

**MUSIC AS TRANSGRESSION: MASKING AND SONIC ABJECTION IN
NORWEGIAN BLACK METAL**

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In the late 1980s, the Second Wave of black metal was founded in Norway by the band Mayhem. This heavy metal scene was populated by bands such as Emperor, Darkthrone, Burzum, Gorgoroth, and Satyricon. These bands performed chaotic music, often setting lyrics with themes of Satanism, anti-Christianity, murder, rape, and torture. Extremely fast or slow tempos, unusual song structures, distortion, and lo-fi sound quality distinguished the scene stylistically from other European and American heavy metals. The individuals who created this music did so under the disguise of masks: pseudonyms and corpsepaint, a makeup style that makes one look like a corpse. Members of black metal bands also engaged in extremely violent and criminal activities, including burning churches, murdering strangers and friends for various reasons, and committing suicide.

This thesis explores the connections between the music and the transgressions of this music subculture, with masking at the intersection between the two. Masking in black metal leads to the creation of a new persona, the “black metal double.” This double is the splitting of subjectivity between personal and public personas that black metal musicians enable through masking. The space between the two personas of the black metal musician is navigated by the voice. The black metal scream that splits and fuses the subjectivities also signifies the bodily and emotional pain of this process.

This bifurcated existence predicates an alternate, abject mode of being for black metal performers. Masking becomes a theoretical means for living two lives: one as private citizens

and the other as black metal musicians who transgress criminal and musical limits. This abjection, however, is politicized and aestheticized in the acts of music and crime. The masked lives of these black metal musicians often represent dead beings, and it is through this performance of non-existence that political impossibilities and abjections become possible and lived. By collapsing the boundaries between abjection and subjection, as well as musical and non-musical life, black metal musicians create new spaces of political and cultural meaning-making through masking.

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PREFACE

I would like to acknowledge my thesis committee, Deane Root, Jim Cassaro, and Olivia Bloechl. Thank you for letting me work on such a strange topic and for taking it seriously. I would also like to thank my undergraduate mentors, Rena Mueller, Stanley Boorman, and Martin Daughtry. Finally, thank you to my friends and family.

This thesis will explicate the connections between black metal—a subgenre of extreme metal music that was popularized in Norway in the early 1990s—and the masking practices of its performers, whether visual, audible, vocal, or philosophical. Essentially this work is a hermeneutics of human action, taking as its object of study the musical and extra-musical activities of a subculture. This thesis focuses musically on the black metal scream, and extra-musically on the practice of masking, although the two are related. Masking ultimately appears as a means to an end, in which black metal musicians conceal their human identities in exchange for alternate modes of being. This existence, I argue, is an abjection, both visual and sonic, that responds to the Church's hegemony in greater Norwegian society and politics, among many other hierarchies and power structures that black metal performers invariably rebelled against. In other cases, this abjection appears racially or nationalistically motivated. Throughout this thesis, I take much of black metal's early output as my object of study. This is because masking has somewhat fallen out of practice in current, non-Norwegian black metal bands. Further, the

criminal transgressions associated with the subgenre are also mostly limited to the same Norwegian scene in the 1990s. So, black metal's masking and criminal behaviors, as well as the connection between the two that I theorize, are unique to the time and place that I focus on.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Black metal from Norway grew out of a reaction towards the increasingly hip death metal coming from Sweden in the 1980s, as well as a fundamental misreading of heavy metal from other European countries.¹ Black metal musicians expanded on themes of evil, anti-Christianity, Satanism, xenophobia, nihilism, and melancholia to create a new “blackened” style of heavy metal. This style was different from other heavy metals in its rejection of virtuosity and fidelity. Other elements of metal, such as its dark or Gothic imagery, were adapted and heightened by black metal. Iconographic and theatrical elements, particularly masking, come to have very different meanings in this subgenre, and masking becomes the key to understanding the genre’s unusual ideological norms, violent behaviors on and off the stage, and alternate modes of being alien to the outside world. While discussing masking and what I call the black metal double life, I analyze the Norwegian black metal bands Mayhem, Emperor, and Dimmu Borgir more closely. Mayhem is one of the scene’s founding groups and has a complicated history in relation to masking and criminal transgressions. Emperor is another of the earliest “symphonic black metal bands,” who also engaged in criminal activities and masking, and their output is examined more

¹ Heavy metal, generally, refers to the style of hard rock n’ roll that depends on heavily distorted electric guitars, fast tempo music, virtuosic guitar solos, hyper-masculine communities. Death metal, as one subgenre of heavy metal that came from the late 1980s and 1990s, was similarly male dominated but utilized faster tempos, different kinds of guitar virtuosity and vocal growls. Black metal, as will be explained throughout this thesis, differed from death metal in significant ways, most notably through slower tempos, lack of virtuosity, and screamed rather than growled vocals.

closely in relation to the scream. Dimmu Borgir is a slightly later band whose position in black metal is largely in the aftermath of the chaotic, violent scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Dimmu Borgir is also one of the first black metal bands to find mainstream success by exporting their music to America and the rest of the world. I look at the band's most recent output—the live CD/DVD set *Forces of the Northern Night* (2017)—as it appears as a micro-historical artifact, one that implicitly documents masking practices across decades.

In my discussion of the relationship between masking and abjection, I use an earlier example as a case study—Emperor's "Towards the Pantheon" from their album *In the Nightside Eclipse* (1994). My decision to use Emperor is partly due to their influence in the scene, and partly due to that album's significance to future bands that share their symphonic sensibilities, such as Dimmu Borgir. Finally, I choose Emperor at this moment because of the nature of the crimes that they committed and the way that those crimes interacted with their music—in ways subtler than contemporary bands such as Mayhem or Burzum, who tend to dominate narratives of the genre's early history. In short, I argue that masking, particularly in that it concealed a black metallers' humanity, allowed those performers the theoretical license to live abject (double) lives—as both human and demon, private and public, alive and dead, silent and screaming.

Musicological literature on metal has produced significant monographs in the past thirty or so years. Particularly important is Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, which captured the nuances of metal music and culture at the time—that metal is defined by its dialectical struggle between freedom and control, its practitioners are obsessed with power and intensity, and that the use of certain modes are

historically associated with certain negative emotions.² Walser's monograph is the first notable musicological work on metal, but it unfortunately came a moment too soon to take much Norwegian black metal into account. Other musicological works since Walser's have dealt with black metal explicitly,³ but I wish to present the very specific scene of black metal that I focus on in a kind of historical narrative aided by journalistic recollection of the events, before engaging more recent interpretations of the music. Other important works of metal studies also approach the music and culture of metal in ways not incompatible with this study, but they remain outside of my scope. Particularly, Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (1991) is another early text in the canon of metal studies that was invaluable to scholars who wished to understand the creation, appreciation, and mediation of heavy metal in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ Weinstein's model is one that this work follows at points, namely in the approach of understanding music in terms of extra-musical symbols of expression—such as lyrics, album and song titles, and band names—or in terms of metal's general Dionysian themes. Much of Weinstein's work is still relevant today. However, given that she and Walser largely missed the boat on black metal their works only provide a model for which to approach black metal, without any insights into its particular content.⁵ Today, the field known as “metal studies” is mostly

² Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993). I leave out Walser's discussion of gender and sexuality here because it is not in the scope of this thesis, and Walser's claim that the scene is hypermasculine has been criticized as reductive and outdated. See Niall Scott, “The monstrous male and myths of masculinity in heavy metal,” in *Heavy Metal, Gender, and Sexuality: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Florian Heesch and Niall Scott (London: Routledge, 2016), 121-130.

³ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford, London: Berg, 2007).

⁴ Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991).

⁵ Notably, the two fall on different sides of the genre's problems of masculinity. Weinstein finds the genre “masculinist,” while Walser claims that masculinity is often performed ironically or

dominated by thinkers in sociology, religious studies, women's studies, and a scarce few ethnomusicologists and historical musicologists.⁶ Publications that deal with black metal as its sole object of study include Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind's *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998) and Dayal Patterson's *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* (2013).⁷ In the following short historical background of the scene, I cite these two texts a great deal because they provide a plethora of interviews with performers and authorize the historical events that the scene experienced. It should be noted though that neither text is critical or interpretive. Further, *Lords of Chaos* has been particularly criticized as being a product of the scene itself, as co-author Moynihan tends to mythologize events and avoid any critical examination of the worldviews of his interlocutors, largely given that he himself is a member of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan.⁸ However, as an insider to certain aspects of the scene, Moynihan is a valuable resource.

“Pure” Norwegian black metal (sometimes written as “True Norwegian Black Metal” or TNBM), as its fans and practitioners call it, can be an unintelligible, complicated subgenre of extreme heavy metal music. First-time listeners of the music will note its abrasiveness, its extreme distortions, the obfuscation of the vocalist's words, and the lo-fi (low-fidelity) quality of

subsidized with feminine characteristics such as long hair, tight clothes, and high-pitched vocals. Gender and sexuality in metal has been thoroughly re-examined by Rosemary Lucy Hill, *Gender, Metal and the Media: Woman Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁶ For example, see *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, ed. Andy R. Brown, Karl Spracklen, Keith Kahn-Harris, and Niall Scott (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁷ Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2003 [1998]), and Dayal Patterson, *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2013).

⁸ Ross Hagen, “Musical Style, Ideology, and Mythology in Norwegian Black Metal,” in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*, ed. Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 180-199.

the work, both in the studio and in live performances. Listeners may find themselves put off by the music due to its too-frantic or too-glacial speeds, its unusual song structures, or its obsession with and constant evocation of icy Norwegian landscapes—not to mention its nihilistic, melancholic, xenophobic worldview. Listeners are often offended by the music’s anti-Christian lyrics and satanic ritual-like performances, often including concert mutilations of animals and humans alike. Fans of the music are drawn to it for most of the same reasons.⁹ Sonically, black metal is distinct from other heavy metals in a number of ways: sometimes, by the heavy use of ambient synthesizers, the lack of power chords (chords consisting only of root, fifth, octave), and generally slower harmonic changes.¹⁰ Black metal’s production value is also a typical point of contention for fans of other metal genres, with some writers noting that black metal essentially lacks what makes other metals sonically “heavy.”¹¹

The music has its origins in the 1980s, when bands such as Bathory (from Sweden), Hellhammer (from Switzerland, who would later become Celtic Frost), and Venom¹² (from Britain) performed speedy, yet atmospheric heavy metal that utilized gothic, satanic, and often anti-Christian imagery and symbolism in their lyrics, album art, and on-stage dress.¹³ These early black metal bands were isolated projects however—one or two bands from a local community at a given time that performed within a greater (but often more general) local heavy metal scene.

⁹ For a discussion of black metal’s fandom and a call for future ethnographies of the increasingly diverse fan-base, see Juliet Forshaw’s “Metal in Three Modes of Enmity: Political, Musical, Cosmic,” *Current Musicology* 91 (Spring 2011): 139-160.

¹⁰ Hagen, 184-5.

¹¹ Hagen, 187.

¹² Venom coined the term “black metal” with their 1982 album *Black Metal*.

¹³ Ian Christie, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2003), 270. For an examination of the Gothic in heavy metal, see Bryan A. Bardine, “Elements of the Gothic in Heavy Metal: A Match Made in Hell,” in *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, ed. Gerd Bayer (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 125-139.

This “First Wave” of black metal is therefore considered an “avant-garde” genre by sociologists, yet to form a full-fledged scene.¹⁴ The first black metal scene originated in Norway, known as the genre’s “Second Wave,” behind a set of aesthetics and a rebellious but dangerous ideology put forth by a few significant individuals.¹⁵ This Second Wave was dominated by Norwegian bands such as Mayhem, Burzum, Emperor, Gorgoroth, Immortal, Darkthrone, and Satyricon. The following history will focus particularly on Mayhem, as this band was ostensibly the first Norwegian black metal band, and due to their importance they become standard-bearers for most of the bands that followed.

1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK METAL EVENTS

In 1984, sixteen-year-old Øystein Aarseth—better known to black metal fans as Euronymous—founded the band Mayhem, which would come to be called “the most important and influential band in black metal history,” surely to the disagreement of very few black metal fans.¹⁶ In 1988, Mayhem added Swedish vocalist Per Yngve “Pelle” Ohlin, who took on the ominous stage-name Dead, and drummer Jan Axel Blomberg, who named himself Hellhammer after the influential band from Switzerland. Mayhem began to form its reputation as a satanic, ritualistic band that utilized frenetic speed and melodrama to nearly fatal performative ends. Euronymous also

¹⁴ The distinction between avant-garde genres and scene-based genres is made by Jennifer Lena and Richard Peterson, “Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres,” *American Sociological Review* 73, no. 5 (October 2008): 701-3.

¹⁵ Another similar scene developed in Germany just before the Norwegian black metal scene. The bands Kreator, Sodom, and Destruction are considered the most important of the German “black thrash” scene, and these bands eventually had profound influence on Norway’s scene. See Patterson, 59-64.

¹⁶ Patterson, 127.

operated Helvete [“Hell” in Norwegian], a black metal record store that opened in Oslo in 1991 where young musicians could gather with likeminded individuals, record underground music for Euronymous’s label Deathlike Silence Productions, and even live temporarily.¹⁷ Some of those young musicians included members of the bands Emperor, Enslaved, and Darkthrone, three of the most seminal Norwegian black metal bands. These bands took their musical, lyrical, vocal, and performative cues from the work that Mayhem did on the stage and in the studio, as well as the way they carried themselves off the stage and in the real world.

A unified scene began to take shape around Helvete and Oslo—where pseudonyms replaced birth-names, where bands took to the stage in very specific black-and-white garb often adorned with metal spikes or studs and their faces covered in white corpsepaint,¹⁸ where pentagrams or inverted crosses hung from necklaces, and where the vocalists screamed about malevolent debaucheries, including but not limited to murder, ritual sacrifice, rape, torture, worshipping the devil, and so forth. The lyrical content was supported with extreme onstage antics. In 1990 (although some sources claim 1989), Dead described a recent Mayhem gig in Sarpsborg to the zine¹⁹ *Slayer*:

We had some impaled pig heads, and I cut my arms with a weird knife and a crushed Coke bottle. We meant to have a chainsaw...that wasn’t brutal enough! Most of the people in there were wimps and I don’t want them to watch our gigs! Before we

¹⁷ Christe, 271 and Patterson, 153-4. For an understanding of the store’s economics, as well as black metal sales and distribution, see Louis Pattison, “Nocturnal Transmissions: The Selling and Distribution of Black Metal,” in *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, ed. Tom Howells (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), 86-103.

¹⁸ The term “corpsepaint” is generally accepted as being coined by Dead. See Patterson, 142-4. Black metal journalist and owner/operator of the zine *Slayer*, Metalion claims that the Brazilian band Sarcófago influenced Euronymous’s obsession with spikes and corpsepaint. See Moynihan and Sørderlind, 36.

