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'Kvlt-er than Thou': Power, Suspicion and Nostalgia within Black Metal Fandom

Ross Hagen

Introduction

In spring 1991, the Norwegian black metal band Mayhem's guitarist Øystein 'Euronymous' Aarseth and singer Per 'Dead' Ohlin participated in an interview in the fanzine *Slayer* in which they positioned their band as spearheading a new direction in extreme metal (Kristiansen 2011: 209–11). The interview touched on a number of topics, including songwriting, politics, record contracts and business practices, but Euronymous reserved particular vitriol for the growing popularity of extreme metal. He waxes nostalgic for his favourite bands from the 1980s and details his wish to create a new scene 'out of reach for normal idiots' because he 'refuse[s] to have anything to do with all the mainstream trendies in the scene today'. Euronymous laments especially that many of these trend-followers are starting 'clone' bands and zines. Dead echoes these sentiments, claiming that 'everything has drifted away from what it once was, or should be' and details in later interviews how his performing style, which included self-mutilation, was at least partly aimed at driving away casual listeners (Kristiansen 2011: 290).

It is not without some irony that the Norwegian black metal scene Euronymous hoped for became arguably the most visible and economically profitable genre of extreme heavy metal over the 1990s and 2000s. In Norway especially, the metal category of the Grammy awards has been dominated by black metal bands since the metal category debuted in 2001. However, black metal initially became widely known not for its music but instead because of a series of arsons, murders and other criminal acts perpetrated by members of the Norwegian scene. Dead committed suicide in 1991, and Varg Vikernes, sole member of the band Burzum, enlisted fellow scene members in a spree of arson attacks directed against historic Norwegian churches in 1992 and 1993. A feud between Vikernes and Euronymous ultimately resulted in Vikernes stabbing Euronymous to death in 1993. Vikernes served 15 years in prison, and a number of other black metallers were given lesser sentences for their crimes. In the aftermath of this controversy and the associated publicity, black metal's musical style and visual aesthetic became increasingly popular both in Norway and around the world. Although all underground music scenes experience a certain identity crisis if they become more widely popular, the mythology of black metal's violent past amplified this problem.

In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which the genre's foundational events in Norway serve as a touchstone for fans' sense of subcultural identity as its musical style and fan base

expanded and diversified. I do this through an investigation of the term *kolt* in black metal discourse, a term that evokes insularity, community and hermeticism. Among black metal fans, the term is variously shorthand for a certain musical style and visual aesthetic, a term of derision for fellow black metal fans, and an appraisal of authenticity and uniqueness. It also invokes a sense of nostalgia for black metal's past, when the genre allegedly maintained an ideological and stylistic purity that has since been lost. I begin by outlining my research methodology and introducing the black metal musical style, followed by an exploration of *koltness* and its relationship to fundamentalism, subcultural capital, authenticity and nostalgia among black metal fans. Finally, I investigate how *koltness* is used as an epithet against devotees of traditional black metal by proponents of new musical subgenres.

Methodology

My research focus for this chapter mainly concerns the public discourse of black metal fans and musicians on several online forums and communities (see also Chapter 17 of this volume). Although black metal has dozens, if not hundreds, of devoted online forums, I paid particular attention to the discussion boards at *Nuclear War Now Productions* (hereafter NWN), an American record label that specializes in underground black metal and death metal. NWN largely eschews the more commercially focused aspects of the genres and also actively reissues obscure demos, particularly from South America and Eastern Europe. The forums at NWN are particularly active, with a number of participants from around the globe and with varying levels of experience within the black metal scene. The label's focus on more musically esoteric forms of black metal and death metal is also reflected in the forums, providing an ideal environment for studying elitist and obscurantist discourse in black metal fandom. My reliance on publicly available websites and message boards rather than private forums or closed Facebook groups is in the interest of accessibility and in order to mitigate concerns over consent.

