

From Hyperborean Darkness to Transcendental Light: On Challenging Masculinity, and the Immanence of Black Metal through the Esoteric Christianity of Hunter Hunt- Hendrix and Liturgy

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between esotericism and masculinity in heavy metal, and in particular black metal, through the case study of the esoteric writings and practices of Hunter Hunt-Hendrix from the US black metal band Liturgy. Academic research in metal subcultures has shown a pervasiveness of discourses that uphold a model of hegemonic masculinity prevalent in twentieth-century western society, based upon the articulation and valorisation of heteronormative archetypes such as the “warrior,” the “blue collar worker,” and “the metal god.” Men and masculine cultural values are coded as dominant, active and “warrior-like,” while women and femininity are passive, subordinated, and disavowed. This is mirrored in the esoteric project of black metal, where the desire for true authenticity and the valorisation of the “Viking” warrior mentality informs its embracing of esoteric systems and occult practices that provide narratives for traditional masculinity to be upheld. However, shifts in wider social and occultural landscapes have led to a challenging of black metal’s aesthetic and cultural orthodoxy. This article argues that the work and music of Hunt-Hendrix provides such a challenge through her depictions of esoteric Christianity that upend several of the tenets of black metal, while also being informed by her cultural values as a queer, trans woman.

Keywords: Transcendental Black Metal; Liturgy; Hunter Hunt-Hendrix; Esotericism; Transgender; Christianity

Black metal is a genre of music that has fully embraced esotericism and occult practices, creating a counter-knowledge against hegemonic cultural modes that functions as a “complex cultural system, providing sets of ideology, meaning, practice, and traditions—in essence, a complex and coherent worldview.”¹ In

1. Kennet Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’,” 535.

its discursive quest for rebellion and authenticity, black metal positions itself ideologically, aesthetically, and culturally against liberal society, monotheism, and egalitarianism. As a result, it has embraced antinomian models of esotericism. The first and second waves of black metal in the 1980s and 1990s used satanic discursive practices to fashion an adversarial stance against prevailing cultural norms, while expanding their esoteric vision to include Nordic/Germanic heathenism and paganism. Meanwhile, antinomian ideas towards race and gender are also present in the third wave of black metal from the 2000s to the present, such as with National Socialist Black Metal or through the genre's relationship with Radical Traditionalism which focuses on valorising counter-narratives of pre-Christian "native cultures" in northern Europe.

While Western esotericism has a history of depictions of femininity, androgyny, and transgenderism in areas such as hermeticism, alchemy, modern witchcraft and paganism, the use of antinomian esotericism within black metal discourse, with its allusions to individualism and elitism, is aggressively phallogocentric. The masculine aesthetics of black metal, codified in the second wave of the 1990s, predominantly portray the black metal male as authentic, active, and in control of his own universe, a sovereign warrior standing against the armies of modern "progress" and egalitarianism. The female, in comparison, is passive, subordinated, and effectively exscribed out of black metal discourse. Any attempts to "feminize," or dilute this discourse through the introduction of feminine or non-masculine cultural values, are aggressively policed.

Into this discourse enters Hunter Hunt-Hendrix. The singer and guitarist for the American black metal band Liturgy, she has followed a different spiritual and philosophical approach to black metal since the late 2000s. Gaining notoriety in 2010 when she produced the paper "Transcendental Black Metal" for the academic conference and subsequent book, *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1*, her views on the history and cultural values of black metal, and its relation to art, politics and culture, was seen as the antithesis

of black metal aesthetics.² The response from the wider black metal scene was overwhelmingly visceral and negative: not only were Hunt-Hendrix’s ideas pilloried, her masculinity and the ways in which it went against the orthodoxy and normative ideals of black metal—effeminate, intellectual, sensitive—was also called into question.

Hunt-Hendrix has since gone on to create a series of idiosyncratic and self-made cosmological concepts, from the totalising operatic project of *Ark Work* to the art/life praxis of *Perichoresis*. Said praxis transmits a philosophical system for articulating the godhead and its relation to the cosmos called *transcendental qabala*.³ The resulting system and the counter-narrative it produces is highly syncretic—instead of looking to a Nordic pre-Christian past, it looks instead to the spiritual myth of “America” and the transcendentalist school of thought. It also synthesises ideas and concepts, from a post-Marxist view of history to the modern philosophies of Nietzsche, Schelling, and Kant, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the apocalyptic poetry and mythopoesis of William Blake.

In May of 2020, Hunt-Hendrix came out as a trans woman. Before this coming out, she displayed a femininity (or rather non-masculinity) in Liturgy’s performances and interviews that was polarizing within the black metal scene, but in her initial coming-out statement she argued, “The music and ideas I compose come from a female heart, whatever that means, and I don’t want to partially distort the transmission through an ‘effeminate male’ mask any longer. . . . This statement is essentially making itself. I have no choice, there is no way for me to stop it from coming out, I am simply surrendering to it.”⁴ For Hunt-Hendrix, becoming a trans woman was essential to her living an authentic life and staying true to expressing her faith and spiritual ideals through her music.

This article begins with an overview of academic discourse into the construction and protection of masculinity within heavy metal, in particular

2. See Hunter Hunt-Hendrix, “Transcendental Black Metal.”

3. Hunter Hunt-Hendrix, “The Perichoresis of Music, Art, and Philosophy,” 279.

4. Jazz Munroe, “Liturgy’s Hunter Hunt-Hendrix Comes Out as Transgender.”

the “hyperborean” black metal originating from Norway and Sweden in the 1990s to the present day. In examining how black metal’s desire for active and essentialist forms of masculinity inform its use of esoteric systems and occult practices, this paper will then analyse Hunt-Hendrix’s explorations of the esoteric and the divine through her music, essays, and videos, in particular her development of spiritual and philosophical systems that are expressed through her music. I argue that through such practices, Hunt-Hendrix has provided a series of provocations and challenges towards black metal’s traditionalist discourses by upending several esoteric doctrines prevalent in the scene, as well as providing a discursive space and counter-mythopoesis to black metal’s relationship with gender, masculinity, and esotericism.

British Power and Warrior Stances: Masculinity in Metal—The Academic Perspective

Since its UK roots in the late 1960s as an evolutionary mutation of rock and blues, heavy metal, according to Robert Walser in his 1992 study *Running with the Devil*, has gone on to become “one of the single most successful enduring musical genres in the past thirty years.”⁵ The subsequent decades have seen metal music become a fully integrated part of the global entertainment industry and a fully consumable part of popular culture, while localised extreme metal scenes such as Norwegian Black Metal and Swedish Death Metal have become major cultural exports.⁶

In response, there has been a growing body of academic research into metal scenes, examining not only the genre’s form and content, but its relationship with wider social issues of race, class, and gender. Foundational texts, such as Deena Weinstein’s *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (1991) alongside Walser’s work *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, examine metal scenes along sociocultural and musicological lines while a third text,

5. Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil*, X.

6. See Brown, Spracklen, Kahn-Harris, and Scott, *Global Metal Music and Culture*; Spracklen, “True Norwegian Black Metal”; Nordström, “Contextualizing Extreme-Metal Music.”

Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge (2007) by Keith Kahn-Harris, updates research to take into account the proliferation of extreme metal subgenres such as black metal, death metal, and doom metal.⁷

In their analysis regarding gender within metal scenes, all three texts point to metal music, its lyrical themes, aesthetics, and discourse as upholding forms of hegemonic masculinity. By hegemonic masculinity, I am referring to the concept coined by R. W. Connell that relates to “a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities.”⁸ A couple of things of note. While hegemonic masculinity implies the idea of a single existing masculinity, there is no one true essential masculine mode/expression. Therefore, we should not think of a single masculinity, but of *masculinities* where dominant, hegemonic forms of masculinity exist in relation to subordinated masculinities through a series of power relations based upon gender inequalities, social consent, marginalisation, and de-legitimation. Secondly, since its initial formulation in the 1990s, both Connell and James Messerschmidt have reformulated the concept to take into account four developments within the field. The first is *gender hierarchies*, where hegemonic masculinity incorporates other masculinities, and even a relational approach to women and femininity. The second development regards the *geography* of masculinities and their socioeconomic relations to global, regional, and local cultures. The third development concerns *social embodiment*, and the representation and use of bodies in everyday life, especially in the case of transgender practices and queer theory. The fourth development

7. In this article I refer to the conceptual framework of “scene” used by Kahn-Harris (2004), Moberg (2011), and Granholm (2016) to denote the existing discursive landscapes in metal. The use of the term in place of “subculture” accounts for the differing levels of engagement by fans, musicians, and other practitioners towards metal, while also accounting for their participation in “dominant” or other forms of culture. On occasion I use the term “community” to denote a particular localised aspect of the metal scene, be it physical or virtual. See Kahn-Harris, “The ‘Failure’ of Youth Culture”; Moberg, “The Concept of Scene”; Granholm, “Ritual Black Metal.”

8. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, 28.

is the *dynamics* of masculinities, in particular how individuals construct differing internalised masculinities that take into account contradicting desires, emotions, and socioeconomic factors over time.⁹

In describing the dominant masculinity of metal music, Weinstein describes metal subcultures as being the “preserve” of “white males,” while Walser posits metal as “a discourse shaped by patriarchy,” that is primarily supported by “a teenage male audience.”¹⁰ Kahn-Harris describes the metal scene as being overwhelmingly heteronormative in its structure, identities, and discourse.¹¹ As such, the majority of heavy metal conforms to a gender binary where “[m]en act, women are acted upon. . . . Power, the essential inherent and delineated meaning of heavy metal is culturally coded as a masculine trait.”¹²

For women in heavy metal there is not, according to Weinstein, a barrier to entry based on misogyny. Instead, heavy metal discourse is based upon a form of gender separatism through “a rejection of the cultural values associated with femininity.”¹³ Kahn-Harris observes women in metal scenes and communities are often being “side-lined” or represented as “marginal to the scene” where they “tend to be visible as hyper-feminine, or not at all.”¹⁴ Walser argues that female subjectivities and experiences are regularly “exscripted” from metal communities, while said communities valorise a misogynist world without women where aggressive displays of masculinity (through music, concerts, associated media, etc.) are enjoyed through male bonding.

Despite its extreme sonic nature and desire to position itself as a nihilistic “other” to popular culture, black metal has mirrored the wider metal discourse when it comes to ascribing forms of masculinity to identity aesthetics. Jasmine

9. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, 47–70. For more background information, see: Connell, *Masculinities*.

10. Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, 67; Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 109.

11. Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Music*, 72–76.

12. Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, 67.

13. *Ibid.*, 67.

14. Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Music*, 74.

Shadrack states it clearly: “The phallogocentrism of black metal . . . is essentially no different from extreme metal’s other variants and if anything, the archetype of the male metal warrior is more prevalent in black metal than anywhere else.”¹⁵ The dominant mode of gender is that of a homogenous masculinity that adheres to “heteronormative” expressions, rules, and behaviours, that, like other forms of metal, “reinforces Patriarchal ideals and traditional sexual mores and values.”¹⁶

Black metal upholds such ideals of masculinity in several ways. There are allusions to the individualist archetypes of Nietzsche’s “Übermensch,” or from satanic and left-hand path doctrines regarding the self as the site of pure agency. There are the aesthetics and typology of the black metal “warrior” kitted in spikes, leather and “corpsepaint,” ready to take battle against the forces of Christianity, egalitarianism, and modernity. Then there is a desire, through the consumption of black metal texts and products, for achieving a form of unique individuality that is perceived as being “true” and “kvlt.” Kvlt is a term particular to black metal that refers to the genre’s level of “authenticity,” both in musical form and content (harsh, low production values, and gestures of provocation in the lyrics), and at the level of discourse in the way that black metal bands cultivate an “aura of mystery” through unwillingness to engage with the music press. Fans debate what constitutes the right level of “authentic participation” and commitment to the genre.¹⁷

Most heavy metal communities and the general scene see themselves as an “imagined community” that is inclusive.¹⁸ However, research has shown that women must conform to said community’s masculinist codes of gender to be

15. Shadrack, “Denigrata Cervorum,” 24.

16. See Spracklen, “True Aryan Black Metal”; Sarelin, “Masculinities within Black Metal”; Forster, “Commodified Evil’s Wayward Children,” 119.

17. Hagen, “Kvlt-er than Thou,” 227–30.

18. By “imagined Communities,” I refer to Benedict Anderson’s concept regarding groups of people (from tribal villages to nation states) who, even though they may never meet each other, can imagine the format of their communion, and therefore share a sense of socially constructed togetherness. See: Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (2006).

accepted, either by adopting masculine norms and becoming “female chauvinists,” or by exploiting hypersexualised ideas of femininity and aggressively chasing male band members.¹⁹

When it comes to depictions of women in black metal, there is a similar form of gender separatism where women are portrayed as simply uninterested in black metal or unwilling to go the extra mile to achieve “kvlt” authenticity. As such, women/femininity are reduced to “passive, shallow and temporary,” while men/masculinity are considered to be active, in control, and perennial/universal.²⁰ Mirroring wider metal discourses, female sexuality and pleasure are “punished,” although in black metal, such depictions are “symbolic,” with women portrayed as witches or demons displaying an active female sexuality that is evil “by association.”²¹ Such displays of female sexuality and pleasure place women where they are seen as enjoying their subjection and degradation, despite their anti-theistic positions, mirroring the traditional fears and mistrust of female sexuality that underlies orthodox Christianity’s inherent misogyny.²²

While sexism and misogyny are acknowledged in the black metal scene, attempts to tackle such issues face a general avoidance or disavowal. Kahn-Harris identifies this tendency as a paradoxical strategy of “reflexive anti-reflexivity” that allows black metal practitioners to engage in transgressive forms and ideas, while at the same time permitting them to walk back from adopting an outwardly “political” or ideological stance. This depoliticizing of scenic discourses or “knowing better but deciding not to know,” allows for the disavowal of the prevalence of sexism and misogyny, while at the same time creating an orthodoxy that allows black metal scenes to actively resist attempts to challenge its unquestioned doxa.²³

19. See Sonia Vasan, “Den Mothers and Band Whores.”

20. Sarelin, quoted in Shadrack, “Denigrata Cervorum,” 74.

21. Forster, “Commodified Evil,” 118.

22. *Ibid.*, 118–19.

23. Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 145.

Such an example can be seen when Hunter Hunt-Hendrix in 2010 presented “Transcendental Black Metal” for the academic conference and subsequent book, *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1*, provocatively arguing for a new relationship between black metal, art, politics, and philosophy. In going against the prevailing norms, the overwhelming response of the black metal scene was a trenchant dismissal of both the band and Hunt-Hendrix’s ideas as being wholly counter to the genre itself. On social media platforms and forums, many of the comments not only called into question the validity of their work, but also made comments relating to their apparent *lack* of both “kvlr” and of the active forms of masculinity required to be true adherents of black metal. In one discussion thread on the *Encyclopaedia Metallica* forum, Liturgy and Hunt-Hendrix were pilloried as “posers,” “hipsters,” and “pretentious.” Meanwhile Hunt-Hendrix was described as “trying too hard to be an intellectual,” a “faggot,” an “overly pretentious dweeb” that “didn’t understand black metal,” and a “vapid windbag,” while some posters noted “his tone of voice” was “forced,” and in “a higher tone” than everyone else’s, with Liturgy’s music itself seen as “overtly accessible and poppy.”²⁴

Ultimately, Liturgy were seen as a threat to the cultural fundamentalism essential to black metal’s “reflexive non-reflexivity.” Their music and the insistence on the part of Hunt-Hendrix to introduce new artistic values were viewed as a weakening of the sonic and spiritual doctrines inherent in black metal’s cultural codes, as well as going against the active and dominant masculinity required to be authentic. Hunt-Hendrix’s intellectual persona was overwhelmingly judged as “whiny,” passive, and feminine, a judgement that continues in corners of the black metal scene to this day.

As for Hunt-Hendrix, in May of 2020, a decade after the initial “Transcendental Black Metal” controversy, she issued a statement on Instagram where she came out as a trans woman, declaring “I am a woman. I have always been one,” and that the cultural values of femininity and female subjectivity were central for her ideas and music:

24. See *Metal-Archives.com*, “Transcendental Black Metal—Hipsters Do BM.”

I could have done all this before Liturgy started, but I didn't out of fear. I knew I was female and not male, emotionally and in my experience of my body. . . . The feminine imbues everything I am, even beyond 'gender identity.' As a woman, I am a musician, a theologian and poet and aim to model my life on the saints, to be an authentic channel for God's love. . . . I have a great respect for masculinity, but I've never known how to participate in it because it isn't me.²⁵

While coming out was a major life event for Hunt-Hendrix, she had, in an earlier blog post, spoken of issues regarding her gender identity, stating that she was “gender non-conforming,” and “more trans than most people seem to suspect.” She also stated that she knew she was “not a man” since her early twenties, but made a pact with her masculine side through a strong desire to be stable in her identity,²⁶ while also exhibiting internalised transphobia in a way that, as an adherent of Lacanian psychoanalysis, she felt being transgender was a form of delusion borne of mental illness.²⁷ At the time of coming out, Hunt-Hendrix stated that she was now “accepting of her femininity” and that she “[took] pride in being a queer, feminine being,” while attitudes towards heteronormativity were “really holding humanity back from its highest potential.”²⁸

Despite isolated negative reporting that also contained virulently misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic comments,²⁹ the news of Hunt-Hendrix's coming out as a trans woman were reported by most of the metal music press and throughout the metal scene in generally neutral or positive terms. Despite the polarising attitudes surrounding Hunt-Hendrix in the past, the subsequent discourse around her coming out as a trans woman points to a slow broadening of attitudes within black metal regarding race, politics, and gender that reflects the wider shifts in cultural norms of the past few decades. Black metal, thanks

25. Munroe, “Liturgy's Hunter Hunt-Hendrix Comes Out as Transgender.”

26. Hunt-Hendrix, “Narrative, Philosophy, and Gender Identity.”

27. “Hunter Hunt-Hendrix—Why It Took So Long for Me to Come Out as Transgender (Part I),” YouTube Video.

28. Hunt-Hendrix, “Narrative, Philosophy, and Gender Identity.”

29. Ayoub, “Hunter Hunt-Hendrix: ‘I am a Woman’.”

in part to the proliferation of social media and online platforms, has entered a new “wave” of evolution in the last twenty years as the music has become more accessible within popular culture.³⁰ In acknowledging the greater prevalence of this new wave of black metal, recent academic research over the past decade and a half has challenged the prevalent framings of masculinities in metal, as well as exploring female, queer, and BIPOC experiences in the scene.³¹ Such research has also challenged the reification within media and academia of an essentialist and hegemonic masculinity at the heart of metal, arguing for the existence of different and sometimes adversarial masculinities that contest pervading gender norms both within and without metal communities, while also allowing for the possibility of more diverse interplays between different types of masculinity.³²

30. While a full history of black metal is outside the scope of this essay, there are three distinct “waves” in the genealogy and evolution of black metal’s sound, ideas, and ideologies. The first “wave” of black metal began in the early to late 1980s, where bands such as Venom, Bathory, Mercifyl Fate, and Celtic Frost began to push the sonic and timbral envelope of metal’s sound. The “second wave” from the late 1980s to the late 1990s was based in Norway and Sweden, where bands such as Mayhem, Burzum, Thorns, Immortal, Emperor and Darkthrone crystallised the genre (and discourse) through a series of extreme sonic “signifiers” and positions towards an aesthetic fundamentalism. The black metal archetypes of transgression, violence, individualism, and elitism would be codified in this wave, with several musicians taking part in anti-Christian religious violence (such as church burnings) and murder, as well as racist/homophobic ideologies aligned with overtly Satanic themes. After this period there has been a loosely defined but acknowledged “third” wave of black metal from the early 2000s to the present day, where black metal breaks out of the Norwegian centre, becoming a global genre in the USA, the rest of Europe, and South America. In this wave there are further subgenre splits to include “depressive suicidal black metal,” “atmospheric black metal,” and “post-black metal.” There is also an increasing level of sonic innovation and experimentation as bands in this wave explore different structural and compositional approaches, e.g., minimalism, avant garde noise, neo folk, electronics, etc. For more information on black metal’s history and genealogy see: Moynihan and Søderlind, *Lords of Chaos*; Granholm, “Sons of Northern Darkness”; Patterson, *Black-Metal*; Shadrack, “Denigrata Cervorum”; Introvigne, “Black Metal and Satanism.”

31. See Liana Dawes, “Challenging an ‘Imagined Community’”; Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone, *Queerness in Heavy Metal Music*; Rosemary Lucy Hill, “Gender, Metal and the Media”; Sarelin, “Masculinities Within Black Metal”; Niall Scott, “The Monstrous Male and Myths of Masculinity in Metal”; Spracklen, “True Aryan Black Metal”; Shadrack, *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound*.

