THIS ISN’T PARADISE, THIS IS HELL: DISCOURSE, PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY IN THE HAWAI‘I METAL SCENE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

AMERICAN STUDIES

DECEMBER 2012

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Keywords: metal, popular music, popular culture, religion, subculture, Hawai‘i
Abstract

The island of Oahu is home to probably the most ethnically diverse metal scene in the United States. Contemporary Hawai`i prides itself on being a “model of multiculturalism” free of the racism and ethnic strife that is endemic to the continent; however, beneath this superficial openness and tolerance exist deeply felt class, ethnic, and racial tensions. The metal scene in Hawai`i experiences these conflicting impulses towards inclusion and exclusion as profoundly as any other aspect of contemporary Hawaiian culture, but there is a persistent hope within the metal scene that subcultural identity can triumph over such tensions. Complicating this process is the presence of white military personnel, primarily born and raised on the continental United States, whose cultural attitudes, performances of masculinity, and conception of metal culture differ greatly from that of local metalheads. The misunderstandings, hostilities, bids for subcultural capital, and attempted bridge-building that take place between metalheads in Hawai`i constitute a subculturally specific attempt to address anxieties concerning the presence of the military, the history of race and racism in Hawai`i, and the complicated, often conflicting desires for both openness and exclusivity that exist within local culture. The metal scene in Hawai`i is perceived by participants as an idealized community that transcends the limitations and social tensions of dominant culture. Heavy metal allows participants in the Hawai`i scene to use cultural fragmentation to their advantage; to stay one-step ahead of dominant cultural authorities, and disrupt the ways in which they are perceived by others. The contentious, emotionally charged community that metalheads
have built for themselves in Hawai`i does provide a profound sense of belonging and identity, even if such feelings are unstable and always in contest. The knowledge that one belongs to such a community, that one retains membership in an underground world that most people are ignorant of, does carry over into participants’ everyday lives, making those spheres of life that metalheads have less control over seem less imposing and intimidating.
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I am standing in Mad Dog Saloon’s crowded main room in the heart of Waikiki on a muggy April night in the spring of 2009. Several of my friends have come with me this evening; humoring me as they occasionally do by accompanying me to a local metal event that they have very little interest in for their own sake. We are surrounded by a fairly diverse, multiethnic crowd: local metalheads, Mad Dog regulars, military personnel, friends and girlfriends of the band, and tourists who have wandered in from the street. Most of the locals are of Asian and Pacific Islander decent; most of the tourists and military personnel are haoles. All have come to witness the much anticipated (by me at least) live debut of local black metal titans Majestic Tyranny. I harbor a deep, abiding love of black metal music and have experienced it live many times on the continental United States. I am familiar with its aesthetics, rhetoric, ideological peculiarities and sonic affect. It is safe to assume that most of the people at Mad Dog Saloon this evening, even the metalheads in attendance, are not very familiar with black metal and probably have, at best, a vague sense of what Majestic Tyranny are attempting to achieve. The majority of the crowd is slightly older and whiter than is typical for a metal show on O‘ahu, although haoles make-up at most half of the crowd. Many of the younger local
scene members either cannot get into Mad Dog Saloon or shun Waikiki on basic principal.

Before us, crammed onto a small stage in the corner of the room stand Majestic Tyranny themselves and a bizarre, incongruous apparition they are. Dominating center stage is Majestic Tyranny’s singer; well over six feet tall, muscular, bearded, long-haired, looking like an undead Conan the Barbarian who has just shambled in from some fantastic battlefield. He is wearing the traditional Norwegian-style face paint known as corpse paint, usually consisting of black around the eyes and mouth with white covering the rest of the face. The effect is intended to be demonic and inhuman, and black metalers usually succeed in this impression. The Majestic Tyranny vocalist is no exception in this regard; he looks genuinely menacing and bestial. From a certain perspective corpse paint can be seen as a kind of “white face” although this interpretation would probably never occur to the vast majority of black metalers. It must also be noted that the majority of black metal bands are of white, European ancestry, the vocalist for Majestic Tyranny included. He is wearing black from head to toe, with spiked bracelets and an impressive bullet belt. Around his neck hangs a necklace of the hammer Mjölnir, symbol of the Old Norse God Thor and a favorite accoutrement of both Old Norse Pagans and metalheads. The rest of the band are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and reflect a more toned-down version of the vocalist’s visual style. Speaking in a low, guttural, highly theatrical voice the vocalist greets the crowd by observing, “There are so many children of Satan here tonight!” The crowd responds with appreciative howls before being drowned out by the barrage of dense, frenzied black metal unleashed by the band as they begin their first song.
How can we make sense of this brief snapshot of an unusual black metal performance? What is the purpose of invoking Satanism and the Old Norse Gods in the heart of Waikiki while drunken haole tourists look on confusedly and local Christians mutter suspiciously to one another about devil worshippers, and multiethnic metalheads hurl one-another around the pit? What sorts of identities are being constructed or contested by this strange half menacing, half humorous performance? How many people in Mad Dog Saloon that night enjoyed being referred to as children of Satan, and where would such pleasure come from? Why might a multiethnic individual from West Oʻahu, without any particular connection to Scandinavia, feel attracted to and empowered by a symbol like Thor’s hammer? In many respects Hawaiʻi is the least metal place on Earth. Majestic Tyranny were attempting to evoke images of icy Norwegian mountains and forbidding, primordial forests populated by demons and werewolves. Such imagery could not be more in contrast to the neon-lit sleaze of Waikiki on a Sunday night, and this is exactly the point. Metalheads in Hawaiʻi are attracted to metal culture because of its radical otherness. It does not just seem like something from another place, but something totally removed from the mundane world. Metal envisions a mysterious, magical, romantic world that is simultaneously deeply hostile to many facets of dominant culture. In presenting a pummeling, abrasive, largely inaccessible form of extreme heavy metal music to a mixed, multiethnic crowd of observers while glorifying Satanism and vilifying both Christianity and modernity, Majestic Tyranny create a deeply unstable, ambiguous cultural space in which pleasure can be derived from the discomfort and bewilderment of others, as well as from awareness of one’s unique subcultural knowledge and identity. It
is this chaotic, enigmatic affect that gives metal culture in Hawai‘i much of its power to
disrupt the identities of participants and confuse the expectations of outsiders.

Metal in Hawai‘i brings myriad facets of contemporary American culture into
contact, which rarely confront one another under normal circumstances. White, twenty-
something Military guys fresh from Afghanistan drink alongside middle-aged, working-
class Filipinos having a beer after a long-day’s work. Morbidly obese haole tourists from
Omaha or Dallas accidentally find themselves warily observing an exuberant circle pit
populated by local, multiethnic teenagers at places like the Hard Rock Café or Mad Dog
Saloon in Waikiki. Local moms and dads who have come to see their teenage son’s
metalcore band at Pipeline Café find themselves baffled by the spectacle of straight-edge
military haoles with giant black X’s on their hands apparently beating each other
senseless in the center of the auditorium. Far more so than the vast majority of other
manifestations of contemporary youth culture, metal in Hawai‘i forces disparate cultural
elements into confrontation with one another, creating a liminal cultural space filled with
tension, confusion and ecstasy. This uncertainty, disorientation, and chaos create an
entropic realm in which power can be contested. Participants in the O‘ahu metal scene
express an intense desire for the divisions and inequalities that characterize their
everyday lives to be dissolved or overcome through participation in the scene. This
desire usually goes unrealized, although the O‘ahu metal scene does provide an important
venue for these desires and anxieties to be explored, challenged, and disrupted.

This study analyzes the activities, performances, anxieties and discourses that I
observed within the metal scene on O‘ahu from August of 2008 until May of 2011. I will
address two closely related questions: **How does metal subcultural identity complicate or problematize previously acquired ethnic, racial, sexual, class, gender, religious or national identities?** Do the meanings and identities created in the subcultural environment carry over from the mosh pit back onto the street and vice versa, and if so, **in what way?** Metalheads in Hawai‘i engage in a range of discursive and performative practices in an attempt to achieve empowerment, to aid in the construction of versatile, pleasurable identities, and to establish a unified, inclusive community. Like the cultural landscape of O‘ahu more generally, the metal scene is a deeply complex, highly diverse, and often confusing cultural entity. Various shades of insider status are pitted against numerous manifestations of outsider status; each subcategory within the scene attempts to lay claim to particular kinds of power and identify themselves with specific aspects of metal culture. Tensions within the scene are endemic, with different factions constantly vying for power and attempting to marginalize unwanted elements; these tendencies coexist with a simultaneous desire for unity and inclusion. These anxieties often mirror social tensions endemic to the larger culture of contemporary Hawai‘i, in spite of the fact that scene members are seeking to escape these very problems through subcultural activity. Simultaneously, scene members have often expressed to me and one another the mythology of Hawai‘i as a land free of racism, inequality and social strife; at other times these same individuals will openly acknowledge the fictitious nature of this myth and the bedrock reality of these problems.¹ This contradiction sheds light on some of the most deeply felt anxieties within the O‘ahu scene; we are seriously divided/ we are all one ‘ohana. Indeed, this contradiction is a

¹ Okamura 2010, 10.
reflection of a larger contradiction that can be seen throughout contemporary Hawai`i; within the O`ahu metal scene it takes subculturally specific forms.

But metal is very far from being a stable entity, concept or culture; indeed it is deeply contested and nowhere more so than in Hawai`i. While Majestic Tyranny shriek about pentagrams and bloody rituals involving goats, somewhere else on O`ahu there are Christian metal bands praising the healing blood of Jesus Christ and the universality of God`s love. Metal is something like a Platonic ideal; a perfect standard of authenticity that can never be truly achieved but which is sought after feverishly. Metal is far more than a type of music, or even a family of musical genres; it is a range of cultural ideals that stresses community, identity and individual power. How this supposed international metal community is defined, what constitutes an authentic metal identity, and how individual power can best be achieved is the stuff of deeply contentious subcultural discourse. It is this discourse, these battles for status, prestige, and power, and more specifically how these battles play out on the isolated, ethnically diverse, culturally unique battleground of O`ahu that constitutes my primary concerns in this dissertation.

This study is, first and foremost, an ethnography. I have spent more hours than I can keep track of in attending shows and making casual conversation with scene members, discussing Hawai`i, metal culture and the scene itself. These casual discussions were invaluable in terms of filling in important gaps in my understanding and sharpening my conception of particular topics. But such everyday talk poses a difficult methodological problem: how do I keep track of these discussions and make sure that they are accurate? Although I took careful notes throughout my field work, these kinds
of informal dialogs cannot be analyzed as carefully or used in the same way as formal
interviews. Although essential to my work, these extemporaneous bits of ethnographic
data must be seen as background information that enriches the overall fabric of my
perspective without being useful as specific, closely read evidence.

From December of 2008 until May of 2011 I conducted numerous formal, recorded interviews with about 40 scene members, and many more semi-formal conversations that were not recorded. About two-thirds of my informants come from either multiethnic backgrounds, or identify with a particular Asian or Pacific Islander ethnicity. Roughly one-third of my informants are haoles, and the majority of these individuals are, or were at one time, in the military. In the majority of cases I have attempted to the best of my ability to conceal the identity of my informants. The Oʻahu scene is quite small by mainland standards and the need to protect my informants’ identities was paramount in order for them to feel comfortable expressing themselves and to avoid any conflicts within the scene that might arise as a result of my work. I have attempted to balance ethnographic detail, with the very real need to provide anonymity to my interviewees in a scene where everyone knows everyone else. The one major exception to this anonymity comes in the form of my friend and informant Lowell Gerry, vocalist for local death metal band Before Fire and driving force behind local promotion company Nemesis Productions, who insists on my using his real name. Lowell feels that it is important that he take responsibility for his comments and that he has nothing to hide, so I am quite willing to honor his wishes.
I had originally, and in truth naively, gone into this project hoping for quiet one-on-one interviews in which I was able to steer the direction of the interviews and move from topic to topic in a standardized, predictable way. It soon became obvious to me that such an approach was neither possible nor desirable. As folklorist and popular culture ethnographer Bill Ellis sagely reminds us, “Stories are like living organisms existing in relationship with many ecological factors: other story lines with which they compete and share material, the teller whose brains they inhabit, the communities through which they disseminate.”\(^2\) It became quite clear to me that my friends and informants in the Oʻahu metal scene were indeed telling me stories; stories about themselves, their childhood, their families, their friends, their experiences in high school, in church, on stage, at shows, in mosh pits, and in numerous other contexts. In most cases these stories were told in lively, jovial groups filled with laughter, interruption, and disagreement. Very early on in this project it became evident to me that these interviews were performances; as much performances as anything that I observed bands doing on stage. My friends and informants were performing for one another, they were performing for me, and they were performing for whoever might be reading what I would eventually write. In a very significant way, the methods through which I have been attempting to study power, taste and identity construction became themselves a venue in which to play these games of culture.\(^3\) Far from being sterile, objective data, my interviews themselves became performative texts that played a role in the culture that I was attempting to document.

\(^2\) Ellis 2003, 5.

\(^3\) Bourdieu 1984, 12.
Ethnographers, as well as those scholars who are critical of ethnography, often raise the important question of veracity; how does the ethnographer know that their informants are telling them the truth? Are the statements provided by a particular informant really representative of the culture or the subject that they are discussing? Some would say that because memory is unreliable, people are dishonest, and ethnographers themselves bring their own slew of biases to the table, that ethnography is not a worthwhile method of scholarship. Others would go so far as to say that ethnography is exploitive and unavoidably ethnocentric. These concerns are essential in dispelling lingering claims of “scientific objectivity” that have too often deluded the analyses of anthropologists and sociologists in particular, but ethnography need not be directed toward the acquisition of some mythical, essential truth. In their wonderful article *Narrating the Self* Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps remind us that, “While narrative does not yield absolute truth, it can transport narrators and audiences to more authentic feelings, beliefs and actions and ultimately to a more authentic sense of life.”


Ethnographers that deal heavily with oral narratives, interviews and other genres of linguistic performance must conceive of their work as a form of *discourse analysis*; the interpretation and examination of a creative, on-going process of meaning-making that is very much group oriented and constantly in flux.5 In telling stories about their early experiences with metal, in talking about the character of the scene, in describing the behavior of other scene members, my informants are not presenting me with some factual

5 Foucault 1990, 18.
document of “what the scene is really like,” rather they are outlining a perspective that engages a particular cultural discourse in an attempt to lay claim to power and pleasure.

For this reason, I have relied heavily on the work of folklorists like Bill Ellis, Gary Allen Fine, Patricia A. Turner and Richard Dorson in conceptualizing my methodology.⁶ These scholars remind us to not only pay attention to what an informant is saying, but how they say it, in what context they say it, and to whom they are saying it. I have done my upmost to preserve the interviews that I recorded as meticulously as possible, including every pause, interruption, nervous laugh, and garbled phrase. My dissertation will include very close, surgical readings of these utterances. Bill Ellis argues that this type of closely read, contextualized ethnography, “will have two practical values: first, we will understand how our cultural vocabulary and grammar restrict our capacity to describe experience, and second, we will hear, perhaps for the first time, what our informants so desperately are trying to say in the face of legendry.”⁷ Although Ellis is mainly concerned with contemporary legends, his insights regarding this particular category of folklore are equally applicable to the subcultural discourses being constructed by my informants. Ellis’ assessment of close ethnographic readings has a number of important implications for this project: firstly, it suggests that arcane, subculturally specific jargon can be instrumental in constructing a participants’ understanding of their reality and have the capacity to contest the assumptions and narratives of the larger cultural setting, in this case 21st century O’ahu. This is not to say that slang, obscure

⁷ Ellis 2003, 159
terminology, and subculturally distinctive narratives directly challenge dominant culture, but as Ellis suggests, language, and the limitations we place upon the language we use, play a deeply important role in our perception of reality. Secondly, Ellis proposes that if ethnographers can retain awareness of the particular argot and narrative genres being employed than we will have a far more nuanced understanding of the more significant connotations of what our informants are attempting to communicate to us. My in-depth understanding of contemporary metal terminology and narrative forms, as well as my general understanding of youth culture in Hawai`i, allows me to hear my informants in the various languages and genres in which they speak and to apply that understanding to my analysis.

Although I have spent a great deal of time talking with metalheads in Hawai`i, I have spent just as much time observing and participating in local metal shows where the majority of scene activity takes place. From the beginning of my fieldwork on O`ahu I have attempted to find a reasonable balance between relatively unobtrusive observation and enthusiastic participation. I believe there is much to be gained from hanging back in the shadows and patiently taking note of what is going on at local shows. Seeing, listening, and taking-in the events unfolding around me provided a different and perhaps more detailed assessment of a particular show. I have seen the majority of bands that comprise the O`ahu metal scene many times and have taken great pleasure in watching them evolve, improve and interact with each other. While it was not always easy to stay towards the back when a favorite band launched in to a particularly enjoyable number, I have attempted to allow myself throughout this project particular evenings designed for
quiet observation; when one is not directly involved in what is going on, one tends to see different things.

Although I have often been a simple observer, I have more often been an enthusiastic participant when attending local shows. The most honest reason for this methodological decision is that I simply cannot help myself; I am a passionate fan of heavy metal music and I immensely enjoy seeing it performed live. Perhaps more so than other types of music, heavy metal is a profoundly physical and experiential form of art that is intended to elicit wild, even fanatic responses from its audience. Although headbanging, moshing, shouting my approval and myriad other subculturally approved forms of physical activity are very much knee-jerk reactions for me when attending a metal performance, such behavior on my part does have more practical, methodological functions for me regarding this project.