Although I am a practicing black metal musician and have been involved in extreme metal scenes both online and in person for years, I did not participate in these particular discussions. I have had many similar discussions in the past, however, both with fellow black metal fans in other online forums and among bandmates and friends in 'real life'. In this research, my previous insider knowledge benefited me mostly as a guide for productively navigating black metal forums and also as a means for recognizing the tensions between the desires for belonging and individuality (Hodkinson 2005). To a certain degree, this study is auto-ethnographic because, even though I am looking in on a community of black metal fans, their debates and disagreements align with my own experience as a black metal fan and musician.

For many fans of black metal and extreme metal, these online venues form an extensive part of the globalized black metal scene, as actual concerts and gatherings may be few and far between for many fans. Even if fans participate in a local black metal scene, they often view their activities as part of a larger worldwide or translocal scene (Bennett and Peterson 2004; Kahn-Harris 2007). The nature of online communities does create some attendant issues, particularly as they are populated often by only the most vocal participants. Contests over status within online communities may be amplified because participants are not able to evaluate appearance and style in person. The anonymity can sometimes result in heightened combativeness that would not arise in face-to-face communication. There is also no way to evaluate the truthfulness of what participants say, but I follow Karl Spracklen (2010) in that

my interest lies not in the truth of their statements but rather in the fact that such statements seem necessary.

To these ends, I searched the NWN forum for topics and threads that I knew would spark debate among the board members and then catalogued the discussions. In addition to simply seeking out the term kvlt, I searched for discussions of the controversial 'blackgaze' subgenre. Blackgaze mixes black metal with musical gestures more typical of 'shoegaze' indie rock bands like My Bloody Valentine and Smashing Pumpkins and inspires debates over musical genre and what it means to be 'black metal'. I also searched for threads about the American band Liturgy, whose indulgence in academic philosophy and publishing (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010) earned them the scorn of many traditionally minded black metal fans. In addition to NWN, I consulted the comment threads of a few YouTube videos and several Facebook groups dedicated to archiving black metal artifacts from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Important to note also is that the divide between fans and musicians is not always clear within black metal's fan culture. Extreme metal musicians are often voracious collectors and participate fully in the genre as fans, even if they are essentially celebrities within the global scene. With this in mind, I occasionally draw from the discourse of black metal musicians because, in my experience, they are complimentary and reciprocal aspects of the wider fan culture.

Black Metal Music Style

Black metal is often purposely esoteric, both in its musical style, lyrical themes and visual imagery. The music itself is marked by incredibly fast 'blast beat' drumming, distorted guitars, screamed vocals and faux symphonic keyboards. The guitar parts often use 'tremolo picking', a fast double-picking technique that creates a constant 'buzz' as opposed to an attack and decay. Typical black metal harmonic progressions revolve around sequences of minor chords, resulting in a dense and ominous sound when coupled with heavy distortion. Black metal bands are also notorious for pursuing a deliberately murky and low-fidelity sound in the recording studio (Hagen 2011). Many black metal songs celebrate a romanticized ancient past rooted in nature, occultism and pre-Christian mythology. The musicians are known for dressing in a faux-Viking style for promotional photographs and performances, often wearing 'corpse-paint', a mask of white and black make-up. Typical album covers feature grainy black and white photos of the band in their costumes. Band logos tend to be quasi-legible at best, functioning almost as an esoteric sigil. Although these qualities seem designed to reserve black metal for a select audience, they also appeal to a much wider fan base, especially when allied with the aura of transgression that flowed from the events in Norway.

Black metal as a genre is usually traced back to the early 1980s and black metal fans tend to divide the style's history into three distinct 'waves'. The first wave took place in the mid- to late 1980s. In the first wave, the term 'black metal' does not yet refer to a codified musical style, but refers instead to lyrical and visual content dealing with evil, Satanism or the occult. The English heavy metal band Venom and the Swedish band Bathory are seminal groups who defined hallmarks of the genre's sound and imagery. Bathory's early albums featured a low-budget production aesthetic that many later bands mimicked. Both Bathory and Venom cultivated evil, Satanic and mysterious personae, although in the case of Venom the evil imagery was at least slightly in jest.

