“AND AM I BORN TO DIE?”: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY APPALACHIAN HEAVY METAL

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alexandra Dellgren entitled "AND AM I BORN TO DIE?: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY APPALACHIAN HEAVY METAL." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music, with a major in Music.

Leslie C. Gay, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Leslie Gay, David Salkowski, Rachel Golden

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
“AND AM I BORN TO DIE?”: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY APPALACHIAN HEAVY METAL

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Music
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Alexandra Dellgren
May 2024
DEDICATION

In loving memory of Kenzie Kawasaki
(1992-2020)

In your absence, I found the courage to confront my own demons and embrace a life of clarity and purpose. Your memory continues to fuel my resolve each day, reminding me of the beauty in forgiveness. Thank you, my dear friend, for the years of laughter, tears, and the countless memories we shared.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis represents not only a great deal of on the ground research, but countless stories, perspectives, and experiences. I would like to take a moment here to thank a few of these people without whom this would have not been possible.

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To the staff of the BrickYard, members of Appalachiatari, Primeval Well, Genital Shame, Feminazgûl, Nechochwen, Pan-Amerikan Native Front, and Dope Skum, thank you for sharing your stories with me. Thank you for your time, your candor, your sincerity, and for opening your hearts. I know the conversations we had were not always fun, and I thank you for your commitment to this project and the transformative possibilities of heavy music. I am so lucky to have been embraced by the metal community in East Tennessee and to have made so many friends on this journey.

Lastly to my friends and family: Aaron, Mom, Dad, Johan, Susie, Martha, Shari, Marshall, Marty, Peggy, Evie, Nick, Alex, and the Concord United Methodist Chancel Choir, thank you for believing in me and supporting my academic and personal goals. I am incredibly blessed to be surrounded by such an overwhelming amount of love. Your constant support has provided motivation and inspiration integral to the completion of this research.
This thesis delves into the terrain of Appalachian heavy metal by tracing the histories of both the region's people and its pristine landscapes marred by capitalist exploitation and colonial abuses. Through a case-study based exploration of the lyrical and sonic expressions of contemporary Appalachian heavy metal bands, my research explores how these artists serve as modern-day storytellers, confronting and processing the enduring trauma embedded in Appalachian history. The musicians, rooted in the very communities they address, are pivotal actors in the ongoing struggle for identity and justice in the face of historical injustices.

The research herein serves as a testament to the cathartic and therapeutic power of Appalachian heavy metal. By telling these stories and experiences, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how a misunderstood genre like heavy metal can serve as a powerful medium for confronting and ultimately, transcending, legacies of exploitation and trauma.
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All transcriptions created by the author.
CHAPTER I

MOUNTAIN CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY

“Ten thousand million nightmares, temptation by the score, I used to get so high, and still I wanted more. You think my time is wasted in search of who I am, I tried so hard to kill the boy inside the man.”

“Can You Hear Them?” by Ozzy Osbourne (2016, Spotify playlist, track 1)¹

Stepping Out

As I sat in my car amid the sea of other stickered up Subarus, I came up with a litany of reasons why I should go home. With over three years of sobriety under my belt, I wasn’t worried about a relapse or the cravings. I knew I wouldn’t walk in and immediately be identified as an addict or chastised for “not being able to hang.” I knew I looked the part too. I chose my signed Y.O.B shirt, a personal favorite band of mine, knowing any doom metal fan worth their salt would know the group. What was I so scared of? I was solid in my sobriety and proud of my growth. Despite this, I had built my new life around ensuring the success of my recovery. I don’t often have friends my own age, I have a “no alcohol in the house” rule for my partner and any visitors, and above all, I avoid bars. That was about to change.

Tucked away in the Bearden area of Knoxville just west of the college campus, sits a small restaurant called the BrickYard Bar and Grill. By day, they serve pizza on their outdoor patio, which makes you feel like you’re sitting in a beer garden in Berlin, but by night the BrickYard becomes Knoxville’s premier venue for local and travelling heavy metal bands. I had learned about the venue from my advisor, and, though I had avoided the inevitable foray back into the bar scene for as long as I could, I saw a post on their Facebook about an upcoming “doom night” and knew this was my chance to finally go for it. After an embarrassingly long

¹ See Appendix A for Spotify playlist
time sitting in the parking lot, and more than one panicked call to my partner, I finally gathered the courage to enter the venue.

Walking past a few fans smoking outside I force myself to put on a smile: “fake it ‘til you make it,” as they say. I beeline to the bar and I’m pleasantly surprised to see an extensive selection of non-alcoholic beers and mocktails, and my favorite: Liquid Death. Liquid Death is a sparkling water beverage, fashioned to look like a beer can adorned with an epic image of a melting skull. It allows sober people to participate and feel like a part of the community without being singled out, but it also serves as the universal secret signal of sobriety in the hardcore scene. I order hastily, avoiding eye contact, as though the bartender could see directly into my soul, and run to the nearest open table I can find.

Placing my phone with the “voice memo” app open and recording in front of me, I begin to realize how hyper-focused I had been on getting through my interaction with the bartender. Though I never noticed it in college, a bar has a distinctive smell to it. A particular mix of sweat, liquor, musk, and tobacco mingle to create a surprisingly delicate aroma, specific to the dive bars I had been to all over the country. Tonight, the nostalgia of the bar’s soundscape, the low murmur of casual conversation, the soft tinkling of glasses and the crackle of an amp being plugged into a guitar, doesn’t make me nauseous as I had expected. Rather, as a surprising nervous energy bubbles in my stomach, and I feel my shoulders relax and I soften into the night ahead.

Soon, the folks who had been sitting on the patio begin to make their way inside and the buzz of conversation drops to a whisper. I know the music is about to begin. Knoxville’s own Wailin’ Storms takes the stage first. As they begin to warm up, plug in, and check microphones, the ambiance of the evening is shattered as lead vocalist, Justin Storms excitedly belts out: “do
you belieeeeeeve in life after love?” The whole crowd laughs, and another layer of anxiety peels away as I join the crowd singing out Cher’s iconic disco tune.

In stark contrast to the warm-up song, the first piece embodies the “doom” genre featuring heavy lyrics expertly paired with slow, trudging drumbeats and excessively distorted guitar. Impressed but exhausted, I decide I have done enough for a single Sunday night. I have conquered a major milestone in my sobriety and have taken a good first step into on-the-ground thesis work, and for a single Sunday night, that was enough. With the decision made, I stand up and walk to the bar to drop my can off, but I had forgotten one tiny detail: metalheads may look scary, but they are some of the kindest, most inclusive, and chattiest people in the world. I turn to leave but hear, “I’m sure you’re not leaving before I play right?” Assuming the bartender must be talking to someone else I hesitate, and he comes over to introduce himself. Jason introduces me to his girlfriend sitting at the bar and a few of their friends. As it turns out, most people who come to heavy metal shows at the BrickYard at 10 p.m. on a Sunday are regulars.

Our conversation starts casually enough, chatting about our favorite bands and artists. A little while later, another musician gets up on stage to do a solo set and makes a joke about being too wasted to have established a setlist and tells the audience he will just be “winging it.” Though I hadn’t intended to bring up my sobriety with my new friends, I make an offhand comment about having “been there.” We get to talking about the devastating opioid epidemic and its shocking effect on the Knoxville hardcore scene. Feeling comfortable enough to be vulnerable now, I begin to open up about my own addiction and admit that this is my first time being back in a bar since getting sober.

Though I had been a heavy drinker most of college, I got good grades and assumed this is what all students did at a “party school.” Later, when I moved home in the middle of my final
semester of undergrad at the University of Michigan, I convinced myself again that my drinking was typical of someone living through a global pandemic. Even when best friend Kenzie overdosed and died and I embarked on my longest bender to date, I talked myself out of the truth that was staring me in the face: I was an addict, and I was killing myself.

It wasn’t until ten days after Kenzie passed when I woke up to have my morning shot, that I realized that my body was finally saying “enough.” The next 20 hours would be the most traumatic and terrifying of my life. After about seven hours, my stomach was totally empty and each time I would rush to the bathroom I would only produce miniscule amounts of acrid yellow bile despite the violent and uncontrollable heaves. After fifteen hours, when I was shaking so violently that I could no longer stand, I called my mother to my basement room and begged her to take me to the hospital. Over the next three days I was blessed to have a team of doctors and nurses at my side to aid in my detox. I haven’t touched a drink since.

I had avoided bars not because of what happened while I was drinking, but because of what happened after. For the first two years of my sobriety, I was nauseous constantly. Convinced that there had to be something wrong with me, I saw countless doctors and endured numerous tests to pinpoint the cause of the nausea. Finally, when we had investigated every possible physical source and found nothing, I was diagnosed with PTSD due to my traumatic detox. I learned about the intimate connection between trauma and gut function (Stam and Akkermans, 1997), the “gut-brain axis” (Appleton, 2018), and how my traumatic event being connected to nausea affected my life with PTSD afterwards (Michopoulos et al., 2019). Though I believed in the brain’s ability to affect the physical body, I was shocked to see the extent to which trauma had changed my fundamental body chemistry and the rest of my daily life.
Normally when I tell the story of my addiction, detox, and sobriety, I avoid some of the gorier details. Back here in the BrickYard though, I know I don’t have to hide anything. Metalheads aren’t scared by violent emotion or trauma: they lean in. Overwhelmed by the warmth of these people who had only an hour ago been strangers to me, I couldn’t help but feel incredibly grateful. For the rest of the night, we migrate between the stage area and our table between sets: an ebb and flow between reminiscing about those we lost to addiction and expelling our frustration in the mosh pit. When I finally get back in my car, I am exhausted, both mentally and physically. Speechless, I can’t help but cry confusing tears of excitement, joy, and relief. I did it.

The BrickYard has since become my research home-base. The folks I met that first night have become my friends and confidantes, and I no longer feel nervous when I walk into the venue every weekend. Jason always says, “we have one rule at my bar: don’t be a fucking dick.” Many people I know from outside the scene express distrust or dislike heavy metal fans because of the way they dress and act. I am inclined to believe that these people have never personally known a metal fan, because if they did, I know they would feel differently. Since I began going to shows and listening to hardcore music in high school, every member of the community has basically lived by Jason’s rule, “don’t be a fucking dick.”

Just as I bared my story to everyone that night at BrickYard, so too did I tell that story to each of my collaborators in this project. The questions I asked were deeply personal and authentic to my own state of vulnerability. I have been able to create a space of reciprocity and honesty. Everyone involved in the creation of this work has used the often-misunderstood genre of heavy metal to process times of feeling misunderstood and to navigate even the most difficult obstacle.
In this project, I explore many facets of intersectional identity of the Appalachian metalhead. At the heart of it all though, inspired by my own trauma, I ultimately seek to explore the ways in which trauma, both personal and collective, is felt through the body and expressed through music. In the following section, I examine various historical sources of collective trauma in Southeast Appalachia. Through an exploration of the desecration of the natural landscape by coal companies following the Civil War, the resulting opioid epidemic, and the displacement of Native peoples, I hope to provide a brief insight into the backdrop on which contemporary Appalachian metal plays out.

**Intertwined Histories of Appalachia**

In Charles Dickens’ 1850 autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, Dickens addresses systemic issues of mid 19th-century England: child exploitation, a manipulative and abusive prison system, addiction, and institutional poverty. One hundred years later these same problems persisted, exacerbated by the demands of the industrial revolution. It was this scene of depravity and destitution which originally spawned heavy metal in the early 1960s and 70s. Black Sabbath was created in Birmingham, England by Ozzy Osborne, Tony Iommi, Geezer Butler, and Bill Ward, who began making music to “escape a life of factory work” (Anselmi, 2020, p.33) and process their feelings of frustration. Influenced by their religious upbringing, shocked at the treatment of the working population, and disheartened by hypocrisies amongst the masses, Black Sabbath tapped into these innate feelings that reflected their experiences with the burgeoning capitalist economy. The songs they wrote spawned a new genre.

There are many similarities between the culture that birthed heavy metal initially, and the one within contemporary Appalachia. Award winning author Barbara Kingsolver highlights this dichotomy in her 2023 novel, *Demon Copperhead*. She explains:
This is a modern retelling of *David Copperfield*, which Dickens wrote to protest the ravages of poverty on the children of his time. I wrote mine for the same reason… a boarding school for indigent boys becomes a beleaguered tobacco farm where foster boys are brought in to do unpaid labor. A shoe-black factory is a meth lab. The dangerous friend Steerforth is now “Fast Forward,” a high school football star with a narcissistic streak (Kingsolver, 2022).

Disheartened by “poverty porn” (see Feltwel et. al, 2017) media portrayals of Appalachian culture, such as *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance, Kingsolver took inspiration from her own experience growing up in rural Kentucky to tell the story of what she calls the “orphans of the [opioid] epidemic” (Kingsolver, 2022). Kingsolver credits the introduction of the coal mining industry with the beginning of contemporary addiction issues in Appalachia after having watched the industry destroy the once bountiful land and the bodies of her kinsmen. As Dickens did, Kingsolver uses the voices of children to shed light on a misunderstood part of society and put faces and names to a people often only associated with stereotypes of laziness and stupidity.

As further observed by Kingsolver, the dangerous and backbreaking work of coal mining and other blue-collar jobs has led to a higher incidence of injury, and, in turn, ever increasing numbers of opioid prescriptions. Additionally, Appalachian states have long histories of substance abuse and illegal substance production dating back to the moonshine industry of the early 20th century. Though opioid use and abuse has been a problem in southern Appalachia for decades, the issue became particularly relevant following the COVID-19 pandemic. In a 2022 study, scholars discovered that deaths related to addiction became more common across the United States in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, but that the mortality rate in Appalachia was 37% higher than in the rest of the U.S. in 2020 (NORC, 2022, p. 6).
Just as Appalachian isolation has led to distrust of outsiders and a negative image, the
ingular nature of heavy metal communities has included similar circumstances, with similar
effects for the prevalence of substance abuse. NORC similarly cites the culture of rural
Appalachia as a possible culprit in the heightened susceptibility of abuse. They say:

Traditional rural Appalachian culture of tangible social support wherein people “take care
of their own” in communities, could exacerbate drug epidemics through the sharing of
drugs, particularly prescription medications (NORC, 2022, p. 5).

Additionally, access to mental health resources in the area proves more challenging than
elsewhere due to what the NORC describes as “cost, stigma, social norms, lack of transportation,
and insurance issues” (2022, p. 5). Resulting deaths due to alcohol, prescription, and illegal drug
overdose, have been referred to as “deaths of despair” (p. 9) as their cause often stems not from a
physical issue, but from increased feelings of hopelessness. Though experienced globally,
COVID-19 and its resulting isolation had an overwhelming effect on the Appalachian region, due
to especially limited access to in-person treatment and support in recovery (NORC, 2022).

Data concerning diseases of despair in post COVID-19 Appalachia becomes especially
relevant in reference to the most susceptible demographics. In rural communities, substance use
has been observed to be most common among, according to scholars at UNC, “young white
males with low education levels” (2020, p. 4), and the highest mortality rates have been observed
among “individuals ages 25-54” (NORC, 2022, p. 23, Figure 1.1). For Appalachian males ages
25-54, the overdose mortality rate is a staggering 54% higher than for men outside of the region.
Interestingly, as observed by Larry Bloom in his 1997 study, and circumstantially confirmed in
Figure 1.1. “Annual Mortality Rates, Ages 15-64, Deaths per 100,000” (NORC, 2022, p. 11)
my own ethnographic fieldwork, this same demographic of white, uneducated men between the ages of 25 and 54, also represents the typical demographic of heavy metal fans and performers.

Though the coal industry perhaps left the clearest mark on modern Appalachian society, I was surprised by how deeply the historical treatment of Native peoples has also affected my present-day collaborators. Aaron Carey of the band Neochochwen for example began performing heavy metal largely to connect with his Cherokee heritage. However, he only became truly aware of this familial history in adulthood. He says: “we weren’t allowed to talk about it, that was the lowest thing you could be… there was so much prejudice in the area” (personal communication, September 9, 2023). Heavy metal gave Carey a vehicle to connect with his heritage, and it also gave him an outlet to express his confusing feelings around not having access to it earlier. Carey and other bands that I worked with expressed an interest in using their music to venerate hometown heroes that history forgot and shed light on the brutality of Native history. Knoxville’s Answers in Blood for example is working on a song about the Creek War of 1813 which led to the eventual surrender of over 21 million acres of Native land (Tucker 2011), and Pan-Amerikan Native Front is named for the Cherokee syllabary, the basis of the written Cherokee language, which serves as evidence of the fantastic linguistic innovation being used in the early 1800s.

Since the formation of the band Blackhawk in the 1970s, Native performers have used heavy metal to bring attention to the treatment of Native peoples in the United States. Prior to British settlement, an estimated 60,000 Cherokee people lived in Appalachia (Sanford, 2020). Following the British victory in the French and Indian War, the Proclamation of 1763 forbade colonial settlements any further west of the Appalachian crest. This was a blow to white American settlers like Daniel Boone who saw the edict as an infringement on their destiny and began to wage war on the natives (Smith, 2022). After the colonies won independence and with
no official ban on the seizure of Native land, Cherokees were forced to give up major swaths of land in Appalachia (Sanford, 2020). President Washington sought to further “civilize” the natives with governmental programs designed to assimilate them into “Euro-American lifestyles and economies.” The next major assault on the Appalachian Cherokee nation occurred in 1830 with President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act. The ensuing “Trail of Tears” saw the death of an estimated 4,000 Cherokee nationally as they were forcibly marched from their homelands to the West (Harless, 2017).

Employment of Christianity was another way that settlers attempted to “civilize” both the Cherokee and the rural people of Appalachia. Religious studies scholar Richard Callahan coins the term, “industrial religion” as a discourse that attributes “suprahuman power” (2010, p. 1) to raw materials and mechanical technologies. Industrial religion essentially posits that 19th-century American Protestant reformers worked with industrialists to “civilize landscapes, cleanse bodies” and convert individuals not only to Christianity but to the principles of modern labor and consumption (Callahan, 2010, p. 2). In the whole of American history, religion and industry have been codependent, forging relationships that historian John Giggie relates to “institutional bodies, as social organizers, and as moral vantages for national life,” with resulting benefits to both industries (2002, p. 399).

