

KENTUCKY: SOUND, ENVIRONMENT, HISTORY – BLACK METAL AND APPALACHIAN COAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Panopticon's 2012 album *Kentucky* explores the human and environmental costs of coal mining in Appalachia, suggesting that the exploitation of the area's residents and land has been the status quo since the nineteenth century. The album blends the sounds of black metal with bluegrass, historical protest music and archival recordings, using black metal's capability for raw musical wrath to amplify the anger of disenfranchised Appalachians. *Kentucky* also demonstrates a possibility for black metal that tends toward a generous humanism, seeking to understand how people identify with their landscape and their labor.

Introduction

In 2012, one-man black metal band Panopticon released *Kentucky*, blending black metal with bluegrass, covers of coal miners' protest songs and samples from archival recordings. Situated in the Central Appalachian Coal Region of the United States, eastern Kentucky and the area's residents have endured a protracted history of poverty, environmental destruction, and political oppression which local vernacular music, particularly bluegrass and country, has consistently critiqued (See, for example, Stimeling, 2012).

Panopticon's album unambiguously tackles the social and environmental issues that plague the region, dovetailing black metal's ability for raw musical wrath into a long tradition of musical protest. The buzzing and blasting of the black metal sound world has the strength to echo the chaotic din of the mining process itself, the music's capability for rage amplifying the anger of disenfranchised Appalachians. Moments of bluegrass, archival samples and sound effects connect the album to the history of the Appalachian landscape and the sedimented frustration of residents, which the sounds of black metal release into the sonic present.

Black metal, with its history of fascist tendencies and hatred of society (see, for example, Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 38-43), seems an unlikely venue for ecocriticism and promotion of labor rights. On *Kentucky*, however, Austin Lunn (the multi-instrumentalist behind the band, and a Louisville native) channels the energy of revilement into a critique of corporate mining practices that damage the environment and oppress residents. Panopticon's incorporation of bluegrass music into this album differs from earlier uses of local music traditions in black metal; rather than using folk music to bolster images of a romanticized Pagan past, the bluegrass on *Kentucky* serves to mourn actual past events, protest present ones and sonically unify a long, complex regional history –

occasionally even to the point of oversimplification.⁷³ *Kentucky* suggests that exploitation of Appalachian residents and land has gone hand in hand, and frames the desire to preserve the Appalachian landscape through human desires for clean air, clean water, natural beauty, freedom from noise and the preservation of historic areas. This essay will first contextualize *Kentucky* within ecocritical discourses of landscape, memory and indigeneity, as well as within the coal region's distinct socio-economic background. I then examine how the use of sounds – black metal, bluegrass, archival recordings and sound effects – create a musical work that presents the land and residents of southeastern Kentucky as an unbroken line of victimhood from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Ecocriticism and black metal

Ecocritical readings of music have grown more common, as scholars begin to recognize the particular ways in which music assists in building ideas of landscape, home, and place-based identity, thereby mediating understanding of our natural surroundings. *Kentucky*, as a product of both black metal and Appalachian music culture, particularly draws on ideas of geographic peripheralization, place-based heritage, and the association of mountains with the divine (Stimeling 2012, p. 9; Schama, 1995, p. 413-421). Awe in the presence of natural beauty is a longstanding topic of black metal, with particularly strong links to the Norwegian scene's predilection for snowy forests and majestic fjords, an expression of National Romanticism that stretches back to the 19th century. Charles Rosen (1995) notes that the Romantic interest in nature was no longer simply about evoking or imitating natural beauty, but showing "the correspondence between the sensuous experience of Nature and the spiritual and intellectual workings of the mind" (p. 129). Rosen's statement addresses the tendency to think of the wilderness as something completely external to ourselves; yet, as Simon Schama (1995) puts it, "it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape" (p. 10). Romantic composers, the Norwegian black metal bands, and Appalachian musicians leading up to and including *Kentucky* have all looked to the meanings found by their communities in the "raw matter" of their natural surroundings. Rebecca R. Scott (2010) finds that Appalachian culture takes pride in its sense of rootedness, with many residents embracing the place-based identity that Americans generally reject in favor of mobility (p. 127). The desire to live their entire lives in their birthplace indicates that their land forms a large part of who they are, and what they inherited from past generations, adding layers of nostalgia to their experience of the mountains.

