was aware of its existence. I was most concerned with the third assumption. If there was a scene thriving in the Triangle, a part of me wanted to hear it. But I was also unsure, because this time I would be diving in alone. I asked others in the cohort if they had seen any of these shows. Their responses were dismissive; they didn't go to "those" clubs and they weren't about to go with me. Weren't they at least curious?

My graduate school experience became the seed of this project, a study of life narratives among women in the Triangle area who identify with death metal, and extreme metal, music. It began on that first day, but two more encounters in graduate school propelled me further and left me pondering why, in a program that studies folk expressions of art and life, were extreme metal communities unexplored or, at worst, discounted?

One was a year later, when I gave a first-year graduate Folklore student and avid music fan a ride and he asked me about my musical tastes.

"My tastes are broad," I tell him. "Classical, world, jazz, some indie, experimental, punk, electronic, dark folk, blues. I like most anything soulful, discordant, low-pitched, or in a minor key. But my favorite is death metal."

"Death metal?" he groans. "Why?"

I tell him how I like the intensity of the sound, how its multilayered instrumentation and often jarring time signature progressions demand my full attention in the moment, and how I feel the heavy distortion and low pitch of the drums, vocals, bass and guitars resonate through my body as I listen.

When that fails to continue the conversation, I reach for common ground.

"You know, from a folk perspective, the formation of death metal as a genre is actually quite fascinating."

He stops me there and insists that death metal as a genre is nothing but a commercial production. We start debating. I bring up how the emergence of what became classified as "death metal" had began as an underground "glocal" movement that arose in the late 1980s, involving pockets of local scenes—in Florida, New York, Britain, Sweden, and Brazil, for example. Each scene was influenced by underground metal—thrash, speed, and some crossover punk—but the sounds varied based on the availability of specific musical equipment and the culture of the area. He counters, saying that those areas are fabrications made up by labels to sell albums, much like "grunge" had been marketed as the Seattle sound in the U.S. in the 1990s.

To be sure, death metal had become commercialized, and the sounds of these regions capitalized. Record labels had signed on new bands during the first popular period of the genre in the early 1990s, only to drop them once the peak seemed to wane (Suffocation and Deicide are examples of this pattern). Commercial music labels have a history of cannibalizing local scenes.

But he was ignoring the movement that started the wave of popularity, not to mention the record labels (Relapse Records being the most prominent) that were created by fans to produce their own music and similar music from bands they had learned about through the tape-trading global pen-pal network, or whom they had met at local shows in small clubs and house parties. Fans tape traded through mail and developed relationships, sometimes relocating to form bands with each other and to be part of burgeoning scenes. Fanzines and mail-order trading helped spread these distinct sounds globally and smaller scenes developed. Fans began producing albums, creating small independent record labels that they disseminated through local record stores. His words also ran counter to my own experiences as a fan in the early 1990s; and to the mound of letters and tapes I had received in response to comments I sent to an independently-published extreme metal fanzine, *Sounds of Death*.

Our debate proved to be futile, but its undercurrents—the reticent attitude to acknowledge death metal as a valid folk phenomenon—remained with me through my coursework. To most folklorists of the 1960s, and some schools today, popular or commercially produced music was not considered in the realm of the "folk." Rather, music that was generated in daily life—such as working songs, sea shanties, and ballads—along with vernacular musics—such as blues, old-time, gospel, and many forms of religious music—created by communities and shared through generations were worthy of study under the umbrella of "folk music." While folklorists did not actively *deny* the "folkness" of other musics, they led the definitional charge tacitly, by their choices. And since *they* were looking at ballads, blues, etc., *those* musics somehow "counted." Like other genres popular with folklorists, death metal shares some of the same key features; it was often started, for instance, by working class individuals, or, when considered on a global scale, by those who felt marginalized by the larger mainstream culture. Its

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members circulate the music among each other in community and employ emic standards of authenticity, taste, stance, and innovation. Likewise, the community shares commonly held values and edicts that they attribute to their involvement with the music. Yet, with the exception of Harris Berger's groundbreaking research (1999a; 1999b), folklorists' purview has tended away from metal in general, and towards narrow definitions of "the vernacular." What about the fans who listen to the music, integrate it with their lives, and even produce their own music as a result? Sociologists, musicologists, scholars of leisure studies, and anthropologists have studied death metal scenes; folklorists can also add a unique perspective to the conversation.

Regarding fans, the last encounter I had in the program finally set me on the course of research. In a class on the art of ethnography, my professor commented independently (I don't recall the context) that his son listened to death metal and that he didn't quite understand it, because he perceived the music to often be misogynistic. Again, I was caught off guard, since I had not heard that argument in years. While I had recognized and encountered displays of misogyny, it was not necessarily one of the definitive characteristics of the genre. I mentioned that women have been involved with death metal since its inception, as musicians, fans, journalists, promoters, and producers, and it would be interesting to ask them what *they* thought about the music. What particularly had he considered misogynistic? Was it specific lyrics (because for every song that featured misogynistic lyrics, I could provide a number that do not)? And were people reading or internalizing the lyrics? Was it the scene itself, and if so, which scene, since local scenes vary? Also, what was he considering death metal? Because to me, there's an ideological difference between death metal and other types of more mainstream metal. He recommended I conduct a study, in particular with women, using ethnography to explore some of these questions.

As I met and began talking with women in the local scene, I found that they had their own questions and interpretations, which sometimes coincided with my own, but other times created moments of friction. They shared common narratives, though their backgrounds varied. For one, they each described the process of becoming a fan in terms of personal catharsis. As they continued to involve themselves with death metal music (and other forms of extreme metal), whether alone or within a community, they began to develop a confidence that enabled them to address forces of oppression and dominance they were experiencing in their everyday lives. Importantly, they spoke about experiencing this confidence not only in concert venues, as most scholars have studied, but also in other contexts. The fans with whom I talked argued that engaging with death metal provided them the space to construct identities of power that they used to reclaim power and transform marginalized positions in their broader social context. To understand what they meant by this, I had to examine how their involvement with death metal was incorporated into their life narratives. I began to realize that what they were describing was not just "empowerment"; instead, for some, it was resilience.

Finding Research Participants, Framing Questions, Methodology

While I had grown up an hour away from the Triangle and was an insider to death metal music, I was still an outsider to the local scene. Even when I had attended regular shows in Raleigh, Garner, Chapel Hill, and Carrboro from 1992-1998, my small group of friends and I had not sustained active involvement with members in that area. The clubs we had frequented most often—Snookers, Fall Out Shelter, The Caboose, Lizard and Snake Café—had long closed, and the remaining venues—The Brewery and Local 506—had broadened their music formats. My friends and I had interacted more often with punk and metal fans in the nearby coastal plain towns of Rocky Mount and Greenville. Some, such as "Dio" and his friends and relatives—who

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had organized Wilson Metal Festivals—had remained connected with metal fans across North Carolina even after the scene lulled. But as I moved away from the region in 2001, I let myself lose touch with them. One thing had remained constant, however, as I discovered driving around late one Friday night. Though its day format had switched to indie music, the college radio station at North Carolina State University, WKNC 88.1 in Raleigh, still aired weekend night shows featuring extreme metal. As I listened to the DJ, I recognized the voice immediately as Lucretia, Mistress of Destruction, a DJ who had taken over around the later death metal period in the 1990s. Her voice was unmistakable. At the time, we had joked that she sounded like a metal version of Lillith from Cheers, more passionate, lively, but still sardonic. As she announced herself, I knew I would have to contact the radio station.

Lucretia, whose real name is Laura, agreed to take part in an interview at her home. I ended up interviewing her multiple times over the course of the research. We engaged informally at shows, at an exhibit opening featuring her artwork in 2012, and most recently on Facebook. Our formal interviews tended to last over two hours, with one lasting for five. Laura directed me to two more consultants: Liz, a former Raleigh resident and NC State engineering student, who was younger and had also served as a DJ at WKNC for extreme metal shows; and Louise, a Durham resident and UNC graduate student in social work, who had been a vocalist in two local grindcore bands.

To locate other fans, I posted fliers at the University Of North Carolina campus advertising the project. A number of students and friends of students contacted me who were not necessarily fans of extreme metal, but who preferred other genres of metal. Though shows in the region often booked death metal and other genres, such as metalcore, on the same bill, I wanted to limit the research to death metal and other forms of extreme metal, such as grindcore, doom,

and black metal. The song structure, lyrical content, imagery, instrumentation (including vocal styles), and fanbase of the other genres tended to differ between the more mainstream metalcore and extreme metal. At the time, I wanted to limit my scope, leaving the option to branch out as I got further along. Two undergraduate students, Chloe—who identified interchangeably as transfemale and genderqueer—and Kelicia—who identified as an African American woman—described themselves as extreme metal fans and used bands as their points of reference. I interviewed Chloe, who was a vocalist for a local band, during exams at a local café. While I expressed an interest in follow up interviews, she did not respond. I ended up interviewing Kelicia multiple times; she also sent me stories and journal entries she had written in her classes based on her relationship with death metal. Through the years, we took overnight trips together to three shows in Spartanburg, Baltimore, and Wilmington; in Wilmington, we met up with Amanda, another research consultant, whom we had both met independently. I had met Amanda through another consultant, Elizabeth.

In this relatively small scene, many of the research consultants knew of each other or met over the course of the project. In efforts to disassociate myself as much as I could from inadvertently participating in scene politics, I chose to attend most local shows alone and engage with consultants briefly, though equally, instead using the venue to observe larger crowd patterns of the live event. Laura and a fellow graduate student had suggested I contact Elizabeth. But I also found out about her two other ways. Online, I had found a NC chapter of the New York Death Militia, which is an international club, supposedly started by Will Rahmer, a member of the New York death metal band Mortician, in 1987, and dedicated to keeping alive local extreme metal scenes. Elizabeth, based in Raleigh, was the chapter's head. She also ran an online extreme metal radio show on Brutal Existence radio and DJ'd weekly metal nights at the Dive Bar in

Raleigh. I had seen Elizabeth from somewhere else, though. While working as a teaching assistant at the Center for Documentary Studies, I came across a photodocumentary book of a squatter house in Raleigh in the 1990s. As I perused the pages, the scenes of the kids had reminded me of my own experiences in similar houses during that period. I recognized Elizabeth's face as one of those kids.

Elizabeth advertised a survey for me through social media, in which I asked a set of broad questions. After receiving 30 respondents, I took down the survey. Since I had begun interviews, I soon realized that I needed to keep to a micro ethnography, observing consultants in multiple everyday contexts to see how their death metal identities played out in other arenas. The survey respondents, many of whom had lived in neighboring regions at some point, provided broader contextual material for the death metal field.

Over the course of the research, I attended 15 shows, and met ten additional fans in the scene, four of whom were women, who shared experiences informally and publically through group conversations. Though they consented to letting their words be included in the research, when I asked the women if they wanted to follow up with formal interviews, they declined. Therefore, if I have included any of their words, I have kept them anonymous.

To summarize, while the official consultant field remained small—seven core consultants, thirty survey participants, and myself—the consultants' backgrounds broadly represented the demographics in the larger local scene. Ages varied from 18-44 (three between the ages of 18 and 23; one in her late 20s; three in their 30s; and one in her 40s). Socioeconomic family backgrounds varied from working class and lower middle class (3) to middle class (2), to upper middle class (2), with one unknown (though she currently engages in a professional job position). Three had attended private schools in their early years before shifting to public school,

while the rest had attended public primary and secondary schools. One had dropped out of high school but continued to college and ultimately graduate school. One had taken college courses but never finished; one had an associate degree; two were working on their undergraduate degree; one had completed an undergraduate degree; two were in the process of completing a masters degree; and one had achieved a masters. Seven consultants were white and one was African American. Three self-identified as genderqueer, three as masculine, and two as feminine. For the purpose of the study, I limited my scope to women, but aspects of their narratives closely parallel some of the male participants documented in other studies.

The interviews began with deliberately broad questions. I asked consultants how they would describe death metal, what determines "good" death metal, how they became attracted to the music, how often they experience the music, and what they considered important for a study of women in death metal. I wanted to see where they took the conversation; then I would ask follow-up questions based on our discussions. We often listened to music together, because I wanted to get a sense of their listening practices, what they noticed in the songs, and what they chose to play. Often, the music would conjure discussion of memories and other narratives connected to their experiences.

I interpreted the narratives using Berger's (1999a; 1999b) phenomenological methodology, which addresses the continuing re-interpretation, re-constitution, and re-framing of subjective selves and experiences in relation to immediate situational contexts, to broader social backgrounds, and through dialogue and critique. Ethnography through this lens involves a partial sharing among subjective parties with the researcher as actor engaged in the process. Participants recognized my prior experience with death metal, but, since I had met them in the research context, they initially read me as an academic from the University of North Carolina, which is

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popularly referred to as a "public ivy" school. Framing my study on women's experiences with death metal also likely influenced them to locate themselves within gendered domains. To address these biases and gain a clearer sense of the multidimensional contexts that informed their life narratives, I conducted multiple long interviews in various contexts and spoke with them repeatedly from 2010-2013. Over time, some of them learned more about my background, which encouraged them to share additional stories. My conversations with these women led me to reflect on my own past experiences with death metal, engaging in auto-ethnography through memory re-contextualization and archival analysis of my own previous writings.

Commonalities, Narratives of Empowerment

What emerged first were deeply personal narratives of how these women had used death metal instrumentally to instill a confidence that enabled them to make choices that improved their everyday conditions, which were often, though not always, connected to marginalized and stigmatized gender constructions in their life histories. They consistently referenced mainstream gender ideologies practiced in the American South that they felt were confining and did not represent them. In particular, they spoke of conscriptions that required women to be passive, nice, accommodating, and physically attractive, and to focus on acquiring and sustaining heteronormative monogamous romantic relationships. Since these narratives were central to their engagement with the music, I wanted to dive deeper to see what informed their interpretations of death metal and the death metal community, and how they experienced this sense of confidence (which they termed "empowerment," and which they talked about internalizing over years of listening). So I interacted with them not only at shows, but also in other venues, in public spaces before or after work, during radio shows, in private spaces at home, alone, with their friends, or on overnight trips. Through examining descriptions of empowerment and gender construction in

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the life narratives of female extreme metal fans in the North Carolina Piedmont, I argue not only that these women are obtaining power through involvement in the scene, but they are also using this power to do gender on their own terms in other arenas.

However, gender was not the only cultural construction that informed their identities of power. Consultants described the empowerment they had experienced through extreme metal along a continuum of possibilities, based on forces of domination they were struggling against in their lives. These dominant tropes—which sometimes appeared as race, gender, class, age, family background, or social stigma—could not be isolated into separate fields, but inform and intersect holistically in the history of the person. For one consultant, racial identity was a source of oppression in combination with gender, family obligations, education, and peer stigma. For others, class struggles dominated their life histories, as they sought to transform tropes of oppression into tools for empowerment. In social practice, the categories of age, gender, race, family, geographic backgrounds, education, peer stigma, class-affiliations, and personal histories interlace as they are re-contextualized, re-constituted, and re-framed in the continual narrativization of selves.

As these women continued to listen and involve themselves with extreme metal, they developed an internal confidence—which was sometimes felt communally, but also occurred listening to the music alone in their bedrooms (or cars)—that increased incrementally and allowed them to face modes of domination in other arenas. They speak of these forces as constants in their lives, forcing them to develop strength to wade through obstacles, as they continually worked to improve their everyday conditions. Therefore, the music was not used as an escape from problems, but as a vehicle for transformation and resilience.

Previous research on women in American metal scenes

    While most folklorists have yet to examine metal, much less extreme metal, in recent decades, Metal Music Studies has become a burgeoning international field populated by sociologists, musicologists, scholars in leisure studies and popular culture, socio-cultural anthropologists, artists, philosophers, journalists, and psychologists who study in many other countries.[1] Their provocative findings are challenging commonly held perspectives on metal fans and scenes internationally. The field studies are proving that while all of the explored scenes consist largely of men, women occupy spaces in each domain.

    As such, the current wave of scholars in Metal Music Studies have begun to problematize previous research examining women in extreme metal. While foundational research had also used ethnographic methods, fieldwork, interviews, and sociological questionnaires, initial scholars who researched women in death metal tended to limit their studies to social practices taking place within the live concert venue. Particularly, they discuss an emic categorization process involving two modes of gender presentations taking place among female participants at shows in various American regions: Houston, Texas (Vasan 2009; 2011), the Midwest (Klypchak 2007), areas of New York (Purcell 2003), and the South (Hutcherson and Haenfler 2010). Education Studies scholar Sonia Vasan (2009; 2011), Popular Culture scholar Brian Klypchak (2007), sociologists Natalie Purcell (2003), and Ben Hutcherson and Ross Haenfler (2010) all report that women in American scenes adopt a set of standards and judge other members based on their gendered presentation. These researchers generally agree that scene participants, both men and women, place women in either of two categories: that of the

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[1] United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Germany, Scandinavia, Russia, Poland, Finland, Egypt, Myanmar, Botswana, Kenya, South Africa, Angola, Indonesia, China, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand

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"girlfriend" or that of the "true fan." According to the participants, the "girlfriend" wears heels,

tight or revealing clothes, and uses her sex appeal to gain power in the scene by attracting men.

