

EXPERIENCE, PRACTICE, WRITING: A METHODOLOGICAL OUTLINE OF DRONE METAL RESEARCH

Owen Coggins
The Open University, UK

Abstract

My doctoral research concerns reports of spiritual experience, mystical practices and religious discourse, imagery and sound in the extreme doom subgenre of drone metal. After briefly examining previous scholarship relating to drone metal, I outline the methods I undertook in gathering information about the intertwined phenomena of listening, and talking or writing about listening: participant observation at concerts and music festivals, autoethnography of listening to recordings, surveys, interviews, the collection of online material, examination of material culture, and my writing of music reviews for the music website *Echoes & Dust*. Finally, I describe some unexpected instances showing the co-constitution of methodology and the field of study.

Methodologies in Metal Studies

In existing literature, the drone metal has been occasionally mentioned, often relating to reception and usually comprising anecdotal reports of SunnO))) concerts mentioning ritual or transcendence (Lucas 2013; Partridge, 2013). The extremeness of drone metal music (again, most often that of SunnO))) specifically) has been noted in relation to metal's demands on the listener (Scott 2011); to contemporary popular culture (Morton, 2013; Shvarts, 2014); or to visual artists (Ishmael, 2014). Even the wider doom metal scene—while noted as one of three (Bogue, 2007) or four (Kahn-Harris, 2007) main strands of extreme metal—has received little scholarly attention in its own right (but see Piper, 2013). This is despite doom musicians searching for extreme sound in slowness, in marked contrast to thrash, death and black metal's frenetic speeds. Doom metal has also spawned as many sub-subgenres; and doom further emphasizes characteristic aspects found elsewhere in metal, such as very low vocals (especially in funeral doom), obsessions with a 1970s horror aesthetic, witches and wizards, and psychedelic drugs.

Mentions of mysticism in metal scholarship have been either gestures towards metal's fascination with esotericism or the occult which leave the meanings of such terminology vague, undertheorised and implied (e.g. Walser, 1993, p.137; Gaines, 1998, p.187; Purcell 2003, p.122; Christe, 2003, p.63). By contrast, some elaborately theoretical Black Metal Theory exegeses (see Masciandro, 2010; Saheb and Abaris, 2013), are themselves drawn into esoteric obscurity, though perhaps creating conditions, via Bataille, for productive theorisation of mysticism and extreme metal (see several contributors in Wilson, 2014).

Ethnographic methods have been used to approach other intersections between religion and metal: where religion is understood as inspiration or foil for lyrics or ideology (Cordero, 2009; Baddely, 2010; Granholm, 2011); as a normative framework of public morality (Wallach, 2008; Hecker, 2012); or as a

stable social institution (Moberg, 2009). Religious themes in metal have rarely been seen as a communicative resource, offering an appropriate vocabulary or mode of speaking, for listeners as well as musicians to draw upon in discourse about musical experience. I wished to explore from a number of angles the appropriation, exchange and uses of religious symbols in musical events and products, as well as tracing the circulation of mystical discourse and the cultivation of mystical practices in drone metal within a wider extreme metal milieu.