In *Demon Copperhead*, Barbara Kingsolver targets a “new generation of lost boys born into beautiful, cursed places they can’t imagine leaving behind” (2023). Appalachia is said to blend this natural beauty with what reporter Mason Adams calls “environmental destruction, human suffering, and dogged persistence” in a way that makes it the ideal birthplace for black metal, a genre that relies on the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the terrible (Adams, 2018). Bands from the area create a distinctly Appalachian style by morphing Native American lore,
neo-pagan tradition, classic country and bluegrass, and familiar black metal sonic modalities. All-female black metal band Feminazgûl for example utilizes nature sounds recorded deep in the North Carolina wilderness in their 2020 album *No Dawn for Men*. Feminazgûl reclaims the desecration of the natural landscape by evoking feminine pagan spirits who rejoice in the process of rotting and new life, and in doing so celebrate the unrelenting spirit of Appalachian people who strive to maintain beauty in the face of destruction. “The Rot in the Field is Holy” (Spotify playlist, track 2) specifically speaks to this saying:

```
The rot in the field is holy
The rot on the vine is holy
Rest in the ground
Rot in the ground
The fruit on the branch is sacred
The skin of the dead is sacred
Rest in the ground
Rot in the ground
Long may we live, long may we rest
(Feminazgûl, Bandcamp, 2020)
```

These intertwined histories created a community of disenfranchised people with a fatalistic attitude toward government, seen to be nepotistic, corrupt, and highly ineffective. By publicizing the myth of a “culture of poverty,” and reporting using sensationalized terms like “pillbillies” (Burris, 2014), the media continues to take *structural* failures in education, infrastructure, and healthcare and place the blame solely on the people themselves.

The metal artists with whom I worked to create this project all use their music to connect to the darkness within their history. Further, their musics serve to process their personal and collective trauma by embodying identifications with Appalachian landscapes and cultures, including a special sort of peacefulness in communing with the mountains. In this way, Appalachian “mountain culture” and connection to the land serves as backbone of their stories. Appalachian affinity for the mountains goes back centuries. My collaborators revel in the
opportunity to touch history as they meander through the ancient Appalachian wilderness. The awe-inspiring allure of the Appalachian Mountains has sparked the imaginations of artists and laymen alike for centuries and spurred a great breadth of lore from both settlers and natives. From the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier in the early 1800s, to Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods* (1998), and the iconic chorus of John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Roads” (1971, Spotify playlist, track 3), the mountain range inspires wonder, along with a sense of locality and return. What follows is an ode to my collaborators who follow in these great footsteps of creativity, and the mountains that inspire them.

**Scope and Methodology**

The data, interviews, and analysis included in this research are drawn from years of experience in the heavy metal scene, and just over one year of ethnographic fieldwork in person and online in Eastern Tennessee. My primary research site was of course the BrickYard, a venue I frequented multiple times per week and where I often held interviews with collaborators. Quickly I learned that the heavy metal community of Knoxville and its surrounding cities is both close-knit and quite small. I occasionally attended shows at The Concourse, a large concert and event space in North Knoxville, that primarily hosts touring hardcore and EDM bands. About an hour west of Knoxville, you can find The Hideaway located in Crossville, and an hour east of Knoxville lies Capone’s in Johnson City. Many of the same bands play at all these smaller venues and I was pleased to find the same core group of fans on any given night at one of these locations. As the hardcore community in Eastern Tennessee is tight, the connections I created working with these folks often led to new ones, and I have been grateful for the culture of reciprocity we have created together.
I use the term “collaborator” throughout this project not just to avoid the baggage of other dated terms like “informant” or “subject,” but because of the dialogic process used throughout this research. In any ethnographic field, it is impossible to totally remove the authors bias from the final work. As such, I worked to extend the culture of reciprocity created between myself and my collaborators into all steps of this process. I met with most of my collaborators at regular intervals to ask follow-up questions and provided drafts to those who wished to be included in the editing process. I am conducting this research at a fascinating time in both American and ethnomusicological history, and I have worked to ensure that my research aligns with not only academic standards, but my own ethnical expectations. The stories that were shared with me were of a deeply personal nature, and this dialogic editing process serves to ensure that the final message honors my sources.

My research relies on standard ethnographic techniques including participant observation, interview, transcription, and audio/visual recording. Clifford Geertz and others have addressed the possible pitfalls of multisited ethnographic study, arguing that it is difficult to create a “thick description” (1973) of sites when you are not fully immersed in a single site. However, rather than exploring musical significance within a single people or performance venue, this project seeks to explore the overarching theme of collective and individual trauma throughout Southeastern Appalachian black metal. Therefore, I align here with the view of Cindy Horst who sees multisited ethnography as an opportunity to engage with another aspect of thick description whereby attention is drawn to the “networks, relations, and flows” within systems (2009, p. 123).

Single site ethnography, while undoubtedly a valuable endeavor I found to be insufficient for capturing the complexities and challenges of my research. Thus, I follow Horst who states, “applying multi-sited methods enables us to study the field as a network of localities which are
linked to each other through various types of flows” (2009, p. 120). Particularly in our hyper-modern and globalized world, a multi-sited approach suits this project. The Appalachian Mountains span the majority of the East Coast and their range of influence and significance spans far a broader area than can be observed in just one spot.

Moreover, Liz Przybylski’s (2020) concept of “hybrid ethnography” served as an essential part of my research process. I have taken advantage of the deeply involved online presence of heavy metal fandoms and gained initial access by posting on online forums for performers and fans alike. More than ever post COVID, the online world has become a constant presence in our lives and remains a way for bands to stay connected to their fans. Because of the internet’s formidable impact, the distinction between “online and offline activities” has in many cases, become blurred (Przybylski, 2020, p. 43). Many metalheads with whom I worked believed that they could be their most authentic selves online and saw their online friends as a central part of their social life.

I expand upon Liz Przybylski’s concept of “hybrid ethnography” to also reference the hybrid between historical and ethnomusicological practices I use in this research. When I initially set out to begin my ethnographic fieldwork, I envisioned a project that focused exclusively on personal trauma related to addiction. It quickly became clear to me that the personal traumas experienced by my collaborators and the music they wrote to cope were firmly rooted in an Appalachian ethos developed over centuries. In other words, the tumultuous history of the Appalachian people and the resilience they developed in response informed not only what sorts of personal traumas my collaborators experience, but the ways in which they respond. The histories I begun to touch on in the previous section thus provide the cornerstone for my methodological approach to this thesis.
My own intersectional identities as a metalhead, a recovering alcoholic, a blonde, small, white woman, and a Coloradan have played an undeniable role in my ethnographic field work. I comprise a multitude of insider-outsider identities that uniquely position me as a researcher with specific vantage points. Armed with essential background knowledge of the genre, an extensive band T-shirt collection, and an awareness of the common vernacular language, I faced few obstacles in terms of acceptance and was able to interpret the potentially confusing communication techniques within the scene. I mention my physical appearance because while women have written extensively on their mistreatment in the scene (see Shadrack, 2021), I have experienced very little in the way of discrimination or harassment. I have however, experienced my fair share of sexual comments. For example, after introducing myself and my research at a local Knoxville show, a group dedicated their “masturbation set” to the “hot blonde music researcher.” They have since apologized for this remark.

My identity as a recovering addict takes on special significance for this project when considering the nationally recognized drug and alcohol abuse issues in the Southeast Appalachian region. Even in my small community in North Knoxville, I am aware of two recent fentanyl related overdose deaths. This issue has made its way into the heavy metal music scene too, with performers joking onstage about not remembering their last set or hurrying to get off stage to get high. Much in the way that many use heavy metal to process trauma, autoethnography has become both a way for me to process my own trauma and a critical methodological frame for this work. Through this autoethnographical method, I can appropriately examine the uniqueness of my own positionality and how that interacts with my research.
To better understand the positionality of my collaborators in the present, I begin my analysis in Chapter 2 with an ethnography of the Appalachia of the past. Utilizing traditional ethnographic fieldwork methods, I analyze primary source material from the Civil War and Reconstruction to learn about the sounds of battle and worship music that helped form existing expressive musical modalities. Unlike my living collaborators however, the voices of soldiers, travelers, and even fictional characters have long been silenced. To do this, I look to the work of Richard Cullen Rath who writes about the soundscapes of early America. Rath encourages a method by which the researcher historicizes the orality of the written past, saying:

We must introduce the sounds that humans made: but how to do this when sounds are so evanescent? Nature sounds stayed more or less constant over time: thunder sounds much as it did then. Perhaps some human sounds then, are less ephemeral than scholars of orality can see as well (2003, p. 42).

In this way, historical soundscape research probes the written word for insight into the sounds of days past. By focusing on historically significant metaphor and onomatopoetic description, I attempt to place myself in the shoes of my informants and hear with their ears. Throughout the following chapters, I look to archival documents housed locally at the University of Tennessee and East Tennessee State University. I consider historical regional sources to fortify the significance of heritage in the creation of modern Appalachian music. By listening to the voices of the past, I helped formulate an understanding of the experiences that shaped the music of their kin.

In each chapter, I root the musical output of my collaborators in Appalachian heritage and identity by exploring elements of Appalachian history. Utilizing Rath’s methodology, I analyze both archival first-person accounts of significant historical events and works of fiction.
Musical, natural, and man-made sounds are lost to space as soon as they have been created, but the written word lasts for an eternity. As such, I look to not only works of significant literary movements, but the historical and sociological implications of their inception that speak to the specific culture within Appalachia, and how the region was viewed at the time of authorship. In Chapter 3 for example, I consider the female tropes of the mid-20th century Appalachian literary renaissance movement, and how they affected and reflected expectations of womanhood in the mid-1900s.

Ultimately, I have adopted a multidisciplinary and multi-temporal approach to my analysis. What I have loved most about my musicological research is the fluidity of the discipline, and my work with scholars from allied fields. This project primarily draws from research in gender and queer studies, philosophy, anthropology, and religion, in addition to ethnomusicology. Using a combination of multidisciplinary scholarship and strategies from both historical and ethno-musicological toolboxes, I thus trace a distinctive Appalachian identity, accessed and presented through connection to collective traumatic history, as well as a deep connection to the natural world, a salient relationship for heavy metal bands throughout the mountain range.

**Belliphonia, Naturalism, and Cultural Memory**

Much in the way that I use a multisited ethnographic approach to my fieldwork, the methodological framework for this project draws from a broad range of scholarship. Throughout my interviews, I was struck by the plethora of ways that metal artists throughout Southeast Appalachia looked to 18th -and 19th-century American history in the creation of both their personal identities and musical expressions. As such, I utilize the innately multidisciplinary
nature of ethnomusicology to explore the various ways in which my collaborators access their heritage.

In this project, I argue that black metal in Appalachia reflects and reclaims the sounds of trauma inflicted by war and industry on the people and natural landscape. This idea relies largely on J. Martin Daughtry’s concept of belliphonia, which he defines as “sounds that armed combat produces” (p. 33). In his writing, Daughtry looks at the ways that modern warfare has resulted in the weaponization of sound. He explains:

A sound’s salience and emotional charge depends on the life histories of the people who hear it, and upon the comparative backdrop against which they listen to the sounds that are emplaced in a particular time and location (2015, p. 38).

By acknowledging the subjective way in which we all experience sonic reality, and how “life histories converge with spatial politics” (p. 154), Daughtry places the significance of a sound in the ears of the auditor. I use Daughtry’s work to connect the long bygone sounds of Appalachia’s past including the deep history of Appalachian worship music, with more contemporary hardcore metal genres. In doing so, I recognize the invisible, yet longstanding wounds created by the belliphonic aspects of Appalachia’s troubled history.

In my exploration of the relationship between sound, culture, and nature within modern Appalachian metal music, I draw many ideas from R. Murray Schafer (1977), who coined the term “soundscape” as an alternative to “ambiance” or “acoustic environment.” Schafer argues that sound, in tandem with all other senses and our personal lived experience, work to create place. More specifically, Schafer’s concept of “hi-fi” (serene, natural, cyclic) and “lo-fi” (monotonous, busy, manufactured) soundscales too often gets equated with high and low quality. Certainly, Schafer acknowledges the growing demand on our ears but rather than
describing places as inherently bad or good, he clearly advocates for the active, present, mindful listener in one’s own soundscape. He states:

Noise pollution results when man does not listen carefully. Noise pollution today is being resisted by noise abatement, this is a negative approach, we must seek a way to make environmental acoustics a positive study program. Which sounds do we want to preserve, encourage, multiply? When we know this, the boring or destructive sounds will be conspicuous enough and we will know why we must eliminate them. Only a total appreciation of the acoustic environment can give us the resources for improving the orchestration of the world soundscape (1977, p. 4).

I use this idea primarily to investigate the lasting sonic ramifications on Appalachian populations and the ways that capitalism changed American priorities beginning during the Industrial Revolution. Schafer’s work on soundscapes was released in the wake of the American environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s which brought issues of preservation and conservancy to the fore. However, the people of Appalachia had been grappling with the effects of corporate greed on the natural world for decades prior.

I look to the ideals of ecomusicology which, as defined by Jeff Titon, “probes the relationship between music and sound, nature and culture, and the environment in a time of environmental crisis” (2016, p. 69). In doing so, I hope to better understand the interwoven nature of sound and identity. Titon also observes that topophilia—the strong sense of place—sounds most frequently in cultures that are “rooted in place and are usually close to nature” (2016, p. 71). For many who live in contemporary Appalachia, the experience of topophilia extends even to their sounds, as much of the history of Appalachia links to brutal disputes over
territory—something physical which *can* be owned—whereas the music of the area is owned by anyone who connects with it.

Yi-Fu Tuan, the geographer who initially coined the term “topophilia” (1990), also theorized “levels of place” with which people create emotional attachments: the ecological/physical, architectural, societal/cultural, and personal/physiological. Like Tuan, I am interested in the creation of societal and cultural space through emotional connection to ecological space, and how that ultimately leads to psychological connection to place based on both personal and cultural memory. Through a sonic analysis of historical texts and pieces of literature combined with ethnographic fieldwork among contemporary performers, I illustrate the impact of sound on the establishment of all levels of place and, ultimately, identities rooted in those places.

Additionally, I draw on ecofeminism and civic eco-nationalism to further investigate the ways in which my collaborators paradoxically utilize essentialisms of gender and Native identity, at once rejecting and reinforcing universalized narratives of femininity and “indianness.”

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is defined by Karren J. Warren as the “position that there are important connections—historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical—between the domination of women and the domination of nature” (1990, p. 1). The observable effects of climate change—hurricanes, floods, droughts, wildfires, etc.—obviously impact those in the global south and those in material poverty more than those in North America and most of Europe. However, as ecologist Greta Gaard poignantly articulates:

Make no mistake: women are indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather it is a result of inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty (2015, p. 23).
Ecofeminism acknowledges the link between what historian Tracey Rizzo explains as the “patriarchal suppression of women and the capitalist exploitations of resources” (2018, p. 298), and highlights the ways that women are most strongly affected by climate change. Both the cultural and social approaches, as initially explored by Carolyn Merchant (1995), to ecofeminism will thus be central to my work, especially in terms of “ecomaternalism” (MacGregor, 2006) and the gendering of “mother earth” which some have speculated (see Shiva, 2004 and Roach, 2003) contributes to the general ambivalence towards the degradation of our natural world; I will explore this concept more fully in chapter three.

This research also examines the impact of stereotypes within both Appalachian culture and the broader perception of the region throughout the United States. I draw on Paul Gilroy’s concept of anti-anti-essentialism (1997), which aims to embrace and reclaim that which is used to oppress, demean, or devalue groups of people. Essentialist perspectives suggest that different groups inherently possess distinct natures and qualities, while anti-essentialist perspectives reject the notion of fundamental “essence.” Gilroy contends that these opposing and “simplistic” viewpoints, which dominate the discourse around the “authenticity” of Black music have become entangled in an unproductive relationship of “interdependency” (1997, p. 100). Even the awkward double negative chosen by Gilroy in “anti-anti-essentialism” seems to highlight the irony in the absence of a clear dichotomy between essentialist and anti-essentialist views. Importantly, Gilroy sees music as the key to resolving these cultural questions of identity.

Within his extensive discussion of music, Gilroy foregrounds Amiri Baraka’s concept of the “changing same,” to explain the importance of musical and oral traditions. The changing same refers to the idea that despite outward changes in society–politics, music, culture, etc.–there are certain fundamental aspects that persist. Though this concept may seem similar to anti-anti-
essentialism in its recognition of immutable truths, the changing same specifically highlights Baraka’s critique of the illusion of progress without substantial changes in societal structures. In reference to music, Gilroy says:

Because the self-identity, political culture, and grounded aesthetics that distinguish Black communities have often been constructed through their music and the broader cultural and philosophical meanings that flow from its production, circulation, and consumption, music is especially important (1997, p. 102).

Specifically, Gilroy identifies antiphony as being what he explains as “a bridge from music into other modes of cultural expression” (p. 78). This practice of call and response has remained popular in what Jeff Titon refers to as the “parallel traditions” throughout musics of the African diaspora, and in the lined-out hymnody of Baptist churches throughout Appalachia (Harless, 2017).

Gilroy’s argument hinges on the imagery of the ebb and flow of the ocean to explain the multi-directional flow of information and ideas established by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. A great deal separates the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains as physical and conceptual spaces, but they are also more similar than meets the eye. On a scientific and physical level, both have existed for millions of years and have been created through centuries of erosion and tectonic movement. As a result of this ancient “changing same”-ness, both have come to represent constancy and eternity, as well as divine inspiration. Mountains and oceans are used in literature as a metaphor for distance and isolation, i.e. lovers or families separated either by choice or force, and the journey to cross them becomes both a literal and allegorical test of stamina and determination. Just as Black music traveled through the motions of the Black Atlantic as a preserver of identity and culture, so too did Scottish and Irish immigrants bring
their traditions of balladry to the Americas. I do not equate the experience of white immigrants to the US to that of the victims of the slave trade. I do however assert a perhaps unexpected connection between the conceptual space of the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains as similarly fertile grounds for cultural and musical exchange.