She is motivated by sexual desire rather than an "earnest" attraction to the music. Meanwhile, the

"true fan" dresses in regular to oversized t-shirts and jeans, camouflage, or shorts, much like the

men in the scene. She does not evoke displays of romance in relation to the men and instead

adopts the same mannerisms and language as men in the scene. Though she may be attracted to

men in the scene—most of the fans that these scholars interviewed use heteronormative

discourse—she is more motivated by a connection with the music rather than romance. Other

names are attached to these types, for example "band whore" and "den mother" (Vasan 2009), or

"chickiepoos" and "chicks with balls" (Morla 2010). All of this research builds on Krenske and

McKay's ethnographic study of gender and power relations in a rural metal music venue in

Queensland, Australia, implying that these folk categories may exist in other global scenes with

similar economic, social contexts, and mainstream gender constructions (2000).[2]

Each label involves the dialectic relationship between the hyperfeminine and the

masculine, and each label defines a woman participant based on male relationships with women.

Musicologist Robert Walser (1993), who laid the foundation for metal research, notes how this

process in metal is one of exscription, in which women are stripped of gender to eliminate them

as a threat. The women who adopt the alluring hyperfemine or "femme fatale" model can gain a

level of power over men in the scene, but they are ultimately reduced to sexual objects and are

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[2] Given that gender construction varies cross-culturally, to interpret these folk categories and their applications as universal is problematic. For one, even if the presentation is similar or utilizes the same cultural artifacts, its meaning is interpreted not only based on the death metal community, but also on the larger cultural context in which the localized death metal community resides. Also, as noted in participant Louise's account, scenes within the same region may vary in these gendered categories and their coding.

subjugated through hypermasculine displays of dominance in the form of degrading remarks, symbolic sex with instruments, or physical sex. The women who, according to Vasan, "dress and behave like men" (2009, 72) gain acceptance by supposedly masking their gender, but they limit their freedom of expression in the process. Klypchak (2007), who explores identity in the metal scene using the exscription model, argues that though women involved in the scene may gain a limited amount of power, it is hardly enough to boost their positions to that of the men in the scene. Ultimately, these researchers conclude that women are modifying their appearance and behavior to assimilate into a male-dominated domain. Though they may gain a limited amount of power from participating in the death metal scene, they do so at great cost.

Vasan (2011), who mostly interviewed women death metal fans in Texas, argues that these women are willing to subscribe to masculinist codes as a cost-reduction strategy to experience empowerment and liberation through their involvement with the music. She repeatedly mentions how participants experienced painful events or gender-related difficulties that led to their involvement and sense of empowerment in death metal. Though she does not explore these backgrounds in depth—instead, she limits her study to participants' current involvement in the scene—she does suggest that based on this history of challenging experiences, the death metal scene might be the only place where they feel such empowerment. She notes, "If death metal does provide a certain empowerment and liberation to women, which is not available elsewhere, then it follows that women will submit to the sexist norms of the subculture in exchange for the privilege of continued participation in it" (2011, 344).

Though this research is meaningful—women can be excluded and judged on male terms—a problem arises from this research perspective. While hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities exist alongside other gendered discourses in the scene, women who

actively perform more masculine or feminine gendered identities become read in this light as simply subscribing to masculinist or sexist codes. Such a model tends to downplay the experiences of the women in the scene in lieu of their interpreted concert venue displays. It undermines their own interpretations of gender (or temporary refusal of it), and their personal motivations and backgrounds which inform their participation in the scene. Folklorist and Performance Studies scholar Harris Berger, using phenomenological ethnographic methods to explore death metal fans in Akron, Ohio, notes of the live concert event:

> The participant's constitution of these [live] experiences is influenced by his or her purposes in attending the event . . . and his or her perceptual skills. . . .These, in turn, are informed by past musical experience . . . and nonmusical experiences (a good day at work, local ideas about gender, a series of nonunion, service-sector jobs). Ethnomusicology includes this entire complex, all understood as experience. (1999b, 23)

Keeping in mind the background complexities and histories from which fans interpret their own actions and those of others within the scene, their use of power does not necessarily associate them with masculinist codes; instead, they frame this power within the context of their past experiences. Walser notes,

> Metal replicates the dominant sexism of contemporary [American] society, but it also allows a kind of free space to be opened up by and for certain women, performers and fans alike. Female fans identify with a kind of power that is usually understood in our culture as male – because physical power, dominance, rebellion, and flirting with the dark side of life are all culturally designated as male prerogatives. (1993, 131-32)

Walser's observations may not apply to all global scenes or American scenes, but they do concur with how my research participants described their involvement with the Raleigh scene. These women also coded the music as masculine, but as Sociologist Deena Weinstein argues, this does not imply that they are "necessarily masculin*ist*, as the genre's 'master signifier' is *power* rather than gender—and as a result, heavy metal devotees do not necessarily 'exult in their maleness'" (2009, 27-28). Along these lines, cultural anthropologist Amber Clifford's work

depicts how metal can be seen "as a queerscape that allows queer women to perform female masculinities" (2009, n.p.). Regarding fans of metal in the United Kingdom, Gender Studies scholar Rosemary Hill's research argues that the women she interviewed "find in metal a space in which the construction of mainstream femininity does not need to apply and therefore acts as haven from expectations of a gendered identity that they feel does not fit them" (2012, n.p.). She posits that rather than constructing alternative gendered presentations, "in metal fandom [some] women [who previous scholars categorize as masculine] can experience a 'genderlessness'" (2012, n.p.). Vasan opens up the possibility for exploring these motivations in her concluding remarks. She writes, "If the patterns of social exchange theory hold true for women in death metal, then their need for liberation and personal fulfillment through the music and the scene must stem as much from a lack of such empowerment in mainstream society as from a lack of empowerment in alternative groups or subcultures" (2011, 347).

My research findings align with both Hill's discussion of "genderless" experiences in the scene and Walser's readings of gender in which metal allows individuals, including women, to perform "identity work," playing with gender, or becoming temporarily un-marked as women, and in the process obtaining power formerly only available and associated with men. I seek to understand how women in the scene are using tropes in death metal to experiment and make statements regarding the cultural construction of the "female" in mainstream American society. Through this process, these women gain (or regain) a sense of power that transforms their positions of marginalization.

Such transformations occur not only within the live concert venue, but also in everyday social contexts. To examine this, we must expand the research beyond the death metal scene, to situate these women in everyday life, exploring the places that both inform and interact with their

death metal identities. In these areas, their various identities intersect and interlace through social practice. Equally important is how these women construct these identities by engaging reflexively with their experiences in the process that practice theorist Giddens refers to as *structuration* (Berger 1999b, 26). Through structuration, past intentional acts, which are informed by individual and larger social contexts, "become objectified as the context for present acts" (Berger 1999b, 26).

Since most of my consultants became involved with extreme metal during their secondary school years, their identity construction through this time was a critical marker for how they continued to grow with the music and incorporate it into their adult lives. Julie Bettie's ethnography of girls attending a public high school in California's Central Valley parallels the narratives of my consultants. In *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* (2003), Bettie describes the social hierarchy of the school, which involves a group commonly referred to as the smokers, or rockers. These individuals shared common "life-worlds" that she refers to as a "hard-living habitus." She aptly shows how their life choices were informed by a common culture that was not shared by other members of the school: students, teachers, and administrators. This work, along with music journalist Laina Dawes's (2012) foundational research with women of color in American and Canadian metal scenes, provides an interpretive framework for understanding how my consultants use extreme metal to wrestle with frustrations involving a range of social constructions: gender, class, race, family backgrounds, education, etc. While my consultants are situated in North Carolina, they share commonalities that connect them with the voices in both of these works.

To summarize, this study contributes to the burgeoning body of research (Hill 2012; Clifford 2009, 2014, 2015; Riches 2011; Dawes 2012) that examines how female fans interpret,

challenge, temporarily escape, or play with gender in their own terms within extreme metal scenes. It also expands upon that research through situating participants in their broader socio-historical contexts. By examining the life narratives of death metal participants, it offers a critical framework that will enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of not only women's involvement within the scene, but also how they interpret their own participation—rather than simply conforming to masculinist norms—and specifically how they use the music to gain empowerment and develop resilience in their everyday lives.

Chapter Synopsis

This thesis consists of three main chapters. Chapter Two, Privileged Knowledge, examines first how consultants define and engage death metal. I examine the process of listening as gaining access to a privileged knowledge, and then discuss power in terms of this privileged knowledge, exploring how it builds confidence incrementally in the listener, eventually expanding into other arenas. Broadly, I explore commonalities in my consultants' fan narratives, from participating in the local extreme metal community to listening individually, and discuss how consultants naturalized their involvement with death metal. Chapter Three, Power and Oppression: Confronting Forces of Domination, examines the process of empowerment by focusing on the life narratives of consultants Laura, Louise, and Kelicia, and discusses how they became attracted to death metal and how they used it instrumentally to shift social positioning in other areas. Though I present their narratives from the framework of personal histories, I also point out where their experiences intersect with those of other consultants. In Chapter Four, Power, Fear, and Authority: Developing Resilience, I argue that ultimately this process of empowerment through death metal (or extreme metal in general) has enabled consultants to develop a long-term emotional resilience when facing adversity. I revisit the process of listening

and reflect upon my own empowerment after talking with these women, before broadening the

discussion again to consultants.

CHAPTER 2: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LISTENING

Introduction

This chapter explores the affective transformation that fans experience when sounds of noise become sources of pleasure, and the ensuing sense of belonging that fans feel through their musical journey to decipher these sonic codes. It examines how fans identified with death metal to such a degree that they naturalized their involvement with the music as an extension of their identities prior to learning the "secrets" of the musical subgenre. Through engaging in privileged knowledge of the music, they gained a sense of personal empowerment that they built through continued listening. To understand this sense of empowerment, it is first necessary to learn the parameters that define music categorized as "death metal." So I begin with a discussion of the definitions of death metal, from both scholars and consultants.

Defining Death Metal: Scholar and Consultant Comparisons

In the "Lost" Episode of anthropologist Sam Dunn's video series *Metal Evolution*: *Extreme Metal,* sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris defines extreme metal as "taking all the musical elements of heavy metal and pushing them one step further to the point whereby you start departing from conventional aspects of music" (2014).[3] Scholar Michelle Phillipov also defines extreme metal, and by extension death metal, as "a diverse collection of musical styles, each of which seeks to disrupt the expected conventions of pop, rock, and heavy metal in an attempt to remain as inaccessible and unpalatable as possible to 'mainstream' audiences" (2012, xv). When

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[3] Banger Films produced *Metal Evolution* as a series for VH1 Classic, but when VH1 pulled funding for the episode on extreme metal, the creators used crowd funding sources to produce the episode and disseminate it for free online in May of 2014.

the music becomes unpalatable, Kahn-Harris notes, "most outsiders would say, 'Oh, that's just a noise.' It's actually a very complex form of music and delving into that complexity is part of the fun" (2014).

Whereas traditional metal bands incorporate the infamous tritone (augmented fourth or E-A#), known historically in Western Christian composition as the "*diabolus in musica*" (Bogue 2004, 94), death metal takes the harmonies further, down-tuning electric guitars by a half-step or whole step, playing in open fifths and fourths, using half-tones, and often avoiding major/minor progressions, instead transitioning abruptly between various speeds of power chords (Bogue 2004, 94). These low frequencies are amplified and mixed equally with mid and high tones, creating a distorted ensemble of bass and guitars marked by high intensity and volume. The drums add thickness to the sound by incorporating "blast-beats," fast tempo strikes of the snare and tom drums, cymbals, occasional poly-rhythms, and the machine-gun sound effect of the double kick drum. Whereas some earlier metal bands, such as Venom, Possessed, and Hellhammer, and various punk bands incorporated amelodic or screaming vocals, death metal vocalists "scream in a guttural growl, creating a deeply reverberant, low-pitched sound with scratchy, metallic overtones" (Bogue 2004, 95). Bogue describes the rhythm as a series of "catatonic fits" that can produce a musical affect upon the listener where the "self becomes nothing more than a character whose actions and emotions are desubjectified, even to the point of dying" (2004, 99). Cultural Studies scholar Rosemary Overell calls this sensation "brutal affect," in which listeners experience an "evacuation of self" or "a blowing away of self" (2011, 202). The low-tuned pitch of the guitars and the often syncopated bass sounds of the vocals and drums played at loud decibels vibrate within the listener, further transgressing the boundaries of bodily experience and pop sounds. Phillipov notes that while the voice deepens, it no longer

becomes engendered, and "ceases to sound human, resembling instead some 'unspecifiable animal or machine'" (2012, 64).

Bogue contends that the music is antipop in both structure and content. This is especially true for the lyrics, which are often indecipherable without a lyric sheet.

> Formally, death metal lyrics largely avoid rhyme and seldom follow rock's traditional alternation of verse and chorus. For most parts, songs are structured as autonomous verses of varying meters and numbers of lines. In terms of content, the lyrics transgress most pop terms. Just as the music rejects anything that might sound pretty, tender, or cheerful, so the lyrics shun all expressions of hope, optimism, or romantic love. . . . Seldom do death groups celebrate alcohol, drugs, or sex (save in connection with death). . . . While ignoring heavy metal's Dionysian themes, death bands specialize instead in metal's traditional dark side, themes of chaos, death, violence, and destruction. (2004, 102)

Within this dark side, lyrics offer a range of possibilities, which tend to cluster in four thematic areas. The first addresses political, economic, and social decay: industrialization and the exploitation of the wage worker as slave to a corporate host who exerts power; religious ideologies as tools of oppression and hypocrisy; the impacts of wars; environmental degradation; disease and epidemics; and more recently, gender conscriptions and violence against the person. Commonly, these lyrics invoke the "violence of the real," or the everyday experience of domination, death, and destruction.

The second speculates upon themes of transformation. It involves dystopian future landscapes, or the transformation of social structure. But it also speculates on what it means to be human by exploring trans-humanism, sometimes through socially-engineered means. Specifically, characters within these lyrics experience the obliteration or transformation of the body into a hybrid being, whether monstrous, alien, machinelike, or exhibiting a transcendent consciousness. This theme involves what Kelicia referred to as "new states of understanding" (Phelps 2012). Within this cluster are often episodic depictions of madness, usually from the

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point of view of a general first person narrator, often a mad doctor who creates new forms of being from the destruction of the body.

The last two clusters of lyrics generally accentuate the phenomenological affects of the musical composition. One depicts gory scenes of dying, decay, or mutilation, in first-person present tense as a suffering narrator. The other describes scenes of violence against a victim, often, as in the case of the band Suffocation, but not always, for revenge. In this last cluster, the narrator relishes in the murderous act, which often leads to the narrator's subsequent death or punishment. Each of these clusters engages in grotesque imagery in which the body becomes inverted, meaning that which is inside is wrenched out, that which is defiled is explored or relished, or that which holds social power is subverted.

When asked to define death metal, research participants echoed these sonic, lyrical, and visual themes. Some participants begin with the music itself, often describing it as brutal, intense, heavy and extreme, while what they describe as "good" death metal emphasizes deep penetrating bass, "brutal" guitars, heavy drums, musical complexity and instrumental virtuosity. Many participants quote particular bands, such as Suffocation, Severe Torture, and Cannibal Corpse, as reference points to help illustrate their definitions.[4] Only 1/3 of survey respondents drew attention to lyrical content (see appendix for survey questions).

Survey respondents tended to define the music based on the three key musical elements,

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[4] This phenomenon of citing bands is consistent among research participants. Examples in the survey were Suffocation, Obituary, Morbid Angel, Dying Fetus, Autopsy, Hail of Bullets, Asphyx, Unleashed, Vomitory, Abysmal Dawn, Sinister, Nile, Séance, Baphomet, Carcass, Calm Hatchery, and Morpheus Descends, among others. When asked to define good death metal, research participants often use bands as reference points to bridge an understanding between myself and their descriptions. One anonymous survey respondent from Fayetteville, NC, for example, invoked this process in her/his definition of death metal, saying, "I usually try to think of a band that is vaguely related and go off from that. If they still don't know what I'm talking about it's really hard to see death metal the way I see it" (2010).

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which Sydney summarizes as "growling snarling vocals, driving percussion, guitar heavy" (2010). Sara defines death metal as "an extremely diverse sub genre of heavy metal, spawned from the mid 80s and inspired by thrash metal. Extreme drum beats, very guttural vocals (usually), and a good focus on guitar" (2010). Rachel describes it as "classically influenced precise guitar riffs with heavy distortion, growling and screaming vocals, heavy thick and full bass tones, fast (often double bass pedal fast) drumming" (2010). She goes on to incorporate specific equipment that had been available in a particular geographic area, which defined the sound of the music coming out of that scene: "As a lot of this style of music comes from Europe, you can hear Vox and other European-style amplifiers used, making the sound a lot more full and tones more rich" (2010).