To begin with, these kinds of physical, participatory acts of signification are necessary for me to show the bands and other scene members that I am enjoying the set and that I am capable of behaving as a participant, not just as an outside observer. Just as my friends and informants were performing for various audiences during our interviews, so too was I performing for the O‘ahu metal scene at live shows and in numerous other contexts. Although I did have a practical need to prove to the metal scene that I was a legitimate fan of the music in order to gain their trust and enlist their help for this project, my desire to acquire my own cultural capital and to show the rest of the scene that I was a metalhead not so unlike themselves was a more compelling motivation. I wanted the metal scene on O‘ahu to appreciate my presence within their
scene for reasons that had nothing to do with my doctoral dissertation, but rather as part
of my own, personal, ongoing project of self-creation and identity construction; I wanted
them to think I was cool.

In addition to strategic and performative reasons for participation, there is no
getting around the fact that mosh pits must be experienced to be understood. Some of the
most breathtakingly intense moments of my life have been experienced in mosh pits.
There are many different ways of moshing, and indeed, every individual mosh pit has its
own unique character. It would not have been possible for me to write about the
Dionysian excess of a fully formed mosh pit if I had stayed politely in the corner
scribbling down notes or murmuring into my voice recorder. Although mosh pits are by
no means the sites of unrestrained, mindless violence that they may seem to be to
outsiders, they are chaotic places where injuries do sometimes occur. I remember very
well having to present a paper at a graduate student conference sporting a tremendous
black eye from having been accidentally head-butted in the face in a mosh pit a few
nights before. I will delve into detailed descriptions and explanations of particular
moshing experiences later in this dissertation, but for the moment let it suffice to say that
mosh pits are places of ecstatic, vertiginous cultural activity in which the scene’s
compassion, frustration and sense of community can all be experienced in their most
heightened and immediate forms. Ethnographic participation is absolutely mandatory in
order to gain any perspective on a cultural activity of such significance and intensity.

During the period of my fieldwork, the O‘ahu metal scene found itself in a
precarious, uncertain moment in the history of popular music. The record industry that
had completely dominated popular music since the early 20th century was in the process of collapsing.\textsuperscript{8} Illegal file sharing and new advances in recording software, for better or for worse, have totally revolutionized the way in which listeners acquire music, as well as the ways in which musicians produce and make money from their music. Since at least the mid 1990’s the recording industry, particularly the major labels, have been rather indifferent to metal, and extreme metal in particular. In a very significant way, metal scenes in the United States have managed to stay relatively removed from the impositions of the major label record industry and other financial interests.\textsuperscript{9} Metal culture valorizes the concept of “the underground” and demonizes “selling out” to a dramatic degree; the music industry is perceived as at best a necessary evil and at worst the personification of everything that metalheads are struggling against. In this sense, the O‘ahu metal scene is very pure, community-based and apathetic towards financial concerns. As one young scene member whom I will call Will puts it:

If there was a band that did take themselves really seriously, and like wanted to go on tour and make a CD and stuff, I would kind of see them as like a joke kinda. Like at first I wouldn’t really take them seriously, I wouldn’t see them as like a real band kinda. Like they just want to get famous. They probably would end up getting famous and then they would be the one’s laughing at me but (laughs)…\textsuperscript{10}

Here we see Will equating relatively modest ambitions like touring and putting out a CD with a lack of authenticity. For most people within the O‘ahu scene, metal should be about artistic expression, community building, and perhaps more than anything

\textsuperscript{8} Suisman 2009, 51.

\textsuperscript{9} Kahn-Harris 2007, 95.

\textsuperscript{10} 6-29-2010
else, the pleasures and experiences available through participation in the metal scene. Metal bands on O‘ahu do not become involved in the scene in the hopes of making money or signing a record contract; their motivations are largely social and artistic.

With this in mind, the metal scene on O‘ahu does produce a rich array of physical artistic texts including recorded CDs and MP3s of music, fliers promoting shows, album cover art, concert photography, video recordings of performances, and band t-shirts. Music is either recorded using at-home software, or in one of O‘ahu’s small, inexpensive local recording studios. The recorded music that does circulate through the scene is either distributed over the internet or sold on CD-Rs at shows. Fliers and album art are often crafted by band members or promoters with drawing or painting skills. Several members of the scene are semi-professional photographers or videographers who take wonderful pictures and videos of scene activity as a hobby and distribute them over the internet. T-shirts are invariably designed by band members or close friends and printed at commercial t-shirt shops. Very little financial capital is produced through any of these activities which serve largely artistic and promotional functions. For an ethnographer, these texts are immensely rich and instructive; they provide a venue through which the scene imagines itself. I have collected as many of these artifacts as possible over the course of my fieldwork and they will provide an important component of my analysis.

In addition to the gradual demise of the record industry, the metal scene in Hawai‘i also finds itself at a significant crossroads in the history of popular music as a result of the proliferation of virtual culture and social media. Baudrillard ominously foretells, “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It
is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”  

The postmodern world that Baudrillard envisions is one in which virtual images proliferate to the point where meaning and signification are impossible. To a certain degree Baudrillard’s concern of a world of endless simulation has relevance to the metal scene in Hawai`i. Very few nationally or internationally successful bands perform in Hawai`i, and much of what the younger scene members know about metal culture elsewhere comes from things that they have seen or read on the internet. This produces an ambiguous combination of insecurity regarding their lack of experience, frustration at what they are missing out on, and pride in their uniqueness and insulation from passing trends.

Consider the following statement given to me by one of my informants, whom I will call Martin, regarding the difficulty of seeing major, international bands perform live in Hawai`i:

For me, it doesn’t really change things. Because…I’m on YouTube a lot (band laughs). I watch a lot of bands live. And I listen to a lot of bands, so I see and hear almost the same things everyone else sees just not…in person. Just on the video camera. 

We see here that for Martin watching a video recording of a band playing their music on YouTube is not dramatically different than seeing a band perform in the flesh. Digital mediation is said not to be a major drawback for Martin as well as many of the other younger scene members whom I spoke with. Given that this is the case, Baudrillard

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12 6-29-2010
might assume that the O‘ahu scene exists purely in a virtual sense; just a bunch of kids posting videos of themselves on YouTube for other people to watch. However, this is most definitely not the case; the O‘ahu scene thrives in the live setting. In the quote above, we can see that Martin is trying to dismiss his relative lack of experience with seeing nationally and internationally successful bands perform live by trying to equate YouTube videos with first-hand experience. We can see that he pauses nervously before admitting that he is, “on YouTube a lot,” and that his band-mates laugh a little bit at his expense when he says this. He pauses again when he says, “I see and hear almost the same things everyone else sees just not…in person.” His pause before saying, “in person,” is very telling; Martin is quite aware that watching a band on YouTube is very different than seeing them in the flesh, but he is attempting to prevent himself, Hawai`i, and the scene from appearing to be culturally isolated or subculturally inexperienced.

The role of virtual culture and social media in the O‘ahu metal scene is complicated and, on the whole, not as significant as one might expect given Hawai`i’s geographical isolation and the general unreliability of music venues on O‘ahu. Facebook serves as an important method of promoting shows and communication between scene members. I have borne witness to and participated in many interesting on-line conversations via Facebook with scene members, and these on-line communications have been very useful to me in my research, but on-line activity is far less important than face-to-face interactions at shows. Some scene members do curate webpages and write blogs that are relevant to the scene, but these virtual venues serve as an extra method of commenting upon things that happened at live performances, not as any replacement for
the live setting. In comparison to the very visceral, physical, immediate cultural activity that takes place at live shows, on-line activity is supplemental in its significance.

The scholarship of popular culture ethnographers like Henry Jenkins, Sarah Thornton and Janice Radway has been deeply important to my methodology. These important scholars have provided me with a methodological framework that incorporates both textual analysis and ethnography into a dynamic understanding of popular culture. The interdisciplinary rigor of American Studies and Cultural Studies has proven to be absolutely necessary in dealing with the myriad types of data that the Oʻahu scene has presented me with. In addition to their interdisciplinarity, American Studies and Cultural Studies have continuously reminded me to situate my subject in its historical context.

Although ethnography has been my primary methodology throughout this project, different fields of study have helped me re-imagine what ethnography consists of and how it can be understood. Of course, my most invaluable insights regarding the process of ethnography have come from my friends and informants in the Oʻahu metal scene who kept me on my toes and have never let me forget that at any given time, I am only seeing part of the puzzle.

Metal in Context

This project concerns a unique, isolated community of heavy metal fans and musicians on the island of Oʻahu between the summer of 2008 and the spring of 2011. But such a community must be understood in the context of heavy metal as a global

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phenomenon, or as an international subculture. Metal is one of the most widely distributed subcultures and genres of popular music in the contemporary world.\textsuperscript{14} Having been in existence as a distinct musical genre since roughly the late 1960’s, and, I will argue, as an identifiable subculture since sometime in the late 1970’s, metal remains perhaps the most diverse, resilient and internationally recognizable form of popular music culture on Earth. Although boasting consistent, enthusiastic subcultural membership in a few metal hot spots like Germany, Brazil, Norway, and Indonesia, metalheads exist in fluctuating and less visible numbers in virtually every corner of the world. The only lingering exceptions to this process of internationalization are the less-developed regions of sub-Saharan Africa, and even there metal is gaining a foothold. Deena Weinstein argues that, “Death metal rules underground metal; the subgenre has the largest contingent of bands and the most extensive global reach. It is found in every part of the world where there is an industrial working class and is more ubiquitous than McDonalds.”\textsuperscript{15} As Weinstein notes, metal since its earliest days has been closely linked with the industrial working class, and this tendency continues as metal proliferates throughout the developing world.

Exactly when hard rock became heavy metal is an inevitably subjective assessment, but this question has become a discursive focal point for metal fans; something like a subcultural creation myth. Human beings revel in organization and genealogy, and metalheads are certainly not an exception to this rule. Ian Christe begins

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\item[14] Wallach, Berger, Greene 2011, 4-5.
\end{footnotes}
his very well informed, and in many ways definitive, history of heavy metal with a wonderfully detailed timeline of metal’s development. Christe’s chronology begins with what most metalheads agree to be the first genuine heavy metal record and the first genuine heavy metal band: Black Sabbath’s eponymous first album released in 1970. Although some metalheads occasionally refer to bands from the 1960’s like Blue Cheer and Led Zeppelin which preceded Black Sabbath, the two most authoritative histories of metal, Christe’s Sound of the Beast and anthropologist Sam Dunn’s wonderful documentary Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey both name Black Sabbath as the original heavy metal band. During the 1970’s heavy metal grew very much in tandem with the burgeoning punk scene in England with each style contributing to the sonic characteristics of the other. Both punk and metal can be seen as a response to the implosion of the 1960’s counter-culture and the nihilism, hopelessness, and frustration that replaced the optimism of youth culture in the 1960’s.

Beginning in the late 1970’s with bands like Motörhead, Judas Priest, and Saxon, heavy metal began to take on very unique characteristics that distanced the genre and its fans from punk and other forms of rock music, a process that would continue into the present. In perhaps the best and most scholarly book ever written about heavy metal, musicologist Robert Walser describes the sonic and emotional characteristics of classic heavy metal:

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16 Christe 2004, viii.
17 Christe 2004, viii.
19 Christe 2004, 8.
If there is one feature that underpins the coherence of heavy metal as a genre, it is the power chord…The power chord can be percussive and rhythmic or indefinitely sustained; it is used both to articulate and to suspend time. It is a complex sound made up of resultant tones and overtones, constantly renewed and energized by feedback. It is at once the musical basis for heavy metal and an apt metaphor for it, for musical articulation of power is the most important single factor in the experience of heavy metal.  

Although during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s English heavy metal found a unique musical framework for the articulation of power, triumph and ecstasy that came to be known as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, metal culture would soon spread across continental Europe and North America, finding a particularly loyal and innovative fan-base in central and northern Europe amongst the working class.  

During the early 1980’s heavy metal developed a distinctive aesthetic that borrowed from leather and denim clad bikers, sword-and-sorcery imagery gleaned from fantasy novels and films, as well as occult and Satanic imagery drawn from hundreds of years of European religious folklore. Male metalheads (and most of them were male) became famous for having long hair, a style which differentiated them from punks, skinheads, and most other youth subcultures of the 1980’s. An identifiable sense of community and identity gradually coalesced around heavy metal music as the genre proliferated across the world and came to be vilified by conservative, usually religious cultural voices.

The 1980’s was a profoundly formative decade for metal. With the ascension of Iron Maiden, Ozzy Osborne and Judas Priest into the upper-reaches of mainstream

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20 Walser 1993, 2.  
22 Christe, 33. Mudrian, 77.  
popularity, metal began to both grow and fragment. As the more accessible bands and styles gradually made their way onto MTV, main-stream radio, and the larger concert venues, metal began its on-going process of subgenreization. While bands like Van Halen, Def Leppard and Scorpions streamlined the metal sound and toned down its transgressive imagery in order to appeal to a mass audience, bands such as Bathory, Mercyful Fate, Venom, and Slayer took metal further towards sonic and aesthetic extremes, and appealed mainly to metal’s traditional male, working-class fanbase.

Throughout the 1980’s metal continued its complex relationship with punk, which had itself split-off into more accessible forms exemplified by bands like the Clash and the Buzzcocks, and much more extreme versions that came to be known as hardcore. Throughout much of the 1980’s metalheads and hardcore kids were violently antagonistic towards one another, while the styles of music, rather ironically, continued to exchange a great deal of mutual influence. So-called crossover bands like D.R.I., Corrosion of Conformity and S.O.D. openly encouraged subcultural and musical mingling between metal and hardcore in the mid and late 1980’s, a process that has continued to evolve since that time. The O’ahu metal scene exhibits a fascinating example of how these two subcultural cousins have coalesced in the 21st century.

As accusations of Satanism and demonic brain-washing from the religious right became more hysterical, metal adapted its sound and aesthetics to live up to these almost


impossible standards of transgression. We see here a fascinating example of what Bill Ellis calls ostension; the acting out of contemporary legends that were initially unfounded, but came to be partially true through the process of ostension. Ellis explains: “The more naturally occurring incidents are explained in terms of “Satanism,” the more certain people, especially adolescents, will be tempted to experiment with ostension, either by acting out narratives as hoaxes, or more dangerously, by taking Satanism seriously and becoming, however temporarily, part of the legend itself.”28 The playful, provocative, less-sincere version of ostension, what Ellis calls pseudo-ostension, has become commonplace in metal. Images of pentagrams, lyrics about Satanism, and declarations of hostility towards Christianity have been some of metal’s defining features since the mid 1980’s. The Majestic Tyranny performance described above fits neatly into this category. However, what Ellis calls ostension proper has also occasionally occurred, most famously during the Norwegian black metal scene of the early 1990’s in which dozens of churches were burned down, many graveyards were desecrated, and a number of people were murdered.29 What began in the feverish imaginations of conservative Christians in the United States eventually inspired the real-life acting out of these conspiracy theories and subversion myths by Norwegian and Swedish metalheads who decided to take the combination of Satanism and heavy metal very seriously indeed. I will explore the symbiotic relationship between conservative Christianity and heavy metal in greater detail in Chapter Two; this brief synopsis is meant to serve as an introduction to this important relationship.

28Ellis 2003, 225.

29Olson 2008.
In the early 1990’s the bottom fell out of the mainstream, pop-metal market.\textsuperscript{30} The giddy, unprecedented success of Metallica and glam metal in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s was followed by a sudden and precipitous plunge in mainstream metal’s popularity and the virtual demise of the entire glam metal genre. The rise of grunge and alternative rock had a great deal to do with this, but like the disco craze of the late 1970’s, the fan-base of glam metal in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s was largely caught up in the fad of the moment and lacked sincere, long-term commitment to the genre. While glam metal was dying its abrupt, violent death, what came to be called extreme metal was experiencing an artistic, if not commercial, renaissance.\textsuperscript{31} In the United States bands like Death, Morbid Angel, Autopsy and Repulsion took the already intense thrash metal genre to new, highly experimental places, heavily contributing to the burgeoning subgenre of death metal.\textsuperscript{32} Inspired by some of the same more extreme thrash metal bands that were provoking the Americans, metalheads in Sweden began reaching similar musical conclusions as their counterparts in Florida and California, giving rise to the highly influential Swedish death metal scene.\textsuperscript{33} Just to the west in Norway, bands like Mayhem, Emperor, Burzum and Darkthrone were constructing a droning, haunting, deeply emotional form of heavy metal that came to be called black metal. Terrorism and Satanism aside, the music produced during this early period in Norwegian black metal was strikingly unique and evocative; this small scene in Norway inspired likeminded

\textsuperscript{30} Christe 2003, 236.

\textsuperscript{31} Christe 2003, 237-238.

\textsuperscript{32} Mudrian 2004, 74-85.

\textsuperscript{33} Ekeroth 2006, 26.
artists all over the world to produce some of the most interesting, emotive heavy metal of the last 20 years. Death metal and black metal are probably the two most important subgenres that fall under the banner of extreme metal, but there are many others and more are being created all the time. The characteristics of extreme metal as a general category include a lack of traditional verse/chorus/verse song structure, harsh/screaming vocals, highly controversial subject matter, melody either being used in very specific ways or totally abandoned, extremes in tempo, very long or very short song lengths, heavy use of distortion, unusual guitar tunings, and a general emphasis on sonic intensity and abrasiveness. Extreme metal has come to dominate the metal scenes in North America and much of Western Europe, but traditional, more melodic metal still retains popularity in places like Germany and Italy.