The extent to which Lunn draws on local stories and music surrounding the history of coal mining in Kentucky firmly positions the album within a long tradition of Appalachian "place-based rhetoric that interrogates the essence of Appalachian identity and raises important questions about who has the right to speak on behalf of past, present and future coalfield residents" (Stimeling, 2012, p. 20). This rhetoric prizes indigeneity and the image of a community isolated and left behind by the rest of the nation, resulting in a unique cultural enclave with distinctive language, music and religion (Scott, 2010, p. 33). *Kentucky* embraces this intersection of music, landscape and geographical and cultural marginalization in a way that moves beyond the National Romanticism of the Nordic and Cascadian black metal bands. Drawing on this lineage

⁷³ Bluegrass is a subgenre of country music known for its virtuosic playing style and influences from jazz, and has its roots in the music of Appalachian settlers from the British Isles. It is customarily played on acoustic string instruments such as the fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, upright bass and Dobro. Vocals typically feature a "high, lonesome" sound.

of ecologically concerned black metal, it goes a step further in allowing individual voices – rough, emotional and opinionated – to speak with the music, marring, illuminating and expanding his musical and lyrical ideas with their own. In this way, *Kentucky* broaches a humanity that few, if any, black metal albums today can match; this is not the solipsism of Xasthur, Botanist or Burzum, but a polyphonic work that happens to have been assembled by a single individual.

Southeastern Kentucky: Poverty and labor issues

Kentucky deals with several events in the state's history that continue to impact the region to the present day. Harlan County, located in the depressed southeastern region of the state, was the site of a violent, decade-long struggle for labor organization, and the source of two of the labor songs *Kentucky* covers. Conditions for Harlan County miners began deteriorating in 1929, with the onset of the Great Depression, and the added difficulty imposed by wage cuts in 1931 culminated in a drive for unionization (Hevener, 1978, p. 10-11). Pro- and anti-union members of the community grew harshly divided, and the Harlan County Coal Operators' Association effectively paid local sheriffs and their deputies to prevent unionization (Hevener, 1978, p. 176-177). Between 1931 and 1939, eleven people were killed – six miners and five law enforcement officials (Hevener, 1978, p. 177), earning Harlan County the nickname "Bloody Harlan." Harlan County was the site of another coal mining labor dispute in 1973; this strike was documented in the film *Harlan County USA*, from which Lunn draws an extensive sample.

Harlan County and the surrounding area remain depressed today. According to 2010 census data, nearly one third of the residents of Harlan County live below the poverty line. In 2014, a *New York Times* analysis ranked several eastern Kentucky counties the most difficult places to live in the U.S. (Flippen, 2014). Harlan County was ranked 3,112 out of 3,135 counties, with a median income of \$26,758, 13.2% unemployment, only 10.7% of the population having a college degree, and an obesity rate of 43% (Flippen, 2014).

Mountaintop removal mining

Other portions of the album deal with so-called "Mountaintop Removal Mining" (MTR). MTR was developed in the 1960s as a cheaper, safer, higher-yield alternative to deep mining. Rather than tunneling into the mountains, MTR uses explosives to remove soil and rock – "overburden" – from the tops of mountains, relocating it into neighboring valleys, until the coal seam is exposed and can be excavated with draglines. This method of mining requires fewer workers, provides safer above-ground working conditions, and can move massive amounts of coal quickly, using some of the world's largest heavy machinery. Since 1977, MTR operations have been required to return the mined land to its "approximate original contour" ("Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act," 1977, p. 65), which means placing the overburden back onto the mountain, re-grading the land, covering it with topsoil and planting vegetation. As companies are not required to maintain the land after the initial reclamation process, their process tends toward quick fixes that do not culminate in permanent re-vegetation, resulting in widespread erosion (Burns, 2007, p. 123). Vast areas of land remain deforested, and valley fills have destroyed hundreds of miles of streams, resulting in lasting changes to the ecosystems they supported and the rivers into which they fed (Burns, 2007, p. 126-128). Beyond the environment itself, residents of MTR areas live with the tre-