The 'second wave' in the early 1990s features the Norwegian groups Mayhem, Burzum, Emperor, Darkthrone and Immortal along with a number of more obscure bands in other parts of Europe. These Scandinavian bands codified black metal as a musical style distinct from other forms of extreme metal and associated it with a particularly antisocial and misanthropic worldview. Many second-wave black metal bands expanded on the models of the first wave by indulging in more grandiose and complicated arrangements while retaining the requisite harsh guitar tones and murky-sounding recordings. In some cases, the musical style was a deliberate reaction against styles of death metal that were seen as too commercial or 'trendy' and which failed to back up their 'evilness' with any real conviction (Spracklen 2006).

Finally, the 'third wave' of black metal refers to the period beginning in the late 1990s when the black metal style spread, diversified and became increasingly popular among metalheads globally. Some black metal bands experimented with electronic music, while others, most notably Cradle of Filth and Dimmu Borgir, reigned in some of black metal's more esoteric characteristics and found success crossing over to fans of goth music and more mainstream heavy metal. However, the spectacle of the Norwegian scene ensured Scandinavia's prominence and near-hegemony over the black metal genre in the following decades, essentially evolving into a creation mythology for the genre.

Nostalgia and Fundamentalism in Black Metal Fandom

Although participants in black metal fall along a diverse spectrum, I am focusing here on the nostalgic and fundamentalist thread that runs through much black metal discourse. Black metal fundamentalists generally look to the early 1990s Norwegian scene as an essential ideal for black metal, an esoteric musical style and worldview that explicitly rejects modern culture and commerce. For these participants, the genre declined into commoditization and stylistic impurity as its visibility and influence grew. I use the term 'fundamentalist' here not as a purely religious term, but as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, reflecting 'strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs'. From a religious fundamentalist viewpoint, the Truth was revealed once in the distant past and the goal of the religion is to uncover that ancient Truth and remain faithful to it in all circumstances. Implicit in this conception of fundamentalism is the assertion that the modern world has since fallen away from the Truth. Fundamentalism in black metal advances essentially the same position.

This thread of fundamentalism is also used as a means to measure the fidelity and authenticity of newer artists and fans. As a result, these fans and musicians often view attempts to expand, alter, 'academicize' or commercialize black metal with deep suspicion. The metaphorical 'fall' of black metal is found in its increasing commercialization and the resulting expansion in the genre's fan base. Karl Spracklen's research also highlights the importance of geographic location, particularly concerning connection with northern Europe and an imagined community built on Nordic-ness (2006, 2011). Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen (2011) note that among some European black metal fans and musicians, there exists a sense that a geographic connection to Northern Europe is a cardinal feature of *true* black metal.

Balanced against this fundamentalist camp are a number of 'progressive' participants who no longer feel a strong affinity with the roots of black metal. Yet these fans and musicians also use black metal's disdain for commercialized music 'scenes' as a justification for jettisoning aspects of the genre's traditional worldview and musical style. Although not

immune from nostalgia for the days when black metal was a more obscure and rarefied musical style, many of these participants consider that they are continuing to cultivate the genre's reactionary spirit.

Subcultural Capital and Kvltness

In evaluating statements of black metal fans and musicians, I draw on the idea of subcultural capital, as adapted by Sarah Thornton (1996) and Keith Kahn-Harris (2004b, 2007) from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Broadly stated, subcultural capital refers to hierarchies of power based on scene-specific knowledge, material acquisitions such as record collections, and the extent to which one successfully performs or embodies the scene's ideals for behaviour and dress. Subcultural capital can be either bestowed upon an individual by other participants or actively claimed for oneself. Kahn-Harris makes a further distinction between 'mundane' subcultural capital and 'transgressive' subcultural capital in heavy metal scenes. Mundane subcultural capital in heavy metal fandom revolves around displays of knowledge, particularly historical narratives, systems of classification and large numbers of obscure bands (Kahn-Harris 2007). Transgressive subcultural capital focuses instead on individualism and artistic idiosyncrasy, rewarding those who challenge norms both within the scene and in society at large. These two types of subcultural capital are not mutually exclusive and participants cultivate both of them. Mundane subcultural capital ensures a scene's longevity while transgressive subcultural capital provides an impetus for evolution and stylistic development. Individual scene participants also concern themselves with both types in order to avoid charges that one is merely a 'poser' or 'trend follower', someone who lacks experience and knowledge and enjoys the music simply because it is 'cool' or 'different'. Even worse, one might be a 'hipster' colonizing black metal in order to demonstrate one's own interesting and impeccable tastes.

