

BEER, BLOKES AND BRUTALITY: WHITENESS AND BANAL NATIONALISM IN AUSTRALIAN EXTREME METAL SCENES

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Abstract

This paper maps how Australia's extreme metal scenes present visual and verbal symbols that draw upon the canon of white Australian identity, while reflecting a desire for independence, authenticity and power through the 'brutality' of scenic space. I argue that Australian extreme metal's glorification of 'everyday blokes' has the dual effect of exalting Australian men as legends while simultaneously crafting a transhistorical essence of normative masculinity that shapes nationalist narratives. This consecration of sameness and the subsequent excription of difference establishes stringent boundaries of who may claim to belong, both within the culture of the scene and the nation itself.

Introduction

The story of Australian national identity is, in large part, a story of isolation. The frontier myth of national belonging is reflected in the tales the nation tells itself; the propagation of nationally-honoured histories of struggle, courage and triumph that coalesce in the imagined outpost of white Australia. Such isolation is itself an imperialist conceit. Australia was founded through invasion, conquest and dispossession. The ideological collectivities that construct modern Australia as a white possession, and furthermore a white masculine possession, have naturalised a cult of ordinariness that dictates national identity. This paper then investigates how the mutually supportive operations of masculinity and whiteness have shored up Australian identity within the spaces of Australia's extreme metal scenes. Australian metal is located in the interplay between local and global considerations; simultaneously isolated from yet tethered to the international scene. Despite a wealth of music cultures and audiences within Australia, heavy metal music has nonetheless long struggled to find a foothold in the national imaginary. As such, while numerous metal scenes exist throughout the country, Australian metal itself is marked by fragmentation rather than consolidation. The intersections of these domestic scenes then provides fertile ground for mapping the ways in which white masculine identity is constructed and maintained within an Australian context. Australian identity, I argue, has been almost entirely constructed around images of white men. I investigate how Australian extreme metal scenes invent Australia; how the spatial and musical practices of scenes reproduce dominant narratives of 'authentic' national identity, and moreover, how they do so in consciously Australian ways. Australian metal's glorification of nationalist masculine archetypes has the dual effect of exalting Australian men as legends while simultaneously crafting a transhistorical essence of normal masculinity that shapes nationalist narratives. Such normophilia, the consecration of sameness and the subsequent excription of difference, establishes stringent boundaries of who may claim to belong. These scenes confront the problematic nature of what it means to speak of Australian metal in a country largely devoid of not

only a strong national scene, but built upon a narrative of masculine heroism and integrity that denies the violence of the nation's past. Australian extreme metal scenes thus operate as important sites of negotiation and resistance. Nonetheless, they may also fall back on tired notions of tradition that reassert the problematic aspects of Australian identity rather than reconciling them.

Honesty, purity, brutality: locating the 'australian' in Australian heavy metal

Heavy metal scenes in Australia acknowledge both individual specificity and a shared national context (Phillipov, 2008, p.217) as a means of staking out their own territory in a community that is increasingly oriented towards the global. The broader cultural, personified image of the nation, Overell observes, is often male and constructed through the amalgamation of wider national stereotypes to represent Australian identity within metal scenes (2012, p.266-267). Scenes interpolate national subjects in different ways and to different extents (Overell, 2012, p.267). Despite attempts to project a distinctly Australian identity, according to Phillipov (2008) "it is unclear whether there is anything particularly 'Australian' about Australian metal" (p.217). Few Australian bands attend to geographic and cultural particularities, Phillipov contends (2008, p.217), but I would also argue that while Australian metal may musically cater to more global trends, interactions within Australian scenes themselves, rather than musical output alone, may proffer more complex and multifaceted insights into the manner in which 'Australia' comes to be represented within Australian metal - and crucially, *who* represents such Australianness. I readily acknowledge Phillipov's suggestion that a 'genuine' Australian identity may not be permeable in ways other than tropes; however, I would stage further investigation of what is 'Australian' about Australian metal. The performative gestures towards white masculinity within Australian scenes are indicative of the manner in which regional difference still intrudes upon ostensibly universal practices (Homan, 2000, p.32). As such, where Phillipov (2008) suggests that "metal has not become 'indigenised' in Australia in the way it has in some other parts of the world" (p.217), I suggest that Australian metal bands have attempted to indigenise metal precisely through effacing the meaning of 'indigeneity'. Such tactics erase a deeply problematic and violent colonial history and instead situate 'authentic' Australianness as that which corresponds to particular archetypes of white Australian identity.