mendous noise and home-damaging vibrations of blasting, layers of coal dust coating their property, and the fear of coal waste leaks (Burns, 2007, p. 33-39). Furthermore, one of the few reasons Appalachian residents have supported the coal industry is its promise of steady employment; MTR, however requires far fewer workers than underground mining, resulting in increasing coal yields but decreasing employment (Burns, 2007, p. 67-68). Today, MTR operations produce just over half of the coal mined in eastern Kentucky, with the remainder coming from underground mines (“Kentucky Quarterly Coal Report,” 2014, p. 2).

Kentucky: Sounds, texts, sentiments

The remainder of this essay examines the sounds and texts of *Kentucky*, and how they are brought together to form a narrative of unbroken oppression. The album takes a long, roughly chronological perspective of the history of exploitation and abuse of the local residents in the southeastern portion of the state, from the treatment of Native Americans in the early nineteenth century, to the strikes of the 1930s, and ending with issues of MTR. I begin with the labor songs Lunn covers – historical texts that ground the album – before turning to the sounds of black metal, archival samples and the lyrics Lunn screams.

Labor songs

Lunn buttresses his album with the performance of three historical coal mining protest songs. Two of these originated in the Harlan County Mine Wars of the 1930s, while the third stems from the emergence of MTR. Together, these songs authenticate the album’s interest in historical context. The first two use an acoustic, bluegrass-based sound to communicate pastness; he does not bring them into the black metal sound world of the present. The first of the protest songs, “Come all ye coal miners,” was originally composed in the 1930s by Sarah Ogan Gunning, a coal miner’s wife and communist sympathizer. The lyrics, which exhort the oppressed coal miners to join the union and “sink this capitalist system in the darkest pits of hell,” frequently do not scan perfectly into her melody, giving the song a spontaneous and improvisatory quality. The song builds on Appalachian ideas of belonging to both the region and coal mining by birth (“I was born in old Kentucky, in a coal camp born and bred”), as well as on the image of the exploited, but brave and self-sacrificing coal miner (“Coal mining is the most dangerous work in our land today/ with plenty of dirty slaving work and very little pay”). The song nowhere suggests that mining itself should end, focusing instead on building up the wretchedness of the work and the stinginess of the employers.

Lunn also covers “Which Side Are You On?” – a prominent pro-union song that played an important role in both the 1930s Harlan County Mine Wars and the 1970s Harlan County strikes. The song was originally written in 1931 by Florence Reece, the wife of a coal miner, a union organizer and Communist sympathizer, and its text aligns Appalachian masculinity with union membership, while the “gun thugs” – strike breakers – are glossed as cowards:

They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals there.
You'll either be a union man, or a thug for J.H. Blair.
Which side are you on?
Oh, workers can you stand it? Oh, tell me how you can.
Will you be a lousy scab, or will you be a man?

Which side are you on?

Reece herself, then in her 70s, performed the song several times during the 1970s strikes. Lunn adds banjo and a bass drum to the song, but sings the opening lines (“Come all you poor workers, good news to you I’ll tell/ of how that good old union has come in here to dwell”) a capella, with crackling distortion used to suggest the sound that would come through a megaphone, echoing Reece’s performances for crowds of strikers in the 1970s. The sound of these opening lines drifts over an imaginary crowd of gathered strikers, exhorting them to listen and gesturing at the song’s history.

Lunn’s performance of “Black Waters” moves toward black metal’s murky sound world; the song deals with the social and environmental costs of MTR – problems that arose in the past, but continue in the present. Jean Ritchie, a Fulbright scholar and folk musician, originally composed “Black Waters” in 1967, when MTR was relatively new. Instead of the straightforward bluegrass performance he used with the previous two, Lunn drowns his voice in reverb until the words, and sometimes even the tune, become obscured. His backing music consists of blurry, ethereal synthesized chords – reminiscent of atmospheric black metal tracks – with a softly strumming guitar providing the only rhythmic differentiation. In addressing issues that are both historical and contemporary, he brings the sound of this song into the possible world of black metal, particularly its hazy, ambient side.

