

“They Do Things Other People Don’t Like”: A Folkloristic Approach to Extreme Metal Music

I first met my partner, Paul, while working together at a restaurant in Ontario. At the end of my first shift, Paul told me that the staff had a little tradition: once all the customers left, each employee would select a music album, and we would shuffle them together in a playlist, blasting it through the speakers as we cleaned down. “You can pick anything you want,” Paul explained; since no customers were around, we were not limited to family-friendly music. With a glance to ensure my attention, Paul shrugged nonchalantly and returned to building the playlist. “I usually listen to heavy metal,” he confided. Sure enough, moments later, distorted guitars and coarsely screamed vocals filled the restaurant.

I was surprised by this admission: with shortly cropped hair under a Scottish flat cap and well-groomed facial hair, Paul did not look like my assumption of a heavy metal fan (loud, aggressive, long haired, cloaked in black). Paul is excitable, kind, and a leader in the kitchen—certainly a far cry from the angered screams and harsh chords of the music pulsing through the speakers. In both scholarship and the popular imagination, there are some generalized assumptions about “who” listens to heavy metal. Typically, fans of the genre are viewed as a subculture, meaning that style plays a significant role in their subcultural identification (Hebdige 1979). With heavy

metal, fans often convey their identity as “metalheads” by sporting long hair, jeans, and iconic black t-shirts with band logos (Peechatka 2014, 359). Metal style is also evoked through language, with slang such as “poseur” (meaning disingenuous metal music or fans) used to indicate insider and outsider status. Cultural images and subcultural scholarship frequently stereotype metal fans as adolescent male teenagers from lower-class backgrounds living in urban areas (Gross 1990, 122), with a penchant for rebellion, anger, and violence as expressed through their heavy metal music. While there may be some truth to this, it does not capture the full picture: these rebellious teenagers have grown into adults, but they are *still* metal fans. For people like Paul, who no longer fit this stereotypical image, listening to heavy metal is less about demonstrating communal belonging through a subcultural style and more about using music to explore the self. Heavy metal music, then, is embedded with personal meanings and significance outside of “subculture” and “fandom” that dominate our perception of what constitutes a fan.

There have been multiple studies on heavy metal music and its fans dating from the 1990s, most taking a musicological or sociological approach. Robert Walser (1993) and Deena Weinstein (1991) are early scholars of heavy metal, and their sociological methodologies have influenced the academic work of those such as Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) and Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene (2011). Metal scholarship has explored issues of gender—including female metal fans (Vasan 2011) and metal as a performance of masculinity (Spracklen 2020) — issues of class and race (Spracklen 2020), and metal within global context (Wallach, Berger,

Greene 2011). Few scholars, however, have taken a folkloric approach to heavy metal and its fans. According to Dan Ben-Amos, folklore is “artistic communication in small groups” (1971, 13). Important to folklore is not artistic *creation* but rather artistic *communication*, the continued transmission of a work of creation to express something significant among those sharing it. This definition highlights how the sharing, listening, and communicating through engagement with metal music can constitute folklore as an artistic mode created by and for “heavy metal fans.” A folkloristic approach focuses on the affect evoked by metal music, and how this affect is shared to communicate mutual feelings and understandings among both listeners and performers. While Harris Berger has taken an ethnomusicological approach to death metal, exploring the emotional significance of this genre, his work has focused primarily on metal musicians rather than casual listeners and fans (1997; 1999). I seek to fill this gap by examining an emic description of metal music according to a long-time fan — Paul — who engages with this music daily, yet on the fringes of what we might call “fandom.” While Paul is a fervent listener of metal, he does not view himself as a member of a fandom, yet he is a fan in the sense that he emotionally engages with the genre to express himself and a sense of belonging. My focus, then, is not upon fans who sport heavy metal style and keep up to date with their favourite band’s performances and music releases, but rather on everyday audiences who incorporate this musical genre into their daily lives in subtle and overlooked, yet incredibly intimate, ways. Through Paul’s discussion of heavy metal music, this paper explores how individual and collective meanings of this genre are

negotiated, and how extreme metal music is an important facet in the folklife of individuals as a means of community formation, self-expression, and emotional release.