Fieldwork at concerts

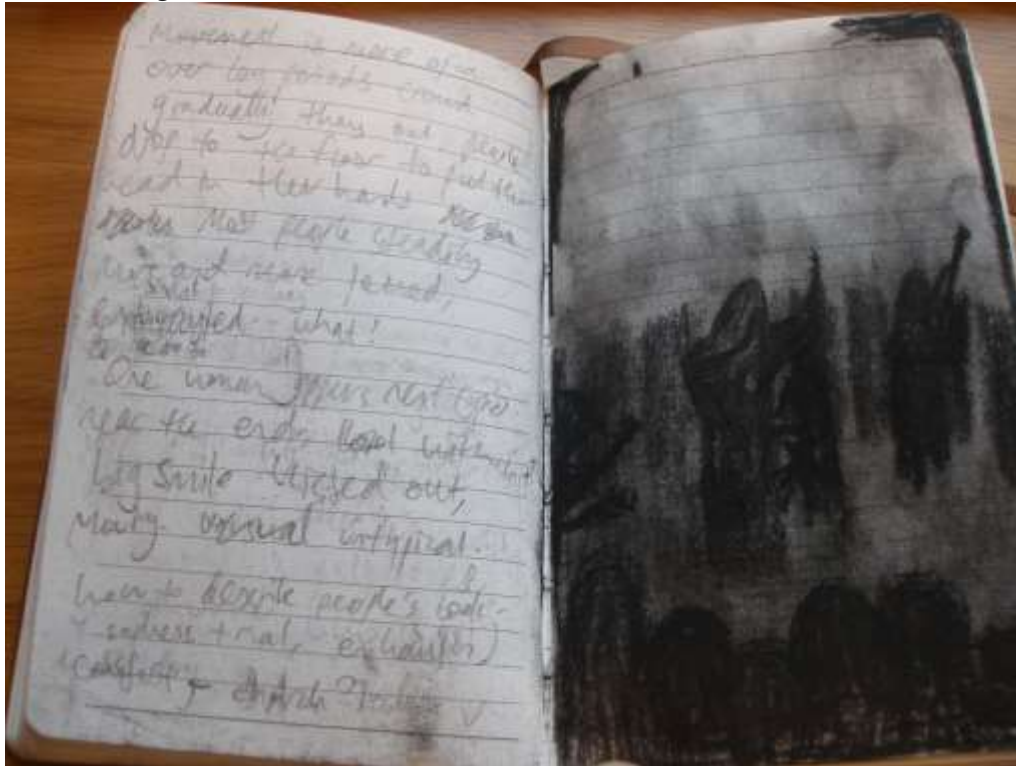
In 2012, I watched drone metal band Om perform at the Scala venue in London. I discussed with friends the support act, dub reggae collective King Midas Sound; noted in the crowd Dylan Carlson, founder of the band Earth and acknowledged as drone metal's godfather-figure; observed and what other band shirts attendees wore or bought at the merchandise stall; overheard an audience member bemoan Om's recent style, saying, "it's getting too complicated, I just want the riffs;" noted the slight different emphases in performance from recorded versions of Om tracks; and tried to balance absorption in the music with observation of other listeners.

Recognising the value of these different sorts of information, I felt that participant observation should be a central aspect of methodology. After securing Ethics Committee approval, I attended fifty-seven concerts and ten music festivals, involving more than fifty specifically drone or drone metal performances. Around half of the concerts were in London, and I travelled to other cities frequently. Audiences outside London seemed in general smaller but more enthusiastic, a feature remarked upon by many attendees, including those at London shows. The same centre/periphery relation was mentioned by an interviewee who remarked that Paris and Brussels shows suffered from similar large but "jaded" audiences compared to smaller but more committed attendance in smaller towns.

No drone metal "scene" has developed in any city in the UK or elsewhere, so attending shows in different cities allowed observation of drone metal events in different contexts and with different audiences, generally on the margins of local extreme and experimental music scenes. While my attendance of events was more intensive in terms of the number of events, it was not unusual for keen listeners to travel distances for concerts, or to attend more than one concert on a particular tour. Most concerts were in pubs or small music venues but some were in larger concert halls, churches, art galleries, and, on one occasion, in a crypt. Attendance ranged from below ten to more than 1000. As this included headline concerts of the highest profile drone metal bands, and large metal festivals that included drone metal performances, this covered the range from smallest to largest drone metal events that took place during the research period.

My research revolved around listening, and talking/writing about listening. As such, the dual focus of participant observation during fieldwork was to listen, and to observe others listening, while also writing notes about my own response to sound, and talking with others about the music. Recognising the value of modalities other than writing, which collect other kinds of information, and encourage other ways of observing, I sketched venue spaces, equipment, merchandise, or, more impressionistically, sound itself.

Figure 1: Field notebook with notes and sketch of SunnO))) performance, December 2013.



Fieldwork at festivals

Music festivals such as Roadburn in the Netherlands, and Desertfest in London, were particularly rich sites for participant observation. They featured a large range of performances, often exclusive shows unavailable elsewhere, and they attracted larger audiences enabling comparison with smaller shows. Also, there were extensive opportunities for conversation due to longer overall duration (up to four days), and, most importantly, an generally convivial festival atmosphere conducive to spontaneous, good-natured discussion of music with attendees whose like-mindedness was already shown by their investment in time, travel and ticket price to be at the event.

These “festive” aspects bring to mind Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, where rules and hierarchies are suspended (Bakhtin, 1968). Metal’s marginal status, and even doom metal’s somewhat marginal status within metal, were overturned, with visible and performed commitment to doom metal being the norm within the festival’s environs. Separation between musicians and audience, still evident at many concerts, was lessened, as revered musicians hung out in the crowd, a tendency which many Roadburn attendees, including musicians, remarked upon.