¹⁹ “Zine” is short for magazine and is usually used in reference to fanzines, smaller publications run by one or few individuals.

began to play there was a crowd of about three hundred in there, but in the second song “Necro Lust” we began to throw around those pig heads. Only fifty were left, I liked that!²⁰

Imagine experiencing such a bizarre performance: Dead onstage, his face painted white and black, screaming in a hoarse wail, and cutting his arms. This quote captures the performance aesthetic of black metal and its particular brand of brutality—prescient, given the fact that the show was attended by future members of bands such as Emperor, Immortal, and Enslaved—but it also says something about the intended audience and community that early black metal musicians wished to cultivate. The musical, performative, and theatrical features of bands such as Mayhem were utilized with many goals in mind, but perhaps the most salient was the attempted creation of an exclusive scene, built by and for a group of elite, devil-worshipping white men,²¹ most of whom had come from middle or upper-middle class suburban homes.

As exclusive as such a scene was, its relatively marginal status to the outside world soon problematized its very existence. Beginning in 1991, the black metal scene underwent a series of chaotic, but important events. Dead committed suicide with razors and a shotgun in August 1991 in a home he shared with other members of Mayhem. The band’s response to finding his body lives in black metal infamy: Euronymous delayed calling the police, bought a disposable camera and took pictures of the corpse, the head of which was blown open and Dead’s brains were strewn all over the floor and walls. These pictures later resurfaced as the album cover to the live bootleg *Dawn of the Black Hearts* (1995). Euronymous also took pieces of Dead’s skull to make

²⁰ Cited in Patterson, 144. Nick Richardson claims Dead’s performance is a parody of Christ and a subversion of the Eucharist. Richardson also discusses the element of bloodflow in black metal performance. See Richardson, “Looking Black,” in *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, 148-169.

²¹ Women appear in no accounts of this specific scene that I have been able to locate.

jewelry that could be distributed to “worthy” bands.²² In 1992 a bomb was detonated at a death metal concert in Stockholm that was initially blamed on black metal musicians, and later that year a string of serial church arsons began in Norway that would later result in the incarceration of many black metal musicians.²³ One of those churches, the Fantoft stave church (medieval wooden church), even appeared in ruins on the album cover for *Åske* (1993), an album by one-man band Burzum (one-time Mayhem session bassist Varg Vikernes, a.k.a. Count Grishnackh). Vikernes, in an interview, once described the impetus for the scene’s madness as largely attempting to scare away posers; however, so many people wanted to take part in the scene that “we had to up the madness...and go even further to alienate ourselves...[and] ended up promoting pure insanity and stupidity, alias ‘evil’.”²⁴ Dead’s suicide has also been influential to successive black metal bands, but this thesis is particularly concerned with the church burnings—reportedly anywhere from twelve to sixty—as the black metal culture’s primary extra-musical activity that came to define the scene to the outside world,²⁵ even though the scene began to pull apart after the arsons.

The terrors committed were not completely targeted at the external world. In August of 1993, Euronymous was murdered—stabbed to death in his Oslo apartment by Vikernes, his own band-mate at the time. Further, Vikernes was also under contract with Euronymous’s Deathlike Silence record label. Upon interrogating Vikernes, police also discovered that Emperor’s drummer, who went by the name Faust, had committed murder about a year earlier at a park in

²² Patterson, 149.

²³ Moynihan and Söderlind, 307. Ultimately, it was determined that the bomb had been placed by militant animal rights activists Animal Militia. Also see Christe, 275.

²⁴ Patterson, 165.

²⁵ Moynihan and Söderlind, 83.

Lillehammer where the opening of the Olympic Winter Games had been held.²⁶ The drummer had stabbed Magne Andreassen, a middle-aged man who had solicited sex from Faust and followed him home from a pub.²⁷ Other members of Emperor were similarly arrested at this time for church arson or other acts of assault. One would think the scene was faltering, at least due to a shortage of personnel. Members of important bands such as Mayhem and Emperor were dead or incarcerated, all before the age of 25 and some before the age of 20. Yet, more outsiders than ever were interested in the scene, and some of black metal's best-selling and most influential albums were also produced at the same time as these various acts of violence. Among these albums are Mayhem's *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* (1993), Emperor's *In the Nightside Eclipse* (1993/1995), and Darkthrone's three genre-defining albums: *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* (1992), *Under a Funeral Moon* (1993), and *Transylvanian Hunger* (1994).²⁸ Emperor's album also broke ground for Norwegian "symphonic black metal," black metal music that uses symphonic instruments, organs, choruses and any other element that might not typically be found in black metal proper, but is more likely to be found in a piece of classical music.²⁹ Former Emperor bassist Mortiis would later work as a solo act and, perhaps building on the electronic/symphonic foundation set by *In the Nightside Eclipse*, continued thereafter to combine black metal with keyboards in a way that highlighted metal's fascination with medieval and fantasy imagery.³⁰ Burzum's *Filosofem* (1992/6) is another important album from this period, one that challenged

²⁶ Moynihan and Söderlind, 112.

²⁷ Christe, 277 and Patterson, 168.

²⁸ See Appendix A: Discography.

²⁹ Celtic Frost is likely the first band that included classical instruments into black metal, but the influence of Emperor on the Norwegian scene is much more direct. See Patterson, 52, for information on Celtic Frost's decision to include orchestral instruments and female vocalists in their metal music. Other early bands that used classical instruments were Bathory and Master's Hammer from the Czech Republic.

³⁰ Christe, 283.

black metal's predilections for speed and chaos by employing slow, ambient, and simple melodic riffs.³¹

The chaotic Norwegian scene of the early to mid-1990s also inspired similar violent acts throughout the world, with church arsons and graveyard desecrations occurring in Sweden, England, Russia, Poland, Germany,³² and even Japan—all in the name of black metal.³³ A particularly strange murder case occurred in Finland in 1998 involving black metal musicians as well.³⁴ Black metal had also reached Greece, France, and Italy, resulting in a number of influential black metal albums but far less destruction of property or individuals.³⁵ The circulation of black metal music to these relatively far-off countries existed almost entirely in the trade of CDs and cassettes. In the early 1990s, black metal bands also rarely played live,³⁶ let alone toured the way that their contemporary thrash metal cousins such as Metallica or Slayer did. When black metal bands did play live, it was often less a performance of music and more of a theatrical play or demonstration of violence/ritual. Mortuus, in his solo keyboard material, would even pantomime to prerecorded music while a black-and-white film of him wandering

³¹ Vikernes, while in prison, shifted personal ideologies from Satanism to Odinism and even National Socialism, prompting him to release his own *Mein Kampf*/Odinistic *Hávamál*, entitled *Vargsmål*. Vikernes's role in the black metal scene, while significant as "Norway's black metal bogeyman," is mostly outside of the scope of this thesis. For most of Vikernes's interviews about his role in the church arsons, murder of Euronymous, or his general ideology see the chapter "Count Quisling" in Moynihan and Söderlind, 145-194.

³² For an examination of the German band Absurd and the murder they committed in 1992, see the chapter "Furor Teutonicus" in Moynihan and Söderlind, 271-304.

³³ Christe, 284; see also the chapter "Lords of Chaos" in Moynihan and Söderlind, 305-346.

³⁴ Moynihan and Söderlind, 339-46.

³⁵ See Nathan T. Birk, "South of Helvete (And East of Eden)," in *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, 8-29.

³⁶ One interesting exception from this period is the 1993 "Fuck Christ Tour" that included Greece's Rotting Christ, Canada's Blasphemy, and Norway's Immortal. See Patterson, 74.

through castle ruins played in the background.³⁷ As the decade went on, black metal's global visibility required more live performances, and with those performances came rock n' roll levels of stardom and a much more visible incantation of black metal's masking practices, which for a time had only existed in album sleeves, promo photos, and stories. Today, many outsiders discover the music due to its perceived connections to the church burnings, murders, and suicides. I initially tried to avoid the perceptibly tenuous link between the music and transgressions, but unfortunately most research questions inevitably asked what that link might be, so I have decided to take it seriously. First, I examine masking in the scene—how practitioners view the practice and its potential historical precedents—which leads to a discussion of black metal's "double life," i.e. how masking has contributed to a creation/split/destruction of individuals and subjectivity. In the following chapter, I examine the black metal scream as a focal point between identities both masked and human, and as a potential place where transgression and abjection become sonically real. Abjection, then, supplies the framework for this study in that it explains how masking, music, and transgression are all related.

³⁷ Christe, 286.

2.0 DISGUISE AND SELFHOOD

*“Whoever dares to perform in the dangerous disguise exposes himself to the spell of sinister, incalculable forces. Dark demonic powers awaken inside him; he himself becomes a demon.”*³⁸

This epigraph is from Otto Höfler’s *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (1934), as translated and quoted in “Oskorei,” an essay from 1995 by Austrian researcher and artist Kamdon. Kamdon’s essay is a fascinating examination of the parallels between black metal culture and the old Germanic/Nordic myth surrounding the Oskoreia—Odin or Wotan’s Wild Hunt, a supernatural group of demonic characters still celebrated today in parts of Europe and Scandinavia.³⁹ Höfler’s assertion about the act of masking is a powerful one considering the esoteric tales of black metal musicians and their transgressions—groups of men who donned animalistic disguises and embodied demons. One could read that quote and think of the corpse-painted faces of Dead, Euronymous, Faust, Varg Vikernes; the human men behind those masks; and the suicide, murder, and arson they committed in the name of black metal. In many cases, the masks of corpse-paint and pseudonym become a wholly new and different persona, one that has the potential to destroy its human counterpart: the demonic persona of Dead brought the mortal Per Ohlin to the spiritual realm, and Euronymous—his name meaning “prince of death”—

³⁸ Kamdon, “Oskorei,” from Moynihan and Söderlind, Appendix II, [1995], 382.

³⁹ Moynihan and Söderlind, 198.

eventually fulfilled his pseudonym's destiny. Varg Vikernes, named Kristian at birth, would even fulfill his own namesake: the word *Warg* in German or *vargyr* in Norse meaning both "wolf" and "criminal, outlaw, malefactor, evil being, and Devil."⁴⁰ The murderous Faust also became a Faustian figure whose musical successes did little to satisfy his deadly and unapologetic urges. Faust even ominously spoke of the problems of his black metal mask before he committed murder:

Corpsepaint shouldn't be used everyday. It should only be used when you feel like some dark event would happen... At such events, I look at myself as one of creatures of the night...a child of darkness.⁴¹

Faust's words are naturally ominous to us retrospectively, but his words show that he was aware of his mask's powers, how it anticipated dark events, and should be used sparingly. Pseudonyms and masks are an integral, yet often mysterious part of black metal culture and practice. That masks accompany lawbreaking or law enforcement is perhaps unsurprising, given the general history of real and fictional masked heroes and villains. Masks naturally conceal and disguise their wearers to a number of different ends. In many regularly practiced events in Western societies today, such as Halloween or Mardi Gras, mask-wearers temporarily become external to the cultures and societies they normally inhabit. In black metal, masks appear equally important to extra-musical presentation and musical activities in an atypical sense of ritual.

In this section, I explore the umbrella category of black metal theater and spectacle, focusing on the specific element of masking. Physical masking most often takes the form of corpsepainting one's face, and usually includes wearing black clothing adorned with spikes,

⁴⁰ Moynihan and Söderlind, 208.

⁴¹ Drew Daniel, "Corpsepaint as Necro-Minstrelsy, or Towards the Re-Occultation of Black Blood," in *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, ed. Scott Wilson (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), 40-1.

black combat boots, and costumes made to resemble medieval armory or occult robes.⁴² Corpsepaint usually consists of a pale white foundation with black makeup around the eyes and mouth, sometimes with black lines following the contours of the face. In some cases, blood red makeup is used as well. Black metal visual aesthetics have their roots in rock and metal music from the late 1960s and 1970s. Bands such as Judas Priest popularized leather clothing, armor and spikes, while bands such as Coven, Black Sabbath, and Black Widow were the first to use inverted crosses on album covers.⁴³ These bands touched on satanic themes in their lyrics and stage performances, but they sounded nothing like the Norwegian ilk of Mayhem, Burzum, and Darkthrone. Corpsepaint itself is typically traced back to singers such as Alice Cooper, King Diamond, and Arthur Brown. Nick Richardson, in his article “Looking Black,” traces the history of Norwegian Metal to the point that it “blackened.” Richardson particularly connects black metal’s visual cues with chiaroscuro and horror film aesthetics.⁴⁴ These connections are useful, but I wish to historicize the practice of masking in other ways—compatible with Richardson’s observations but more deeply engaging practitioner intent of the black metal community. It is not sufficient to say that black metal performers wished to emulate gothic cinema, and Richardson would probably agree in that he also mentions surface connections to the character Pierrot the Clown from the Commedia dell’arte tradition.⁴⁵ Corpsepaint and masking in black metal is often

⁴² See Claire Barratt, “Death Symbolism in Metal Jewelry: Circuits of Consumption from Subculture to the High Street,” in *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, 227-242. Barratt examines the market of jewelry deemed worthy of metalheads, but the metal Barratt looks at is mainstream, not black. Her focus is particularly on the ubiquity of skulls in metal jewelry.

⁴³ Patterson, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Nick Richardson, “Looking Black,” in *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, 148-169.

⁴⁵ Richardson, 151.

recognized by writers as crucial to the genre, but I look to answer why it is crucial and how it might be connected to the music's screaming and the practitioners' criminal transgressions.

2.1 BLACK METAL MASKING

Masking is a technique of camouflage, disguise, concealment, and transformation. In popular music today, there exist numerous examples of performative masking: as part of public/performer personas, such as with artists Sia, Buckethead, and Deadmau5, or as performing a character, such as with David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust or Twenty One Pilot frontman Tyler Joseph's Blurryface. For some performers, masking can provide a public entity separate from their private lives. In other cases, masking might simply be an attempt to dazzle audiences with strange spectacles. These masks—Sia's bicolored wig, Buckethead's downturned KFC bucket and plastic mask, Deadmau5's giant mouse head—exist, we assume, only on the stage or in the recording studio. In black metal, masking creates new personas that are both performed and embodied, some even off the stage and in the real world. As we will see, black metal musicians have a range of opinions regarding the practice of masking, their intentions behind masking, and the effect it has on performers.