Transgression: Defining Extreme Metal

Although we might refer to fans of metal music collectively as “metalheads,” heavy metal is not one singular genre but an umbrella term for a vast arrangement of musical performances. As musicologist Robert Walser puts it in his ground-breaking study on heavy metal, the genre is “not monolithic,” but rather, it “embraces many different musical and visual styles, many kinds of lyrics and [performative] behaviors” (1993, 3-4). Originating in the 1970s,¹⁸ heavy metal soon exploded in popularity, resulting in the fragmentation of the genre into multiple subgenres, each with its own style of performance, lyrical themes, and musical motifs (Walser 1993, 13). The only true signifier of heavy metal, and what creates the “heavy” sound, is a distorted electric guitar (41). Indeed, “any element of musical sound can be heavy if it evokes power or any of the grimmer emotions” (Berger 1999, 59). Although Paul listens to a variety of heavy metal subgenres, the ones he prefers fit under the subcategory “extreme metal.” As the name suggests, extreme metal takes heavy metal motifs and pushes them to the extreme, resulting in a very intense sound. This category of heavy metal features subgenres such as death metal, grindcore, doom metal, and black metal (Kahn-Harris 2007, 3-4). Generally, these subgenres

¹⁸ Harris Berger’s ethnographic participants identify Black Sabbath’s first album, *Black Sabbath* (1970), as the first metal record, but this is a contested claim among many fans (1999, 57).

perform songs with “heavily distorted guitars, high volume, driving heavy rhythms” and “screaming vocals” which distort the lyrics (Morris 2015, 292). Often, lyrical content contains dark themes, Satanic imagery, and anti-modern ideologies, such as a call for the return to paganism (292). Of these subgenres, Paul’s favourite is black metal, distinguished by its high-pitched screams, rapid tempos, and “tremolo” picking (alternating continuously between upwards and downwards strokes) (Kahn-Harris 2007, 4). Whereas heavy metal bands like Metallica or Kiss are mainstream and popular, extreme metal exists in the “underground,” on the fringes of society, and offers a “transgressive” alternative to Western music practices (Kahn-Harris 2007, 5, 31). This transgression purposely subverts what is “the acceptable” in Western art (36), making extreme metal intentionally countercultural. While heavy metal broadly has become a successful commercialized genre, extreme metal is its antithesis, pushing the boundaries of sonically pleasing music to offer a transgressive alternative to the mainstream.

Although I am inclined to call Paul’s musical preference that of extreme metal, he is not so hasty to use this descriptor himself. When I asked him if he would classify his music library under any genre(s), he said no, but that there is “always a base type of music you listen to” and that his base type is “heavy metal.”¹⁹ Paul refuses to define himself under any particular subgenre because he does not “want to get stuck listening to the same things.” Throughout our interview, Paul lists a lot of metal

¹⁹ Unless indicated otherwise, all citations are from an interview I conducted with Paul on November 15, 2021 in our home in Newfoundland.

subgenres: from “pirate metal,” which he dismisses as a joke, to “deathcore” to his current favourite, “black metal.” Paul also enjoys a variety of music outside of metal, such as bagpipe music, popular and local folk music, and some indie artists and bands. For Paul, it is “technical skill” above all else that he likes in his music, and he finds that in abundance in extreme metal. Paul likes that extreme metal is so complex that amateur guitar players like himself are not “capable of playing this stuff,” explaining that “there’s nobody on YouTube” who can accurately cover the songs, unlike the “nine million covers” of popular artists like Lana del Ray. In Paul’s opinion, music is only “interesting” if artists are experimenting with sound and working in an anti-commercial framework: “You should be pushing to have your album [out] because producers don’t want it the way you want it.” This mentality aligns best with extreme metal, which is counter-mainstream and spreads through small, independent networks rather than commercial means (Kahn-Harris 2007, 5). Often, this music is considered “too harsh for mainstream audiences” and “unbearable to all but the sturdiest fans” (Peechatka 2014, 358). Paul’s music preference, then, is not about using music as a means of defining his identity or allegiance to any particular subgenre: he is not a “metalhead.” Metal is not a lifestyle nor a community for Paul. It is a means of seeking out music that impresses and amazes through technical skill that can only be achieved in a genre that defies expectations and does not seek to please.