32. See Scott, “The Monstrous Male”; Sarelin, “Masculinities within Black Metal.”

Disruption through the rise of neoliberalism and global capitalism over the past three decades, alongside poststructural and postmodern discourses in academia and wider society, have challenged, or at least questioned, hegemonic power structures with regards to gender, race, and class. As a cultural milieu, metal, and black metal in particular, has seen various challenges and conflicts occur as clear-cut social categories including “man/masculinity” and “woman/femininity” have become undermined and disrupted. Metal discourses have seen increased representation from women, queer, and BIPOC fans and musicians, as well as an increased pushback against prevailing metal orthodoxies. Today, there are black metal bands, festivals, and writers who openly challenge prevailing opinions and norms, describing themselves as anti-fascist, queer, and feminist, while there has been increasing critique of the prevailing cultural signifiers that are central to black metal.³³ While this does not point to a wholesale change of black metal cultural doxa, such developments have shown the cultural and social values of black metal are not immutable and are constantly being questioned.

Dark Gods and the Metal Void: Black Metal and Esotericism

Of metal music’s fragmentation into subgenres that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, none are more extreme in form, content, aesthetic, and ideology than black metal. As a genre originating in the Scandinavian countries of Norway and Sweden, black metal generates a position of musical and ideological fundamentalism that marks itself against both heavy metal and other extreme metal genres perceived as too commercialised and inauthentic.³⁴ The result is a virulent aesthetic of negativity, misanthropy, and nihilism in a music that is against “the instrumental rationalities that dominate Western society: it is anti-

33. See Kim Kelly, “Riding the New Wave of Anti-Fascist Black Metal”; Hank Shteamer, “Brooklyn Anti-Fascist Metal Fest Was a Beacon for a Troubled Scene”; Daniel Lukes & Stanimir Panayotov, *Black Metal Rainbows: A Book Like No Other*.

34. See Spracklen, “True Norwegian Black Metal”; Forster, “Evil’s Commodified Children,” 24–25.

Christianity, anti-state, anti-commercialisation.”³⁵ Scenic discourses valorise elitism among fans and musicians, encouraging them to pour scorn on posers, show disdain towards the masses, and undertake a commitment to pursuing antinomian systems of knowledge. As such, black metal at its core can be seen as an esoteric project that utilises the genre as “a kind of ritualistic medium for personal transformation.”³⁶ The preoccupation with dark and antinomian ideas in the pursuit of an authentic self at odds with western liberal society ensures that it becomes a breeding ground for the development of “complex cultural system[s]” that incorporate currents of “rejected” knowledge that are inherently esoteric, while also providing a space that invites adherents to engage and articulate said currents through both the music and wider discursive channels.³⁷

This fascination should come as no surprise. The cultural landscape of heavy metal and the wider history of rock music and popular culture in the twentieth century has long shown a symbiotic relationship between rock, metal music, and occultism.³⁸ Through a desire to maintain an “authentic,” rebellious self that goes against normative morals and behaviours, it is not surprising that rock and heavy metal would latch onto marginalised and rejected forms of knowledge and ideology that could bolster such claims. It was the first wave of black metal that saw a marked difference from the occulture presented in rock and heavy metal discourses of the period. The lyrics and artwork of bands such as Venom, Mercyful Fate, and Bathory displayed a greater emphasis on themes of darkness, satanism, and anti-Christian symbolism. Shadrack argues for the 1960s–70s occultural impact of Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan in providing the ideological and aesthetic inspiration for black metal’s first wave.³⁹ Overt occult symbols like

35. Spracklen, “Gorgoroth’s Gaahl’s Gay!” 91.

36. See Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 38. See also footnote 30.

37. Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’,” 515.

38. See Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’”; Granholm, “Why All That Satanist Stuff in Heavy Metal?”; Moberg, “Popular Culture and the ‘Darker Side’ of Alternative Spirituality”; Bebergal, *Season of the Witch*.

39. Shadrack, “Denigrata Cervorum”, 47–49.

a pentagram with the head of Baphomet (as stylized by LaVey in *The Satanic Bible*) were used by Venom on their 1981 album *Welcome to Hell* and 1982's *Black Metal*, while an inverted Christian cross in flames is displayed on 1984's *At War with Satan*. These albums come with song titles and lyrics characterised as explicitly satanic and/or anti-Christian. Meanwhile, Bathory in their *Black Metal* trilogy of albums began to show a strong interest in Norse mythology that utilised artworks depicting pagan mythology, such as the cover of the 1988 album *Blood, Fire, Death* that famously displays Peter Nicolai Arbo's *The Wild Hunt of Odin* (1872).⁴⁰

While such occult and satanic imagery was on open display in the first wave of black metal, their use was only to create transgressive “shock value” within the realms of artistic practice; there was little if any actual engagement with Satanic ideology or occult practice.⁴¹ Granholm argues further that with the second wave of Norwegian black metal bands in the 1990s, the given stereotype of these bands being “satanic” originated in a media driven moral panic over the wave of church burnings and murders associated with the scene.⁴²

Despite a media script of black metal bands as being “satanic,” the majority of this second wave should instead be viewed as heathen rather than satanic in its worldview.⁴³ Many of the bands in this wave promote a heavy heathen influence with multiple displays of pre-Christian Scandinavian culture, myth, and imagery.⁴⁴ Viking and Old Norse imagery, iconography, and mythology are prevalent, along with Scandinavian landscapes of forests, glaciers, snow/ice, and winter darkness, with multiple references to pre-Christian nationalism and heathenism. In line with a heathen/pagan framework, the second wave of black metal shows various elements of “the longing for a long-lost pre-Christian past,” “nature-romanticism,” and “the importance of a ‘folk’.”⁴⁵

40. See Spracklen, “Metal Music and the Re-imagining of Masculinity,” 89–102.

41. See Shadrack, “Denigrata Cervorum,” 46.

42. See Moynihan and Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos*; Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness,’” 529–30.

43. Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness,’” 527–30.

44. See Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness,’” and “Ritual Black Metal”; von Helden, “Scandinavian Metal Attack”; Walsh, “A Great Heathen Fist from the North.”

45. Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness,’” 528.

Despite a sustained commitment towards esoteric ideas and knowledge through the utilisation of heathen frameworks, the strategy of “reflexive non-reflexivity” ensures that for many black metal fans and musicians, such engagement is still at the level of aesthetics, not cohering into a fully formed and practiced ideological or spiritual system; the “music” is still felt to be the primary focus of discourse in the black metal scene, with political and spiritual issues kept to the margins. However, by the time of the “third wave” of black metal from the early 2000s to the present, a small but noticeable number of black-metal bands have connected directly with the occult milieu, engaging with esoteric systems and occult practices to the point where “representatives of this scene not only claim a serious religious-philosophical attitude, but frame their artistic activities as religious-occult practice.”⁴⁶ Described as “ritual black metal,” these bands express having an explicit “occult core” that places esoteric spirituality front and centre in their praxis, with the music and discourse being used as a vehicle of supra-representation for esoteric ideas and forms.⁴⁷

With regards to the religious or spiritual undercurrent in black metal music, Niall Scott argues for viewing the ritualistic aspects as a form of “apophatic liturgy,” the music and live performances containing liturgical moments that go beyond the theatrical, providing opportunities for authentic emotional and spiritual transcendence. But transcendence in this case “concerns not presumption of a Christian pre-given lifeworld [but] rather a transgressive goal that is nihilistic to its core.”⁴⁸ Whereas the Christian apophatic tradition aims towards a deeper understanding of the unknowability of God, black metal goes much further, using its language of renunciation and nihilism to go in the opposite direction against God, walking away from him “in a state of disappointment, lament and sorrow.”⁴⁹ Instead of being seen as the opposite

46. Granholm, “Ritual Black Metal,” 17.

47. *Ibid.*, 28.