The connection to Black culture can also be seen in the church music culture of the south, and within the evolution of the blues of the region. I believe that this is perhaps due to what Gilroy describes as the “aesthetic and commercial fruits of pain and suffering” and the ways that “musicians have played a disproportionate part in the long struggle to represent Black creativity, innovation and excellence” (p. 107). Just as Gilroy recognizes figures like Quincy Jones as playing that role in Black culture throughout the nation, other Black artists like Bessie Smith, Josh White, the Johnson Brothers, and Ellis Williams (Pearson, 2017) similarly cemented the genre of “mountain blues” in representing Appalachian creativity, innovation, and excellence while communicating the pain and suffering of life in the region. These connections between Black and Appalachian musical culture and history become especially relevant in Chapter 2, where I follow the thread of sonic expressions of resistance from the end of the Civil War to the contemporary era, establishing cultural meshworks between Appalachian church music genres, old-time music and blues, and Appalachian heavy metal.

Though Paul Gilroy’s argument focuses on Black culture and music, the ideas he references ring true for many groups who are subject to stereotyping. Further, the connection of Appalachian old-time music to Black artists, musics, and instruments should not be overlooked in pinpointing the possible roots of the negative attitudes toward Appalachian music and culture. Even the banjo, the most prominent of Appalachian string instruments, comes from African
origins (see Conway, 1995) and would not have made it to the American south had it not been for the movements of the “Black Atlantic.”

Gilroy’s wide-reaching ideas encompass questions of modernity, essentialism, nationalism, and hybridity, topics which also find significance in the forced migration of the native peoples of the Southeast Appalachian region. In my use of Gilroy’s work, I align strongly with his opposition to “ethnically absolute” approaches to diaspora studies and utilize his “explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (1993, p. 15). Gilroy warns that “modernity” can be used to separate contemporary Western society from past atrocities committed and implores us to take these unsavory histories as a “legitimate part of the moral history of the West as a whole” (p. 70). Most importantly, Gilroy argues that the music apparently born of the negative impact of racial subordination or of the “curse of enforced exile,” actually represents a repossession of this “curse” as it “becomes affirmed and is reconstructed as the basis of a privileged standpoint” (p. 111). I utilize this idea of reclamation particularly in Chapter 4 to explore the work of my collaborators who find strength in their Native heritage and apply it to their music as a form of both therapy and individual expression.

**Other Important Literature**

While representing a range of religious viewpoints, all my collaborators grew up in the Christian faith and feel the impact of that upbringing today. As such, the importance of Appalachian religious history is central to my argument, and I draw primarily from a book of essays, edited, and compiled by Bill Leonard (1999). This collection has a special focus on “mountain churches” (United Baptist, Old Regular Baptist, and Primitive Baptist specifically) which are unique to the region. These denominations, whose musical traditions are of special interest to this project, are linked to mountain culture in important ways that Leonard describes.
As “grassroots constituency and kinship relations, as well as a pervasive piety and spirituality” (p. xxii). Though many of my collaborators do not still actively practice Christianity, these fundamental tenets of mountain culture and community seem to remain relevant to the formation of contemporary Appalachian identity. Moreover, Jeff Titon’s (1997) research and recordings on the Old Regular Baptist tradition in Kentucky remain some of the only musicological research on the topic of Old Regular Baptist religious culture and musical style, and I have found his work exceedingly helpful.

My analysis of the importance of history in the creation of identity within southern white musical culture is also inspired by Aaron Fox’s work on honky-tonk music in Lockhart, Texas. Though he focuses on a different part of the United States, much of his work rings true for a “significant number of other working-class Americans who live in similar peri-urban communities” (2004, p. 21). I have been especially influenced by his discussion of whiteness and social capital within primarily white communities who experience high levels of poverty and addiction. Appalachian people have long been the victims of harmful stereotypes and the labels of “redneck” and “white trash.” Fox explains the associations with these terms saying,

The embodiment of this identity entails a stereotypical range of class-marked attitudes and ideologies, including parochialism, nationalism, patriarchy, inscrutability, a penchant for violence, and an ingrained racism (This final sense is so pervasive that the word “redneck” is sometimes used as a synonym for “racist”) (2004, p. 25, parenthetical remark in the original).

As in Lockhart, Texas, many white communities in Appalachia feel a similar sense of political disempowerment and decline of social capital wherein, as Fox explains, the “dignity of embodied labor is in question as never before” (p. 25). The importance of physical labor takes on
further significance within Appalachia as families lived and worked in particular industries for
generations such as coal mining and logging.

Additionally, I look to the work of Matt Wray (2006) who investigates the impact and
history of the term “white trash” in Appalachia. Wray places special significance on early
twentieth-century discourse rooted in public health campaigns which, led by urban class
reformers, sought to find and eradicate the source of “poor white degeneracy” (p. 64). Wray
highlights the post-Civil War shift in thinking that used a hyper-scientific, albeit bogus, method
of social analysis. Prison reformer Richard Rugdale became especially important in publicizing
and popularizing the belief that inbreeding was to blame for Appalachian issues of degeneracy
and his work was cited in the beginnings of a eugenics movement popularized in the early 1900s.
These beliefs are still widespread today. Wray states:

The strength of the sterilization movement in the United States was such that by the early
1930s, eugenic reformers routinely performed involuntary sterilization…believing it to be
the only sure way to stop the propagation and proliferation of the “unfit” … Such actions
suggest the degree to which, by the late 1930s, it had become commonplace, respectable
even, to advocate for consigning entire segments of poor rural white populations to lives
of institutionalized abjection and state sponsored sterilization (2006, p. 67).

Both Black populations and white Appalachian populations have been victims of the harmful
stereotypes of being “lazy, lustful, and cunning” (Wray, p. 67), and were thus subjected to
violent assaults on their personhood in the wake of the Civil War by the hands of “social
reformers” of the early twentieth century. These commonalities are plentiful, and their impacts
are seen and felt to this day.
Drawing again on Paul Gilroy, I utilize his ideas of cultural and collective memory as expressed musically to explore the ways that our own trauma as well as the trauma of our ancestors find relevance in contemporary heavy metal performance. Cultural memory, like all forms of memory, tells a biased story of the truth, which functions to provide members of a certain group with an understanding of the past. Cultural or collective memory also serves to create a powerful shared identity that allows members to remain connected even when they go far away. Though cultural memory celebrates the beauty of community, in its most powerful forms, it involves recollections of historical trauma as experienced by victims of the group. Living in Knoxville and seeing the confederate flag frequently for the first time in my life, I have seen first-hand the negative possibilities of traumatic collective memory festering and creating resentment. It has been speculated that General Sherman’s 1864 march on the south left major long-term impacts on the capital and economic growth of the region that contribute to the feelings of displacement and bitterness that many still feel today (see Maas, 2019 and Feigenbaum et al., 2018).

**Overview of Chapters**

The subsequent chapters address how trauma, both individual and collective, is embodied and performed within Appalachian heavy metal bands. This opening chapter serves as a framework for the project, outlining essential topics like identity and whiteness, stereotyping, and the effects of coal mining on the Appalachian environment. The chapters that follow address these topics in greater detail and probe into the stories of several active participants in the Appalachian heavy metal scene. Throughout each chapter, I connect to the history of resistance that is prevalent in Appalachia and vital to the creation of mountain ethos and culture, thereby asserting the primacy of heritage in the formation of contemporary Appalachian identity.
Chapter 2 explores the historically based origins of the “Appalachian folk metal” sound, connecting it to the belliphonic sounds of the Civil War and the impact of industrialization, particularly the introduction of coal mines, and the evolution of traditional worship music. This chapter includes interviews with musicians raised in the Old Regular and Primitive Baptist traditions who utilize these melodies and stories, as well as old-time music techniques and instruments in their heavy metal writing of today. Chapter 3 continues the discussion of the impact of the industrial revolution on the American South through the eyes of black-metal performers who utilize Paganism, rather than Satanism as is traditional of the black-metal genre, to address the ongoing desecration of Appalachia’s wilderness. Through a utilization of ecofeminist literature, I focus here on the voices and experiences of women through their connection with the natural world, and pursue questions of sonic ownership, topophilia, and naturalistic connection to the divine. Chapter 4 turns to the utilization of Cherokee and other native lore within Appalachian black metal bands and probes the ways in which artists connect to their native heritage and the perseverance of their ancestors to tap into strength in the modern day.

I am greatly indebted to my collaborators in each of these chapters, as the questions I am asking force them and myself to address potentially buried trauma and put into words that which had previously only been explored musically. In the concluding chapter, I provide a brief insight into the follow-up interviews conducted with my collaborators. In these meta-discussions, we explore the ways in which this project has opened the door for deeper personal insight and growth. In line with my reciprocal views of ethnographic work, it seemed only fitting to end with a dialogic reflection on how I and my collaborators have changed throughout this process. The
stories that follow provide a deep and personal look into our lives, and I hope that by the end you too feel this connection.
CHAPTER 2

SHAPE-NOTE SINGING AS PRECURSOR TO OLD TIME METAL

Throughout the heavy metal genre, there are many instances of bands taking existing tunes from other genres and covering them in their own “heavy” style. Metallica famously covered Bob Seeger’s “Turn the Page” (Spotify playlist, tracks 4 and 5) Nightwish performs “Phantom of the Opera” (Spotify playlist, tracks 6 and 7) and there have been (epic) covers of Schubert’s “Der Erlkönig” (Spotify playlist, tracks 8 and 9). I recently discovered a video of Youtuber Andy Rehfeldt playing heavy metal guitar side by side with the original Alan Lomax video of Nimrod Workman singing “O Death” (Spotify playlist, track 10). Workman, a Kentucky-born folk singer, coal miner, and union man, learned old ballads from his grandfather and namesake Nimrod Workman Sr., and spent his life advocating for black lung victims, before dying of the disease in Knoxville in 1994. Rehfeldt here becomes part of a long history of hardcover covers, a lineage that shows just how versatile and far reaching the genre can be.

In this chapter, I explore the history of another extremely versatile genre, one with deep roots in Southeastern Appalachia, and one which I argue serves as a precursor to the contemporary tradition of “Appalachian folk metal”: shape-note singing. Sacred harp or shape-note singing originated in New England in the early 19th century. This style of singing was related to 17th century English styles of hymnody but took on a distinctly American character as it migrated south with expanding American populations. Though the practice died out in the North, the folklorists of the 1930s, “rediscovered” singing groups in the American South, and since then, the style has become more prevalent in critical and popular culture (Carlton, 2012). Congregations divide up the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass groups on each side of the room in what is called a “hollow square.” The tenor always has the melody and can be sung by people of any sex; it is also the suggested
location for new singers to the style. Leadership also rotates between members who take turns choosing the hymn, standing in the middle of the square to sing the melody and beat time. Having been described as “a-capella heavy metal” (Sacred Harp Bremen, 2020), shape-note singing is raucous, grating, and often heard as “primitive.” These terms, which are often used derisively by critics, are also reclaimed by heavy metal musicians, who see these traits as not only definitive of the metal genre, but as something to be proud of. The musicians I highlight in this chapter utilize Appalachian tropes, melodies, instruments, and musical techniques to not only provide their music with a sense of emplacement but to claim and reclaim the perils of their Appalachian ancestry.

Cecil Sharpe (1917) and Alan Lomax (1934) initially studied the music of Appalachia using what geographers Revill and Gold call the “concept of voice as a set of embodied and political practices” (2018, p. 1406), and I utilize this idea to foreground the importance of the “voice” in oral traditions. However, with the benefit of a century of additional research, my aim is to shift the emphasis from understanding how “voice” represents and entire population or geographic area. Instead, I focus on exploring how an individual voice functions as a distinctive marker of identity, agency, and influence, particularly in a historical context where certain forces aimed to diminish individuality.

Émile Durkheim’s concept of “collective effervescence” (1915) or, the innate human need to come together in collective assemblies, aids in my investigation into in the way that group singing creates and encourages community ethos. Durkheim explains:

All parties, political, economic, or confessional, are careful to have periodical reunions during which their members may revivify their common faith by manifesting it in common. To strengthen those sentiments which, if left to themselves, would soon
weaken, it is sufficient to bring those who hold them together and to put them into closer and more active relations with one another (1915, p. 210).

In this way, shape-note singing takes on further significance. It is not only a purgative physical action, but also a form of community building essential to survival in times of hardship. Rotating leadership and the egalitarian seating structure of shape-note singing take on new meaning as intentional methods of building camaraderie. Or rather, shape-note singing uses communal vocality to embolden and fortify individual voice.

J. Martin Daughtry’s concept of the “belliphonic” finds particular salience here, as I take the “grating” sounds of sacred harp singing and Appalachian folk metal as a reclamation of the sounds produced by a history of war, intruding industry, and destruction of land and people. “Belliphonia” draws specific attention to the possible traumatic impact of sound on its auditors, and thus to the significance of using sound to reclaim power after trauma. I use the term not only for ease of communication, but for the associations it carries that foreground both individual and collective trauma. Especially intriguing are the methods through which the individual voice and vocality manifest themselves in words, melodies, and techniques steeped in the rich histories of Appalachia.

Trauma—physical, emotional, or even sonic—leaves an indelible mark on the body. When the trauma experienced is significant enough to affect an entire people or generation, the long-lasting effects can be felt over centuries. Perhaps this is why even contemporary shape-note singers continue to perform with such force, and cling to their singing communities. Through a brief survey of first-hand accounts of the Civil War that use historically significant metaphor and onomatopoetic description I elucidate the sonic trauma inflicted by war. I then explore the growth of shape-note singing and its critical reception during the period of reconstruction to
further highlight its role in Appalachian musical resistance history that connects to contemporary Appalachian metal bands. In a culture that prizes masculinity and penalizes public expressions of vulnerability, the purgative possibilities of primal sound making made shape-note singing an emotional outlet for the 1800s soldier, 1900s coal miner, and typical 2000s metal head. If, as argued famously by Alan Lomax (1968), different types of singing act as a functional reinforcement of existing structures, shape-note singing, like heavy metal, can be seen as both a social and cultural rebellion.

On the Battlefield

The use of natural sounds to describe the destruction of war finds historical precedent that can be traced back to the European settlement of North America in the 1620s. Early settlers were surprised to find the climate harsher and the storms more frequent and violent than similar latitudes at home (Rath, 2003). The Puritan religious culture that grew out of New England therefore emphasized the power of lighting. Preachers would, as Rath explains, “use sound to frighten and push [their] audience toward repentance and piety” (2003, p. 24) by explaining storms as evidence of God’s anger. In an essay about this surprising new landscape, preacher Increase Mather writes: “there broke a most awful and amazing clap of thunder, attended with a violent flash or rather flame of lightning which… filled the room with smoke and flame” (1684, p. 11). And in his now famous sermon, Sinners in The Hands of An Angry God, Jonathan Edwards writes, “there are black clouds of God’s wrath hanging over your heads, full of the dreadful storm and with big thunder” (1741, p. 3). This metaphor obviously resounded for the colonists and remained prevalent in their vernacular. Puritan religious culture traveled down from New England to Appalachia as European settlers migrated South and West in the early 1800s and lasted until the beginning of the Civil War in 1861.
Though the brutality of war remains ageless, the sounds it creates change in tandem with the creation of new technologies, so too do the associations we make. Looking at the rather poetic description of the Battle of Antietam from writer and politician Charles Carleton Coffin, we see him employ the ever-relevant simile of explosions and thunder:

It was no longer alone the **boom** of the batteries, but a **rattle** of musketry—at first like **patterning** drops upon a roof; then a **roll, crash, roar**, and **rush**, like a mighty ocean billow upon the shore, chafing the pebbles, wave on wave, with deep and heavy explosions of the batteries, **like the crashing of the thunderbolts** (Coffin, 1862, emphasis added).

Richard Cullen Rath reminds us, “not all sounds can be reduced to print” (p. 3), but by referencing a recognizable and unchanging sound like thunder, Coffin’s colorful description of such a horrific scene finds meaning with even contemporary readers. The muskets and cannons in use at the Battle of Antietam were of the highest sophistication, but because their impact was so horrific and stirred such primal reactions in those that were close enough to experience it, Coffin compares the sonic impact to only natural sources: thunderbolts, ocean waves, etc. In doing so, Coffin employs imagery of an angry sea or a wild storm that would have created similar fears and feelings in the minds of his contemporaries.

The salience of this metaphor seeped into the lives and writings of the masses. Throughout the journals of Confederate and Union soldiers alike, newspaper articles, and letters, descriptions exist comparing battle to thunder: Confederate soldier Michael F. Rinker writing to his parents in May of 1864, observes: “During them six days it was awful. There was one continual roar of thunder all the time from the artillery and small arms” (Rinker, 1864). Union
soldier John Milton Bancroft writes in his diary in 1861, declaring the literal repercussions of the belliphonic. He says:

Perhaps we may hear the **crashing** of cannon, the **clanging** of steel, the **roar** of armies.

Night brings news of the taking of Richmond by Butler. The cheers come down the lines from the camps above and from far away in the distance. We doubt the news, but we cheer—cheer as loud as any and the **sound rolls along the camps** way to the North (Bancroft, 1861, p. 31, emphasis added).

Fredrick Douglass uses the sonic metaphor of thunder to expound on the perils of war in his famous speech on West India’s Emancipation:

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning.

**They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters** (Douglass, 1857, emphasis added).

These quotations, among many others, illustrate the significance of sonic trauma in wartime and the salience of the thunder metaphor in striking fear into the hearts of those who understand its immense and unavoidable power.

Within Daughtry’s definition of belliphonic, lies the understanding that the emotional wounds left by these sounds can be re-opened outside of wartime by similar sounds. Even today, veterans are impacted by the sounds of fireworks, backfiring cars, and, most commonly **thunder** (VanEls, 2001; Davis, 2010; Liberzon, 1999). This demonstrates the time-honored significance of the sonically powerful thunder metaphor. Of course, technology changes along with our understandings of God and Earth, but thunder sounds the same as it did thousands of years ago, and it holds the same emotional weight for the unexpected auditor. I explore this idea in the
subsequent section where I follow the metaphor of thunder in the experiences of southerners following the war.

