

BLACK METAL, TRAUMA, SUBJECTIVITY AND SOUND

Screaming the Abyss



Jasmine Hazel Shadrack

Emerald Studies in
Metal Music & Culture

Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound

‘Shadrack’s brave usage of autoethnography to explore how black metal is a movement beyond music presents a new and refreshing paradigm through the exploration of an often-misunderstood subculture. Her skill in intertwining methodology with her own subjective reflexivity is an important and much-needed addition to gender, music, and performance studies.’ – Laina Dawes, author, *What Are You Doing Here? A Black Woman’s Life and Liberation in Heavy Metal*

‘Seldom do we as scholars get to interact with a professional musician who sees their work as autoethnographic; even more seldom do we see that valuable and difficult work coming from women in genres such as heavy metal. With an eye on both critical theory and musical performance, Dr. Shadrack creates an interwoven story of personal experience, gender studies and women’s studies, sexual oppression and sexual violence, and brings forth deep discussions of religion, iconography, existentialism, women’s voices in and out of metal, and the many ways in which women are symbolized, represented and delimited. It is a groundbreaking work, one that continues a line of work in gender and heavy metal that represents some of the best work on gender in publication right now. The image of Denigrata Herself, the horned goddess screaming into the patriarchy, is an icon for our times.’ — Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone, Professor of Anthropology, University of Central Missouri, USA

‘Dr Jasmine Shadrack has accomplished a tremendous feat in this book: as an autoethnographic study, she has combined the rigours of academic research with an unsurpassed level of insight that sets a new standard in how reflection and experience can be expressed. Despite its complexity, the text is extremely accessible and weaves a narrative, making it a guide for others on how music and the arts can be a friend to those suffering from the effects of trauma and abuse where the two intersect. This is a book of hope and a source of healing. Even though it articulates a principled stand through Shadrack’s use of black metal, the relevance of her discussion reaches far beyond the music culture where she finds her solace. Her work will resonate with a wide-ranging audience - not only those working in the field of gender, feminism, metal studies and cultural studies, but also the many victims of abuse, marginalization and those suffering oppression.’ — Dr Niall Scott, Reader in Philosophy and Popular Culture, University of Central Lancashire, UK

Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss

BY

JASMINE HAZEL SHADRACK



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For Mum

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. (Revelation 12:1)

Hazel Gillian Margaret Shadrack
1954–2000

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Foreword

It is a privilege to be asked to write the foreword for *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss*. It is a book I have waited a long time to read. When I first met Jaz in 2011 and I was researching my book *Gender, Metal and the Media* I was thrilled, inspired and delighted to befriend such a warmhearted, fierce and astonishingly talented woman. I was keen to learn more about her experiences as a woman making metal music and believed that she had a unique contribution to make to metal studies. Little did I know what lay in store for her.

Jaz began to explore the idea of autoethnography, of using her own experience as a metal musician. Reading Stanley and Wise's *Breaking Out Again*, she found a way to think and write analytically about her life in music.

And then the man who claimed to love her set about undermining her strength and sense of self through violence and abuse. It is with horror that I now read about her experiences at the hands of that man, and the terrifying impact on her health. Jaz's unique contribution to metal studies is now also a significant contribution to understandings of how men's violence against women impacts on our bodies, our identities, our art. And how those impacts do not stop when the violence stops, but continue through our lives, changing us permanently.

Freed from the abuser, Jaz found solace in black metal, taking on the new role of frontwoman in Denigrata as well as guitarist. As she details, writing and performing as Denigrata Herself provided a means to feel the pain and to navigate the trauma in order to rebuild her sense of self, which had been wrested from her. In doing so she simultaneously rewrote the meanings of black metal. At their album launch in the little round church in Northampton, with her antlers, guttural rage and ferocious guitar, I was blown away and delighted at the courage of the performers, astounded by the interplay of vocals between Denigrata Herself and Manea. And not a little starstruck. What a privilege to be there.

In analysing her musical life, Jaz argues that black metal is an art form that allows the contemplation and reflective feeling of psychological collapse or void, providing a musical immersion into crisis of the annihilated self. The horror of this is plain from the beginning. But the power of black metal and artistic creation to reconnect with self and rebuild, to move through darkness and renihilate (Hunt-Hendrix, 2015, p. 292) is stirring: it is black metal's introspective focus on the negative that enables this transcendence.

Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss is therefore a vitally important book. Black metal, the annihilated self and the blackened heart are soldered together in ways that enable us to understand how metal music allows us to examine our pain, our trauma, our obliteration. The book tells us about the power of metal to help us to comprehend ourselves, especially those painful and damaged parts of ourselves, but also the gritty, determined, angry and stalwart kernels of identity from which we can cut through the pain to emerge, moth-like, into the dark. Even if it is not enough.

The pain Jaz depicts here is not only the pain and trauma of a man's abuse, but also the pain of the sexism directed towards her by strangers and acquaintances as she put fingers to strings, chords to air, words to feelings to make art. Where metal studies contain a number of fan accounts of metal sexism, Jaz confronts head on the misogyny of the metal world based on her personal experiences as a musician with many years of playing participation. The book evidences the emotional and psychological toll of that sexism and its impact on the musician's ability to make her art as she pleases. Those who claim that the metal world is not sexist need take heed.

And yet this analysis of pain, trauma and misogyny is wrought with self-compassion, with love for metal, and generosity towards the reader. It is a fast-paced and inviting read. Jaz's voice is warm, fierce and full of courage. Like listening to black metal, this book is an intense and challenging read. It is intense because of the honesty with which Jaz writes of her experiences. It is challenging because her analysis of those experiences, of black metal and of metal culture make for discomfiting reading. And that is how it should be: reading about trauma, violence and hatred should not be easy. The rewards for the reader are profound. *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss* presents an entirely new perspective on metal from the inside. And so I am intensely moved to proffer this book to you. This book is a game-changer.

Rosemary Lucy Hill

Author of *Gender, Metal and the Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music*

Preface

I am concerned with the performance of subversive...narratives... the performance of possibilities aims to create...a...space where unjust systems and processes are identified and interrogated. (Madison, 2011, p. 280)

If a woman cannot feel comfortable in her own body, she has no home. (Winterson, 2013)

Black metal is beyond music. It exceeds its function of musical genre. It radiates with its sepulchral fire on every side of culture [...] Black metal is the suffering body that illustrates, in the same spring, all the human darkness as much as its vital impetus. (Lesourd, 2013, pp. 41–42).

Representation matters. Growing up, there were only two women in famous metal bands that I would have considered role models: Jo Bench from Bolt Thrower (UK) and Sean Yseult from White Zombie (US). This under-representation of women in metal was always obvious to me and has stayed with me as I have developed as a metal musician. Female fans seeing female musicians on stage creates a paradigm of connection: that representation means something. Judith Butler states that,

on the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of language which is said either to reveal or distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. (Butler, 1990, p. 1)

Butler references de Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray, Foucault and Wittig regarding the lack of category of women, that 'woman does not have a sex' (Irigaray quoted in Butler, p. 1) and that 'strictly speaking, "women" cannot be said to exist' (Butler, 1990). If this is to be understood in relation to my research, my

embodied subjectivity as performative text, regardless of its reception, suggests that my autoethnographic position acts as a counter to women's lack of category. If there is a lack of category, then there is something important happening to 'woman as subject'.

Some of this book seeks to analyse 'woman as subject' in female black metal performance by using interpretive performance autoethnography and psychoanalysis. As the guitarist and front-woman with the black metal band Denigrata, my involvement has meant that the journey to find my home rests within the blackened heart of musical performance. Interpretive performance autoethnography provides the analytical frame that helps identify the ways in which patriarchal modes of address and engagement inform and frame 'woman as subject' in female black metal performance. The rationale for this book has been to identify patriarchal modes of address and engagement from a developing subject position, transforming it into research by using one methodological and one theoretical frame. It begins by using autoethnography to analyse my experiences of intimate partner abuse and my subjective evolution as the front-woman in a black metal band. In so doing, I have been able to present not simply an autobiographical study, but an autoethnographic inquiry that applies psychoanalysis to analyse my subjective narrative.