Responses to whiteness and patriarchal nationhood in Australian heavy metal scenes can appear in outright displays of racism, homophobia and misogyny. However, the nation constructed within Australian extreme metal is one largely maintained through tacit reproductions of hegemonic Australian identity. Nationalism, as Overell (2012) points out, "manifests itself in ways apart from waving a flag and openly denouncing migrants" (p.267). In Australia's extreme metal scenes, I argue, white patriarchal nationalism largely takes the form of a more mundane, unspoken national condition; what Billig (1995) calls "banal nationalism". The very idea of nationalism itself, he argues, entails some notion of extremism (1995, p.1) and limited temporality or transience. It becomes important to thus conceive of nationalism in its mundane, lived forms. Banal nationalism is introduced by Billig to address the ideological habits which enable established nations to be reproduced (1995, p.6). These habits are not removed or abstracted from daily lives - rather, the nation is continuously indicated, or "flagged" in the lives of its citizens (Billig, 1995, p.6). Nationalism, far from being an "intermittent mood in established nations" (Billig, 1995, p.6) is the endemic condition. There are extremist nationalistic elements within

Australian metal scenes; these are the most hypervisible narrative performances of white Australia within heavy metal. However, what is 'Australian' about Australian heavy metal is an Australianness which continues to be realised through banal forms of nationalism. Australian identity within heavy metal continues to be entangled within a territory of whiteness that is invisibilised yet omnipresent. Extreme metal scenes bear witness to the privileging and consecration of extremely mundane forms of white capital; capital which nonetheless becomes an impressive bartering tool in the "field of whiteness" (Hage, 1998, p.57) represented by domestic scenes.

The symbols that Australian metal deploys gesture back to an overarching hegemonic masculinity which is represented at the core of the nation, the "white heart" that Schech and Haggis refer to (2000, p.232). I argue that the musical spectrum represented by heavy metal music produced in Australia - and particularly thrash, black, and death metal and grindcore - caters to these archetypes lyrically, aesthetically and musically. In presenting visual and verbal symbols that draw upon the canon of white Australian identity, such scenes simultaneously reflect a desire for independence, authenticity and power through the self-styled brutality of the music itself. Examination of Haun's (2010, n.p) interview with long-term performers within Australian metal scenes reveals that common descriptors of Australian metal rest on the purity and ferocity of the genre. "Loud", "chaotic", "ugly", "ferocious", "bestial" and "brutal" are repeatedly used in discussions of Australian scenes, where, crucially, phrases such as "heavy as fuck" and "brutally aggressive" are used to separate 'true' Australian metal from "overpublicised, glamourised, commercial shit" (Haun, 2010, n.p). A sense of 'doing it the hard way' - and taking pride in such efforts - is crucial to the central identities of Australian metal scenes and, I argue, underpins many nationalist narratives of Australia itself. Locating some form of purity or truth through creating heavy metal that is brutal and ferocious, true to the alleged ethos of metal, finds correlation with older colonial and settler narratives within Australian discourse that stressed strength and resilience. Such representations of men living off the land under violent and hostile conditions, challenging the authority of the Colonial Father, sustained the democratic nationalist tradition that Ward (1958) pointed to as constituting the "Australian legend", and produced the heroes that enabled the myth of the typical Australian to become a valued cultural currency.