Distortion: Community Formation Through Metal

Even though Paul does not define himself as a member of metal subculture, community is still significant to his engagement with heavy metal music. When taking me through his music collection, I found it interesting that Paul remembers every single CD or LP that was gifted to him, and by whom. Pulling out his Windir *Arntor* LP—a black metal band—he mentions that, “You got it for me for my birthday last year. It’s spectacular.” With the next LP, *Periphery III* by the progressive metal band Periphery,²⁰ he says, “I think you also got this for me for my birthday, for the year before.” Paul and I are quite intimate, so it is not a surprise that he remembers gifts we have exchanged, but Paul also remembers which CDs have been given to him by friends and family. Although he had trouble recalling the artist of one of his CDs, Paul remembers that “someone had bought that [CD] for me.” Later, he indicates that his Silverchair CD was also a gift from the same person, and although he has never listened to Silverchair, “they thought” that he would “like it” and he finds it “kind of cool” that someone would purchase a CD for him based on their perception of him. Here, physical CDs are not simply objects but mementos of past relationships (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, 331). Paul does not disclose

²⁰ As with most generic classification systems, some bands do not easily fit into a singular subgenre. Periphery is a band considered “progressive metal,” a designation for bands that push genre boundaries, combining techniques and sounds from other genres with metal. Recently, the band’s genre and style has been called “djent” by fans, due to the *djent, djent, djent* sound of their guitar playing. Periphery has toyed with this desire for generic classification: their most recent album is cheekily called *Djent Is Not a Genre* (2023).

who this person is to me, but he seemingly remembers, turning music-sharing into a way of creating and maintaining bonds with specific people. These CDs and LPs also reflect relationship boundaries: while I was able to purchase an LP for Paul that he describes as “spectacular,” he was given CDs he does not often listen to, signifying levels of intimacy through music sharing. Though Paul does not frequently listen to these CDs, indicating they are outside of his personal tastes, he still values them as a reminder of a bond between individuals expressed through music. Metal music sharing, then, is a method of both creating and expressing a sense of community.

Dorothy Noyes states that for folklorists, groups are the “locus of culture” and the “focus of identity” (2003, 11). She elects to use the term “group” rather than “community” to combine “the empirical networks of interaction in which culture is created and moves” with the “community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance” (11). Noyes argues that groups comprise of bodies interacting and doing things, along with a performance of group together-ness that we define as “community.” Communities, then, are performed and created through a performance that demonstrates similarity, rather than difference. Paul may listen to metal music within a “group”—at the restaurant, for example—but this group only becomes community through the performance of *music sharing*. Outside of physical CDs and LPs, Paul shares digital MP3s with both of his brothers, as well as his friend Matt, all of whom live in Ontario while Paul resides in Newfoundland. Through exchanging music, Paul communicates and relates to his friends and family across geographic distance. For Paul, Matt is the only person he

can freely share music with because Matt does not simply put music “on”; he “sits down and listens.” There are some especially heavy songs that Paul feels he can only share with Matt because Matt is “open” to all music genres and will not judge Paul for his preferences. Through the act of listening to Paul’s music, Matt does not merely consume music: he connects with Paul. Music sharing is important to Paul, who feels you should always be “open” when someone shares music with you because they are “sharing something that means something to them.” By sharing extreme metal, Paul engages in artistic communication, where a musical art form is used to express one’s inner self and create a sense of community through music exchange.

On a larger scale, sharing music is incredibly important to the extreme metal genre. As an “underground” genre that opposes mainstream music labels, extreme metal relies on its fans and listeners to “disseminate [...] across the globe” (Kahn-Harries 2007, 5). Black metal in particular is described as “decentered” as it spread through “zines and tape-trading” in the 1990s, and through Internet chat groups today (Hagen 2011, 183). This music sharing is informal, shared through listeners rather than corporations, but it is also organized, with fans creating magazines, webpages and groups to facilitate large-scale music trading. Paul participates in one such group, r/BlackMetal on popular forum website Reddit, where individuals share any new or favourite black metal music via hyperlinks. Furthermore, when Paul was younger and just beginning to listen to heavy metal music, he and his friends would “put all the music we had” onto USBs which they would frequently trade to expand their music libraries. This sharing method was how Paul acquired the majority of his

current MP3 collection. Through participating in music sharing, individuals like Paul are connected to a global web of artists and fans, where music is created by the artist and then shared locally among friends and acquaintances. The sharing creates a group network, or a community, equating the artist with the fans, and letting individuals connect with each other on a personal level through the direct exchange of music.