I have called my preface *Denigrata Cervorum*, which is Latin for blackened hart. This is polysemic in meaning: *Denigrata* is the name of my black metal band that has provided me a site for my autoethnography. The development of the term 'black' into 'blackened' means the noun becomes a verb, investing the band name with the active, rather than passive. This syntactic form also places an 'a' as its suffix, making the word appear feminine. Through my performance as *Denigrata Herself* in the band, my autoethnography has become blackened, darkening the environment enough for me to position my experiences inside it, transforming the performance into a dramaturgical, dialogical space. *Cervorum* means hart, or stag, and the significance of this for me is not only the direct connection to nature, which black metal venerates (as explored in Chapter Three), but also the antlers that I wear on stage as a perceived symbol of masculinity. Brenda Gardenour Walter writes that,

Denigrata Herself claims a female authority equal to that of men, even within systems that seek to abject the feminine. Blackened and horned, this Satanic antlered priestess gores the patriarchal order of Black Metal, the Academy, and the establishment at large. (2016, p. 2)

Gardenour Walter's words help to encompass not only my role on stage but also how I use that role to subvert the dominant discourse. The phonic parallel of the homophonic 'hart' and 'heart' is valuable because aurally it connects with how my heart has felt on my autoethnographic journey. Thus, *Denigrata Cervorum* has become the most meaningful and accurate frame for my research.

The dominant structure and discourse that has underpinned and informed much of my work has been the ways in which patriarchy's centrality has impacted

on my life, from a survivor of domestic abuse to a black metal musician, moving from immediate sexism and misogyny to its hegemonically constructed frame that filters through my musical engagement. Alongside this, I have engaged with literature on women and popular music and have refined it to a more specifically black metal literature review. There has been nearly four decades of work on women and popular music and some of the key areas are also identified: the masculinity of the music industry and its sexist practices (Bayton, 1998; Burns & LaFrance, 2002; Downes, 2012; Leonard, 2007; Marcus, 2010; Whiteley, 2000); the gendering of instruments (Bourdage, 2010; McClary, 1991); the gendering of aggressive music (Dawes, 2012; Hill, 2016; Kitteringham, 2014; Overell, 2014; Vasan, 2010); and women's place within popular music as groupies (Frith & McRobbie, 1978; Leonard, 2007; Weinstein, 1991; Whiteley, 2000) all identify patriarchal modes of address and engagement that are preventative, controlling measures that impact directly on women's engagement with popular music. As this is well established research, I have chosen to focus on the lesser-known field of black metal literature and black metal theory. However, what I have learnt through engaging with the popular music literature on female participation is that patriarchy functions not only as the dominant structure and discourse but also as the subordinating enclosure in which women navigate. I acknowledge that this work offers a different perspective on this field of inquiry by using autoethnography with female black metal performance.

Autoethnography has provided me with a concrete structure within which my subjective experience can be placed and examined. This informed my choice of theoretical frame such that I instinctively felt the data collected from my autoethnographic research would give the most truthful rendering through the application of psychoanalysis; this has felt akin to examining my experiences whilst lying on the psychoanalyst's couch. I use both Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva. Butler's work on gender and performativity has been particularly valuable, alongside one of her most recent publications, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. This text marries her theoretical position with her own voice. Kristeva's work on abjection, jouissance and the corpse are also valuable to my research. I find her work to be the most germane to my own: not only has Kristeva's psychoanalytical work been powerful in terms of the development of cultural theory (which I have been engaging with and teaching for some years), but when I directly applied her work to my autoethnography that I made a deep connection with her. Not only is it fierce and exacting, there is a darkness in her writing voice that echoes my own. As Gloria Anzaldúa notes, 'A woman who writes has power, and a woman with power is feared.' This correlation also speaks to the writing position of much of black metal literature and autoethnographic writing inasmuch as the style and the subjective writing position often speaks of darkness and the search for subjective embodiment.

These elements have provided me with a solid frame that is also fluid and breathable. Speaking the truth to patriarchy through feminist autoethnography and feminist black metal performance has enabled my subjective embodiment to develop in such a way that it presents my narrative as a performance text. It is a sublimating discourse that identifies patriarchy's fear of me as a woman, as a

xx Preface

survivor and as a black metal performer. I have been ‘an exile who asks “where”’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8), but through my research: through my

discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. Thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as *alter ego*, points it out to me as loathing. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10)

Whilst I fully acknowledge I am just one voice with one set of experiences identifying and calling out patriarchy for its bigotry, I have been greatly encouraged by the tenet of autoethnography that actively asks for the subjective voice to be heard. Rather than focusing on other women’s experiences (which I did try initially), I realised that I was ignoring my own. It became clear that they contained important information that needed to be explored. In so doing, I realise my voice is just as vital and angry as other women’s. This is my time.