Constructing the 'white heart' of Australian national identity

The frequency with which the national subject is imagined through masculine figures is then omnipresent within Australian metal. Overell's study of Australian grindcore scenes reflects this relationship, noting that the national subject interpolated by scene members was overwhelmingly male (2012, p.266) and white (2012, p.267). Locating what is Australian about Australian heavy metal may then require not only investigations of explicit nationalism, but the tacit nationalisms of daily life which foreground white subjects in representations of Australia. It is by now a familiar observation that narratives of Australian identity have almost entirely been constructed around images of white men (Connell, 2003, p.9). Apart from pandering to images of egalitarian bushrangers, heroic resistance on the goldfields and wartime sacrifice, Vasta (1993) argues, Australian identity is defined in terms of a "masculine emphasis on mateship" (p.212), a definition that works to exscribe Indigenous peoples, women and migrants. Nevertheless, this remains the dominant myth of Australian national identity. The "longstanding affiliation of nationhood and masculinity" (Bode, 2006, p.1), which enables the procession of a "specifically Australian system of cultural signification for the common man, whose values

[are said to] shape the national character” (Schaffer, 1988, p.20), thus affirms the masculinist outlook of narratives of Australianness. It is therefore crucial to note that such masculinities are not necessarily realised through romanticised archetypes of the past, but instead located in the simultaneous mundanity and exceptionalism of 'every day' Australians. This normophilia and privileging of the ordinary then becomes the most tacit; yet, I would argue, most powerful, process through which Australianness is interpolated and performed by domestic metal scenes.

Normative national discourse, which excludes migrants and celebrates hegemonic national identity is insidious and perhaps just as powerful as jingoistic patriotism. The commensurance of whiteness with 'Aussie-ness', or 'Australian' with men, in locating the national character of Australian heavy metal indicates the stringent narrowing of acceptable boundaries of national identity. It is through reaffirming Australian identity through performative gestures to white hegemonic masculinity that Australian heavy metal scenes constitute themselves within a nationalist discourse. The banal nationalism of Australian metal is one that necessitates the circulation of the resistance myth that underpins nationalist imaginings. Australian masculinity, for Bode (2006), is a political trope overwhelmingly represented through the image of the “Aussie battler” – a man whose life is defined through hardship and struggle, but maintains his courage, strength and masculinity (p.3). The discourse of the 'Battler' has become ingrained in Australian political conversation (Bode, 2006, p.2) and the discourses of heavy metal – musician Ben Wrecker argues that the fierce do-it-yourself ethic of the Australian scene is underpinned by “the 'Aussie Battler' mentality that nothing's supposed to be that easy” (in Haun, 2010, p.3). Such sentiments are in large part fed by the lack of patronage for a national scene and severe censorship of heavy metal material within Australia (particularly within the 1990s – see Pettman, 1995; Phillipov, 2008). Nonetheless I contend that this supposed affinity with such battler figures is represented within the main rhetoric of masculinity in contemporary Australia, which Connell (2003) claims is overwhelmingly concerned with the crisis of white, heterosexual men and their need for reaffirmation and support (p.10). It is then crucial to critically analyse the ways in which such figures are used to translate Australianness, and moreover, how they are figured within the translocation of an international whiteness.

Banal nationalism and the sanctity of the local

Australian scenes are dominated by masculinity, in some broad sense, but a more fruitful analysis emerges in critiquing the particular kinds of masculinity that are privileged within these sites, and how they have emerged in response to a discursively Australian context. Furthermore, mapping the way in which space and place figure in domestic heavy metal scenes allows for an understanding of their role in the creation of national identity in Australian contexts. Notions of what constitutes Australianness, Horne (1998) argues, may have been predicated upon rural myths of stoic frontiersmen conquering the land (p.51, see also Schaffer, 1988), but the empirical reality of Australia is one of “suburbanism” (Horne, 1998, p.16) and ordinariness. To appear ordinary, argues Horne, is a necessary condition for success in Australia (1998, p.39-40). I am drawn to this contention that ordinariness is a definitive attribute of the Australian character. Rather than accept it uncritically, however, I am interested in examining the constitutive parts of such ordinariness, and furthermore, articulating what this ordinariness might occlude. The rhetoric of the 'local' is well-established in the dominant narratives of Australian metal scenes, which