Musical Response

As discussed earlier, the Puritan religious culture of Increase Mather traveled from New England to Appalachia as European settlers migrated South and West in the early 1800s (Carlton, p. 442). Through a combination of the musical practices of the Second Great Awakening, the musical reform movement of 18th-century New England, and influence of indigenous materials, these peoples found solace and community through the new, distinctly American, style of hymnody which would eventually become Sacred Harp and its allied traditions in Baptist churches throughout the South (Carlton, p. 444).

Throughout the mid 19th century, shape-note singing faced great challenges from pioneers of the “Better Music Movement.” Critics like Thomas Hastings and Lowell Mason criticized the genre for “being rude and primitive” (Carlton, 2012, p. 441). Hastings published his opinions readily and without mincing words. He says:

When the discerning part of the community had last become sensible of the absolute worthlessness of the music generally heard in our congregations, and awake to the necessity of a reform, it was quite natural that the first determination should be to throw aside the whole mass of insipid compositions, to which they had long listened, and to substitute the works of foreign masters in their stead (1822, p. 228).

This passage makes clear not only the prevalent reformist thinking regarding the singing of the laity, but also their opinions on quality of American music. Hastings continues to describe the un-“discerning” faithful as being “outstripped by their zeal” as they “mangled and crushed” the tunes of European composers with the “harsh vociferations… meagre tones, and unemphatic
pronunciation” by “ignorant vocalists” (1822, p. 228). This clearly elitist description of a musical practice owned by all, regardless of literacy, musical or otherwise, class, or gender perhaps explains its near banishment from the Northeast.

Despite this negativity in the North, the practice flourished in the South. An article from the *Atlanta Constitution* from August of 1892 is evidence of its continued success. It reads: “The Chattahoochee musical convention has just completed its fortieth annual session… the convention met Thursday morning last, and continued with its sessions for four days, with hundreds in attendance” (A.B.F., p. 2). Though the author is obviously struck by the musical elements, they are more interested in the social dynamics of the singing and the activities surrounding it. The article details how the church community rallied around the singers by providing food and company and that the singers were “fed like kings.” Impressed by the communal singing and rotating leadership, the author ends by saying, “This, indeed, was a novel sight, and one enjoyed by everyone present” (A.B.F., 1892, p. 2).

In another article by Sarge Plunkett from September of 1898, we see a re-emergence of the thunder and lightning metaphor. This op-ed aptly subtitled, “Good Cheer Crowds Out the Gloom of Bad Weather and Bad Politics from Those Present,” speaks to the fantastic power that communal music making carries, and shows the seemingly innate human need to find connection in times of trouble. Plunkett says:

If it were not for our consequence and cheerfulness, we would be ready to say that the Lord is angry. His lightnings flash and His thunders roar and His rain pours down as it never poured before, at least since the flood… We had thought that when the [Civil] War was over the lion and the lamb would lie down together—that there would be no north, no south, no more wrangle over politics nor any problems to solve… The truth is that there
is just such a state of affairs as to put the people to thinking, and they are ready to exclaim: “Is everything corrupt!” But amid it all the melody of a hundred voices are sounding out from Indian Creek church, and the greatest singing convention ever held in these parts is now at work (Plunkett, 1898, p. 22, emphasis added).

In his writing full of deep thought about the political nuance of post-war North and South relations, Plunkett contrasts the terror of the Lord’s wrath against his warlike people with the sound of hundreds of voices coming together in unison.

In juxtaposing the difficult political and economic state with the joy of such a massive singing convention, Plunkett hits on perhaps the prime goal of shape-note singing and other congregational genres: human connection. Emile Durkheim (1915) theorized that individuals rally around symbols–objects, themes, logos–that represent their group. Through communal, coordinated actions (like singing), an atmosphere of emotional fervor and excitement is created. Durkheim coined this phenomenon as “collective effervescence,” when subjective experience transitions from “me” to “we.” While of course this sensation finds deepest significance in times of turmoil, Durkheim took this a step further by saying that collective effervescence is not only beneficial but required for the survival of individuals. Though the practice of Sacred Harp singing is less popular today, its community benefits have not waned. Further, many contemporary heavy metal artists look to musical and thematic attributes of the genre to create a sense of Appalachian emplacement in their work.
Southern Gothic Metal

Truman Capote’s *Grass Harp* (1951), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), and Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), established the Southern Gothic aesthetic as a distinct critical literary subgenre in the early 20th century (Tunc, 2013). These works foregrounded deeply flawed characters in exceedingly grotesque and derelict settings and situations within the South following the collapse of the Confederacy which, as I explored in the opening chapter, led to poverty, violence, racism, and religious extremism. Southern Gothic transformed tropes like the traditional decaying Gothic castle into the post-war plantation, and thus sought to expose the myth of the idyllic old Antebellum South for what it was, and the ideals of the dispossessed Southern aristocracy (Palmer, 2006). The darkness and social critique inherent to the genre, perhaps make it the ideal aesthetic vehicle for heavy metal, a genre also defined by its criticism of the dominant social narrative.

This genre of literature has gone on to inspire the aesthetic of many Appalachian bands like Louisville, Kentucky’s Panopticon. Panopticon released their first album in 2007 and are widely accepted as the first mainstream band to fully embrace the black metal aesthetic from an Appalachian perspective (LA Weekly, 2017). In addition to using bluegrass modalities like banjo, and highlighting local old-time musicians, founder Austin Lunn also adds his voice to the long history of Appalachian environmentalists. Like Southern Gothic literature, Panopticon juxtaposes traditional and romanticized elements of antebellum musical society with the violent, and technologically enhanced sounds of heavy metal. An avid outdoorsman, Lunn regularly references environmentalist philosophers and cites Sigurd Olson’s famous quote as inspiration: “without love of the land, conservation lacks meaning or purpose, for only in a deep and inherent feeling for the land, can there be dedication in preserving it” (ed. Knopf, 2012, p. 2). Thus, the
destruction of Appalachian landscape by heavy metal machinery becomes represented in Lunn’s application of heavy metal sonic markers. The album *Kentucky* (2012) for example, contains tracks that are exclusively bluegrass like “Bernheim Forest in Spring” (Spotify playlist, track 28), covers of Appalachian protest songs like “Which Side Are You On?” (Spotify playlist, track 29), and songs that combine heavy metal and bluegrass instruments like “Bodies under the Falls” (Spotify playlist, track 30).

I met self-titled “black metal folklore” guitarist, Ryan Clackner at a sludge night at the Brickyard, and he is among a generation of bands and artists influenced by the work of Panopticon. Clackner began his musical life as a gigging jazz musician in New York, however, having fallen in love with Johnny Cash, rockabilly, and old-time music, Clackner moved to Nashville to pursue a musical career in the country music capital of the world. Once there, he struggled to find his place, and cited ghosts of his jazz music roots and his heavy drinking as the downfall of his first Tennessee based group, Junkyard Road. In a recent interview, Ryan likens these battling personalities to “two wolves” trapped inside, with one as an “alcoholic metalhead trying to make sense of life, and the other a repressed jazz musician trying to figure out how to deal with it” (Sanders, 2023). These “wolves” prevented him from reaching his musical potential.

Ryan tackled the alcoholic “wolf” first and got sober, which helped him to find clarity both in his own mental health and in his musical life. Combining his three “deepest musical loves,” metal, jazz, and American folk, resulted in the creation of the 2015 band Stump Tail Dolly. The band name references a Kentucky fiddle tune, “Stumptailed Dolly,” which is also the slang term for the paddle and dolly tub used when washing clothes the old-fashioned way (Titon, 2001). *Soundtrack to the Second Civil War* (2017), Ryan’s first release under Stump Tail Dolly,
received largely critical responses regarding its—as even Ryan admits—clumsy combination of the two genres. One prominent reviewer went so far as to say that the album constitutes “the best argument I’ve seen for how we have finally exhausted all facets of creativity,” and that “just like a real civil war, the album feels at odds with itself” (Mark Z, 2017).

“Cumberland Gap” (Figure 2.1; Spotify playlist, track 11), the sixth track on the album *Soundtrack to the Second Civil War*, takes the melody and lyrics from a song with roots in the Civil War. Cumberland Gap itself, a mountain pass situated at the juncture of Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky, was used in the late 18th century by colonists travelling westward to the Trans-Appalachian frontier. During the Civil War, the Confederate and Union armies also engaged in a yearlong battle for ownership of the pass (Glazer, 2011). The tune of the same name was originally a fiddle tune used to commemorate the site of the battle and the defeat of General George Washington Morgan. The most popular written version of the song appeared in the 1934 *American Ballads and Folk Songs* by John Lomax. The lyrics celebrate military victory by describing the “Yankee’s humiliating September retreat to the Ohio River” (Glazer, 2011, p. 13).

Stump Tail Dolly’s version of the song integrates timbral elements which link it to the old-time tradition, using traditional lyrics as well as the original melody. Stump Tail Dolly also keeps the typical orchestration of fiddle, banjo, and (electric) guitar, and the “Cumberland Gap tuning” of the banjo, F#BEAD, as used by American singer/songwriter Dock Boggs who popularized the song (Glazer, 2011, p. 14). This tuning allows the banjo to be played in D, the same as the fiddle would, by extending the bass range of the instrument. Additionally, much like the metal accompaniment to “O Death” by Andy Rehfeldt, the metal elements of the song serve more as a backing track than the primary element. Whereas other parts of the album feel more
Figure 2.1. “Cumberland Gap” Vocal Transcription
traditionally heavy metal, “Cumberland Gap” gives Clackner and fiddler Lucy Cochran the ability to showcase their talents with traditional bluegrass techniques. Essentially though, this song serves as a heavy metal cover of an old-time tune.

Though perhaps Stump Tail Dolly did not achieve the monetary or critical success Clackner had initially hoped for, the core idea and thematic material remained significant in his life as a performer and he has spawned dozens of crossover group and solo projects with growing levels of acclaim. After a relapse into substance abuse, Ryan created another group called Primeval Well, a collaboration with drummer Zac Omerod, keyboardist Edward Longo, and bassists Luke Lindell and Josh Hines. A perhaps more refined version of Stump Tail Dolly, Primeval Well again combines old time mountain music and black metal, but this time with a sprinkling of modal jazz. When the band formed, Clackner was living in a halfway house in the country and was required to “punch-in” at 9 p.m. every night. In an interview with Bandcamp, he recalls pounding coffee and cranking out music in a period of life where he was, “miserable, but also functional… so tired and delirious and insane all the time” (Sanders, 2023). Liberated from substance abuse and the musical funk he had been in because of it, Clackner led Primeval Well to their 2021 release, Talkin in Tongues with Mountain Spirits. This album, which finds its spiritual center in the “terror and splendor of the Appalachian Mountains,” has been described by NOCLEANSINGING as, “what black metal might have sounded like if it had originated along the Mason-Dixon line in America or in the Appalachian Mountains, instead of Norway” (Islander, 2021). I find this quote particularly indicative of the success of Primeval Well in creating a sense of place. Talkin' in Tongues exhibits a cleaner and more nuanced amalgamation of genres than Ryan’s work with Stump Tail Dolly, perhaps nowhere better than in its penultimate track, “Where All Things Are Forgotten” (Spotify playlist, track 12).
The melody and text for “Where All Things Are Forgotten” are borrowed from the popular shape-note tune, “Idumea” (Spotify playlist, track 14). The song prior, “Tales Carved in Stone on a Forbidden Road” (Spotify playlist, track 13), ends with animalistic roars and guttural growls, when, out of the silence, rings Ryan’s *a capella* voice (Figure 2.2). Ryan repeats the lyrics and melody once before sparse electric guitar chordal support enters. As the track goes on, Primeval Well adds elements of “metal” before reaching the tracks volume and intensity climax at 3:30. Notably, when transitioning from the atmospheric section to the more clearly “black metal” one, the listener hears the unmistakable sound of thunder.

The choice of this specific hymn for the album finds both thematic and biblical significance in creating a sense Appalachian emplacement. The text of “And Am I Born to Die,” or, “Idumea,” was written initially by brother of leader of the Methodist movement, and prolific hymnwriter, Charles Wesley in his 1763 publication, *Hymns for Children* (Figure 2.3). The text, which ruminates on the purpose of corporeal life and the inevitability of death, seems an awfully dark meditation for children, but perfect for a black metal album. The original hymn text by Wesley contains six, eight-line stanzas, and draws from the original text of Ecclesiastes 3:2, “a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to harvest.” For “Idumea,” the text was divided and renumbered when first set to music by Ananias Davisson (sometimes written Davidson) in 1816. The title “Idumea” references the land of Edom (Esau, first-born son of Isaac and twin to Jacob) given to him by God.
Figure 2.2. “Where All Things Are Forgotten” Vocal Transcription

Freely... almost meterless

And am I born to die? To lay this body down?

And must my trembling spirit fly into a world unknown,
A world of darkest shade,
Unpierced by human thought,
The dreary regions of the dead,
Where all things are forgot!

Soon as from earth I go,
What will become of me?
Eternal happiness or woe
Must then my portion be:
Wak'd by the trumpet's sound
I from my grave shall rise,
And see the Judge with glory crown'd,
And see the flaming skies.

Figure 2.3: Hymns for Children Original Text (Wesley, 1763, p. 57)
The story of the Edomites must have spoken to those early Appalachian communities, thus explaining the popularity of the tune and its consequential association with shape-note singing. From the very beginning, it seems as though the Edomites were destined for a life of misery and servitude. After Isaac bestows God’s blessing upon Jacob, “behold, thy dwelling shall be the fullness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above,” little remains for the eldest, Esau who “hated Jacob because of the blessing herewith his father blessed him” (KJV, Genesis 27:39-41). Isaac even says that Esau’s descendants would live in barren parts of the world and in constant conflict, only to serve Jacob’s offspring. Certainly, the “root of bitterness” (Hebrews 12:15-16) sewn in Esau speaks to the possible resentment of anyone who feels deprived of their birthright.

Musically, the tune also holds Appalachian and jazz based musical elements that further associate the song with this specific location, particularly through the Scottish/Irish origin of the tune, and associated banjo tuning. Many scholars have speculated that the original song writer, Ananias Davisson simply harmonized an existing folk tune, though, that remains un-confirmed (Titon, 2009). This theory does find some evidence in the melody’s use of a pentatonic Aeolian scale (1, 2, b3, 5, b6), which avoids half steps, a trait typical of many folk songs throughout the British Isles (Meredith, 2001). The Aeolian mode finds significance in its defining interval of a minor sixth, which evokes a bleak and mournful feeling. This scale is used often in jazz guitar, making it an ideal way for Ryan Clackner to incorporate his jazz improvisation skills into his version.

“Where All Things Are Forgotten” is also played in “sawmill” tuning. Sitting at a table on the Brickyard Patio, Ryan told me the story he heard, that holds that the tuning came from old banjo picker named “Joe Sawmill” (personal communication, February 11, 2024). Joe was asked
to play a tune before he was hanged. The song he played was deeply mournful, and no one had ever heard it before or could figure out how to play it. After he was hanged, a curious onlooker stroked the strings of Joe’s discarded banjo, and the tuning was discovered and named after him. “Sawmill tuning,” a staple of Appalachian old-time banjo and fiddle playing and an identifying sonic trait of *Talkin in Tongues*, is achieved by raising the second banjo string one step. This adjustment results in gDGCD (or aEADE for “A modal”), a tuning defined by double open fifths. “Sawmill” tuning can be used to play minor tunes, but more often it is used for songs in Dorian or Aeolian modes like “Pretty Polly” or “Cold Frosty Morning.” As most tunings get their names from a specific tune, there exists some speculation as to where the name comes from for sawmill tuning, as there is no tune called “Sawmill.” In using such an iconic old-time tuning with an extremely metal backstory, Ryan thus achieves both a sonic and thematic synergy between the two genres.

The association of the Appalachian Mountains with ancientness also is relevant through medieval sonic and theoretical associations. One banjo player I met on Facebook claimed that the doubled pitches evoke the sound of a crosscut saw, an essential piece of equipment in the lumber industry of 19th-century Appalachia, which produces two distinct pitches droning back and forth. The droning sound created by the open fifths and defining of sawmill tuning can be connected to Scottish-Irish musical history, in its recreation of the drone produced by the bagpipe and dulcimer. This may also explain why sawmill tuning is also often referred to as “modal” tuning (Titon, 2009). While the use of “modal” in this context is a misnomer, it speaks to the ancient feel of the open fifth which can be tied all the way back to medieval chant. Regardless of

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2 Sawmill tuning for the fiddle consists of the same general notes but without the C or D leaving only the two open fifths.
how sawmill tuning got its name, its usage evokes a specific mood and thus, allows its player to take part in a storied oral tradition which defines old time music.

Clackner’s “Where All Things Are Forgotten” ends with yet another nod to the origin of the text, the chiming of a church bell. Like much of the rest of the album, the atmosphere seeks to evoke a feeling of eerie solitude. The text, melody, and tuning all reinforce this feeling through their implicit and explicit connections to the “ancient,” allowing the listener to fully grasp the history of the woods that are so essential to the music of Primeval Well. I find this album a testament to Ryan’s growth as a musician and songwriter, and also to his increased knowledge of and connection to Appalachian life and culture.

Appalachiatari: Lining Out Tunes and Tattoos

The Whitesburg, Kentucky arts center Appalshop, founded in 1969 as the Appalachian Film Workshop, serves as a museum, radio station, performance venue, gallery space, and education center, devoted to shining light on the forgotten histories and peoples of rural Appalachia. In beginning my research, I was keen to become acquainted with the institution and their extensive archives. Unfortunately, due to the flooding in the summer of 2022, Appalshop’s physical space had been destroyed, and they had closed all on-site activities. As such, I was limited to browsing their content available online, and in doing so, I came upon a Whitesburg native named John Haywood, who has since become a friend.