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My thanks and love go out to the warm and welcoming ISMMS and Trans-States/ Occulture scholarship groups. Particular love and thanks to Rosemary Lucy Hill, Amanda DiGioia, Niall Scott and Cavan MacLaughlin.

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To Jess Farr-Cox and Rebecca Lamont-Jiggins, there aren't enough words to convey my thanks and gratitude. You will run the world; I have no doubt.

And lastly to my incredible husband Matt, and our fur son, Mr George Edward Pants, esq. You are my world.

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Introduction

There is no easy way in or out of this narrative. I have asked myself why I decided to write it all down and was left with only more questions. What if I *don't* write it all down? What if I continue to keep my story to myself? No. This book represents me drawing a line in the sand. The inward spiral of trauma has such an awful beginning and such an unsatisfying end (if there is such a thing as an end). This book holds its struggles close: sometimes competing, often surprisingly incompatible issues writhe together. Its heart is a dark one and its soul incandescent. Together they form the story of my survival: a story that is honest, impassioned, angry, feminist, psychoanalytic and above all, real. It is a story of a woman who survived domestic abuse and used black metal to deal with the resulting C-PTSD and Fibromyalgia. It is a difficult story, but it is mine.

Make no mistake: writing about your own trauma hurts. Natalie Goldberg puts it like this:

Go for the jugular. If something scary comes up, go for it. That's where the energy is. Otherwise, you'll spend all your time writing around whatever makes you nervous. It will probably be abstract, bland writing because you're avoiding the truth. Hemingway said, 'Write hard and clear about what hurts'. Don't avoid it. It has all the energy. Don't worry, no one ever died of it. You might cry or laugh, but not die. (2005, p. 54)

You must relive it to expel it. You may not remember everything in order; trauma has a way of hiding in the gaps only to re-emerge at a later, less convenient time ('oh yeah, and *that* happened too'). If any of this speaks to you, please know that it's OK. It is OK not to recall everything in a scientific, objective manner, because trauma is not objective. It can never be. It is OK to feel confused, unsure, and weighed down. I hope that there are things in this book that help you to unpack some of these concerns. That leads me to the way this book is written, which is part academic analysis, part raging scream, and it is based on my PhD research. At every stage, I have been honest. That is all that is left to us: our own truth. Not everyone will want to listen; some will be committed to misunderstanding; and some will choose to believe the abuser's fake narrative. That is their story, not yours, and not mine. Fuck them. Writing about my experiences in a meaningful and analytical way that prevents it from being just an autobiography or solipsistic navel-gazing has been a challenge. This is not a memoir, but an analysis. The usual and expected academic objective writing position has been abandoned where

appropriate in favour of the autoethnographic performative, meaning-bearer 'I' because there can be little use for cold objectivity when you are engaging with trauma. It comes from me, so my voice deserves centrality.

According to psychiatrist Dr Bessel Van Der Kolk,

the essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable. Each patient demands that we suspend our sense of what is normal and accept that we are dealing with a dual reality: the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous, ever-present past. (2014, p. 35)

For those of you in therapy, or even sitting with a trusted friend or partner to talk about trauma, this is true. We are trying to narrate, analyse, deconstruct and extrapolate sense, or reason, some overarching justifying causal trigger that made the abuse occur. We are trying to verbalise pain and violence *in* a controlled environment. The two do not match up. I am in therapy and when I am in a session, the comfy seat, the calm environment collapse around me as I open my mouth to speak. Reality only reasserts itself once I leave. The antagonistic juxtaposition of reality versus 'a ruinous, ever-present past' needs negotiating. It is hard work and exhausting, but I would argue, absolutely necessary.

This is a record of my journey through trauma and what I have done to survive. It is, of course, not for everyone. Why would it be? I would most certainly not have chosen this for myself. No woman would. Yet here we are. Here we all are.