“Black Waters” builds on a nostalgic sense of home, framed primarily in terms of the “clear waters” that were, and the “black waters” that exist as a result of mining. It equates the destruction of the mountains’ contours with destruction of the memories inscribed in them:

In the coming of the springtime we planted our corn.
 In the end of the springtime we buried our son.
 In the summer comes a nice man who says everything's fine
 my employer just requires a way to his mine.
 Then they tore down the mountain and covered my corn
 and the grave on the hillside a mile deeper down.
 And the man stands and talks with his hat in his hands
 while the poisoned black waters rise over my land.
 Sad scenes of destruction on every hand.
 Black waters, black waters run down through my land.

The disposal of overburden into the valley results not only in the destruction of the year’s corn crop, but also the erasure of a family gravesite. Arguably, the son remains buried there, but the re-contouring of the hillside becomes a re-contouring of memory and a destruction of the family’s sense of rootedness, and therefore, sense of self.

By performing the songs of workers’ rights advocates such as Gunning, Reece and Ritchie, Lunn sets his project apart from black metal’s history of fascist tendencies. (See, for example: Kahn-Harris, 2007; Moynihan and Söderlind, 2003; Olson, 2008, 2011) Neither does he align himself squarely with the as yet underground, little discussed “Red and Anarchist Black Metal” movement, nor entirely with environmentalist black metal. While his songs express concern for the environmental damages caused by coal mining, he never suggests outright that all mining ought to be stopped; he seems more concerned with the human stories of oppression and greed, and with today’s miners and

mountain residents having safety and fair wages. The performance of these songs also allows Lunn to demonstrate his understanding of history, using words from the past to shore up his own opinions and prove the authenticity of his contribution to the region's legacy of musical protest.

Sounds: Mining, nature, metal

Kentucky anchors these protest songs with lengthy tracks that combine the sounds of black metal, bluegrass, archival samples and sound effects to address the environmental and human costs of the coal industry. Several of Lunn's lyrics demonstrate a particular interest in sound – the sounds of heavy machinery, insects and weather, and even the sound of the Big Bang. In “Black Soot and Red Blood,” Lunn juxtaposes the strident sounds of mining with the sound of a brood of cicadas. (“Tonight the dis-harmonic symphony of the cicadas plagues my ears/ Drifting off to the mind-numbing hum of grinding gears”). The roar of a brood of periodical cicadas (*Magicicada*) can be deafening, dominating the outdoor soundscape for the summer weeks they spend above ground. Collectively, their droning buzz ebbs and dissipates, like the strident whir of a circular saw speeding up and slowing down, and as Lunn suggests, like the roar of a distant, tireless machine. The cicada has long been a symbol of insouciance in Western culture, an insect that improvidently spends the summer singing while the ant prudently gathers food for the winter (this moral tale appears as early as Aesop's Fables, ca. 600 BCE). The buzzing body of the cicada is glossed here as equivalent to the machinery of mining; they drone on, without concern for the future or the long-term consequences of their actions. Here, cicadas and machinery both participate in the local soundscape, signaling a preference for momentary advantage over long-term prosperity, an image of the cheapness of life and landscape in the coalfields.

In “Killing the Giants as They Sleep,” on the other hand, the lyrics juxtapose the sounds of mining with the act of creation/the Big Bang. (“You hack at the mountain and scrape away for your simple need what was formed by silent gods on the day the void first burst with sound.”) Here, the colossal sound of nature coming into being is a good at which mining slowly chips away – destruction seeking to negate creation. While the suggestion that the Appalachians are as old as the universe is a gross exaggeration (they are estimated to be half a billion years old), Lunn here draws on the cult of the past, which, as Yi-Fu Tuan says (1977), “calls for illusion rather than authenticity...a mood of time-soaked melancholy” (p. 194-195); what is old should be preserved as a support to human emotion and identity. In other moments of the song, industrial sounds suppress, interrupt and destroy the sounds of nature, which are themselves a source of human comfort. (“We wept as we passed through the mountains clothed in July clouds, under the restraint of power lines, their fury bursting through the summer haze as ethereal music filled the air...soot-grinding gears halt serenity.”) The lyrical, soaring melodies of this song, occurring alternately in the guitars and tin whistle, soar above the screams and blast beats that fill in the texture, gesturing at the emotions the mountains help Lunn to feel. This song in particular foregrounds environmental concerns, setting aside the issues of labor rights to focus on the mountains themselves – their beauty and “timelessness” – and framing their destruction as an injustice.