John founded the band Appalachianari as a combination of elements of Baptist hymnody, old-time banjo and guitar, and black metal, to create what he calls “mountain metal.” After growing up in the small town of Whitesburg, he lived in Louisville during and after college. He spent a few years as a tattoo apprentice but found that he “didn’t identify with folks as much in
the city” (personal communication, October 20th, 2023). Having gained specialized training in tattooing and fulfilled his goal of experiencing life in a more metropolitan area, John felt called to return to Whitesburg and did so with the “hopes that [he] can be a sort of inspiration.” Upon his return, John opened Haywood Arts, a tattoo shop and art gallery. Following the floods, Haywood transformed the space into a performance venue after dark, to make up for the loss of Appalshop and provide a safe space for locals to hear heavy metal music.

It was here that he became close with Whitesburg bass player Matt Carter. Matt served as the record manager of Appalshop’s radio station WMMT 88.7 and would bring LPs and CDs into Haywood Arts of what John described as “a lot of records that I never was able to find as a kid… a lot of rare, music from the 70s and 80s” (personal communication, October 20th, 2023). In addition to digitizing this physical collection of music, the two would experiment with the recording software Garage Band to make demos, and their fascination with musical technologies led to the name of the band. A portmanteau of “Appalachia,” to denote their passion and emphasis on local bluegrass music, and “Atari,” a nod to the video game console they grew up playing on, Appalachiatari makes explicit their goal in modernizing “old” time music.

“Lordy Mercy”

Appalachiatari’s newest album Blood on the Altar (2022), explores John’s upbringing in the Old Regular Baptist (ORB) tradition, and serves as an outlet for him to explore religious trauma. Though the ORB church shares some similarities with the more popular Southern Baptist denomination, they reject many more modern additions to church life like Sunday school and technological innovations like musical instruments. Additionally, the Old Regular Baptist tradition began in Appalachia; today nearly 90% of the faithful live in a small region in the mountainous areas of Kentucky (Titon, 1999, p. 117). Due to the conservative nature of the faith,
lack of Sunday school, and regional specificity, these communities become exceedingly close, and leaving the faith is often met with great social and familial consequences.

John also designed the album cover for *Blood on the Altar* (Figure 2.4) to reference the push and pull that he feels between the ORB faithful and the musical life he lives now. The centerpiece of the artwork features a stereotypical snake handling preacher being attacked by the snake. This image serves a twofold purpose: to call out the hypocrisy John sees in “sinners on their high horse preaching goodness from the pulpit” (personal communication, October 20th, 2023), and to address the ways in which Appalachian religion becomes stereotyped in popular culture. Snake handling began near Chattanooga in 1910 when Pastor George Hensley said he was called by God to “take up serpents,” as the scripture indicates in Mark 16:18 (Burton and Speer, 2003). The image of the snake-handling preacher has been used in popular culture to further the idea that Appalachian people are backwards religious zealots. Haywood uses this explicitly inflammatory image to force listeners to confront their preconceived notions about Southern religious culture. In the album artwork the preacher is flanked by women in prayer to the left, and men playing banjos and guitars to the right. This image explicitly juxtaposes the Old Regular Baptist tradition which eschews all musical instruments, and the band in which John plays now.

The title of the album *Blood on the Altar* and its corresponding song on the album address the direction of contemporary religion that John sees as the “church following the antichrist.” This is a reference to a verse in 2 Corinthians 11:14 that says, “and no wonder, for
Figure 2.4. *Blood on the Altar* Album Cover Art by John Haywood (Bandcamp, 2023)
Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light” (KJV). This verse reconfirms the idea that the Devil’s greatest weapon is deception. John fully accepts this teaching and believes that evil entities search to convince the laity that evil is good. Blood on the Altar takes this idea one step further, accusing the church itself of promoting cruelty and bigotry in the name of goodness. John expressed a deep frustration with this hypocrisy and says that this album is a musical recreation of the “arguments [he] has in [his] mind every morning with religious folks” (personal communication, October 20th, 2023).

For John, this album is just as much about expressing his current experiences with religious trauma as it is about exploring the roots of his rebellion in childhood. John’s first foray into the world of heavy music came through 80s rock bands like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden. The opening track on John’s album, “Lordy Mercy” (Spotify playlist, track 15), draws heavily on these early musical interests. Rife with power chords, fast paced guitar solos, and pleasing, repetitive melodies, the band makes plain these influences. The opening guitar riff is particularly evocative of this, through both its classic rock distorted timbre and utilization of the tritone (Figure 2.5).

Not only does the syncopated and catchy melody clearly evoke a specific era of musical history, but it also opens with and prominently features the interval of the tritone. This interval finds historical significance beginning in medieval music theory wherein it was called the “devil’s interval,” a sequence of notes so sinister and disturbing that they may conjure the Devil himself. As such, the interval has found popularity among the music rebels of all time periods. Especially in an album that catalogues one man’s journey through leaving Christianity to find purpose through rebellion, an interval with direct associations to Satan seems quite appropriate in this context.
Figure 2.5. “Lordy Mercy” Guitar Transcription
The song, “Lordy Mercy” finds its greatest meaning within the lyrics that juxtapose the experience of attending the funeral of John’s “Pepaw” and imagining his own funeral, with that of watching the same family member drink himself to death years earlier. The lyrics are as follows:

Follow me down to my sanctuary  
Write my name in the obituary  
Lord, I feel so unnecessary

Come sit with me at my dinner table  
It’s your flesh and blood if I’m really able  
Then we’ll sit back and watch a little cable

Have mercy, God Almighty  
On my soul  
Or I’ll come back for you

Put all the furniture in the front yard  
Here comes Pepaw with a deck of cards  
Drinking his medicine from a mason jar

Singing and dancing and telling lies  
It’s all I can do just to get me by  
Come on baby, just a little try

Have mercy…

Follow me down to my funeral  
You don’t got to dress so casual  
Just got to act kind of natural

Follow me up the cemetery hill  
Listen to the sound of a ringing bell  
We’ll be dancing at the gates of hell

Have mercy…  
(Haywood, Bandcamp, 2023)

Despite John having forsaken organized religion in his twenties, the repeated pleas for mercy speak to the hold that John’s religious trauma has on his everyday life. He explained to me the confusion he feels coming back to the “holler” after losing a friend or family member. On one
hand, being together with the people from his youth to sing and dance and eat together is wonderful, but on the other, these sorts of reunions only seem to happen when someone passes away and are therefore tinged with sorrow. John reflected on being reminded of “how [people active in the faith] were and are outside of [his] own little world,” and the guilt he feels for leaving it behind (personal communication, October 20th, 2023).

Within the Old Regular Baptist community, personal reflections on God and one’s relationship with Him is done through an ambiguous combination of speech and song. In attending a service at the Old Time Gospel Baptist Church in Lenoir City, Tennessee, I experienced this dynamic that John described firsthand. Pastor Junior Ward led congregants from four other ORB churches in a morning of spirited song. Coming from a personal background in the restrained worship style of the Methodist faith, I was surprised by what I heard. As I sat in the pews, it took only a few moments before the preacher was moved not to speak, but to sing. For the next hour and a half, speech and song melded into one amalgam where neither could be distinguished from the other. The leading singer began to intone “Come thou fount of every blessing,” and, in the absence of any song books, the congregation repeated the line and continued until it seemed as though enough people knew the hymn to carry on as one. Instead of one long sermon and relevant scripture readings, Mr. Ward interspersed the service with intoned, nearly sung, mini-sermons in a similar manner to how John does throughout Blood on the Altar.

Singing with others finds scientific and historical significance as one of the longest standing and most widely preserved sources of collective effervescence. Not only does this act of fellowship reify community sentiment, but medical studies have proven over and over that the benefits extend into ones mental and physical well-being (Bailey and Davidson, 2002; Silber, 2005; Clift et al., 2008). Savage et al. (2018) have argued for the “music and social bonding”
hypothesis of recent research and have found further scientific proof that community music activity leads to a higher production of oxytocin (and therefore increased feelings of happiness and sensitivity towards others emotional states) than other group activities. That John would find such solace in exploring his religious trauma musically, finds support in this exciting new research and it further explains to me why the Old Regular Baptist tradition has had such success in maintaining a centuries-old and completely oral tradition.

Conclusion

Just as shape-note singing and Baptist lined out hymnody reclaim the violent sounds of war and industry, so too does the music of Appalachiatari and Primeval Well reclaim the unpleasant sounds of addiction, environmental desecration, and emotional despair. Further, the personal stories of Ryan Clackner and John Haywood speak to the therapeutic, “effervescent” power of communal music. Both Appalachiatari’s Blood on the Altar and Primeval Well’s Talkin’ in Tongues explore themes of loss, grief, regret, and loneliness through the utilization of specific sonic, lyric, and thematic material that serve to root them in an Appalachian musical ethos. Their positionality not only creates a sense of emplacement that speaks to a very specific audience, but it roots them within a regional religious and musical history.
CHAPTER 3

SONIC REIMAGINATION, RECLAMATION, AND QUEERING OF THE MOUNTAIN WOMAN IN THE MUSIC OF TRANSGENDER APPALACHIAN HEAVY METAL PERFORMERS

“The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement, and the one statement that cannot be destroyed. You can burn books, buy newspapers, you can guard against handbills and pamphlets, but you cannot prevent singing.”

– John Steinbeck, 1970, vii

During the mid-20th century literary movement of the Appalachian Renaissance, important writers like Wilma Dykeman, Lee Smith, Ron Rash and Charles Frazier came to prominence. Prior to this time, Appalachian culture was often conflated with Southern culture at large. These writers sought to bring nuance to the Appalachian experience by highlighting the significant economic and ecological issues, using regionally specific dialects, and crafting emotionally complex characters. In doing so, they not only established the beginnings of a rich literary tradition, but also shaped broader American perceptions of Appalachian people and culture for years to come (Tunc, 2013, p. 83). Influenced by biblical and folkloric stories, this literature is often characterized by the prevalence of certain tropes, including feuding families, wise old matriarchs, vigilantes, stoic “Indians,” and the town drunk. Though some of these tropes can be chalked up to stereotyping, others are rooted in truth and worn with pride, such as that of the mountain woman.

Wilma Dykeman’s 1962 novel, The Tall Woman, which tells the story of a woman’s battle for education and equality in a small North Carolina town in the years following the Civil War, provides a case study of what the ideal mountain woman should be. Protagonist Lydia McQueen

3 See, for example, Wilma Dykeman The French Broad (1955); Lee Smith: Fair and Tender Ladies (1988) and Oral History (1983); Ron Rash, Serena (2008) and One Foot in Eden (2002); Charles Frazier, Cold Mountain (1997) and Thirteen Moons (2006).
strikes the perfect balance between family commitment and independence, possesses a deep knowledge of local flora and fauna, and actively participates in community and cultural traditions. Though the “mountain woman” trope initially referenced women in the 19th century (Leonard, 1999, p. 201), these qualities are timeless, and characters of this ilk can be found throughout Appalachian literature, film, and balladry, as well as in the Appalachian heavy metal scene.

In this chapter, I continue the discussion of Appalachian music of resistance, exploring the ways in which the role of women in the creation and maintenance of community culture through music making has developed, and how these histories play into the shaping of contemporary Appalachian female identity. I focus on two bands, Genital Shame and Feminazgûl. Both bands are fronted by transgender women, Erin and Margaret, respectively, who were born and raised in Southeastern Appalachia. Both bands self-identify as black metal, a sub-genre defined traditionally by its rejection of Christianity and use of Satanic imagery and source material. While neither Feminazgûl nor Genital Shame utilize Satanism in their writing, the black metal nomenclature and association with Satanism hold significance as a rejection of traditional southern, Christian gender roles and feminine ideals.

The frontwomen of Feminazgûl and Genital Shame at once subvert the conventional archetype of the Appalachian “mountain woman,” while simultaneously embracing characteristics such as fierce independence, naturalism, and maintenance of culture. I explore the ways in which Appalachian women have fought back against essentialisms not only of race and ethnic heritage, but also archaic essentialisms of gender which hold that gender “is a discrete and dichotomous social category,” or, that gender is determined biologically, totally indisputable, and indicative of certain categorical behaviors and properties (Gülgöz et al., 2019, p. 1).
It was these ideals that prevented women initially from participating fully in the labor movement within Appalachia, and the same ideals that prevent cis and trans women from being more fully embraced in the black metal community. Through their exploration of the essence of womanhood, Erin and Margaret actively redefine the role of the mountain woman, following in the footsteps of their predecessors.

Women, Coal, and Song

In the early 1930s, Harlan County, Kentucky earned the name “Bloody Harlan” due to the consistent and violent clashes between coal company executives and striking miners. Their demands were simple: a pay increase of $1 a day, a guaranteed 200 working days per year, and the abolition of the “North-South wage differential” (Courier Journal, 1941, p. 34) which guaranteed miners from ex-union states an additional forty cents of hourly pay than those from the South (Figure 3.1).

Though this conflict could have easily become a war between the workers, Harlan became a center and symbol of the labor movement. Perhaps nothing is a better illustration of this than the song “Which Side Are You On?” written by the wife of a union leader named Florence Reece (Spotify playlist, track 16). One evening during the conflict, the Sherriff, J.H. Blair and his men raided and ransacked the Reece residence, in an effort to scare the union leader and his family. While the law enforcement officers waited armed, outside the house for Sam to return, Florence is said to have torn a sheet from the calendar on the wall to write down the lyrics to the song that would become the centerpiece of many social movements (Fowke and Glazer, 1973, p. 55).
It Isn’t a Labor ‘War’ In Harlan

Harlan County already is getting ugly publicity because blood has been spilled at strike-bound mines. And who can blame the press of the Nation if it calls this a “labor war,” and uses such gory words as “bloody Harlan?”

Yet it isn’t a “labor war” at all. It is, on the contrary, merely a small rough-neck element indulging in its favorite pastime of homicide.

Figure 3.1. The Courier Journal, Louisville, Kentucky, Sunday April 6, 1941 (1941, p. 32)
Song also played an important role in the movement, by encouraging solidarity, promoting messaging, and expanding possibilities for inclusion. In the same fashion as shape-note singing, protest song often uses familiar melodies. This tactic not only subverts the financial and accessibility challenges of printing, but it allows for greater participation among those who may not have great musical literacy. “Which Side” for example seems to draw its melody from a few different sources that would have been known to the miners of Appalachia. The melody closely resembles both an Old Regular Baptist hymn called “Lay the Lily Low” and the broadside ballad known as either “Jackie Frazier” or “The Ballad of Jack Munroe,” which Francis James Child believed to have its roots in seventeenth-century Scotland (Greene, 1957). Thus, in using these melodies with both religious and cultural significance, protest songs take on additional sentimental meaning to those singing them.

The creation and lyrics of “Which Side” reflect both the growing impact of women in the labor movement, and the resulting solidarity that they inspired. The lyrics directly demand that miners throughout the country make the decision between being, “a union man or a thug for J.H. Blair,” thereby drawing the line not between factions of workers but between the workers as a whole and the rich men taking advantage of them. Reece’s immortal words were also indicative of the progressive and inclusive nature of the women’s auxiliary committees which sprung up around this time. Despite a historically “tepid” support of housewives in labor and other social movements, women became a stronger part of the union in the early years of the Great Depression (Merithew, 2006, p. 65). The women of this auxiliary movement sought to refashion the existing rhetoric around motherhood and homemaking. They also sought to refocus national and local discourse about the larger labor movement towards the miner’s commitment to interracialism by partnering with immigrant women and Black women (Merithew, 2006).
At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (c. 1800), the burning of coal, gas, and oil skyrocketed to accommodate the new need for energy, transportation, and fuel powered machinery. As illustrated by Michael Mann’s now famous “hockey stick” graph (Figure 3.2), atmospheric carbon dioxide increased gradually until about 1900 (also, consequentially, during the beginning of labor disputes in Appalachia) when global temperatures and greenhouse gases began to skyrocket. Women of early 20th century Appalachia like Florence Reece saw firsthand the ecological destruction brought on by industrial mining practices like mountain top removal. Additionally, as noted by Greta Gaard (cited in Chapter 1), and observed by women’s auxiliaries throughout the labor movement, women, and women of color specifically, are those most affected by climate change (2014, p. 23). Despite promises made by the coal companies of economic gain and wages returned to the family unit, women often ended up with additional household duties due to the unreliable hours required by the mines.

In our contemporary world of environmental turmoil, women still bear the major onus of climate change. However, another group has been identified as affected disproportionately as well: the LGBTQ community. Queer people already live on the margins of more conservative societies and are often denied fair housing and employment rights. The presence of what Gaard calls “climate change homophobia” becomes especially apparent when considering the media blackout of queer people prior to Hurricane Katrina and the reaction of the religious right, who believed the disaster was intended to punish gay people and waved signs saying, “Thank God for Katrina” (2014, p. 24).

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4 As of 2024, no statewide laws exist in Tennessee ensuring employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and lending for LGBT communities. Further, the state banned cities and counties from passing nondiscrimination laws and bans transgender people from using bathrooms consistent with their gender identity. Tennessee also has no state anti-bullying or nondiscrimination laws in schools. There also exist laws prohibiting drag performances and laws that criminalize HIV-AIDS. (Kindy, 2023)
Figure 3.2. “Hockey Stick Graph” from the 2001 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Mann, 2001, p.107)
According to a poll conducted by Harris Interactive, women and LGBTQ Americans, “think, act, and vote more green than others” (2009). This is unsurprising given the established ways in which climate change disproportionately affects queer people. For the band Feminazgûl of Asheville, black metal serves to make a statement about the treatment of the earth. Further, in stepping into the motherly role of protector, advocate, and scholar of the ecological land-and soundscape of Appalachia, the women of Feminazgûl embody the trope of the traditional mountain woman.

**Feminazgûl and *No Dawn for Men* (2020)**

I became acquainted with atmospheric death metal band Feminazgûl through vocalist Laura Beach, whom I met in a Facebook group for metal lovers in Eastern Tennessee.

Feminazgûl was founded in 2018 after Laura met songwriter and trans-rights activist Margaret Killjoy on Tinder. As two queer women making black metal is almost unheard of, they have since been the subject of great mainstream acclaim and the subject of articles by NPR (Gotrich, 2020) and Esquire (Kelly, 2020). The name Feminazgûl is a portmanteau of the term “feminazi” coined by conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh to describe radical feminists, and the “Nazgûl,” or Ringwraiths of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Though at first glance much of their music is not blatantly political, as implied by their name, their lyrical themes surround power and the ways that it takes away our humanity. *No Dawn for Men* itself was released the day after COVID lockdowns began, on March 17th, 2020, and it echoes these themes of power, perversion, death, loss, and new life.