One of the earliest wearers of corpsepaint, King Diamond, vocalist for the band Mercyful Fate (Diamond's trademark was the inverted cross painted on his forehead), recalled seeing Alice Cooper on tour and said, with regard to his makeup:

It had such an impact on me and I thought it must have an impact on anyone who looks at the stage and sees this. To me he looked like not a real person, he looked like something totally out of this

world, and it felt like if I could reach up on stage to touch his boot, he would probably disappear into thin air.⁴⁶

What exactly this impact is on any given audience member is debatable and subjective, but for Diamond, the physical presentation of painting one's face has an otherworldly or inhuman effect. If we consider Diamond's interpretation of Alice Cooper as one possible reason for the use of corpsepaint, then makeup, leather clothing, and spikes are ostensibly used to create an aura of surreal mystique around the practitioner—perhaps merely aiding in the combination of visual and auditory stimulation meant to evoke something demonic. Some black metal musicians echoed this early sentiment. Hungarian ex-Tormentor/Mayhem vocalist Attila Csihar said: "You use costumes, that was the idea with makeup too I guess, the corpsepaint; not to hide yourself but represent something un-human in some way."⁴⁷ Masking through corpsepaint evidently becomes a means with which to differentiate black metal musicians from other members of humanity. Black metal musicians can be characterized as holding the power to modify the audience's perception of them. For Csihar, though, it is not a practice of concealment, but transformation—a distinction that can be blurred. Diamond and Csihar's comments also both speak to an element of otherworldly inhumanness, where the musician looks as if they exist from or on another plane, as in Diamond's case. Inhumanness might also take the form of a demon, creature, or child of the night, as Faust had put it—something that exists on the earthly plane if only to torment mortals. And other intentions certainly exist for black metal musicians. For example, Dead believed that his mask made him look deceased specifically, and it is unclear if or how that might be different from Csihar's inhumanness or Diamond's otherworldliness. In effect, these musicians "otherize" themselves, and through this, appeal to the audience's desire for "otherness." Ritual studies

⁴⁶ Patterson, 19.

⁴⁷ Patterson, 285.

scholar Ronald Grimes, writing on masking as a gesture of concealment, notes that: “To don a mask is to don otherness and doff selfhood.”⁴⁸ This otherness results in different kinds of fears and dangers for both mask-wearers and those who witness masking. Unlike most forms of social masking, black metal’s dangers are expected by its fan-base. By transforming themselves to be inhuman, repellent, or monstrous, black metallers cater to their audience members, those that wish to witness monstrosity incarnate, and there are plenty of different modes for embodying such desires.

Yet, this “othering” effect, a kind of marginalization from society that is not racially but socially marked, appears to have changed throughout the course of black metal history. Nuclear Holocausto Vengeance, guitarist and vocalist for Finnish band Beherit, has a slightly different interpretation than Diamond’s or Csihar’s:

We try to get across as much of an evil mood as possible...There are always some people who are shocked when we appear on stage with our faces painted black, heavy studs and chains; we confront them with the things they’re scared of. At a recent show I drank some blood on stage...⁴⁹

This quote is cited from a 1992 interview Holocausto had with Robert Müller of *Metal Hammer Germany* magazine. Holocausto’s comments are not completely at odds with Faust or Diamond’s experiences, or with Dead or Csihar’s reasoning, but he evidently has a different intention towards the audience. More than appearing merely inhuman or ethereal, Holocausto wants to appear as *evil* as possible and to *shock* the audience with “the things they’re scared of.” It is interesting that Holocausto highlights that their faces are painted black, omitting the fact that their faces are also painted white as well. The chiaroscuro of black-and-white is what gives black

⁴⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995 [1982]), 82.

⁴⁹ Patterson, 120.

metallars such a high-contrast image (good for album sleeves and concert flyers, among other things).⁵⁰ Looking evil seems analogous with the descriptions provided by Faust, Dead, and King Diamond—to again reduce the practice to merely a presentation of non-human otherness, highlighting the paradox of the living dead. While Holocasto’s comments are significant and speak to practitioner intent within the black metal scene, it is also hard to imagine that such an intention could still be relevant today, after black metal has enjoyed mainstream success and public visibility for more than twenty years. At black metal concerts today, it is probably safe to say that not a single audience member is confronted with “the things they’re scared of.” In fact, it is quite the opposite. The Norwegian band Dimmu Borgir, appearing on the scene in the mid to late 1990s, is one of the oldest mainstream black metal bands that still regularly tours and releases albums. After having donned their stage personas numerous times over the past twenty years (nearly one thousand times according to guitarist Silenoz), fans at Dimmu Borgir’s concerts are rightly expectant of the aesthetic presentation they receive. Silenoz describes his feelings towards corpsepaint: “I’m sure it would be nice to not put on corpsepaint and spikes every night. But we’re so used to it and it’s such a huge part of our look that it would be totally wrong to abandon it.”⁵¹ Both audience and band are used to the look, and so it remains, carrying the baggage of black metal history for better or worse. But the audience for black metal shows today appears much more consistent and reliable than the audience at, for example, the Mayhem show in 1989.

⁵⁰ Daniel, 39. Daniel also theorizes that historically pallor became the default complexion of melancholy, but Holocasto seems more concerned with the black designs, the “black bile” or “black blood,” than the stark white foundation.

⁵¹ John Wiederhorn and Katherine Turman, *Louder Than Hell: The Definitive Oral History of Metal* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 519.

Of course, Holocausto's example of frightening the audience was not always the case in relation to audience intention in the early scene. As Holocausto's quote demonstrates, audiences at black metal shows might not have been prepared to handle the on-stage presentation of a group of overly masculinized musicians wearing tattered black clothing, chains, and spikes. Audience reaction, however, was not always on the mind of the practitioner. Mayhem vocalist Dead, like Faust, typically wore a mask for *his own* benefit. He was known to collect deceased animals and inhale their stench before singing on-stage or in-studio. He also buried his clothes in the soil for days before a concert so they would smell of decomposition.⁵² Dead's motivation was far less concerned with the audience than Holocausto's. Rather, Dead inhaled the stench of decomposition in order to occupy the mindset of black metal screaming (just as Faust wore corpsepaint to get closer to darkness before an evil event), even in the studio where there was no audience to receive him (or for him to scare away with mutilated pig heads). Dimmu Borgir, given that they are "used to" wearing corpsepaint and spikes every night, put on their black metal masks as part of an agreed-upon relationship with the audience, and potentially less so because they themselves are comfortable performing black metal in those entrapments. Simultaneously, the entrapments that these musicians in Dimmu Borgir don for their live shows appear to be an unchanging part to a set of looks specific to their black metal personas—their double lives, as it were.

Dead popularized corpsepaint for the early black metal scene, and this make-up style is arguably the most recognizable aspect of the scene's aesthetics. Dead's intention was to look as pale and lifeless as a corpse.⁵³ The relevance of death to corpsepaint is perhaps the most direct

⁵² Patterson, 142.

⁵³ Patterson, 144.

sense of inhumanness that black metal aspires to, as opposed to representations of animals or nameless demons. Daniel Drew has argued that the corpsepaint practice is congruent to American minstrelsy performers who staged black subjectivity. Similarly, Daniel argues, black metal musicians stage subjectivity of the dead, or “necro-minstrelsy.”⁵⁴ This staging of subjectivity is clearly quite different from blackface, though. Necro-minstrelsy, rather, is a performance of subjectivity that does not exist in the real world until black metallers bring them to life. Such deadness was and is an explicitly crucial element to black metal’s symbolic iconography, a prominent element of stage presence, as well as their band names, album and song titles, and lyrics. Euronymous, after Dead’s suicide, essentially claims that such iconography and presentation is at the core of black metal ethos:

Dead killed himself because he lived only for the true Black Metal scene and lifestyle. It means black clothes, spikes, crosses and so on... But today there are only children in jogging suits, and skateboards, and hardcore moral ideals; they try to look as normal as possible.⁵⁵

Euronymous frames Dead’s life and death in terms of black metal fashion, or “lifestyle.” Looking normal, therefore, became the bane of any authentic or legitimate black metal musician. Further, one must look hyperbolically “more dead than dead,” or perhaps more dead than Dead.⁵⁶ It is unsurprising then that bands such as Dimmu Borgir still choose to mask themselves in corpsepaint for every show, even considering Silenoz’s comments about wishing they could abandon the practice. In some ways, it is the only relic of early black metal that the band still employs in a traditional sense. Dimmu Borgir, and any other band that wears corpsepaint, therefore seems to share the lifestyle implications of early Norwegian black metal on the stage—

⁵⁴ Daniel, 42.

⁵⁵ Richardson, 149.

⁵⁶ Daniel, 44.

without the stench of decomposition, we assume, and not only for their sake but for the sake of the audience's expectations.

The decision to wear corpsepaint today, for bands like Dimmu Borgir, might boil down to pragmatism as performers in a certain genre or idiom, but the fans have decided its importance. Often the fans participate in the masking, as is evident in live shows where fans are seen wearing corpsepaint in the same style as the band members. The practice of masking is in fact largely a participatory one in contemporary scenes that still mask. Early black metal practitioners even tried to frame masking as an historical practice of communities. Varg Vikernes once remarked that the practice of masking could be traced back to European antiquity, when the world was a place for man, spirits, and deities: "However, only the initiates could see the spirits, and in order to do so they needed to put on a mask." According to Vikernes, the sorcerer of any European town might hang his clothes to appear as if he was hanging from a tree and would then cover his body with ash: "The ash was the mask. The ash was the corpsepaint."⁵⁷ The audience might similarly require masking in order to better engage with the black metal spectacle in front of them, "to see the spirits" or potentially enter the spiritual realm that black metal occupies. Dimmu Borgir appears in corpsepaint night in and night out not because it makes them appear deceased as Dead had once hoped for, or because they wish to confront the audience with the things that frighten them as Holocausto did, but because of its cultural association with the genre and what is at this point the necessary act of masking—one that the audience can recognize and *participate* in. Masking acts as a blurring agent of the spectacle's boundaries and ostensibly allows the spectator to occupy the same culturally external position that black metallers inhabit.

⁵⁷ Wiederhorn and Turman, 518.

Finally, it is worth framing black metal masking with masks that came before and after those of the 1980s and 1990s in Norway. There exists historical and anthropological precedence for many of the claims that Kamdon and Vikernes make regarding corpsepaint's European lineage. Cesare Poppi's article "The Other Within: Masks and Masquerades in Europe" sheds light on the various associations that masking had in pre-Renaissance Europe, such as celebrations of the dead, themes of witches and spirits, and a material presence of "other" to official cultural politics.⁵⁸ Poppi describes the Wild Hunt, much like Kamdon's Oskorei, in which the dead wandered the earth en route to purgatory.⁵⁹ The leader of the marching dead was the character Harlequin, who today is often performed comically, but was once a demonic figure notable for its high-contrast use of color, such as black-and-white. Particular to European history, Poppi also argues that masking formalized and prescribed actions for the mask-wearer. For black metal in Norway in the early 1990s, such prescribed actions included making black metal music, burning churches, and if it came to it, killing your enemies or yourself. This violence therefore potentially has its historical and cultural precedents in European Renaissance masking traditions, real or imaginary.⁶⁰

Wearing corpsepaint and preparing for performance the way Dead did are two different things, however. Today, Dimmu Borgir has chosen to embrace the physical aesthetics of the black metal they grew up with, masking being but one of the more prominent features of such an aesthetic order. To my mind comes the image of a young Shagrath (Dimmu's lead singer)

⁵⁸ Cesare Poppi, "The Other Within: Masks and Masquerades in Europe," in *Masks: The Art of Expression*, ed. John Mack (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 190-215.

⁵⁹ Poppi, 193.

⁶⁰ Ingo W. Schröder and Bettina E. Schmidt, "Introduction: Violent imaginaries and violent practices," in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder (London: Routledge, 2001), 1-24.

performing live in the late 1990s, many clips of which can be found on YouTube, including the band's music video for "Mourning Palace."⁶¹ Typically, the singer appears as the focal point on the stage, as is the case in popular forms of rock or metal. Shagrath had his own style of corpsepaint (and still does, although it has changed), including black diamonds around his eyes, black lipstick, and long black hair (many black metallers have a similar, but subtly different look). Typically, he would stand on stage, shirtless with black spiked gauntlets on his wrists, black pants, and black combat boots—blood running from his mouth and onto his chest. Today, his look is cleaner. Specifically since the album *Abrahadabra*'s release in 2010, when the band's aesthetic shifted significantly, Shagrath has taken the stage in all-white robes and studs, sometimes wearing a Lovecraftian horned mask. Dimmu Borgir, perhaps tired of donning the same masks for twenty years, altered their black metal personas significantly. While the clothes have changed in terms of style and color, the practice of corpsepaint remains largely immutable, however.

Today, the genre's masking practices seem pushed to an extreme, whether serious or satirical. Many new bands refuse to wear masks, particularly in black metal circles in the Americas, and some of these bands do so in order to self consciously oppose Norwegian black metal. Shagrath chooses to wear a new mask over the old corpsepaint, perhaps signifying a new threshold of personage, playing with the typical dichotomy between black metal and non-black metal personas, suggesting an evolution of the black metal double life.

⁶¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vcTRWE2_u8

2.2 THE BLACK METAL DOUBLE LIFE

Role-played and masked personas are profoundly different from the off-stage appearances of many black metallers. As Poppi notes in his genealogy of European masking, masks created not one, but two distinct identities—what I term the black metal double life.⁶² Looking back on this scene historically, it is often the case that a black metallers' human appearance shocks more than their black metal one due to the over-exposure to the black metal side of a performer's life. In the documentary section of Dimmu Borgir's concert DVD *Forces of the Northern Night*, lead singer Shagrath appears without makeup. His hair is in a ponytail and he wears a buttoned shirt and black sunglasses. The rest of the band all dress very differently from their onstage personas as well. Guitarist Galder wears hooded sweatshirts, and co-founder/songwriter/guitarist Silenoz wears camouflage hats and Black Sabbath t-shirts. They dress comfortably. Meanwhile, their onstage personas decorated in corpsepaint, chains, and spikes are painstakingly curated by the musicians, as seen in the DVD's documentary section on "Makeup Routines." These masks are restricted to the space of performance though; they do not leave the arena or follow the band members home. Perhaps members of Dimmu Borgir have observed Faust's warning, and in doing so, are able to live stable double lives, one as black metal musicians and the other as members of a larger community.

This "double life" that Shagrath and many other black metallers experience was central to Norwegian black metal's earlier practitioners as well. Historically anthropologists and art historians have commented on masking as bridging the gap between "primitive man" and his

⁶² Poppi, 196.

