



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

Jasmine Hazel Shadrack

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Review by Amanda J. Haste

Jasmine Hazel Shadrack achieved her Ph.D. in 2017 while lecturing full time in popular music studies, and this, her first monograph, marks the debut of her career as an independent scholar. In *Black Metal, Trauma Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss* the author uses autoethnography as a framework within which to situate, examine and analyze her own experiences of domestic abuse and the resultant trauma which has altered her life course in so many ways. A key tool for her healing and recovery has been musical performance as a black metal guitarist and singer, particularly in the band Denigrata, and she uses autoethnography – and specifically interpretive performance autoethnography – to present and critically analyze the role of black metal (BM) performance and her desire to play extreme music in a male-dominated genre, thus creating “a new plateau for self-embodiment and recovery” (16).

Shadrack opens with a chapter on the concept of interpretive performance autoethnography as a methodological framework, and the important shift to using “I” as she situates herself within the narrative “as a feminist autoethnographer, a survivor of domestic violence, a musician and an academic” (3). These multiple identities play out throughout the book as the author employs authors such as Lacan, Butler, Hall, McClary, Cixous, Kristeva and Hill-Hendrix to weave an interdisciplinary exploration of black metal subculture with performance studies and gender studies.

Chapter 2 explores extreme metal’s engagement with women, and its cultural practices which traditionally demote women to sexual objects or hangers-on, only joining the scene as an excuse to “dress up in black lace and wear rubber corsets” or to “play in bands [to be] with their boyfriends” (30). Shadrack relates her own negotiation and re-encoding of this role by “work[ing]



hard at playing the guitar so that musicianship would legitimize my occupation of space within extreme metal" (27), an experience echoed by my own experiences as a saxophonist in all-male jazz and big bands.

Chapter 3 provides a fascinating analysis of the history of BM and its subgenres, and in Chapter 4 "The Feminine Absent" Shadrack expands her discussion of the "hyperborean" wave of the 1990s and the "transcendental" third wave of the 2000s in terms of the role and absence of women.

Chapter 5 "Of Wolves and Witches" examines BM's "links with occulture, the void as wolf tone and the witch as restorative feminism" (99) and the gendered space of (masculine) hyperborean and (feminine) transcendental BM. As a musicologist – though not a metalhead – I particularly enjoyed her close analysis of Denigrata's *Kyrie Eleison* (95-7) which clearly demonstrated the gendered characteristics of the music, which have led to assumptions by listeners that of the two guitarists in the band – one male, one female – the "broken chords have been written by the woman and the sharper, semitonal structures [...] by the man" whereas in fact "the female guitarist has composed the hyperborean riffs and the male guitarist [...] the transcendental (97). Likewise, Shadrack's analysis of the wolf tone, a rogue harmonic dreaded by string players which appears out of nowhere – the "accidental harmonics cry across Ebs and G#s, screaming and lamenting over the other notes" – demonstrates that whereas the wolf note ranks alongside the tritone, the *diabolus in musica* as an unwanted "aberration," BM has embraced its "abyssic qualities" through its "otherness and sonic representation of the void" (100).

In Chapter 6 Shadrack examines the performance and reception of her BM band Denigrata, and her own alter ego as the screaming, growling horned priestess Denigrata Herself, whose role Shadrack describes

earlier in the book: "I do not perform as me, but as Denigrata Herself, a representation of parts of me that facilitate access to my trauma" and who "functions as a vessel for expurgation" (16). The book concludes with a peroration on the author's own trauma-related disintegration and her reconstitution of self through BM, and her contribution is complemented by contributions from legal pracademic and disability specialist Rebecca Lamont-Jiggins and Amanda DiGioia, who is currently focusing on gender and heavy metal. There is also a very useful glossary and some suggestions for further reading, along with practical support for those facing domestic abuse.

Make no mistake – this is a tough and complex subject and this book is characterized by unflinching emotional honesty; it is also beautifully written and exquisite in its richness, depth, and academic rigor. Despite the autoethnographic framework, *Black Metal, Trauma Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss* is not insular and inward-looking but rather remarkably far-reaching in its insight and relevance. It will resonate particularly with those working within the fields of music, gender, feminism, disability or cultural studies. It is an account of healing, of restoration, of reconstitution of self through music. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Dr. Amanda J. Haste (Ph.D. Musicology, Bristol University, UK) teaches as adjunct faculty in the Music Department of Aix-Marseille University, France and has published widely on identity construction through music and language, and on musician identity. She co-authored (with Prof. James Block, DePaul University) *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015)* and she is currently in the early stages of planning a collection of essays on autoethnographic analyses of musical performance, emotion and healing.