While North America and Northern Europe led metal’s artistic evolution in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, processes of globalization were beginning to make themselves felt within metal culture during this period as well. Sepultura and Sercófago from Brazil contributed significantly to the development of thrash and death metal, while adding musical characteristics and subject matter that were uniquely Brazilian. As Communism began to crumble metal bands throughout Eastern Europe began forming bands that would eventually coalesce into some of the most prolific metal scenes in the world, particularly in Poland, Russia and Ukraine.\(^\text{34}\) In Japan, Singapore, Indonesia and throughout Asia metal scenes began to take shape that would reorient metal culture to suit

\(^{34}\text{Olson 2012.}\)
their particular locations and cultural attitudes. The story of metal’s ongoing proliferation across the world is far too long and complex to recount in-depth here, but it is important to emphasize that metal has taken on culturally unique characteristics in the various regions, nations and ethnic groups in which it has manifested while retaining the ideal of an international, subcultural identity that transcends geographic boundaries. As we will see, Hawai‘i is a particular, unique case study in this ongoing process of globalization.

Hawai‘i in Context

Although this dissertation is intended to contribute to the ongoing discussions concerning international metal culture, it is just as much about Hawai‘i at the beginning of the 21st century. Although I will be discussing several bands from Maui and the Big Island as well as the stories and experiences of scene members who grew up elsewhere in the Pacific, the vast majority of my research concerns the scene on O‘ahu. As the most populous, diverse and urban of the Hawaiian Islands, O‘ahu is quite different from its neighbor islands and serves as a cultural nexus for much of the Pacific. O‘ahu is also where Hawai‘i’s tensions, hostilities, inequalities, and uncertainties can be felt most keenly; these problems inevitably manifest themselves to varying degrees within the metal scene. These tensions take on ambiguous, sometimes contradictory forms when filtered through the lens of the metal scene, but never totally dissipate. Honolulu is the economic, political and cultural center of O‘ahu. The North Shore is much more rural


36 For an interesting overview of metal’s internationalization see Scot McFadyen and Sam Dunn’s documentary Global Metal, Seville Pictures 2008.
than Honolulu and is home to many of Oʻahu’s most wealthy citizens, as well as several of my informants. West Oʻahu is perhaps the poorest and most underdeveloped part of Oʻahu and houses many of the recent immigrants from elsewhere in the Pacific as well as a large portion of Oʻahu’s Native Hawaiian communities; many of my informants are also from this part of the island. Tensions regarding the presence of the military in Hawaiʻi, the tourism industry, and Hawaiʻi’s status as part of the United States are acutely felt in West Oʻahu, and indeed throughout the island. Metal bands hail from all parts of Oʻahu, and members bring their experiences and frustrations with them into the scene, while simultaneously emphasizing a hope for these divisions to be nullified.

At the southern edge of Honolulu, surrounded by the Ala Wai canal, lays the heart of Oʻahu’s tourism industry, the world-famous Waikiki. Waikiki is a disorienting, over-developed, tourism carnival where millions of tourists congregate every year in order to bask in the hyper-realistic depictions of Hawaiʻi and Hawaiian culture on sale there. Very few of my informants live in Waikiki, and most tend to avoid it whenever possible, but shows sometimes take place there due to the high venue concentration. The Hawaiʻi being paraded before tourists in Waikiki is a Hawaiʻi without context, reference, or history. The vague, seductive, floating signifier paradise replaces the Hawaiʻi that was colonized by haoles throughout the second half of the 19th century and annexed to the United States in 1898.  

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37 Rohrer 2010, 18-21.
blocks away on Kalakaua. Meth addicts pace nervously through the crowded side-streets, past the uncountable numbers of t-shirt shops selling ukuleles and grass skirts. Waikiki is undoubtedly one of the great postmodern landscapes in the contemporary world. In the introduction to his brilliant, disturbing novel Crash, J.G. Ballard writes:

The marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an over-lit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography. Over our lives preside the great twin leitmotifs of the 20th century - sex and paranoia. Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves…We have annexed the future into the present, as merely one of those manifold alternatives open to us. Options multiply around us, and we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly. 

Ballard might have been describing Waikiki, with its simmering undercurrent of racial anxiety, commodified sexuality, and dehistoricized simulations. In a somewhat troubling sense, Waikiki exemplifies the commodification, contradiction, and simulation that characterize contemporary Hawai`i more generally. Waikiki is at once beautiful, exhausting, absurd, charming and obscene.

The presence of the military and the tourism industry are two closely related sources of profound tension in Hawai`i. Like many very deeply felt anxieties, the trepidation felt towards the military and tourism in Hawai`i are intertwined with a paradoxical sense of dependence and economic necessity. Jonathan Okamura observes:

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Regarding the economy there is no question that tourism has dominated Hawaii’s economy since the 1960’s as the major industry. At more than $12.2 billion per year, “visitor related expenditures” in the tourist industry comprise almost one-fourth of the gross state product of about $51 billion, and tourism generates the same proportion of state and county tax revenues ($1.2 billion). Nearly one-third (31 percent) of the jobs in Hawaii are created directly or indirectly by the tourist industry, primarily in service and sales work.\textsuperscript{39}

Many people in Hawai‘i are resentful of the effects of tourism on local culture and frustrated with their economic livelihoods being tied to such a fluctuating and service oriented industry. Simultaneously, the tourism industry has come to dominate Hawai‘i’s economy to such a degree that it will remain an absolutely essential fact of life for the indefinite future. The military presents an even more troubling factor in Hawaii’s culture and economy. Kyle Kajihiro documents the extent of the military presence on O‘ahu:

\begin{quote}
On O‘ahu, the most densely populated island the military controls 85,718 acres out of 382,148 acres, or 22.4 percent of the island….Throughout the archipelago, the combined armed services have twenty-one instillations, twenty-six housing complexes, eight training areas, and nineteen miscellaneous bases and operating stations….In 2000 there were 33,930 armed forces and 50,804 military dependents stationed in Hawai‘i….Today the military is the second largest “industry” in Hawai‘i behind tourism, with expenditures totaling approximately $4.39 billion, or 9.8 percent of the gross state product.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

While the attitude of locals towards tourists is fairly ambiguous, a large proportion of local attitudes veer much more sharply towards fear and hostility when it comes to the military presence in Hawai‘i. As locals and military personnel come into much greater social contact within the O‘ahu metal scene than is usual on O‘ahu, these

\textsuperscript{39} Okamura 2008, 58.

\textsuperscript{40} Kajihiro 2008, 3-4.
tensions and divisions are of great significance within the scene. From the infamous Massie Affair in 1931 to the groups of swaggering military haoles to be found on the streets of Waikiki or Chinatown on an average Saturday night, the military represents a rather menacing manifestation of American imperialism for many residents of Hawai‘i.\textsuperscript{41} I will be discussing the impact of tourism in Hawai‘i throughout this dissertation and the presence of the military within the O‘ahu metal scene in specific detail in Chapter Three. The metal scene on O‘ahu experiences the same challenges and anxieties that characterize contemporary Hawai‘i more generally. Simultaneously, participants in the local scene have a desire to overcome these tensions and divisions. My research indicates that these desires, more often than not, fail to achieve the cohesion and scene unity that most scene members long for.

Contemporary O‘ahu finds itself at the juncture of many of America’s most frenetic fantasies and desires. It is the tourist paradise \textit{par excellence}; a destination that is at once cloaked in exoticism and reassuringly, unthreateningly familiar. It is presented as paradise in a very biblical sense; a timeless place where the pain and sorrow of the mundane world can be forgotten, and one’s most longed for pleasures and desires can be satiated. This \textit{discourse of paradise} articulates at once innocence and sensuality, simplicity and unrestrained self-indulgence. As Yaguchi and Yoshihara have argued, Japanese imaginings of Hawai‘i have been equally significant to those proffered by Euro-Americans in building the romanticized image of Hawai‘i on sale in Waikiki today.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{41} Stannard 2006.
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\textsuperscript{42} Yaguchi and Yoshihara. 2004.
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These impossible fantasies are superimposed on the very real inequalities, frustrations and alienation of the people who grow-up, live, and work on O‘ahu. In spite of this, locals themselves are frequently seduced by the discourse of paradise, internalizing and perpetuating it, regardless of how much it may contrast with their everyday lives. Native Hawaiians as well as the more recent immigrants from Samoa, Tonga and Micronesia are not as easily taken in by phrases like “island paradise” and “model of multiculturalism” as the inequality and injustice that they experience in Hawai‘i are more glaring than the more socially and economically established ethnic groups.  

Throughout my dissertation I will endeavor to contextualize the local metal scene within the complicated cultural and political milieu of contemporary O‘ahu in the hopes of shedding a unique light on both 21st century Hawai‘i and international metal subculture. The O‘ahu metal scene hopes to create a protected realm where the racism, inequality, and xenophobia that are endemic to Hawai‘i can be escaped; this dissertation will outline both the successes and failures of this hope.

**Myself in Context**

I am both very much an insider and very much an outsider to the local metal scene on O‘ahu. I am an insider insofar as I am a knowledgeable, dedicated, long-time fan of heavy metal music. As in many music-based subcultures, knowledge and taste are the most significant factors in establishing subcultural capital within metal culture. Knowledge of metal history, the distinctions between subgenres, the ability to recognize and utilize the names of numerous bands of varying levels of fame, the wearing of

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41 Okamura 2008, 55-56.
appropriate metal t-shirts, and the ability to articulate one’s personal taste in music are all important in earning the respect of other metalheads, earning one’s place in the local scene, and contextualizing one’s self within metal’s vastly intricate array of sub-factions and genre cliques. I am more capable than most in these areas and as a result I have an easier time being accepted by the scene than a less knowledgeable fan might. My usual enthusiasm at shows and my willingness to take part in mosh pits have also earned the appreciation of many of the local bands and fans that I have attempted to befriend. No one can really question my status as a metalhead, but subcultural capital and acceptance by the scene on O‘ahu is far more complicated and difficult to obtain than simple allegiance to metal as an international subculture.

I am an outsider within the scene for a number of important reasons. The simplest and most obvious factor that distinguishes me from my friends and informants in the scene is that I am a haole who did not grow up in Hawai‘i and, particularly in the earliest days of my residency, I have an incomplete understanding of local culture. This distinction between local and outsider identities is a vastly complicated, ambiguous and vitally important one in Hawai‘i and there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that I am decidedly not local. My lack of localness has both positive and negative effects regarding my acceptance in the scene. I will explore the significance of the concept of the local in greater detail later, but for the moment let it suffice to say that localness is a discourse of immense intricacy and connotation in contemporary Hawai‘i that evokes one’s ethnic, racial, economic, regional and cultural identity while remaining a deeply unstable, ambiguous concept.
There are a number of other important factors that distinguish me as an outsider within the local scene. I am a quite a bit older than many of the informants who have helped me throughout my research. While there are a number of important scene members who are my age or older, many of the people whom I have conducted research with were in their late teens at the time of my research and did not quite know what to do with me. In addition, I am not a Christian and many people involved in the O‘ahu scene are overtly so. Religion is a deeply important aspect of metal all over the world, and religious identities are some of the primary lines of demarcation in the O‘ahu scene. Connected to, but distinct from the religion issue is the straight edge factor. Straight edge is a movement that emerged from hardcore culture in the 1980’s that rejects the use of drugs, alcohol and sexual promiscuity.\textsuperscript{44} I am not straight edge; many people within the scene are. Finally, my project itself and my status as an ethnographer mark me as an ambiguous participant in the scene. On the one hand, metalheads are often impressed that I study metal culture for a living and are quite flattered that I came to O‘ahu to study their scene. On the other hand, scene members are often understandably weary of being misquoted, taken out of context or having sensitive remarks about other scene members repeated. Many of the younger scene members have only a vague idea of what an ethnographer is or how I am different from a journalist. I have done my best to assuage these concerns and explain my project to the scene members who have been kind enough to work with me and invite me into their scene.

\textsuperscript{44} Haenfler 2009, 7-11.
I have organized my dissertation in a way that will allow me to explore the numerous intersections between the identities available through metal and the myriad other identities available to, and imposed upon, scene members. My research has strongly indicated that no single aspect of my informants’ identities takes precedence over all other aspects of their identity; indeed, to speak of “identity” in the singular is misleading. Although my informants are as diverse a group of people as an ethnographer could hope to amalgamate within any self-recognized community in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and political affiliation, they all share an intense desire and tendency to avoid simplistic categorization. Although they may have less control over the ways in which some aspects of their personhoods, such as sex or racial categorization, are constructed and projected onto their bodies, they use other identity markers and signifiers of selfhood to confuse the essentialized aspects of their identities. Metalheads in the O‘ahu scene take great pleasure in evading and disrupting those aspects of their identities that the larger culture has burdened them with; metal, with its ambiguous signifiers, arcane jargon, and a general air of menace, is particularly useful for this type of disruption. Metal is not resistant in the sense that it necessarily challenges Capitalism or social injustice, but it does stir-up semiotic and cultural disorientation; it successfully evokes chaos in many different ways and in many different contexts. This chaos does not inevitably overcome the divisions and inequalities that are endemic throughout dominant culture, but it can give participants tools to evade and disrupt external impositions. The organization of my dissertation allows me to examine how this chaos is manifested in particular areas of contestation.
Chapter Outline

Chapter One will examine the concepts of scene and subculture, both how those concepts have been theorized in academic discourse and how those concepts are understood within the O‘ahu metal scene itself. In the years since Dick Hebdige’s landmark text *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, the term subculture has been criticized and often dismissed as being too imprecise and homogenizing.\(^{45}\) Although Hebdige’s analysis of post-war British subcultures did suggest overly simplistic explanations of what particular subcultures “mean” that should not necessarily discount the term subculture itself. In Chapter One I will argue that the term subculture has made its way into everyday usage and serves as a method of self-identity for members of the subculture as well as a method of definition for outsiders attempting to comprehend groups of young people. The term scene is ubiquitous amongst metalheads on O‘ahu and serves as a much more focused, localized conception of group identity. In Chapter One I will theorize how these two conceptions of group identity function within the O‘ahu metal scene and how they both problematize, and are problematized by, other competing identities.

Chapter Two will analyze the complex and immensely significant role of religion within metal subculture and in the O‘ahu metal scene more specifically. Many bands within the O‘ahu metal scene express overtly, self-consciously religious agendas. Their lyrics, artwork and artistic missions stress specific religious themes and ambitions. Virtually all other bands that are not overtly religious articulate a keen interest in the supernatural. This interest often manifests itself in the form of folkloric figures like

\[^{45}\text{Hebdige 1979.}\]
zombies, vampires, trolls, or werewolves. Regardless of the specific characteristics of a particular metal band or artist’s interest in the supernatural, death, morbidity and the inner-working of the body are almost always underlying themes. In Chapter Two I will articulate why religion and the supernatural have come to preoccupy metal culture and how this fixation plays itself out in the unique cultural environment of O‘ahu.

Chapter Three will take a close look at the relationship between military personnel and locals within the O‘ahu metal scene. Issues of localness, xenophobia, racism, imperialism, and the limits of subcultural identity all come to the fore when military personnel represent a significant presence at local shows. Younger local scene members often express fear and anxiety regarding the presence of larger, older, more physically aggressive military personnel at local shows, particularly regarding their presence in mosh pits. The often excessive use of alcohol by military personnel contributes to their air of menace. Older local scene members usually express a sense of inclusiveness regarding military personnel participating in the scene. As in many other respects, it is hoped that subcultural identity can triumph over local divisions; I will argue that this desire usually fails.

In Chapter Four I will investigate the ways in which metal subcultural activity allows participants to examine, both individually and collectively, their gendered identities. Metal music and subcultural activity throughout the world is dominated by men. This is beginning to change somewhat, with important female artists becoming more visible within international metal and women, particularly in Western Europe and Japan, taking a more active role in scenes. There are more women in the O‘ahu scene
than is typical on the continental United States. Men continue to dominate the scene, but women are more visible both on stage and in the audience throughout the Oʻahu scene than is usual. Metal culture exaggerates, problematizes and deconstructs masculinity in ways that have significant potential to disrupt the gendered identities of participants, but in other situations gender normativity, particularly regarding women, may also be reinforced. The tension between these two potentialities, and the scene’s ongoing ambivalence towards femininity, constitutes one of the most significant battles within the Oʻahu metal scene. Perhaps most significantly, metal valorizes masculinity to a dramatic degree, and this deeply seeded tendency has profound effects for everyone involved in the scene. The Oʻahu scene’s desire to transcend gender divisions usually dissolves in the face of powerful cultural impulses, directed both from within metal culture and from dominant culture.

Metal subculture, both locally and globally, remains focused primarily on men and masculinity. The performance and examination of masculinity is a thread that runs throughout metal subcultural activity manifesting itself in myriad different ways. In many subgenres of metal, masculinity is exaggerated to the point of absurdity. Anger, violence, strength, and toughness all become hyperrealistic versions of these concepts in ways that have the potential to expose the artificial, discursive quality of masculinity, but more often reasserts the empowering value of masculinity. The kinds of hyper-masculine posturing, gesturing and hyperbole that have been out of fashion in many forms of popular music for decades not only persist within metal subculture, but become wild caricatures of themselves. The “tough guy” is exaggerated almost beyond recognition and his ridiculousness and self-destructiveness are dramatically played out for everyone
to see. The audience also engages in ritualized, masculine overflow in the mosh pit. The sometimes simulated, sometimes very real violence, hyper-masculinity and general excess of mosh pits often reinstate the value of masculinity, but metal performances can also push masculinity beyond its breaking points, blowing its circuits and dissolving into chaos. The most apparent concepts on display in metal like anger, violence, power and control are often very misleading. Anger masks what most metalheads read as exaltation; what appears to be violence is a way of showing physical affection and blurring the lines between bodies in such a way as to circumvent homophobia; the appearance of pleasure in control is really ecstasy in its abandonment. While masculinity is routinely deconstructed within the Oʻahu scene, femininity and women remain problematic categories, and the avenues of empowerment and self-creation that are available to men are often not available to women.