**Songs of Nature and Heritage in “Illa, Mother of Death”**

Illa, the mother of death  
We welcome you to this hall  
Illa, the mother of the dark  
We welcome you into us
Welcome to this hall
Welcome to this hall
Make us not safe
Make us brave

In darkness no one reigns
The night has no king
The night has no queen
In darkness no one reigns

Illa,

Illa, the mother of death
We welcome you into this hall
(Killjoy, Bandcamp, 2020)

The first track of *No Dawn for Men*, “Illa, Mother of Death” (lyrics above, Spotify playlist, track 17), serves as an invocation to the pagan goddess Illa, with whom Margaret works closely and includes in most of her art. Illa herself is a goddess of nature, which is a common designation of female deities in global religious practices. She is also a goddess of overlooked qualities of the feminine: death, rot, darkness, and the new life that follows it. The goddess Illa, much like her invocation in *No Dawn for Men* is at once scary and beautiful. Utilizing the “woods, the fire, the wind, the water, the rutting earthly rot,” (Meredith Yayanos, 2021) the women of Feminazgûl combine musical and natural elements native to the Southern Appalachians in what can only be described as a musical expression of both extreme joy and extreme grief amid a politically trying time in American history. Over the course of the 2020 COVID lockdowns, these themes of rot and decay became more important and prevalent in our everyday lives. As such, this song became both a prayer for strength and bravery in a time of great confusion, and an anthem of rebirth.
The opening of “Illa” contains two sounds that may shock the seasoned death metal fan. The first minute and a half of the track is comprised of the song of the eastern phoebe, a plump little songbird that resides across the eastern United States and whose song is composed of what bird expert David Sibley describes as “two rough, whistled phrases usually alternated seeeriddip seebrrr” (2017, p. 258). Additionally, the song features an accordion melody with a tone almost reminiscent of the Scottish bagpipe. Though these sounds expertly create the ambience that Feminazgûl cultivates, the deliberate choice of audio references carries with it important historical and thematic associations that tie into the album’s themes of power and corruption.

Of all the native birds to the Appalachians, the phoebe is hardly the most iconic in song or image. The brightly colored blue jay or cardinal with their intense and recognizable songs would seem to be a more appropriate choice in terms of evoking a distinctly Appalachian soundscape. However, it is the phoebe’s innate song and the morbid activities of its adult male that made it the right choice for the album. In 1990 study, eastern phoebes were collected at 10 days of age and reared in a laboratory. Just before the birds would have begun to sing (around 35 days), the technicians deafened the birds by removing the cochlea. The songs of these deafened phoebes were judged to be normal when compared to those intact phoebes in the wild. This study proved that the *Savornis phoebe*, like other non-passerines, did not require any auditory feedback for normal vocal development (Kroodsma & Konishi, 1991, p. 477). In other words, the song of the eastern phoebe is not learned, but totally innate.

The phoebe takes on further significance as the victim of human greed and in terms of the desecration of nature by a people on stolen land. Adult male eastern phoebes have been regularly

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5 Thanks to composer David Rothenberg who helped me to identify this bird. (personal communication, April 17, 2023)
documented to commit infanticide to increase their mating chances. Ritchison & Ritchison hypothesized that since the introduction of coal mining companies to Appalachia, “suitable territories and nest sites” (2010, p. 620) have become more limited, thereby increasing competition and the rates of infanticide among non-breeding males. According to a study by the Nature Conservancy, sounds of nature are undoubtedly an “important characteristic” (Gagnolet, 2015, p. 1) of the area. As Titon observes, “without sound interference, animal species communicate freely” (2016, p. 77). But as oil and gas production increased throughout the region, so too did the noises that accompany it. This same study confirmed that these unnatural sources of noise “interfere with communication and other auditory cues, reduce habitat quality, and cause changes in physiology and behavior” (Gagnolet, 2015, p. 1). Given the eastern phoebe’s innate need to create beautiful music even after inhumane mutilation, and the male’s tendency to be driven to infanticide by increased competition, the bird makes a perfect fit for the prevalent themes of power and corruption referenced within Feminazgûl’s discography.

The theme of stolen land has been prevalent in Killjoy’s work over the last few years as she fell into a “bit of a rabbit hole” thinking about what it means to be the descendant of “people who fled colonization in order to become colonizers” (Killjoy et al., 2021). Killjoy is of Scottish-Irish heritage and most of her family came over during the famine after fighting in the Irish Civil War. Though they came over to flee the harsh realities of British rule, they ended up on stolen land becoming colonizers themselves. Margaret, having been raised Irish-Catholic has since used her music to further connect to her heritage, her family’s history of resistance, and to the traditions passed down through generations. Feminazgûl has released music based on Irish vampire stories and curses, and in “Illa, Mother of Death” the accordion is used as a connection to both Killjoy’s Scottish heritage, and the history of Appalachian settlement. As Margaret says,
“there is nothing I can do individually to dismantle whiteness, but I don’t get to opt out or deny my position and privilege” (Killjoy et al., 2021). By including a perverted sort of polka among the opening Appalachian soundscape of “Illa,” Feminazgûl directly reconnects to ancient familial traditions while simultaneously acknowledging the ways in which white colonizer ancestors perverted the culture of the colonized.

Following around seven minutes of snarling vocals and typical black metal instrumental acid rain, “Illa, Mother of Death” ends much as it begins: with accordion and the song of the phoebe descending into a few moments of total silence. In a survey of literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and America, R. Murray Schafer (1977) noted a “decline in the number of times quiet and silence are evoked in literary descriptions” (p. 145) and was struck by the increasingly “negative way in which silence is described by modern writers” (p. 146). Though I have found this to be true in my own reading of most modern literature, that which is set in the Appalachian wilderness does not conform to the same trends. One does not know true silence until they have found themselves in the middle of nowhere, miles away from the hum of electricity and human activity. The silence at the end of “Illa” takes the listener out of their 21st-century mindset and places them in the soft hands of Illa to fully appreciate the awesome splendor of the natural world.

Genital Shame, Balladry, and Inner Transcendence

Erin of Genital Shame grew up Aaron in northern West Virginia in what she describes as a “fundamentalist Christian family” (personal communication, December 1, 2023). Despite no longer being identified with any organized religion, Erin finds great musical inspiration and personal purpose through her own spirituality. She says,
You can get pretty close to something transcendent or numinous without believing in something. It's helpful to create metaphors to use in materiality. I see Genital Shame as a shadow self, to talk about me, and an analysis of liturgy. I really believe in the power of the unconscious trying to broadcast something to us that we're not able to make sense of consciously (personal communication, December 9, 2023).

Erin also credits this “transcendence” to the creation of Genital Shame. She told the story of having taken a run by the river, when all of a sudden, a “vision” came to her which told her to “buy a headless white guitar” and begin a black metal project called Genital Shame.

The name “Genital Shame” itself is intentionally inflammatory. Our political climate does not provide a great deal of support for transgender individuals. Eighteen states have passed laws restricting trans students from participating in school sports, and several representatives have proposed “genital inspections” of student athletes if there is a dispute regarding their sex (Kindy, 2023). These ideas derive from a common belief that the genitalia of a trans person are a public matter, with media portrayals and politicians focusing often on “the surgery” and defining people by their genitalia rather than the content of their character. In response to this culture, a culture which is largely designed to shame transgender individuals into hiding or submission, Erin uses Genital Shame as a source of trans pride. In the liner notes of her first EP, Lion Piss + Arm Vulnerability, she also acknowledges the work of Feminazgûl and Margaret Killjoy, thus taking her place within the “emergent tradition of trans, queer, and nonbinary metal musicians” (Dawson, 2022).

Genital Shame aims to queer not only the landscape of the black metal community, but also what she calls the “sonic traditions of black metal” (personal communication, December 9, 2023). Despite the vision that bade her to create a specifically black metal project, the genre is
known for adherence to strict codes of conduct, musical production, and performance. Those who antagonize these codes are often met with great adversity within the scene. Not only does Erin break the rules of “black metal” but she also sees this rule-breaking antagonism as definitive of Genital Shame, she calls the project “an interrogation of how far you can get towards breaking those rules without it being something else” (Dawson, Bandcamp, 2022). To be queer and female presenting in a subculture that tends to prefer those that are neither, while simultaneously shattering most of the established musical expectations, certainly has placed Erin on the map within the heavy metal community. But her even more tenacious rally against evangelical Christianity has helped her to stand out further within Southern Appalachia.

**Lion Piss + Arm Vulnerability**

Erin has long “struggled with having Appalachian roots” (personal communication, December 1, 2023), but through her 2022 autobiographical album, *Lion Piss + Arm Vulnerability*, she is able to explore the impact that her childhood in rural West Virginia has had on her adult life. Just by judging from the opening moments of the album, which feature guttural screams and a repetitive rapid guitar riff, the new Genital Shame fan may underestimate Erin’s depth of musical knowledge and experience. Pablo Picasso once said, “learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them.” Perhaps no one knows this to be true better than Erin, who studied classical guitar and musical production with Aaron Carey. Throughout this album, and the rest of the Genital Shame discography, Erin takes classically based paradigms, techniques, and scales, and distorts them through a clear manipulation of traditional expectations.

In our interviews, Erin often emphasized that Genital Shame is a positive project for her. Despite the difficulties that she faced growing up and transitioning, the music serves as a

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6 Founding member of Nechochwen, with whom I work in chapter four.
celebration of her growth as a woman and as a musician. This positivity is echoed technically in her frequent use of major tonalities, yet another way in which she subverts black metal normative expectations. The melody of first track “Gnoistienne” (Spotify playlist, track 18) for example, is essentially built on an A major scale. Within this major tonality, Erin’s guitar line experiments with both the natural and lowered 6th scale degree throughout, which leaves the listener in doubt as to the true tonality of the piece.

I interpret this perpetual sense of uncertainty about the binaristic characterization of the piece as representative of the experience of transitioning. Throughout the heavy metal milieu, there exists a broader acceptance of transgender people than in American Southern culture at large, allowing for more fluid explorations of both gender and tonality within the scene. This element of scalar and melodic ambiguity is also prevalent in the second track, “Ego Non-Sum Trust Fund Puer” (I Am Not a Trust Fund Baby, Spotify playlist, track 19), where the opening guitar riff gets looped with another track that plays the same melody simultaneously a minor second down. This serves to disorient and forces the listener to really focus to find the original melody (Figure 3.3).

The clear highlight of the album, however, comes at the end with the eponymous track, “Lion Piss + Arm Vulnerability” (Spotify playlist, track 20). Like the others, this song begins with a guitar riff, but this time, the simple melody is played on an acoustic guitar with less attention to accuracy. Additionally, you can hear soft sounds of chatter in the background that
Figure 3.3. “Ego Non Sum Trust-Fund Puer” Guitar Transcription
give the feel of sitting in a coffee shop during an open mic night. Lastly, rather than screaming or growling, Erin delicately intones a melody with slight variations in each repetition.

The lyrics and title of the album address body insecurity, certainly one of the most difficult pieces of life for many women in the 21st century. At 2:54 into “Lion Piss,” Erin breaks the calm atmosphere she created and bursts into about one minute of harsh vocals and traditional black metal guitar distortion before easing back into the acoustic. The lyrics (found in Figure 3.4) address a fairly common insecurity regarding a woman’s storing of body fat in the upper arms, commonly referred to as “bat wings.” The incredible frustration and disappointment of finding a dress or top that is flattering, save for the sleeves which highlight that particular insecurity, has become an almost universal experience for many women. The screaming section of this song seems to reflect that moment of outrage that we often must keep in. By connecting to such a seemingly insignificant, albeit incredibly common, feminine experience, Erin places herself within a discourse of lamenting the experience of womanhood rather than one specific to gender transition. Further, she gives her listeners a realistic glimpse into her everyday life that they can connect to (Figure 3.4).

The first two tracks seem to fall under what R. Murray Schafer defines a high-fidelity landscape, “one in which discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level” (1993, p. 43). “Lion Piss” however, seems to hide the musical elements behind what Schafer describes as “an over dense population of sounds where perspective is lost” (1993, p. 43). By hiding the guitar and vocal melodies within this dense lo-fi soundscape, Erin sonically mirrors the shame and uncertainty she expresses in the lyrics. By breaking out of the acoustic coffee shop atmosphere and into her screams midway through the song, Erin signals a desire to rid herself of these bodily shames. Ultimately, she succumbs to the societal pressure and back
Figure 3.4. “Lion Piss + Arm Vulnerability” Vocal Transcription
Into the lo-fi soundscape which begins the song, Erin repeatedly told me, Genital Shame functions as a “positive project,” but also a realistic one. Culminating in an ambiguous ending, *Lion Piss* works to communicate the often-confusing experience of womanhood sonically, lyrically, and atmospherically in the 21st century.

This short album provides not only a refreshing take on the typical sonorities and modalities of black metal, but an insightful picture of a woman exploring the multiplicities of her identity. I am especially entranced by the minimalist simplicity employed throughout the album. This speaks to Erin’s fondness for minimalist composers Kali Malone and Meredith Monk (personal communication, December 23, 2023), whose work seeks to elucidate the beauty in the ordinary. Though much of Erin’s other work is much more flippant and inspired by Riot Grrrrl-esque aesthetics and societal critiques, *Lion Piss* takes on a far more introspective tone and at times it even feels intrusive to be listening. To provide such a vulnerable insight into one’s heart is remarkable, and it makes for a unique and surprising listening experience.

**A New Florence Reece**

The Appalachian Renaissance of the mid-20th century marked a pivotal moment in American culture at large through its redefinition of Appalachian identity and womanhood. Through the development of complex characters, these authors sought to bring nuance to a misunderstood culture and experience and shed light on significant economic and ecological issues. Through the work of women like Margaret and Erin, the archetypal mountain woman of Wilma Dykeman’s Lydia McQueen, marked by commitment to family, culture, and song, has transcended time and remained relevant in contemporary discourses (Tunc, 2013).

Real life Lydia McQueens like Florence Reece, Margaret Killjoy, and Erin Dawson continue to be proud bearers of culture and challengers to ideas of femininity and resistance. By
rejecting conventional archetypes while simultaneously embracing certain elements of Appalachian identity, these women contribute to the constant renegotiation of what it means to be a “mountain woman.” Just as they dismantle essentialist notions of gender identity and performance, Genital Shame and Feminazgûl confront conceptions of authenticity and genre differentiation within the often-rigid world of black metal. In so doing, these women follow in the footsteps of the writers of the Appalachian renaissance such as Wilma Dykeman and Ron Rash, and the real-life feminist pioneers like Florence Reece by demonstrating the ongoing vitality and relevance of Appalachian culture and resistance in a rapidly changing world. I see their work as a celebration of the rich legacy of those who came before, and an embrace of the dynamic possibilities of the future.
CHAPTER 4

KINGS OF THE WILD FRONTIER: INNER AND OUTER “INDIANNNESS” AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN CULTURAL MEMORY

Much of what I know about the frontiersman and American folk hero Davy Crockett, I learned from Fess Parker’s song, “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” (1954, Spotify playlist, track 21). Though the song itself has remained popular in American media culture since its release in 1954, the text contains numerous examples of hyperbole, exaggeration, and outright lies. Some lines, like that Crockett was “born on a mountain top” and not in a valley, seem inconsequential, but others, like that he “fought single-handed through the Injun war ‘til the Creeks was whipped and peace was in store” (Parker, 1954), contribute to the image that Davy Crockett was a valiant warrior in an equally matched battle and not that he participated in what was essentially a massacre against Native peoples. While Crockett eventually opposed President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act during his time in Congress, media representations like “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” further downplay the harsh treatment of Native Americans in the 19th century on the American Frontier (Hutton, 2000, p. 28).

In chapter 3, I began to explore the ways in which Scottish and Irish heritage played a role in the performances of Feminazgûl’s Margaret Killjoy. I continue this discussion here by further investigating perhaps the most impactful part of Scottish musical history, ballads (Meredith, 2001). “The Ballad of Davy Crockett,” functions in the same manner as traditional Scottish ballads, with a simple, strophic form paired with singable melodies to facilitate ease of transmission among generations. However, the creation of ballad heroes often turns simple stories into legends that are meant to speak more to the ethos of an entire culture than to communicate truths about a specific person or event. Colin Turnbull famously observed this phenomenon during his time with the Mbuti of the Ituri forest saying: “these stories grow until it
is difficult to tell the difference between what is meant to be a straight, factual account and a traditional legend” (1962, p. 134).

These songs were carried initially to the Appalachian Mountains through the waves of migration in the 17th and 18th century. Like much musical culture at the time, Appalachian ballads were transmitted orally, and therefore underwent significant changes both in tune and content. Place names, current events, and significant persons were often the subject of these divergences, allowing the music to maintain relevance throughout time and space. The isolated nature of the rugged Appalachian Mountains necessitated a people who were self-sufficient and could thrive without reliable communication. As such, for much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the diffusion of new influences was limited enough to allow for the untainted transmission of balladry from one generation to the next (Child, 1896, p. 156). Ellen Churchill Semple, an early geographer, reported that some ballads she encountered like “Lord Bateman” and “The Turkish Lady” bore an “unmistakable identity” to the poems of the same name in Kurlock’s Ancient Scottish Ballads (Semple, 1901, p. 601). Even into the 20th century, technological changes like radio allowed for even greater accessibility at a time of great disturbance brought about by the coal industry. These melodies, lyrics, and stories have lasted into more contemporary musical culture with tunes like “Auld Lang Syne” and “Scarborough Fair” (Meredith, 2008, pp. 169-174).