48. Niall Scott, “Seasons in the Abyss,” 23.

49. Niall Scott, “Black Metal’s Apophatic Curse,” 186.

of the Christian apophatic tradition, showing a “dark love for the Divine,” black metal’s apophysis goes beyond the mystical tradition, embracing “only the physical, material realm.”⁵⁰

Ritual black metal and the heightened importance of liturgical and ritual aspects of music performance is but part of a greater exploration of musical, aesthetic, and esoteric boundaries within the third wave of black metal. Such explorations occur along two main currents: the first sees an entrenching and codification of what Marcus Moberg terms “dark alternative spirituality,” as diffuse occultures linked to satanism and neopagan systems are made explicit in the world building and identity formation of its adherents.⁵¹ As well as those associated with ritual black metal, bands such as Gorgoroth and Behemoth crystallise Luciferian satanism and left-hand path ideology into a full-blown worldview, while other bands look to the idea of a living nature that symbolises a deep, mythical connection to a pre-Christian past.⁵² Meanwhile, bands such as Graveland, Absurd, Spear of Longinus, and Deströyer 666, gravitate towards more extreme movements through National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM) or Radical Traditionalism.⁵³ While Karl Spracklen argues that the adoptions of openly reactionary and extreme rhetoric are on the margins of mainstream black-metal discourse, the emphasis in creating “counter-narratives” emphasising elitism, sacralisation of the self, and an antagonism to both Christianity and secular western society has resulted in several overlaps between black metal and politically radical esoteric currents, with sections of the black metal scene

50. *Ibid.*, 186.

51. See Moberg, “Popular Culture and the ‘Darker Side’ of Alternative Spirituality.”

52. There are also the metal subgenres of Viking or pagan metal which, while also having a greater direct lyrical and aesthetic appropriation of Nordic myth and pre-Christian Scandinavian heathen imagery, are outside of the scope of this article.

53. For more information on National Socialist Black Metal, see Hedge Olsen, “Voice of our Blood: National Socialist Discourses in Black Metal,” and “Burzum Shirts, Paramilitarism and National Socialist Black Metal in the Twenty-first Century”; Buesnel, “National Socialist Black Metal” and “Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing.”

becoming a recruitment ground for various far-right and neofascist movements.⁵⁴ Such movements tend to uphold normative concepts of the gender binary within an ideology that reinforces dominant, essentialist modes of masculinity and femininity based around institutions and pursuits coded as “hyper masculine,” such as the military, fitness, hunting, and self-reliance.⁵⁵

In the second current, black metal is the basis for generating increasingly idiosyncratic esoteric systems of knowledge. Many bands and practitioners in this current, Nicola Masciandaro argues, no longer feel the necessity to hold onto the aesthetic and symbolic trappings of black metal’s second wave, instead seeking a deeper engagement with spiritual and esoteric cultures, including politics and philosophy,⁵⁶ resulting in an exploration of cosmic existentialism, and the melancholic subjectivity of self-transformation through music and ritual. This creates, according to Shadrack, a black metal that “appreciates a deeper occultism, situated in cold, harsh panoramas, which evoke the black metal extract rather than conserve orthodox traditions. Instead of finding any satanism or heathenism in the third wave, it is more a deference to and representation of the dark unknown of the universe.”⁵⁷

In this current of black-metal cosmology, God and Satan are replaced by the cosmic pessimism of an unknowable and divine eternal void that is thought of as being feminine in nature, taking the form of “a cosmic reading of the womb, of the Great Mother of Abomination, the archaic mother.”⁵⁸ But while the idea of the great unknowable yet mystical abyss is coded as feminine, this does not

54. See Spracklen, “True Aryan Black Metal.” For more information on the relationship between black metal, esotericism, and far right and extreme politics, see Goodricke-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 193–212; Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*; Senholt, “Radical Politics and Political Esotericism”; Koch, “The ONA Network and the Transnationalization of Neo-Nazi-Satanism.”

55. See Johnson, “A Deliciously Troubling Duo,” 415–19; Nordvig, “Neo-Paganism”; Fricke, “White Gods”; Höfig, “Re-Wild Yourself”; Burley, “Total Life Reform.”

56. Masciandaro, “Anti-Cosmosis: Black Mahapralaya,” 90.

57. Shadrack, “Denigrata Cervorum,” 168.

58. *Ibid.*, 103.

necessarily mean an improvement from previous depictions. Representing the feminine as a divine abyss can still uphold essentialist gender constructs and a different form of binary coding through the removal of women’s physicality and humanity, where “the alignment of women with a divine (be it mother or virgin) representation does not free women to claim their own place and space within black metal.”⁵⁹

Hunter Hunt-Hendrix and Transcendental Black Metal

In this occultural landscape of authentic individualism, antithetical spiritualities, and traditionalist counter-narratives valorising “rejected” knowledge (with corresponding models of masculinity), Hunter Hunt-Hendrix made their first waves within the black metal scene. At this point a state of contextual clarification is needed. In Hunt-Hendrix’s writings and interviews, in particular those regarding the development of her spiritual ideas and cosmology, while she sets herself apart from prevailing black metal orthodoxy, there is little (if any) mention of “gender,” or ideas regarding femininity or feminine cultural values. For example, in her 2015 essay “The Perichoresis of Music, Art and Philosophy,” Hunt-Hendrix describes her introduction to black metal and the subsequent creation of Liturgy as a platform upon which she could create “a soul for myself, an aesthetic, symbolic system” to “transmit, manifest, and live in faith” through music and art. Such a system would allow her to overcome “the self-destructive forces” she was undergoing at the time, forces that included “constant pain, suffering huge levels of anxiety and paranoia, [and] struggling against suicide.”⁶⁰

But since coming out as a trans woman, Hunt-Hendrix has opened up in recent interviews about how her struggles with gender dysphoria have affected both her and the music of Liturgy. In one interview, she states that she might never have originally gotten into black metal if it *weren’t* (emphasis mine) for her

59. *Ibid.*, 103.