The competing demands of mundane and transgressive subcultural capital result in a complex balancing act for both artists and fans. For example, it almost seems to be a requirement for extreme metal bands to declare in interviews that they do not follow 'trends' even as they dutifully list all of the bands that have influenced them, displaying their intimate knowledge of the scene. Black metal arguably increased the importance of transgression in extreme metal, due to the criminal acts associated with the 1990s Norwegian scene (Kahn-Harris 2012: 218). In this vein, black metal musicians sometimes expand their disdain for trends into a dismissal of the entire fan culture around their music. Likewise, black metal fans must negotiate their participation within black metal fandom, sometimes even to the point of denying that they are part of a scene at all (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). As will be shown over the course of this chapter, the workings of subcultural capital in black metal fandom are often informed by an undercurrent of suspicion regarding the motives and subcultural credentials of one's fellow fans.

The nexus of these competing demands over scene-specific knowledge, innovation, belonging and individuality in black metal is encapsulated in the term *kvltness*. *Kvltness* is specific to black metal, but it is essentially a measure of authenticity. The term is flexible and takes on slightly different aspects when applied to recordings, bands and fans, although a focus on insularity and exclusion remains constant. When used to describe musical style, *kvltness* often refers to the musical gestures and harsh low-fidelity production aesthetic of late 1980s and 1990s black metal. Demos and other hard-to-get recordings are also frequently described as *kvltness* due to their obscurity. *Kvltness* black metal bands often cultivate an aura of mystery, rarely granting interviews, performing concerts or even disclosing the names of band

members. In the age of the Internet, this tactic perhaps attempts to replicate the mystery that surrounded underground recordings in the 1980s and 1990s, when information about the musicians was often difficult to find.

When used to describe black metal fans, however, kvltness takes on shades of irony, humour and playfulness. As noted by Kahn-Harris (2007) and Phillipov (2012), parody, humour and camp are important parts of the pleasure fans derive from extreme metal. The dourly misanthropic, warlike and occasionally violent aesthetic promoted by Norwegian black metal is so extreme that it often borders on the ludicrous. The black metal costume in particular can easily be read as a comically inadequate attempt at toughness and evilness. The members of the NWN forum tend towards this tongue-in-cheek usage of the term, using 'kvltng' as a verb to describe vacationing with an eye towards local record stores and macabre attractions. Yet, even as black metal fans appreciate parodies and other comic aspects of the scene, play never undermines their seriousness about the music and the scene (Kahn-Harris 2007). The evaluations of truthfulness and authenticity within the scene continue to carry significant weight, creating a final wrinkle in which kvlt is used as a term of sarcastic derision, referring either to someone who is adopting aspects of black metal fashion and comportment without a lasting commitment to the subculture or to someone who is simply trying too hard to fit in. As in other youth cultures, black metal fans are typically hostile towards those who they suspect are false or inauthentic (Muggleton 2000).

Individualism and Authentic Participation

Black metal fans recognize that kvltness may be at odds with the individualist strain within transgressive subcultural capital when kvltness creates a standardized and commercialized group identity. In response, fans and musicians claim not to care if they are not in line with the accepted strictures of the scene. Just as with other forms of subcultural capital, the denial of the importance of kvltness is in itself an attempt to establish an alternative form of transgressive power. An ultimate claim to kvltness is to be somehow beyond concerns of authenticity, to be so kvlt that the evaluations of one's fellow travellers are irrelevant. A number of black metal celebrities have promoted these ideals of radical individualism with some, particularly Varg Vikernes following his release from prison, disavowing the black metal scene entirely (Angle 2010).