Some discuss the various subgenres within death metal. For example, survey respondent Tina notes:

> It is a form of rock music, but much heavier. It has heavy down-tuned guitars, very fast drumming (most of the time) called blast beats, and the vocals vary in sound depending on the style. Brutal death metal usually has guttural vocals, while old school death metal has deep vocals and sometimes raspy. Melodic death metal sometimes can get mistaken for black metal vocals, as they are usually sounding like someone is "gagging on cheese." (2010)

Other respondents incorporate the sensations they feel while listening in their definitions. Sydney begins by describing it as "very heavy, very commanding, very in your face. Death metal is a force. Death metal awakens the dormant part of you and stokes the primal instincts. It absolutely moves you to your core and polarizes people almost instantly; either you love it or you hate it…The music is loud and driving without having to be at a loud volume" (2010). When asked to determine "good" death metal, she also notes, "Good death metal really awakens something inside of you and almost forces you to move, to thrash, get violent, feel the music. Good death metal is something you can listen to over and over and still get goosebumps; it can

transcend your preconceived notations of a band and capture your attention" (2010). An anonymous respondent from Swansboro, NC, describes it as "hard, fast, and just sounds like it can consume you" (Anonymous 2010).

Still others described the music using dark or grotesquely comical imagery. Rachel's earlier definition ends with a visual tapestry that invokes a sense of struggle, desolation, obscurity, and bestial fury: "Like a doomed hellhound in a pit of vipers, in the moonlight, in an abandoned castle" (2010). Two anonymous respondents from Brown Summit, NC (possibly the same person, maybe a troll), described the music as first "babies being thrown into a grinder," then second, "a storm in the nature of organized sound" (Anonymous 2010). Many referenced the music's similarities with the horror fiction genre. Mia notes, "I would describe it as more extreme than thrash metal, taking inspiration from the horror film genre" (2010). Kelicia defines it hesitantly, "I would say that there are far too many subgenres of death metal to completely generalize, but if I had to, I'd say it's akin to a horror story in music form, but usually without a plot" (2010d). She later says it's akin to car crash testing, or "controlled chaos." "The music hits you and there is this cosmic release of energy and excitement, but it's very controlled and tight and usually with expected results [satisfaction, that is]" (Phelps 2012).[5]

In their definitions of death metal, fans incorporated a balance of musical and experiential descriptions, combining discussion of the musical style with the immediate sensations it evokes, and the symbolic representation of the imagery associated with these sensations. They learned

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[5] Like these fans who use visual references that invoke sensations or vignettes rather than narratives, I have my own repeated image that describes the affect of listening to death metal. I often visualize an existential image of being on the edge, or event horizon, of a black hole. Everything I can see towards the hole is stretched, being ripped apart. At any point, I feel I could fall, plummeting endlessly toward oblivion. I wonder what it would be like, to be obliterated by such awesome power of nature, to lose myself entirely. I even feel brief moments of falling, but manage to regain control, always locked in the moment.

how to interpret these affective sensations as sources of power and transformation through

continued listening, eventually associating this power with the very definition of death metal.

Obtaining the Secret: Privileged Knowledge and Empowerment

In her description of death metal, Charleston, SC, resident Cindy's response alludes most

eloquently to the process of emotional and affective transformation that she attributes to the

music. She writes:

> Death metal is an art form that manages to transform natural human emotions that carry
> negative connotation into a more positive sense of empowerment and determination.
> Death metal tends to portray situations through the eyes of the victor, instead of the
> victim. This is an important theme that lends to the sense of power and self awareness
> that is a central theme in the lyrical subject matter. The art of transforming sound into
> extremely intense, aggressive, and complex music, while maintaining beauty and
> integrity is always at the core of good Death metal. You don't just play a few down tuned
> power chords, belch out a few lines about killing everyone, and call it Death metal. It's a
> way of life. (2010)[6]

To experience this sense of transformation, Phillipov discusses how death metal's

musical structure requires "especially attentive and focused listening to find meaning and

pleasure in the music" (2012, 85). The listener actively reorients herself to decipher non-

traditional musical cues as sources of pleasure rather than noise. This leads to repeated listening,

and over time the listener adopts a position or "taste" that differentiates her from casual listeners.

The experience of "brutal affect" sonically "allows for an intense sense of belonging with

others to a particular space and music" (Overell 2011, 202). Within the community of death

metal listeners (both online and in local spaces), those who can discern the nuances between

songs gain prestige in the scene, earning what Sarah Thornton—in her research on club culture—

calls "subcultural capital" (2006, 84). Becoming "in-the-know" about the sounds and pleasures

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[6] Here she is referring to the fourth lyrical cluster mentioned earlier, and also to the larger theme
of transformation within the music.

of death metal allows a listener to gain mundane, or everyday insider, subcultural capital (Kahn-Harris 2007), because it builds inclusion and strengthens everyday cultural bonds among fans in the death metal community.

Phillipov argues that "the pleasures of death metal's inaccessibility can be linked to its contribution to the exclusivity of the death metal scene, and in particular, to a romance of the scene as being maintained and populated only by those truly dedicated to the music" (2012, 84). In other words, there is a kind of privileged knowing or "secret" about death metal that has evolved within the scene, distancing itself from mainstream society.

Indeed, research participants defended death metal as a "secret" which separated them from casual listeners. To engage in a "secret" implies a privileged knowledge and air of authenticity. It creates a division between what "appears" and what is "secretly true." While the nature of the secret begins with music appreciation and the experience of insiderness in being able to decipher the sonic barrage, it extends to deciphering truths in the music's *themes*. For example, even when the secret is a lie, as when bands use Satanic imagery but do not actually participate in Satanism, fans hold privileged knowledge over its truth (Brown 2007, 75-76). They experience power in knowing the secret, in opposition to those outside the scene who were tricked or fooled. This power reflexively becomes a role in their identity construction.

In their personal narratives, research participants often step out from positions of exclusion that become empowered through their knowing the "secrets" of death metal. They describe themselves as outside or contrary to cultural norms, in their interests, philosophies, and self-presentations, often defining themselves in relation to that in which they are opposed. Many share personal histories of adversity, whether in everyday life or in singular trauma situations. In

such cases, participants had found that listening to death metal helped them develop resilience.

One participant, Louise, notes:

> I think people have some shit that they've been dealing with as a kid. But so I think it's like a natural kind of movement to get into darker heavier music if you've been through darker, heavier shit in your life. Then, it has this kind of reverse effect where it's actually therapeutic, because like maybe for once in your life, you're part of a community. Maybe for once in your life, you're finding music that you can really identify with. And you don't feel alone, and you've got a way to kind of express how you feel just by listening to it. You think you're in on a secret that's yours. The whole rest of this screwed up world doesn't get to do what I get to do; this is awesome. So it actually kind of builds you back up a little bit. It's like almost even therapeutic and for people that stick with it. If you stick with it, it's because it's serving you in a really positive way, for the most part. (Newton 2010)

Kelicia taps into this secret privileged knowledge as she listens to her headphones while walking to class on her college campus. She looks around at people she encounters: "If they could hear the beauty in my ears!"(2010c). But to her, they most likely would not read the music as beautiful, so they would not be able to enjoy what she is able to experience in that moment.

Liz, like Louise, Kelicia, Cindy, and others, expresses the therapeutic benefits she had achieved through involvement with the music, both through live performance and in processing it on her own. She says death metal taught her how to survive, that "there's nothing you can't figure out." She started with deciphering the music, then moved to the lyrics, which she says convey an "open disbelief with the way the world is running." She describes the lyrics' often dark, mystical fixation as a trick, like a puzzle, that helped her to find her own strength. The sense of a puzzle is important. Here, as among other members, the process is not just about listening and finding resonance; instead, it's about the journey to *discover* that resonance. Much of the sense of community, and the strength Liz mentions, rests in the recognition that others have expended this same effort—they too have taken the journey. In this way, though the lyrics often involve fantasy, they appeared to be more real than what she was experiencing in her

culture. Through involving herself individually with the music, she also picked up on references

to authors, which mentally stimulated her to explore other works to decipher. For example, she

learned about the German author Goethe from the black metal musician whose stage name is

Faust. As she continued to grow with extreme metal, she says it felt like a guide to "self-

discovery" (Everette 2010).

Previous researchers report similar findings among participants. In Berger's ethnography,

Dan Saladin argued that listening to death metal had become a "vent for life anger" (1999b, 270),

or daily frustrations. Hickam and Wallach reported fans using the music to gather strength to

fight back against adversity in their lives (2011, 268). Commenting on general aesthetics, Berger

asks why we (in the sense of members of culture) listen to metal, watch horror movies, or read

tragedies.

> In daily life, rage, fear, or sadness erupt because of negative events, real or imagined. In the framed sphere of music or literature, however, we are able to experience these emotions without having to suffer the consequences. Experiencing rage without actually having to suffer humiliation or violence, experiencing fear without actually being threatened, experiencing sadness without actually undergoing a loss, we are freed up to attend to the affect itself and treat the affect as an aesthetic object on its own terms. . . . Anger, beauty, or glory themselves require no affective or emotional justification because affects and values are the *grounds* of interest. Inside the performative frame, we are free to experience and appreciate rage or depression, because we need not worry about the consequences. (1999b, 272)

Engaging art in this way, rather than being escapist, becomes a method of practicing and

accepting emotions, staying with them, working through them in the moment. As my research

participants explored these emotions within the context of extreme metal, they began to feel

more comfortable and confident dealing with them in other areas of their lives.

Becoming-a-fan: Individual and Community Involvement

Research participants reported being attracted to death metal first in their formative years

(11-16 years old), at or near the onset of puberty. (Louise and Laura were exceptions: Louise

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transitioned to it from punk in college; death metal had not yet existed when Laura was this age, but she had become interested in the progenitors of death metal around this time.) In her ethnography of female punk fans, sociologist Lauraine Leblanc (1999) considers this a critical time period when girls are expected to leave the freedom of childhood and adopt the restraints of femininity, what she labels the "femininity game," which she argues places women in a no-win situation. In adopting normalized constructions of femininity, they are cheating themselves into being passive, compliant, and involved in beauty and relationships. When they win, they lose (1999, 137).

Like Leblanc's respondents, who resisted popular constructions of femininity using punk music, all my research participants had developed gender constructions that incorporated their relationship with death metal so that they saw death metal and their gender constructions as naturalized. For example, when asked what attracted them to death metal, many research participants noted that they had always been "tomboys" or interested in "less girly things." Using oppositional discourse, they contrasted femininity construction's focus on romance with their own pre-occupation with "darker elements," existential and social themes related to death, the grotesque, and the macabre, all of which they ranked as more important. For the most part, they defined these pre-occupations as more "masculine," but not all considered themselves as "masculine." Instead, they defined themselves as simply resistant to, and free from, gender norms.

They also described themselves collectively as always being "weird" or not "normal" in terms of their surrounding southern culture. Liz notes how in middle school, she was the "uncool of the uncool." But she later says she's been the weird kid her entire life, citing her parents' German Jewish influence. For example, she discusses how her parents took her to a Holocaust

memorial when she was three years old and read her WWII children's novels and Yiddish folktales. She notes how she questioned religion at age five, asking her parents "If God exists, why don't we see him?" (Everette 2010). Others pointed out similar, though not culturally-Jewish, experiences of being "weird" in pre-adolescence, often by exploring horror, fantasy, war films, or religious mysticism either alone or with family. They also cited anger as a common emotion that marked them as "weird" or "different," which became a source of stigma. They used these constructions, along with their personal histories, to develop what Susanna Larsson labeled as "constitutive authenticity," in which their relationship with death metal was considered a natural progression of their life narratives (2013, 102). Such fans considered death metal so intertwined with their sense of self that they called it the sound of their "soul." Kelicia, for example, often referred to herself, especially when meeting new people, as "weird, mean, and exceptionally nice." She also described death metal as the "energy of my soul," which she notes evokes these social markers (Phelps 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010e).

Stepping forth from positions of exclusion, research participants' positions as women in the death metal scene were far from naturalized. The death metal community in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, similar to other extreme metal communities in the South, primarily consists of white males (though more males of Hispanic descent are participating); they range from teenagers and college students to older men in working class positions. Scholars have successfully discussed elsewhere how authenticity in death metal communities becomes a gendered process in which women experience this pressure to conform to heteronormative standards of femininity and masculinity (Krenske 2000; Vasan 2009, 2011; Hutcherson & Haenfler 2010; Klypchak 2007). Women who either emphasize their femininity or exscribe it altogether are accepted members according to hegemonic standards of masculinity. Because their

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bodies are culturally marked as outsiders upon entering the local scene in any social context, my

research participants report the feeling of being judged by their appearance and having to prove

their authentic interest in the music to fellow fans. For this reason, some choose to engage in the

music more individually, listening and collecting new music on their own, or attending shows in

other towns. Others, such as survey participant Sara, did not consider themselves as members of

the scene—in part due to the lack of a local music scene in the rural areas where they lived, and

in part as an extension of their identities as outsiders. Sara summarizes this sentiment:

> I don't really consider myself a part of the scene. Perhaps it's because I am in a very tiny
> southern town (Canton, NC) that doesn't have a death metal scene. Perhaps it's because
> most fans of death metal don't really consider themselves "joiners." I like what I like. For
> the most part I'm not a fan of the scene. It's really hard to find what I feel to be
> "legitimate" musicians and artists. Maybe it's that way with any genre of music really.
> The sheep outnumber the goats, so to speak. (2010)

However, others choose to involve themselves with the local community, sometimes

while challenging these cultural proscriptions. When Ted publically adopted the name Chloe, she

first questioned whether she could be involved with the scene due to what she described as its

masculine undertones (2010). She wondered if she could still be feminine and embody those

masculine themes as a musician in her own band. But after feeling inspired by Marissa Martinez

of the band Cretin, who describes being trans in the scene, Chloe used engagement with

hyperfeminity in the scene to "come out" for the first time in public at a black metal show in

Chapel Hill, decked out in pink platform boots and pig-tails. She found the scene members

embraced her performance as transgressive, in line with the prized importance of transgressive

subcultural capital among scene participants (Kahn-Harris 2007). [7] How they read her did not

matter as much to her as the freedom she felt in her public expression.

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[7] Kahn-Harris (2007) reports that scene dynamics work within the interchange of two types of
subcultural capital, mundane and transgressive. Mundane subcultural capital involves developing

I regularly found that research participants used their involvement with death metal at shows, with other members, or in everyday listening, to play with gendered identity construction rather than simply conforming to normative male prescriptions. Participants had constructed identities that directly opposed popular constructions of femininity, whether in choosing to be more assertive over what they called "complacent agreeableness," or "always being nice," or in redefining the terms of beauty. They expressed power in being "women" and constructed gendered identities with varying degrees of femininity and masculinity. Even more masculine-presenting participants who recounted stories in which they had "passed as men" garnished power in being able to outsmart or "trick the audience." Survey respondent Sydney notes, "Death metal has really made me aware of that untapped, discouraged, frowned upon part of my female power. It sounds silly, but death metal is like my feminist declaration of transcending the oppression of patriarchal society" (2010).

On a more phenomenological level, like Rosemary Hill's observations of women in metal scenes in the UK (2012), Gabby Riches's research with women's participation in mosh pits discusses how women's involvement at shows affords them a sense of freedom and immediate "genderlessness" (2011, 328). Research participants reported similar experiences in which they escaped the gendered body simply by listening to the music. This goes back to the brutal affect discussed earlier, in which listeners can interpret the voice as genderless. By listening to and internalizing that voice, they experience freedom, which they use to affect other aspects of their lives.

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shared knowledge of bands, musical cues, and everyday occurrences in the scene, while transgressive subcultural capital involves the celebration of radical individualism in the scene, challenging everyday norms through musical innovation, opinion, or performance. While mundane cultural capital builds scenes, transgressive subcultural capital seems to be preferred.

So far, I have discussed how fans "became" fans, how listening to death metal empowered them incrementally through continued engagement, and how participation with the music transformed previous self-definitions of "weird" or "tomboy" into sources of confidence and pride. For many, both individual and community involvement in the extreme metal scene reinforced this sense of confidence, while others felt empowered through a more intimate engagement with the music. In the next chapter, I explore how consultants use their involvement with extreme metal as vehicles for empowerment in everyday contexts. Consultants gained an internal confidence through engaging with extreme metal, whether individually or in the local scene. In their life histories, they use this confidence to transform other social positions, not only where they had initially experienced exclusion, but also in new environments and arenas.

CHAPTER 3: CONSULTANT NARRATIVES:
POWER AND FORCES OF OPPRESSION

Introduction

To illustrate how women use death metal involvement to transform marginalized positions in their life narratives, I focus on three individuals from my fieldwork, each of whom occupied varying positions in the local scene. These women also actively adopt varying degrees of masculinity in their self-presentation, while identifying strongly as women.[8] First, there's Laura, an artist and show promoter, who describes herself as a "teenage stoner dude in a middle-aged woman's body." Then there's Louise, a vocalist and radical queer activist in her thirties. And then there's Kelicia, a twenty-something middle-class African American who regularly attends shows but does not identify with the local extreme metal community. Their narratives, though focusing on individual presentations of empowerment, are hardly meant to be anecdotal. Rather, they present themes that other participants also discussed over the course of the ethnography from 2010-2013. I explore these themes most closely in Laura's narrative.