encourage fans to support Australian acts at a grassroots level. However, I argue that such prizing of the local is simultaneously embedded within the broader spatial politics of Australia's banal white nationalism. The ongoing fetishisation of the local within Australian metal is predicated upon processes of enshrining the banality of every day life. Through the symbolic capital of the 'ordinary' man, the spatial and musical practices of Australian metal scenes enable the formation of a transhistorical essence of not only Australian men, but Australian whiteness.

The dual effect of privileging mundane forms of capital and reinventing them as sacred allows whiteness and white practices to operate as the dominant norm. Such collective ideologies hence naturalise not only the boundaries of identity, but furthermore, the role and power of dominant groups. Such powers may not always emerge through direct and explicit racism and misogyny, however. Certain Australian metal acts have predicated their sense of the local on images of ordinary, unpretentious, working-class masculinity. A trope of Australianness that emerges within scenes, argues Phillipov (2008), is the invoking of "hard-drinking Aussie "yobbo" (an uncouth working class person, usually male) stereotypes" (p.217, my interjection) that are played on in both unreflexive and tongue-in-cheek ways. Such durable images then allow for the transposition of recognisable cultural narratives within both Australian and international contexts. Thrash metal band Mortal Sin, arguably the first Australian metal act to gain international recognition, actively pushed an informal, egalitarian masculine identity through signifiers that marked their performance as identifiably Australian. The band's live performances and creative output, particularly in the earlier stages of their career, are marked by aesthetic and textual signs that represent their Australian identity; or more specifically, particular iterations of Australian identity that corresponded to their own geographic and cultural surroundings. The cover art of Mortal Sin's first album *Mayhemic Destruction* (Vertigo, 1987) featured a winged demon overlooking a post-apocalyptic vision of Sydney, anchoring the band to a specific place. The liner notes on the same release affirmed the band's attempt to locate a geographically specific identity:

"Extra special thanks to: Fosters Lager, Vic Bitter, Tooheys Draught, Jim Beam, Johnny Walker, UDL & cheap wine and also mull & dakka, steroids (Wayne doesn't use them), those things that kept us awake in the studio (what was that stuff anyway?) & the Pill. Also pizzas, McDonalds, parra burgers. Bill where's all the chocolate gone from the machine? Vegemite and of course Aussie sun & Aussie beaches & the 301 pool table and rec room". (*Mayhemic Destruction*, LP inner sleeve, 1987)

Here Mortal Sin utilise textual markers that cater to the distinct banalities that 'ordinary' young men in Western Sydney engaged with at this time. The explicit references to alcohol foreground a relationship between Australian masculinity and drinking, what Horne (1998) refers to as the "test of manliness" (p.27) realised through the "brutal pleasure" of violent pub culture (p.28); "mull & dakka" was popular slang at that time for packing a marijuana pipe. Furthermore, these notes represent certain forms of geographic identity realised through spatial and cultural markers – "parra burgers" alludes to the Western Sydney suburb of Parramatta that the band originated from; "the 301" was a recreational club located at 301 Church Street in Parramatta. Mortal Sin's performance of Australianness was one tied particularly to the Western Suburbs of Sydney and their population – what was colloquially known in this period as a 'Westie'. Drummer Steve Hughes, for example, wore Canterbury socks during some live performances in the early 1990s, conveying a symbo-

