

Abstract

Extreme metal music (EMM) is both an umbrella term and a sub-category of heavy metal, with origins in the early 1980's. It is a complex amplification of heavy metal that has garnered increased attention during the last two decades due to some bands becoming more popular and accessible than anticipated for the styles it comprises. Although women have a small but steady presence in heavy metal, this number shrinks when applied to extreme metal - a subculture which has typically been coded as a masculine domain (Purcell 2003; Kahn-Harris; 2007; Walser 1993; Weinstein 1991).

For women, participating in such an overwhelmingly male-coded environment can incur sexism, marginalization, and misogyny. This begs the question: *Why and how do women participate in a genre so often considered to be a man's domain?*

By use of ethnographic research, participant observations and interviews, this study surveys female participants (fans, musicians, and music industry workers) in the New York Tri-State area involved in the EMM scene to address the elements that surface as common identity markers for women in New York's EMM scene, the regional comparisons from previous studies, with regard to ethnicity, age, and education, and the ways in which their behaviors intersect with gender performativity and feminist musicology. By exploring themes of embodiment and performativity, it will reveal how gender and agency play a role in women's consumption and production practices within EMM.

Keywords:

Extreme Metal Music, Gender, Embodiment, Performativity, Ethnography, Agency and Feminism

Note

The beginning part of my thesis entitled, *Individual Thought Patterns*, references the 1993 album by the metal band Death. Founded by guitarist and vocalist Chuck Schuldiner, Death is known to be one of the most influential bands to have created the death metal music genre we know today. This album in particular, explores and criticizes the philosophical and social norms in humanity. Schuldiner's writings challenge and expose the human condition while highlighting agency and truth.

I reference this album as it explores feelings of alienation, difference, and what Schuldiner seemingly understood to be a voice for the marginalized. In this sense, the concepts put forth by Death's *Individual Thought Patterns* correlate to women's participation in extreme metal and expresses an unheard voice. In essence, women like men, are individuals whose own theoretical and social struggles can offer insight to feelings so often discarded. While extreme metal has often been castigated to being a genre of misanthropy, sexism and violence, the same themes work to empower and transgress women who find a place of liminality while participating and performing in the subculture. As a result, extreme metal offers a lens in which one can look beyond the traditional perceptions of the genre and instead reveal the human experiences and liminality in which women can emerge empowered.

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I. INTRODUCTION

*“Time is a thing we must accept
The unexpected I sometimes fear.
Just when I feel there's no excuse for what happens,
Things fall into place
I know there is no way to avoid the pain that we must go through
to find the other half that is true
Destiny is what we all seek...”¹*

The year 2000 brought a myriad of new experiences for me. I was going away to college, both to live and to study, I was going to have to get my first real job, and finally I was going to have to do all of this while maintaining a serious long-distance relationship. For a recent high school graduate this was a double handful to be juggling while learning the ropes of life away from home and non-parental restrictions. It was also the first phase of my budding relationship with metal music.

I like to think that I came into my relationship with metal late as my first loves were 80's new wave, i.e., Joy Division, OMD, Depeche Mode and The Cure, and punk like The Clash, Swinging Utters and Minor Threat. I was very much a throwback new waver swimming in a sea of 90's pop, "alternative" rock and hip hop from my early junior high school days up until my last year of high school when I started listening to punk. I blame it on having a sister 11 years older than me who often left vinyl records lying around the house with covers that could do nothing but fascinate my 13-year-old self. What could have been as enticing as men with long hair looking like women and women with short hair looking like men? Thank you Annie Lenox.

Growing up in Yonkers, a suburb of NYC, life was, at times, surprisingly non-diverse. In my mind, it has always been the city's fifth borough, and with NYC's reputedly sheer abundance

¹ Chuck Schuldiner. *Destiny*, song from the album Individual Thought Patterns. Performed by Death. (1993; New York City: Relativity, 1993.) LP.

of artistic variety, it was surprising to me that while growing up there, I could not find others with the same interest in the music that I gravitated towards. Sure, my peers were predominantly Hispanic, Latino, Black and Asian kids, but in terms of musical diversity, my environment fell victim to the typical genres that pre-teens and teens listened to: mainstream popular music.