This contributed to what Victor Turner described as liminal *communitas*, produced in a shared sense of removal from the ordinary world (Turner, 1969). Many people were literally far from home, sharing accommodation and facilities with others in the same situation. Time was also reconfigured around music: asked what time it was, an attendee replied ‘It’s forty minutes to [headline band] Loop’ rather than ‘nine o’clock.’

Figure 2: Participant observation at Roadburn festival. Researcher in middle right, talking with other attendees about recent performances. Image courtesy Stefan Raduta.



Listening to recordings

While concerts are oriented towards live music, recorded music is invariably present, even if secondary. At Roadburn festival campsite, recorded music was played and much discussed, and in both 2013 and 2014, the first music I heard at the festival was Sleep's *Dopesmoker* playing on car stereos as I arrived at the campsite. Conversations at festivals and concerts frequently concerned recordings, in comparing live and studio tracks, commenting on what was playing on the PA between bands, purchasing recordings and other merchandise, discussing new, classic and obscure recordings, and speaking about listening practices beyond the festival. People talked about listening to recordings of particular bands in preparation for seeing them perform, or reported that listening to a live performance had changed the way they heard an album. Thus practices of listening to live and recorded music, and talking about live and recorded music, overlapped and were never fully extricable.

In addition, listening to recordings myself was an important aspect of research, in listening for the "content" of recordings; paying attention to my own listening practices and how they affected listening experience; and examining my own responses to drone metal recordings. Part of my motivation for the research project was my own interest in the music, so this fit broadly into existing listening patterns, though I did listen to proportionally more drone metal overall. In terms of content, as well as interest in general musical and sonic structures and textures I listened for potential perceived sonic references to religiosity. Regarding the practice of listening, I tended to use certain recordings for certain contexts, particularly during reading and writing work. Later, I found that many interviewees shared these uses, especially for distorted timbres, extended durations without abrupt stylistic or rhythmic changes (though heavy riff entries did not interrupt in this way), though other listeners reported that working or reading during this music for them would be impossible. I

also attempted to observe my own more affective responses, or especially powerful moments of listening. In all of these cases, I was aware that this intermittent and general auto-observation was incomplete, unsystematic, and affected the construction the listening practice I was observing. Later, when writing music reviews, the aspect of listening-in-order-to-write-about-listening became more pronounced, where listening involved a more deliberate mental processing of the experience in relation to language within established discursive conventions.

Surveys

Keen to approach attendees' own understandings of live events, I constructed short online surveys, asking about demographics, ownership of recordings, merchandise purchases, and one qualitative question leaving room for a full paragraph response: "Describe your experience of the [band name] performance." The final question requested contact details, should the respondent be happy for me to contact them further. For several concerts, I posted links to the online survey on Facebook event pages, and distributed paper flyers at the venues. These two methods were congruent with normal ways of sharing information relating to underground music (such as upcoming gigs), and so, while the research project was unusual, the modes and sites of communication were familiar to participants.

I also employed extreme metal's visual codes, using for the flyer image a Fraktur/Old English-style font, monochrome design and high-contrast photograph of a church. This was my own photograph of the St. Joseph-at-Heuvelring church and hall in Tilburg, the latter of which is used as the Het Patronaat stage at Roadburn Festival. The image subtly implied the direction of my research questions, while remaining consistent with metal's appropriations of religious architecture.

I used alternative photographs of the same church at Roadburn for later concerts, while to distinguish between flyers for two SunnO))) concerts in Kortrijk and The Hague, which had links to separate surveys, I used photographs of churches in those cities.

Figure 3: Front and back of flyer distributed at Bong concerts.

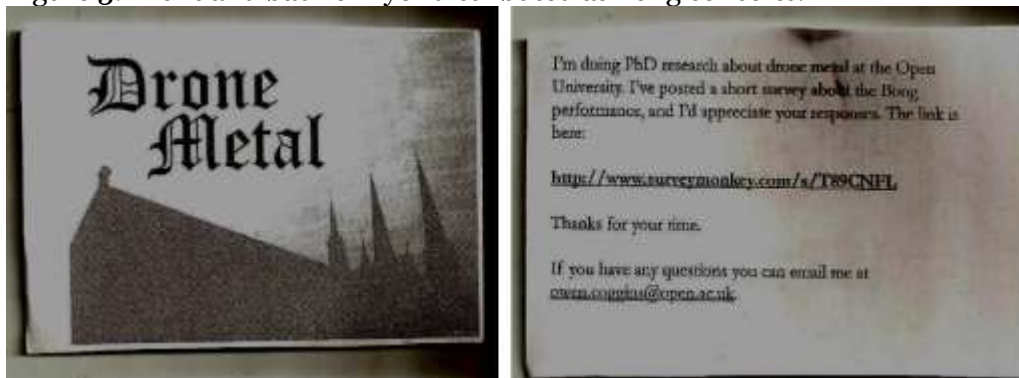


Figure 4: Alternative survey flyer designs for Dylan Carlson and Om concert tours, also featuring St. Joseph-at-Heuvelring church, Tilburg.