What is significant to this sense of community formed via music sharing is that there are limits to with whom this music is shared. As stated earlier, much extreme metal is considered too “harsh” for the average listener (Peechatka 2014, 358). This statement is a form of gatekeeping, of creating and maintaining the barriers of belonging within a community. Extreme metal is not intended to be accessible, both in terms of acquiring this music and wide-spread enjoyment. Unlike pop music, which aims to have the widest mass appeal, extreme metal purposely limits itself to only the most dedicated of listeners. When speaking of the popular heavy metal band Ghost, Paul dismisses their music, saying he used to really like the band until he realized, “It’s just pop.” What Paul means by this is that the band has catchy tunes and is performed well, but the music relies on typical four-chord melodies. Although performed heavy, Ghost employs popular music techniques, making them accessible and, according to Paul, *not* metal. Throughout his discussion of music, Paul sets barriers to what extreme metal is, implying that there are distinct boundaries that so-called true metal listeners must surpass. On the opposite end of the metal spectrum, Paul identifies the band Cattle Decapitation as the “heaviest band in the American death metal genre

ever.” I am inclined to agree, since I find much of this band too extreme and harsh to enjoy myself. As Paul explains, the band is “anti-human,” with their lyrics bashing humanity as destructive and corrupt. Even Paul agrees that he can “only take a little bit of them at a time,” but he gets “really into” the band every once and awhile. Bands like Metallica and Ghost are a part of the heavy metal genre, but these bands are “easy to listen to” as “everyone knows a Metallica song” and do not quite compare to more genuine metal bands, like “Napalm Death” and “Cattle Decapitation,” which are bands that “nobody is listening to.” Real extreme metal is to be unknown and countercultural, distinctively against the sounds of the mainstream and working not to be popular, but to stand out as sonically different. To be an extreme metal listener is to not only know, but to listen to and enjoy these unlistenable bands, even if only in small doses. The way Paul positions some bands as popular, albeit heavy, and other bands as unlistenable to most implies that there are boundaries that he places around certain bands, and only those who know and listen to these bands can consider themselves true heavy metal fans. The community then, is open in terms of anyone who listens to these bands can be a part of it but closed in that it requires a test of knowledge to prove yourself as a listener of extreme metal.

In a sense, it can be argued that one’s extreme metal preferences work as a musical shibboleth, or as a test to prove one’s membership to a group. When discussing the Norwegian black metal band, Gorgoroth, Paul conveys that this band and Cattle Decapitation “have their place” in his musical library for “whenever someone thinks that they have the heaviest music, because they don’t.” Here, Paul

implies that what most people consider heavy metal is *not heavy enough*. He continues, saying that “most people who think they listen to heavy metal music then throw on a Killswitch Engage song and are like [imitating], ‘Listen to this breakdown!’ Like [mockingly] *good for you*.” The music that most would consider heavy is dismissed by Paul as easy listening, not worthy of the title heavy metal. Some songs on Paul’s playlist are there not necessarily because he enjoys listening to them, but because he wants to prove that he listens to the heaviest of metal—music that the average listener is *unable to listen to*. As a shibboleth, extreme metal music can be used to prove one’s belonging to the extreme metal community, as people who truly enjoy this genre would be able to identify the bands or at least be able to consume them. Although Paul does not consider himself a part of a widespread extreme metal community or “fandom,” community still plays a significant part in his engagement with extreme metal, as he creates this community himself through sharing music with others, and he gatekeeps and defines the boundaries of extreme metal listeners by creating a musical test to prove one’s participation in the extreme metal scene—or, to prove they are not a “poseur.”

Legends: The Folklore of Extreme Metal

What Paul demonstrates through his listening to extreme metal is that smaller folk groups emerge within a larger community of fans. Instead of considering himself part of a fandom, Paul creates intimate networks where music is shared, and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are defined through one’s ability to enjoy and engage with

extreme metal songs and artists. Once we begin to dig a little deeper into these folk groups and their networks, we see other types of artistic communication happening outside of music sharing, such as legend-telling. Legends proliferate around Norwegian black metal bands—a notably brutal subgenre of extreme metal and Paul’s absolute favourite. Although many of these narratives are based on real events, I refer to them as “legends” because of their expressed negotiation of belief. As folklorists Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi argue, belief is an “indispensable ingredient of legend narration” (1976, 94). How belief is represented within legend telling is complicated, as often the teller might “believe unconditionally” while also believing “with some second thoughts, with a trace of doubt or with mixed feelings” (99). Furthermore, legend telling sessions often begin or end with an “inconclusive discussion of its truth,” demonstrating that legends are not simply expressions of belief, but *social negotiations* of belief (109). While colloquially, we might refer to the stories surrounding black metal bands as “rumours,” they are better referred to as “legends” because they are full narratives that open discussion of not only these bands and of the Satanic belief system they supposedly support, but also of the beliefs, values, and opinions of their fans and followers.