Metalheads in the Oʻahu scene create their world through discourse, performance, and imagination; by speaking and interacting they project meanings onto one another, and allow signification to bounce back onto themselves. In the introduction to his wonderful book *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith reminds us that, “Part of the pleasure of popular culture is talking about it; part of its meaning is this talk, talk which is run through with value judgments.” Metalheads speak endlessly about not only the music itself, but also the personalities involved in the subculture, both local and international. Much is invested in subcultural identity and metalheads guard the music they love and the people they respect jealously; music or individuals who are deemed

inauthentic are vilified and excluded. Exactly what is considered inauthentic, and by whom, varies greatly. But metalheads do not just talk, they do things as well. The live setting is the primary venue for this action and what goes on there seems at first glance to be in contrast to the boundary building that goes on in metal speech. Live shows are ritual spaces; they are places of ecstasy, liminality and transformation. Writing in reference to Grateful Dead shows, Religion scholar Gary Laderman argues:

Dead shows are not ‘like’ a religion, they are religious… There is more to music than what passes through the eardrum. The physical vibrations at the root of musical expression can penetrate and liberate bodies individually and collectively, creating personal and social experiences that are interpreted as religious, sacred, spiritual, and, for many Deadheads and rock fans generally, the source for extraordinary transformations and insights that do not end when the lights in the arena are turned back on.47

While metalheads put fourth great energy drawing boundaries and building discursive defenses around their scenes and subculture, live shows are places of, in the phrasing of Victor Turner, “liminality and communitas,” where anti-structure and the blurring of boundaries between individuals can take place.48 Metal discourses, and indeed much of human activity in general, are dedicated to the careful organization of reality. Live shows are places where the discursive structures and systems of organization that metalheads use to impose control over their worlds can be temporarily abandoned, and the immediacy and sublimity of experience and deindividuation are allowed to run free. I have seen and experienced this process many times and I am a different person because of it. With that in mind, numerous essential identities and cultural categories continue to reassert themselves, even if they are temporarily

47 Laderman 2009.

abandoned in the intensity of shows. I will illustrate the ways in which the Oʻahu metal scene destabilizes some externally imposed categories, while failing to permanently disrupt others.

In my conclusion I hope to articulate the ways in which metal subcultural activity does alter participants’ perceptions and senses of identity in significant ways, while also outlining the ways in which it is unsuccessful in doing so. The discursive boundary building that takes place in so much of metal talk is intended to purify and authenticate scene activity, but this talk is also like a sand castle that is being built so that it can be destroyed at the appropriate moment. Metalheads on Oʻahu are caught in a paradox involving wanting to maintain scene boundaries and expel impure elements, while simultaneously wanting to overcome these very same prejudices and divisions. The boundaries and social hierarchies that metal builds and maintains contain within them the implicit understanding that these structures can be annihilated in moments of heightened intensity at live shows; this hope is sometimes successful, and sometimes otherwise. When successful, these moments of deterritorialization can instigate feeling of intense pleasure and panic in the moment, but they also serve as powerful memories of boundarylessness and freedom long after the show is over and the heightened intensity has diminished; by losing themselves temporarily, metalheads can seriously delegitimize the essentialized identities that have been constructed around their bodies. This breaking-down of imposed identities does not always occur, indeed it often fails spectacularly, but the potential, the desire for disruption runs throughout heavy metal subculture. Metal subcultural activity does have the power to complicate, pluralize and empower previously acquired identities, but it does not always succeed. Metalheads in the Oʻahu scene are
able to devise useful tools and tactics through scene activity that can be applied to everyday life on a situation to situation basis. I hope to persuasively argue in the body of my dissertation that metal subcultural activity is significantly transformative for scene members on O‘ahu not in the sense of permanent, fundamental transformation, but more in the sense of acquiring practical memories and methods that can be used to challenge, evade, and confuse authority and power. These transformations must be understood in the context of local culture and its history, but it also must be seen as a unique moment involving globalization, virtual culture and postmodernity.
Chapter One

Scene and Subculture: Constructing Authenticity

The term *scene* is used with incredible frequency by my informants to describe the community of metal enthusiasts that they are a part of on O'ahu. Although fraught with internal tensions and divisions, the concept of the O'ahu metal scene as a comprehensible community of like-minded metal fans, visual artists, promoters, and musicians is almost universally expressed by my informants. The health of the current scene, the artistic ability of many of the bands, the level of commitment that many scene members retain, who ought to be included or excluded, and the authenticity of other scene members’ metal identities are all hotly contested questions, but the existence and reality of *the scene* is not seriously questioned by anyone, and the word *scene* itself is used with significant regularity. Scene members often express frustration at the metal scene on O'ahu’s lack of total autonomy and bemoan the necessity of having to do shows with hardcore bands or other less metallically inclined bands, but they none-the-less consistently articulate the existence of a cultural network of metalheads that supports and finds identity in one another. The metal scene on O'ahu is quite small compared to metal hot-spots like Indonesia, Germany, or the continental U.S., but it is all the more community-based for that very reason. Like O'ahu more generally, roughly two-thirds of the O'ahu metal scene are of Asian or Pacific Islander decent, and most of my informants seem to take great pleasure in listing a multiplicity of ethnic affiliations. The

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majority of scene members are at least acquainted with most other scene members, creating a cultural, discursive space that is very personal, musically incestuous, and often judgmental.

Participants in the O‘ahu metal scene spend a great deal of time discussing the scene’s short-comings with one another, brooding over reasons for its relative lack of commercial success. Most of my informants have high hopes for the scene, although exactly what those hopes are very between the two basic poles of artistic experimentation on one side, and commercial viability on the other. The following blog, written by my friend Raul and posted on his website Awaken the Mosh, serves as an excellent example of this type of discourse. 50 Raul is a young Filipino man in his twenties who, like most metalheads, hails from a working-class background. Intelligent, knowledgeable, friendly, and passionate in his love for heavy metal, Raul is an important player in the O‘ahu metal scene. The first section of his blog reads as follows:

As I wandered the streets of Chinatown after a show, a mixture of thoughts about Hawaii’s local metal scene started bouncing around in my head. How is it that so many bands fail at making a lasting impact here in the islands? Is it that we just lack the longevity to crack the boundaries of the national music scene? It can’t be a lack of talent. Maybe it’s a lack of originality? I’ve seen hundreds of bands play live that just seem to be cheap imitations of what’s been done before. I hate to admit it but I often find myself having to bite my tongue & lower my standards with many local bands. Sure we all pat each other on the back & pay the $5 entrance fee, but would we honestly go out of our way to buy their album if we didn’t already know them? 51

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50 In this case I am using Raul’s real name. Any interested parties would be able to Google this speech and come across his blog on Awaken the Mosh right away, so maintaining his anonymity regarding these publicly posted comments seems unnecessary.

51 www.awakenthemosh.com/2011/05/03/waimea-sunset-blasting-slayer-on-the-way-to-haleiwa/#more-1326
We see here a number of important, telling elements that represent both the general structure of scene discourse, and Raul’s own attempts to position himself within a particular part of metal subculture. He begins by noting that he is troubled by the current state of the scene; he tells us that particular concerns were, “bouncing around in my head.” Raul continues by explaining that the Hawai‘i metal scene has not achieved either the commercial or the artistic success that other scenes have attained. Bands do not have the commitment for, “longevity,” and evince, “a lack of originality,” causing Raul to, “bite my tongue & lower my standards,” when attending local shows. Although this seems like fairly harsh criticism, Raul is uncertain that these are really the problem, offering the first two bits of criticism as questions rather than statements. He also, “hates to admit,” that local bands are not as challenging or artistically dynamic as they might be. Crucially, Raul firmly states that, “It can’t be a lack of talent.” The first half of this blog does not condemn the local metal scene to mediocrity and obscurity as a result of inadequate musical ability or a lack of authenticity. Raul is expressing his frustration with the local scene precisely because it has so much as yet unrealized potency. The overall message of this blog is optimistic; Raul is looking towards a future for the Hawai‘i metal scene in which it realizes its potential. The primary evils that Raul distinguishes within the local metal scene are a lack of commitment, an unwillingness to sufficiently engage in the scene, as well as a fear of taking artistic risks.

The first half of Raul’s blog reflects in a somewhat exaggerated form a common tendency within metal scenes all over the world towards self-criticism, but the second
half of this particular blog is perhaps even more significant, gesturing in a very serious way towards the unique attraction that heavy metal holds for people in Hawai‘i:

As a friend once told me, Hawaii’s just not a very good incubator for metal music. We’re not exactly descendants of Vikings who spend our days setting villages afire, we don’t spend half the year in the bitter cold of winter either. I do feel a bit odd blasting Immortal’s Sons of the Northern Darkness while my toes warm themselves in the sand “on a white sandy beach in Hawaii.” The rest of the world sees us as an island paradise, full of palm trees & ukuleles and well, it is to some extent, unless of course you spend your nights anywhere near A’ala Park or Hotel Street after midnight. Maybe this is where my love of heavy music stems from. Too much plastic, sugar-coated Hawaii. Too many paintings of coconut trees on hotels, in place of where they once stood… but now I’m rambling. It could make for some great song lyrics though.\(^5\)

Raul begins this paragraph by citing an unnamed friend who suggests that Hawai‘i is an unlikely place for metal, a sentiment that I have heard expressed in different ways and in different contexts innumerable times within the O‘ahu metal scene. He goes on to recognize that most people in the Hawai‘i scene are not descended from Northern European ancestors, while Norway, Germany and Sweden are, from Raul’s perspective at least, some of the most metal places of origin imaginable. Because much of contemporary extreme metal originated in Scandinavia and celebrates snowfall, forbidding mountains, and subarctic wilderness, Raul asserts a particular contrast between this musical/aesthetic world and life in Hawai‘i. The classic Norwegian black metal album *Sons of Northern Darkness* by the band Immortal is offered as an example of this contrast, a rather extreme example, as this particular album is famous for its heavy thematic emphasis on ice, snow and winter. However, Raul is not saying that Hawai‘i is

\(^5\) [www.awakenthemosh.com/2011/05/03/waimea-sunset-blasting-slayer-on-the-way-to-haleiwa/#more-1326](http://www.awakenthemosh.com/2011/05/03/waimea-sunset-blasting-slayer-on-the-way-to-haleiwa/#more-1326)
incompatible with metal subculture; rather, he is saying that it may *seem* incompatible, but that it is really very applicable. Raul evokes the discourse of paradise only to dismiss it as saccharine, superficial nonsense that does not reflect everyday life in Hawai‘i. For Raul, Hawai‘i is *very* metal in certain respects, which is to say, simultaneously brutal, violent, and beautiful. Metal’s attraction for Raul lies both in its stark contrast to, “us as an island paradise, full of palm trees & ukuleles,” and in its relevance to the real-life pain and adversity that he associates with, “A’ala Park or Hotel Street after midnight,” locals which are infamous for their squalor and homelessness. The emotional content of heavy metal helps participants in Hawai‘i to make sense of the contradictions and injustices they experience in their everyday lives, while the aesthetic, ideological and sonic qualities of metal provide a refreshing, empowering antithesis to the discourse of paradise.

Many of the more serious, dedicated musicians within the local O‘ahu scene cite the scene’s lack of commercial ambition and tendency to ignore the world outside of Hawai‘i as a major obstacle to its success. Perhaps the most invested, long-time member of the local metal scene is one of my informants whom I will call Kevin. His band has toured extensively outside of Hawai‘i and is one of the few musicians within the Hawai‘i metal scene who has experienced some commercial success. Kevin is considerably older than most other scene members and wields significant influence and respect within the scene. He is of Euro-American descent, and has been involved with the punk and metal scenes on O‘ahu since his high school days during 1980’s. He expresses his frustration with the local scene in the following way:
KEVIN: Yeah. The problem with the local bands out here, and I tell this to people all the time, and I tell it to a lot of the musicians out here as well, is that they’re just not consistent. And we have been together, I’ve had this band since 1993, that’s damn near...that’s a long time. But a lot of the band out here, you get a really good band and they’ll break up in six months. I don’t know if you remember a death metal band called (name of defunct local death metal band)?

BHO: Might have been before my time.

KEVIN: They actually...if I was in a record label position...I would have probably signed them. Because whatever it was they had it. And they were...one of the guys is in (name of currently active local metal band).

BHO: Which...they have a lot of potential as well.

KEVIN: They do. But (defunct death metal band) for some reason...whatever it was...those kids were drawn. And it was even entertaining, and I liked it. They would dress up in the leather and the white make-up and they came out and you’d get goose bumps. And they were high school kids. And I didn’t like the music and I was like, “these guys got something.” And you know it was one of those things, if they had kept it together...I would have joined that band and I would have taken them places. I would have done stuff with them because they were all over the place...but it was one of those things: six months, can’t keep it together. Somebody quit or somebody did something else or...but there are a lot of bands here that have potential; they just don’t stick around. They break up and they do different things, and it’s unfortunate because that’s how you...longevity is how you get well known. Very few people...everybody thinks, “oh, we didn’t make it in six months we’re going to quit.” It’s just very few bands make it that way.53

Kevin expresses a criticism of the O'ahu metal scene that is quite different from Raul’s, one that emphasizes a need for greater perseverance and commercial ambition. Unlike Raul who asserts that the local metal scene lacks artistic dynamism and originality, Kevin feels that the death metal band that he mentions “had it,” by which he means charisma and a unique sound, but were unwilling to dedicate themselves to a more professional music career. Kevin even goes so far as to assert that he would have joined

53 6-26-2010
the band in question himself, in spite of the fact that he is not a fan of death metal, and, “taken them places,” which is to say, commercially successful places. At the beginning of this speech, Kevin tells us that, “I tell this to people all the time,” an acknowledgement that this is an often repeated narrative that he regularly employs when giving advice to younger scene members. At the end of his example, Kevin uses the phrase, “make it,” twice, a phrase that has become a popular music cliché and is meant to signify a significant degree of popular and commercial success. Very few scene members within the O‘ahu scene speak in these terms and Kevin’s employment of the “making it” concept positions him as a much more career driven individual than is typical of the O‘ahu scene.

Although the specifics of Kevin’s criticism of the scene differ from Raul’s blog, the overall message of these statements is very much the same: the scene has a great deal of potential which will inevitably be realized once particular shortcomings are rectified. This type of oratory is intended to invigorate and motivate the scene to action.

The O‘ahu metal scene is a discursive space through which ideas of artistic value, community, individual ambition, and definitions of success can be debated. However acrimonious an individual’s statements might be, however far from its true potential a particular faction feels that the scene has diverged, the desire for an artistically vital community of metalheads in Hawai‘i remains consistent throughout the scene. Virtually everyone that I have spoken with during my field work has expressed the belief in Hawai‘i as a unique cultural space with the potential to foster an internationally significant metal scene, however far from that goal they may currently be. Scene members invariably return to the notion that metal seems to be anathema to Hawai‘i; the sunny, warm, care-free stereotype of Hawai‘i is held up as the polar opposite of the cold,
hard, morbidity of heavy metal. But my informants use this contrast to illustrate the superficiality and absurdity of the discourse of paradise rather than to suggest that a metal scene in Hawai‘i is a dubious enterprise. As both Raul and Kevin indicate in their respective ways, metal in Hawai‘i faces myriad challenges which must be dealt with in order for the scene to flourish; both suggest that in spite of their superficial incongruity, Hawai‘i needs metal in some way.

My friend Lowell is one of the principal architects of the O‘ahu metal scene and has probably done more than any other individual to bring the various factions within the O‘ahu metal scene together. Lowell is a haole transplant from the east-coast of the continental U.S in his thirties, who has lived, worked, and played music on O‘ahu for a number of years. He is gregarious, with a bawdy sense of humor, and a great deal of fun to be around. Apparently friends with absolutely everyone is the scene, Lowell often seems to be everywhere at once at local shows, having fun and taking care of business simultaneously. Lowell has often expressed to me his annoyance with the local scene’s tendency towards subgenreization and factionalism. His frustration emphasizes a lack of open-mindedness regarding musical tastes, and his desires stress the importance of community. When I asked Lowell if O‘ahu has a particularly supportive metal scene, he had this to say:

Yeah there is, and there has to be. Or else it will all fall apart. Before Fire, Amarnah, Upon Golgotha, Affront the Weak, we represent kind of metal and metalcore. And we stick together, we look out for each other. We always make sure we go to each other’s shows, we open up for each other. In Hawai‘i we have a word ‘ohana, family. We are like the metal ‘ohana. 54

54 2-16-2011
Here, Lowell enthusiastically asserts both the existence and the necessity of a meaningful sense of community among metalheads on Oʻahu. Although a long-time resident of Hawaiʻi, Lowell was not born and raised in Hawaiʻi and occasionally evinces an immigrant’s zeal for his adopted home. His use of the Hawaiian word ‘ohana is a very telling attempt on Lowell’s part to connect his own identity and that of the local metal scene to a more traditional, indigenous identity. Lowell continued in this vein a few moments later:

I’m all about people being able to have access to what they want. And I love metal, so I want that to be accessible. I don’t want people to feel like because they like metal they have to move to the mainland, you know? Or, I am in a metal band so I have to move to the mainland. Hawaiʻi at one time used to be a sovereign nation, and uhhhh….in the essence of that I would appreciate it if we could become self sustainable when it comes to music as well. We don’t need the mainland. I mean it’s nice to have them come here or have us go there, but I don’t want to have to relocate just because of the type of music I like and play. It’s a beautiful place and I want to stay here.55

Here, Lowell does not just correlate the metal scene with Native Hawaiian culture, but also with the sovereignty movement; a rather bold statement for a haole from the mainland. But it would be a mistake to take Lowell’s statement here too literally; he is very much aware of the difficult political ramifications of such a convergence. Rather, these statements should be read as a politically infused metaphor intended to illustrate Lowell’s desire for a genuine sense of community among metalheads in Hawaiʻi, and independence from scenes on the continent. Again, we see the assertion that heavy metal and Hawaiʻi seem like an unlikely pairing, but one that makes far more sense than

55 2-16-2011
outsiders initially assume. This specific use of irony is intended to both expose vacuous misconceptions of Hawai`i, and draw attention to heavy metal’s versatility. Lowell articulates a desire to build a vital, mutually supportive metal community in Hawai`i, in spite of the practical obstacles. We see here something that could be called a will-to-community; a profound desire to construct a palpable sense of subcultural identity within the scene on O‘ahu that is connected to international metal, but autonomous and self-sustaining.