“indwelling soul.”⁶³ A similar effect of bridging the double lives of black metal practitioners seems at play here—masking regulates the black metal/public persona, and without the mask the private persona thrives. Ivar Bjørnson, co-founder of the band Enslaved, described the black metal double life thusly:

I think it's possible to want to see the world burn and see everything stop, and then go home and wish the best for yourself, your family, your kids. I think it's possible to have those two thoughts in your head at the same time. A lot of writers are fascinated with the 'double life,' a lot of writers write very extreme books and the thoughts the main characters have, these thoughts have to come from somewhere. Are you a homicidal maniac or sexual deviant yourself? A lot of people claim that everyone has these secret double lives to some extent and I think the only difference in the black metal scene was that these people chose to vocalize that double life.⁶⁴

He goes on to describe Euronymous's double life, particularly towards its premature end, as marked by a confusing imbalance of personas, often appearing differently to old friends than to new faces interested in the scene at Helvete.⁶⁵ Snorre “Blackthorn” Ruch, Vikernes's accomplice in Euronymous's death and Mayhem's second guitarist at the time, succinctly echoed how Euronymous had changed toward the end of his life: “He refused to let go of his mask.”⁶⁶ Euronymous took his self-proclaimed role as black metal's Norwegian ruler as his quotidian profession—something that arguably led to his rivalry with Varg Vikernes and the ensuing

⁶³ Olive L. Riley, *Masks and Magic* (New York: Studio Publications and Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1955), 10. Masks of the American Northwest particularly show man-animal hybrids in Riley's study. For a literature review of masking in anthropology, see the first part of Donald Pollock, “Masks and the Semiotics of Identity,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 3 (September 1995): 581-597.

⁶⁴ Patterson, 158.

⁶⁵ Moynihan and Söderlind, 73.

⁶⁶ Moynihan and Söderlind, 134. See Brandon Stosuy, “A Blaze Across the Northern Sky,” in *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, 37-59, for an oral history of United States Black Metal with Snorre Ruch as a contributor, who himself is considerably “un-evil” when not in his black metal mask.

confrontation that led to his early death. In short, his mask, “the prince of death,” was unable to live a stable life for very long outside of black metal performances. Another suitable example from early black metal is naturally the character of Dead. Dead’s on-stage self-mutilation was a public display of theater and appears normal in that space to the initiated, but his personal self-mutilation and suicide was a private display of depression and incalculable darkness—which elicited a wide range of reactions from those close to him in the scene.⁶⁷

The double life of a practitioner is an important, deeply personal praxis that is negotiated in a variety of ways. Nick Richardson, in his article “Looking Black,” describes black metal theater as “[giving] partial material reality to some of the characters we imagine ourselves to be. The rites and rituals, the shadows, the make-up, are reflections of our personality, not self-erasure.”⁶⁸ The connection between personas then cannot be considered meaningless, but related, intentional, and specific. As with most elements of black metal, practitioners have different views on the subject. Varg Vikernes, for instance, believed that his pseudonym “Count Grishnackh” was an entirely different person: “Like my girlfriend says, she hates ‘The Count’ but she likes me... I don’t like the Count...But I know that it’s not me. It’s like a shadow of mine that’s created by the light put on me by these Zionist journalists.”⁶⁹ Anti-Semitic comments aside,⁷⁰ something that Vikernes (and others in the scene) never explains is which of these personas he is at any given moment. Does the Count make music for the one-man band Burzum and play bass on Mayhem albums, or does the Count burn churches and stab friends? It is

⁶⁷ Edia Connole argues that Dead’s suicide is in fact a very social act within black metal culture in “Seven Propositions on the Secret Kissing of Black Metal: OKSVLVM,” in *Mors Mystica*, ed. Edia Connole and Nicola Masciandaro (Schism Press, 2015), 333-66.

⁶⁸ Richardson, 165.

⁶⁹ Moynihan and Söderlind, 146.

⁷⁰ It would take an entire thesis to explain Vikernes’s racist worldview and how it relates to his music and the political groups and journals he has founded despite his incarceration.

unknown what Vikernes thinks in any case, but it is likely that the Count takes part in both, for music and crime are practices where masking is most often normalized by fans and practitioners. Having since attempted to cut ties with black metal, Vikernes would probably say the Count no longer exists and that Varg Qisling Larsson Vikernes is the sole perpetrator of his current actions, musical or otherwise.⁷¹ Vikernes's comments suggest that the Count's existence is, however, a partial self-erasure of his own subjectivity. In other words, there are times when his subjective self *is and is not* the Count, and at other times, *is and is not* Varg Vikernes.⁷²

Yet such a distinction might be unnecessarily binary. It seems that when a black metal musician dons his black metal persona, they can be both the character (Euronymous or Dead, etc.) and the human (Øystein Aarseth or Per Ohlin, etc.).⁷³ Neither persona can exist completely without the other, as perhaps both Euronymous and Vikernes/The Count had learned the hard way. As Kamdon notes in his "Oskorei" essay: "the psyche of the performer became one with the psyche of the creature he represented."⁷⁴ Even when the human behind the mask is recognizable to other humans, Kamdon claims, the mask-wearer appears paradoxically as another person when "wearing the specter's disguise," and the boundary between performer and creature is both rigid and negated.⁷⁵ Again considering the current example of Dimmu Borgir, Shagrath is Stian Thoresen as much as Stian Thoresen is Shagrath. His friends and family

⁷¹ Moynihan and Söderlind, 175. Varg's new name includes an intentional misspelling of "Quisling," a notorious Norwegian collaborationist during World War II, whom Varg believes he is related to. This is his latest pseudonym and mask.

⁷² For this paradox of masking, see Elizabeth Tonkin, "Masks and Powers," *Man* 14, no. 2 (June 1979): 237-248.

⁷³ Caoimhe Doyle and Katherine Foyle, "'It's a suit! It's ME!': Hyper-Star and Hyper Hero through Black Sabbath's 'Iron Man'," in *Mors Mystica*, 177-200. Similarly, Doyle and Foyle argue that the alter-egos of Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Kanye West (Yeezus) eventually become one with the person behind the mask.

⁷⁴ Kamdon, 382.

⁷⁵ Kamdon, 382.

recognize him under the mask, but they potentially suspect he has become the animalistic demon he represents—in Shagrath’s case the orc Shagra, from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* series. In this paradox of identity, new meanings of identity can potentially be created. Band-mate Silenoz’s name is taken from the Greek mythological Silenus, a tutor and companion to Dionysius. There is an unmistakable connection between this pseudonym and the importance of Dionysian aesthetics to black metal, and in this sense, the pseudonym perhaps allows for a Dionysian mode of play.⁷⁶ To conceal is, in the case of the black metal mask, to reveal; take the case of black metal pseudonyms—Shagrath, Silenoz, Euronymous, Faust, Dead, etc.—which reveal and prophesize as much as they conceal or erase. The crafted names and styles of makeup tell us something about the crafters as much as they hide them.

Richardson, at the end of his article, realizes the limitations of masking as black metallers from the early 1990s grow older:

The sight of a grown man in corpsepaint and spikes, beer belly spilling over his waistline, the realization of how inadequate we’d really be in war, only renders more painful the distance between who we are by day, and who we become when we throw on *Under a Funeral Moon*...⁷⁷

Masking, today more than ever, appears to clearly conceal the specifics of humanity, in this case, the inevitability of old age. Masking might have always been hiding one’s inadequacies though, and these are potentially becoming more and more visible to audiences of bands today, such as Dimmu Borgir. But while the distance between “who they are by day” and their black metal lives is a now-painful separation, it appears that the stronger and more preferred of the two personas is

⁷⁶ Appropriately, Silenoz is labeled “Mr. Always Drunk Guy” during one of the home footage segments on the second disc of *World Misanthropy* (2002), one of Dimmu Borgir’s concert DVDs.

⁷⁷ Richardson, 169.

the black metal one, opening up the potential to both conceal and illuminate inadequacies, and might therefore freeze black metal masking as a dangerous practice for the founders of black metal today. What once might have been a juvenile play of masking has since become a potential bid for a self that might be powerful or strong, while risking other elements of exposure. The band members of Emperor, perhaps quick to realize this, let go of their masks rather quickly thereafter *In the Nightside Eclipse*.

Masking potentially allows black metallers a variety of modes of being. As we have seen, it allows for distinct personas that could occupy different spheres of discourse, public and private, where black metallers carry themselves differently. That masking could be tied to the criminal acts of black metal seems like a foregone conclusion, such as in Faust's quote about the dangers of masking. Masking has also been historicized as a means to an ends: initiations rites in secret societies, subversion of power structures in carnival, and as a way for children to release inhibitions, such as during Halloween.⁷⁸ Prehistoric masking in Europe has tended to be classified in two ways by ethnologists: as representations of cosmic laws (usually in the form of secret societies), and as instruments for social correction (in the form of punishment or in an inversion of power, such as carnival).⁷⁹ Also particular to the European masking tradition is the function of a mask as disguise, something that European masking practices employed more regularly than other traditions, where masks had more specific meanings or embodiments historically.⁸⁰ In his history of studying masks, Henry Pernet notes that one of the most common descriptions of masking asserts that ritual masks represent spirits, specifically dead or ancestral

⁷⁸ Riley, 23-24.

⁷⁹ Andreas Lommel, *Masks: Their Meaning and Function* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 198.

⁸⁰ Lommel, 213.

ones.⁸¹ Pernet offers some interesting alternatives to this popular reading, in that he finds some masks represent events instead of spirits.⁸² Although Pernet is referring specifically to “moments of cosmogony,” there may be a parallel in black metal masking, where masking correlates to “when dark events happen,” to paraphrase Faust. Masking, then, relates to the double life of black metallers not only in terms of physically disguising or revealing one persona or another, but as a signifier of the event they participate in, criminal or musical. So, masking can come to regulate the ontology of difference between black metal and human activities.

Pernet also points out that masking dead spirits usually takes the form of a skull-mask.⁸³ Black metal corpsepaint with its sunken black eye sockets might similarly be thought of as depicting a skull, a perception of the practice not previously noted. It seems the popular conception among black metallers and their fans is that the corpsepaint represents an animate corpse. Related to the skull-mask, we might also theorize that the black metal mask is related to the European death mask—a mask that freezes the appearance of its wearer in death. In black metal, the wearer’s death is thus both rigid and alive. Yet, Shagrath today wears a mask over his corpsepaint—likely not made of skull but probably plastic—that nonetheless might carry some of the signifiers that anthropologists associated with skull-masks, that is, as inherently tied to ritual. Black metal ritual might more regularly be conceived of as anti-ritual or as ritual destruction (of churches, of selves, etc.). Of course, black metal activities, musical or criminal, are not performed with the kind of regularity that rituals are often defined by in ethnographies,

⁸¹ Henry Pernet, *Ritual Masks: Deceptions and Revelations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992 [1988]), 45.

⁸² Pernet, 78.

⁸³ Pernet, 81.

such as occurring at specific times in the day, week, or season or at certain sites.⁸⁴ Masking, in that it is tied explicitly to specific actions, such as Faust's "dark events," signifies ritualization. Again, this lacks the construction of ritual as mundane, sacred, formalized, and intentional, especially when considering that black metallers, such as Emperor's guitarist Samoth, have spoken about the spontaneity of such events.⁸⁵ Rather, ritual here is defined in terms of its liminal nature, where masking allows its wearers to negotiate between cultural and anti-cultural subjectivities and identities. Taking masks as a type of ritual gesture, Ronald Grimes has explored interpretations of what it means to don a mask, regardless of who wears it or what it looks like.⁸⁶ The black metal mask, like the European death mask in Grimes's study, plays with the boundaries of life and death, and therefore, with notions of concretion. In the process of concretion, Grimes asserts, the mask makes rigid what is a process, i.e., the way corpsepaint rigidifies the process of dying. Black metal challenges this concept of the mask due to the performative nature of the subculture, while at the same time embodying the essential "deadness" of its wearers. Performativity is the location of slippage between ritual and the everyday world—the distinction between the two, while always questionable, becomes a location where black metal strives to exist. Rituals basically afford a place of anti-structure, an order outside of social rigidity, particularly in that rituals express thought through action by integrating the two—something that is relevant to black metal's criminal and musical activities.⁸⁷ That music and crime would both come to express the same thought (anti-Christianity, generally) suggests that

⁸⁴ Grimes, 24-39.

⁸⁵ Moynihan and Söderlind, 103.

⁸⁶ Grimes, 78-9.

⁸⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1992), 26, 30, 41. "Anti-structure" is a concept particularly initiated by Victor Turner's early works in ritual studies. The concepts of action as expressing thought and ritual integrating action and thought essentially come from Clifford Geertz. Stanley Tambiah explains how ritual is performative.

black metal ritual, marked by masking, is actually a complex twofold process where different types of action are integrated with each other (not just with thought/belief), i.e., crime and music as one performance (more on this later). The double life of practitioners has shown how such a liminal area is a dangerous place to exist though, and that black metal's double lives mostly ended with one persona triumphing over the other shows the precarity of black metal's situation—between reality and ritual in a very real sense.⁸⁸ The double life thus appears necessary in order for such liminality to be transversed, the precarity of ritual masking allowing the precarity of musical and criminal integration.

For Antonin Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double*, the theater is the “Double” of a dangerous, inhuman reality.⁸⁹ Perhaps we can call the *Gestalt* of masks, performativity, music, and crime a total sum of theater, which acts as an Artaudian Double—particularly relevant to this conception of the double because Artaud's work was so readily haunted by the troubles of life.⁹⁰ Artaud writes of the Double as “given up to the childishness of his schoolboy gibes” and being “roused by the repercussion of the turmoil, [moving] unaware in the midst of spells of which he has understood nothing,” and there is perhaps an analogy in the black metal double—a kind of juvenile playing with turmoil or truly dangerous realities.⁹¹ The spectacle of ritual masking creates space for audience participation (perhaps not in the complete sense for Artaud), and the

⁸⁸ See Bernhard Leistle, “Ritual as Sensory Communication,” in *Ritual and Identity: Performative Practices as Effective Transformations of Social Reality*, ed. Klaus-Peter Köpping, Bernhard Leistle, and Michael Rudolph (Berlin: Lit, 2006), 33-73, on the precariousness between reality and ritual.

⁸⁹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 48.

⁹⁰ See Helga Finter, “From ‘Antonin Artaud and the impossible theatre: the legacy of cruelty’”, in *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, ed. Edward Scheer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 47-58. Finter also describes how theater, for Artaud, staged death, an interesting parallel to be had with black metal masking.

⁹¹ Artaud, 67.

double, in this respect, is potentially something the audience can risk embodying to the same dangers as black metal's musicians. In that masking appears as a ritual gesture within black metal theater, the erasure of boundary between performers and audience members thus appears as part of a negotiation between realities. The danger to black metal's fans is presupposed by the nature of masking, theater, and its double.