Laura: Power in Performing "Authenticity"

In my first interview with Laura, she told me that metal had "saved her life." We were sitting on two adjacent couches in the front room of her 1950s' ranch home in Raleigh,

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[1] In their discussion of justified anger among fans in metal, Brian Hickham and Jeremy Wallach (2011) make the distinction between displays of power and aggression and what they call "fighting back," or exhibiting strength in the face of adversity. They argue that fans use the music to access strength to fight back from positions of marginalization. Harris Berger's (1999a; 1999b) ethnographic research also discusses the practice of using death metal as a vent for "life anger."

surrounded on each wall by eighteen years of local death metal and personal history—band posters, album covers, and hand-drawn show fliers. Munching on a pizza before her radio DJ spot at midnight, she leaned forward and told me about her life in Baltimore, Maryland, before Raleigh. She was in her mid-twenties then and living in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship with someone she described as a "soul-sucking man" or "John-turned-crackhead." At the time, the early 1990s, she was working on a degree in engineering and often used her schoolwork as an excuse to leave the house. It was during one of these jaunts that she heard White Zombie's Spider Baby on a college radio station, WSLU out of Seton Hall University. She says the music transported her back to her teenage years when she had listened to punk and metal nonstop; it reconnected her to a time when she had felt power and control.

In her life narratives, Laura consistently referred to her engagement with punk and metal as methods of "fighting back" against school or family-sanctioned gendered presentations and events in which girls were supposed to be passive, feminine, and, like all students, amenable to institutional norms. In the early 1980s as a teenager living in Texas, Laura had used her senior art project to stage a boycott of her prom, instead urging people to attend a Dead Kennedys show that was taking place on the same night. She also skipped graduation in lieu of a Blue Oyster Cult concert. But her Baltimore boyfriend had hated her punk and metal past, and the two rarely discussed it. With pop metal bands saturating the mainstream market in the late 1980s, she says that she was inclined to think metal was dead. At the same time, she was losing her own sense of aesthetic agency. Hearing White Zombie on the radio changed all that.

In her ethnographic research on listening practices, musicologist Tia DeNora discusses how a number of her research participants had also used music associated with particular time

periods in their lives to "help them recapture the aesthetic agency they possessed (or which possessed them) at that time" (2000, 143). She contends:

> In this sense, the past, musically conjured, is a resource for the reflexive movement from present to future, the moment-to-moment production of agency in real time. It serves also as a means of putting actors in touch with capacities, reminding them of their accomplished identities, which in turn fuels the ongoing projection of identity from past into future. Musically fostered memories thus produce past trajectories that contain momentum. (2000,143)

Laura's narrative reports this same process. As the days pressed on, she continued listening to metal, in a process she called, "getting my soul back." Laura plotted and worked and ultimately moved to Raleigh, where she attended graduate school for engineering at NC State University. Shortly after arriving in North Carolina, she volunteered to DJ for the college radio station 88.1 WKNC, playing music on the "heavier end" (2010c) and adopting the on-air name Lucretia (after both the controversial Italian figure Lucretia Borgia and the women's rights activist Lucretia Mott). She started going to metal shows regularly. Less than a year later, while at the local metal bar Snookers, she heard the death metal band Carcass playing over the sound system.

"That was Heartwork 1993—Carcass was my gateway drug," she says. Laura has been on what she calls "the dark side"—meaning extreme metal—ever since.

Laura's front room has no television; quoting punk band Flux of Pink Indians, she says she has no need for such "vicarious living." Instead, there are three scratched up couches, a coffee table, and a stereo system in the corner, with crates of vinyl records stemming out towards the front door. Laura's place is for socializing. At the time of this interview (2010a), we were sitting in her front room with a group of her male friends. She opens her book of drawings that she has created for shows, fundraisers, album covers, and band drum heads, and I can see that she even includes sketches of her friends in her artwork, as models frozen within pages of

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interconnected stories. She proceeds to tell me the story behind each image, where she was when she drew it, what the scene invokes, and how it was received by others. This depicts how critical her involvement with her friends is to her involvement with death metal and with her art.

As she continues showing more fliers, a college-aged male friend in the room urges her to read from her book of quotes. She pulls out a black book resembling a Moleskin diary and proceeds to read lines drawn from everyday conversation with her extreme metal friends. The group of friends in the room reminisces about the situations from which each quote had emerged. The quotations came from shows, hang-out sessions where they were sitting around listening to music, gatherings at the radio station, or times spent hanging out after shows. Laura's identity, informed by her past and shaped with those around her, is deeply intertwined with the extreme metal community

Being involved in this community—as a DJ, fan, artist, manager of an independent record label, and show promoter—is all part of what Laura refers to as "wearing my soul on my sleeve." She equates metal with the condition of "being true," being honest to oneself, and true in one's representation to others. As an example of practicing this truth, years ago, she quit her job at an office to work as a stagehand for theater productions, noting that she left the "rat race" to be "part of the art." Her job provides her the freedom to work on show fliers in the rafters and adhere to a gender construction more in tune with her identity process of "being true to myself." Like other research participants, Laura's truth performance actively positions herself in direct opposition to social norms outside of the extreme metal community: norms of cleanliness, gender presentation, and economic status. As she participated in griping about her ex-boyfriend, she invoked these oppositional associations.

> He met me at a metal show. I had just gotten off of work, so he knew I worked nights. I
> was dressed pretty much the way I always dress; I was in cut off camouflage shorts

because it was summertime. Just got off work, hadn't showered in five days. I was on a bicycle. Everything that was me was *there that night* [her emphasis, as she bangs three times on the coffee table]. No false advertising! My hair wasn't combed; I wasn't dressed pretty. I didn't have on makeup. I didn't talk about my office job. I didn't drive away in a car. He knew I'm not some super-product-hygiene queen. You caught me on a good day. I took a shower today. But it had been four days because I was busy. (2010e)

In this passage, as throughout the fieldwork, oppositional formations emerge distinguishing Laura from socially valued middle-class identities depicted through careers (which often depend on 9-to-5 work schedules and office settings rather than night work), car culture (as opposed to bike culture), and female gender conscriptions of cleanliness and polished self-presentation (as opposed to messiness and displaying of flaws). Laura's oppositional identity-formations are dialogic processes constructed through difference in relation to an 'Other.' In each of our meetings, Laura seemed to speak to a specter in the room—the face of the socialized woman in mainstream American culture. In recounting these stories, she often contrasted herself with other women in the scene, many of whom she imbued with stereotypically "feminine" characteristics. These women loved shoes, she explained; they played up their looks to gain men's attention; they weren't interested in the music, only the men involved. When I asked her why these women would subject themselves to what other research participants had called the "sounds of torture" just to "attract men," she shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe because of the bad boy image. They want to piss off daddy."

Though they typically play the foils in her stories, she does not always fault these women, because they are often quite nice to her. But, to her, they align themselves with values she opposes in practice. Citing the larger problems of female gender socialization, she complains that most girls grow up thinking they *have* to wear makeup. They watch television and think that's what they're supposed to look like. She says:

If you throw away your TV and start looking around at Target and Walmart and what the average American looks like, you begin to see yourself as thin and beautiful. You're not so bad compared to the average American. But if you're watching TV all the time, sure you're going to think something's wrong with you. These girls are growing up like that. And their mothers grew up like that, and *their* mothers. So they just passed it on. (2010d)

Laura's mother was a school teacher who, along with her aunts, was raised with positive cultural associations of femininity that coincided with Laura's interpretation of the more feminine-presenting women at shows. While she admits to caring about appearances, her choices of presentation are informed less by these mainstream cultural standards and more by her desire to project an identity that is "true" to her mood, and one that associates her with art and with the extreme metal community.

We all care what we look like. It might be a lesser degree than some people. But when I put on this shirt [a Suffocation shirt], it's a conscious decision. When I bought this shirt, it was a conscious decision. I like the band; I like the artwork. I was having a touch of asthma because of the pollen today, so I was like, "Suffocation makes sense!" If I feel like shit, I'll wear my black cow manure shirt to work so everybody knows to stay away from me. If I'm working two 18-hour days back to back, I've got a Total Abuse shirt that I like to wear that says, "Kill me" on it. And I don't care about what I look like to the same degree that my mother cares about what she looks like or the Hot Topic cuties care what they look like. I don't spend an hour scrutinizing what T-shirt I'm going to wear to a show, but I'll be like, "Oh, I'm seeing a stoner metal band. I think I'll wear my Sword shirt. It's a cool shirt and I'm going to see a stoner metal band." Or "I feel like fucking with people today. I think I'm going to wear a hot pink Carolina ballet shirt to the death metal show." (2010e)

Laura's choice of clothing in these cases is in direct conversation with those around her, but always with an air of authenticity regarding her own presentation of self. Her occupational position behind the scenes of artistic productions allows her to congregate with artists without having to adhere to a professional dress code that is often associated with the upper-class echelons of society in the Triangle area who patronize the arts. In fact, in these positions, she dresses in a manner that not only expresses her punk and extreme metal identity, but accurately portrays her mood in the moment.

Evil, Not Pretty.

Laura's reliance on "truth" presentation in opposition to mainstream beauty standards is highlighted in a story that she tells about an encounter at a show. In this incident, a male musician and feminine-presenting fan had called her pretty, to which she responded, "Don't insult me." At the time, she had what she called a "fucking volcano" (a cyst) on her chin. Working in the hot rafters as a stagehand, she remarked that she occasionally would get a pimple. While she preferred that it wasn't there, she also didn't really care. That night, she hadn't put on makeup to cover it up; she just let it be. But when the two called her pretty, she felt they were deceiving her, which goes against her values and imposed a cultural expectation that she refused to accept. "A power metal girl, or an indie rock girl," she explained, "would be like, 'Oh, thank you.' A black metal girl is going to say, 'Yeah, right. Fuck you.' And the punk rock girl is going to say, 'Fuck your fascist beauty standards. Bite me.' But since I'm hybrid, I was like, 'Don't insult me'" (2010e).

When discussing such encounters, Laura often invoked another oppositional identity— her motto: "I'm evil, not pretty."

The motto emerged from a specific outing with one of her closest male friends, a death metal drummer in the local scene. One late night, after a show in Charlotte, the two were sitting at a diner when an older man sitting at the next booth turned to them. Taking a jab at the drummer's feminine-coded long brown hair in comparison to accepted standards of men in the South, he said, "Y'all look the same."

The friend didn't hesitate. "That's because we're both evil, not pretty."

The man turned around in disgust, when suddenly the friend realized that in defending himself against the man's corrective comment, he had just indirectly referred to a woman as "not pretty." He stumbled upon his words as he tried to apologize. Laura stopped him.

"No! Dude, you're awesome. I'd rather be evil than pretty. Pretty is skin deep; evil goes to the bone."

"Oh, but you are pretty!"

"I don't want to be pretty" (2010e).

To Laura, being "pretty" is about participating in a discourse that offers women limited and disposable power. "But evil goes to the bone." She replaces "pretty's" negation, the word "ugly," with a word that in the death metal community carries power—evil. By substituting a symbol of power for one that often demoralizes young women, Laura empowers herself in opposition.

Evil in extreme metal represents freedom and choice over socialization and submission. Musicologist Robert Walser (1993) discusses how metal fans engage occult and mystical imagery, often typecast as transgressive, because of their modern associations as sources of power and mystery. Fans will use appropriated symbols of evil, often stripped of their socio-cultural and historical pasts, to "frame questions and answers about life and death" and to explore a sense of "mystical meaningfulness" through communal musical experiences that addresses the powerlessness of their everyday lives (1993, 154). They also use such imagery to critically analyze "socially produced anxieties and fantasies about power, history, and morality" (1993, 155). Just as bands use horrific and grotesque displays as "condemnation of horrors that are entirely real" (Walser 1993, 158), so do fans interpret horrific, culturally coded 'evil' imagery as "an honest reflection and critique of a brutal world" (1993, 158). In this way, evil

becomes a moral statement exposing cultural and physical indignities to which Laura is opposed.

Laura has a strong sense of personal and social morality. Rather than condoning human

indignities, her identity as evil in metal constitutes a critical awareness of the realities that

"hegemonic society does not want to acknowledge" (1993, 162). Walser notes, "Metal explores

the 'other,'. . . the dark side of the daylit, enlightened adult world. By doing so it finds distinction

in scandalous transgression and appropriates sources of communal empowerment. . . . The

meaningfulness of images of horror, madness, and violence in heavy metal is intimately related

to the fundamental contradictions of its historical moment" (1993, 162). Exploring transgression

in relation to the madness of modernity also "allows individuals to feel utterly in control" (Kahn-

Harris, 2007, 158). To Laura, the power in evil is nurtured through community involvement,

opposition to hegemony, and "truth" presentation. Her everyday actions and choices are

informed by this trope, which is so embedded in her identity processes that it "goes to the bone."

Folk Group: 'Life-Worlds' of Oppression

Scholars may interpret Laura's actions in the scene as subscribing to masculinist codes in

death metal. She admits to being judgmental of women more than men in the scene, with some

of her remarks echoing what other research participants have called internalized sexism. When

asked about this, she cites her own experiences growing up in public schools where girls

consistently ridiculed her. "I was 95 pounds soaking wet," she says. Her family's rural western

New York accent became a source of stigma when, in her middle-school years, they moved to

Houston, Texas.

As I continued to ask about her life, I noticed a pattern that echoed that of other

consultants who described their public school experiences during this same time period. Many

had described themselves as "weird" in relation to peers and administration. With the exception

of Kelicia, whom I will discuss later, most consultants had dealt with these experiences by

associating with other kids who, based on school stigma, placed themselves at the margins of

public school hierarchies. Since stigma was a common impetus for group involvement, the

students occupying the margins exhibited nonjudgmental attitudes towards those whom they

considered to be in their group. Kate, one of sociologist Julie Bettie's research participants,

conveys this sentiment. "She explained that the only rule for membership 'out here' was 'not to

judge'" (2003, 132). These individuals, who tended to listen to transgressive music, shared not

only experiences of social stigma, but also often performed lower-class identities based on a

variety of outside life experiences, which Bettie describes as a "hard-living habitus" (2003, 102).

Bettie's research highlights how a public school's social hierarchies incorporate the

economic, social, and political hierarchies of the larger society. Students who were more

successful in school and garnished more school-sponsored opportunities performed identities in

line with middle-class America; through their involvement with the school, they learned a sense

of entitlement. Those who performed lower class identities, in contrast, shared a subordinate

status, which became a source of shame. Looking at a group of students who self-identified as

the "smokers" or "rockers," Bettie found that they often occupied spaces unrecognized by others

in the school. They were consistently made "invisible," with other research participants

(including members of the administration) labeling them as marginal and not worth interviewing.

Bettie notes,

> Lacking in cultural capital and performing poorly, the smokers had little interest in the
> academic dimension of school. A spectrum of experiences at homes and in their
> neighborhood created a disposition among the smokers, a way of apprehending the world
> (Bourdieu's 'habitus') that did not match the world view and social skills required to be
> successful in the middle-class milieu of the school. Their sensibilities, not recognized as a
> cultural difference of class, were often perceived by school personnel and other students
> as individual behavioral choices, but were in reality a common culture, evidenced by the
> fact that these individual students were drawn to one another by the life-world they had in

common. The difference between them and other students was that the latter could operate more easily within the normative assumptions suggested by discourse at school of what family life looks like, what parents do for work and leisure, what life trajectory students will have. Key assumptions of this discourse were that parents were confident, articulate, drug-fee, warm, and supportive, and had the time and skills to encourage their children's education. Further, it was assumed that their work was 'respectable' and legal and their leisure activities morally acceptable to the middle-class and settled-living mainstream. (2003, 103)

Bettie consistently noticed how the "discourse of other students, teachers, and curriculum material worked persistently to make working-class performers feel marginal and reinforced an ideology of homogeneity that didn't exist in reality" (2003, 105).

While many of my consultants were from middle-class families, their life experiences made it difficult for them to identify with middle-class gendered positions in school. For example, Liz, whose father had passed away when she was ten years old, felt that the school-sanctioned femininity and academic subject matter were less important than exploring questions of existential meaning and perusing her own scholarly choices (Everette 2010). Beth—who, like some other participants, no longer lived with her family in high school, but instead stayed in a "squatter" home—worked to pay rent and provide for herself and her friends, all while making sure she made it to school on schedule (2010). Chloe, who suffered family tension based on her gender identity, had found the nonjudgmental marginal status of metal friends comforting (2010). In their common life-worlds, much like those described by Bettie, "there [were] other more pressing worries at hand. Both stresses from home, which were brought to school, and the related marginality smokers felt at school resulted in their rejection of school involvement" (2003, 105).[9] By sharing common experiences, they developed the confidence to present identities that actively rejected what they defined as "mainstream" cultural norms, often through

[9] While most of their friends had 'opted out' of school, all of my consultants, though struggling through and actively criticizing public school structure, had excelled in their college lives.

self-fashioning. Bettie described the "smoker" group's styles of self-fashioning as "intentionally confrontational and defiant," marked by deliberate efforts to "offend the sensibility of middle-class teachers and preps" (2003, 125). In Bettie's examples—where Nick wears an orange dress to the prom, and Tara wears a condom necklace to a Catholic school—the students' displays were "badges of dignity within the smokers' economy of style" (2003, 125). They also fall neatly in line with Kahn-Harris's discussion of transgressive subcultural capital in the extreme metal scene (2007).