The statements that I have been examining regarding my informants’ understanding of the local scene must be understood as on-going, discursive performances. Raul’s, Kevin’s and Lowell’s respective assessments of the scene are attempts on their part to lay claim to particular kinds of power, and position the scene in such a way as to emphasize the importance of their own tastes and desires. Foucault describes this particular understanding of power in his History of Sexuality:

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggle and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another.56

Multiple sites of tension exist within the O‘ahu scene, represented by competing desires and actors that promote those desires. These intersecting, contending desires do not and cannot dominate one another entirely, but exist as what Foucault calls, “perpetual

56 Foucault 1990, 92.
spirals of power and pleasure. These discursive contests constitute one of the most significant methods of identity construction within the O‘ahu metal scene as they emphasize both the pluralization of identities within the scene, as well as how the scene defines itself in relation to other cultural forces in Hawai`i.

Raul’s musical tastes and interpretation of metal subculture emphasize the more extreme, artistically ambitious representations of contemporary metal. His desires for the O‘ahu scene involve musical experimentation and engagement with the vanguard of extreme metal in Norway and Sweden. Commercial success and mainstream accessibility are of little interest for Raul, while the development, improvement and growth of the local scene are of much greater importance. Raul is perhaps the most dedicated and knowledgeable metalhead out of all of my informants and his ambitions for metal in Hawai`i are less forgiving of mediocrity and inauthenticity. Kevin, being somewhat older than my other informants and with a much greater interest in commercial success, tends to think in terms of longevity, accessibility and marketability. He has very little patience for the lack of melodicism characteristic of extreme, experimental metal like the Immortal record mentioned by Raul. Kevin hopes for his music and the scene more generally to be a viable commercial activity and for the younger members of the scene to take their subcultural activities more seriously. Lowell, while harboring desires for a certain degree of financial success, is primarily interesting in fostering a sense of community within the O‘ahu metal scene. He is less artistically demanding than Raul, and less commercially ambitious than Kevin, but perhaps more invested in the over-all

57 Foucault 1990, 45.
health of the O‘ahu metal scene than either of them. Raul, Kevin and Lowell represent three particular perspectives, or sites of intensity. These intensities become meaningful through discursive interaction with one another, and the relationship between these competing perspectives constitutes power in the Foucaultian sense.

**Part Two: Subculture: Macro-Discursive Principals and Practices**

The term *subculture* is used less frequently and with greater qualification than *scene*. The older, more long-term metalheads whose identities are much more invested in heavy metal are far more likely to use the term subculture and emphatically claim membership in such a category. Whereas scene refers to the local network in Hawai`i, the term subculture is used to signify an internationally cohesive family of metal fans and musicians that share an artistic, aesthetic, discursive world; the scene can be understood as the local franchise of the community that practices and proliferates the subculture. In the introduction to their brilliant book *Metal Rules the Globe* Wallach, Berger, and Greene explain: “When musicians and fans around the world align themselves with a transnational metal community, they begin to stake out stances and identities that are sharply opposed to certain local or national customs and values, while strengthening their rootedness in others.”\(^5^8\) In Hawai`i, this opposition takes on myriad forms, as participants in the scene negotiate multiple ethnic, national, religious, and regional identities simultaneously. The concept of metal subculture is used to combat both the false, constructed version of Hawai`i that is often projected onto the islands, as well as the specifics of lived individual experience and identity construction that participants find

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\(^5^8\) Wallach, Berger, and Greene 2011, 7.
frustrating. Conversely, my informants articulate an appreciation for values concerning inclusivity, openness, and personal warmth that they feel are shared between both local Hawaiian culture, and heavy metal subculture.

In different contexts metalheads may use the term subculture to refer to both the international community, and to the practices that characterize that community. But scene members who have less experience with heavy metal outside of Hawai`i, who do not wear metal t-shirts or other distinctly metal clothing, and who generally are less inclined to position metal as a central aspect of their identity, are less likely to use the term subculture. If this latter category does employ the term subculture it is often in a negative context, usually to describe individuals or groups who are overly fashion conscious or inauthentic. A handful of members, usually younger people with little experience outside of the O`ahu scene, claim to have never heard of the term subculture before and to have no clear idea of its meaning.

The term subculture itself is a descriptive/restrictive term and must be understood in the discursive context in which it is used. Subculture as an academic term has been in use since at least the 1950’s but has since expanded outside of scholarly discourse.59 Numerous youth cultures identify emphatically with the term subculture and draw a strong sense of cohesion from it. Journalists, parent groups, church organizations, law enforcement and myriad other peripherally concerned parties also use the term subculture to define particular groups of young people usually associated with particular kinds of popular music. As Sarah Thornton cleverly states, “I am forced to conclude that

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subcultures are best defined as social groups that have been labeled as such.\textsuperscript{60} As Thornton perceptively reminds us, scholars are not the only discursive gatekeepers who dictate the terminology that goes into labeling and constructing identities. Subculture participants themselves are instrumental in this process, as are numerous non-academic cultural voices, and they will continue to use the term subculture whether it is academically fashionable or not.

That being said, the term subculture is not very fashionable within academic analyses of youth culture in 2012. As used by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970’s and 1980’s, subculture came to be applied too imprecisely and depicted participants as overly homogenous. In the 1970’s British Cultural Studies very much wanted to see “spectacular subcultures” as the vanguard of a working-class youth rebellion against consumer Capitalism.\textsuperscript{61} They argue that youth subcultures are resistant to dominant, hegemonic culture in some essential way. CCCS scholars often mistake subcultural rhetoric regarding rebellion and rejection of the mainstream uncritically as unambiguous evidence of their resistance to hegemony. Youth subcultures often resist all sorts of things, but only occasionally does this resistance translate into the kinds of counter-hegemonic, left-wing, political activity that CCCS adherents hope to find. The resistance most often evinced by youth subcultures is closer to a method of cultural and psychological organization; a way of discursively demarcating their worlds and pushing against elements defined as impure and unwanted. On O‘ahu, my

\textsuperscript{60} Thornton 1996, 162.

\textsuperscript{61} Hebdige 1979, 14-19.
informants regularly employ a kind of semiotic and discursive misdirection; a desire to
confuse and disrupt the expectations of others. This is a significant, and often successful
form of resistance, even if it does not take the form that Marxist scholars in the CCCS
might have been looking for.

In his groundbreaking study of table-top fantasy role-playing gamers _Shared
Fantasy_, Gary Allen Fine attempts to chart the ways in which his informants build and
maintain meaningful communities around their creative play. The Dungeons &
Dragons enthusiasts that Fine is concerned with share a great deal in common with
metalheads, and indeed, it is fair to assume that in the early 1980’s when Fine was
conducting his fieldwork that many of his informants probably did listened to heavy
metal. Indeed, a 2007 special feature in the American heavy metal magazine _Decibel_
explores this very relationship and interviews numerous metal musicians who are long-
time D&D enthusiasts. This popular culture convergence should illustrate both that
even individuals who claim a strong sense of subcultural membership also have
allegiances to other cultural communities, as well as the mutual influence of J.R.R.
Tolkien, H.P. Lovecraft and Euro-American religious folklore on both fantasy role-
playing games and metalheads. Heavy metal places far more emphasis on transgression
and masculinity than fantasy role playing games, but both genres share numerous
aesthetic traits and an emphasis on creative fantasy.

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62 Fine 1983.

Fine poses an interesting set of criteria by which the existence of a subculture can be assessed:

For a subculture to exist one must be able to cite networks of communication through which common information is transmitted. Second, one needs to show that gamers identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture. Finally, the subsociety must be identified as such by the outside of the group, which increases the perception of common interests of the group members and increases solidarity.64

Fine’s first piece of criteria, while important, is perhaps somewhat out of date. With the proliferation of the internet and social media, networks of communication are much easier to establish and do not necessarily signify a distinct subculture. Fine’s second and third criteria are much more instructive and are very much in line with Thornton’s conception: a subculture must perceive of itself as such, and must be perceived by parties outside of the community as such. The word subculture itself is significant; as this piece of terminology has filtered out of academia and into public consciousness, this particular signifier and the concepts that is signifies must be understood as critical to the identities of the communities to which it is applied. Regardless of how much disagreement there may be among scholars regarding the exact definition and criteria needed to constitute a subculture, the word itself and the ideas that it conveys have taken on a discursive life of their own, one that cannot be reined in by the acceptance or dismissal of academics. Catherine Bell makes a similar argument in defense of the term ritual that is equally applicable to the term subculture: “It seems

more responsible to hold on to our battered terminology, just as we hold on to the
artifacts of our own personal histories no matter how difficult they might become.”

For the majority of my informants, heavy metal represents a cultural world tied
together by particular sounds, images, ideas and pieces of shared history. While the local
scene is an immediate, albeit unstable reality, metal as an international subculture is a less
tangible concept. For many of my informants allegiance to an internationally cohesive
sense of subcultural identity is one of the most important aspects of their identity,
although never the only aspect of their identity. As Honi Fern Haber reminds us, “Since
the self is a member of many different communities and so is essentially plural, it is also
always capable of being redescribed. Because each subject is always plural in this way it
is made up of multiple selves, and so any community can always be deconstructed to
reveal plural and possibly conflicting interests.” While this plurality is unavoidably
clear among my informants, metal subcultural identity continuously reasserts itself in
various degrees of abstraction. Metal is an ideal, a conceptual/artistic world that has the
capacity to convey a profound sense of belonging while simultaneously evading
definition and full realization. In many ways the enormous complexity and multi-faceted
nature of contemporary metal subculture are precisely what makes it a useful method for
identity construction; metalheads are able to continuously contest, redefine, pluralize and
evade essential meanings and identities through the framework provided.

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65 Bell 1992, 7.
66 Haber 1994, 2.
Hebdige does not sufficiently account for this understanding of subcultural plurality in *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. He has a tendency to define what particular subcultures mean in a very broad sense: skinheads are about *this*, mods are about *that*. His analysis does not account for the endless power struggles that go on within scenes and subcultures, or for the rather vast diversity within a subculture as internationally diffuse and populace as heavy metal. Hebdige’s concept of *cultural noise*, however, does have a significant amount of applicability to the O‘ahu metal scene:

Subcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomenon to their representation in the media. We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy ‘out there’ but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a type of temporary blockage in the system of representation.67

While this type of cultural noise may be less realizable in Columbus, Ohio or Frankfurt, Germany, metalheads on O‘ahu do revel in their ability to create a disconcerting, disorienting contrast between heavy metal subculture and the discourse of paradise. However they may be positioned within the discursive politics of the local scene, virtually all of my informants have expressed taking acute pleasure at how *out of place* metal seems in Hawai`i, and in their ability to confuse and even frighten people in Hawai`i who are unfamiliar with metal subculture or who feel it does not coincide with their conception of what Hawai`i should be. My informants, much more so than other metalheads that I have known outside of Hawai`i, take enormous pleasure in metal’s subculture’s ability to disrupt meaning and create cultural noise.

67 Hebdige 1979, 91.
My informants in the O’ahu metal scene have repeated to me almost without exception their frustration with the conformity, provincialism and close-mindedness that they feel is prevalent throughout dominant culture in Hawai‘i. Reggae and Jawaiian music are frequently cited as the only acceptable forms of music among many pockets of youth culture in Hawai‘i, genres that my informants often feel are artistically limited and emotionally vapid. The ways in which the discourse of paradise has been internalized by locals, and particularly the ways in which local masculinity has been constructed, represent focal points of hostility for the majority of my informants. One of my informants, who I will call Ron, is a young Filipino man in his twenties. His parents introduced him to heavy metal as a child, and metal subculture continues to be a deeply important aspect of his identity. At the same time, he identifies strongly as Filipino, and as someone born and raised in Hawai‘i. Ron explained his understanding of metal subculture in Hawai‘i in the following way:

And me, in terms of the subculture? Hawai‘i is a little bit odd, because all of us have gone through the same stuff. I guess nationally it’s the same way, but here it’s a little bit special, because here you are the oddball. I am the dude listening to Immortal wearing a Slipknot shirt before I go body-boarding at Sandy’s. So while everybody is blasting their reggae music, I have my acoustic guitar playing Master of Puppets. And everybody just makes fun of me like, and I love that.68

Ron asserts that metalheads in Hawai‘i struggle against dominant culture in a much more serious way than metalheads elsewhere. While he openly, delightedly rejects the conformity inherent in many aspects of dominant culture in Hawai‘i, such as reggae, Ron also embraces and enjoys other distinctly Hawaiian activities such as body-boarding.

68 9-8-2010
Ron finds empowerment and pleasure in confounding expectations about what a young Filipino man from O‘ahu ought to like, how he should act, and what sorts of cultural signifiers he should cloak himself in. By listening to black metal on the beach, and playing Metallica on his acoustic guitar instead of Bob Marley, Ron is not just resisting dominant culture; he is creating cultural noise. This disorientation, confusion, the mixing and remixing of disparate signifiers, can be far more subversive than more one-dimensional conceptions of resistance precisely because it evades essentialization, stability and definition.

Metalheads in Hawai‘i are far more likely to be noticed and ridiculed than their subcultural counterparts in most other parts of the developed world where metal has been visible for longer periods of time. In Los Angeles or Tokyo, wearing a bullet-belt or a jean-jacket covered with Satanic metal patches would attract very little notice; in Hawai‘i these accoutrements are far more likely to receive negative attention, both from one’s peers and form one’s family. My informants are acutely aware of this fact and take immense pleasure in the fear and confusion that they are able to provoke. Two of my informants, whom I will call Amy and Donna, are young women in their twenties. Both come from multi-ethnic backgrounds, and both were born and raised in Hawai‘i. Amy and Donna are highly skilled, accomplished musicians, and their band is one of the most respected metal bands on O‘ahu. They expressed the following point to me during an interview:
AMY: Like for me, it’s like people always think I’m going to beat them up or something, it’s kind of nice. I’m not necessarily trying to show that I am shock; I just wear these things because I like it. It just so happens that they are usually associated with toughness, military masculinity, stuff like that.

DONNA: I don’t have style so…. (Amy laughs)

AMY: I don’t know, it’s kind of nice…a lot of people are intimidated by me…I’m just fine with that, I guess. I’m just being myself…I actually get a kick out of it.69

Amy has a highly affective subcultural style; the metal signifiers that she wears in her everyday life are both impressive and intimidating. As this statement illustrates, Amy finds her ability to disquiet people she encounters, and disrupt their expectations regarding what a young woman in Hawai‘i ought to look like, very empowering. Like Ron, Amy takes pleasure in mixing contradictory signifiers in order to create cultural noise; feminine signifiers, contrasted against bullets and spikes. The purpose of these visual gestures is not to find empowerment by appropriating masculinity, but rather through confusion and disruption. Donna, as her comment suggests, does not project a metal visual style, or according to her, any other particular sense of style. This non-style has its own transgressive potential, as young women in Hawai‘i are expected to be fashionable, feminine, and stylish. The potential for creating cultural noise and provoking negative reactions from other locals makes being a metalhead in Hawai‘i a particularly challenging subcultural affiliation.

69 4-27-2011
Discourse, Community, and Authenticity

Thornton offers a very insightful comment regarding British ravers that is equally applicable to many other subcultures: “Interestingly, the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t.”

There exists, for the O’ahu metal scene, myriad manifestations of contemporary culture in Hawai’i to construct their identities in opposition to. As Thornton points out, a discursively constructed entity known as the mainstream is often cited as the principal object of hostility. The mainstream refers to any and all aspects of contemporary popular culture that are inauthentic, insincere, vapid, and/or overly commercial. While it may be possible to identify the more dominant or commercially successful forms of popular culture in Hawai’i, the mainstream is essentially a discursive projection created by particular subcultural communities that allows them to better define what they are not. Just as heavy metal subculture is something of an abstraction, so too is its discursive, polar opposite, the mainstream. Different informants have expressed to me different ideas about what musical, cultural communities constitute the mainstream, but the consistent criteria involve inauthenticity, being overly fashion conscious, and being artistically close-minded. These manifestations of the mainstream are often denounced as trends and their followers as posers or hipsters.