lic relationship between sport – and particularly, a violent contact sport, the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs being one of the biggest rugby league clubs in Australia – and Australian hegemonic masculinity (see Rowe and McKay, 2009). Mortal Sin thus locate themselves not only within Western Sydney (“Thanks also to...the Blacktown Council bludgers (you know who you are)” (LP inner sleeve, 1987), but also within the dual spheres of masculinity and socialisation, specifically through marking their space within the heavy metal scenes of New South Wales, and Australia at large: “[thanks to] the Parrabangers, the Blacktown & Marayong thrashers, the Gosford, Newcastle & Wollongong thrashers, [all] metal heads & bangers, deathheads, thrashers, slammers, moshers, throughout Australia and the world” (*Mayhemic Destruction*, LP inner sleeve, 1987). Mortal Sin's narrative of Australian identity is representative of Phillipov's assertion that extreme metal scenes and audiences are situated within an interplay of local and global considerations (2008, p.217). Mortal Sin's music is oriented towards a global aesthetic; their identity as a band, however, was largely predicated upon their Australianness. Mortal Sin position themselves both within and without a transnational metal community; hence a sense of being both connected to and distinct from the global metal scene forms one of the central structuring practices of Australian heavy metal.

Implementing a distinct Australian identity within heavy metal necessitates the construction of a national subject that becomes amplified within the space of the scene. Mortal Sin's good-natured representation of Australian masculinity as that which was comprised largely of beer and sports enabled the reiteration and validation of 'blokey' forms of socialisation, made permissible through the mechanisms of white absolution. The acceptance of the popular idea of the knock-about, hard-drinking, sports-loving, down-to-earth "bloke" as the typical Australian male, Thompson argues, also enfolds within it the occasional violence and bigotry that accompanies such positions (2007, p.180). The “whitewash of sentimentality” (Thompson, 2007, p.178) renders such potentially harmful behaviour as excusable and even fondly looked upon for young white men; even when young men of colour are criminalised for the same actions. Furthermore, a “particularly perverse confusion between manliness, criminality and Australianness”, for Coad (2002, p.55) means that drunkenness and a defiance of law often becomes a dominant Antipodean conception of what it means to be a man. For certain segments of contemporary Australian scenes, national identities are then demarcated by violent heterosexism and threatening hypermasculine behaviour. The menacing territorialism embedded within such archetypes (Thompson, 2007, p.177-178) allows scenes to act as spatial and social mediums for the construction and maintenance of aggressively heteromale practices, made palatable through this whitewash of sentimentality. King Parrot, an extreme metal act from Melbourne who incorporate thrash metal and grindcore, have made such performances an important component of their identity as a band. The band's image is one of dark humour, violence, mayhem and a rough masculine characterisation cultivated through cultural markers that can be read by scene members as distinctly Australian. Live shows feature audience members loudly shouting “How ya goin’?” in breaks between songs (field notes, 6.2.2014), which is often met with teasing abuse from the band (“Shut the fuck up”, “This fucking wanker up the front”, field notes, 6.2.2014). The perceived homosociality of live crowds (despite large numbers of women being present) hinges on the simultaneous sexualisation of women within and excription of femininity from the space of the scene. King Parrot's discursive violence, for example, is compounded by a performative hypermasculinity that usually ta-

kes the form of misogyny: “Sometimes you've just got to say this is my cock, and it's what you need” (field notes, 6.2.2014).

King Parrot's narratives of identity are reflective of Berger's “stances” (2010), ways of marking out their own position in relation to an increasingly globalised heavy metal scene. King Parrot's approach is illustrative of this, as they tether their own band to a wider international scene by catering to popular narratives of the brutality of heavy metal, while remaining distinctly Australian. One of King Parrot's most popular items of merchandise, for example, is the *Blaze in the Northern Suburbs* t-shirt. This shirt, I argue, is an important scenic artefact for two reasons: firstly, it attempts to connect King Parrot to a transnational metal community by relying on particular forms of cultural capital. “Blaze in the Northern Suburbs” (based on their song of the same name) is a clear reference to Norwegian black metal band Darkthrone's album *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* (Peaceville, 1992); these allusions to the Norwegian black metal scene are furthered by the image of a blazing house on the front of the shirt. Such an image corresponds to the common association of black metal with arson, and particularly church arson (Moynihan and Söderlind, 1998, p.79). Secondly, the shirt also binds King Parrot to Australia – and specifically Melbourne – by alluding to specific forms of localised knowledge. The reference to the Northern Suburbs locates a definite geographical point, ie. the Northern municipalities of Melbourne and their suburbs. These suburbs are traditionally industrial and working class; furthermore there is a common association (perpetuated largely by media) of these areas with theft, gang violence and arson (White et al. 1999; Baum & Gleeson, 2010). The phrase itself is also one that positions King Parrot within a local history of heavy metal music in Melbourne – *A Blaze in the Northern Suburbs* was the name given to a 1997 demo by local grindcore band Filth. The phrase “Blaze in the Northern Suburbs” is hence a multilayered one comprised of multiple textual modalities that rely on certain ways of reading; in doing so, such texts thus allow King Parrot to both enter a dialogue with a broader transnational scene, and anchor their own Australianness within a distinct location.