Many of the legends about Norwegian black metal have been sensationalized, such as with the journalistic book *Lords of Chaos* (Moynihan and Soderlind 2003) and its fictionalized film version of the same name (2018). *Lords of Chaos* (2003) traces the history of the band Mayhem, considered to be the originators of Norwegian black metal. This band is notorious among metal fans, as

one of their members (Euronymous)²¹ was murdered by fellow artist, Varg Vikernes, of the solo-band Burzum. While *Lords of Chaos* claims to be true, it also casts doubt on its narratives: the authors imply that much of Mayhem founder Euronymous's "evil image" was a performance, rather than part of his genuine belief system (Hagen 2011, 183). As well, there are rumours that "allegedly," as Keith Kahn-Harris points out, members of Mayhem consumed the brain of one of their fellow band members after he had committed suicide but there is no evidence beyond the hearsay of the band and its fans (2007, 45). These rumours bleed into the film version of *Lords of Chaos* (2018), which opens with a disclaimer: "based on truth... lies... and what actually happened" [sic]. Statements such as this contribute to the legendary aspect of the band, where narratives emerge and are spread through rumours, or "lies," of the folk, representing the band as at once beyond the scope of the everyday *and* as belonging *to* the folk. While many of these incidents have real-life police reports, providing so-called tangible proof of the narrative, many are less verifiable, emerging as part of the legend-cycle surrounding the band and the wider black metal genre.

These legendary narratives greatly contribute to the band's image both among extreme metal fans and in wider social contexts. When discussing my research for this paper with my peers, individuals who do not listen to the genre often mentioned off-hand that they know of the notoriety of Varg Vikernes and the band Mayhem. Legends surrounding Mayhem are part of the wider legend-cycle of "Satanic

²¹ Many black metal performers use stage names and personas; keeping with the spirit of black metal and its subculture, I will refer to these musicians by their stage names.

Panic,” which feared that heavy metal music was “brainwashing” youths into violence and suicide (Victor 1993, 163). As folklorist Bill Ellis notes, legends emerge in “clusters” of various forms of narration and information that reflect and reveal “an anxiety specific to a particular place and time” (2000, 4). Surrounding black metal, and heavy metal more widely, is the fear of the loss of control: of rebellious teenagers breaking away from normative behaviour and enacting violence using the folklore that surrounds Satanism and the bands that sing about it. Paul himself is not immune: he mentions that his mother bought him an album by the Christian-metal band Haste the Day because, “She thought I was going to hell. Because of the music I was listening to.” While Paul does not believe in the evilness of music, others in his life do, requiring him to think about his own relationship to religion and belief through music. Ultimately, Paul determined that this music matters to him more than the fear of hell, valuing musical expression above religious doctrine. Through black metal, both listeners and artists explore—and contest—their own belief and value systems. Many extreme metal musicians report being “committed Satanists” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 38), but the question becomes is this religiosity genuine or part of the band’s performance? Black metal, then, expresses not only beliefs, but the negotiation and questioning of belief, and this is exemplified through the legendry that surrounds the music both within and outside of the black metal scene.

Other than a brief mention of “church burnings,” something which Varg Vikernes actively promoted that resulted worldwide copy-cat arson (Kahn-Harris 2007, 45-46), Paul does not discuss the infamous legends about

Mayhem. Rather, he discusses the legends that surround the band Gorgoroth, a more contemporary Norwegian black metal band. This band is one of the aforementioned bands that Paul listens to demonstrate that his taste in heavy music is more intense than the average listener. Paul states that the band leader, Gaahl, “literally almost killed someone in his basement.” This statement does have a factual basis, as Gaahl was convicted of battery (Kahn-Harris 2007, 46). Paul expands on this conviction, stating that Gorgoroth performed a “quote-un-quote Satanic ritual” onstage that resulted in the video performance of that concert being banned and confiscated by “the EU” [European Union]. Years later, when the footage was released, Paul tells me that it was then converted into a new music video and that “in the midst” of this, Gaahl was imprisoned “for trying to kill a fan who had tried to murder him because he was a Satanist.” Paul then laughed and proclaimed, “you can’t make this stuff up!” This exclamation expresses a negotiation of belief, where Paul is aware at how outrageous this narrative sounds, but the extremeness of it only proves, rather than denies, that it must be real. When I pushed Paul further, asking if this narrative was “metal,” he complicated this sense of belief, stating that, “It’s really good promotion for the band, and I mean—the stories are probably for the most part true [...] we’ll just assume all that’s true.” Like any good legend, belief is up for debate for both the listener and teller, blurring the lines of truth and fiction. Paul’s ambiguity surrounding the truth of the narrative demonstrates that verifiable “truth” is not necessarily the crux of this legend. Rather, its importance is in how this legend contributes to the image of the band and black metal: a transgressive tale for a transgressive genre.