60. Hunt-Hendrix, “Perichoresis,” 280–81.

gender dysphoria, arguing that she felt drawn to the genre’s aesthetics of isolation and aggressive antipathy, as well as “the sense of it just being impossible to be understood.”⁶¹ She also states that an “experience of womanhood has shaped all of my music,” and that there was “maybe an inner sense of womanhood before [the 2015 album] *The Ark Work* without a kind of identification with queerness on a collective level, and that the latter appeared along with *The Ark Work*. Because I began to understand what that meant a little more.”⁶² While it would be possible to make the *post-hoc* logical assumption that the development of her spiritual ideas up to this point have been based on her identification with queerness and a sense of womanhood, I will not do so in this article. Suffice to say that Hunt-Hendrix has argued that her philosophical and spiritual ideas are inseparable from her art and music, and these ideas are currently undergoing forms of reinterpretation as she explores her own narrative identity as a trans woman. But in giving an overview of several of the components and concepts that go to make up her spiritual cosmology, and their articulation through her music, it is possible to see where elements of her personal transformation as a queer trans woman resonate with elements of spiritual transformation.

In 2010, such discursive strategies became more explicit with the publication of “Transcendental Black Metal,” where she lays out her vision for the future of black metal not only musically but as a vehicle for the creation of different spiritual and esoteric practices. The essay posits a materialist and teleological view of black metal as part of a wider history of metal as a whole, describing the second wave of black metal as being *hyperborean* in nature, embodying an immanent limit of intensity, a final horizon of possibilities that Hunt-Hendrix terms the “haptic void,” representing “the culmination of the history of extreme metal.”⁶³ Hunt-Hendrix links black metal’s esoteric codes of heathenism and radical traditionalism with that of a metaphysics of immanence, as hyperborean

61. “Machine Music’s Albums of the decade: An Interview with Liturgy.”

62. *Ibid.*

63. Hunt-Hendrix, “Transcendental Black Metal,” 56.

black metal engages in a “fortification” through “the establishment of a paradigm or set of rules and the ensuing exploration of potential that lies within those constraints.” Meanwhile its aesthetics are “lunar, atrophic, depraved, infinite and pure. The symbol of its birth is the Death of Dead. Its tone is Nihilism, and its key technique is the Blast Beat.”⁶⁴ She compares the subject of hyperborean black metal to that of a mountaineer traversing the terrains of metal history until they reach the ultimate hyperborean summit, whereupon they feel compelled to leap into the haptic void, into “(a) total maximum intensity. A complete flood of sound. An absolute plenitude.”⁶⁵ However, the promise offered by the imminent horizon of the haptic void is a false one, resulting in an overwhelming nothingness with no end. Unable to breach their self-imposed limits and leap into the haptic void, the subject is “left, crestfallen, frozen and alone,” in a realm that is “dead with purity, totally absolute, self-same and eternal.” The mountaineer experiences “a profound apostasy that he cannot fully understand and arrives at nihilism. . . . Having climbed to the peak of the mountain, the mountaineer lies down and freezes to death.”⁶⁶

In response, Hunt-Hendrix proposes a new relationship with the haptic void in the form of *transcendental black metal*. Looking to America, with nods to Emerson and Thoreau, rather than Scandinavia for spiritual inspiration, transcendental black metal is “the reanimation of the form of black metal” that breaks past the haptic void of hyperborean black metal, infusing it with “a new soul, a soul full of chaos, frenzy and ecstasy.”⁶⁷ This process of “self-overcoming” through black metal from the hyperborean to the transcendental sees black metal’s spiritual nihilism transformed into affirmation through a process known as *renihilation*, a “No’ to the entire array of negations which turns to an affirmation of the

64. *Ibid.*, 54.

65. *Ibid.*, 57.

66. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

67. *Ibid.*, 59.

continuity of all things.”⁶⁸ The result is a turning over of hyperborean qualities towards a transcendent aesthetic that is “solar, hypertrophic, courageous, finite and penultimate.”⁶⁹ The key musical technique of this overcoming is what Hunt-Hendrix terms the “burst beat,” that is “a hyper blast beat . . . that ebbs, flows, expands and contracts, breaths.”⁷⁰ Hunt-Hendrix has since gone on to argue that the burst beat, by its very nature and flow, represents her emotional experience of the world which she assigns as being feminine.⁷¹

The ultimate purpose of transcendental black metal is not only an aesthetic expansion beyond the limits of the hyperborean by the inclusion of different compositional techniques, but also a spiritual evolution and overcoming of the self through a process of arduous struggle or renihilation. Shadrack in *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound* expands this concept, arguing for renihilation as a process of transformation through self-overcoming whereupon one goes through a “mystical death,” becoming a subject able to access “immortal life.”⁷² Once one passes through the process of renihilation, argues Shadrack, a psychic shift occurs resulting in the internal manifestation of “transcendental law,” or “the transcendental object, a space where action precedes rule and the transformation of the subject.”⁷³ Through her undertaking of autoethnography and her own black metal music in articulating her past as a survivor of domestic abuse, Shadrack offers an example of her own renihilation as a process of catharsis where she was able to “excise the trauma and recalibrate it, re-encode it through haptic void ruptures and expurgation. I sacrifice my abused self and eviscerate it to sculpt something new.”⁷⁴

68. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

69. *Ibid.*, 54.

70. *Ibid.*, 59.

71. “Machine Music’s Albums of the Decade: An Interview with Liturgy.”

72. Shadrack, *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound*, 21.

73. *Ibid.*, 21.

74. *Ibid.*, 26.

In the subsequent years since her “transcendental black metal” essay, Hunt-Hendrix, through a series of blog posts, YouTube videos, and Liturgy albums, has undertaken her own form of cathartic self-overcoming, using the transcendental, synthesising elements of art, politics, religion, and philosophy to access higher levels of being and achieve a connection to God, a feminine divine she calls OIOION. The necessary eschatological project, argues Hunt-Hendrix, is to use black metal as a spiritual vehicle to move beyond the impasse of the hyperborean through the process of renihilation into a new historic aeon, an armistice that she calls *Haelegen*, whereupon humanity would move beyond the human itself through the apocalyptic vision of *Aesthetica*, a “city on a hill,” that is, the kingdom of God on earth. Sharing affinities with William Blake’s apocalyptic vision of the unison of Jerusalem with Albion, Haelegen sees the utopian posthuman kingdom where various binaries, such as good/evil, technology/humanity, materialist/idealist, and master/slave come together and meet in unison. As a divine vision of heaven, Haelegen would govern itself according to four ideal laws: *sovereignty*, seen as a structure of “pure music, where more of what separates us is discarded”; *hierarchy*, or the “ideal” social arrangement “where people are able to productively share much more effectively than usual”; *emancipation*, or “the expansion of rights . . . and more forms of emancipation where collective identities will be allowed to crystallize” (Hunt-Hendrix for example cites the fight for transgender civil rights in the past decade as an important example of a drive to uncover and acknowledge hitherto unrealised identities); and *individuation*, or “the aspect where one has a right, fundamentally, to learn, grow and pursue what talents one has, and then to be sharing it and getting feedback.”⁷⁵

The totalising project to acknowledge and enact such a soul-searching vision through the process of renihilation is referred to by Hunt-Hendrix as *The Ark Work*, described as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*-inspired “total work of art,” melding contemporary music and philosophy and taking place in “real time” across contemporary