Conclusion

The ongoing fetishisation of the local within Australian metal is predicated upon processes of enshrining the banality of every day life. Through the symbolic capital of the ‘ordinary’ man, the spatial and musical practices of Australian metal scenes enable the formation of a transhistorical essence of not only Australian masculinity, but Australian whiteness. Such practices then have the dual effect of privileging mundane forms of capital and reinventing them as exceptional. In doing so, such collective ideology and practice allow whiteness and white practices to operate as the dominant norm and hence naturalises not only the boundaries of identity, but furthermore, the role and power of dominant groups. Casting a dominant group's culture as the norm and Others as deviant, where they are represented at all, allows racism and its representations to become common sense (Pettman, 1992, p.3). While the majority of the Australian metal scene may not be explicitly or overtly racist, the scenic practices of staging Australian identity as that which is divorced from Aboriginality and instead begins at the moment of colonial invasion erases non-white Others from the national space. History in Australia, Birch (2001) argues, is “served up by the dominant white sector of Australian society as something that is digested with great familiarity” (p.20). The stock clichés of Australia's European history - the “Australian character”, the “battler”, “a nation forged through collective adversity” (Birch, 2001, p.20-21) shore up Australia's self-image as a liberal democracy, founded on struggle. This stock legend emerges within the

national archetypes celebrated by Australian metal, whose national identity is foregrounded by white everyday heroes whose transhistorical essence becomes the hegemonic narrative in mapping the true sons of the nation.

The task of representing the national space within metal scenes is the burden carried by the 'ordinary' masculinities of Australian narrative identity, all of whom gesture back to the national archetypes that shore up hegemonic masculinity. Scenes interpolate national subjects in different ways and to different extents (Overell 2012, p.267). Thematically, the 'Australianness' in Australian metal panders to wider national archetypes of the national character, those which have been sustained and reproduced through the careful imprinting of master symbols. The cult of the ordinary thus finds itself represented within Australia's extreme metal music scenes, which seek to tether contemporary Australian identity to the cultish 'everyday-ness' of icons of the past, and negotiate a place for Australian metal within a broader global scene. However, making authentic Australian identity contingent upon such banal subjects is intensely problematic, and allows for the creation of a nominal white hegemonic patriarchy and the erasure of Others from the national story – namely women, Indigenous persons and non-white migrants. Heavy metal's worldwide spread and the increasing number of stances available to metal fans worldwide does have the capacity to allow for increasingly fluid and flexible constructions of Australian identity within the space of domestic scenes. Many Australian bands, young and old, have taken up this mantle, advocating a search for nationhood that may exceed the stringent boundaries of patriarchal whiteness, and hence attempt to open up the possibilities for Australian whiteness so that it may reject the imperial detritus of colonialism. Nonetheless, the inability to alter the perception of the nation as a white possession remains the central challenge. The task remains, then, to explore how the seemingly incoherent nature of a self-proclaimed egalitarian, multicultural nation that is built on the violent enforcement of essential sameness may allow for the rethinking of identity, difference and nationhood within its heavy metal scenes, and in doing so, decentre the whiteness at the core of Australian identity.

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