Although the fan debates over kvltness and its importance resemble the ideological struggles and competitions for status in the other underground music scenes, black metal fan discourse differs in some fundamental ways. Studies of punk scenes have articulated ways in which fans categorize each other and create hierarchies between true fans and posers, between 'us' and 'them' (Fox 1987). Typically, individual fans claim to embody the values of the scene, to 'be', while accusing others of only appearing to embody these values, or merely 'doing' (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990; Williams 2006). The black metal scene is full of such accusations and they are a significant driver behind claims to kvltness. One of the principal values of kvlt is a disdain for any sort of communal scene in favour of a strain of radical individualism. Of course, as Williams (2006) notes, nearly all music scenes claim to promote 'authentic' individualism even as they enforce rigorous standards of dress and comportment. Further, the increased media presence and commercial potential of black metal since the mid-1990s has in some cases resulted in a borderline paranoia regarding bands' and fans' trustworthiness and commitment to the genre. This mistrust can exist even if one wears the right shirts, references the right bands and eschews the taint of the commercial (Spracklen 2006: 42). The violence in Norway also arguably opened the door for

this paranoia, causing the scene's fascination with death and darkness to suddenly become real and forcing participants to question their commitment to it (Mørk 2009).

Online black metal fan communities by their very nature possibly also exacerbate the tensions surrounding claims to kvltness. Participants online are often not able to judge their fellow fans by their behaviour and style and instead must rely on postings and comments on blogs, videos and discussion boards. Even though distanced forms of participation like tape-trading, self-produced zines and correspondence have long been a part of metal fandom, online forums do not require the same level of work and trust. Recent studies of online communities focused around straightedge punk have also suggested that virtual online scenes encourage participation by more casual fans, if only because of the transience of these virtual venues (Williams and Copes 2005: 85–6). Kvltness and related forms of elitism attempt to guard against such casual or ephemeral participation.

The participants at the NWN forum debated the importance of kvlt metal identity in several extended threads over the past few years. Indeed, it seems to be a recurring topic. In the 2011 thread 'What defines a metalhead..whats [sic] accepting and is not to you', the initial poster Abomination81 states that 'Growing up in my day being a metalhead wasnt [sic] so much [about] being a[n] elitist' and questions the importance of image as opposed to devotion to the music (Nuclear War Now 2011a). Participants in the discussion were split over the issue. A number expressed frustration with the conformity of the metal scene, with poster Brown Growth claiming 'a metalhead is someone who is deeply interested and invested in metal as a genre of music, not someone with stunted adolescence problems and ridiculous patch-covered jackets', echoing concerns about participants who seem to value belonging to a particular group and cultivating their own status. However, poster Shorty replied that 'Looking like the most casual dude when you pretend to deeply like BLACK or DEATH METAL is just awful ... You can't be taken seriously', while also admitting that 'even the dumbest poser can buy patch[es] and shirts', reiterating the sense of paranoia over inauthentic participation by stressing that looks and fashion cannot be trusted. Finally, several posters associated the concern with being outwardly kvlt with a childish mindset that older fans have outgrown, with poster Holy Ghost noting that,

I still buy tons of records and listen to metal all the time but the older I get I'm more interested in spending time with my wife and dog and paying my mortgage than being 'grimm' [sic] or whatever ... most people get older they get over this idea they've got something to prove ... yet I'm also happy that the older I get music is still the most important thing to me, just without all the other stuff that goes along with subculture bullshit. (Nuclear War Now 2011a)

Holy Ghost and several other posters also conclude that the overriding problem is the sense that these conceptions of metal identity are based on what others might think, while a true fan should be above such concerns. As Holy Ghost puts it, 'I don't listen to metal to impress other people or earn kvlt points'.

In addition to illuminating the debate over authentic participation, these excerpts also hint at the reactionary nature of much black metal fundamentalism and imply that its subcultural capital is being claimed by a new generation of black metal fans. In a thread entitled '1993 ... were you DEATH or BLACK?' (a reference to the split in extreme metal style following black metal's initial rise in visibility) poster NK7 states:

This thread is fun, I mean it's cool to see our resident bunch of mid/late-20 morons – who obviously started with black metal in '98-'99- claim they got into it in 1993.