75. Nieuwaal, “An Interview with Hunter Hunt-Hendrix of Liturgy.”

physical and virtual terrains of society.⁷⁶ The function of *The Ark Work* is to bring together themes of “aesthetic transgression, emancipatory politics and messianic eschatology,”⁷⁷ through a praxis she calls *perichoresis*, an “art/life process—a vehicle for living in and transmitting faith, hope and love during an era when it is difficult to believe in structures that have historically activated this type of transcendence.”⁷⁸

In her attempts to engage with *The Ark Work*, Hunt-Hendrix has released a series of Liturgy albums that attempt to articulate her spiritual ideas and worldview. These works also offer a means of revelation and self-overcoming through renihilation both on the level of representation and as a poetic aspect of creative becoming that cannot be contained by reason alone. In 2009 Liturgy released their debut album *Renihilation*, which received generally positive reviews. But those that reviewed the album noted that Liturgy as a band were already breaking away from mainstream black metal aesthetics and discursive approaches; they did not wear leather or spikes, nor adorned themselves with “corpse paint”; they were soft-spoken and had an intellectual air about them; and most importantly, despite the intensity of the music, there was none of the virulent negativity, misanthropy, or nihilism. One reviewer, “shantideva” on *metalarchives.com* noted, “You won’t find much blasphemy here, precious little darkness, and no crushing angry atmosphere.”⁷⁹ This was followed in 2011 by the band’s second album, *Aesthetica*. Referencing the name of Heaven according to Hunt-Hendrix’s cosmology, it was the band’s breakout success, being a continuation of *Renihilation*, albeit with better production qualities.

In 2015, Liturgy released *The Ark Work*, which saw Hunt-Hendrix attempt to fully realise the possibilities of transcendental black metal on several fronts. While the album still contained the bedrock of black metal’s sonic signifiers, such as harsh tremolo, picked and distorted guitars, high pitched vocal screams,

76. Hunt-Hendrix, “Perichoresis,” 283–84.

77. Hunt-Hendrix, “Eternity, Time, and the Genius Apostle.”

78. Hunt-Hendrix, “Perichoresis,” 279.

79. Shantideva, “Upbeat, Anti-linear, and Utterly Insane—93%.”

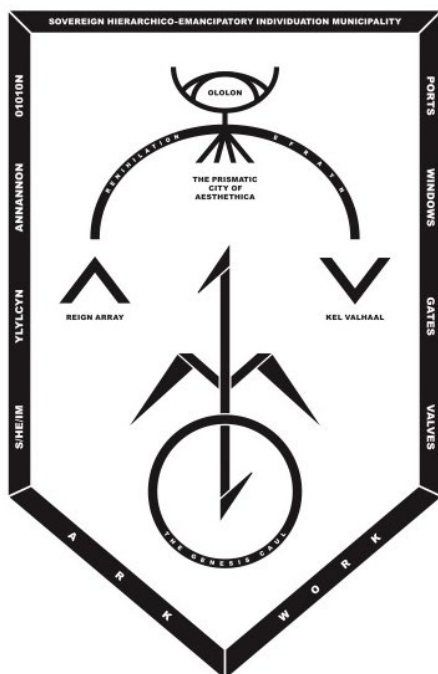


Figure 1. A diagram of cosmos from Liturgy's 2015 album, *The Ark Work*

and tightly wound and undulating snare-drum beats (that Hunt-Hendrix calls the “blast beat”), in terms of compositional and sonic production Hunt-Hendrix sought to combine black metal’s sonic extract with other musical forms and styles. This meant the inclusion of different musical styles and genres such as electronic music and hip-hop (alongside its subgenre trap), along with the use of “non-metal” instruments and electronic samples such as the harp, piano, and bagpipes, as well as utilising vocal styles outside of the harsh black metal scream, such as monotonous drawls and hip-hop influenced vocal deliveries. There is also the use of differing compositional structures from neoclassical and operatic music, as well as unconventional and avant-garde rhythmic signatures. Then there are multiple references to Hunt-Hendrix’s spiritual cosmology, with the album artwork containing a series of condensed and concentrated

diagrammatic representations of the cosmos (see figure 1), that convey a “nesting of fictions within fictions to produce a certain density, even opacity” to the levels of reality in the cosmos.⁸⁰

But as well as being a site for musical experimentation, genre transgression, and a poetic articulation of her spiritual ideas, Hunt-Hendrix has recently stated that there was an “unmistakable queerness” that grew in her music between the release of *Aesthetica* and *The Ark Work*. She began not only to confront the issues surrounding her gender dysphoria during this period, but also increasingly identified with electronic music and experimental hip-hop genres which she argued were “types of music that are connected to queer communities.”⁸¹ With *The Ark Work*, there is an attempt by Hunt-Hendrix to articulate a subjective transformation from the hyperborean to the transcendental in the way the album resolutely breaks apart the black metal aesthetics and orthodoxy alluded to in previous albums. Noting the half measures she felt with making *Renibilation* and *Aesthetica*, Hunt-Hendrix stated in an interview that she “wanted to make this record that [she] was very scared to make.”⁸² But in realising the creation of *The Ark Work*, it would in effect enable her not only to live in faith and affirmation, but also allow her to “authentically create, or follow an impulse.”⁸³ This impulse, implied through *The Ark Work*, was not only for Hunt-Hendrix to escape the negative energy and psychic trauma of her past, but to turn this trauma into an acknowledgement and affirmation that she was “a woman, a queer person and also a lesbian,”⁸⁴ not only on a subjective but on a collective

80. O’ Sullivan, “On the Diagram,” 24.

81. “Machine Music’s Albums of the Decade: An Interview with Liturgy.” While an analysis of the relationship between queer communities and genres of music such as electronic music and hip-hop is outside of the scope of this essay, for more background information, see Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound*; Garcia, “An alternate history of sexuality in club music”; Harper, “Scar-Tissue Music”; Wilson, “Post-pomo hip-hop homos”; Andreana Clay, “Like an Old Soul Record.”

82. Currin, “The Liturgy Manifesto.”

83. *Ibid.*

84. “Machine Music’s Albums of the decade: An Interview with Liturgy.”

level, as the album has since become an inspiration to other trans women who connected on an emotional level with the album.⁸⁵

In the years since the release of *The Ark Work*, Hunt-Hendrix has argued that for all its daring sonic inventiveness (and a determination on her part to enact a form of renihilation), as an articulation of her identity and experience, the album is incomplete. In recent interviews she has argued that due to her gender dysphoria and the concomitant hatred she was receiving from the black metal scene, she felt that she “wasn’t living [her] authentic truth during that time,”⁸⁶ while admitting in another interview that *The Ark Work* would have been a much stronger musical and artistic statement had she made the decision to come out as transgender sooner, noting that there “was an aspect where I wasn’t being totally free and that was part of the incongruence.”⁸⁷

Despite such reticence with her previous releases, it is Liturgy’s most recent album, 2020’s *Origin of the Alimonies*, that sees not only the most explicit musical articulation yet of Hunt-Hendrix’s spiritual vision, but also the most integrated expression of her gender identity and queerness through her music. Undergoing a long period of conceptualisation and production (Hunt-Hendrix has stated that the *Alimonies* as a project has been in development since she was 20 years old),⁸⁸ the album reproduces the structure and style of an *opera seria*, complete with a *libretto* text and elements of *aria* that aim to “integrate the languages of Wagner and Messiaen with metal and trap music and to continue and transform [William] Blake’s mythopoeia.”⁸⁹ Indeed, Hunt-Hendrix pointed out that her music had moved beyond the standard motifs and structures of black metal, arguing that the album should be seen as an actual opera with avant-garde characteristics (and not as a rock album with operatic overtures), where

85. Fantano, “Liturgy Interview,” YouTube video.

86. *Ibid.*

87. “Machine Music’s Albums of the Decade: An Interview with Liturgy.”