Laura's narrative of transgression in public school coincides with these accounts, as does her active defense of her friends' behavior in relation to others "outside of the scene." While she grew up in an emotionally supportive, non-divorced, middle-class family, she associated with friends who exhibited Bettie's hard-living habitus. She was also strongly influenced by her father, a construction worker who encouraged her musical interests and often discussed daily power relations that affected tradespeople in the larger society. In school, Laura experienced an overt form of socialized conflict in which students who held positions of power had targeted her. "Jocks picked on me. Cheerleaders spread rumors." To navigate through this period, she met what she called the "loser kids and the punk kids" and those with stigmatized ethnic backgrounds. She started listening to punk and the precursors to metal. Her friends at school advised her to act "like you're nuts" so that the other students would leave her alone. Laura cites one experience in particular when a "jock" picked her up in the hall and threw her against some lockers. With nobody coming to her aid, she punched him, blacking his eye. "That's when I grew a pair of balls," she says (2010e).

As Laura recounted similar stories of growing up, her passionate tone reinvigorated the decades-old narratives with a sense of emotional immediacy, as if they had just happened. She

discussed how she was often punished by school administrators when she defended herself, or when her altercations made her break codes of punctuality or classroom norms of quiet passivity. Her art teacher provided her the only solace by focusing her frustration on artistic endeavors. Each story repeated a narrative pattern in which Laura faced external oppression and domination and managed to overcome it, either through it directly or with the help of people she values.

In the extreme metal community, she continues to surround herself with people who help each other overcome. Laura strongly identifies with her friends in the extreme metal community, and her interviews were consistently flavored with stories from their lives. She shares a loyal group identity with them (an identity that even extended to band members she had not yet met). When discussing her friends, she notes how together they "build each other up, make each other awesome" (2010a, 2010e). It was through a conversation with one of her friends that she decided to leave her office job and seek out a career in line with her values. They share an oppositional identity to mainstream norms and often a personal background of school or social stigma. Laura herself had often been ridiculed by girls in her childhood,[10] which led her to question her own place within mainstream gender norms, and ultimately to oppose them. Her male friends discuss oppression they experienced in school, family, or social life, stigma they often experienced in schools from other boys and girls who held higher social prestige. They, like her, had used extreme metal to confront and overcome these forces of oppression, developing an adversarial identity or identities of opposition. Laura notes how art becomes a way to *realize* this confrontation.

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[10] In all her narratives of directly overcoming oppressive situations, the only time that she talked about overcoming oppression caused by women was in the context of the extreme metal community. Since Laura was quite forthcoming about her past and stories of empowerment, I am left to infer that she was less likely to overcome oppressive situations when dealing with women *prior to* her involvement with the extreme metal community.

"You know, you work it out vicariously. . . . Sometimes art is the way of doing what you can't do in real life; . . . if nobody gets hurts there's no victim. . . . And when it gets too much, you listen to something like this, and you feel better." Laura expands her discussion to art in general. "There's always been dark imagery in art" (2010e).

In talking about how this may have affected her attitude, she notes, "I think death metal has made me stronger and independent, which is the white side of the fact that it's made me more cynical and hateful." These words closely echo those voiced both by Bettie's (2003) "smokers and rockers" and by my other consultants. "Because if you spend a lot of time without the societal support mechanisms that most people have to have, you tend to be more of a recon person than a whole army person" (2010e).

Laura attributes her attitudes to her past experiences of oppression, from growing up in public school to living with an addict who threatened her life. Her connections with members in the extreme metal community, in turn, assume that they inhabit similar "life-worlds" (Bettie 2003, 105). In making these choices, she is not, as some scholars would suggest, simply adhering to male behavioral norms. Her actions are informed by her life history, as reconstituted through everyday narrative performance. Laura's participation in the death metal scene enables her to find spaces where she can gain power and strength by constructing an identity that she sees as authentic. She then uses this power in her everyday life.

Louise: Challenging Social Oppression with Performance

Laura's life narrative shares themes of oppositional and group identity construction with most of my consultants in the extreme metal scene. Louise, in contrast, tells a different story. She used her position as a vocalist to challenge mainstream gender norms that she saw happening within the scene. Like Laura, Louise has used extreme metal instrumentally as a

source of power, not only as a vessel, but also as a dialogic partner. Louise describes herself as a feminist with radical anti-capitalist values, and as a queer-identifying woman involved in radical queer organizing. Though she has never presented herself as "fem" (hyper-feminine), her involvement as a female singer within the extreme metal scene has been challenging. Through her life narrative, she discusses how she has engaged with the scene and used it to strengthen and sustain her in other domains.

Louise transitioned to extreme metal in her college years, after listening to punk as a teenager. Describing a defining moment that propelled her into extreme metal, she tells how her metal friend Barry encouraged her to buy At the Gates' *Slaughter of the Soul*. When they listened to the first song, Blinded by Fear, she recalls: "he looked over at me and I was like, 'Whoah! This is fucking intense; this is amazing!' And he looked over at me and he was like, 'Hits the spot, doesn't it?'" (2010)

Louise's attraction to extreme metal follows that of other participants. She had shifted from punk to metal due to the "musicianship" of the song compositions and her attraction to the vocals. She notes that she had always been intrigued by the darker side of things; the motifs in extreme metal were easily relatable. "Dark, sad things don't scare me. . . . It's easier for me to go into that space and feel cozy and comfortable. I don't want to live there . . . but it's nice to visit, you know." Louise describes herself in school as a "weirdo" whose parents were "hippies" and who never fit into any "normal scene"; consequently, she gravitated towards other "freaks" who shared similar musical interests and identity backgrounds. Her interests in both punk and metal led her old punk friends to call her a metalhead and her metalhead friends to call her a punk. Caught in the middle, she didn't feel that she had a space to fit in until she started performing.

Growing up, Louise had wanted to perform in punk bands, but guys in the punk scene

refused to be in a band with her.[11] When she moved from Durham to Asheville (just three hours

away) to go to college, she found the scene more welcoming to women as performers;

subsequently, she started the grindcore crust band Resurrectum. She talks about her experiences:

> Those first few years, I was really working some shit out. I was writing some heavy stuff about family dysfunction, personal trauma, politics, feminism. We were using lots of pagan imagery to talk about feminism. One of the songs I wrote for Resurrectum, there was this feminist quote—I don't know who said it—but that one of the things that threatens men is that because women's menstrual cycle that we can bleed without pain and bleed without fear of injury, where if a man's bleeding, he's been hurt. So I was like, "Oh my god! That's metal as shit! Right?" So I actually wrote a song about menstrual blood. And people went wild! (2010)

Louise used the tropes of "brutal imagery" within the scene to work through gender and personal

issues. Regarding the platform of extreme metal, she notes:

> Here's what I realized: being a vocalist in a metal band, you can scream at the top of your lungs about some shit that is not cool and everyone in the audience is like [in gruff voice], "More! More!" What other setting do you have where you can literally stand there and scream about all sorts of fucked up shit and people aren't like, "Stop!" It was amazing. (2010)

> On tour, she encountered towns in which male fans at shows were not always so

welcoming. In these situations, Louise used her identity as a vocalist to assert power and

establish herself as an equal in the space. She shares an example:

> There was this one show in this tiny little town in Pennsylvania and it was a bunch of little young hardcore kids, like doing flip kicks and all that crazy shit.[12] Well, not when

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[11] For more about gender construction in punk scenes, see sociologist Lauraine Leblanc's (1999) ethnographic work.

[12] In the US, extreme metal bands often perform on mixed bills, most recently with hardcore and metalcore bands. This can be a source of tension at shows, as the two subgenres of music attract conflicting types of fans and use competing tropes in their music. Consultants discuss, for example, how metalcore fans mosh using karate-style methods of kicking, while extreme metal fans engage in more of a push- or fist-style of circle dance. Also, consultants have expressed frustration with what they call a more overt, macho "bro" posturing in metalcore scenes, as opposed to the masculinity in extreme metal, which utilizes more fantasy-oriented tropes.

we were playing, because we got up there, and they were like, "What the fuck is this shit?"

And literally, the entire group of boys, because they were boys—they were like sixteen—moved all the way to the back of the space, like across the entire room. Well, I had a fifty foot mike cord, so I just walked and got like as close as we are [two feet away] and just fucking belted the entire set out. And they were literally like arms folded back against the wall scared shitless. So it was an opportunity for me to reclaim. (2010)

After the show, two teenage girls came up to her. "And they were like, 'That was awesome! We've never seen anything like it!' And I was like, "Take some CDs. Good luck, ya'll. This place is fucked up!'"

Reflecting on this story, she situates herself as a woman empowered by her role as a vocalist:

So there were times where being a singer in a band helped me take up some space as a woman and spread some messaging. Because, when you've got a microphone and it's turned on, you get to say what you want to say. People don't necessarily agree; they might not hear it. But you get to say it. And there's power in speaking your truth. There's a lot of power in that. (2010)

Like Laura, who used extreme metal to regain power and speak her "truth," Louise used her involvement with extreme metal to deal with her own struggles with mainstream gender construction. But her sheer presence as a gendered performer forced her to deal with those same issues within what she called the "counterculture." She used this tension as a catalyst for transgressing scene norms and providing exposure for counter-attitudes and perspectives.

As what she calls her shining moment, she recalls visiting friends in the band US Christmas—composed of mill workers from Marion, North Carolina—at the Scion fest in Atlanta, a large southern regional metal festival. At the merchandise booth, bandmembers were selling split 7"s featuring a song from her band at the time, Subramanium. The song on the split

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Comparing masculine presentations among the two subgenres would be a fascinating study, as all of my consultants cited similar frustrations.

album was deeply political, due to both its lyrics and the fact that she was a female vocalist belting them out. Seeing teenage boys carrying that album around filled her with pride; she felt that, at the very least, it could expose them to alternative perspectives that might not be available in either mainstream or counterculture societies.

Louise built upon these musical moments of empowerment in other contexts, using her sense of personal triumph as a springboard propelling her to empower other women facing adversity. After graduating, Louise became a social worker. She reported that her experiences dealing with dark material through the extreme metal community helped her relate to clients (including sex workers, crack addicts, and women with severe mental illness who were homeless). She notes:

> They picked up pretty quickly that I was not some scary Christian lady in there to help all these poor people; that I was a freak, too. You know? It just comes across; it does.[13] I can dress up in a suit, but it's still—I'm edgy, that's who I am. And I think I made them really comfortable with me. I think I made them more comfortably connect with me, because they were like, "Alright. This woman has either been through some shit or she knows about some shit and she's not some weird outsider coming in to fix me." (2010)

While her involvement with extreme metal has helped her relate to clients, her encounters in her professional position have encouraged her to reflexively examine the scene. She recognizes it as a tool that can potentially galvanize young women, along with other fans, to empower themselves, while at the same time could also be a source of oppression. Recognizing this, she and her sister foster the former by running the Durham Girls Rock summer camp, where they provide opportunities for teenage girls to learn musical instruments and start their own

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[13] North Carolina is part of a southern region in the US, colloquially referred to as the Bible Belt. The social influence of Protestant Christianity had varying impacts among women's life narratives in this research.

bands. Louise uses her position as a performer as an empowering model to offer young girls an alternative outlet when facing stigma.

The extreme metal scene has been therapeutic for Louise, but she has also used the space to regain a sense of power and has continued from that position of power. A self-described "freak," she helps other women struggling with marginalization as a result of personal traumas and/or gendered, classist, and racist institutions.

Kelicia: Racial identities, Masculinity as Armor

While Laura and Louise found the extreme metal community central to their sense of empowerment, Kelicia, the youngest and only African American key consultant, emphasized a more intimate involvement with the *music*, rather than with the music *scene*. In fact, that scene, which was culturally coded as a domain predominated by white fans, reflected much of her frustration involving racial identities in the Piedmont. [14] At the beginning of the research, Kelicia had already attended many live extreme metal events in small club venues, usually featuring touring groups or local bands in full-day events. As a writer for an online album review blog, she regularly talked with other female death metal fans online, but rarely did so in person. Over the course of the research period, she began to negotiate an identity in the local extreme metal community, meeting friends in the scene, considering playing bass and performing vocals, talking with band members, and experimenting with clothing and sexuality. Her narratives describe an intimate relationship with the music, through everyday listening, and its role in her life as she negotiated relationships with her parents, peers, and larger social spheres. Kelicia's

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[14] Even though a number of Hispanic, Latino, American-Indian, Asian-American, and African American fans attended every show included in this research.

story is similar to those of the other consultants regarding what attracted her to the music and her marginal positions in public education.

Kelicia gravitated to death metal during a period of intense anger and social pressure. She had attended a Christian private school up until third grade. There, teachers would punish her for not speaking "proper English," though she was simply speaking the vernacular with which she was familiar, what she referred to as "African American dialect." In fourth grade, Kelicia transferred to a public school that included more children of African American and Hispanic descent. The black kids in the new school mocked her voice and accused her of trying to be white. Over the next two years, whenever they saw her, they would chew things up and spit them at her; they would also push her in the halls. During this period, she met a friend whose mom had introduced her to punk music. While Kelicia had been listening to pop music, she now latched onto punk, because she identified with the anger it expressed. Punk became an outlet, a temporary vent for her frustration. But it did not last.

When she was eleven years old, she developed a crush on a white boy who wore metal band t-shirts to school. At first, she tried to use his music as a conversation starter.

She states, "I would read his [band] shirts and write down band names, and google them. And I would be like, 'Uh, yeah, I was listening to the new blank song.' And he would be like, 'Oh?' But he had a girlfriend, so it didn't help anyway" (Phelps 2010c).

One day he wore a Cannibal Corpse shirt. She went on Pandora, an online music site, to look up their songs and listen to them. She found them boring. "They just sounded so hollow," "lacking substance," as opposed to being "dynamic" (Phelps 2010a). But she listened to the site's recommended bands with similar sounds and discovered that she liked the music played by bands like Suffocation, Dying Fetus, and later Devourment. The voices initially turned her off,

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because she was so used to hearing lyrics, but the more she researched, the more she began to find sounds that resonated with her.

> And I think that's one reason why metal stuck with me. Because around the time when I stopped liking that guy . . . I was still pretty angry, because I still kept getting picked on, and I still wasn't accepted by *my* race, but the white people were just kind of like, "Is she a poser?" So I got into this metal realm, but the metal was just angry. And I was like, "You know what? I'm angry, and this gives me a release, because it's energy, so whatever." I think that's probably one reason why it stuck, and it's catchy [laughs]. That helps. (Phelps 2010c)

She began to look up lyrics online, interpreting them based on her life situations. For example, when I asked if death metal had helped her get through her anger, Kelicia brought up the song "Drilling for Brains," a song featuring a sadistic dentist, by the band Mortician. She described sitting in her room, listening to the music, and finding it therapeutic, empowering.[15]

> Yeah, because I mean, I didn't want to go out and murder someone [laughs]. But you know, when I heard the songs—you can't understand the lyrics, but when I'd read the lyrics—they're all about killing other people. I was like, "Yeah, that could be you, couldn't it?" You know? "That could be me doing that to you, drilling for braaaiiins!" You know? And I was like "Yeah, okay, I'm angry." And I would always have this built up energy, and when I would listen to it, I would just sit in my room headbanging and stuff, and it was just great. And then I would be like, "Whew. Everything's good again." It took my anger from me. (Phelps 2010a)

She began developing a relationship with the music as a sustaining power, transferring her anger over to it to get her through daily situations at school. As Kelicia continued listening, she began to develop what Berger's research participant Dan Saladin called "proactive rage"

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[15] Kelicia grew up in Winston-Salem, population 230,000. The city is home to R.J. Reynolds, the corporate manufacturers of Camel cigarettes, who played a prominent role in the state's tobacco farming legacy. Winston-Salem is a changing region, influenced by "New South" ideologies which stress cosmopolitanism, but racial tensions flow under the social current. Suburban policies pitting groups of loitering teenagers against an assumed social order are similar to those discussed in Donna Gaines' book, *Teenage Wasteland* (1991). When Kelicia was a teenager, lawmakers had passed legislation to control teenage public behavior under the cloak of preventing "gang activities." The town had a curfew, and teenagers under the age of sixteen were not allowed in the mall alone or alone in cars after a certain hour. This inevitably influenced Kelicia's listening behaviors, which limited her listening to her room or with headphones.

(1999, 270-271) or resilience. As a young teenager, she still had limited agency to change her immediate situation. She still had to go to the same school, face peer judgment, and work out conflicting interpretations of race and gender in her identity work.[16] She began to cloak herself in some of the tropes of death metal as a type of armor to protect herself and ground herself in a sense of power while she worked through these issues. Defining the music as masculine, or even hypermasculine, she associated it with strength, power, and intimidation.

Talking about middle school, she says, "I covered all of my notebooks in pictures of metal bands and, you know, really hot metal guys covered my locker. I took metallic sharpies to my bookbags and wrote all their names and wrote lyrics and stuff on them" (Phelps 2010c). Having not been raised as "one of the guys," and experiencing rises of heterosexual attraction, this response—layering her materials with allusions to heterosexual romance—was common among her peers. As a child, Kelicia had been attracted to pop music associated with these public display patterns, and to "boy bands" like NSync, who projected a less threatening version of masculinity. So the pattern was not new, but the imagery's symbolism had changed. The death metal imagery, with its tropes of power, shock, death, and violence, enabled her to establish space and transform stigma into "fighting back" visually.