The black metal double life is thus a consequent of the masking practices that dominated black metal culture for decades with perhaps unforeseen developments. Particularly, masking today seems to reveal the nature of the practice, i.e., as a potential concealer/revealer of inadequacies or the performance of (subverted) power; as a potential erasure of the distance between spectacle and audience; and a ritual endangerment. Once the practitioners' lives had reached extremities (of crime, living conditions), the double life appears as a bid for survival in a dangerous mode of being—one that potentially keeps current mask-wearers Dimmu Borgir from befalling the same kinds of fates as Dead, Euronymous, The Count, Faust, and any number of black metallers whose double life struck a deadly imbalance. In the next section, I examine the voice—point of intersection between black metal's two lives—an intersection that illuminates how the double comes to navigate the concrete world.

3.0 SOUND AND TRANSGRESSION

While costumes and corpsepaint are cosmetic shifts that black metal musicians can employ to temporarily prioritize their animalistic or mythological identities, there is another element to masking that is employed in a stricter dichotomy: the voice. There is an obvious distinction between Shagrath or Dead or any other black metal screamer using their black metal singing voice as opposed to their speaking voice. Throughout Dimmu Borgir's *Forces of the Northern Night* performances, Shagrath uses his normal voice to introduce concepts or talk about topics at length in between songs. He never introduces a song's name using his normal voice, though. He always uses his black metal voice to growl out the song names: "Vredesbyrd," "Gateways," and so on. And of course, once the song has begun, it is only performed in the black metal vocal style, which can be many things: low, mid, or high growls and hoarse screams. The difference between Shagrath's black metal voice and his normal one is, however, a distinction that is physically unmistakable. The binary is as black-and-white as the corpsepaint on his face. Further, the black metal scream only exists jointly with the rest of Shagrath's masked persona (one could imagine the dissonance of seeing him scream when not in costume as similar to the potential comedy of him speaking normally in his black metal outfit). Jörg Schnass, writing about voice

building and growth for vocal students, argues that “discarding masks” liberates the true self.⁹² The black metal voice, then, chooses to keep the mask on, and the identity of the screamer thus remains problematized. The voice therefore seems to be of critical importance to the black metal persona, its mask, and its functional duality—a duality that ultimately connects sound and transgression.

3.1 THE SCREAMING VOICE

Here, I wish to discuss the black metal voice in two distinct ways: (1) in terms of physiognomy, anatomy, and how black metal screams are achieved by singers, and (2) in philosophical, theoretical, and historical terms, which inevitably position the screaming voice vis-à-vis other social and cultural formations, or what Annette Schlichter and Nina Eidsheim call “the weight of the symbolic” in terms of explaining the voice as the carrier of notions of “the self” in the West, often to the omission of a discussion of the voice’s materiality.⁹³ I attempt to discuss the voice in terms of its materiality and its importance to creating subjectivity (or abjecting subjectivity) in the case of black metal performance. Similar to the works of Schlichter and Eidsheim, I aim to erase neither the materiality nor the metaphorical potential of the voice. Implicitly here, Roland Barthes’s formulation of the voice’s “grain” also appears relevant in that the grain is the material

⁹² Jörg Schnass, “Voice Building and Personal Growth: Rediscovering the Dignity of a Lost Art,” in *The Modern Singing Master: Essays in Honor of Cornelius L. Reid*, ed. Ariel Bybee and James E. Ford (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 206-224.

⁹³ Annette Schlichter and Nina Eidsheim, “Introduction: Voice Matters,” *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 3 (May 2014).

of voice and breath made intelligible to a listener who knows what he/she is hearing.⁹⁴ For Barthes, voice is where body meets discourse, and this can be a useful framing of the voice for both material and philosophical discussion of the scream.

Michael Edward Edgerton describes “extreme vocal behaviors, such as shouting, screaming, and rasping” as “complex acts that involve a mixture of air, musculature, and tissue responses to increased loads placed within the vocal tract.”⁹⁵ Specifically, Edgerton classifies extreme vocal behavior in three categories: complex and unstable oscillations (musculature), forced blown (air), and rasp. As Edgerton notes, such taxonomy of vocal behaviors is subjective, and any attempt on my part to place black metal vocal styling (or any single black metal vocalist’s styling) into one of these boxes as a case study would be misleading. First, of Edgerton’s three types of extreme vocal techniques, rasp seems most pertinent to black metal screaming across the genre. Of the singers that this study is concerned with—Mayhem’s Dead, Emperor’s Ihsahn, Dimmu Borgir’s Shagrath—all three of them depend on rasp as a primary feature that distinguishes their screaming voices from their speaking voices. Rasp, in Edgerton’s own words, involves “excessive adductory tension along with low airflow and a small abductory excursion.”⁹⁶ Rasp, more than forced airflow or musculature oscillations, is a likely cause of vocal pathology. However, musculature tensions and forced airflow are not completely absent from black metal or other extreme metal that features screaming. When compared to other metals (power, death, doom) or other extreme rock music (emo, scream-o, etc.), black metal’s shriek employs rasp in a decidedly unique way.

⁹⁴ Roland Barthes, “Listening,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 255.

⁹⁵ Michael Edward Edgerton, *The 21st-Century Voice: Contemporary and Traditional Extra-Normal Voice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 127.

⁹⁶ Edgerton, 129.

Black metal screaming, as in Shagrath's case, is not a singular vocal mode. In a track like "Mourning Palace" from *Enthroned Darkness Triumphant* (1997), Shagrath employs high-pitched screams, which likely require all three of Edgerton's extreme vocal techniques to comfortably and consistently perform. Shagrath, in his higher pitched vocal screams, is likely building up a raspy tension in the back of his throat and then forcing airflow and muscular tension with no or little vertical laryngeal movement, because the screams appear relatively stable and do not oscillate. For his lower screams or growls, Shagrath's airflow is significantly decreased, resulting in a more comfortable technique that is less likely to damage his voice. Ihsahn from the band Emperor has a completely different, albeit less varied technique. Ihsahn, throughout his musical output, has a much raspier, thinner, and quieter sound to his vocal screams. Consider any of the tracks on Emperor's *In the Nightside Eclipse* (1994) and Ihsahn is usually barely audible among the din of electric guitars, drums, and synthesized symphonic sounds, but this is also due to a difference in record production.⁹⁷ Ihsahn's vocal technique shares many traits with Shagrath's, such as the employment of rasp with low airflow, at times exerting greater muscular tension and forced airflow (but this is done far less frequently than Shagrath). It should be noted though, that this style seems to have carried over with much greater popularity and usage in current American black metal bands, such as Deafheaven, Panopticon, and Liturgy. This kind of reverb-heavy sound appears to fit with the current trend of more homogenous black metal aesthetics, where the sonic qualities of voice, guitar, and rhythm section are usually differentiated to a lesser degree. Shagrath's style, on the other hand, fits in with death and thrash metal bands of the past and

⁹⁷ For interviews with the members of Emperor about the making of the album, see J. Bennett, "Total Eclipse: Metal, Mayhem Murder. The Making of Emperor's *In the Nightside Eclipse*" in *Precious Metal: DECIBEL Presents the Stories Behind 25 Extreme Metal Masterpieces*, ed. Albert Mudrian (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 280-291.

present. The popularity of Ihsahn's vocal style might also be explained by the desire of current bands to appear as incomprehensible as their influences.

The differences between Ihsahn and Shagrath are also largely dynamic: Ihsahn's voice is not loud enough on the recordings of *In the Nightside Eclipse* to warrant a mode of listening directed primarily at the vocals, whereas Shagrath's voice is always mixed so that it appears as the center of focus. The unintelligibility of the music of the earlier bands such as Mayhem and Darkthrone was replaced with intelligibility and better recording/mixing by the time Dimmu Borgir had fully arrived on the mainstream scene in 1997. There are thus two kinds of black metal screams, but they share many qualities and much of what follows can apply to many genres of rock music that use screamed vocal production. Still, the more marginal screams of the earlier bands, including Emperor, beg for an orientation of the screaming voice that does not always imply typical characteristics of loud or forceful vocal espousals. Instead of implying power, strength, masculinity, or a demand for attention, black metal screams the opposite of those qualities (or in the case of attention, a different kind of attention, perhaps mediated by closeness and not direction). Given the black metal double, the screaming voice would seemingly be prime for a public mode of discourse, and yet its closeness and dependency on the body might suggest a reserved, private, or even intimate atmosphere of music and language.

How we understand the voice as a carrier of selfhood requires an understanding of the acoustic as a means of knowledge about bodies, social or otherwise—an epistemology that Brandon LaBelle uses to frame his monograph *Lexicon of the Mouth*.⁹⁸ The voice, LaBelle asserts, is always already a voice subject full of gendered, raced, and classed meanings that tell

⁹⁸ Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), viii.

us there is an implied *someone* behind the voice.⁹⁹ For Artaud, the voice always already assumes the role of persona, or subjectivity.¹⁰⁰ The voice thus appears to function similar to the facial mask that always already implies a mask-maker and mask-wearer. The scream, at its most basic philosophical level, might tell us that the body is in pain, struggling emotionally, or angry. In fact, one of Norway's most exported bits of culture is a visual representation of this: Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893). *The Scream* has been a visual image associated with mental anguish and emotional responses to suffering.¹⁰¹ We might similarly understand black metal screaming in terms of releasing inhibitions, as self-therapy or signifying catharsis as a response to this implied pain. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the American psychologist Arthur Janov developed what would be popularly known as "primal scream therapy." Screaming, according to Janov, allows the patient the ability to re-experience childhood pain while simultaneously liberating oneself from said pain.¹⁰² The black metal scream might simply be a cathartic release of emotion, a re-experiencing of pain that temporarily subsides it. But this does not fully capture the range of black metal aesthetic intention, in which we have already seen many practitioners strive for demonic visual and aural representations. Black metal toes the line between primal scream therapy and trying to sound evil, as this would also lack specificity to the scene. Black metal screaming might carry intention vis-à-vis self-healing, but that is never made explicit. Using Kamdon's essay as a foundation for understanding the black metal scream in similar terms to masking, it can be historically or mythically connected to the high-pitched banshee screams

⁹⁹ Labelle, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Finter, 53.

¹⁰¹ Alexandra Pitman, "Edvard Munch (1863-1944) *The Scream*," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 198 no. 1 (January 2011): 72.

¹⁰² Beate Kutschke, "The Scream in Avant-Garde Music: The New Left and the Rediscovery of the Body," in *The Modernist Legacy: Essays on New Music*, ed. Bjorn Heile (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 65.

and shouts of the supernatural Oskorei.¹⁰³ The voice would therefore have similar masking capabilities in that it is identified with inhumanness, potentially animality. The comparison between the Oskorei and black metal singers seems particularly salient in Dimmu Borgir's *Forces of the Northern Night* concerts, where Shagrath appears in white furs, with a mask over his corpsepaint, screaming inhumanly. Casual listeners might notice the scream's potential for catharsis or its mimetic representation of demonism, but black metal theorists and scholars have other interpretations as well, which more readily deal with problems of intelligibility and the potential of the scream as mask.

In "The Tongue-Tied Mystic," Gary J. Shipley asserts that "Black metal screams what cannot be told."¹⁰⁴ Shipley describes the scream as "mindless," "noise but not speech," and "untranslatable," to be a bit reductive of Shipley's work.¹⁰⁵ Many listeners would probably agree with that description of the genre's vocal technique—it relays no semantic content in many cases. The reason that we can consider it "noise but not speech" is perhaps because we know that Shagrath or Dead or whoever is singing is also in the process of masking. Because we recognize the human under the mask, or that there simply is a human under the mask, we similarly recognize that there is a human voice under the scream. We make meaning of the voice's shrieking mode because we recognize its inherent differences in relation to the voice's "normal" mode, even in the case of Shagrath and other black metal screamers who can be understood in their screaming modes in ways that Dead and Ihsahn could not (although as mentioned, new screamers are also striving for incomprehensibility in some circles). It appears untranslatable

¹⁰³ Kamdon, 385.

¹⁰⁴ Gary J. Shipley, "The Tongue-Tied Mystic: Aaaarrgghhh! Fuck Them! Fuck You!," in *Mors Mystica*, 201.

¹⁰⁵ Shipley, 205.

only because it is artificial, a representation of a different creature's vocal espousals. The black metal voice, then, can signify persona much in the same way that corpsepaint and pseudonyms imply duplicity in similar ways. Arthur Janov, in his book *The Primal Scream*, describes the scream as a signifier of the "psychophysical split" and its erasure simultaneously:

To become whole again, it is necessary to feel and recognize the split and scream out the connection that will unify the person again. The more intensely that split [that is the primal pain] is felt, the more intense and intrinsic the unifying experience.¹⁰⁶

Far more than mere cathartic release appears to be at play here. A black metal screamer potentially unifies his/her two personas in the moment of screaming, despite the scream's elicitation of listeners to recognize its implicit differences to the human voice. Just as the vocalists' personas bleed into other areas of life—from personal to professional and vice versa—the black metal scream is the crucial intersection of those personas, where they become one in an intense expunging of emotion, often resulting in physical and emotional pain (and possibly healing).

In that a scream both simultaneously hides the singer's human condition and potentially splits and fuses the two personas at play should seem contradictory. The voice's ability to carry selfhood seems compromised by the scream's unintelligibility, but in fact, the scream shows the double life at its most material.¹⁰⁷ To again echo Barthes, the grain of the voice suggests it is in a double posture, doubly producing both language and music.¹⁰⁸ I argue that the voice in black metal screaming is essentially in a double posture of producing music and identity (through language and text), which is consistent with Barthes's conception of the human voice as always

¹⁰⁶ Arthur Janov, *The Primal Scream* (London: Abacus, 1970), 41, as cited in Kutschke, 65-6.

¹⁰⁷ For Artaud, for instance, the scream represented raw existence. See Stephen Barber, *Artaud: The Screaming Body* (London: Creation Books, 1999).

¹⁰⁸ Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 269.

carrying meaningful speech. This double posture in black metal is achieved by splitting the identity and putting it back together. The black metal scream, much like the mask, plays with the boundary between human and other. Just as the mask has represented inhumanness, so does the black metal scream. However, in that the scream largely remains unintelligible to the uninitiated, the grain of the voice begins to pull apart, and identifying a black metal singer as a human is a contested process by this play with semantic sense and nonsense. The idea that nonsense, or disorder, would be potent in a ritual of black metal performance should be unsurprising. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, notes that: “Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder...in ritual, form is treated as if it were quick with power to maintain itself in being, yet always liable to attack.”¹⁰⁹ In both cases of vocal and facial masking, these ritual gestures fail to erase human agency, just as a mask implies a crafter so does a scream imply a screamer. The voice, however, marks the pain of the double life, that painful distance between two selves that seems to be constantly renegotiated through vocal performance.