As legends, these narratives contribute to the quasi-mythical status of the band, interpreting the band leaders not as people, but as legendary folkloric figures in the scene. Many times, Paul laughingly exclaimed “he’s fucked!” when discussing Gaahl, or Varg, or any other prolific black metal performer. Through his laughter, Paul shows his pleasure at the transgression of these individuals, while simultaneously rejecting their violent actions with his words. By legend-telling, Paul demonstrates knowledge of these bands and contributes to the “brutal” image of black metal, while simultaneously rejecting these actions as permissible. We can argue, then, that legend-telling allows listeners like Paul to express the value of transgression, while also condoning real-life violence outside of the fictional space of performance.

Darkness Within: Understanding Black Metal Lyrics

What black metal legends demonstrate is the performative nature of transgression and belief within the black metal genre and the pleasures it derives from its fans. As a form of “good promotion,” these acts of violence are ubiquitous in the genre, and violence becomes a key aspect of how the genre performs and defines itself. Scholars and critics alike are quick to point out that much of the perceived darkness of black metal comes from its lyrical content. Heavy metal and extreme metal have a “fascination with the dark side of life” and seek to represent “perverse deviance” within a “successfully functioning society” (Walser 1993, xvii, 144). Much of this darkness is represented through its use of distortion, both in terms of guitars and vocals, but meaning is also derived through its lyrics (42, 26). Lyrically, most

extreme metal songs are heavily pessimistic, dealing with the “desperate and desolate conditions” of modern society without offering any “real solutions” (Morris 2015, 293). Like the name suggests, black metal music is dark music, made to reflect the harsher sides of life and oppose the bright tones and joyous lyrics of pop music. I cannot argue that the lyrics are not violent—because they are, some uncomfortably so—but this violence does not mean that there are not other values and meanings to be found within these songs. I turn now to Paul’s favourite black metal songs to explore how black metal lyrics, while aggressive, can be used as an interpretive folk framework, allowing listeners to engage with personal emotions collectively, and to represent the beliefs and values of a wider folk culture.

Two of the three metal songs Paul calls his favourites are by the band Windir. Windir is a Norwegian band, originally consisting of one member, Valfar.²² What sets Windir apart from nearly all black metal bands is the fact that they draw heavily upon local folklore and culture, describing “local sagas” using “traditional folk tunes” and singing in an “archaic rural dialect” (Hagan 2011, 194), resulting in this band being a hybrid of what Paul refers to as Pagan folk metal and black metal. Indeed, the dialect is specifically the dialect of the hometown of Valfar, the founder, songwriter, and lead performer of the band (Spracklen 2020, 109). One of Paul’s favourite songs is “Fagning” which roughly translates to “Fawning.” This song is folk-historical, describing the legend of Sverre, one of the kings of Norway who, according to the song, the

²² Valfar himself is a bit of a legendary figure within black metal, as he tragically died during a snowstorm at a young age. His music is well-loved, and many lament the loss of such a talented musician.

Devil believes in to burn down the Christianity in Norway.²³ These lyrics advocate for Norwegians to “rule their own land” by returning to folk culture and paganism before Christianity—even if that entails violence. When discussing Newfoundland treason songs, Kenneth S. Goldstein states that he predicts that songs that explain historical events are likely to disappear in time as formal instruction overtakes folk memory (1991, 138). Windir actively opposes this disappearing of historical-folk music, using “Fagning” as a way of preserving folk culture through a distinctively Norwegian musical form that reflects the opinions and beliefs of not only individuals, but potentially entire folk groups.