"I wanted people to fear me," she says. She began the process of "becoming metal," adopting metal clothing and tropes. In this way, she could shield herself from the symbolically violent terrain of middle school. At eleven years old, Kelicia asked her dad to take her to an army

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[16] Though she describes her family as supportive, at this time, her involvement with death metal caused consistent friction with their Christian values and who they wanted Kelicia to be. They interpreted the music as demonic, so while she was experiencing school stigma, their responses contributed to her feeling that she belonged nowhere. It took years of negotiating with them to gain their support for her chosen method of coping. Considering the time period, it may have been difficult for her to frame the stigma she was undergoing in a way in which they could understand.

surplus store, where he bought her combat boots.[17] She pulled her hair back, and started wearing

black t-shirts, shirts she had ordered that featured her favorite bands, and baggy chained pants,

clothes commercially associated with the "metal look." As she adopted these tropes, she began

experiencing more stigma. White students interpreted her clothing—increasingly her badge of

identity—as inauthentic and accused her of trying to "be white." Their actions fed the cycle, as

she internalized those voices and "suited up" to meet them by armoring herself and aligning with

metal images of strength. And as she continued to self-present this strength, and conversely

continued to get more criticism about who she "should be," she began feeling a sense of power in

being different or "weird." Over time, she internalized this pride, no longer needing the death

metal shield to protect her. She could wear any clothing and still strongly identify with the

music.[18]

Overcoming Stigma: Transgression as Power

       Kelicia's sense of power in being different or "weird"—as she referred to herself—was

contrarily reinforced through the lack of community she felt within the death metal scene.

Though she had used the music to empower herself, she faced constrictions in the death metal

community that paralleled those she had dealt with at school, with fans and peers indicating she

was "inauthentic" as a death metal fan. Her participation in the death metal community also

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[17] Her father is a lieutenant in the police department and has a history with the military. Therefore, this request may not have been particularly unusual or outside his realm of understanding.

[18] In a 2014 conference on Metal and Culture in Dayton, Ohio, a British audience member asked me if any of my consultants had gone to a school that required uniforms, which he saw as possibly regulating some of the stigma. Since Kelicia had used clothing to fight back, a school uniform might have limited her sense of power. Laura, too, would have found it limiting, as school uniforms tend to enforce gendered identities. Chloe, who had attended a private school until high school, reflected how constricting school uniforms had been to her identity. She tried to transform the male uniforms into more feminine presentations, often risking punishment by school authorities for doing so.

marked her as "inauthentically" black according to her family and non-death metal friends. In

her ground breaking work *What are You Doing Here? A Black Woman's Life and Liberation in

Heavy Metal*, Dawes (2012) shares similar narratives from women in metal scenes who were

treated by others as though they were betraying their black heritage by not following a set of

cultural expectations. One fan, Pisso, notes, "Some people who have met me for the first time

automatically assume that I'm dissing my hood or I'm not being 'real.' They have no idea of

where I grew up, my values, or my cultural background. They are expecting an authenticity from

me that I can't even give them" (2012, 52).

Dawes writes, "A black metalhead can be perceived not only as an affront to the past and

present struggles black people have endured, but as a personal insult to those closest to them"

(2012, 79). Discussing black culture, she notes:

> Every black person in North America is somewhat aware of prevailing societal
> assumptions, and must struggle to rise above them. Sharing certain commonalities—like
> dialect, dress, dating, and music preferences—signifies to other blacks that you show
> pride in who you are as a black person. For anyone who chooses not to adopt those
> cultural signifiers for whatever reason, the choice is seen as a rejection, even an insult.
> The status quo has questions ready for this: Do you think you are better than me? Why
> don't you want to be like us? (2012, 79)

In discussing her music interests, Kelicia consistently says she is considered "less black."

She notes,

> I have white people telling me I'm not black. I have to hear it from my own race and then
> other races, too. "Oh, you're not black at all." Why? "Because you listen to metal. That's
> white people music." Do you know how many times I've heard that in the course of my
> short life? Seriously, at least two or three times a week, I hear I'm not black. . . . A lot of
> people want to be authentic to their race. At least for me, I know it's harder for black
> people to accept me, because I am different as far as like, yeah, they're always like, "You
> talk like a white person. You listen to white people music. You dress like a white
> person." What does that even mean?" (2010c)

Kelicia's experiences resemble those of Dawes' informant Camille Atkinson, who says,

"You have people on both sides of your life, your family life and your peers, telling you that you

are not black enough because you listen to this music. So you do question yourself. What ends up happening is that you create for yourself an identity of what a black person should be" (2012, 54).

Kelicia reflects this tension in her fiction writing. Her characters often struggle with expectations from members of black communities and local metal communities. Her protagonists meet harrowing ends, and in their dying moments, they experience a sense of freedom, usually through listening to death metal (2010b).

In Chapter Two, I discussed how Kelicia felt power in her everyday life through listening to death metal, engaging in the secret privileged knowledge, and deciphering its sonic barrage into beauty. She notes, "I usually feel special when I'm walking around and it's just because I'm into death metal, period. . . . Especially when I walk around with my Zune, and I'm like, 'If you could hear this beauty in my ears right now [both laughing], then your life would be complete!'" (2010c). But Kelicia's sense of empowerment doesn't only come from listening to death metal; it also comes from her culturally marked status in the death metal scene, where her role as a self-defined black woman has fueled confidence in adopting a transgressive stance. Dawes calls this the 'only one' syndrome (2012, 101), in which black members use their uniqueness in the scene to feel special. Kelicia notes, "Like I would never change my race for anything. I don't know. I always feel extra special being black and a woman at a metal show. . . . Because people are always so confused. They're always just like, 'Black woman!'" (2010c). Throughout her interviews, she describes show interactions in which she was called out or treated differently based on her race. Most of the time, people were amused or excited to see her there as a black woman (2010a, 2010c). At other times, they gave her space because they may have felt intimidated, which she interpreted as being based on her race (2010a). And occasionally, when

another fan interacting with her dropped a racist statement, she felt empowered to call that person out (2010f).

Growing up straddling cultural categories and feeling no sustained connection with any of them, Kelicia developed an identity of power that was grounded in both her sense of uniqueness and her fierce individualism; these, in turn, developed directly as a result of overcoming stigma through death metal. Rather than feeling a strong sense of empowerment through communal activity, she consistently described her empowerment within scene contexts as highly personal (Phelps 2010a, 2010d, 2010e, 2010f, 2012), with rare exceptions (2010g).[19] Dawes parallels Kelicia's narrative when she notes how she and her interviewees often felt territorial when seeing other black women at shows (2012, 101; Phelps 2010c). Kelicia describes this shared sentiment. "And then, one show, one singular show, I saw this black girl there who I had never seen before. And you know I'm gonna notice! I was actually upset! I'm like, 'I'm the black woman! I'm the only black woman!'" (2010c).

These illustrations portray how death metal was not only empowering for Kelicia during her school days, how she continued to utilize it as a source of power in developing transgressive identities, which she expressed as being her authentic self, both within the scene and outside it.

Conclusion

Each of these three consultants' narratives—which echo themes voiced by many others in my fieldwork—speaks to the transformational power of the music outside of the scene. As consultants embarked on the musical journey from Chapter Two, they grew to connect the music

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[19] Over the course of the research, Kelicia has begun to participate more within the scene. While personal empowerment has been her main source of engagement—taking the music into her body through the live venue, *despite* [her emphasis] the others around her (2010a, 2010c, 2010f, 2013)—her friendship with Amanda, who is well connected in the American death metal scene, has afforded her access to meet and hang out with some of her favorite death metal musicians.

to an internal sense of power that propelled them to transform their life situations. They associated this sense of power with freedom to express "authentic selves" in multiple contexts. By participating in the death metal community, Laura found the power to confidently display oppositional identities without shame, to embody alternatives to common mainstream female gender conscriptions that did not align with her values, to participate in careers that emphasize art, and to foster fellowship and emotional support with others in a community. By performing in the extreme metal community, Louise found the power to voice her frustrations without guilt or shame, to work through trauma and social oppression, and to act as a model and a source of support for others who have experienced or are wading through oppression. Kelicia used death metal to arm herself and push through difficult environments, to develop the confidence to embody alternative views and identities that conflicted with those around her, and to speak to those conflicts in her own creative endeavors. Like most of my other consultants, they have fashioned positions in the world in relation to the power they feel in the music.

This chapter has shown how consultants applied the empowerment they felt through death metal in other contexts; this application, in turn, continues to sustain them, as they use the music to transform their lives. To understand how the music sustains them, I need to return to the process of listening which I touched on in Chapter Two, specifically in relation to resilience. To transform those "brutal" sounds to pleasure and empowerment requires vulnerability and strength—two key components needed for resiliency. In the next chapter, I discuss how consultants not only empowered themselves to deal with oppression, but are developing resilience through death metal to face future adversities.

CHAPTER 4: DEVELOPING RESILIENCE—REFLECTING ON CONSULTANT NARRATIVES

Introduction

In his now-classic ethnography of a death metal scene in Akron, Ohio, in the 1990s, folklorist Harris Berger utilizes a critical phenomenological approach that acknowledges the ethnographer as a "subject among subjects" (1999b, 258) who voices opinions and criticisms with all other "subjects" involved. Through face-to-face communication, the ethnographer engages in a dialectic in which she and the research participants share their own partial knowledge in order to reach a clearer understanding of the situation or perspective in question. Like identity scholars Holland and Lachicotte, Jr. (1998; 2007) argue, this understanding is informed by social interaction and personal histories, and will continue to shift based on the multiple subjects' internalization and reflexive responses to social historical discourses, emerging identities, and power dynamics. Berger used this approach to strike up conversations with his main consultant, Dan Saladin, that challenged Dan's involvement with death metal and his everyday interpretations in light of what Berger saw as larger class and race-related sociohistorical discourses in a post-industrial global capitalist context. While I often employed open-ended methods of interviewing to see where my research consultants took the conversation first, the activity of narrating selves that research consultants performed involves structuration, as Berger discussed (1999b, 26), and a dialogic engagement with me, the interviewer. Hearing their stories challenged me to come to terms with why *I* had been attracted to death metal. While they stressed empowerment and shared with me some intimate details of their lives, I often felt too vulnerable to share my own stories with them, afraid they would read me differently, or worrying

that it was simply not the place to divulge those secrets. But as Louise and others asserted that death metal was a secret shared among fans, born from life experiences that had influenced them to engage with the music, I realized that those experiences were intertwined with how they had found not only empowerment, but also resilience, through the music. To be resilient involves both vulnerability and strength, which they experienced both in listening to the music and in maintaining their involvement with it.

Subject among Subjects: Examining the Anger that Bore Me

What follows is a deeply personal story, my own, that I choose to share—first, out of respect for my consultants who entrusted me with their narratives, and second, because I have heard similar stories from friends growing up and from a few women I encountered through this study who chose not to officially include their remarks. Their stories of resilience through death metal are part of the narrative thread that—as with all the consultants discussed earlier—reflects the capability of this artistic medium to provide a method for overcoming oppressive conditions. While they understandably chose not to publically share their stories, I decided to share my own to symbolically incorporate them into the larger conversation.

This research project was one of the hardest journeys I've ever had to face. Roughly a week before I started graduate school in 2008, returning to an area of the state that harbored some hard memories, my dad got officially diagnosed with PTSD from his stint in the Vietnam War.

My sister, who is eight years older, called me. "Isn't it great? He's finally talking about it. All those years, and now we know why – it makes sense."

I couldn't hold back the anger. Yes, I was happy that my dad was finally seeking help after holding it in for so long. I wanted the best for him. Since I had moved away in 2001, we

had built a strong relationship based on compassion and trust (anthropology coursework helped). I had learned to appreciate again the positive aspects of his personality that I had experienced when I was a child: his witty southern humor and charm, his earnestness and candor, his code of honor, and his strong hardworking ethics. I loved my dad. But it had been a long road back to that point, filled with nights of terror, anger, and shame. Around the time I turned 12, his drinking habits became more obvious, and mom and I became his verbal punching bags. The man I had grown up with playing basketball and joking suddenly viewed me as the enemy. I began tiptoeing around his presence, sneaking out when I could, and later just leaving, spending the night outside. I heard the same words from him that I was hearing from my former friends at school. I internalized their words over the years, becoming "worthless," "ugly," and "trash." School, which had been a source of academic confidence and acceptance in my elementary years, offered no relief, because I had to deal with "being a girl" and "being a proper student" who didn't talk about the bad things (i.e. what I was dealing with at home, or from other students). Suck it up – who would believe you? Everybody's got problems.

My dad had used the GI Bill to distract himself from his memories and make up for lost time, graduating with every associate degree he could until the money ran out. He had raised himself and his family from rural farmers living in his home county to a middle-class family living in a suburb in a new county, Wilson. When I was a kid, he worked as a computer programmer for a bank, a job that he loved. In the mid-1980s, that bank was bought out, and he was offered a position leading to one of the Vice President positions in the new bank. Over the years, he realized that the politics of business and interpersonal civility as practiced at this bank did not coincide with the values he had learned prior to Vietnam. To cope with his predicament, with the pressure of providing for his family, and with his mounting memories, he drank. The

day after his nights at the "country club," he'd get up bright and early for work, humming like nothing had ever happened. He led a double life, and we were supposed to, too.

I didn't take it quietly. I'd yell back—get physical (some would say, exacerbating it), turning that fear into anger then shame. It wasn't right what he was saying about me and about mom, and I wasn't going to take it. And every time, I'd hear from my mom, from other family members, and later from a social worker that I was making it worse, that he just had a problem. I was being "ugly." (To them, this term pointed to my "misbehavior"; I heard it, though, as a physical judgment—not only had I failed at being a daughter, but I was also not a sweet, pretty country girl.)

After I got off the phone with my sister, I felt all that anger and pain from the past resurfacing. I wanted to scream at her, "You weren't there!," because she had left for college just before the bad years. She didn't have to spend New Years cleaning up the shards of a broken glass that her dad had just thrown, while her mom was crying. She didn't have to hear on the night of her eighteenth birthday, "Oh, you're eighteen? Good, you can get the hell out." She didn't have to suck it up and hold in all her adolescent fears, and instead worry about where she was going to sleep for the night. She didn't have to shift from writing a paper for school to finding the least dangerous "safe house," because dad had stopped off for drinks on the way home.

And here again, in August 2008, life had become upturned. I had moved by myself from Asheville, a place celebrated for its openness and creativity, and was about to start graduate school in a town that my old teenage friends and I had deemed as upper-class, elitist, or "prep-ville," surrounded on campus by people who dressed and acted like those who had shunned me in school so many years ago. And I was expected to suck up my fears of not being "good

enough" and to be there to help support my dad, the whole time holding it in. Because who in Chapel Hill wanted to hear about it?

I hadn't initially planned on studying death metal academically. But the topic kept coming up in class, almost like a beacon. I found myself engaging in debates I hadn't had to argue for decades. My opinions had changed over time; I was physically coded as a woman, not the wiry teenager who could easily "pass" as a dude at a show if I wore a baggy t-shirt. And while I had learned to reexamine the "inclusiveness" of the local death metal community more critically, I also began reimagining what I had found so empowering and life-affirming about the music during those tumultuous years, and why I had never let go of it.

The more I pursued my research, the more strangers began to engage me on the topic. When I told one person that I liked death metal, she asked me if I was violent. She cited an anecdotal study on rats—a bit of scientific folklore perhaps; I didn't look it up—where researchers played classical music and the rats whizzed through a maze, but when they played metal, the rats all killed each other.

I laughed. "What kind of metal?" I asked her. "What bands? Because certain metal would probably make me want to kill someone, too, or at least knock down the maze to get the hell out of there." Radio pop does that to me. She said it was probably "Slayer or something"—it's always "Slayer" in these tales.

I didn't want to revisit death metal in the local scene where I had grown up. Because while that was a time when I felt a sense of empowerment over my body (and, like Kelicia, had used death metal tropes as armor), it was also a time of intense pain. I had PTSD too, and it came out sometimes in the interview process. I remember one day Laura was talking about how a

fellow female-fan had made some "poor life decisions." She rationalized her actions, saying that this woman had not had the proper home life or upbringing.

"She hadn't had mom and dad to teach her values like you and I had had," Laura said.

 I immediately got defensive. "I learned those myself."

She hesitated, and then continued with her story. And at that moment, I realized my biased vantage point. Hearing all these tales of strength, through the interviews, I wanted to learn how these women had actually become empowered, as they all said in their narratives. Had I too, and had I just forgotten about it?

I had to revisit my own trauma of living in that house—not only how I remember, re-present, reconstitute, and recontextualize it now, but how I wrote about it *then*. I used to write poetry, essays, death metal lyrics, and stories based on my experiences, philosophical musings, religious questions, social discourses, and stories from friends who had suffered violence in mental institutions, wilderness camps, or shared life worlds. Like Kelicia's stories, these writings often featured death metal; like Louise, I used them to explore gender and personal trauma; like Laura, the stories reflected strong bonds with friends who had provided support through struggle; and like Elizabeth, whose narrative was not explored in detail here but was embedded throughout, those friends had to carve out their independence together, in spite of and in response to their family backgrounds. The tone of the writing was arrogant and less nuanced, but it expressed empowerment and an inchoate sense of resilience coupled with optimism.