Paul Gilroy uses sailing ship imagery to explore this process of migration and flow. He explains, “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” represents “the movement of key cultural and political artifacts” (2003, p. 4) This idea finds significance both in the story of Scottish-Appalachian balladry, and in the forced removal of Native people throughout the American frontier. In this chapter, I continue the discussion of the role of the ballad in
Appalachian culture by exploring its connection with Native American oral culture and history within two contemporary heavy metal bands: Pan-Amerikan Native Front, a one-man, Mesoamerican black metal project, and Nechochwen, a neo-folk metal project from Northern Kentucky. Moreover, I explore the fluidity of communal memory as it pertains to shaping identity both through specific geographical space and through diasporic connections established initially due to the Indian Removal Act in early 1830 (Abram, 2015, p. 143).

The bands I interviewed had two primary goals: to bring attention to the atrocities committed against Native Americans as well as their significant technological, military, or cultural achievements, and to connect to their Native heritage and draw strength from their ancestors. Each group seeks to right the wrongs of American media and educational systems, which downplay the treatment of Native Americans in the early 19th century, minimize the accomplishments of Native peoples, and shame Native descendants into hiding their ancestry. Specifically, I analyze two different musical interpretations of the life, death, and legacy of Tecumseh, which seek to restore him to his proper role as a hero in American history. They say that history is written by the victors, but by utilizing first-person narrative and ballad-like structure, these bands rewrite history and venerate the forgotten icons of Appalachian Native culture.

**Pan-Amerikan Native Front**

Following the commercial success of the song “Indians” by Anthrax (1987), the subgenre known as indigenous metal, came to prominence within the heavy metal scene. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, North American groups like Testament of California, Florida’s Blackfoot, and Winterhawk which formed in Chicago, joined the global trend of utilizing heavy metal sonic modalities as a medium for preserving linguistic and cultural heritage while simultaneously
spreading awareness about the atrocities committed against various Native peoples. Further, these bands seek to expose and destroy the false dichotomy imposed upon native musics between “traditional” and “modern music,” by, as metal scholars Soltani and Zappia explain, “transgressing their status as relegated to being part of the ‘world music’ and ‘traditional’ genres” (2020, pp. 8-9). For instance, Niel de Jong, a member of New Zealand based group Alien Weaponry, exemplifies this approach by foregrounding the Māori language in his songwriting. According to Jong, “the Māori [language] will stay alive with young people if it’s cool” (O’Reagan, 2017). He therefore sees Alien Weaponry as a tool for the preservation of the language.

Pan-Amerikan Native Front, an Appalachian born and inspired band, draws inspiration from historical battles for their contemporary music. Prior to the 2016 release of their first full-length album, Tecumseh’s War, this one-man indigenous black metal project had already achieved underground success. In the style of the church-burning, “OG,” Norwegian black metal bands like Venom and Mayhem, the front man of Pan-Amerikan Native Front takes on a stage name that speaks to the aim of the project: Kurator of War. In an interview with Bandcamp, Kurator addressed the purpose of the band:

This project is about the fierce resistance indigenous peoples of the Americas have endured throughout centuries of colonial and post-colonial occupation. As I began to study my personal native identity, it naturally led me to uncovering a buried indigenous history, not just in my ancestral homelands, but in those of my relatives throughout turtle
island. In short, this is native black metal warfare in solidarity with all indigenous nations (Bandcamp, 2017).

Kurator of War has no interest in your comfort; his goal is not to create peace or reconciliation. Rather, Kurator of War works to produce artwork that is equally as brutal as war and the treatment of Native people across the Americas as a whole.

With a childhood that Kurator of War describes as “largely absent” of indigenous culture and language, Pan-Amerikan Native Front serves to not only educate the public about Native history and culture, but to reclaim and adopt the culture of which he had been deprived. Even the name and logo of the group, Pan-Amerikan Native Front, is intended to educate the audience. The unfamiliar characters in the logo (Figure 4.1) are a reference to the Cherokee syllabary. Created by Sequoyah in 1821, this document allowed for the reading and writing of the Cherokee language, and it marked one of the very few times in documented history where a member of a pre-literate society devised an effective writing system (Sandefeur, 2018). The eagle in the Pan-Amerikan Native Front logo is also based on the one used by 45th infantry division of the United States Army; an Oklahoma-based unit, colloquially referred to as “Thunderbird” for its mostly Native membership, which played an important role in World War II. To Kurator of War, this homage honors the process by which a “Native symbol made its way to Europe to fight in the biggest war in history” (Krasman, 2021). Prior to the 1930s, the 45th infantry used the swastika as a tribute to the Native American populations in the Southwestern US where the division was stationed (Figure 4.2). Though the symbol originated in India, it has been used by countless American tribes to represent healing (Balchin, 1955, p. 168). Of course, following the rise of the

7 Here, “Turtle island” is a reference to the creation story common to many North American Native peoples that tells of a turtle who volunteered to save humankind by carrying the world on its back. (personal communication, January 12, 2024)
Figure 4.1. Pan-Amerikan Native Front Logo (Bandcamp, 2024)

Figure 4.2. Original Insignia for the 45th Infantry (Ross, 2019)
Nazi party, the shoulder sleeve emblem needed to be changed. A design by Kiowa artist Woody Big Bow was chosen as a replacement which featured the Thunderbird, another Native symbol which represents power and strength. (Donnelly, 2000).

The idea of a Pan-American indigenous identity finds further significance in Pan-Amerikan Native Front ’s 2016 album, *Tecumseh’s War*. Like Sequoyah, Tecumseh found success as a warrior, teacher, and perhaps most significantly, as a diplomat. Tecumseh gained initial notoriety in battle in the mid 1790s during a series of battles against white Kentuckians invading the Ohio River Valley. Over the next twenty years, Tecumseh led a campaign of resistance, urging natives across the country to join his Indian Confederacy. He later proved to be an essential tactician in the War of 1812, leading the British to the capture of Detroit among other victories. On October 5th, 1813, Tecumseh was killed during the Battle of the Thames (Simmons, 2012).

Though the Ohio Valley Confederacy died with Tecumseh, most easily accessible accounts of his life hold that the “vision of Native American Unity died with him” as well (2020). Pan-Amerikan Native Front aims to prove this claim false. For Kurator of War and other Native musicians, Tecumseh’s message of Native unity resonates profoundly. He says, “[Tecumseh] saw all indigenous people as one, who share land, lifestyle, philosophy, and thought” (Zhou, 2020). Within this, Kurator of War also sees room for variation, locality, and personalization. This anti-essentialist viewpoint ala Paul Gilroy acknowledges the shared identity and history throughout the Americas, while leaving room for personalization and transformation. Kurator of War embarks on a quest to understand what it means to be Native in the context of 21st century life. Gilroy explains this concept:
[I] comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions which suggest that the invocation of tradition itself may be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the post-contemporary world (2003, p. 101).

Thus, Pan-Amerikan Native Front and other Native bands seek to both promote their familial histories through a restrengthening of tradition and to redefine their Native identity in relation to the realities of the 21st century.

Kurator of War describes his LP Tecumseh’s War as “eight tracks of woodlands warfare in the name of sovereignty! In solidarity, in war! Long live Tecumseh” (Zhou, 2020). In line with the original inspiration for Pan-Amerikan Native Front found in the idea of old legends and stories, Tecumseh’s War is rooted in the strong culture of Native oral tradition that initially carried the story to Kurator of War. The album uses the story of Tecumseh to “give breath and vigor to the indigenous experiences and history through the sounds of black metal” (Bandcamp, 2020, my emphasis). As implied by his chosen stage name, war and battles are a major focus both of the album and of the stories he had been told. Like battle, black metal can be aggressive, ugly, battering, or militant.

Kurator of War, like many of my other collaborators, views heavy metal musical styles and sonic modalities as not just effectively communicating but enhancing the genuine experiences lived and felt during battle. Even more than that though, the despair communicated through the heavy distortions of metal give voice to the trauma and lament inherent in battle. Kurator of War says, “the story and music come from the heart, and as such, a voice to the ancestor.” In contrast to the brutality found in the album, Kurator of War liberally utilizes what
he calls “down-picking power chords” (Zhou, 2020) that gives Tecumseh’s War an old school rock and roll feel, uncharacteristic of other traditional black metal artists and albums.

All of these elements: storytelling, preservation of language, brutality, and classic rock soundscapes culminate in the penultimate track, “The Battle of the Thames” (Spotify playlist, track 22). The track tells a story of major cultural significance and utilizes hyperbole to highlight elements of folkloric merit, similarly to “The Ballad of Davy Crocket.” The lyrics are found on the Bandcamp page of Pan-Amerikan Native Front:

Along the flowing river of the Thames
The enemy crosses in boat and cavalry
Weakened British troops, clinging on
For a final stand is imminent
American horsemen dash at the line
Exhausted and disordered
A second barrage follows
Riding and firing
The attacks quickly subdue
The expected surrender
And subjugation

Others fled upon seeing the enemy
Native warriors remained
Lurking by the swamp
Unknowingly left to fend for themselves
Within range the battle began

Tecumseh has Johnson in sight
He charges
Leaders of opposite brigades
Face to face
But in a single shot to the chest
The fall of his tomahawk signals the end
(Kurator of War, Bandcamp, 2016)

Each element of the soundscape in the track serves to place the listener within the battlefield. In fact, Kurator of War eschews his typical, black metal, fast-paced style for a much slower and regal pace, one more indicative of the sludge-doom style. This evocative choice is
fitting not only because of the heartbreaking lyrical content, but also due to the sense of decorum and confidence it gives Tecumseh as he faces his final battle. This is most prevalent in the repeated, trudging baseline (Figure 4.3).

The lyrics in combination with more traditional heavy metal sonic motifs also begs the question of a pan-global Native identity. Specifically, 1980s Nordic groups like Mayhem and Burzum draw from a warrior culture of masculinity borne from a history of displacement and oppression. Both traditional Nordic black metal and contemporary Native metal evoke images of warriors on horseback singing songs of brotherhood as they ride across an endless sea of grasslands and searching for glory in battle. Kurator of War’s description of the scene is meant to draw to mind the death of Boromir from J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Two Towers (1954). Much like how Boromir is described fighting valiantly against the Uruk-Hai despite being both out-gunned and out-manned, he is ultimately pierced by an arrow. The final dropping of his sword symbolizes both his corporeal death, and his transferal of Gondor’s leadership to Aragorn and the rest of the fellowship. In “Battle of the Thames,” Kurator of War echoes this sentiment quite literally, “the fall of his tomahawk symbols the end.” Perhaps the Sámi of Scandinavia which inspired Tolkien and the various native peoples of the Americas share a pan-global native identity.

Kurator of War creates art to draw attention to both the technical and combative prowess of Native Americans, and their mistreatment by white settlers that have been historically ignored or minimized by the dominant cultural narrative. In this goal, Kurator of War has undeniably been successful. Throughout countless reddit forums and album reviews, heavy metal fans from around the globe remark equally on their enjoyment of the music and their excitement at learning about these histories. Brian Krasman of the blog “Meatmead Metal” puts it beautifully:
Figure 4.3. “Battle of the Thames” Bassline Transcription
The album might send you on a research mission like it did for me to learn more about this piece of American history that further deteriorated Native Americans’ trust in this land. If this was taught in my schooling, it was brief, through this record and Kurator of War’s mission helped open my eyes wider to this period, which was vital to the nation’s history but also detrimental to the people from whom this place was taken. That is that ugly, horrific history some people want to shield you from to maintain some dream of American greatness, events this band refuses to leave buried. (Krasman, 2021)

Nechochwen- “Walks Alone”

Pan-Amerikan Native Front’s Tecumseh’s War found inspiration in a 2015 album called The Heart of Akamon by West Virginia artist Aaron Carey. Heart of Akamon similarly draws thematic content from the life and achievements of Tecumseh, in what Kurator of War calls a “storytelling creation” which is “extremely well put together with immeasurable historical and cultural depth” (Walters, 2022). This album is more than your typical heavy metal project with unrelenting distortion and snarling, and features gentle guitar, emotional vocals, and virtuosic solos on traditional instruments.

Aaron grew up in rural West Virginia and became interested in his own Native heritage in his early teens. He learned about it primarily from his grandfather who, living in the early 1920s, wasn’t allowed to even acknowledge his own Native identity as a child. Aaron became fascinated with the history of the Shawnee people of the Ohio River Valley, and, in the absence of any known Native “hometown heroes” he went on a search to find some of his own. He says he became “obsessed” with the research. Others noticed his interest as well. At age 14, a friend gave him the name Nechochwen which means “he who walks alone” in the Lenape language, because he spent the bulk of his time “reading about obscure Native history and writing death metal
guitar riffs." Though he became fascinated with Tecumseh’s death at the Battle of the Thames initially in the early nineties, his interest, both personally and musically, has been unwavering and he told me it took “24 years for it to feel proper to make a song about it” (personal communication, November 13, 2023). It was from this lifelong passion and search for heritage that Heart of Akamon was born.

While Pan-Amerikan Native Front identifies with a distinctly Pan-American conceptualization of Native identity, Aaron Carey and his project Nechochwen find inspiration through a more specifically local and Appalachian brand of “Indianness.” Like myself, other metal fans and scholars have been struck by what Jake Walters of the online music review platform Everythingisnoise calls a “love that he has for his home that is as inspiring as it is fascinating” (2022). Aaron’s research into his heritage works through a frame of locality, where he sees the storied land of his people as the lens through which to view the growth of his culture. “It seems like from ancient times there has been a bit of a dark grey cloud lingering over this area” Aaron explained, he emphasized that “we have a lot of problems with poverty and opioid addiction too.” However, Aaron challenges the widely held beliefs that native people never actually lived in the Ohio River Valley and that it was only ever a hunting ground… Of course, this claim isn’t grounded in fact, with artifacts having been found in the Ohio River Valley going back almost 16,000 years. (Abram, 2015, p. 54). This story however, speaks to the negative image of the area in the minds of Native people.

Aaron’s purpose with Nechochwen is clear to him, to “connect people who know things [about native culture] that aren’t found in books or online.” Like most students in traditional American educational systems, Aaron learned about figures like Sitting Bull and Geronimo. However, even living in West Virginia, he learned nothing about important local figures like
Black Hawk, Half King, and Tecumseh, and came upon them on his own. Nechochwen, and their album _Heart of Akamon_ specifically aim to shed light on the “amazing things” done by Native would-be hometown heroes that no one ever seems to hear about. Most importantly with _HoA_, Carey looks to re-animate popular thought on “Woodland Indian culture,” which he finds wildly underrepresented and misunderstood within as outside of Native communities. As such, he describes the album as “more region-specific” than other releases, and the content focuses primarily on Eastern tribes like the Shawnee and Seneca. As Shawnee himself, Aaron sees the album as a way to honor his personal connection to the culture.

Unlike the lead singer of Pan-Amerikan Native Front, Kurator of War, who looks specifically to make music that speaks to a Pan-Indian identity, Aaron sees it as too large of a task. He says, “having one project that’s a general representation of American Indian history is beyond my abilities” (personal communication, November 13, 2023). Despite this the discography of Aaron’s band Nechochwen spans a broad range of locations, histories, and tribes, allowing him to learn not only more about the history of Native people from all over the country, but to learn their languages. Earlier pieces within his extensive discography illustrate this far reaching, yet still incredibly specific approach. “At Night I may Roam” (2010, Spotify playlist, track 23) for example, is Aaron’s own English translation of a Lakota poem, “Traversing the Shades of Death” (2016, Spotify playlist, track 24) tells the story of the white settlers in the Wyoming Valley, and “Winterstrife” (2018, Spotify playlist, track 25) is about a single father raising his kids during the great depression.

Written amid a tumultuous divorce and directly following the death of Aaron’s mother, _Heart of Akamon_ takes on a more personal tone than some of his other albums. “Akamon” itself is an ancient word that comes from either Hitchiti or Yuchi, languages which pre-date Shawnee
and Lenape languages. It means wilderness or, what Aaron explains as “Earth in her primal form,” and has been part of the lexicon of Native people for centuries (Walters, 2018). The title then speaks to the heart of the land itself, ancient and generous, that provides for us in the same way that she provided for our ancestors, as he explains in the liner notes.

The pivotal track, “October 6, 1813” (Spotify playlist, track 26) serves as both the album’s musical and emotional centerpiece. Drawing inspiration from the death of Tecumseh, akin to Pan-Amerikan Native Front’s “The Battle of the Thames,” Neochochwen adopts a unique approach, diverging from the brutality of Kurator of War’s interpretation. The three songs leading up to “October 6” contain typical sonic markers within black or atmospheric metal songs. “Lost on the Trail of the Setting Sun” for example, brings us again to the Battle of the Thames with guttural screams and intense distortion. When Aaron came to writing “October 6,” he said the album needed “balance” and sought to transport listeners to the aftermath of Tecumseh’s untimely demise, as he is laid to rest in a clandestine and sacred location the day following the battle. This is achieved primarily through the melodic and tender utilization of the lament genre, incorporating elements of traditional Native and American music. The track also prominently displays Aaron’s classical guitar training, as well as a solo (2:22-2:48) on the Native American cedar wind flute which further establishes the song outside of traditional black metal aesthetics.

Tecumseh was a revered and cherished leader who, as Aaron explains in the liner notes of the album, “formed a far-reaching confederacy of tribes through his brilliant oratory skills in multiple languages and his almost supernatural prophetic sensibilities” (2015). This confederacy was made of ancestral enemies whom he was able to bring together after finding a common foe in the white settlers, and in turn, found success in resisting western expansion. The repeated plea,
which echoes in the back of the song “okiima (chief) rise again,” harkens back to the earliest of laments and speaks to Aaron’s intimate knowledge of western classical music. Specifically, laments in post-medieval music are often characterized by a falling bass pattern (as in “Dido’s Lament” by Purcell), which many have argued to represent the falling of tears or bodies. This same motif has been used throughout the canon due to both its emotional weight, and storied past. Throughout the intricate and flowing guitar part, a syncopated falling bass is used as a cadential figure (Figure 4.4) that leads the listener into the vocal melody.

Perhaps the most striking element of this piece, is the mournful vocal duet (Figure 4.5). The simplicity of the melody combined with the clarity of the lyrics makes for a truly vulnerable tribute to a man that Aaron has long admired and finally feels ready to pay homage to. Aaron didn’t want to focus on his physical passing, but rather paint “a picture of the sadness of the burial of a powerful, irreplaceable man” (Walters, 2018), and thus emphasize the incredible impact his loss had on native peoples both then and now. The falling bass motif often occurs in tandem with the lyric “okiima (chief) rise again.” This combination further endows the lyrics with the sense of emotional breakdown.