Peter Schwenger, in “Phenomenology of the Scream,” argues that the scream is an attempt of the self escaping the body, and what is revealed is rather “something beyond the personal.”¹¹⁰ But Schwenger also notes that the scream is “ultimately a matter of the flesh, of situatedness, of being-there.”¹¹¹ The scream therefore implies a realization of being, or being-there, and the anxiety or horror of existence. This is, of course, related to the pain of the double life. These are two different kinds of fleshy pains—one of a hyperawareness of existence and the other of an anxiety that attempts to bridge the gap between two kinds of existences. The voice

¹⁰⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 95.

¹¹⁰ Peter Schwenger, “Phenomenology of the Scream,” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 382-395.

¹¹¹ Schwenger, 387.

appears aware of this double posture as well, emanating from the flesh of the vocal cords and the body/mouth as acoustic chamber, but also as a signifier of the anxieties of existence(s). The body, however, also hears the scream, whether emitted by itself or another. One interpretation of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* asserts that the central person in the image, standing on the bridge with mouth agape, is not the screamer.¹¹² His hands cover his ears and this person is actually realizing the terror of listening to the scream, which Munch had allegedly heard (or hallucinated) while witnessing the blood-red skies caused by the Krakatoa explosion of the 1880s.¹¹³ Schwenger asserts that the screamer is nature itself, but that Munch did not paint the scream *per se*. Rather, Munch has painted the horror, the anxiety, the terror of the scream, and this is an important distinction.¹¹⁴ Black metal necessarily both screams and hears itself. Black metal screamers emit terror and experience it as all listeners of the music do. This is thus a shared experience of the double posture of pain. While masking must remain more or less unchangeable, the vocal screams of black metal are more closely related to the temporality of performance and thus appear as a changeable representation of the black metal double life. Particularly though, the scream serves as a constant reminder of the physicality of the pain of dying, which, along with other non-musical activities (such as crime) comes to be aestheticized in the music. Screaming, Schwenger asserts, does not radiate the I-ness of the screamer; every scream is like every other. Here, I must disagree. The very nature of black metal has proven that screaming is particular to the individual emitting it, his flesh, and the pain he wishes to escape.

¹¹² Philip Friedheim, "Wagner and the Aesthetics of the Scream," *19th-Century Music* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 63-70. Friedheim's interpretation is really first articulated in Reinhold Heller, *Edvard Munch: The Scream* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973). Heller cites critic Karl Scheffler's many observations about painting and poetry.

¹¹³ Marilyn S. Olson, Donald W. Olson, and Russell L. Doescher, "On the Blood-Red Sky of Munch's 'The Scream'," *Environmental History* 12, no. 1 (January 2007): 131-135.

¹¹⁴ Schwenger, 392.

3.2 SONIC ABJECTION

Why pain though? What are black metallers doing when they force themselves to re-experience pain, when they split their self to make it whole? The scream suggests that they simply wish to escape the bodies that experience pain, but the answer to those questions must also be both political and theoretical, given the nature of black metal. The early history of this scene, its performances, and its politics suggest an extra-musical performance of self-abjection, in which the musical and personal lives of black metal musicians aestheticize and politicize abjection in congruent ways. I use the term abjection as both Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva define it.¹¹⁵ Bataille explains “abject things” first through the “imperative act of exclusion,” a constituent behavior of anal eroticism.¹¹⁶ Socially, this imperative act takes on the form of sadism in sovereignty. Kristeva expands on this understanding of abjection in a number of ways, describing “a ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing,” but also more simply and concretely as the “loathing of filth, waste, food, etc.” that protects her self.¹¹⁷ This abjection can be understood as between subjecthood (being separated from the mother) and objecthood (dying and being a corpse).¹¹⁸ The two definitions of abjection supplied by Bataille and Kristeva are

¹¹⁵ Keith Kahn-Harris makes similar observations about transgression and abjection in his monograph, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford, London: Berg, 2007), 29. I wish to both expand on his comments by digging deeper into Bataille and Kristeva, and also apply the concepts more specifically to black metal, not just extreme metal generally.

¹¹⁶ Georges Bataille, “Abjection and Miserable Forms,” in *More & Less*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (Pasadena, CA: MIT Press, 1993), 20.

¹¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

¹¹⁸ There might also be valuable overlap here with an understanding of Artaud’s concept of the *subjectile*, between subject and object, beneath and above, etc. See Jacques Derrida, “From ‘To unsense the subjectile’,” in *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, ed. Edward Scheer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 125-136.

more or less the same, but have subtle differences in regards to personal and social abjection, both of which are relevant to black metal.

Black metal's early history is a contested one, especially in terms of the importance of its extra-musical and personal events, and this importance is fought over by bands all over the world still to this day. If not explicitly fought over, the history of black metal is still a starting point for bands in other scenes simply because of its infamousness.¹¹⁹ On the surface of black metal in the early 1990s, it appeared as a unifying musical practice in which young white men from the suburbs around Oslo could rebel against both their bourgeois parents and the lame death metal being made in Sweden. More than that however, this community unified around a nefarious set of ideological extremes—anti-Christianity, Satanism, white supremacy, and criminal actions that lashed out at mainstream Norwegian society in various ways.

Black metal visually and sonically performs abjection. As we have seen, practitioners of the music engage in multiple masking practices: Satanic pseudonyms mask their given names, white and black “corpsepaint” literally masks their faces, and animalistic, pathological, inhuman screams mask their voices. By taking on a persona perpetually between life and death, black metal practitioners perform a duplicitous identification with real subjectivity or objectivity, in which we have seen their imbalance lead to crime and/or death. In many cases, this subjectivity appears temporarily inhuman, but in some cases, conscious subjectivity is obliterated, as was the case when Dead killed himself. Kristeva explains such a conflicted identity as the cause of abjection. In her taxonomy of abject individuals, she describes: “The in-between, the ambiguous,

¹¹⁹ Birk, “South of Helvete (And East of Eden).” Black metal performers from Italy and France explain themselves and their scenes often in relation to the Norwegian scene. The history of crime is always a topic of debate.

the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience.”¹²⁰ While existing as both a corpse and not a corpse, black metallers embody abjecthood—a space in which they can potentially commit crimes without fear of taboo. The crimes that black metal performers committed thus appear to abjectly disturb societal order. By burning down dozens of stave churches, members of black metal’s “Black Circle”¹²¹ attempted to disorder the society that brought them up, often quite comfortably. Other black metal crimes were much deadlier, e.g., when Varg killed Euronymous or when Faust murdered a stranger. Faust once said of his crime, “I have to stand up for what I’ve done...there’s no remorse.”¹²² Black metal crimes writ large, including suicide and murders of members and non-members alike, are more than mere societal amorality as they typically show no remorse, an assumed normal response in contemporary Western societies. Rather, crimes mark the boundaries of black metal’s esotericism—they become rites of passage and sublimations toward abjection. Further, black metal’s transgressions present an incomprehensible ethos to the outside world—a tightly defined culture that greater Norwegian society largely cannot understand, and in some cases, finds hilarious. Yet, the crimes are so inextricably linked to the music that black metal appears as no mere genre or subculture. Black metal calls for a complete, abject mode of being: an existence of non-existence in which practitioners transgress any kind of class boundaries in an attempt to exist artistically and politically on the fringe. Abjection is perhaps visually and conceptually easy to imagine or perceive. The crimes that black metal musicians committed were often represented at live shows in the form of Gothic *mise-en-scène*, pyrotechnics, and bloodletting, not to mention the masking

¹²⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

¹²¹ The “Black Circle” was a term used by the media to describe the small group of individuals in the bands Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone, Emperor, etc.

¹²² Moynihan and Søderlind, 114.

at the center of this study. Sonic abjection, on the other hand, requires a close and comparative listening.

In many ways, there exist examples from black metal that explicitly proclaim abjection and tightly link black metal masking, the transgressions of the practitioners, and the music. Varg conceived an entire album for Burzum, called *Åske*, around the church burnings, including a ruined church as the album cover (and select copies came with a lighter). Dead's suicide was also featured as an album cover—an image that disturbs easily. Instances like these have caused black metal to be commented on as visibly presenting the abject in Kristeva's terms, i.e., by making visible that which should remain inside or invisible, blood and guts, rotting corpses, etc.¹²³ This is a visual, aesthetic abjection, but I also wish to bring out a sonic or musical one. By closely listening to the screamed vocals of Emperor's 1994 song "Towards the Pantheon," I wish to show that many more examples of early Norwegian black metal are implicitly abject and covertly proclaim abjection. Understanding Emperor in this fashion thus has greater consequences for the entire musical community as it exists and is understood today.

Emperor's "Towards the Pantheon" alternates between heady, intense harmonic progressions primarily driven by distorted electric guitar and minor mode atmospheric textures between the bass guitar and keyboard synthesizer. It is generic, but also foundational for early symphonic black metal. The piece's instrumental forces are unchanging and consistent in their affective output. The music's lyricism and vocality, I argue, sonically abject selfhood in a revelatory and destructive way. Soon after a short prelude introduces the work's primary harmonic motif, the vocals enter and propel the listener towards a mode of hearing in which the song's lyrics predicate certain vocal affects. This is initiated by an impressively long vocal

¹²³ Brenda S. G. Walter, "Eviscerating the Body of Black Metal," *Dirge Magazine*, 2016.

scream that lasts more than twenty seconds. The lyrics of the first verse, which are sung in English, then follow:

May the wolves start to howl again.
May the age of darkness arise.
We will travel for eternities
Into the unknown to reach what we seek.
Fight the ways through the barriers of light,
Through the wastelands
Where nothing but grief have become the eternal memory.

The lyrics are admittedly generic to black metal, which often focuses on themes such as darkness and light, the unknown, and eternity. This passage, however, is most interesting in its first two lines: “May the wolves start to howl again. / May the age of darkness arise.” As the opening lines to the song, the listener is confronted simultaneously with a request and its affective counterpart in the singer’s vocal timbre and style. Emperor’s singer, Ihsahn, sings with unique vocal resonance—his voice is hoarse and tinny, rough but thin. It barely squeaks through the instrumental track and is not easily comprehended during a first listening. Through knowledge of the song’s lyrics or multiple listenings, a listener can understand the affective similarities between Ihsahn’s vocal timbre and the content of the lyrics he sings, i.e., a wolf’s howling. By lyrically invoking the howling of wolves, the singer metalinguistically identifies with the prayer-like request for animalistic howling. Ihsahn reimagines abjection of the self by masking the human and vocally identifying with the inhuman—the wolves and darkness—as simultaneously embedded in his screams. Sonically and textually, therefore, the scream abjects selfhood in order for the screamer *to be abject*.¹²⁴ Abject art, according to Hal Foster, tends to do one of two things: to approach abjection by identifying with it or to represent its condition.¹²⁵ Black metal, we can

¹²⁴ Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* 78 (Autumn 1996): 106-124.

¹²⁵ Foster, 115-116.

posit, does both in its performances *of* abjection and transgression, in which the mask and the scream obliterate the subject.

The performed abjection in Emperor's music is not, however, an organic experience of being. Ashley Tauchert, in *Against Transgression*, writes that: "Transgression is a liberating act, a means of revising, transvaluing, escaping a dead past...it is reactionary."¹²⁶ Emperor's musical and extra-musical activities, transgressive in different ways, are similar reactionary attempts of revision. In this sense, abjection becomes relative. In black metal's case, abjection provides a mode of non-existence through which society, namely the State and Church, could potentially be undermined or subverted, and is therefore a mode of political resistance that makes sense given masking's potential for subverting power. It is as Bataille writes: "personal abjection and...the abjection of one class imply the existence of a constraint."¹²⁷ For Bataille, abjection inherently describes the struggle between the working and middle classes—the middle class inherently excludes the repulsive working class, which is unable to escape abjection because its condition is self-perpetuating.¹²⁸ In the case of Norwegian black metal, what constitutes an abjected social group is not clearly classist, as practitioners come from a set of classes whose socioeconomic status (basically middle class) is not normally abjected. Rather, the social constraint that results in abjection here exists in the violent repulsion that appears shared by black metal's Black Circle and the social majority of religious or political conformers that saw black metal as threatening. Black metal appears abjected in a third kind of social understanding of the self—having rejected the working class's cyclical misery as well as the middle class's conformity, i.e., the social

¹²⁶ Ashley Tauchert, *Against Transgression* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing 2008), 2.

¹²⁷ Bataille, 11.

¹²⁸ Paul Hegarty, "As Above So Below: Informe/Sublime/Abject," in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 77.

constraints of Norway's prominent State-and-Church relationship, which accounts for nearly 88% of the population proclaiming membership to the Church, despite only 2-3% regularly worshipping.¹²⁹ Abjection in a political sense works similarly to Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and grotesque realism.¹³⁰

Karen Halnon has described "heavy metal carnival," using Bakhtin's concept of carnival.¹³¹ Halnon's fieldwork of concerts focuses on bands such as Alice Cooper, KISS, GWAR, Marilyn Manson, and Slipknot, but the concept of carnival more or less describes the innate characteristics of metal that allow it political and cultural force. Metal naturally challenges social authority, taste, morality, and potentially commercialism. Halnon explains heavy metal carnival through "grotesque realism," a kind of two-way mirror that from the outside appears alienating and from the inside appears as a liminal utopia of creative freedom.¹³² The transgressive nature of the carnival space that metal inhabits and embodies is perhaps heightened by black metal's ability to transgress musical and criminal boundaries. Bakhtin's concept of the carnival creates a space of anti-structure, where proper order is subverted or destroyed and typical conventions are suspended, a culture opposite official culture.¹³³ The grotesque body as described by Bakhtin shares a number of characteristics with Kristeva's bodily abjection; namely, exposing what is meant to remain hidden. Degrading, for Bakhtin, is concerned primarily with lowering high culture through the dirtiness of the earth and the body, again foreshadowing Kristeva's abjection. For Bakhtin, masking reveals the essence of the grotesque,

¹²⁹ Moynihan and Söderlind, 40.

¹³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹³¹ Karen Halnon, "Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism," *Symbolic Interaction* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 33-48.

¹³² Halnon, 35.

¹³³ Bakhtin, 10.

and men of the Middle Ages, he asserts, lived two lives—official and carnival/grotesque.¹³⁴ The mask therefore has much the same function, and we can similarly posit that masking creates carnival for black metal musicians in the same way that it creates duplicity. Black metal masking is thus a politico-cultural action that presupposes lowness, degradation, and doubleness/abjection. An important difference, however, between Norwegian black metal bands and the American heavy metal bands that Halnon examines, is the problem of satire and irony. In short, bands such as GWAR and Slipknot largely perform carnival within the confines of the concert, which is usually tongue-in-cheek. Norwegian black metal takes itself very seriously, although fans have often wondered about certain bands winking at the audience, such as in Immortal’s campy album covers. Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone, Gorgoroth, and Dimmu Borgir perform on and off the stage with almost no camp whatsoever. Navigating carnival without parody is potentially very difficult to do, as parody is an important constituent of degradation, which is essential to grotesque realism.¹³⁵ The elements of carnival—hierarchical subversions, masking, etc.—in black metal are displayed with sincerity and have real consequences for the world outside of the concert space. Similarly, thinking back on masking’s ability to blur the boundaries between audience and performer, carnival is “not a spectacle seen,” but participated in.¹³⁶ Black metal’s political potency is perhaps contingent on its ability to exchange the grotesqueness for pure realism. This realism is most manifest in the earthly battle that took place between black metal and the Church.