Not as pathetic as nowadays people still taking seriously all the 'rules' and anti-trend bullshit stated back then, but quite close. (Nuclear War Now 2012)

Although this discussion thread and others like it are full of older fans asserting their own subcultural status, it does suggest that these older fans are also frustrated with younger fans and musicians who base their kvltness around fantasies from times before they were grown or even born.

Black metal's paranoia over authentic participation is likely a product of the changing conceptions of subcultural identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many scholars have argued that the emphasis on essential identity and belonging has given way to a picture of more fluid affiliations and porous subcultural boundaries (Maffesoli 1996; Thornton 1996). Individuals often freely identify with and associate with disparate groups, although it is worth stressing that this does not preclude long-lasting identification with a particular scene or community (Davis 2006). This flexibility also connects to the hypothesis that culture in the twenty-first century privileges cultural omnivorousness rather than rigid hierarchies of taste (Petersen and Kern 1996). However, for the adherents of a musical style like black metal that prides itself on elitence and esotericism, such cultural trends do not bring welcome change. Indeed, black metal scholars and fans sometimes position the genre as opposed to the fragmentation of postmodern society and argue that its popularization and standardization has opened it up to possible degradation (Mørk 2009: 196). NWN poster SWO argues in the thread 'What is black metal ... NOW?' that this allows 'outsiders who don't understand metal to step in and corrupt the "novelty" of black metal into a pathetic college drop out performance art', specifically referencing the band Liturgy (Nuclear War Now 2011b).

The Power of Nostalgia

For fundamentalist black metal musicians and fans, recycling the original kvlt Norwegian style provides a connection to the black metal tradition and its aura of elitism and social transgression. In this way, it seems to function much as the 1980s' albums of Venom and Bathory did for Euronymous and his fellows. For black metal musicians, the highest compliment is that they are deemed to embody the spirit of kvlt black metal while still forging their own identity within it. Fans face a similar dilemma, for if they acknowledge this nostalgia and connect with black metal's past in the 'wrong' way, then they are mere followers and therefore not 'true' black metallers.

A significant force behind the concern with kvltness and the frustrations of older fans is the simple fact that black metal has lost its sense of obscurity. The proliferation of black metal across the Internet and a recent surge of extreme metal memoirs and zine collections have denied it the subcultural obscurity that fans once prized. Previously rare black metal recordings, along with zines and other artifacts, are readily available to any interested fan. As seen in the beginning of this chapter, nostalgia for times when extreme metal was a more obscure genre is a touchstone for black metal fans and musicians even in the 1990s. For younger fans, musicians and researchers, the availability of material from black metal's past is a boon, even as abundance saps these zines and recordings of their former subcultural capital. On some level, the idea of kvltness is an attempt to reclaim a level of obscurity and rescue at least some black metal from commercial interests.

Yet, it seems that much of the tension around kvltness and authenticity is a result of the fact that kvltness is a commercial force, even if it pretends otherwise. Indeed, veiling or

denying the commercial aspect of rock music is a common tactic among fans (Cavicchi 1998). Black metal fandom's focus on rare kvlt recordings is a prime example of this apparent contradiction, as the black metal fan who actively seeks out and collects obscure records and demos is in many ways also an ideal consumer. As Hills (2002) posits, the desire to defend against commercialism and commodification is a common theme within cult fandoms, even when it conflicts with actual fan practices. Fan studies has often had a tendency to recreate this dualism between the commercial consumer and the 'cult' collector and fan producer, with the fan producer valued over the 'simple' consumer. This value system has been challenged within fan studies over the past decade, and both Hills (2002: 29–31) and Phillipov (2012) argue that popular music and subcultural studies have likewise focused their attention on supposedly resistant and anti-commercial music genres and scenes. However, even if the discourse of black metal fans and musicians does tend to focus on resistance to trends and mainstream commerciality, the consumerist side of black metal is not necessarily seen as bad among black metal fans, provided one is purchasing the 'right' materials. Indeed, the practice of collecting rare black metal recordings, both old and new, mirrors the 'curatorial consumption' (Tankel and Murphy 1998) found in many media fandoms, as well as the spirit of systematic and slightly competitive connoisseurship found among record collectors in general (Straw 1997).