Hardcore, heavy metal’s brawny, tattooed half-sibling, is often cited as the local metal scene’s subcultural antagonist. Paradoxically, if the respective origins and

70 Thornton 1996, 105.
71 Thornton 1996, 105.
development of heavy metal and hardcore are examined with any degree of depth the profound mutual influence of both musical styles and subcultural frameworks is unmistakable. The O‘ahu metal scene’s perception of the local O‘ahu hardcore scene illustrates how the micro-discourse of scene politics projects desires regarding the macro-discourse of subculture. On a balmy evening in March of 2010, I enjoyed a lively conversation with one of O‘ahu’s most well-loved bands in the parking lot of a Thai restaurant after a performance. The band members in question are all young men in their twenties, from multi-ethnic backgrounds, who hail from West O‘ahu. They expressed to me their feelings of frustration and alienation with the local hardcore scene:

**SAM:** See…I have one…*only one* problem with the hardcore scene. Is, if they’re really into hardcore they are gunna go to a metal show and just stand still. If it is not a half-time beat so they can two-step or breakdowns so they can hardcore dance they are not gunna move…they’re just gunna stare at you. Even if you do eventually have a half-time beat or a breakdown, they’re still not gunna move because you are not a hardcore band. We have so much experience with that…with seeing that…

**TOMMY:** I *hate* that man…

**RICK:** Well that opinion may only be because of the Hawai‘i scene though…

**SAM:** Yeah, maybe only in Hawai‘i it’s that way but so far…yeah…you are right maybe only in Hawai‘i it’s that way.

**BHO:** So basically, yes, you guys feel that there is a big distinction?

**SAM:** (murmurs of assent from band) A *big* distinction here…everyone here prefers hardcore and pop punk, cuz the girls like it. Mix the two and you’ve got girls and guys that want to dance…you’re golden here; you’re a pop-punk hardcore band. It’s all the rage now.72

We see here a number of rhetorical characteristics that are distinctive of how many people in the O‘ahu metal scene understand hardcore. Sam explains that if metal

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bands play too fast and do not provide the tempos appropriate for the distinctive forms of dancing popular among hardcore kids in Hawai‘i, than the metal band will not receive a positive reaction from the crowd. Contemporary hardcore is generally slower, more predictable and musically simpler than contemporary metal, making it ideal for the more organized, control-oriented, hardcore dancing popular among many of the younger hardcore kids on O‘ahu. Whereas metal mosh-pits are characterized by chaos, hardcore pits, particularly the more modern and straight-edge forms of hardcore popular on O‘ahu, are expressive of a desire for control and order. William Tsitsos describes this tendency within straight-edge hardcore: “For the straight-edgers, the mosh pit is a sort of proving ground in which those who are too weak must be forcibly eliminated. The exaggerated, violent gestures of moshing can be seen as attempts to beat some order into the pit, to purge the pit of its chaotic, anarchic (i.e. punk) elements.”

Two-stepping and other forms of hardcore dancing should not really be understood as moshing at all; they are highly structured, individual forms of dancing designed to emphasize an individual’s strength and skill. In many important ways hardcore dancing is the antithesis of metal moshing, which is principally designed to induce ecstatic deindividuation. In the above statement Sam suggests that hardcore kids attempt to impose order on local shows either through a refusal to participate, or through hardcore dancing. The unpredictable changes in tempo, complexity and abrasiveness of metal are rejected by hardcore kids as dangerously chaotic. The tension between order and chaos is one of the most important

73 Tsitsos 2006, 126.

74 Here is an example of two-stepping at a local hardcore show in Hawai‘i: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4jE8RH5yAY&feature=related
features of the relationship between metal and hardcore on O‘ahu. Sam emphasizes that even when his band does play a break-down, a section in a song that is suddenly slowed down to half-time in order to facilitate moshing, the hardcore kids at their shows rarely respond because of how they are perceived as a metal band. Sam and Rick go on to point out that this may be a problem that is unique to Hawai‘i.

Sam, Rick and Tommy articulate the idea that hardcore, particularly the melodic hardcore prevalent in O‘ahu, lacks authenticity. They assert that musical innovation, artistic expression, and challenging one’s audience are ignored by many melodic hardcore bands in favor of music that will appeal to younger audiences, particularly young women. Sam asserts that pop-punk hardcore is, “all the rage,” and that bands play this style of music principally to appear attractive to women; a major subcultural faux pas for metalheads. These kinds of statements should not be read as factual statements. Sam is not complaining about any particular individual, band, or incident; he is providing an example of what metal should not be like. He is creating a discursive antithesis to serve as contrast for his own band and how he would like others to perceive them. A few moments after describing their negative assessment of hardcore, the metal band in question explained their perception of themselves:

**TOMMY:** Let alone, we have people from Wai‘anae coming. You know what I mean? (band talking over one another in agreement) They don’t even listen to any type of heavy...music...hardcore...just straight roots reggae, rap, Hawaiian...and they see us and they’re like: “You guys...I don’t listen to it...but I like what you guys are doing.”

**SAM:** We’re kind of like metal for the masses! (laughter, assent) Or trying to be....

**BILL:** I like that...

**PAUL:** Metal for the left-over audiences...
SAM: Metal for the left-over masses! The ones who didn’t get taken over by pop punk!75

Here, Tommy, Sam, Bill and Paul are positioning themselves as uniquely accessible outsiders; musicians who do not fit within the prevailing tastes and trends of locals on O‘ahu, but who nevertheless manage to appeal to locals from Wai‘anae because of their indefinable, yet perceptible, authenticity. This reference to West O‘ahu, where the band in question hails from, is deeply significant as it connects authentic heavy metal, with a sense of working-class, local authenticity. Tommy points out that, while most people from Wai‘anae do not listen to metal, his band expresses something unique that transcends genre and connects with people who are from a similar background to himself and his band. Again, we must keep in mind that these are discursive, strategic performances designed to create meanings and values around metal, pop-punk, hardcore, Hawai‘i and the band in question. The phrase, “metal for the left-over masses,” is particularly striking and affective; it reflects a simultaneous sense of alienation and belonging.

The tension between the metal scene’s desire for community, its frequent assertions that musicians in Hawai‘i constitute an ‘ohana and have the aloha spirit, and its simultaneous desire to solidify its subcultural identity through contrast with unwanted outsiders remains a consistent feature of subcultural discourse. Donna offers an interesting example of this contradiction:

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DONNA: I think the metal scene is totally…I haven’t even been anywhere else…but I already probably know that our scene is like way nicer. And it does have the aloha cuz you ain’t gunna see in other places probably not metal people at fucking Blue Ocean Thai is supporting your friend’s band who is in an indie-folk-rock band, you know? But you still gunna be in your outfit there because it’s just so small that you cannot just be, “oh I’m only metal, or I’m only this.” So from there, that’s how I’d say we are different.76

Here, Donna offers a depiction of the metal scene happily supporting other genres and musical communities. She feels that, “it does have the aloha,” and that, “our scene is like way nicer,” than scenes on the continent. This is partially out of necessity, as Hawai‘i has a small population with limited opportunities for community building. But she feels that it is also a result of local culture and the attitudinal warmth and openness bequeathed to contemporary Hawai‘i by Native Hawaiian culture. However, just a few moments later, Donna, Amy and their band-mate Neil express the following sentiments regarding hardcore:

AMY: It’s the people, how they hold themselves, and how they interact with others; that’s what turns me off to hardcore. It’s just the people that listen to it.

DONNA: Yeah.

BHO: Could you talk a little bit more about that? Explain maybe a little bit more about what you mean?

AMY: I don’t know how to describe…

DONNA: They are so like…they just do their thing.

AMY: I feel like they are not really there to appreciate the music. I don’t really know what they are there for.

DONNA: It’s like a style thing it seems to me. A lot of them, they’ve got the very, “oh we wear this and do that, I’m going to do this and…it’s new.”

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NEIL: That’s what I get from the current incarnation of hardcore. Just going through the motions I guess.

DONNA: Yeah. And they’re all young.

AMY: Yeah they’re all so young.

DONNA: So you know that’s the time when they are totally going to be like, “I want to be cool!”

NEIL: I can’t really speak for them because I don’t know what they have been through but…just to me it seems like they are kind of playing angry.

AMY: I don’t want to hang out at a club with them…I just don’t…I’ll hang out with the metal people, or like indie people or something. See, I even like indie more than hardcore (everyone laughs). 77

Amy, Donna and Neil present hardcore kids as people who simply, “want to be cool,” and who are disinterested in artistic expression or genuine community building. They suggest that both hardcore and its fan-base are, “young,” and, “new,” which is to say, untested, ephemeral, and trendy. Very significantly, Neil speculates that hardcore kids may be offering empty performances of anger, rather than sincerely giving vent to their inner-demons. Within metal subcultural discourse, nothing can be more damning than the suggestion of insincere emotion. Within a subcultural milieu in which perfromativity is absolutely ubiquitous, the appearance of an obvious, unconvincing performance is the subject of intense scorn. In this brief example Amy, Donna and Neil give voice to a paradoxical desire for the Hawai‘i scene to be a warm, inclusive family, and to be purged of inauthentic, unwanted posers. This should not necessarily be read as a personal attack on any specific individual or even group of individuals; what we see here is a discursive construction designed to convey identity to the positive elements within metal subculture through contrast with a hypothetical Other.

77 4-27-2011
Metal subcultural discourse asserts an intense desire for authenticity and indifference to the tastes and opinions of outsiders. Calling someone a *poser* or a particular style of music a *trend* is one of the harshest things a metalhead can say; these designations convey something or someone who does not belong in the idealized metal family/subculture. These terms suggest an intrusion from the outside, as well as lack vitality and confidence in one’s own tastes. Two of my informants, who I will call Jim and Tony, had just graduated high school at the time of our interview. Both are haoles from the North Shore with a great appreciation for extreme metal of all types. They articulated their understanding of metal subculture to me in the following way:

**BHO:** So, do you consider metal to be a subculture? Does that idea mean anything to you?

**JIM:** Yeah, yeah….metal is totally a subculture to me.

**TONY:** It’s a good subculture. A good underground culture too…

**JIM:** It’s definitely not a trend…it’s just like a group of people…that aren’t like the normal…kinda like they don’t follow the normal…they don’t follow like the normal like expected trends…that you are expected to follow. That’s what I like about metal.78

For Jim, metal subculture’s unwillingness to conform is one of its defining features, as well as one of its most attractive attributes. Here, Jim contrasts the idea of a subculture with the idea of a trend; metal is a subculture because it is not a passing, insincere fad. Metal subculture retains its sense of community and identity because it has staying power and is able to transfer its sense of authenticity back onto the metalheads who practice it.

78 5-29-2010
Skill, knowledge, and passion are also important criteria for the definitions of subculture that my informants have suggested to me. Two of my informants, whom I will call Hank and Roger, were guitarists in one of Hawai‘i’s most successful metal bands at the time of our interview. Both were born and raised on O‘ahu, and come from multi-ethnic, working-class backgrounds. They responded in the following way when I asked them if metal was a subculture:

**HANK:** Definitely!

**ROGER:** Yes! Absolutely.

**BHO:** What exactly does that mean, if you had to define what that means?

**ROGER:** That’s a good question.

**HANK:** I honestly see metal as kind of elitist group of people. Not necessarily that all of them are, you know, egotistical and all that type of shit. But, to be able to pick out what’s happening in a song, especially in a metal song, to be able to pick that out and know what is going on in a metal song really takes a special kind of ear…a special kind of… I mean if you have been listening to Opera your whole life you know, never heard a metal song, and 30 years down the road you happen to pop in Dimmu Borgir…you’d be fucking lost. You’d just be like: I have no fucking idea what the fuck is going on…absolutely. You know, I’m not going to speak for everyone but…that’s my take on it. I really think it’s sort of an elitist…sort of, type of people.

**BHO:** It requires a certain kind of knowledge.

**HANK:** Exactly.

**ROGER:** I agree with him. It does take a special ear. Because I couldn’t hear, I mean, I didn’t grow up doing as much metal as Hank. But when I first joined him and I had to learn the first songs that he had written, I felt the side I knew, and learned the side I knew, and after a couple of months passed by I started hearing more things going on in it…like triplets, just certain notes and structures that…I developed an ear for it just by listening and paying attention to what he is doing. So you really have to pay attention to the detail. Metal is a lot of detail.

**HANK:** And, this would be a little bit more of a subculture, I honestly think that metalheads, people that enjoy metal, are some of the most passionate people on
the planet. I mean, you know, you go to a metal show, it’s nothing like you have ever seen. People are just crazy, pumped up… you’re adrenaline’s running, people are going wild and beating each other up, and having a great time. What other form of music is there in the world where you can go to a show, beat the shit out of each other and have a good night? You know?79

Hank and Roger begin by emphatically stating their belief in an international metal subculture. They assert that metal subculture can be understood through the possession of particular skills, practices, and abilities. Hank explains that a metalhead’s ability to comprehend what is going on in a metal song exceeds the ability of even high-art aficionados like Opera fans; a powerful claim to cultural capital. He argues that metalheads constitute an artistic elite with uniquely developed tastes and abilities. In addition to a highly developed sense of musical nuance, Hank and Roger feel that metalheads harbor passion to a greater degree than most people. We see here a desire to connect values associated with the mind or the intellect, like the ability to analyze music, with values often associated with the body or the soul, like passion. This desire reflects a very common tendency within metal subculture to valorize both artistic/intellectual capacity, and primal, emotionally-based vitality. Hank and Roger argue that metal subculture constitutes simultaneously an intellectual elite, and a pack of orgiastic cave-men. This desire to reconcile the culturally constructed Cartesian distinction between mind and body may be one of metal subculture’s most unifying discursive features.

Metalheads use language to construct meanings around their lives, and the term subculture is one of their most potent, complex tools in this process. But we must remember that metal subculture is an idealized abstraction; a social construction that can
never be fully or completely realized. Like many of our most valorized and motivating desires, metal subculture exists within the precarious webs of language and power that metalheads construct around themselves and one another. My informants assert that being a metalhead in Hawai‘i requires a unique willingness to go against the grain, to confound expectations of what a local person ought to be and do. Large gatherings of metalheads, usually outside of Hawai‘i, are often cited as the only places where metal subculture can be fully realized. These metal mother-ships are spoken of fervently, almost reverently by those of my informants who have experienced them. My informant Neil is in his thirties, and is one of the most skilled musicians in the Hawai‘i metal scene. He is of Native Hawaiian ancestry, and identifies strongly with his ethnicity. Neil told me the following story about his trip to one of the massive summertime metal festivals that take place in Europe each summer:

NEIL: Yeah, well I just recently came back from Germany…from With Full Force Festival. And uhmmm…it was just…I went there by myself, no friends or anything, I just kinda went up there on a whim. A friend of mine who is also into metal sent me this flyer with like 60 something bands on it…

BHO: The festival circuit in Europe is amazing man…

NEIL: I had no fucking clue. I was just like: “holy shit…that would be so cool to go to.” And I thought about it for a few days then I was like, “well…why don’t I go then?” So I went up there…and I speak a little German like I took it back in college like ten years ago…and I went up there not expecting how friendly they were to like an outsider…who’s completely out of his element. I knew nobody…I didn’t have friends up there or anything…I just went. I came across these drunk Germans and they welcomed me with open arms…I was like, “This is so cool! I have never felt so welcome, especially amongst another culture of people…just because we like the same music. That says a lot, I mean…you can have a lot of things in common with someone and still be like eh….. but you meet a metal fan and (laughs) there is something about metal that everyone understands. There is something fundamental about
that genre that amongst its fans everyone seems to understand; it’s just really primal I guess. It’s so primal that you can make friends uhhhh…even with a language barrier, a cultural barrier, superficial barriers, German and Hawaiian, you know? And…it was an amazing experience like I said.\textsuperscript{80}

Here, Neil describes a very powerful instance in which, for him, metal subculture triumphs over other factors of identity. He explains that the people he met, “welcomed me with open arms,” and that metal’s primal, almost preternaturally cohesive powers completely overshadowed, “a language barrier, a cultural barrier, superficial barriers, German and Hawaiian, you know?” The passion with which Neil describes this experience is difficult to convey through transcription, but for him, this journey into the heart of metal subculture was a profound experience. We see here the desire for metal subculture to become fully manifest; a will-to-community that can only be fully comprehended through the macro-discourse of subculture. How would Neil’s experience have been different if he were female? What about all of the other metalheads in Hawai‘i who cannot afford to fly to Germany? These considerations bring us back to the myriad ways in which metal subculture fails to fully manifest itself in participants’ everyday experiences, but the \textit{desire} for the transcendence of gender, class, nationality, race, ethnicity, religion and numerous other essentializing factors remains a consistent, definitive aspect of metal subcultural discourse.

\textsuperscript{80} 9-8-2010
Conclusions: The Experience of Scene and the Desire for Subculture

Virtually all of my informants have expressed to me continuously throughout my fieldwork their desire for their essentialized, extra-subcultural identities to be at least problematized, if not nullified outright, by their metal identity. Some of my informants were as eager to disrupt their metal identity as they were to disrupt the other aspect of their personhood; their sentiments could be paraphrased by Foucault’s statement in the *Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*: “Do not ask me who I am and don’t ask me to remain the same.”81 For many of my informants, metal is expected to be the ultimate disruptor of identity; for others metal itself becomes problematically essentializing. Regardless of where my informants fall on this scale, almost everyone in the O‘ahu metal scene whom I have spoken with and/or befriended has expressed to me their desire to evade restrictive personal definitions and to confuse the expectations of others. Metal subculture and scene activity are meant to be tools in this process. The plurality and multiplicity of the scene often allows face-to-face, real-life opportunities for personal redefinition and identity contestation, while metal subculture presents an internationally diverse swarming of potential identities.