Interwoven with his music and lyrics, archival recordings fill the album with the voices of coal miners, their family members and the coal operators with whom they are locked in struggle. The voices are blended into the songs with sound effects suggesting that they are of the past, that they are the evidence supporting the musical rage. The samples come from a variety of sources, in-

cluding documentaries such as *Harlan County USA*, press conferences, and interviews Lunn conducted with friends affected by the coal industry (Cheryl, 2012). Together, these voices provide gritty details, both in the grains of the voices that speak and the content of their stories, and provide a rhetorical and historical framework for Lunn's more poetic lyrics, allowing him to frame present anger in terms of the past.

"Black Soot and Red Blood" includes a lengthy sample from the 1976 documentary *Harlan County USA*, in which a retired miner describes the Harlan County Mine Wars of the 1930s. (The film mainly covers the strikes of the 1970s, but uses their 1930s precedents as context.) The unnamed miner's voice is gravelly with age, and though he speaks with energy, each breath is audible as a wheeze, perhaps a consequence of his years in the mines. Behind his voice and the acoustic guitars, one hears the gentle whirring of an early film reel – a signal that we have entered the world of old images, an era that flickers, both visually and aurally. The man tells his version of events, which focuses on the abuses suffered by the miners and the realization that if they "stuck to their organization and stuck together in solidarity you could defeat [the coal companies]," but also includes the mention of the retaliatory violence dealt by the unionists; Lunn, however, chooses to make this portion of the story difficult to hear by bringing distorted electric guitars back in over it – the man's voice fades into the background, and we are brought gradually back into the sound world of black metal – the sound of present anger. By obscuring the latter part of the man's story, Lunn simplifies history and clarifies his allegiances.

Other samples in the album present arguments, struggles and protests. The ending of "Black Soot and Red Blood" fades into a crowd chanting, "Strike! Strike!" with intermittent screams of rage and/or pain in the background. At this moment, all that remains of the music is a single high-pitched screeching, distorted guitar tone that gradually dies down, allowing the human screams to emerge more clearly. There is an argument, and sounds of a scuffle, and then the voice of an elderly woman declares, "I'm ready to die. Are you?" There is the beep of a recording device being shut off, and then a few seconds of the "silence" of empty tape – a faint fuzz that evolves into the "megaphone" introduction to "Come all ye coal miners." Again, sounds of outdated sound reproduction technology are used to historicize the samples, taking us in and out of the "present" of the black metal sound.

Lunn brings only one of his samples fully into the black metal sound world. Toward the end of "Killing the Giants as They Sleep," a blast beat ushers in a particularly cacophonous moment. Several recordings are mixed together, all dealing with problems wrought by MTR: a discussion of water quality problems, an accusation that the coal companies think it's ok to destroy the landscape because the residents are "hillbillies," and a protestation that "We're not overburden. We're citizens in a democracy." A shrieking fiddle comes in on top of the slew of angry voices, carving out jagged atonal riffs barely reminiscent of the bluegrass it played before. In the background, Lunn is screaming the remainder of his lyrics: "Poison the earth, poison the stream, killing the weary giants as they sleep, blackened waters, sand and soot-grinding gears halt serenity." By bringing this cacophony of fiddle, angry voices, his own lyrics and the texture of a black metal blast beat all together, Lunn reminds his listeners that the issues addressed by this album are not only of the past, but also the present; MTR is happening right now in Kentucky. The benefit of hindsight does not yet exist, and the multiplicity of conflicting voices and desires represent the region's current reality.