Paul’s other favourite Windir song is “Svartesmeden og lundamystrollet,” or “The Blacksmith and the Troll of Lundamyri.” Like “Fagning,” “Svartesmeden” draws heavily upon local folklore, using a folktale of a blacksmith who kills a troll as its lyrical base. The lyrics also localize the tale, naming specific landscape features of Valfar’s home region, Sogndal, Norway. Both “Svartesmeden” and “Fagning” present themselves as natural, reflective, and belonging *to* a place and folk group. Because the songs are performed in the dialect of Valfar’s hometown, they are nearly untranslated-able: Google Translate does not detect the language, and there are very few individuals online who have taken to translating the lyrics.²⁴ The few who have use

²³ All lyrics have been provided by Paul, sourced from various Internet sources he has compiled.

²⁴ The lyrics Paul has provided me are sourced from these translations. I am unable to verify how accurate they are, but for Paul, they best represent the song and are the ones he uses to understand the lyrics. I have used these lyrics to contextualize and analyze these songs, as it is

footnotes to apologize that they are unable to figure out what certain words or expressions mean. Lyrics, then, are not the primary means of communication within these songs *except* for those of Valfar’s hometown—of his folk group. C.K. Szego has documented a similar incomprehensibility with endangered languages in traditional Hawaiian music, noting that non-native speakers use “interpretative moves” based on musical features to develop personal interpretations of a song outside of textual understanding (2003, 312-3). With Windir, the nostalgic feeling of the music results in an interpretation of the song representing the theme of loss of culture and folklore for listeners outside of Valfar’s folk group, echoing lyrical content that calls for a return to paganism and laments cultural disappearance. Lyrically, these themes are specific, but musically, they are universal, allowing individuals like Paul to feel emotions of loss and revival despite lyric incomprehensibility. Windir’s music, then, is highly personal, speaking to and for a hyper-specific folk group, while simultaneously speaking to the wider values of black metal music, including the return to nature and the importance of preservation of folklife and culture, even if that renders the lyrical content inaccessible to most.

What we see with Windir is how lyrics are only a very small part of the black metal experience. Paul explicitly states that when he listens to music, “lyrics are the last thing” he thinks about, and that he doesn’t “really think about the lyrics much.” This means that for black metal music, there is *something else going on* besides the

the only way non-Norwegian listeners such as Paul can engage with the lyrical content of the songs, but I do not claim their accuracy.

lyrics where value is expressed and conveyed. The violent lyrics that so many critics and scholars focus upon are not necessarily how meaning is made nor expressed in black metal. We see this negotiation between lyrical content and found meaning with Paul's other favourite song, "Längtar bort från itt hjärta" ("far away from your heart") by the Swedish black metal band, Shining. Once again, Paul does not speak the language the lyrics are in, yet he finds this song to be incredibly personal — so much so that he doesn't "think anybody else knows I listen to Shining. That band's sort of an 'only-for-me' thing." Shining's lyrics, when translated, are incredibly violent, so I can understand not wanting to share in case one be misjudged. "Längtar bort från itt hjärta" repeatedly states that the singer wishes to "kill you" and that they will "destroy," "shatter," and "kill" "your world," "your dreams," and "your sources of joy." When I mentioned to Paul that I found these lyrics extremely violent, he shrugged and said, "yeah but if you actually looked into it, you'd know that she's singing about killing herself," with "her" referring to the "pussy" the song mentions. I do not know where Paul encountered this interpretation, as there is nothing in the song that indicates this to be true, but there is also nothing in it that indicates it *not* to be true. Although violent, the lyrics are clearly interpretive, something Dee Snider of Twisted Sister echoed in a court appearance against the censorship of "violent" heavy metal music: "Songs allow a person to put their own imagination, experiences and dreams into the lyrics. People can interpret [it] in many ways" (Dunn et al. 2005, 45:18-45:26).

What Paul's favourite songs suggest, then, is that lyrics are not the crux of meaning in these black metal