During the 1990's, while teens in my school were listening to Britney Spears, NSYNC, or Boys II Men, I was listening to The Cure and OMD. I had managed to not be with the "in" crowd. I found solace in hanging out with my older siblings like the dweeby little sister in one of those John Hugh's movies, anxiously trying to see what cool things my brother and sister were doing. When they threw parties, I was soaking up the subculture. It was no wonder when I look back, that I didn't have the same interests as other teens my age. I was simply 13 going on 24.

My love of new wave easily transitioned into a love of "metal" as I found certain new wave bands carried the same heaviness that I would later find in metal. Joy Division's heavy bass lines accompanied by Ian Curtis's haunting and despairing baritone voice transformed into the doom and death metal that I came to like. Compositionally, Joy Division wrote about death, life, and the human condition, themes that I would also find appearing in the death metal I would later hear.

It was years later, in 2007, when I would really deepen my relationship with metal - particularly death and doom metal. In the early 2000's, I remember listening to Metallica's black album and thinking it was the heaviest thing I had ever heard. As a teen, nothing could compare to both the heaviness and the lyrical poetry vocalized by James Hetfield in "The Unforgiven" or "Nothing Else Matters". I felt an even greater sense of connection reading about Kirk Hammet being half-Filipino. There I was, a young Filipina, feeling validated that a half-Filipino guy could rock lead guitar in such a quintessential band! I didn't care what his other half was! As the years

progressed, so did my transition to listening to heavier and heavier metal. Unlike the average adolescent white male metalhead who listened to mainstream metal music, I started listening to metal and extreme metal music (EMM) in my mid-twenties, gravitating towards it not due to any coming-of-age or rebellious stage of teenage-hood, but rather because of a life change.² I had lost my mother to disease when I was 23.

All of a sudden, the deep tonalities that I could find only within EMM seemed to fill a void that no other music could. The deep growling vocals and aggressive blast-beats from death metal provided a form of transgressive and emotional experiences for me. Being that the majority of bands are male dominated in EMM, finding female musicians and vocalists that embodied the amount of rage and anger I felt was extremely rewarding. I found this catharsis in listening to Karyn Crisis (Crisis) and Dawn Crosby (Fear of God). When I was 18 and first heard death metal, I had the same knee-jerk reaction that most people who are unfamiliar with extreme music have, which was, “*What is this shit?!*” I still vividly remember when my then-boyfriend and now-husband played Carcass to me for the first time. It was a song from their album *Heartwork* and I remember telling him what he had just played for me was “*not music*”. At the time, my ears couldn’t process the unfamiliar signature changes, the pace and even the vocal elements. I learned to become familiar with it. As I aged and my life transitioned from feelings of grief and death to hopefulness, my appreciation for EMM deepened.

For whatever reasons Carcass didn’t speak to my 18-year-old self, Carcass snarled into my CD tray at 25. *Heartwork* has become one of my favorite death metal albums for its energy and intensity. What resonated was that although EMM was known for having misogynistic and aggressive lyrics, the content ranged from not just death, gore, and alienation, but also to social

² Jeffrey J. Arnett. *Metalheads: heavy metal music and adolescent alienation*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 12.

commentaries on art, politics, philosophy and the human condition.³ However, the image of the metalhead as portrayed in popular culture was one that I did not identify with. I am not male, white, pre-teen, or deviant.⁴ I came to realize that the lack of female role models in extreme metal is still an issue today. Whereas the general metal scene has seen the roles of women increase with notable figures like Doro Pesch (Warlock), Lita Ford and Joan Jett (Runaways), the media often only highlights female vocalists of mainstream heavy metal. Women in the EMM scene have remained relatively underground in comparison.

And so, with this realization, my exploration of femaleness within EMM began. As a librarian, I took to researching and intellectualizing the genre starting with talks with my husband. I started wondering about the apparent lack of women and their representation within the EMM. I began reaching out to the academic metal community.