Figure 5: Flyer images for SunnO))) performances using images of local churches: Gravenkapel in Kortrijk (left) and St Jacobskerk in Den Haag (right), together with elaborate Fraktur fonts.



The twin purpose for the surveys was to elicit descriptions of events that I had attended (or at least ones that were part of the same tour), and to make contact with potential interviewees. I identified the most relevant events from April to December 2013: Gravetemple, Ufomammut, Nazoranai, Dylan Carlson, Bong, Tim Hecker, Om, and SunnO))) tours or one-off concerts. Due to the scarcity of events at first, some (Ufomammut, Nazoranai, Tim Hecker) were not strictly drone metal, but related music (psychedelic doom metal; avant-garde improvisation; electronic drone ambient, respectively). In total I collected 434 responses across nine surveys.

Interviews

Interviews were arranged by messaging the 161 survey respondents who left contact information in surveys, and a small number of other participants. In

total, 73 interviews were conducted. 13 were in-person, 49 via phone/Skype, and all gave permission to be recorded, and were later transcribed. Most spoken interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. 11 interviews were written, either “live” online chat or in email exchanges. In-person interviewees chose the venues, usually cafes or pubs. Interviews were semi-structured, starting with a request for interviewees to describe their experience of an event, immediately providing common ground for discussion, since I had also attended the same or a similar show. Whether interviewees were describing a show that they felt was excellent, average or disappointing, in each case it was easy to find out about ideal or sought-after listening states, by asking what was so successful, or what was missing or inadequate. Invariably, other bands were brought up in triangulating sonic experience, and, while these were important for understanding the constellations of genre, I tried also to elicit descriptions of sound and response as well as comparisons.

In most cases I avoided specifically mentioning religion or spirituality until the interviewee used a related term or description, at which point I would ask for elaboration. This was not to hide my motives (since I was interested in whatever description was provided, regardless of any “religious” or “spiritual” connotation), and I always explained the focus of my research at some point in the interview. If interview discussion continued for more than approximately 20 minutes without any mention of anything related to religiosity, I would eventually ask the interviewee’s thoughts about other people’s religiously-inflected description of the same event.

My own attendance at concerts, and my perspectives and preferences as a listener helped the natural feel of the discussion. At the beginning of some video-call or in-person interviews, where I felt I had detected faint uncertainty about participating in interviews, it seemed that some interviewees visibly relaxed when noticing my long hair and, invariably, a black t-shirt displaying a metal band; visual markers suggesting that I was an “insider.” This helped with general ease of conversation, but did provide challenges when listeners would, for example, in haltingly describing intense affective responses, stop and say something like “you know what I mean, right?” While I might agree, I would still then need to ask for further explanation.

In general, interviewees were interested in my research project and keen to discuss their musical experiences, habits and preferences. At the end of interviews, when I thanked people for their time, several participants remarked that they always enjoyed discussing music, and had particularly enjoyed the opportunity to talk (and think) at length. After the interviews, I kept in touch with many participants via Facebook, email, and attending similar gigs regularly. Though initially contacted as listeners, several turned out to be musicians who played in drone metal or related bands, and I caught up with them at gigs too.

Online material

Due to the translocal nature of drone metal, the internet was an important site for communication and subcultural work. I collected online information, such as professional and amateur reviews, and promotional materials for concerts and recordings published by artists, PR representatives, and record labels. I also read thousands of Youtube comments under drone metal postings, and viewed forum discussions. I didn’t normally post messages myself, since securing consent would be complicated (see Hagen 2014), though I did “participate” as many others do, by reading discussions. Online material changed over

the course of an event's history, from initial announcements about date, line-up, venue, and with some promotional text. This information was then reproduced, often verbatim, on other sites. Postings on blogs and social media intensified in the immediate run up to a concert, with the same information reposted or other reminders published, promoters sometimes asking questions to initiate discussion that might draw further interest ("Who are you most looking forward to seeing at [whichever] festival?"). Similar patterns were evident across extreme and underground metal and for other experimental music, differences between subgenres becoming discernible more in language and visual style than in methods of communication.