The problem of bluegrass

Lunn uses the sounds of bluegrass on *Kentucky* to unify the album geographically, historically and emotionally. He stretches the historical unity too far, however, resulting in a racialized erasure of Appalachia's former Native American inhabitants, an erasure prevalent in White Appalachian discourses of place-based identity. The album's second track, "Bodies Under the Falls," is an outlier on the album as it deals not with coal mining, but with the abuse of the region's Native American population in the nineteenth century, attempting to situate the history of human greed and sorrow in Kentucky as one that predates coal mining. While its lyrics present the role of landscape in building memories, its music equates Native American loss of land with the losses experienced by White residents. The song tells the apocryphal story of the Massacre at Ywahoo Falls (alternate/current spelling: Yahoo Falls), a legend holding that in 1810, White settlers trapped and massacred hundreds of Cherokee at Yahoo Falls. The event remains part of Cherokee oral history, but no evidence has been found supporting its actual occurrence. Lunn's lyrics suggest that the landscape is the sole remaining witness to the murders, and that the waterfall "forever weeps" for the loss of life:

The blood stained soil, their ancestral forest
Where only trees now know of the horrors seen here.
Forgotten.
A nation left to weep, like spilling water over the falls.
The water passes over stone, falling so far below
Sorrow fills the air where tribal souls sleep beneath the cliffs, where Ywahoo
falls forever weeps.

Here, the landscape itself is the memory, the trace of what humans have forgotten or will not acknowledge.

Lunn's use of bluegrass in the song aligns the plight of the Native Americans with that of the coal miner. In the middle of the track, the black metal texture drops out, ushering in an interlude of banjo, mandolin, drums and a mournful Dobro (lap steel guitar) melody; a song that seems to side squarely with the rights and lives of the Cherokee is filled with bluegrass music – the music of the White settlers. Rebecca R. Scott notes that anti-mining residents of Appalachia sometimes compare their situation to that of the former Native American population, saying that they know how it feels to lose one's land (2010, p. 213-214). Lunn's conflation of White and Native American pain allows him to construct Appalachians as victims in a continuous colonial history, choosing to ignore the issues of race and the erasure of pre-European inhabitants that such a claim presents. The claim that the sorrows of Appalachian Kentucky predate coal mining has a rhetorical power, as it disconnects the pain from mining culture and pins it on the place itself; Appalachia becomes a place of tragedy, of "time-soaked melancholy" (Tuan, 1977, p. 195), and its residents can build a shared identity on these visions of the past. The landscape becomes both witness and victim, linking human generations through its relative permanence.

Conclusion

Kentucky demonstrates how the sound of black metal, whether or not infused with bluegrass, contributes to environmental debates and the issues surrounding Appalachian coal mining. Much of the music that precedes *Kentucky* in the mining debate foregrounds its intentions through textual clarity, and black

metal's predilection for incomprehensibly screamed lyrics destabilizes this tradition and foregrounds noisiness – the noisiness of mining and of protest. Black metal is capable of a raw sonic wrath that borders on the sublime – a sound so massive and chaotic it defies comprehension. The sounds of black metal eerily reflect the sounds of mining – blasting, grinding, hammering – and the loudness capacity of its electricity-driven sound resonates with the vibrations that damage homes near MTR sites. Its sound is grossly unnatural, reliant on electricity and effects, its amplification echoing the staggering size of the world's largest front-end loaders, draglines and dump trucks – machines capable of digging and hauling *hundreds of thousands of tons* of coal per day, machines which are commonplace at MTR sites. Superficially, it is ironic that an electricity-based (i.e. possibly coal-powered) music would become a voice for environmental issues. But as MTR continues to wreak havoc on humans, animals and landscape in the Appalachian region, black metal amplifies the rhetoric of local texts and bluegrass music in an effort to confront the onward march of blasting and drag-lining. The sounds of extreme metal speak the language of industry, and this, along with black metal's ethos of glorified marginalization, is what *Kentucky* contributes to an already rich musical history. Beyond this, the album also demonstrates a possibility for black metal that tends toward a generous humanism, seeking to understand how people process their sense of home, work and nature. In the context of black metal history, *Kentucky* is a humanist outlier, channeling a message of deep sorrow, but with a strain of hope for both the Appalachian mountain landscape and the people who reside there.

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