Questions began formulating in my mind. *Why did other female fans listen to extreme metal? And why would they come to the music if it was considered misogynistic? I had my reasons but what were theirs? If death metal espoused music about death, could it not equally talk about birth and creation - themes often coded as feminine? And in what ways were female musicians performing? Did taking part in the EMM community as a fan or musician empower these women in some manner? Does the re-appropriation of EMM re-contextualize the medium and allow for women to perform in a space of liminality or does it reify the dominant masculine hegemony of space?*

³ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg 2007), 10-11; Natalie Purcell, *Death metal music: the passion and politics of a subculture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2003), 188.

⁴ Jeffrey Arnett, *Metalheads: heavy metal music and adolescent alienation* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1996), 7; Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993) 109-110; Deena Weinstein. *Heavy metal: a cultural sociology* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991) 66.

These profound and complicated questions multiplied as they sat, and over time I found that I couldn't stop myself from trying to answer them in the only way a librarian and anthropology student could - through research and immersion in the field.

Few women exist in today's historical scope of icons who have paved the way for today's younger initiators in extreme metal. As mentioned earlier, one such figure was Karyn Crisis of the band Crisis - who I've been a fan of for years. Crisis was not only innovative for having such a vivacious and provocative front-woman, but it was also a mix-gendered band from New York, with members spanning the international waters. Crisis was made up of bandmates Gia Chuan Wang (Taiwanese) on bass, Afzaal Nasarudien (Pakistani) on guitar and Fred Waring (American) on drums. Lyrics were constructed by Karyn herself and often challenged extreme metal's tendency to promote musical content of misogyny and violence. Professor of Comparative Literature, Ronald Bogue aptly summarizes Crisis's innovation as a band in the following quotes:

*Although not a mainstream death metal band, Crisis uses many death motifs in its music, while its lyrics, penned by Karyn Crisis, articulate decidedly feminist concerns.*⁵

And:

*With Crisis, this experimentation has taken an interesting turn, death metal's musical energy, aggression, and violence expressing not a man's but a woman's rage and defiance.*⁶

As I completed my second semester of graduate school in anthropology, the exploration of the appropriation of masculine terrain by female artists in the EMM community, like Karyn Crisis, became a topic of great fascination for me. Additionally, my curiosity towards this subculture and their practices became increasingly piqued when I found that very little scholarly

⁵ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Routledge, 2005), 169.

⁶ Ronald Bogue, "Music+ Death and the Metal Maiden," *AMERICAN BOOK REVIEW* 18, no. 1 (1996): 3.

literature had been published on the topic of women in extreme metal, especially in regards to women's experiences in NY's tri-state area.

As a result, I began this thesis with the intent to address and shed light on women's experiences in NY's tri-state EMM scene and reveal their patterns of participation and understanding of feminism within extreme metal. Therefore I begin chapter one by discussing a brief history of EMM and the methodology towards my approach to exploring NY's tri-state EMM scene, detailing the theoretical framework in which I situated my research and reviewing the works that have contributed to my study.

In chapter two, I analyze patterns that emerged from my survey and interviews with regard to gender construction, performativity and agency. I then discuss my observations of behaviors and interactions at EMM shows and offer a glimpse of individual interviews, highlighting two women, whose interviews have shed great insight. I also discuss the influence of Third Wave Feminism and the noticeable changing discourse of EMM in the tri-state area for women as performers through an lyrical analysis of the band Castrator. Following, I discuss the emerging patterns of ethnicity and diversity that arose from my study of the participants.

Lastly, given that the overall impression of women in metal has been that women exist as few and far between, I assert in chapter three that there is a changing perception of women's participation, and yet, many complex questions still accompany the future of these women. Additionally, I place importance on regional differences and the demographic make-up of NY's tri-state area and how that can influence the interacting groups of men and women in the scene. I end with suggestions for additional research centered on women in EMM and the applied theoretical framework of gender and performativity, as New York's scene can serve as a particularly interesting site for further sub-cultural investigations.