The hegemony of the Church in Norway, the official religion of which is actually Protestantism, sets apart black metal there from black metal in other places. Lutheranism in

¹³⁴ Bakhtin, 40, 96.

¹³⁵ Bakhtin, 20.

¹³⁶ Bakhtin, 7.

Norway was responsible for the suppression of native religious practices.¹³⁷ Black metal there thus required a theistic Satanism that diametrically opposed Christianity, which has led some writers to think of masking in terms of Christian iconography.¹³⁸ My intentions here are similar in arguing that masking allowed black metal performers the ability to transgress society in a number of forms, political or religious. Their transgressions were largely inspired by the desire to destroy Christianity, potentially because black metallers conflated Christianity with Protestantism, and to reinstate Viking or pagan religious beliefs thereafter. Paganism is often a red herring for those who write about black metal due to the convergence of black metal with folk elements later on, mostly occurring after the church burnings.¹³⁹ On the one hand, some bands were explicitly pagan and desired a return to pre-modern Viking paganism. Generally though, these bands did not mask and did not participate in the criminal spree of the early 1990s. Those bands that did—Mayhem, Emperor, Burzum, Darkthrone—were explicitly anti-Christian and/or Satanist, despite the irony that many of their band names and pseudonyms were taken from mythologies, Norse or otherwise. As I noted earlier, masking itself might have an historical precedent in the mythic Oskorei. Some of the band names, song and album titles, and lyrics

¹³⁷ In fact, the process of modernization in Norway was largely dependent on Lutheranism. The toxicity of Catholicism might also be seen as historically associated with the simultaneous arrival of the Black Death. See Gunnar Skirbekk, *Multiple Modernities: A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011).

¹³⁸ Richardson, 152. Other writers have painted metal's Satanism as being more or less mislead. Keith Kahn-Harris describes it as a misplaced misanthropy (Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 40), but black metallers of the scene I look at really worshipped a horned Christian devil, in many cases. Kahn-Harris also believes the amount of people from this scene are such a minority, that the author discounts transgression as a viable desire, which I find unsatisfactory (Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 49).

¹³⁹ See Kennet Granholm, "'Sons of Northern Darkness': Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music," *Numen* 58, no. 4 (2011), 514-544. Granholm's article includes a brief history of Germanic neo-paganism.

shared Satanic and pagan themes interchangeably, potentially desiring a generic occult vibe.¹⁴⁰ Later, as Deena Weinstein notes, black metal bands matured and often shifted easily from a Christian/Satanic worldview to a pagan, Viking, or Norse set of beliefs.¹⁴¹ Of the early black metal bands that avoided Christian symbols for Viking ones, Enslaved stands out as having been explicitly pagan from the start. The band was also close to black metal's Black Circle, particularly to Emperor, but they avoided involvement in church burnings and rejected the label "black metal" for "Viking metal."¹⁴² Of the musicians who shifted from anti-Christianity or pro-Satanism to paganism, Vark Vikernes is the most salient example in that he found paganism and a deep engagement with Odinism and Norse mythology better fed his racist worldview, a.k.a. pan-Germanic heathenism. It has since propelled him to be an important global authority on white supremacy. But, for the very specific time and place of black metal's anti-Christianity and church burnings, their transgressions cannot necessarily be understood as fueled by pagan desires alone, for their brand of anti-Christianity was so dependent on using and perverting the symbols and characters of Christianity.¹⁴³ While the media's reaction to black metal was crucial in the popular conception of black metal as Satanic and therefore devil-worshipping, the labels pagan or heathen ignore the theistic Satanism clearly at play in the music and presentation of Mayhem, Darkthrone, Gorgoroth, and so forth. Religion in metal is a topic that has been evaluated

¹⁴⁰ Granholm, 528-529.

¹⁴¹ Deena Weinstein, "Pagan Metal," in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013), 58-75. Also see Hagen, "Musical Style, Ideology, and Mythology" for an examination of the Nordic and Germanic cultures that some black metal bands sought to resurrect.

¹⁴² Weinstein, "Pagan Metal," 60.

¹⁴³ My argument here is also in direct opposition to the arguments of Moynihan and Söderlind in *Lords of Chaos*, where they claim that black metal chose to fight against Norway and Christianity due to a nation-wide media ban on violence and horror led to young Norwegians witnessing British heavy metal of the 1980s as completely serious and without camp.

rigorously by scholars in religious studies. For example, Marcus Moberg, in his evaluation of scholarly writing on religion in metal, found that religion in metal has been interpreted as providing cultural meaning-making, important resources for constructing identity, and the means for subversive ideologies—all of which are relevant to black metal. Particularly though, I want to dissect how black metal’s crimes *intersect* with cultural meaning-making, constructed identities, and subversive ideologies.¹⁴⁴ In other words, what is the relationship between black metal’s transgressions and Norwegian institutional power, Church or State?

Black metal’s transgressions, however, might seem to confirm the hegemony of Norway’s political and religious centralization. As Terry Eagleton puts it: “If transgression is to be real, so must be the Law it flouts, which means that transgression cannot help confirming the very power it infringes.”¹⁴⁵ Bataille has similarly noted that transgressions are merely possibilities within taboo that recalls the rules of law.¹⁴⁶ Transgression of this nature therefore seems capable of becoming pointless, or worse, capable of creating new discourses of power. Emperor, and black metal writ large, must do more than merely transgress music or society, for its abject mode of being implicates black metal lifestyle as beyond the power it infringes—although there are exceptions in black metal’s history.¹⁴⁷ I suggest that black metal’s transgressions can therefore be understood as “abjective,” a set of desires or possibly objectives

¹⁴⁴ See Marcus Moberg, “Religion in Popular Music or Popular Music as Religion? A Critical Review of Scholarly Writing on the Place of Religion in Metal Music and Culture,” *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 1 (February 2012): 113-130. Moberg evaluates scholarly discussions of religion in metal and cites Bossius, Cordero, Mørk, and Partridge in this discussion.

¹⁴⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 152.

¹⁴⁶ Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 109.

¹⁴⁷ Here I refer to Varg Vikernes, the “Bogeyman of Black Metal,” whose acts of terrorism were eventually exorcised from black metal and became a potent but different strand of neo-Nazi white supremacy.

with the caveat that they are only achieved asymptotically or seem outright impossible to normative members of society. Certainly, history tells us that black metal ultimately did very little to upset the status quo of Norway's social condition. Rather, black metal, as much extreme metal is often commented on in terms of aesthetics, is an asymptotic striving—a striving for sometimes unclear ideological desires, or in this case, black metal's purported "abjectives."

How black metal's "abjective" comes to be reached by its practitioners is through the very act of physically and vocally masking. Bataille's formation of abjection accounts for the "double movement of exclusion and intrusion."¹⁴⁸ The dichotomous identities inherent to black metal embody such a movement in performance, both of musical and societal transgressions. For Emperor, the two found common ground in masking. I again ask us to consider Faust's warning:

Corpsepaint shouldn't be used everyday. It should only be used when you feel like some dark event would happen... At such events, I look at myself as one of [the] creatures of the night...a child of darkness.¹⁴⁹

Music and violence for Faust thus appear as inherently two modes of criminal transgression, i.e. when dark events happen in two ways. In both scenarios, donning corpsepaint allows the practitioner to take on that abjected mode of existence—a creature of the night, a child of darkness—as a stable position. These are surely the kinds of marginal existences that Kristeva and Bataille write of when they write of abjected individuals—ambiguous, liminal, in between being and non-being. In "Towards the Pantheon," we hear Ihsahn simultaneously mask his voice and identify with inhuman modes of being, similar to Faust's creatures of the night. In the song's second verse, we hear a physical manifestation of black metal's duplicity:

Shield of life, sword of death held up high into the sky.

¹⁴⁸ Hegarty, "As Above So Below," 76.

¹⁴⁹ Daniel, 40-1.

Guided by the shining moon in the starry sky above.
In the horizon beyond black clouds of destruction rages
Like dancing shadows of pain (of pain).

In the quatrain's final two lines, Ihsahn's voice is joined by another (it is unclear if he is joined by guitarist Samoth or if his voice is doubled on the recording). In either case, the voice sounds as if it audibly doubles itself. Similar to the metalinguistic work in the first verse, Ihsahn's voice plays upon the content of the lyrics. In the verse that follows, the lyrics take on an explicit first-person plural perspective: "We will grant Him their pain," and ending with "the throne will be ours." But in these lines, the voice returns to Ihsahn's solo track. This short moment in the song's second verse therefore appears as a splitting of the dichotomous identity that is ever-present in the vocal track—confirmed by the use of first-person plural in the verse thereafter. We thus hear Janov's splitting of the self sonically manifested in Ihsahn's vocal part. Vocally and subjectively masking themselves, Ihsahn and Emperor musically embrace the abjection of the black metal community. The "abjective" of the group would be difficult to know for certain at the level of the artist, but it is in fact their aspiration to an abject state of being that would appear, to an outsider, as an impossible want.

Abjectives might best be framed by a discussion of metal's potential for political and moral resistance.¹⁵⁰ As discussed, there was a clear enemy to Norwegian black metal: the State and Christianity. Perhaps less clear is the position of masking vis-à-vis political possibilities. By masking themselves, I have argued, black metal performers exist outside of humanity and perhaps, outside of political reality. Masking yields a double life, as we have seen, and this double life complicates differences between private and public spheres of discourse. Keith Kahn-

¹⁵⁰ On heavy metal as resistance to popular culture, see Niall Scott, "Heavy Metal as Resistance," in *Heavy Metal Studies and Popular Culture*, ed. Brenda Walter, Gabby Riches, Dave Snell, and Bryan Bardine (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 19-35.

Harris, in his study of black metal using subcultural theory, describes the scene as having the unique paradox of radically different public and private identities, which often allows for publicly racist discourse spoken by privately non-racist people, or that such a racist discourse can be considered apolitical by practitioners.¹⁵¹ More broadly speaking, their abjected lives inhabit spaces outside of Norwegian rule, or at least they believed that such was the case. This position makes certain impossibilities possible, as was the case of discourse in Bakhtin's carnival.¹⁵² For example, Kahn-Harris cites a notorious incident with the band Darkthrone, in which the band released a statement that their album *Transilvanian Hunger* was beyond criticism, and those who criticized the album engaged in "obviously Jewish behavior."¹⁵³ Even after a retraction of the statement, the album went out with the words "Norsk Arisk black metal," or Norwegian Aryan black metal, on its sleeve. Darkthrone's response was basically to say that the band is not political, that is, its music is autonomous from social structures. Being anti-Semitic or anti-Christian is an anti-ideological stance for Norwegian black metallers that seem, perhaps, more interested in imaginary religious wars than actual racial or political ones. Privately, Darkthrone is not comprised of racist people. Privately, most members of the scene practice silence on the subject. It is in the realm of music that they sound out racism, and in this sense, black metal becomes the public mode of being for its members, despite the willful ignorance that Kahn-Harris has noted the scene practices towards scene politics within greater society—ultimately,

¹⁵¹ Keith Kahn-Harris, "The 'failure' of youth culture: Reflexivity, music and politics in the black metal scene," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 95-111.

¹⁵² Bakhtin, 10.

¹⁵³ Kahn-Harris, "The 'failure' of youth culture," 104.

this depoliticization of music by its practitioners is why Kahn-Harris believes it “fails” as a scene.¹⁵⁴

Race in the scene is always a contested topic. Besides the overwhelming lack of diversity among the artists who made black metal in this particular scene, the question of whether or not those artists are white supremacists seems always present. Many outsiders assume the music is racist, when the actual situation is much more complex. Benjamin Teitelbaum’s book *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* provides an ethnography of Nordic, mostly Swedish, nationalisms and music—surprisingly not metal or rock, but rap, reggae, folk, and “freedom pop.”¹⁵⁵ Teitelbaum distinguishes between three kinds of nationalists in Nordic countries: race revolutionaries (Nazis/Aryans), cultural nationalists (can identify as Swede, Norwegian, etc. based on cultural practices, regardless of ethnicity), and identitarianisms (racists who do not believe in racial or ethnic purity as an end, committed to propaganda and intellectual activism).¹⁵⁶ These formations are newer, and black metal of the 1990s as a scene would not truly fit any of them in a particular way, although they most closely resemble cultural nationalists. Norwegian black metal musicians, with the exception of Varg, were not significantly concerned with racial purity, but used shocking language (“Norwegian Aryan Black Metal”) as part of their anti-immigrant nationalism. As abjective discourse, the assumed nationalist basis for some, but certainly not all, of Norwegian black metal appears as a means of making identity through difference. Simultaneously, this binary of self and Other has an analogue in the binary nature predicated by the black metal double, between life and death.

¹⁵⁴ Kahn-Harris, “The ‘failure’ of youth culture,” 105-8.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

In the particular case of masking, humans who inhabit live bodies can perform as dead ones within the frame of abjectives. On the stage or at the crime scene, dead bodies enact political change, potentially subverting typical hierarchies in the world of necropolitics, where the dead usually have little say in flows or structures of power. Norway, in this period directly after the Cold War, struggled with Russia for power and energy, and implicitly this struggle contributed to internal security concerns.¹⁵⁷ Norwegian identity in the Derridean sense found its binary opposite (and its Eastern other in Said's terms) in Russia at this global moment, while at the same time attempted to navigate the erasure of Norwegian-ness that happened in the discourse of *nordicity* that regionally grouped Norway with Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden as a single version of European-ness.¹⁵⁸ European identity politics thus relegated Norwegian identity a marginalized position, and this is perhaps exemplified in Norwegian black metal's rivalry with Swedish death metal. It is perhaps unsurprising that Nordic countries experienced an explosion of nationalist movements at this time as well.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, black metal musicians internally looked to separate themselves from the "inside" cultural politics of Norway and Christianity. Black metal musicians needed to counter the public Norwegian narrative, the basic state discourse that defined the national identity of its citizens as inherently altruistic and globally concerned with the common good.¹⁶⁰ Rather, as we have seen in its performance of deadness, black metal otherizes itself to this politic. While I suggest that black metal masking

¹⁵⁷ For a Foucauldian discourse analysis of this struggle from 1990-2005, see Leif Christian Jensen, *International Relations in the Arctic: Norway and the Struggle for Power in the New North* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

¹⁵⁸ See Pertti Joenniemi and Marko Lehti, "The Encounter Between the Nordic and the Northern: Torn Apart but Meeting Again?" in *Post-Cold War Identity Politics: Northern and Baltic Experiences*, ed. Marko Lehti and David Smith (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 128-156.