These two contrasting interpretations of the same event, Pan-Amerikan Native Front’s “The Battle of the Thames,” and Nechochwen’s, “October 6, 1813,” reflect merely two reactions to the passing of the iconic figure of Tecumseh. Pan-Amerikan Native Front foregrounds Tecumseh’s military prowess and the power he exuded on the battlefield. This is mirrored sonically both in terms of the intense speed and distortion, and in the nearly unintelligible growled vocal line. Conversely, Nechochwen depicts the aftermath of the battle and the emotional impact of the loss. Delicate flute melody, rolling guitar, and mournful vocal duet all
Figure 4.4. Falling Bass Transcription

Figure 4.5. “October 6th, 1813” Vocal Transcription
work in tandem to create a heartbreaking yet powerful lament to the fallen Tecumseh. These divergent interpretations reflect the wide range of native identities.

**Masculinity of the Chickamauga**

The courage and masculine power associated with the Native peoples of the Appalachian Mountains resounds even with locals who are not Native themselves. After meeting the lead singer and Guitarist of local group Dope Skum, Cody Landress-Gibson at the BrickYard, I was invited to a small garage get together of local sludge groups in February. There, I was particularly struck by one song called “Chickamauga” (Spotify playlist, track 27), because I live near a street of the same name. Though I knew that the name was associated with a battlefield, I had no idea the name was also associated with a group of valiant Cherokee warriors.

After the performance, I spoke with Cody about the band and the significance of “Chickamauga.” Like my collaborators from Chapter 2, Cody grew up in a fire and brimstone style Baptist church, where every sermon was about “how we were going to burn in hell” (personal communication, February 16th, 2024). Though Cody and his family are not Native American, they have lived in Tennessee for generations and he connected with the spirituality of Native religion and understanding. The song comes from their first EP *Tenasi*, or the Cherokee word from which “Tennessee” is derived. Like Aaron Carey, Cody’s love for old time music and blues led him to learning about the lore of the land and he became obsessed with Cherokee history. Cody was particularly fascinated with the Chickamauga.

In March of 1775, Dragging Canoe spoke rallied against a deal brokered between the Transylvania Land Company and a group of Cherokee headmen. This deal, which ignored the ban of Native sales to private individuals, resulted in the loss of over twenty-seven thousand square miles of native land (Mize, 2021, pp. 429-30). The Chickamauga, led by Dragging Canoe,
were shocked by the willingness of their brethren to give up land and therefore become complicit in the progression of American colonialism. In line with the teachings and goals of Tecumseh, these men fostered pan-Indian alliances to create a more unified military response against American settlers. They saw the voluntary release of native land as an act of traitorship and worked to revivify the powerful ideal of Native masculinity through decisive and often violent responses to the brutality they faced.

It was this idea of masculinity that Cody connected to most. He says, “[the Chickamauga] didn’t just fight like men, they were diplomats and important culturally too.” Tecumseh saw pan-Native unity and tactful military strategy as the key to fighting colonialism, the Chickamauga thus used him as their ideal image of masculinity: a balance between ferocious and diplomatic. Cody expressed how impressed he was by their fortitude and resilience, “they fought the settlers successfully for over twenty years” (personal communication, February 16th, 2024). Further, while Cherokee warriors traditionally went to war to seek blood for blood, the Chickamauga were motivated by the loss of their sacred lands. As Cherokee Scholar Susan Abram explains, “Following the ideological rhetoric of Dragging Canoe… [the Chickamauga] fought for their people’s sovereign right to exist on the land they claimed in common” (2015, p. 19). Cody explained, “a man and his land have an important bond” (personal communication, February 16th, 2024).

This idea of a gendered connection to land, which I began to explore in Chapter 3 helps to explain why someone without Native heritage may connect so strongly to the Chickamauga. Dope Skum’s “Chickamauga” is a totally instrumental track in which Cody uses claw-hammer banjo playing style on the guitar. Upon hearing it for the first time, I was struck by the clear old-time influence and its effectiveness in the creation of Appalachian emplacement. This was of
course intentional. Cody saw this clear reference to Southern culture and thus Southern land, as the most applicable way to pay homage to the conviction of the Chickamauga in protecting and defending their land.

**Conclusion**

Figures like Tecumseh and Sequoyah, and groups like the Chickamauga are not only important to the Native history of Southeastern Appalachia, but critical in defining and re-defining ideas of manhood and masculinity within the region. I argued at the beginning of this chapter that the artists I worked with sought to bring light to the atrocities committed against native people and to connect with the strength of their native heritage. Though I believe those goals to still be quite accurate, I am perhaps more taken with the way in which the artists define themselves as men through thorough research and reflection on the significance of the American Native population.

For Kurator of War, he defines himself using the relentless fight of Tecumseh. Kurator of War is a black metal warrior, spreading awareness and fighting in solidarity with the Pan-American Native community. Aaron Carey of Nechochwen, “he who walks alone,” defines his native masculinity in terms of great emotional vulnerability. Through tactile relationships with traditional Native instruments and languages, he laments the grief of generations and refuses to let time blur the cultural impact of Native displacement. For Tennesseans without Native heritage like Cody they can find inspiration and motivation in the histories of Native American peoples. Through a mutual connection to land and a refusal to relent, these people strengthen their own masculine identities in relation to Native courage. In all these cases, I was struck by the overwhelming empathy and unincumbered expression of emotion uncommon to contemporary
Western ideals of masculinity. I believe this vulnerability speaks to the affective power of the pieces analyzed here and to their musical beauty.
CHAPTER 5
THE CAPITAL OF TRAUMA

“and the wisdom to know the difference, Amen.”

As the AA meeting ends the way it always does, I give a squeeze to the hands on either side of me. I move towards an older bearded gentlemen who I noticed instantly when he came in a few minutes late to the meeting.

“Hey nice shirt,” I say, “I got to see Panopticon in the Tetons at fire in the mountains a few years ago.”

He responds excitedly, “I bet that was sick, that music deserves to be played in the mountains. I’m from Kentucky so I kind of feel like I was there before they got big.”

I smile and can’t help but think about how easy it is to find collaborators for my work in the world of recovery.

“Thanks for your share tonight.” He says earnestly. “It’s nice to be reminded that even kids and Yankees are all fucked up too. Sorry about your friend.”

He touches my shoulder.

“Thank you. I know it sounds terrible, but sometimes I’m glad something like that happened to me early on that forced me to get sober and I didn’t spend the next forty years ruining relationships with my family and my body and everything else.”

“But you like metal huh? how does your family feel about that?”

He and I laugh together, and I begin to tell the story of how I found metal again while getting sober. I’ve recounted this exact experience so many times over the last few years that I almost have a script. I realize that it doesn’t hurt to tell so much anymore either. Not because it doesn’t
affect me or because I’ve numbed myself to the brutality of those few months, but because I am not ashamed of it anymore.

Talking about own experiences with addiction often serve as an initiation rite into new circles of metalheads that justify my attraction to the genre and prove my lack of disillusionment with contemporary society. In so doing, I make up for whatever visual or relationship-based credit I lack with credit gained from life experience. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) famously coined the term _habitus_ (1977) to refer to a set of tastes that an individual acquires through social experiences and the resulting ways in which that individual perceives and acts within the world. Most importantly, habitus is _not_ innate, but rather formed through social interaction within social structures. Bourdieu also argues that success within a field (or subculture) translates into “cultural capital,” a currency made of prestige and influence that, like monetary capital, can be spent, accumulated, and invested. Thus, through the continuous sharing of life experience I have gained significant cultural capital and reaped the social and emotional benefits of a shared trauma.

Over my last year of online and in person ethnographic work, I have often heard the term “trauma bonding” thrown around to describe the deep relationships that individuals may create through the vulnerable act of sharing their trauma with others. Though the term “trauma bonding” was initially created to describe the cyclical pattern of trauma and the relationship between an abuser and their abused, it has been adapted throughout stigmatized subcultures (Dutton and Painter, 1993). Communities where the sharing of personal information and trauma is expected and encouraged thus become spaces where social and emotional connections are forged both quickly and deeply. Perhaps then, through heavy metal performance, fandom, and
kinship, metalheads ultimately seek to not just process their personal and cultural trauma, but to find community through vulnerability.

Metalheads are attached to the genre because it encourages them to express any emotion, whether positive or negative. Theodor Adorno described subcultural listeners as “emotional” and noted their liberation in accepting unhappiness, choosing music to experience frustration and thus, catharsis (1941, p. 265). This aligns with my ethnographic observations. Most heavy metal fans have typical jobs, family responsibilities, and societal expectations. Finding release by engaging with a community that embraces emotional expression is cathartic. In these spaces, individuals transition from a world of social constraints to one where they can freely express themselves, whether by moshing or screaming. Despite the often-dark themes in heavy metal, these subcultures serve to reinforce belief in human connection and creative potential within the community.

From a broader perspective, Paul Gilroy argues that cultural historians should “take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis… and use it to produce an explicitly intercultural perspective” (2003, p. 15). By highlighting musicians who utilize Appalachian histories of mining, war, religion, displacement, and revolution to navigate their contemporary difficulties and to define their ever-changing identities, I suggest that the Appalachians can be used similarly to explore an intercultural perspective of the southern United States. By looking to and learning from the past, I believe these artists not only find guidance and the courage to process their own personal traumas but explore the collective and generational traumas that are often so deeply buried they may be difficult to identify. Certainly, music provides us with a window to the past. Appalachiatari and Primeval Well utilize songs from traditional Appalachian hymnody with roots going back to seventeenth century England, Feminazgûl interprets the music of the natural
world, much as it has always been, Genital Shame and Neochochwen draw on classical music modalities, and Dope Skum and Pan-Amerikan Native Front reimagine the ballad. As such, these musicians draw not only on historical themes and lyrical content, but also the musical techniques, melodies, and forms which define their heritage. Like Gilroy’s Atlantic, the geographic and temporal multiplicities of the southern Appalachians thus form a deep and historical mode of cultural and musical analysis.

**Old Time Metal and Masculinity**

This thesis has explored but a few of the multitude of ways in which Appalachian metalheads process and confront trauma through their music. I have argued here that metal is defined by its subversive nature and the consistent challenges presented to its stereotypical sonic expectations—extreme loudness, distortion, and screaming—and to societal norms. Though this is most often achieved sonically and lyrically through violent elements of shock value, I have been struck by the contrasting emotional vulnerability through which the members of Appalachiatari and Primeval Well also perform subversivity.

American masculinity is predicated on the image of the ideal man: he is tough, he is courageous, he is assertive, and he is independent. This archetype has led to the stigmatization of emotional vulnerability, especially within more traditionalist societies and cultures like those found within contemporary Appalachia. As I explored in Chapter 2, Ryan Clackner of Primeval Well and John Haywood of Appalachiatari physically embody this dichotomy. From the outside, either may appear to be the image of the “American Man”: large and imposing figures, they both don beards, piercings, and full sleeves of tattoos. Within their music too, they do not totally eschew metal sonic tropes like growling or distortion. In this context, their retrospective lyrics and their soft, old-time influenced compositions, become even more significant and stand out
more clearly. John and Ryan are acutely aware of the destructive aspects of hegemonic masculinity within Appalachian and heavy metal subcultures. In discussing the background of his song “Lordy Mercy,” John opened up to me about how his granddad always was attached to a jar of moonshine, or “medicine,” and he explored the connection between the Appalachian expectation of hiding your feelings and the prevalence of addiction within the region. He explained, “there’s a certain aspect of mountain culture that revolves around moonshining and getting drunk,” and referred to drinking and drug use as a “band aid” (personal communication, October 20th, 2023). In John’s experience, seeking help for mental health concerns has been harshly stigmatized, and men in his community looked to alcohol to numb the pain they felt. Addiction thus serves as a thematic mode of emplacement that builds upon musical tactics of engendering place within their music.

Primeval Well and Appalachiatar connected to musical traditions that similarly subvert expectations of masculine stoicism by utilizing the lined-out hymnody of the Old Regular Baptists and the shape-note singing throughout Appalachia. In attending and reading historical accounts of both types of singings, I have been struck by the ecstatic and emphatic participation by men and women alike. Within these emotionally charged and community-based gatherings, many otherwise apathetic men feel comfortable expressing the emotions they would often feel embarrassed to show to others. Similarly, the music of the bands I featured tap into Appalachian hymnody within their metal performance and thus encourage a community ethos which is accepting and reassuring of masculine emotion. In this way, not only do Ryan, John, and others subvert traditional expectations of masculinity, but they incorporate aspects of traditional Appalachian hymnody within a historically anti-Christian genre.
To Be a Woman

There also exist feminine expectations and tropes within Appalachian popular, religious, and musical culture which go back to the early settlers of the region. In Chapter 3, I explored the implications of the “mountain woman” trope popularized within the literary Appalachian renaissance movement of the early 20th century. Like John Haywood and Ryan Clackner, Margaret Killjoy of Feminazgûl and Erin Dawson of Genital Shame similarly confront and challenge the problematic elements of gendered expectations within Appalachia. These transgender-women performers reclaim the tropes of naturalism and cultural preservation through their surprisingly melodic and autobiographical albums. Further, they play with the accepted understandings of “black metal” by incorporating elements of paganism and sounds of nature. In No Dawn for Men, Feminazgûl uses the sounds of the mountains themselves and foregrounds the call of the Phoebe to highlight the Pagan ideals of femininity. Erin looks to her training in classical music and highlights major tonalities, also subverting black metal sonic expectations.

For Margaret Killjoy and Erin Dawson, heavy metal has provided the ideal arena to express their experience navigating womanhood. When Florence Reece wrote “Which Side Are You On?” in the early 1930s, she was living through incredibly terrifying times marked with poverty and social unrest. Women in this period were still faced with oppressive societal expectations of womanhood, despite their increased presence in the workforce. Like Reece, Margaret and Erin also write music in a perilous time in American history both for the country as a whole and for women (trans- and cis gender alike) specifically. Just as they navigate and expand traditional definitions of the black metal subgenre, so too do they redefine what it means to not only be a woman but to be an “Appalachian Mountain Woman.”
History Class

In my studies of Pan Amerikan-Native Front, Neochchwen, and Dope Skum, I became invested in their music and the rich historical narratives which inspired these performers. I was also encouraged to discover a vibrant online and on the ground community of fans who shared my fascination with Native histories of the Appalachian area and beyond. In particular, I found myself drawn to the stories of Tecumseh and the Chickamauga, whose remarkable courage remains overlooked in contemporary educational systems. This journey of historical discovery, sparked by the music of these bands, was an intentional outcome of their work, as they skillfully use the medium of heavy metal to captivate a whole new generation with the hidden stories of American history.

Through songs like Pan-Amerikan Native Front’s “The Battle of the Thames,” Neochchwen’s “October 6, 1813,” and Dope Skum’s “Chickamauga,” the artists contribute to an extensive history of Appalachian balladry. In the absence of hometown hero ballads celebrating Native figures, Kurator of War, Aaron Carey and Cody Landress-Gibson have taken it upon themselves to fill the void. Figures like Tecumseh and Sequoyah as well as groups like the Chickamauga have played pivotal roles in shaping Native history in Southeastern Appalachia. More importantly, Kurator of War, Aaron, and Cody utilize their connection to these historical figures to redefine Native masculinity, prioritizing emotional expression over traditional Western ideals. In doing so, they offer a powerful reinterpretation of history through their artistry.

Continued Trauma Research

Recent literature and research about the connection between the brain and trauma has led to a renewed interest in trauma studies throughout the discipline of ethnomusicology (see McFerran, 2020). I hope that my work may contribute to this burgeoning body of literature and
place heavy metal and other hardcore genres among more mainstream music therapy techniques. As I have demonstrated here, people of many races, genders, and geographical backgrounds have found comfort and purpose through heavy metal performance. I believe the genre offers unique sonic possibilities which may be particularly useful in processing uncomfortable and even violent feelings that come along with working through trauma. I am heartened by the increased awareness of mental health throughout popular culture and the emphasis placed on it throughout businesses and schools. Ultimately, I hope to see a broader acceptance of genres like heavy metal within ethnomusicology and a recognition of their capacity to support and encourage emotional vulnerability.

I found heavy metal music and community at the darkest time in my life. Being faced at the age of twenty-two with the decision between drinking and dying, I was humiliated to not be able to handle alcohol like everyone else. I wanted my friends and family to still see me as a successful student and singer, and an important member of the community. I fell victim to what I believe to be the most dangerous trap within the recovery community, secrecy. In hiding my feelings within the first few months of sobriety, I fell back into the same cycles which fueled my addiction and the lying and hiding I did to maintain it. It wasn’t until I began to call myself an alcoholic, that I began to find peace in sobriety and finally shed the thinking processes that got me into trouble in the first place. It was the friends I made in the Denver metal community that got me there, and the tenets of emotional vulnerability in the community that facilitated my recovery. I believe it can do the same for many others.
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APPENDIX A

TRACK LIST
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<td>Feminazgûl</td>
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<td>“Take Me Home, Country Roads”</td>
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<td>“Turn the Page”</td>
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<td>“Phantom of the Opera”</td>
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<td>“Erlkönig”</td>
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<td>“Lion Piss + Arm Vulnerability”</td>
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<td>“Chickamauga”</td>
<td>Dope Skum</td>
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Spotify Playlist:  
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APPENDIX B

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Alexandra (Ally) Claire Dellgren graduated from the University of Michigan in 2020 with a bachelor’s degree in vocal performance and the University of Denver in 2022 with a master’s degree also in vocal performance. She has a zoo at home including a dog named Doodle, three cats named Cherokee, Pavarotti, and Bill, a lizard named Steve and a snake named Beverly.

Ally’s research interests primarily involve the intersection between heavy metal music and trauma, she also works in medieval soundscapes. She has presented her research at the Society for Ethnomusicology Midwest chapter in 2023, the 2024 International Congress of Medieval Studies and the 2024 Society for American Music 50th annual convention.