88. Hunt-Hendrix, “Full Text of My Interview with Invisible Oranges.”

89. *Ibid.*

the structures of classical music and opera forces those listening to focus in on occulted aspects and themes within the music and accompanying text to make themselves apparent.⁹⁰

The accompanying press release for the album describes the narrative of *Origin of the Alimonies* as being a mythical tale of the creation of all things. Taking inspiration from the concept of *shevirat ha-kelim* (“breaking of the vessels”) in the creation theory of Lurianic Kabbalah, the opera tells of “a cosmogonical traumatic explosion between OIOION and SHIEYMN, a pair of divine beings whose thwarted love tears a wound from which civilization is generated, producing the Four Alimonies of the intelligible universe and the task of collective emancipation.”⁹¹ The libretto accompanying the album provides the creation story of the cosmos where OIOION creates a child named SHIEYMN to receive her abundance of light. The initial encounter causes a rift between the two, tearing a cosmic wound in SHIEYMN leaving him in pain. Through their desire to be together, OIOION and SHIEYMN create the four alimonies or levels of the cosmos, (OIOION, ANANON [the realm of ideas housed by Heaven], the realm of matter called YLYLCYN, and the individual soul of SHIEYMN), subsequently giving birth to time, history, art, culture, and philosophy. OIOION and SHIEYMN then engage in a dance of love, via the alimonies, that occurs throughout history until the end of time where they can once again be reunited under the armistice of Haelegen.

As well as releasing an album, with an accompanying series of live performances, *Origin of the Alimonies* contains a paratextual dimension with Hunt-Hendrix announcing a series of five YouTube videos (of which one has currently been released).⁹² The videos aim to provide a conceptual background to *Origin of the Alimonies* regarding the origin myth in religion and philosophy,

90. “Machine Music’s Albums of the Decade: An Interview with Liturgy.”

91. Hadusek, “Liturgy Announce New Album *Origin of the Alimonies*.”

92. See Genette, *Paratexts*.



Figure 2. The cover artwork for Liturgy's 2020 album, *Origin of the Alimonies*, consisting of a still of Hunt-Hendrix from a corresponding unreleased film of the album

as well as the album's links to a wider history of opera and the avant-garde.⁹³ There is also an aspect of bodily materiality in the form of a performance from Hunt-Hendrix in an (as yet unreleased) experimental short film accompanying the album,⁹⁴ where the origin myth of the alimonies with its macrocosmic themes of rupture, wounding and transformation is brought down to the level of the individual body of Hunt-Hendrix herself, as she displays her own body which has been undergoing a process of physical transition from male to female (see figure 2).⁹⁵

93. Hunt-Hendrix, "*Origin of the Alimonies* Announcement," YouTube Video.

94. Excerpts from this film can be seen at Hunt-Hendrix, "*Origin of the Alimonies* [TRAILER]," YouTube Video.

95. "Machine Music's Albums of the Decade: An Interview with Liturgy."

Conclusion

In this article we have looked at metal, in particular the subgenre of black metal and its relationship with gender and performative masculinity. From providing an overview of academic discourse and analysis of metal scenes and communities, and their relation to gender, it can be argued that black metal music has historically upheld models and typologies of hegemonic masculinity, from its adoption of the elitist and dominant “Viking” warrior archetype that affirms their adversarial stance against secular, liberal social norms, while disavowing or “exscripting” cultural values of feminine subjectivity, both within the music, and the wider scene. This desire for active, and essentialist forms of masculinity within sections of the black metal scene has led to the embracing of various forms of heathenism and radical traditionalism, whose counter narratives of anti-theism and rejection of modernity and secular politics seeks a return to Europe’s pre-Christian “pagan” roots and associated social identities and cultural values that uphold said warrior archetypes of masculinity.

But despite black metal’s insistence on standing apart from mainstream society, it has undergone challenges that have mirrored wider social and cultural changes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. There has been what Hunt-Hendrix calls a “queering” of black metal culture, which has attempted to breach the scene’s discursive ethos of “reflexive non-reflexivity” and challenged the hegemonic nature of the black metal (and wider metal) scene, as the influx of female, and queer perspectives and subjectivities interrogate the gender categories of black metal.

Through her writings, music, and with the development of an idiosyncratic and esoteric view of Christianity realised through her concepts of transcendental black metal and renihilation as a process of death and rebirth, Hunter Hunt-Hendrix has undertaken a provocation towards black metal orthodoxy by providing a counter-narrative of myth, religion, and history that, from an esoteric standpoint, upends several of black metal’s ideological and spiritual tenets. While hyperborean black metal is virulently anti-theist, adopting an

esoteric standpoint of immanence represented either as a romanticised ideal of “nature” and/or a void of cosmic darkness, transcendental black metal argues for the love of a transcendent feminine God of pure light. While black metal is antagonistic towards western modernity and liberal secular politics, Hunt-Hendrix’s messianic system of esoteric Christianity seeks to unite the modern and secular with the ancient and divine through a syncretic bricolage of art, philosophy, and a Marxist idea of history to usher an eschatological post-capitalist future and the dawning of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Hunt-Hendrix’s own personal journey has seen her embrace her own femininity and coming out as a trans woman, while her spiritual journey through her politics and art has led to a “recontextualization” of the essence of black metal away from being “conceptually alienated from its own essence,” and towards a return to “black metal in-and-for-itself” through “an elision” of black metal’s reactionary tendencies.⁹⁶ In doing so, Hunt-Hendrix has created a space within the black metal scene that not only is concerned with spiritual matters and fervent cultural experimentation, but allows for explorations of gender and cultural values that move away from essentialist ideals of hegemonic masculinity. For Hunt-Hendrix, these explorations now take on a new dimension as her recent coming out and affirmation as a trans, queer woman prompts the construction and exploration of a new narrative identity. It also adds another semantic and ideological layer of revision to her spiritual and philosophical ideas, leading to new reinterpretations of her spiritual models and their relationship with Liturgy and the continuing project of *The Ark Work*. As Hunt-Hendrix has pointed out in an interview: “In my mind, preaching love and Christianity and existing as a female and queer composer within the space of metal itself is a pretty radical thing to do.”⁹⁷

96. Hunt-Hendrix, “Interview with Invisible Oranges.”

97. *Ibid.*

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