Following a concert, comments might appear on the event page, such as people expressing satisfaction or complaints (concerning perceived inappropriate behavior, poor sound quality, stronger- or weaker-than-expected performances from bands, thanking the musicians/organisers). Of these, criticism sparked more discussion than praise, but was still usually shortlived, and after a day or two event pages rarely received more postings or visits. Occasionally, amateur mobile-phone footage was uploaded by audience members. Around a week after a concert, reviews might appear online, then in print, in established music journalism sites and amateur blogs. These too, occasionally received some further comments, but postings were rare beyond a few days past the publication date.

Releases of new recordings were similarly presented as events, with promotional teasers giving way to more comprehensive information about titles and cover art, then perhaps exclusive online streaming of tracks, followed by pre-ordering information, and, finally, the release of the recording for purchase on vinyl, cassette, CD, CDr or digital formats (sometimes free to download). After this stage, tracks or full albums were sometimes posted on Youtube by bands, labels, or more commonly unidentified users, and for more popular recordings, discussion threads developed as listeners left their responses to the music and/or to other commenters (see Coggins 2014a).

I compiled reviews and other commentary for older events acknowledged as canonical or influential, as well as more general music journalism on drone, extreme metal, experimental music and noise, particularly when connections were made with "mystical" language and practice. Interested in the sources and circulation mechanisms for particular kinds of discourse, I tried to collect as many texts as possible for each record or concert. A discursive analysis of these uses of language, together with phrases from conversations during fieldwork and in interviews and surveys focused on particular repeated terms (particular examples including "mystical" "spiritual experience" "transcendent" "meditative" "ritual" "indescribable"). These terms are highly contested within the academic study of religion, and are often used ambivalently or vaguely elsewhere, so it was vital to approach such utterances with attention to their linguistic, social and music-related contexts in order to appreciate particular meanings for speakers and writers taking part in the discourse.

Material culture

While much of the practice of drone metal culture takes place online, live drone metal concerts remain the privileged site for experiencing the music. The highly valued physical vibrations of loud concerts is the most marked example of a bodily engagement with drone metal sound that extends to a preference for physical music formats and media, especially vinyl, and other material cul-

ture such as posters and t-shirts. As well as examining these objects and considering what uses and practices they afforded, I sought to understand any potential references to religiosity, as well as the constructed relations between objects and sound. I also observed the exchange and movement of such items, and the talk (online, in conversation, and in surveys and interviews) surrounding what was valued in such objects and their uses.

Writing reviews: echoes and dust

In December 2013, the music website Echoes & Dust advertised that they were seeking new review writers. I knew the site from compiling reviews, and was aware that they covered drone metal amongst other music from rock to extreme metal. Since much of the online material I compiled and read was of this kind, and several interviewees turned out to be writers for music magazines or sites, so signing up to write reviews was an extension of participant observation in drone metal culture (see also Kahn-Harris, 2007, where methodology included working as an intern at Terrorizer magazine).

Writing for the site also gave me access to music, to discussion amongst staff writers, and, most interestingly for research purposes, to promotional information sent out by musicians or PR representatives accompanying review copies of recordings. These one-page documents (“one-sheets”) contained details such as track names, titles, personnel, instrumentation, and brief but enthusiastic praise for the music. One-sheets are designed to function as a guide for review writers, attempting more or less subtly to direct or encourage certain aspects of the product to be highlighted, and to elicit a positive review in general. As such, they influenced public discourse about music, and it was possible to track certain common threads in reviews back to these one-sheets (that most readers of reviews would not have seen). One example of such influence emerged when a musician complained online that reviewers couldn’t get the track titles correct; in fact they had been mislabelled on the one-sheet. Another musician, in an interview disparaged reviewers, slightly mockingly, for describing the music in highly imaginative terms appealing to sunrise epiphanies and ghosts of legendary musicians. However (and perhaps unbeknownst to the musician) these review descriptions had clearly been influenced by those exact ideas having been distributed on the one-sheet to each reviewer as a prompt for their own writing.

I found reviewing initially quite straightforward, being familiar with a variety of linguistic tropes appropriate to metal in general and subgenres in particular, from reading hundreds, if not thousands of reviews. After having used up these readily available phrases, however, writing subsequent reviews became more difficult, and I learnt to balance conventions (making it understandable to potential readers grounded in the same genres of talking about music) and originality (so that, hopefully, it was more interesting than clichéd). At first I consciously avoided the language of religion, transcendence, meditation and so on, though this revealed a tension: on one hand, I was attempting to demonstrate fluency within the symbolic practice of drone metal and wider extreme metal discourse, though holding back from a notable and, to me, one of the most intriguing aspects of that communication.