Black metal fans have lately begun to seek out important locations and actual artifacts in Norway, a trend often referred to as 'blackpacking'. The tourism industries in Norway have responded in kind to the demand. A collection of flyers, demo tapes and other black metal ephemera formerly displayed at the Neseblod [Translation: Nosebleed] record store in Oslo is now an exhibition at the Oslo Popsenteret, a museum focused on popular music. The curriculum for aspiring cultural ambassadors at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs now includes an introduction to black metal music as an integral part of the Norwegian brand alongside Henrik Ibsen, telemark skiing and Vikings (Halvorsen 2011). Even in 2000, the magazine *Listen to Norway*, a publication affiliated with the Norwegian Music Information Centre and a partner to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was considering the genre as a new and uniquely Norwegian style poised to become a global force (Pedersen 2000).

Perhaps not surprisingly, blackpacking is considered by many fans to be the height of poser-dom and the comments on a YouTube video about a homegrown 'Black Metal Bus Tour' (ContrabandCandy 2010) were overwhelmingly negative, describing the participants as 'scum' who 'don't know what black metal means' and who treat it 'like Disneyland'. Several commenters saw the tour as the final death knell for the style and the metal underground in general. Maintaining the transgressive side of black metal in the face of such things necessitates the elitist fundamentalism that pervades black metal fan discourse and fuels nostalgia for the days of the underground.

Along similar lines, several Facebook groups, including 'Black Metal Museum (Germany)', 'Black Metal Antiquarium' and 'Black Death Nostalgia', have recently been started with the purpose of sharing and curating pictures of artifacts, flyers and photographs from personal collections. In many ways these sites are reminiscent of recent books like *Murder in the Front Row* (2011), which collects photographs and ephemera from the 1980s' thrash metal scene in California. Most of the ephemera in the black metal groups consists of old flyers and advertisements, business correspondence from black metal luminaries, rare T-shirts and demo tapes. Black Metal Museum in particular pays special attention to items once owned by members of the Norwegian scene of the early 1990s as well as newspaper clippings associated with the murders and arsons of that time. In some ways, this archive highlights an aspect of black metal fandom that intersects with true crime fandom. These archival websites also demonstrate differing goals. Black Metal Museum aspires to be a physical archive along the lines of the Neseblod store, with the aim of promoting 'the true

black metal lifestyle', while Black Death Nostalgia describes the page as 'really just a trip down memory lane to the few who are still interested in those glory days' (Beerwölf 2012). These Facebook pages have not seemed to spark the disdain seen regarding backpackers, perhaps because they engage with the practices of trading and collecting that have long been a part of the black metal experience.

The Transgressive Rejection of Kvlt in 'Blackgaze'

The ideal of kvltness as an evaluation of authenticity and fidelity to the aesthetic of bygone eras is not without its detractors in the black metal scene, many of which use the rhetoric of kvltness as a means to claim transgressive capital based on rejection of trends. The posters at NWN base their rejection in terms of individualism, but some black metal fans and musicians use similar rhetoric to justify musical transgressions. The excerpt below is from a webpage on Last.fm for the black metal subgenre 'Blackgaze'. Blackgaze retains the tremolo picking, blast-beat drumming and screamed vocals of black metal, but the chord progressions and guitar parts are more reminiscent of 'shoegaze' bands like My Bloody Valentine. In some cases, the style displays a marked pop sensibility. As one might imagine, such a mixture would be anathema to many black metal fans, but the founder of the Last.fm page deliberately calls out the fundamentalist black metal camp:

Unlike their 'Kv1+' counterparts, the black metallers, Blackgazers are quite a sharp and gregarious lot despite their penchant for moping & emotional theatrics; Blackgazers champion green politics, human rights, anarchism and second hand bookstores filled with drifts of fresh vanilla coffee and incense smoke. They enjoy drinking tea, smoking weed, enjoying life to its fullest and laughing out loud when they hear a good joke. They aren't afraid to discuss their feelings about pimples & bad hair dye or being dumped by their girlfriends or boyfriends either. (Lotsajoy 2011)