The metal scene on O‘ahu, while infused with tension and disagreement, pushes and pulls itself towards the experience of group identity; a cohesion that can never be totally realized but which is sought after feverishly. The metal community that coalesces

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81 Foucault 1982, 17.
out of the interconnected concepts of scene and subculture experiences the former, and attempts to embody the latter. In a passionate, moving piece of oratory, my friend Ron explained his conception of metal subcultural identity to me one afternoon:

When it comes to music, it really…it’s really identity is what happens I think. When you’re younger you latch onto something and you want that to be you, I think. Like for me, I never considered myself a metalhead until I actually met other metalheads. Like I just liked the music and I was like, “something is weird because none of my friends like this. So that makes me interesting all of a sudden.” But oddly enough, my closest friends that I have now, it’s because we all recognize each other’s shirts at some point. It’s like we found each other somehow because we are so strong about our own identity, about this kind of music. That we are so used to fighting against the norm, the culture, you know, popular culture that it becomes…you wear it on your sleeve, as a badge…as a badge of honor basically. So when you find somebody that fought that same battle because he is wearing that same shirt it’s like, “how the hell do you know this death metal band from Sweden? And that’s not the main band, that’s the lead singer’s side band. And you could have only gotten that shirt by flying there and going to that show.” You know, it’s like you suddenly have that unspoken bond. And so for me when I started going to metal shows, I used to go by myself to the early shows here, I just wandered about talking to random people. I was just the crazy kid who kept headbanging when the music stopped. And eventually people became my friends that way. And uh, for me a badge of honor is that I do my best to meet whoever’s playing, because I like to feel that. So that’s the connection for me: I want to be a part of the show, I want to connect with the fans, but I also want to connect with the dude on stage because he is speaking for me, that’s how I see it. All my closest friends now I have randomly met them because they’ve seen me headbanging on the bus. And they like stare me down, they run up to me and they’re like, “dude what are you listening to!” And that’s how I met seriously every single really close friend, every person that really means something to my life; somehow the music brought us together.  

For Ron, metal subculture has an almost mystical capacity to bring metalheads together. He describes his desire to become the audience, to become the band, to become
the music. The notion of metal subculture as a community of interconnected individuals is central to Ron’s perspective. He explains that before he met other metalheads, before he entered into the community, he was merely a fan of the music. This distinction between music fan and subculture participant is deeply significant. Ron speaks of his desire to become metal, to be subsumed by the macro-discursive identity and allow it to eclipse the mundanity of being Fillipino, being Hawaiian, being American, being working-class, being male, being human. Although quite aware that metal subculture can never completely achieve this task, Ron knows all too well that other less fantastic forms of identity will always reassert themselves, his desire to become metal provides perspective on the possibility of temporary deindividuation.

Subculture and scene are discursive frameworks through which metalheads on Oʻahu construct both their day-to-day communities and their idealized group identities. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche articulates humanity’s tendency to categorize their worlds and construct power relationships:

Man designated himself as the being who estimates values, who evaluates and measures, as the ‘measuring animal.’…It was from the most rudimentary form of personal law that the budding sense of exchange, contract, debt, law, obligation, compensation first translated itself into the crudest and earliest social complexes (in their relation to similar complexes), along with the habit of comparing, measuring, and calculating power in relation to power.83

In the Oʻahu metal scene, these power games involve the comparison of subcultural knowledge, the performance of ecstatic behavior at live shows, and criticism of the scene itself. These discursive practices do not describe objective reality, or reflect

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some stable, essential understanding of heavy metal; they are ongoing, creative attempts to build a vital, empowering dialectic between self and group. As Richard Rorty wryly reminds us, “‘The world does not speak. Only we do.’” Innumerable times throughout my research, my informants have expressed to me their alienation as young people being superseded by a joyous sense of camaraderie upon meeting other metalheads, or in some cases, being introduced by a group of metalheads to heavy metal for the first time. These narratives often sound very much like religious conversion stories, and seem to serve a similar purpose for the narrators. But however much my informants may love heavy metal, and however vigorously they use metal subculture to push back against the elements in their everyday lives that they find irksome, extra-subcultural categories continue to reassert themselves. Women do not have access to the same kinds of power and authority that men do within metal subculture; poor metalheads do not have the same opportunities as more wealthy metalheads; racism can be felt in myriad different ways within the O'ahu metal scene. The discourses of scene and subculture are frameworks through which my informants organize their worlds and cultivate power and pleasure. Different factions within the scene are constantly pushing against one another, as well as different sites of contestation within dominant culture. As Foucault reminds us: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” Although my informants cannot defeat or totally evade external definitions, metal subculture and scene activity present a unique field upon which the game of culture can be played.

84 Rorty 1989, 6.

85 Foucault 1990, 95.
Chapter Two

Within the Perpetual Pentagram: Religious Discourse in the Scene

Blasphemy and Confusion in ‘Aiea

It is Friday March 25th 2011 and I am upstairs at the 4Play Nightclub in ‘Aiea. This particular club is situated above a southern Barbeque restaurant, and hosts many of O‘ahu’s all ages music events. Roughly twenty minutes west of Honolulu, ‘Aiea is adjacent to large collections of military instillations, numerous idyllic suburban communities, and the famous Pearl Harbor memorial. Several major highways and lesser byways converge in ‘Aiea, making it a geographical nexus for O‘ahu, filled with roaring, buzzing activity moving in every direction. The overall atmosphere is one of industry, movement, tourism, and restlessness. This evening the sky has turned a vivid neon pink as the famous Hawaiian sunset turns the strip-malls, crowded highways, and clusters of palm trees scattered about ‘Aiea a burnt orange color. The effect is surreal, almost unsettling, in its hyper-realistic beauty. Outside the club, both male and female teenagers stand around in groups of six or eight, surreptitiously smoking cigarettes while their straight-edge friends shoot them dirty looks and offer castigating slogans for indulging in this vice. The teenagers constitute a variety of mainly Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities. They wear uncomfortable looking, skin-tight jeans, and t-shirts bearing the bright, day-glow logos of bands like The Devil Wears Prada and Bring Me the Horizon. Their hair is arranged in long, elaborate, unisex swoops. Older local metalheads, mainly
men, in their twenties, with more traditional haircuts, sit in cars and on bumpers drinking tall-boys of Heineken or Pabst and ignoring the teenagers.

Inside, the large contingent of military personnel who have shown up this evening as a result of the venue’s proximity to their military bases are busy getting drunk; they have steady pay-checks and do not need to drink tall-boys in the parking lot. Enormous, muscular haoles with very short hair laugh uproariously and slap each other on the back, taking shots of Jägermeister or drinking beer. In addition to the unusually high number of military men (and a few women) milling around 4Play’s bar, most of the core members of the O‘ahu metal scene are in attendance. A number of the better liked local metal bands are playing this evening, and the scene has shown up in impressive numbers for the occasion. Most of the military personnel are haoles; most of the local scene members are not. My friend and informant Lowell has introduced me to a tall, burley military guy whom I have never met before and we are chatting amiably. I am babbling on about the bands who are playing tonight and the good-sized crowd that has shown up, without giving too much thought to my small talk. My new friend looks at me intently and says, “Are you a journalist or something? A writer? I can tell by the way you talk.” I am rather taken aback by this near-the-mark insight, and a little bit embarrassed. “No,” I say self-consciously, “I am a grad student at UH. I am writing my dissertation about the local metal scene.” He nods sagely, possibly wondering why anyone would do such a thing. I am drinking a large, cold glass of beer that tastes very refreshing after a long day. One of my straight-edge informants offers me a disapproving look as he carries an armload of equipment into the venue. Again, I feel somewhat embarrassed and self-conscious. I remind myself not to feel embarrassed or self-conscious; imagine what
Clifford Geertz or Mary Douglas had to endure. Several of my other informants arrive whom I have not seen in some weeks. I am happy to see them and we talk and drink beer while the first band sets up their equipment.

About an hour later Upon Golgotha, a local Christian band that I have seen numerous times, is tearing through a blistering, break-down infused set of hardcore influenced death metal. The band in question is one of the more established and well-honed bands in the O‘ahu metal scene. Their drummer launches into a furious blast-beat, a hyper-fast method of drumming characteristic of extreme metal that can range upward of 180 beats per minute. The lead guitarist wanders up and down his fret-board, playing complex riffs and scales at astonishing speed, headbanging his large crop of curly hair all the while. The crowd is nearly frantic, pushing and pulling itself around a rough semi-circle that constitutes the mosh pit while several layers of participants stand on the outskirts of the pit as a buffer zone between the active participants and the more passive observers. The purpose of this buffer zone, which is as important as the actual moshers, is to both protect the observers from the violence of the pit, and to help up any mosher who falls down and prevent them from being trampled; they are something like heavy metal rodeo clowns. I myself often take on this particular responsibility, which often results in sore, black-and-blue forearms and shoulders the next day. Suddenly, the band slows the music down to half-time, a so-called break-down or mosh part. The pit slows its frenetic swirling, thinning out slightly, giving the core participants more room to move. One short, sturdy young man begins punching the air around him in elaborate, highly stylized motions in-time with the music. Another military guy does a series of elaborate karate-style spin-kicks, carefully aimed at nothing. The break-down ends and
the band abruptly speeds up again, climaxing the song with a triumphant roar from their vocalist before ending the song in a haze of feedback. As the crowd hollers their approval, the vocalist gazes seriously into the invigorated audience before emphatically stating: “I just want you to know, Jesus Christ died for your sins!” The crowd apparently does not know how to respond to this information and stares back blankly, the intensity of the moment deflated. The band seems unperturbed by the audience’s lack of response to their message; they have been through this before, and so has the audience.

The evening progresses into one of the more enjoyable metal nights in recent memory. Affront the Weak, local boys from West O‘ahu recently rechristened as Nesta, unleashes a skillfully performed set that reminds everyone in attendance where the musical bar for the local scene is set. I have the chance to see the newly formed Jesus Wears Armani, consisting mainly of some of my military friends, whom I have never seen perform. Their name is a play on the famous Christian metalcore band The Devil Wears Prada. Although the latter band’s name is meant to be a criticism of secular materialism, it is unclear what Jesus Wears Armani is intended to signify, if indeed it is intended to signify anything other than a joke. The military personnel in particular go berserk for their fellow service men in Jesus Wears Armani. At one point, two military guys take turns linking arms back-to-back and lifting each other into the air, pin-wheeling the elevated participant through the air like a human wrecking ball. The drummer for Jesus Wears Armani bellows into the crowd: “This is my favorite song! I want to see some fucking violence!” The pit is happy to oblige; dozens of young men, and a few women, are climbing over one another, leaping from the stage, pushing and falling and getting back up again. The pit is reaching the state of wild, ecstatic abandon that it
always hopes to achieve but often fails to realize. The band delivers its brutal, chugging version of deathcore, whipping the crowd into ferment and then pummeling them back down again.

Suddenly, during a lull between songs, someone yells, apparently apropos of nothing in particular, “FUCK JESUS!!” There is a palpable intake of breath from the crowd, followed by mingled outbursts of laughter, cheering, booing, hissing, and angry rebukes. My friend Lowell’s voice echoes above the din, “Someone is going to HELL!” It is unclear how seriously Lowell intends this statement. For several moments the atmosphere of the 4Play nightclub becomes confused; genuine tension and hostility replace the simulated violence of moments before. Awkwardness and uncertainty characterize the atmosphere now; neither band nor audience knows quite how to proceed. Then the band launches into their next number and the pit gradually reforms and overcomes the moment of antagonism, although the Dionysian joy of earlier in the set has been permanently lost. When Jesus Wears Armani finishes their set, the evening is getting late and many of the military personnel disperse, leaving mostly core scene members and friends of the band to watch the final set of the night.86

The confusion, frustration, playfulness and antagonism evident in the proceeding example is typical of the ways in which religious discourses manifest themselves in the O'ahu metal scene. In California or New Jersey, Christian metal bands are able to have their own shows, and indeed their own scenes. The population is large enough to support

86 Here is link to some excellent photographs of the evening in question, including some rather fetching ones of the author, as they say, caught in a mosh: http://www.awakenthemosh.com/2011/03/26/photos-a-night-of-metal-mayhem-4play/
an exclusively Christian metal scene that allows for more comprehensible religious communication; they are quite literally preaching to the choir. Conversely, the majority of metal in California or New Jersey, which is decidedly not Christian, are free to be as blasphemous or even Satanic as they like without having to directly confront hostile Christian fans. This is not the case on Oʻahu; the population of metal fans is small enough that Christian and non-Christian (or anti-Christian) bands are forced to not only coexist, but provide a certain degree of mutual support. Heavy metal is completely preoccupied with religion and has been since its inception. Far more so than any other subculture associated with a genre of popular music, heavy metal subculture spends a tremendous amount of its creative energy ruminating over themes concerning the supernatural, the metaphysical, the occult and the sacred.

Just as there is Christian hip-hop, Christian alternative rock, and Christian reggae, so too there is Christian metal. In most parts of North America Christian metal abides within a relatively isolated sub-society of evangelical, mainly protestant culture. They play Christian festivals like Cornerstone and Rock For Life, have their own labels, and remain largely isolated within the evangelical community. There are some “break-out” Christian artists that receive attention from non-Christian metalheads, such as As I Lay Dying, the Devil Wears Prada, and Underoath, but these bands have a strong tendency to tone down their Christian message for non-Christian audiences and, in spite of this, are still looked upon with suspicion and condescension by most non-Christian metalheads. My informant Carl, who is in a local Christian metal band, commented on this point during an interview:
I talked to a bunch of guys that hate, uh, Christianity and, uh, on YouTube and stuff and like they’re…I tell ‘em like that I am a Christian and like, “oh that’s just false belief,” and all this stuff so…like I listen to this band called For Today and they’re Christian and there’s a lot of comments on their like, “oh these guys should stop preaching, they suck now I hate them!” Just because they preach with their music that’s super good. And uh, they won’t listen to them. I’ve talked to one dude who wouldn’t listen to them because the singer preaches…like, like even if there was a Satanist band that preaches about Satan I would still listen to them, just not to what he has to say, just for the music.87

Carl argues, and I have had this notion reiterated to me by numerous other Christian metalheads, that non-Christian metalheads dismiss Christian bands without giving them a chance, and that such behavior is close-minded and self-defeating. Conversely, Carl argues that Christians are more willing to ignore an anti-Christian message if the music is to their liking. It is difficult to say how representative this last assertion may be, but many of my O‘ahu informants have made this claim. Regardless of who is more or less open-minded, non-Christian metalheads do not just dismiss Christian metal, they routinely rail against Christianity with a vociferousness and vitriol that would be unthinkable in any other genre of music. Even outside of predominantly Christian cultures, anti-Christianity and performative blasphemy are the norm within heavy metal subculture. In Hawai‘i, the two segments of the metal world that often shun one another, the Christian minority and the anti-Christian majority, must, by necessity, find a way to coexist.

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87 6-29-2010
Part Two: Heavy Metal and Satanic Conspiracy

Since the earliest days of its existence, heavy metal has been fascinated with religion and the supernatural. Black Sabbath, the progenitors of heavy metal sound and aesthetics, displayed an interest in the occult, Satan, and magic in their title, lyrical content, and imagery. What is perhaps even more significant, parent groups, religious organizations, and law enforcement began to point accusatory fingers and raise overwrought accusations of Satanism towards proto-metal performers like Black Sabbath, Kiss, and Alice Cooper during the 1970’s.\textsuperscript{88} As heavy metal developed out of a distinctive sound into a fully-formed subculture, metalheads began to embrace these accusations and use them as central aspects of their subcultural identity. These playful, half-serious performances are excellent examples of what Ellis calls, “pseudo-ostension,” by which he means the partial acting-out of contemporary legends for the purposes of transgression, provocation and pleasure.\textsuperscript{89} By the early 1980’s, performers such as Venom, Mercyful Fate, and Iron Maiden were pushing the Satanic envelope much further than their 1970’s predecessors. Pentagrams, upside-down crosses, and lyrics glorifying the empowering potential of Satanism and the occult were becoming entrenched, definitive features of heavy metal subculture. Although these themes were becoming ubiquitous aspects of the emerging heavy metal subculture, this is not to say that sincere Satanism was necessarily being widely practiced by metalheads in the 1980’s, or that

\textsuperscript{88} Ellis 2000, 195.
\textsuperscript{89} Ellis 2003, 225.
most metalheads took these images, themes, and lyrics at face value. These signifiers allowed metalheads to become the very things that authority figures feared most; metalheads plucked the most feverish, morbid fantasies from the minds of mothers, pastors, and police and attempted to embody them to the best of their ability. These anti-Christian and pseudo-Satanic themes and gestures would continue to proliferate and intensify as heavy metal subculture developed throughout the 1980’s.

Connected to themes of occultism and Satanism, but in many ways distinct from them, are the even more prevalent images and ideas concerning the supernatural, fantastical and monstrous evident throughout heavy metal subculture. Many of these motifs are drawn from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Robert E. Howard’s *The Conan Chronicles*, both of which draw heavily from Northern European folklore and mythology, as well as imaginative reconstructions of what early Medieval Europe was like. These subject matters invariably focus on magic, sorcery and mythical beings, elements that frequently circle back to metal’s preoccupation with occultism. Horror films, stories and novels have also been deeply important inspirations for heavy metal subculture, and indeed the two genres composed something of a dialog throughout the 1980’s. Where Satan, demonic possession, or witchcraft are not present, ghosts, zombies, werewolves or vampires are. Far more so than any other genre of popular music, heavy metal has retained an almost obsessive interest in religion and the supernatural, even when that fascination has been indirect.

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s heavy metal began to transform itself with increasing speed and variety. This period saw both the high-water mark of metal’s
popularity with bands like Metallica, Mötley Crüe, and Poison selling millions of records, as well as the rather abrupt bursting of the major label metal bubble and the steep decline of metal’s mainstream popularity. While glam metal bands were being unceremoniously dropped from their record contracts, extreme metal was experiencing its violent, gory birth. Partially as a reaction against the radio and MTV friendly metal of the late 1980’s, death metal and black metal bands began pushing metal to both sonic and aesthetic extremes. In Sweden and Norway, members of the Nordic black metal scene began burning down dozens of churches as part of what they claimed to be a war against Christianity. Over the course of the next decade, Nordic black metalers would be involved in numerous murders, assaults, arsons, grave desecrations, suicides and general mayhem, all apparently in the name of Satan, or occasionally Odin. During the time of my research, virtually every metalhead on O‘ahu was at least vaguely familiar with these events in Norway and Sweden. These acts of violence and misanthropy have taken on a life of their own and entered into the realm of heavy metal folklore. Young metalheads, who may know only parts of the real story, gleaned from websites and magazine articles, discuss these events of the early 1990’s as strange, religious parables about the limits of acceptable behavior, transgression, and subcultural identity. Most metalheads on O‘ahu that I know, Christian and non-Christian alike, are simultaneously horrified, fascinated, and impressed by the Nordic church burnings. They serve as a subcultural pole; the far end of one particular strain of discourse. I do not know anyone on O‘ahu who would seriously consider burning down a church or killing someone in the name of Satan or

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90 Hagen 2011, 180-181.