¹⁵⁹ Teitelbaum, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Jensen, 168.

and ritual is a necropolitical subversion of power in that it performs live apolitical dead-ness, it should be noted that this is not a typical topic in discussions of necropolitics, which can include discussions of sovereignty, slavery, colonialism, mass genocide, and technologies of war. First, I would frame a *necropolitics of black metal* in terms of the scene's ubiquitous violence. For Barthes, violence is an inescapable product of power.¹⁶¹ Achille Mbembe, in the article "Necropolitics," similarly describes the fundamental attributes of sovereignty as the control over mortality.¹⁶² Thinking of this flow of concepts in its reverse direction, violence and particularly murder in black metal can appear as a bid for power, or at least as a bid for social control/symbolic power.¹⁶³ At the same time, the masked performance of deadness is also a play on mortality's relationship with hegemony. Because violence is ritualized by black metallers—who occupy ritualized and masked bodies—power is naturally relegated to one side of the binary between ritual and other.¹⁶⁴ In other words, the black metal ritual of burning down churches confirms the power of the Church in Norway (just as Terry Eagleton had noted that transgression implies the power of "the Law"). Similarly, Mary Douglas has commented on ritualized bodies as symbolic mediums for political bodies.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, ritualization also infers that black

¹⁶¹ Roland Barthes, "On the Subject of Violence," in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 310.

¹⁶² Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40. Mbembe builds this concept off of Foucault's biopower and the biopolitical. Although a foundational text in necropolitics, Bataille's "general economy" of waste seems to foreshadow many of the same formulations of people, government, and death. See chapters 2-4 of Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000).

¹⁶³ Bell, 137-140, comments on the distinctions between symbolic and secular power, and their relationships to rituals and institutions. For Foucault, such a relationship between power and violence is not a given.

¹⁶⁴ Bell, 78, shows that ritual always assumes an opposition of things inside and outside of the ritual.

¹⁶⁵ Douglas, 128.

metal/ritualized bodies look to transform the structures of power that exist in a ritualized state.¹⁶⁶ That violence and politics are conflated in the black metal scene is not overly surprising, nor is it historically unusual (or taboo) given the histories of Europe and Christianity—histories that black metallers knew (or imagined) to be responsible for the makeup of contemporary Norway.¹⁶⁷ The conflation of the Church, the historical position of Protestantism, and society generally as the enemy of black metal is, however, significant to the political activities of black metallers.

Namely, I argue these activities take the form of a political agency through performed deadness. Essentially Nietzschean in its kind of nihilism, black metal takes Christianity as its point of departure from the world it engaged with nominally.¹⁶⁸ Yet black metal extends beyond the Nietzschean understanding of nihilism and appears as a total annihilation of social, political, and epistemological values. Also fundamentally modern, black metal clearly belongs to a kind of nihilism that is performed and acted out (ritually, as we have seen, but not always regularly). Nihilism may conjure up images of a total apathy towards the world or life, generally. On the other hand, there are many kinds of nihilisms, and black metal's may appear "active," perhaps akin to Marxist revolution, anarchism, fascist revolution, etc.¹⁶⁹ Rather, black metal embodies double lives (i.e., often as corpses) as a nihilism that is repeated through performance and enacted through criminal and musical transgressions. This is therefore a post-nihilism, concerned with the already-assumed death of the subject, and therefore allows nihilism repetitive, political,

¹⁶⁶ Bell, 145.

¹⁶⁷ See Robert Muchembled, *A History of Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 1-30. Muchembled's focus is particularly on youth violence in the European Middle Ages, differences in cosmopolitan and provincial places of violence, and gendered notions of violence.

¹⁶⁸ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 8.

¹⁶⁹ Critchley, 13.

and social force. Such nihilism might even take the form of a kind of aesthetic autonomy, wherein black metal negates certain links to contemporary society in order to temporarily imagine a different kind of artistic and political body.¹⁷⁰

Black metallers act out live deadness as political agents. By masking and embodying subjectivities of non-being beings, black metal musicians consciously inhabit bodies that materially do not exist. Much more so than existing on political or social fringes, this community thus appears to inhabit another mode of being that allows for a different set of political possibilities, i.e. abjectives. At the same time, black metal is not a sovereign body, which is the focus of Mbembe's arguments about necropolitics, or Giorgio Agamben's focus in *Homo Sacer*.¹⁷¹ Rather, I wish for us to reimagine necropolitics in terms of the local or microhistorical. This understanding of necropolitics and abjection requires a rejection of a Hegelian understanding of death and subjection, in which human death is voluntary and necessarily separates the human from the non-human.¹⁷² Black metal fuses the human and non-human, death is not only voluntary but played with in a highly dramatic fashion, and the human becomes abject, not subject. Bataille's conceptions of death embody this self-consciousness. Black metal seems to beg this kind of orientation towards death in its performance and embodiment of it, but at the same time, should take from Hegel the signification of death as a means to truth, perhaps creating an epistemology of the corpse that embraces a death.¹⁷³ Abjection for Bataille comes

¹⁷⁰ Adorno makes a similar claim of Beckett's work post-Holocaust. See Critchley, 27.

¹⁷¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁷² Mbembe, 14.

¹⁷³ Mbembe, 15. Also see Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*, 56. Bataille writes "beings only die to be born," and that life and the void mingle, ostensibly refuting Hegel's master/slave relationship between life and death. This epistemology would seem paradoxical in that it supplants the silence of the corpse with the scream of the process of dying.

from absence, such as the absence of life in the corpse.¹⁷⁴ By playing with this absence, black metallers temporarily transgress the binary of life and death, and therefore transgress society abjectly. The transgression of society in a completely abject sense presupposes the relationship between taboo (death) and politics (which for Mbembe is always concerned with death), and thus necropolitics can come to adequately describe the ways that abject individuals interact with the natural world and the political or sovereign world. Black metal performers, living abject lives, come to temporarily make decisions about mortality that, in a political system, they cannot make. Abject lives appear similar to Agamben and Benjamin's "bare life," or Carl Schmitt's "real life."¹⁷⁵ Besides the instances of violence and murder, the band Mayhem's response to the suicide of their vocalist Dead embodies this paradox of abject lives making decisions about mortality. When Euronymous decided to take pictures of Dead's corpse, pictures that would later appear on the cover of a Mayhem bootleg album, he displayed one side of black metal necropolitics as the inability to mourn properly. In the case of the Christian village church, Bataille describes this site as inherently abject—related to attraction and repulsion (and therefore both right and left poles of the sacred)—but it is a place that does not preclude its own dissolution.¹⁷⁶ Black metal performers, in burning down churches, complete this dissolution in an abject, political sense of destruction.

This connection between transgression/violence and politics is unsurprising, but black metal also supposes closeness between the body, the mouth, the scream, and the politics of Norway. This is predicated by the intimate relation between Agamben's "bare life" and the sovereign body. Agamben describes *homo sacer*, or sacred man, a life that can be killed but also

¹⁷⁴ Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*, 62.

¹⁷⁵ Agamben, 67.

¹⁷⁶ Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*, 92.

exists beyond political or religious law because it is not recognized as homicide or sacrifice.¹⁷⁷ Black metal lives, abjected from society in two ways—musically and criminally—occupies a similar relationship vis-à-vis Norwegian law, as an attempt or abjective to perform music and crime beyond law. Agamben expands on *homo sacer* as a living statue, the double of the self, and as a body that excludes itself from the profane or the religious. Rather, the body of *homo sacer* comes to be defined by its “symbiosis with death without belonging to the world of the deceased.”¹⁷⁸ This is precisely the liminal experience that black metallers play with in their double lives. Of course, Varg Vikernes was eventually tried for his murder of Euronymous and was guilty of homicide. In material terms, black metallers do not exactly inhabit the kind of bare lives that Agamben is referring to because of the privilege they held as white men from middle class families (and due to the nature of Norwegian society and law). Still, Agamben notes that the bandit and outlaw that shares Varg’s namesake (*wargus*, *vargr*, etc.) was a pre-societal Indo-European brother to *homo sacer*.¹⁷⁹ This kind of orientation towards political and religious order is naturally precarious, though.

Kristeva has framed lived abjection to her readers in the form of a seemingly rhetorical question: “Who, I ask you, would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?”¹⁸⁰ Similarly, we could imagine Agamben asking who would willingly occupy bare life-ness.¹⁸¹ Black metal performers might publicly agree to call themselves abject, in that their music’s appeal seems determined by the perception of abjection that they cultivate among their

¹⁷⁷ Agamben, 86.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁸⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 209.

¹⁸¹ Agamben, 138. Agamben quotes Karl Binding, who asks “are there human lives that have so lost the quality of legal good that their very existence no longer has any value?” This is “life unworthy of being lived,” “life with no value,” and “life absolutely without purpose.”

listeners. Further, bare or abject life occupies an existential position over which sovereignty can neither hold power nor control.¹⁸² However, embracing abjection is endangered in other ways. Kristeva, describing abject art, writes that: “the borders between object and subject cannot be maintained. In other words, the autonomy or substance of the subject is called into question, endangered.”¹⁸³ Black metal is not unaware of this danger though, as this border between object and subject is the very border that black metal inherently straddles. Black metal wades and rests in transgression. This is, for Bataille and his commentators, an impossibility.¹⁸⁴ And yet, it is perhaps musical performance itself that allows black metal to maintain some stability vis-à-vis the dangerous practice of masking and maintaining a double life. In the final verse of “Towards the Pantheon,” Ihsahn repeats the first two lines from the first verse, which I argue can be read as identification with abjection. In the final verse, the lines that follow change the meaning and context of this identification:

May the wolves start to howl again.
May the age of darkness arise.
May we touch the black flames
Of the past again...and forevermore.

Here, Ihsahn sings, “may we touch the black flames/ Of the past again...and forevermore.” Previously, he had sung of travelling eternities and fighting through barriers of light, i.e. fantastical representations of what black metal musicians perceive themselves to be doing in their private, criminal, and/or musical lives. In singing of the “black flames of the past,” Ihsahn references the church arsons that black metal had been committing unbeknownst to the general populace at the time. “Towards the Pantheon,” in light of this, appears as a confession, but not

¹⁸² Agamben, 153.

¹⁸³ Julia Kristeva, “Rites of Passage,” (London, Tate Gallery, 1995), 22, as cited in Hegarty, “As Above So Below,” 79.

¹⁸⁴ Tauchert, 101.

only of transgression. This is a confession of political abjectives. In light of this confession, Emperor's crimes become aestheticized in the music. Just as their musical and performative lives had become inseparable from their private and criminal lives, black metal's transgressions inherently predicate a complete abjection of musical and personal existence. Crime and music intrude on each other and exclude any other mode of being. This conclusion might also have further-reaching consequences for other forms of popular music such as rap or hardcore punk. As Susan Sontag notes in her essay on Artaud: "closing the gap between art and life destroys art and, at the same time, universalizes it."¹⁸⁵ Black metal, therefore, orients an understanding of music's general interaction with non-musical life, wherein music can come to uncannily represent real destruction, or as Kristeva put it, the horrors of being. This horror is, for black metal's fans, the impetus for fascination and pleasure, a potential collapse of abjection that emerges as a source of aesthetic beauty, embodied in the vocal and facial praxis of masking.

¹⁸⁵ Susan Sontag, "From 'Approaching Artaud'," in *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, ed. Edward Scheer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 83-95.

APPENDIX A

SELECT DISCOGRAPHY OF BLACK METAL IN NORWAY, 1987-1997

- Burzum. *Burzum*, 1992. Deathlike Silence.
_____. *Åske*, 1993. Deathlike Silence.
_____. *Det som engang var*, 1993. Cymophane.
_____. *Hvis lyset tar oss*, 1994. Misanthropy, Cymophane.
_____. *Filosofem*, 1996. Misanthropy, Cymophane.
- Darkthrone. *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, 1992. Peaceville.
_____. *Under a Funeral Moon*, 1993. Peaceville.
_____. *Transilvanian Hunger*, 1994. Peaceville.
_____. *Panzerfaust*, 1995. Moonfog.
_____. *Total Death*, 1996. Moonfog Productions.
- Dimmu Borgir. *For all tid*, 1995. No Colours.
_____. *Stormblast*, 1996. Cacophonous.
_____. *Enthroned Darkness Triumphant*, 1997. Nuclear Blast.
- Emperor. *In the Nightside Eclipse*, 1994. Candlelight.
_____. *Anthems to the Welkin at Dust*, 1997. Candlelight, Century Black.
- Enslaved (split with Satyricon). *The Forest is My Throne/Yggdrasil*, 1992/5. Moonfog.
_____. *Vikinglir Veldi*, 1994. Deathlike Silence.
_____. *Frost*, 1994. Osmose.
_____. *Eld*, 1997. Osmose.
- Gehenna. *Black Seared Heart*, 1993/7. Holycaust Records.
_____. *First Spell*, 1994. Head Not Found.
_____. *Seen Through the Veils of Darkness (The Second Spell)*, 1995. Cacophonous.
_____. *Malice (Our Third Spell)*, 1996. Cacophonous.
- Gorgoroth. *Pentagram*, 1994. Embassy Productions.
_____. *Antichrist*, 1996. Malicious.
_____. *Under the Sign of Hell*, 1997. Malicious.
- Immortal. *Immortal*, 1991.
_____. *Diabolical Fullmoon Mysticism*, 1992. Osmose.
_____. *Pure Holocaust*, 1993. Osmose.
_____. *Battles in the North*, 1995. Osmose.

_____. *Blizzard Beasts*, 1997. Osmose.
Mayhem. *Deathcrush*. 1987. Posercorpse, Deathlike Silence (1993 Reissue).
_____. *Live in Leipzig*, 1993. Obscure Plasma Records, Avantgarde Records.
_____. *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*, 1994. Deathlike Silence, Century Black.
_____. *Dawn of the Black Hearts*, 1995. Warmaster Records.
_____. *Wolf's Lair Abyss*. Misanthropy Records.
Satyricon. *Dark Medieval Times*, 1994. Moonfog.
_____. *The Shadowthrone*, 1994. Moonfog.
_____. (split with Enslaved). *The Forest is My Throne/Yggdrasill*, 1992/5. Moonfog.
_____. *Nemesis Divina*, 1996. Moonfog, Century Media.
Thorns. *Grymyrk*, 1991. Self-released.
_____. *Trøndertun*, 1992. Self-released.
_____. *Thule*, 1992. Self-released.

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