This particular example demonstrates a tactic in which the idea of transgressive capital is used against the fundamentalist element in black metal fandom. The group's founder Lotsajoy describes a mindset and lifestyle marked by comfort, opulent sensory experience, leftist politics, emotional openness and a wry sense of humour. Here, this is taken to be everything the 'Kv1+' black metallers, with their repeated insistence on stoic grimness, misanthropy and individualism are not.¹ But Lotsajoy also lays claim to emotional fortitude by stating that blackgazers are not 'afraid' to engage with their feelings, implying that black metallers are emotionally weak. In a Bourdieusian frame, this is an explicit restructuring of black metal's dominant system of subcultural capital in favour of everything black metal generally disdains, even as the post intersects with the discourse of strength that pervades heavy metal. Lotsajoy has a vested interest in blackgaze beyond fan activity, however, as he is

¹ The substitution of numeric characters in 'Kv1+' borrows from 'leetspeak', a form of written language that substitutes numbers and other symbols for letters. This alternative alphabet system arose among computer gamers and hackers and functions as a semi-private 'elite' ('leet' or '1337') code, although some phrases have become common across the internet. Lotsajoy's use of leetspeak here likely references its associations with elitism, exclusionary tactics, and hazing among gamers and computer experts. For further information, consult Katherine Blashki and Sophie Nichol, 2005, 'Game Geek's Goss: Linguistic Creativity in Young Males Within An Online University Forum', *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 3(2), 77–86.

the founder of Starlight Temple Society and Krysanthoney Records, two small independent labels that specialize in the style.²

Yet the blackgaze manifesto also fits neatly alongside other examples of transgressive subcultural capital within black metal. Although ideological strictures are problematic for many black metal fans, lest they be seen as adhering to a trend, blackgaze takes this flexibility to an extreme, creating an ethos that rejects many of black metal's core tenets. It is openly resistant to the much of the ideological glue that binds the rest of the black metal scene. Blackgaze's controversial status among other black metal fans serves to buttress the blackgazer's own sense of individuality and difference from the normative style. Rather than focus on the past as a means of avoiding trendiness, like the fundamentalist black metallers, blackgaze is instead positioned as an alternative within the present. Implicit in the blackgazers' critique is the assertion that the transgressive capital claimed by kvlt black metallers is in fact mundane capital in disguise, as seen in the recycling of kvlt styles and bands from decades past, along with accompanying strictures of fashion and ideology.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the workings of kvltness and subcultural capital and its relations to nostalgia and commercialism within the black metal scene. Although the examples at NWN affirm the workings of mundane and transgressive subcultural capital that Kahn-Harris explores, the obscurantist drive of kvltness positions mundane subcultural capital (kvlt demos and nostalgic collectibles) as a form of transgressive subcultural capital aimed at reserving 'true' black metal for a select few fans. Additionally, the easy availability of black metal products online has created a situation in which the outward appearances and behaviours of fans and musicians are deemed less reliable as markers of authenticity, fuelling a sense of suspicion. As seen in the example of blackgaze, some fans and musicians deliberately turn this paranoia around on the kvlt black metallers as a tactic for claiming their own form of transgressive cultural capital.

Future research could further illuminate the role of geography within black metal fandom and the pursuit of kvltness. The importance of black metal's imagined Nordic community (Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen 2011) certainly has the potential to motivate fans and musicians in non-Nordic regions to prove themselves somehow. With this in mind, it perhaps makes sense that many of the bands and fans featured in this chapter are from the USA. At the same time, the individualist tone within black metal discourse may have a particular resonance for American participants (Hester 2012). A broader comparison between black metal fans in America and those in Europe, or even between those in continental Europe and Scandinavia, could provide more insight. Additionally, the advent of more broadly popular American black metal bands like Wolves in the Throne Room suggests that the flow of black metal's products is possibly reorienting away from Scandinavia. This shift may ultimately challenge the concept of the genre as inherently Nordic and will certainly provoke more debate among black metal fans.

2 In the interest of full disclosure I should note that I released an album with Starlight Temple Society in 2009.

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