I remember when I was around fourteen, dad found some writing I had done. "You want to be a writer? You can't be a writer." His eyes said something else. "You won't tell our secrets,

will you?" I have to. He, my consultants, and death metal taught me that. But like death metal, I will keep some of my secrets for a shared few.[20]

Developing Resilience among Consultants: Intersubjective Violence, Vulnerability, and the Soldier Metaphor

I shared these bits of my background to provide future context for understanding how my consultants and I utilized what is commonly considered a symbolically violent medium to develop not only empowerment, but resilience. Developing resilience is a process that begins with the "brutal affect" discussed in Chapter Two, where fans utilized the aesthetics of the music to incrementally build confidence along a path of self-discovery. Chapter Three showed how consultants used this confidence to confront forces of oppression and transform positions of marginalization into positions of power in multiple contexts. Facing these forces of oppression required them to foster both a tough veneer and also the vulnerability and emotional strength to take risks and step through territories where the outcome was unknown and potentially dangerous. The following section builds upon these earlier themes and explores how the practice of listening to and engaging death metal is itself symbolically violent but incorporates methods of resilience which fans apply to everyday violence and domination. To understand this clearly, I return to the act of listening and its relationship to violence and resilience. I also use a common death metal trope, the soldier metaphor, to unpack how fans apply this relationship to everyday contexts. First, I need to define what is meant by violence.

In *Ruminations on Violence*, Dustin Howes examines Western philosophical traditions to elicit two meanings of violence. He defines one meaning, the physical use of violence, as "the use of another's body in order to guide, submit or destroy their will for some purpose" (2008, 9).

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[20] It is important to note that as of 2012, my dad has been sober and continues to transform his life in many positive ways. I love him dearly and am proud of the person he has become.

The second meaning, intersubjective violence, occurs in everyday interactions, due to the fact that "we are separate, habitual, and creative beings" who, through social interaction, may encounter dispositions that are painfully "at odds with," "prevent,", or "destroy our own" (2008, 17). In their life narratives, my consultants—self-defined outsiders who navigated cultural worlds where they encountered values directly opposing their own—often experienced subjective violence in everyday interactions with members of the larger southern community, whether through bullying or enactments of cultural hegemony. They report that these experiences attracted them to extreme metal, and that its sonic violence and imagery helped them work through that violence emotionally. Brian Hickam and Jeremy Wallach define metal's aggression as displaying defense more than an overt power to oppress, as "fighting back," arising from a "need to assert subjecthood and defend oneself from attack and coercion" (2011, 266). My consultants used death metal tropes as shields of defense, to do just that. Through deploying these shields, they developed confidence to assert their voice in the face of injustice, and to take measures to transform their situations. At first, this injustice involved their immediate experiences of violence; over time, however, it came to encompass larger institutional forms of violence. They often used the term "empowerment." Feeling empowered enabled them to develop the emotional elasticity to face continuing struggles and adversity over the course of their lives, some of which they could not always change. The experiences that led them to death metal shaped this emotional elasticity, or resilience, as did the bodily vulnerability required to take in the music itself.

In the recent "Metal and Cultural Impact" conference in Dayton, Ohio, keynote speaker Amber Clifford (2014) drew attention to the experience of the violence of extreme metal sounds upon the body, and how that spoke to the experiences of transgender fans and many others from

the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Clifford's comments—which I will return to in a moment—complemented those of Robin Sylvan (2002), who argued that the live experience of the music built a sense of emotional impenetrability for its fans: "nothing can penetrate *but* the high-volume sensory assault of heavy metal music and the intense adrenalin rush of slamming in the mosh pit" (2002, 174). Sylvan relates the communal sense of the live show to Victor Turner's anti-structure ritual period, arguing that taking in the chaotic force of the music in this context provides a sense of empowerment that becomes "a force for positive change in the lives of metalheads" (2002, 180). The simple act of listening becomes a sensory experience of violence. My consultants described this process metaphorically as being "pummeled" (Phelps 2010c), struck by "intensity" (Warren 2010), engulfed in a "wall of sound" (Newton 2010), "ripped open," and "eviscerated" (Patterson 1993). Clifford's consultants who had begun or were considering gender reconstructive surgery described the music as a sonic metaphor for that experience (2014). Like Bakhtin's (1984) analysis of medieval carnival attendants who used symbols of bodily inversion, the grotesque imagery depicted in the music coincided with an experience of turning the body "inside out" through listening, symbolically dying, and being refashioned or reborn repeatedly. And yet—in line with Berger's discussion about fans exploring the aesthetic affect without experiencing its consequences—listeners not only came out unscathed, but found themselves reinvigorated. Kelicia, for instance, allowed herself to feel her anger and then to transform it over to the music; as she said "it took my anger from me" (2010a, 2010c, 2010f, 2010g). For me, listening required me to be vulnerable, and I felt immense freedom in that, since everywhere else, I felt I had to remain constantly vigilant, on guard.

Being vulnerable allowed fans to take in the music and feel supported; they then were able to develop the strength to transmute their experiences of coercion and domination into

power. To understand the relationship between vulnerability and empowerment, or really resilience, I will use two common metaphors used in metal, the warrior and the soldier, the latter of which was regularly cited among my consultants. While the two terms are often conflated, metal discourse implies a distinction between them.

Other styles of metal have historically presented the warrior as an empowering figure, often as one fighting injustice, representing strength and aggression, or celebrating cultural heritage. Kelicia was attracted to warriors in fantasy, but she also identified with the warrior figure as symbolic of her sense of empowerment in listening to the music and interpreting the lyrics. In this sense, the warrior is associated with empowerment that builds within the listener, whether alone or in a community.

While many styles of metal foreground the *warrior*, death metal repeatedly uses the image of the *soldier*, both in clothing and in subject matter. The soldier suggests critique of the domains of power that dehumanize people into tools or pawns (see Asphyx's "Asphyx (Forgotten War)," for instance, as one of many possible examples). In terms of resilience, death metal also tends to use the soldier to depict individuals suffering through the everyday experiences of war. Songs depicting scenes of war (such as Calm Hatchery's "Blood of Stalingrad") churn with the adrenal intensity and immediacy of possible death, conjuring images of walls of bodies falling upon each other. Lyrics (such as those of Asphyx's "Minefield") depict soldiers in battle, surrounded by the dead. They detail the immediacy of survival in the face of violence.

These images carry a particular class dimension. While historically the warrior class held high status, the term "soldier" commonly alludes not to a high commander, but to the grunt on the ground, who, no matter how specialized, is toiling through the violence of the everyday.

Ideologies of freedom and heroism that may embody the warrior lose their significance in the practice of the soldier, who, in death metal, is just trying to stay alive and make sure that those whom the soldier is close to or fighting alongside also stay alive. The soldier here is ultimately a working-class figure struggling to meet the demands of the everyday. Although many of my participants were middle class, they performed in ways that evoked working-class, socially conditioned mentalities.[21] As Laura discussed, they shared similar life worlds with their working class friends, marked by a lack of support mechanisms, external shaming by dominant institutions, and an experientially grounded understanding of structural forces that maintain hierarchical power and distribute injustice.

Laura's fliers often depicted soldier imagery or references to war, and she also applied the metaphor in everyday conversations. When Laura described quitting her office job and leaving the "rat race," she said it was like a soldier throwing himself on a grenade. When she wanted to dull her emotions and push through a task, she called it "soldiering through." Other consultants used the soldier metaphor when they spoke of wanting to toughen themselves to face situations or emotions that were difficult. "Soldiering" implies using a tough veneer to persevere; this act also requires the emotional intelligence to recognize when one is vulnerable and needs support.

In my own story, I used death metal not only to "soldier through" difficult environments and emotions, but to deal with the lack of control I felt about my body. By the time I was twelve, when my dad had become worse, my body was simultaneously becoming culturally marked as

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[21] In fact, the women with whom I talked who were from rural, lower working-class backgrounds either wanted to remain anonymous or refused to participate in the project. Even though we spent considerable time together, they read me as an academic first. They didn't trust my position as a representative from the University of North Carolina.

feminine without my control. As I got into metal, I adopted common soldier tropes in my clothing. For instance, I wore my dad's dog tags. They made me feel tough, confident. I got my first pair of combat boots a few years later, from a friend who had found them in her mom's closet. They were steel-toed, old paratrooper boots that had belonged to her granddad. During this same period, I gazed upon the grotesque images of death metal album covers and inlays, filled with a disgusted fascination. The images spoke against the ideals of beauty, and I loved them for that. But they also had a reality to them. Recontextualized, they were a way for me to understand what was happening to me. I was becoming monstrous, something my dad hated, and I couldn't understand why.

As home became an increasingly hostile, unstable environment, and with no support from school systems or other institutions, I sought escape at every opportunity (usually on weekends) in "safe houses," the homes of older male friends or friends of friends. But sometimes those were equally hostile to a 14-year old marked female body. Like my dad, other soldiers, and other consultants, I had to develop a tough veneer to get me through those years. But I was also vulnerable. It was only with the help of friends with similar experiences that I made it.

Like Kelicia, who used death metal tropes to arm herself in hostile terrains, I used death metal's grotesque imagery and soldier metaphors to "soldier through" and reclaim some agency over my space. Kelicia had used metal tropes to shield her from social interactions that left her vulnerable. Displaying shields of power, people read her like someone who wanted to be left alone.[22] I too wore death metal clothing as armor, sometimes as a coping mechanism, to assert control over how people perceived my body.

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[22] Fans discussed in Andy Brown's study on heavy metal t-shirts talked about similar experiences (2007)

At death metal shows, I dressed in what other fans considered "male category" clothing—oversized band shirts, jeans or shorts, and combat boots or black Converse sneakers. I felt freedom there, because for once I could feel invisible, blend into the crowd, *not* be looked at; I could transcend my body and the world of romance that was being thrust upon me. I would stand right in front of the speakers, and feel the onslaught of raw sound penetrate me. Not only would I feel a sense of "genderlessness" (or "no genders," as both Rosemary Hill [2011] and Gabby Riches [2011] discuss), but, by getting lost in the experience, I would cease to be a separate ego-self.

The day after a show, I would walk into high school wearing a concert t-shirt and greet my two metal friends who were still in school (my other friends had either graduated or quit), still filled with the energy from the night before. On those days, I didn't care what people thought of me, or if they were judging me. I felt confident because I had experienced a sacred event, a secret shared among death metal fans, and I felt impenetrable.

Normally, I worried with makeup, fixed my hair, and experimented with my appearance. I wanted to be seen as "attractive," but at the same time feared being measured against some high standard of beauty that I knew I could never achieve. I was particularly uncomfortable with the fact that others could view my body from behind and I couldn't do anything about it.

To deal with this insecurity, I started wearing a Brujeria shirt around my waist, fashioning what folklorist Roger Abrahams would call a "badge" of my identity (2003). The shirt featured a decapitated head, a victim of a drug cartel murder.[23] I did not know it at the time, but

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[23] The identity of this person is still under debate. It is speculated that the band members, who started the band in the early 1990s, retrieved this image for their 1993 album cover from a Mexican news publication that was covering the escalating violence among drug cartels in the local area at the time.

by placing this image around my waist, I was engaging in a form of implicit coding, crafting a reflexive statement about the constructions of gender within my community. When I wore that shirt around my waist, I felt empowered, free to enter public domains on my own terms. I was hiding my body underneath a decapitated head, but it was more than that. The body part I had unconsciously replaced with the grotesque image was a part of the anatomy that had all-too-often been objectified. I had learned about this objectification in my preteen years, when friends and I had would walk around the shopping mall, and I would feel myself being watched, becoming an object of desire. By wearing the shirt, I could refuse to participate in this process, and by so doing gain strength to assert an identity of power.

Though I was soldiering through hostile terrain, the impenetrability I felt evoked the empowerment of the warrior. Listening to death metal helped me build strength to deal with the day-to-day; it also helped me formulate alternatives and find my voice through allowing myself to be vulnerable and take in the music—the vocals of which I interpreted as a monstrous beast.

Taking in the Beast: Vulnerability, Empowerment, and Resilience through Gorguts's "Rottenatomy"

I was 14 when I first began listening to what my consultants called the "dark side" of metal. When I listened to my first death metal cassette, Entombed's *Clandestine*, blasting out of the car stereo speakers, the vocals—those echoing growls—immediately enthralled me. Combined with the raw distortion and down-tuned guitars, it sounded like a creature clawing its way through mud and filth. At the time, I deeply wanted to express what I was experiencing, but I couldn't quite articulate my feelings in a way that others could understand. That voice on the stereo, though, became my voice.

Each of us in our small group of friends would find out about a band and introduce it to the others. This became our token or favorite band. My band was the technical progressive

Canadian death metal act Gorguts, a band that incorporated the rhythmic use of guitars and bass and jazz-influenced drum fills with guitar harmonies and the occasional piano introduction (I had played piano since age five). I particularly connected with the Gorguts song "Rottenatomy." While I made fun of the lyrics (which I considered a bit simplistic), I nonetheless used to listen to "Rottenatomy" repeatedly while staring at the tape cover and reading the inlays.

The song's lyrics feature a protagonist, who, having been lost in a jungle for several days searching for a way out, begins to lose grounding and falls into a pit. The music alternates between triple meter and straight "blast beats," which I found disorienting and helped pull me into the scene. In the pit, the narrator—who finds himself surrounded by rotting corpses— realizes his predicament. His voice clearly screams "Help me!" twice, and then responds with a lower pitched growl. The song then moves into its lowest point, with the guitars sawing a rhythmic beat. The lyrics jump tense into the present moment. As the protagonist assesses the situation, "gashes appearing everywhere; scars I'm wishing in despair," the music grows more intense. At that moment, the music reverberated within me. The protagonist attempts to regain control of the situation. He has lost his voice and cannot scream, so when people come up to the pit, they assume he is dead. As the music speeds up, the lyrics offer a coda directed to the listener.

> Below me no one is talking
> If you have your voice, just once you're screaming
> Have a fast look before falling on your knees
> No hope is left when you are deceased.

The vocalist holds onto the last word, the tempo speeds up, and the song ends.

To me, this was one of the more uplifting songs in death metal; I would play it nonstop while listening alone, letting in the music. Feeling lost in a jungle (like the woods in which I played as a kid, or the jungle of my father's Vietnam), I had tried to find a way out for the last

four years, and it was taxing my psychological ability to cope. I screamed to God, to family, and to those oppressing me to ask for help, but I was dismissed. [24] So I had nothing left to do but assess my situation and try to find my own way through. The message in "Rottenatomy" was clear to me. While I am alive, I have a voice, and I need to continue to scream, even if no one hears me. Because that is the foundation of human experience. I need to be aware of every moment and take it in. Gorguts's answer was the screaming voice, a call out, which I interpreted as an act of creation, rather than pure aggression.

To seize one's voice requires a combination of vulnerability and strength—to let in the pain, learn through it, and push on. Most of my consultants used death metal to deal with forms of intersubjective or physical violence, to empower themselves to be voices for change in their everyday worlds, and to develop resilience. In reflecting upon their stories, I realized that I too had used it for the same purposes, and that maybe through being vulnerable and voicing this story, others can find their own resilience.

Consultants Using Death Metal's Resilience to Voice Injustice

All of my ethnographic consultants asserted that the world was full of violence, both physical and intersubjective, and that this violence took the form of daily and systematic

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[24] Like Kelicia, I had grown up in a family of Southern Baptists. When I was a child, I felt accepted in the church of my extended family. When I reached eleven, however, church-members began telling me that I wasn't saved and suggesting that something must be wrong with me. I tried to be "saved," but could never feel that conversion process that drove me to feel accepted in a particular church. The churches that I frequented viewed metal as evil, a position that I challenged, because I saw the music as invaluable and positive. In one service, as the preacher railed against the music, a boy sitting next to me slid his hand along my leg and tried to move up my skirt. Even though others were looking on, his act went unpunished.

I read the Bible and prayed, but I could not divorce the reading from its historical and cultural context. So I explored various religions, trying to find where I fit in. I believed philosophically in a version of post-death much like Kelicia's, but I chose to focus on existence and make the most I could of the present. Death metal tends to focus on the present experience.

injustice. All have incorporated this understanding either into their occupations and/or their daily lives. When asked how death metal has influenced her, Louise suggested that this is why she placed herself in fields where she deals with systematic injustice as a social worker. She continues to challenge herself to empower women who have been subjected to violence, and to counsel young girls who may use music to find their own empowerment. Laura regularly talks with her friends about injustice; her main two life objectives, however, are carving a life close to art and supporting her friends. Though she calls herself a "wastoid fuckup," even her positioning as a "wastoid" directly opposes the social forces that oppress. In addition to carving out alternative social and imaginative spaces through her radio show, she is pen pals with the death row inmates who regularly listen to her on the radio. The fact that these inmates are disproportionally black, poor, and non-Christian highlights the bias of the local justice system and foregrounds the social-justice dimension of Laura's efforts. By writing to offer everyday conversation and everyday support, Laura strikes a blow against injustice, and in favor of humanizing those who have been marginalized and demonized. Kelicia uses her positioning as a writer to challenge racial stereotypes and injustice. She also regularly encourages her female friends to assert themselves when facing intersubjective violence. And I pursued cultural anthropology and folklore in college, because these disciplines examine the range of cultural possibilities, give voice to local experts who are often silenced, and search for solutions to injustice that are grounded in experience. My consultants and I have used the resilience we learned through our experiences with death metal to challenge ourselves, relate with others who have been oppressed, and express attitudes that direct change to face injustice.