Unexpected turns

Two examples illustrate the sometimes unexpected recursive effects of my fieldwork, and the minor but discernible effect my study had on the field itself. The first emerged from my interview with Daniel Arom, attendee at a Grave-

temple performance at Roadburn who contacted me after I posted a survey link on Gravetemple's Facebook page. At the start of our interview conversation, I asked Daniel if he would prefer his responses to be anonymous, and if I had permission to use what he said. The reason I've included his name testifies to the first surprise: he responded that I could only use what he said if I used his name. The third routine question I asked at the beginning of each interview was permission to record the conversation. Again Daniel agreed, and asked if he also could record the conversation, to which I agreed. Later, Daniel told me that he'd posted his recording (video and sound) on his blog *Heavy Portrayals*, and to request the image that I had used for the flyers and survey links. While amused at the asymmetry of consent, I had no problem with this, and sent the image. Later still, people I knew mentioned that they had watched some of the video after having searched for information about my research online, and so Daniel's posting then affected, in a small way, public perception of my research.

Another example occurred when I reviewed for the Echoes and Dust site an album by Ommadon, a Glasgow drone metal band. I was impressed by the originality and scope of the record, despite its almost fundamentalist take on drone metal, comprising two tracks around 40 minutes long each, with incredibly slow riff development but a constantly heavy and engaging sound. I wrote an honestly positive review, using geological metaphor to reflect the pace and scale of the album (e.g. 'the crumpling mountain ranges of riffs, the tectonic low feedback tension and the slow lava distortion,' Coggins, 2014b). Again I avoided any spiritual-affiliated language, but did notice in the one-sheet the line "Ommadon aim to achieve sonic annihilation of the self in their perpetual quest for heaviness," aligning heaviness and sound with mystical connotations. The review was published and promptly posted by different people in Facebook event pages for their upcoming concerts. A second promotional sheet was released for the album's North American release, with three quotes from reviews, including from my own piece (credited to websites/publications rather than individual writers, and with the quote from the more prestigious Terrorizer magazine given prominence):

"You can bet your favorite Sunn O))) picture disc on this thing sounding heavier than a dying planet..."

-Terrorizer

"...if you can zone out and daydream your way into the music, worming your way between the frequencies, there is something very primal to latch on to here." - Blog Of Putrefaction

"...like trying to imagine your own burial under the Himalayas." - Echoes And Dust

My review thus demonstrated fluency in the conventions of talking about drone metal, sufficient that the phrase, understood to be positive within the discourse of the genre, was used by others in a further communicative gesture, in promoting the recording. Similarly, I instigated an interview conversation in order to explore Daniel's responses to the Gravetemple performances, and he judged the conversation appropriate for posting on his own blog about heavy music. This also demonstrates that the methods I used to investigate language around drone metal both "joined in" to already existing modes and conventions of communication, yet also contributed to the production of that discourse which I am attempting to analyse. Further, in both these examples and ot-

hers, there were instances of my interlocutors affecting the presentation to others of my academic work: the interview appearing when people searched online for my research, and the Ommadon members having learnt of my project elsewhere before I met or contacted them.

Conclusion and reflection

Many of these practices, modes of communication, and discursive strategies are familiar to other extreme music subgenres. However, there are some aspects specific to drone metal that inevitably affect methodology and mark this research project. Drone metal's marginal status, even within doom metal, means that many gigs I attended featured one drone band on a bill of four, five or six other bands, and it was unusual to have a line-up of only doom and drone metal, let alone three or four drone bands. On a broader scale, no drone metal scene exists in one city that could compare with, for example, Gothenburg or Tampa Bay for death metal, or black metal in Oslo. Instead, drone metal subsisted through occasional events at the edges of a more general extreme metal milieu.

The extremity of drone metal's minimalist but overwhelming expanses of sound creates an extreme challenge to description, yet one which produces responses to that challenge. This is true in my own fieldnotes, reviews, and academic writing, as much as it is for fellow listeners in conversations, commentary and other discourse. The project is affected in small ways by the drone metal culture that in turn bears slight traces of my research, and this process of studying, rather than seeking to discover or finalise authoritative versions of events, takes its idiosyncratic place in a continuous construction of discourse that perpetuates and constitutes, circulating around and within profound sonic practices, for participants resonating in drone metal.

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