songs: the songs are used as platforms of interpretation where personal meanings and expressions can be explored within a cultural artistic mode of communication. Paul does not “care what they’re talking about” when he listens to music, joking that the lyrics could be talking about “killing doves or goats or whatever all you want.” This lack of lyrical concern does not mean that Paul does not find emotional expression in extreme metal. When I asked what he listens for in music if not lyrics, Paul replied “metal makes you feel something.” Elaborating, Paul says that while listening to this music, you are able to “feel a wide range of emotions” and sometimes this results in a visceral reaction, where “certain chords played together will make your hair stand on end.” Paul admits that extreme metal sometimes “doesn’t sound very pleasing,” but rather than turning off the music, he enjoys it more, as “you have to go through all this y’know hard work to get to the part you want to listen to [...] it’s like walking up a mountain so you can see the view at the end.” This metaphor implies a physical reaction to the music, where it is demanding and unpleasant but ultimately worth the effort one puts into listening. For Paul, listening to extreme metal is not meant to be enjoyable but rather *cathartic*. With *Shining*, it took Paul over “ten years” to get through the album because it is “scary” and “depressive,” but more importantly, because *Shining* was what he listened to as an outlet against his aggressive “hyper-Catholic-Roman upbringing.” This music “scared” him because he thought it would “bring [him] to hell,” but listening to it now is a “relief.” Like his metaphor, working through this music is difficult but ultimately rewarding, resulting in a sense of catharsis due to the way it permitted him to work through and understand

his own beliefs and values—no matter how difficult these internal conflicts may have been. Through its unpleasing sound and ultimate beauty found in the “little parts” that follow, black metal offers a pathway for working through difficult emotions, promising the listener that although things are rough and difficult to deal with, ultimately, relief will be found so long as you keep with it—even if that takes time.

This is not to say that violence is not a significant part of black metal. All three of Paul’s favourite songs deal with violence to some degree, but Paul denies that this representation of violence is meant to promote or provoke real-life action: “it’s not music for you to kill yourself or to kill someone else or something, but people are like, ‘aw that’s brutal, that’s metal.’ No, that’s not metal, that’s a bad decision.” The violence the music presents, then, is not a call to action for further violence, but rather a metaphoric representation of one’s own aggressive feelings and emotions. This comment asserts that anyone who uses black metal as an excuse for violence does not actually understand black metal. For Paul, black metal does no more to promote violence than pop artist “Justin Bieber” does. When discussing an incident at a Lamb of God concert where a fan was accidentally killed when the lead singer kicked him off stage, Paul says soberly that while “everyone was like ‘woah, that’s so metal,’” the band leader, Randy Blythe, was “devastated” because he “just wants to go up on stage, scream, have fun, and make music, just like everyone else.” Physical violence, for Paul, does not have its place in extreme metal; instead, this music allows for a release of violent feelings through screaming, which ultimately makes it feel “fun.” Violence may

surround this genre, but this violence is more metaphorical than literal, allowing for a collective emotional release through the high-pitched screams and distorted chords of black metal.

Black metal music, then, offers an alternative means of exploring one's most personal and difficult emotions. Paul describes black metal as both "simple" and "raw." While Paul clarifies that by "simple" he does not mean "simply played," he never states what he does mean by it. I propose that black metal music is simple *because* it is raw: it is simply a form of emotional expression, including dark emotions that are oftentimes ignored, dismissed, or unspoken, requiring one to work through them on their own. For some, this makes the music nothing more than "angry music"; however, people who view music this way are inherently misreading the music, according to Paul, because the music is not meant to evoke anger but rather to work *through* anger. Instead of masking darkness, black metal music confronts it, forcing listeners to be guided through what remains unspoken in society or in their own lives, and offering a path to the other side. Important to this journey is that through the form of song, one is not guided on this journey alone. As stated before, Paul does not often share his favourite black metal songs because he perceives them as too personal; community is *still formed* through his listening. Paul says that black metal does not put someone into a bad mental state but works as "a way to escape bad places" because it is a "place where you can find a community of people who come from the same place." Through encountering and then working through dark emotions while listening to black metal, Paul is able to escape any bad emotions because he feels other listeners

working through it alongside him. Even if Paul perceives black metal as highly personal and a very individual experience, he also sees it as a way of creating an imaginary community of others who all feel the same way. Black metal, then, is a means of expressing unspeakable emotions and beliefs collectively, through sharing and listening among small groups of people who feel the same, making black metal a significant form of folkloric expression among its listeners.

Conclusion

By discussing extreme metal with fans like Paul, we can see how violent, harsh, and transgressive music such as black metal is an important mode of individual and collective expression of complex, and often unspoken, emotions and beliefs. My hope is that this paper has demonstrated how folklore emerges from, informs, and has become a significant part of black metal and extreme metal more broadly. While there is still much to say about extreme metal from a folkloric perspective, this paper serves as an important framework for considering how negative or violent expressions in folk culture can still be cathartic, meaningful, and incredibly important modes of artistic communication for individuals and their folk groups.

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