In talking about their social activities, my consultants often invoke a position of toughness. Some expanded the conversation, attributing metal's increasing popularity to the

growing global awareness of injustice, violence, and trauma. Louise, for example, points out how extreme metal's waves of popularity each coincide with periods of social upheaval.[25] Discussing the United States, she alludes to an overarching culture of trauma.

"Well, there's a lot of fucked up shit going on right now," she begins. "We've a war on that's . . . ."

I interrupt, "You think there might be a connection?"

Oh, hell yes! September 11 and what that government did to us after that and continues to do to us? Yes. I mean think about hippy music during the Vietnam War. Some of that wasn't all flowers and peace, brother. Some of that stuff was intense. And that's a direct response. We are experiencing some collective trauma. And I think people are going to gravitate towards some more heavy and intense shit when that's going on. There's no jobs. The divorce rate is back up again, because families are under all this stress. People are having some hard times. Hurricane Katrina? And maybe someone in their seventies or eighties can say, "Oh, there's always something going on." But we're definitely, even if there's upswings and downswings, we're on a downswing, because there's some screwed up shit happening right here. And metal music sings about it. Someone's like, "Yep. That's my experience. I can relate to that. That's how I feel." (2010)

Certainly, Louise has a point about current conditions in American society. The now decade-old, 24-hour news and social media coverage portrays scenes of unexpected violence that make it continuously present and always apparent, even interpreting events that were previously seen as innocent or safe in frameworks of war and terror (i.e., the "War on Christmas"). Viewers *learn* that the world is a hostile and unstable place; in American culture, this becomes a hegemonic reality. Family, environmental, political, and economic instability are being challenged as naturalized positions in this hegemonic perspective. Authority figures are training school students and administrators how to handle what they see as the now-everyday risk of gun violence and terrorism in schools. I could expound further, but Louise makes her point clear.

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[25] Death metal first grew in popularity in the United States and the United Kingdom during the first Gulf War.

Does the everyday cultural reality of instability, danger, and fear "explain" the rise of extreme metal's popularity? While American and British death metal bands have discussed anecdotally how the first rise of death metal coincided with the economic recession of the late 1980s and the first Gulf War, I have not yet found a study that quantifiably charts the popularity of extreme metal with the rise of either actual instability or perceived instability in the US. Still, ethnographic accounts in other countries do allude to such connections. The film *Death Metal Angola* (Xido 2014), for example, argues that death metal rose as a scene in Angola because it resonated with fans who had grown up in the unstable climate of war. Without further research, though, I'll let Louise's argument stand—that extreme metal speaks to publics in times of violence, instability, and trauma, and that it can be a powerful medium though which they can speak to these conditions.

Conclusion

Extreme metal's requirement of vulnerability penetrates the listener, and over time can inspire the individual to confront experiences of oppression and domination. It has been an empowering vehicle for my consultants, giving rise to the combination of strength and vulnerability that propelled them to move through their difficulties, and to develop the elasticity to deal with further challenges. While they have all used their resilience to empathize with and empower others, they also all use this confidence to engage the vulnerable act of artistic creation—Louise through music, Laura through sculpture, flier art, and stagehand work, and Kelicia through writing. In so doing, they contribute to the artistic medium—extreme metal— that they had used to develop resilience. Reflecting on my own experiences in light of this work, I see how I too had developed resilience. In giving voice to their stories and my own, I contribute the cycle of resilience to readers and researchers for future applications.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this thesis, I have argued that consultants used extreme metal as a vehicle for transformation and resilience. By focusing on the narrating of selves, my research shows the connections consultants made between their involvement with the music and their life histories. As each recounted what they defined as potent events in their lives, they confidently recognized extreme metal's influence in their decisions, to the point where the music became naturalized as an extension of their sense of "constitutive authenticity" (Larsson 2013, 102). They used extreme metal as a force of empowerment through a process that began with listening to the music, transforming sounds of noise into sources of pleasure. This process of "becoming a fan" instilled them with an internal confidence that they built upon incrementally through continued listening. As they sustained their engagement with the music, they found further confidence by participating in a shared community, as a welcoming space or—as in Kelicia's case—as another space to display a transgressive identity of power. Throughout the process, they used this feeling of empowerment to challenge dominant forces of oppression in their lives, and ultimately to transform positions of marginalization into power. While not all my consultants used extreme metal to deal with marginalized positions related to gender, they all utilized the power they identified with the music to transform their social positioning and make life choices that incorporated extreme metal into their everyday lives. Using this artistic medium, they dealt with difficult emotions which over time enabled them to develop the emotional elasticity, or resilience, that would help them confront future challenges.

Implications for Future Research with Extreme Metal Scenes

By framing consultants within the broader context of their lives outside of the extreme metal community, this research shows not only how they obtained power from the scene to transform their everyday positions, but also how they interpreted their involvement in the scene based on their larger social contexts. The findings problematize previous research that defines masculine-presenting women in the scene as simply subscribing to masculinist norms. While acknowledging the value of such research, my consultants often utilized the scene to confront mainstream constructions of femininity. Whether in the case of Laura (who displayed a type of femininity more in line with her values), Louise (who challenged misogyny both within the scene and within mainstream society), Kelicia (who used masculinity as a type of armoring and power), or myself (who participated in scenic exscription practices to feel power in immediate "genderlessness," or invisibility that did not exist elsewhere), consultants consistently performed gender in the scene on their own terms.

This research methodology also contextualizes metal studies scholar Keith Kahn-Harris's discussion of *reflexive anti-reflexivity*, which is the willingness of some fans to actively downplay or ignore content that they know is controversial, oppressive, or marginalizing to others (2007, 144). Kahn-Harris argues that while unreflexivity involves "not knowing better," reflexive anti-reflexivity is "knowing better but deciding not to know" (2007, 145). He notes that "given the intense reflexivity of the scene and the intense reflexivity required to become involved in it, unreflexivity and anti-reflexivity are relatively rare within the scene" (2007, 145). In the case of sexist content and displays of misogyny, my consultants interpreted material

through the lens of their own life histories, often choosing not to make judgments on the authors or performers of such content, because of their shared life-worlds.

Returning to the initial suggestions that led me to conduct this study with women in extreme metal—the conversations with my professor on misogynist lyrical content—I found that consultants often aligned with Kahn-Harris's discussion of reflexive anti-reflexivity, but explained their activities by referencing their own life histories. For example, when I broached the subject of sexual violence and misogynist imagery in lyrics, Laura quickly suggested the possibility that the authors, who were often heterosexual men in their twenties, had experienced oppression growing up, perhaps at the hands of judgmental women. And since Laura herself had often been ridiculed by girls in her childhood, she was able to feel compassion for these authors, rather than seeing their words as socially violating to women as a whole.[26] She incorporates her life narrative into her response, framing lyrical content around group identities of oppression as she discusses the nature of art as an aesthetic tool for working through those frustrations.

Likewise, other consultants told stories of band vocalists spouting out phrases in live shows that showed how women were culturally marked in the scene, and of subsequently experiencing a teasing or goading relationship with other scene members. For instance, consultants referenced Cannibal Corpse, who in the live show I attended dedicated the song "Fucked with a Knife"—a song whose lyrics viscerally depict sexual violence—to the ladies in the audience. When using examples such as this, consultants proudly discussed hurling insults and taunts back at the perpetrators, in this case George Corpsegrinder of Cannibal Corpse, and thus achieving a level of respect. Most were not willing to quit listening to the band because of

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[26] In our conversations, Laura often invoked women whom she defined as "strong," who had fought historically for women's rights or who had worked as artists.

the lyrics or live displays, saying they enjoyed the song structure enough to ignore them. And since the lyrics were often unintelligibly pronounced, they could experience the music multiple times without even knowing or reading the lyric sheet. Much of this has to do with the nonjudgmental ethos that extends from group identities mentioned in Chapter Three; it also speaks to the power that fans experience through the music. Consultants who *did* pay attention to sexist lyrics described imagining themselves as victors in relation to oppressive villains, or feeling power in the songs' death-like, disorienting "brutal" affect. Rather than forgo the power they felt listening to the song, they actively distanced themselves from the identity of the aesthetic victim, male or female. Kahn-Harris notes how "the majority of extreme metal, for all the aggression and violence of its lyrics, tends not to explicitly target particular 'real-life' people or targets. . . . Most scene members do not respond to the specific details of specific situations in specific ways, but through an ill-defined aggression, which provides a 'fantastic' way of coping with anger" (2007, 53). In this way, my consultants also interpreted the lyrics to fit their use of the music as a coping mechanism, a tool for empowerment, and a source of emotional resilience.

Further evidence points to this type of interpretation. In a conversation with three consultants, for instance, one of them mentioned a crime in Wilmington in which a woman suffered the same acts that Cannibal Corpse describes in "Fucked with a Knife." No one made the symbolic connection between the event and the words in the song, however, despite Cannibal Corpse being one of the consultants' favorite bands. Instead, they all focused on how the woman expressed astounding strength and fortitude by dragging herself several blocks to safety, ultimately saving her own life with the help of police and emergency personnel. In this particular example, they interpreted the violence as a random act beyond the victim's control, and stressed the victim's resilience in saving herself.

Louise, in contrast, read sexually violent attitudes in the music in terms of her

experiences with women who had suffered the brunt of similar accounts:

> And that to me is so counterintuitive to my value system. I'm actually a trauma
> specialized therapist in social work. I work with sexual assault and partner violence and
> other PTSD and trauma reactions. And being in a room full of violent huge men and
> having their kind of leaders endorse and even mock violence against women and violent
> sexual assault, I have major issues with. (2010)

Were Louise present for the conversation, she most likely would have connected the

Wilmington crime with structural promotions of misogyny that she witnesses in mainstream

society and extreme metal. For Louise, if a band exhibits racist or sexist behavior, she may—like

other consultants—still listen to the music and learn about the band, but she refuses to buy their

material or attend their shows. She occasionally listens to bands like Burzum, as she does other

styles, such as pop, that have "contradictory value systems" to her own, but she stops short of

contributing to their livelihood, because she does not "want to financially support that" (2010).

She adds, "It's certainly much easier when you can't understand what they're saying because the

lyrics are unintelligible or in another language" (2010).

My own analysis of misogynist lyrics is more of an amalgamation of all of these

perspectives. As a teenager, I was quick to defend lyrics much as Laura had, based on an

assumption that lyricists had grown up in similar life-worlds of oppression and were responding

to the intensity of their personal experiences through the grotesque, shocking, and disgusting

tropes of the genre. I even wrote my own lyrics that explored these elements, sometimes within

victim/victor relationships, and found a cathartic sense of humor through writing them. Since my

experience of the music was so acutely personal, I interpreted a critique of lyricists to be an

insult upon me, too. From an artistic lens, these conversations about lyrics also tended to invoke

discussions of "high" and "low" culture, the argument being that because extreme metal

musicians—many teenagers themselves—wrote "unintelligent" (Greenwood 2010c) or problematic lyrics, this downplayed the complexity and talent evident in the music as a whole. And it's this complexity that conflicts fans who do not support lyrics that can be read as misogynist but who gain empowerment from the intense experience the music provides.

Like Louise, I refuse to financially support bands whom I know promote oppressive ideologies, but as I have grown older, I also find myself reading death metal lyrics far less often unless the inlay indicates provocative imagery that compels me to read beyond the song or album titles (the art on the album can indicate the type of lyrics in the music). Likewise, given that I use the live show for many reasons, one of which is to experience a temporary sense of genderlessness, if a band member in the live context shouts comments that even address the "women" or "men" in the audience, this immediately thrusts me back into the gendered social realm, and I find myself less likely to dissociate the band from the gendered experience of cultural production. However, I will shout back insults or call attention to the behavior of others. So while I am willing to forego or miss misogynist lyrics in personal listening if the music allows me to feel a sense of intensity through its "brutal affect," in social interactions, I resist them through dialogue or by withholding my support (not buying band merchandise or actively participating in the live show).

These narratives of how consultants interpret the music based on their life histories contextualize the choices they make to actively downplay misogynist content or to challenge it. Even fans who engage in reflexive anti-reflexivity, such as Kelicia, will challenge sexist or racist behaviors when they encounter them individually in the scene. As more fans from diverse backgrounds become part of the scene, they encounter the discursive challenge of using the scene to oppose acts of marginalization in mainstream culture, while still sustaining the

nonjudgmental ethos that allows for those same marginalizing ideas to exist alongside their own within the scene. Louise's narrative points to a solution. Through vocalizing her experiences of those forms of oppression as a performer, she incorporates the power of extreme metal's tropes to challenge popular ideas. As she used the scene to work through her frustrations with—and ultimately to challenge—dominant modes of marginalization, she developed the resilience to face those challenges in everyday contexts outside of the scene. Reflexively, her performances expose fans to a perspective they may not have heard, which perhaps could influence their own life histories. Other consultants mount much the same challenge by their very participation in the scene; by engaging extreme metal to oppose dominant forces of oppression, they invite *other* scene members into reflexive relationships that can challenge scene dynamics. It is hardly a stretch to consider the power that personal conversations and community involvement have in prompting reflection. Laura's conversation with her friends, for example, inspired her to embark on career paths more attuned to her values. Perhaps a longitudinal study of fans in particular scenes can examine how such community interaction can change dynamics not only for individuals outside of the scene, but also for those within it, thus shifting the cultural norms of those folk communities.

Ultimately, this work not only expands folklore studies through adding to Berger's (1999) initial research on the genre in the late 1990's; it also indicates how folklore perspectives provide critical insight to understanding how fans engage the music and these folk communities. By situating consultants in their everyday lives, folklore studies incorporates the complexity of voices and social structures that contribute to fans' involvement—or lack of involvement—in scenes. The life narrative performative lens depicts the dynamic and fluid nature of folklore as that which is continually interpreted and re-interpreted, re-constituted based on these changing

influences and contexts. Through the telling and re-telling of their life histories, consultants in this study showed how they had integrated their personal or communal involvement with extreme metal into their broader lives, how their experiences with the genre contributed to the decisions they made, and how those decisions continued to nurture a sense of resilience to face further challenges. Though they describe the music as "brutal," it is not "brutalizing" to them. Those who had experienced forces of oppression in larger contexts did not suffer re-traumatizing effects when they encountered the aesthetic violence of the music. Instead, they gravitated toward the controlled environment of the violent aesthetic medium and found that it allowed them an expressive space to explore their vulnerability while at the same time develop the resilience to withstand and ultimately overcome the forces of oppression that dominated their lives. While they experienced forces of oppression and marginalization first in contexts outside of the extreme metal community, those experiences informed their interactions with others within that community. Exploring life narratives through folklore methodology thus enables the researcher to understand the larger social impacts of fans' involvement with extreme metal over time. It contextualizes what consultants mean when they say the music has been "empowering" by detailing the instrumental process of using the music to develop the combination of vulnerability and "strength" or assertiveness—what I define as resilience—that is required to approach and face continual life challenges. This process also reflects back upon these folk communities and shows how these perspectives influence consultants' shifting positioning within scenes, how they situate themselves within extreme metal folk groups, and how they may contribute to or challenge the communities. Therefore, this folklore study is particularly useful for both researchers of extreme metal and folk scholars interested in fan communities of other musical genres.

APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE ONLINE VIA SURVEY GIZMO

10 Questions on Women in DEATH METAL

1) If you were to describe death metal to someone who has never heard it, what would you say?

2) What determines "good" death metal for you?

3) How long have you been listening? Do you remember the situation when you first discovered it? What first attracted you to it?

4) What other music do you listen to? Out of all the music you listen to, what percentage would you say you listen to death metal? How has this percentage changed since you first started listening to death metal?

5) Do you read the lyrics? How would you say the lyrics contribute to the experience of the music? Do you read lyrics for other styles of music?

6) Do you consider yourself a member of a death metal scene? What do you think about the death metal scene as you see it?

7) Do you hang out with other women? Do you hang out with other women in the death metal scene? What's your opinion of women in the scene?

8) Has death metal made an impact on other areas of your life? If so, how?

9) If you were conducting research on women in death metal, what would you look for? In other words, what do you think is crucial for researcher to understand about death metal, women in death metal, or specifically your experiences with death metal?

10) First name, Last name, Home town (city, state), Current residence (city, state), email address (never shared, no spam), Mobile Phone, URL, age, gender identity, additional information.

Understand that by submitting this, your answers may be included in a masters thesis on Women in Death Metal to be submitted to the Folklore Program at UNC-CH. A copy will be available online for public viewing. If there is anything you do not want me to include, please let me know. I may contact you to follow up with these questions, and if I do, you have the right to obtain a copy of any interview or transcript.

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