91 Olson 2008, 1-5.
heavy metal, but the example of Nordic black metal remains a compelling potentiality for both my Christian and non-Christian informants.

While Nordic black metal has taken on a unique place in the history of metal subculture, the phenomenon was the result of many years of discursive back-and-forth between metalheads and conservative Christianity. Beginning in the 1960’s, groups of parents concerned by their adult children’s involvement with new religions like The Children of God, The Unification Church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, began coalescing into so-called “anti-cult” organizations. These groups developed a theory which stated that unconventional religions used a method known as “brain-washing” to hypnotize and psychologically enslave their followers. Although this process was vaguely defined and totally unsubstantiated, it became accepted as common knowledge by many segments of the general public, as well as many mental health professionals, in the United States. As the 1970’s commenced and more new religions surfaced, the threat of manipulative cults transformed into a wide-ranging conspiracy theory concerning Satanic cults with elaborate designs for world domination. Heavy metal music was, according to this conspiracy theory, at the vanguard of the Satanic plot and served the purpose of recruiting young people into the super-secret international Satanic cult. Possessed of immense power and esoteric technology, Satanic cults were said to encode subliminal messages within heavy metal music that forced listeners to commit acts of violence and self-destruction. Impossibly


93 Hicks 1991, 88-91.

94 Ellis 2000, 124-125
high numbers of human sacrifice victims were cited by proponents of these theories, suggesting a Satanic organization with huge percentages of the population involved that could simultaneously remain completely invisible.95

In 1990, the seminal British heavy metal band Judas Priest were actually put on trial in Reno, Nevada, accused of being responsible for the death of two young fans. The parents of the two teenagers had been taken in by a conspiracy theory which stated that heavy metal records contained subliminal, Satanic messages that could only be perceived subconsciously. This asserted magical/technological process was known as “back-masking.” The lawyers representing the families of the fans who had committed suicide insisted that Judas Priest had encoded their 1979 record *Stained Class* with inaudible, but undeniably compelling messages that forced the two young fans to commit suicide. This bizarre, fantastical conspiracy theory was taken seriously enough in the United States to go to trial, although the band was eventually cleared of all charges.96 In 1993, three teenaged metalheads in West Memphis, Arkansas were accused of being Satanists and of having murdered several young children. No material evidence connected the teenagers to the crime, but the fact that they listened to heavy metal music and wore black clothing was enough to convince a small town court of their involvement in a Satanic conspiracy and the ritual murder of three young boys. These young men sat in prison for eighteen years before finally being released in 2011 after many years of legal wrangling, aided by both a number of high profile celebrities and the gradual sink in popularity of the Satanic

95 Victor 1993, 3-4.

96 Walser 1993, 145-146.
cult conspiracy theory. Although these two cases are some of the most famous and disturbing examples of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, many other similar accusations and hysterias have proliferated in the United States and Europe since the 1970’s.

But it is crucial to understand that the Satanic cult conspiracy theory was not simply a paranoid delusion that existed exclusively in the minds of conservative Christians. Metalheads, from the earliest days of the genre, have embraced these characterizations to varying degrees. Here we see another example of Foucault’s, “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.” During the earliest, most formative days of heavy metal’s birth, bands like Alice Cooper and Black Sabbath made provocative visual gestures and would even occasionally mention Satan and the occult in their lyrics, but always as figures of fear and negativty or as metaphors for human corruption. The pentagrams, upside-down crosses, and overt blasphemy that would become standard gestures in later periods of heavy metal were not yet being practiced by any of the influential, proto-metal artists. Kiss, whose lyrics were almost exclusively about sex and partying, were widely believed by religious groups and parent organizations to be Satanists and their name was thought to be an acronym for Knights In Service to Satan. While none of these often bizarre accusations had any credence in the 1970’s, the generation of metalheads who were coming of age in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s found inspiration in the fear and paranoia coming from their parents, police, and church

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97 Robertson 2011.


99 Foucault 1990, 45.

100 Ellis 2000, 270.
leaders. The 1980’s saw a creative, combative, mutually titillating power struggle between dominant cultural authorities seeking to interpret popular culture through the lens of contemporary legend, and young metalheads seeking to out-do whatever fantasies their parents could devise and make their most hysterical fears a reality.

In 1981, the British heavy metal band Venom released their *Welcome to Hell* album that set a new standard for overtly Satanic lyrical content and imagery. Their album covers featured goat’s heads and inverted pentagrams, and their lyrics invited fans to commit themselves to Satan and evil. While Venom were mainly trying to provoke parents and religious leaders and give their fans ammunition to do the same, this type of imagery and rhetoric should not be dismissed as mere “shock tactics.” Metalheads were creating a liminal, religious, cultural space in which playfulness, bombast, and transgression could all be explored in ways that were simultaneously fun and empowering. Sincere adherence to Satanism was certainly extremely rare during the 1980’s, but bands like Venom gave fans the opportunity to play with authority figures and one another in a complex game of culture, without committing to any particular ideological worldview. Metalheads in the 1980’s took great pleasure in stoking the fires of Satanic conspiracy theories that where proliferating throughout mainstream American culture, enacting what Ellis calls *ostension*.¹⁰¹

Oddly enough, parent groups, law enforcement officials, and religious leaders who were constructing and proliferating these Satanic cult conspiracy theories were less interested in the more provocative bands like Mercyful Fate, Possessed and Morbid

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¹⁰¹ Ellis 2003, 225.
Angel than they were in the relatively benign bands like Judas Priest, Ozzy Ozbourne, and AC/DC. Some of this had to do with the visibility of the more popular artists like Judas Priest, but it seems that Satanic cult conspiracy theorists needed their Satanism to be covert, subliminal, and secret. If Satanism was out in the open, it seemed less diabolically mysterious and lost some of its subversive power to horrify and titillate. One of the key elements to the Satanic cult conspiracy theory was that it was simultaneously omnipresent, and top-secret; it was everywhere and nowhere; it could not be completely proven or disproven.\textsuperscript{102}

By the late 1980’s blasphemous, Satanic, and occult thematics had reached poetic, dazzling proportions within the early extreme metal scene. As these glorifications of evil, Satanism and occultism became more overt, they received less attention from conservative Christianity. By the time the Satanic cult conspiracy theory was finally being acted out in Norway, the Satanic panics had started to abate in the United States and no one outside of Northern Europe took much interest.

With the exception of people like the West Memphis Three who ended up behind bars, these playful, provocative witch hunts were apparently highly stimulating for everyone involved. Parents and clergy were able to whip themselves into self-righteous fits of condemnation and share ghastly, fascinating narratives with one another. The notion of an evil, mirror image of one’s own idealized community, allows that community to feel a greater sense of solidarity and shared moral purpose. Metalheads were able to effectively challenge their parents’ world-view, appear dangerous and menacing, and immerse themselves in a subcultural community which provided

\textsuperscript{102} Ellis 2000, 120-125.
belonging, identity and play. Ellis recounts a similar supernatural panic during the 1950’s in Scotland when a community became convinced that vampires were stalking their streets and formed armed groups to destroy the undead fiends. Although initially assumed to be some form of mass hysteria, authorities eventually concluded, “after interviewing witnesses and locating a number of earlier ‘hunts’ in the Glasgow area, that the participants enjoyed the panic, seeing it as an adventure, not a nightmare…That there was no vampire is obvious; that the vampire hunt was therefore irrational and socially dysfunctional seems not so obvious.”

Supernatural panics like the Satanic cult scares of the 1980’s and early 1990’s provide venues for the contestation of power and social performance. These kinds of power struggles are not something that one group does to another, they are antagonistic relationships that provide mutual pleasure through the interplay of competing lines of discourse. They can, however, be very dangerous when the struggle becomes too intense or violent, such as in the case of Norwegian black metal on the one side, or the West Memphis Three on the other.

Although the frenzied peak of the Satanic panic has abated in the United States since the early 1990’s, the perception of heavy metal as “devil music” remains, particularly in Hawai‘i. The scope of my ethnographic research has not allowed me to gain a comprehensive picture of how non-metalheads in Hawai‘i perceive heavy metal or their attitudes towards Satanism; however, my informants, regardless of their religious perspective, are unanimous in their belief that dominant culture assumes heavy metal to be Satanic. Regardless of how average people in Hawai‘i understand heavy metal

103 Ellis 2003, 201.1
subculture, or if they have any particular opinions at all, the fact that metalheads believe that they are mistaken for being devil worshippers is absolutely crucial. Christian metalheads see this perception as an unfortunate misunderstanding that they feel responsible to rectify, although they clearly take pleasure in being misunderstood and wrongfully persecuted as well. Metalheads who do not have any particular affinity or hostility towards Christianity often take pleasure in the chaotic, transgressive, provocative capabilities of Satanic and occult aesthetics, as well as that of more ambiguous supernatural creatures like vampires and zombies. Those of my informants who are hostile to Christianity and find empowerment in the figure of Satan take great pleasure in their ability to strike fear into the hearts of conservative Christians and present themselves as rebels and antagonists. Because these three general categories of metalheads must coexist within a single, closely-knit, isolated scene, incidents of chaos and confusion, like the one described at the beginning of this chapter, often occur.

Part Three: Chaos and Salvation

Most of my informants who identify themselves as Christians are not overly concerned with denominational distinctions or complex theological hair-splitting between Christians as far as the metal scene is concerned; the distinction between those who follow Jesus and those who do not is their primary concern. The term Christian, while somewhat homogenizing, is the term usually employed by my informants to signify this distinction, and therefore, it is blanket term that I will be using here. It is significant that all of my informants who are members of Christian metal bands and preach through their music are relatively young men in their late teens and early twenties. They are
simultaneously idealistic about their faith, and very keen to establish a sense of identity through heavy metal. Many of them still live with their parents, experiencing the heavy influence of their authority and the religion that they were raised in as a result. I did not encounter any bands that were both military and overtly Christian during my field work on O‘ahu. My Christian informants’ ethnicities follow the same basic pattern as the rest of the non-military metal scene on O‘ahu: roughly one-third haole, roughly two-thirds claiming multiple Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities.

When Christian metal bands choose a name, they usually employ the conventions used by non-Christian metal bands in order to convey a distinctly metallic sensibility. Consider the names of the following two Christian metal bands on O‘ahu: *Upon Golgotha* and *After Valhalla*. The first name is meant to valorize the biblical site where Jesus was crucified, but the wording itself conveys the same active, powerful, overwrought, esoteric sensibilities that non-Christian metal bands attempt to articulate. The second name communicates a similar feeling, but the meaning behind the name is somewhat more obscure. Valhalla is the most famous dwelling place of the Old Norse Gods, so it follows that *after* Valhalla would indicate the Christian era, the period that supersedes paganism. I earned some subcultural capital of my own when I was able to decipher the meaning of this name for the band without having it explained to me. Both names are written in the distinctive, highly-stylized, nearly hieroglyphic writing style that has become standard convention for metal bands of all types. Metalheads become skilled at translating t-shirts, band names, and harsh vocals in order to comprehend the nearly incomprehensible methods of signification employed throughout metal subculture.
Many of my Christian informants feel a degree of conflict between their religion and their metal identity, and within this conflict resides an important part of their subcultural pleasure. The majority of the Christian metalheads who have helped me with this project articulate feeling misunderstood and unfairly characterized as playing Satanic music. The abrasiveness of metal, and particularly harsh vocals, are often perceived by parents, pastors, and peers who are unfamiliar with metal as evil and demonic. One of my informants, who I will call Mike, described his experiences with this problem:

Yeah, yeah, that’s the problem I guess cuz like when people who don’t know metal they might listen to Christian metal and they would be like, “oh well that just sounds like other stuff…its demonic or whatever.” And so I guess that comes out of it kind of hard cuz in that sense people just assume that it’s not Christian cuz it sounds like regular metal that people are like stereotyped to like, “all metal is supposed to be, like, bad and like…about…the devil and all that stuff you know but…..uh, it’s just like really hard…looking back, I guess we did it more for fun (laughs)…but we tried to do the whole religious thing but you know, but I’m over it because its kinda hard."

Mike is a young man from a fairly conservative Korean family who feels a large degree of tension between his Christianity and his love of metal. When I knew Mike, his band, which was one of my favorites in the local scene at that time, had just broken up because of strain within the band regarding their message, behavior, and overall goals. Mike, in the quote above, expresses irritation at being misunderstood, while also acknowledging that being both Christian and metal is, “really hard.” The harsh vocals that are characteristic of metal make listeners unfamiliar with the style feel as if the vocalist is expressing anger, hatred, and evil. In more practical terms, harsh vocals are
very difficult to understand; even if a Christian listener were willing to give them a chance, the message might still be lost in the screaming and growling. Although very much drawn to metal music, Mike articulated to me during our discussions a large degree of alienation from the metal scene, particularly those aspects that did not support Christianity. His religious sensibilities and his ambivalent attitude towards performance are extremely difficult to reconcile with the majority of scene activity. Mike feels embarrassed because, although he started his band to glorify God, he worries that, “we did it more for fun.” This uncertainty about how Christian metal ought to conduct itself, what feelings it needs to express, and the ways in which it should be different from non-Christian metal were, in the end, impossible for Mike to resolve.

Mike feels that, although his band was Christian and anti-Satanic, there may be something at least unwholesome about metal that made him decide, eventually, to stop being involved in the scene. But most of my informants who either profess a belief in Christianity, or who do not reject it outright, insist that metal is not evil, Satanic, or hateful. They do, however, articulate with astonishing regularity their belief that outsiders see them this way. My informants Bill and Sam told me about this problem:

SAM: I hate it…I hate when metal automatically get’s portrayed as hate music…
BILL: Devil music!
SAM: Devil music like…really?
BILL: We’re not worshipping the devil or anything…like we’re not…¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ 3-27-2010
Sam and Bill feel that it is unfair and absurd that their band should be perceived this way solely because of their sound, but acknowledge that it is a real problem for them. There is no definitive way, at least within the scope of this project, to ascertain how non-metalheads in Hawai‘i feel about this issue, but my informants have expressed their frustration at being labeled devil worshippers to me time and time again. The frequency of these protestations suggests that there is something about this characterization that pleases even my Christian informants. They are speaking in a misunderstood language; the lazy or initiated are likely to come away with the exact wrong impression. This belief that non-metalheads see them as Satanic, even when they are praising Jesus, may also constitute a kind of rebellion through the back door. They are embracing their religion, which is a deeply significant aspect of their identity, while also covertly engaging in the fear mongering and transgressive behavior that metalheads love so well.

Christian metalheads, in some respects, get to have their transgressive cake and eat it too. Many of my Christian informants are impressively passionate, thoughtful, and sincere in their religious convictions. They are willing, as the example described at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, to preach to a very mixed crowd of metalheads, many of whom are not receptive to their message. But there is a reason why they are playing extreme metal rather than other forms of music that are more acceptable and comprehensible to people who share their faith; Christian metalheads often engage in the same kinds of provocative, ambiguous, transgressive performances and discourses that non-Christian metalheads engage in. Consider the following story that some of my Christian informants told to me while explaining how Christians who are not familiar with metal often react to their music:
WILL: Or like when people hear it like, when they first hear it they probably think of like a demon or something you know like they just like hear screaming and …they automatically think it’s bad.

MARTIN: Oh yeah. One time I was playing this song by Kalmah called the Black Waltz, I was playing it and he has just like a scream in the beginning, and my mom is like, “WHAT IS THAT!”

CARL: They’d call it Satanic music and stuff…

MARTIN: All the time at school people would tease us about listening to Satan’s music and it’s uh….I would be listening to like a Christian band and I’d always tell them you know it’s a Christian band, they sing about God and if you worship God…and they are praising God in that way…that it’s not Satanic.106

We see here a number of very telling components of how Will, Carl and Martin see the fusion of Christianity and heavy metal. First, Will asserts that metal vocals are perceived as demonic by people who are unfamiliar with the style. Lacking the appropriate subcultural capital, the casual listener will be frightened and misguided by the way that extreme metal sounds. This disruption and confusion is similar to the ways that non-Christian metalheads create cultural noise that I have described elsewhere; my informants gain pleasure from conveying multiple, often contradictory impressions.

Secondly, Martin describes a situation in which his mother heard him listening to a Christian metal band and became upset and concerned. Although Christian metalheads tend to have a more positive attitude towards authority figures, they still take pleasure in classic parent-baiting activities such as this. Here, Christian metal is helping Martin to reconcile his desire for a wholesome, Christian, family-oriented identity with his desire for a special, esoteric, subcultural world that is incomprehensible to his mother. The point of this story is not that his mother caught him listening to Satanic music, but rather that she misunderstood what she was seeing and hearing and got confused.

106 6-29-2010
In addition to parents and other authority figures misunderstanding the thematic content of Christian metal, Will, Carl and Martin also describe their peers’ lack of understanding. At the end of the above quote, Martin complains about how people at his high school would make fun of him for listening to music that they felt was Satanic, in spite of the fact that it was overtly Christian. While my informants seem to take great pleasure in confusing authority figures, their attitude towards confusing their peers seems to contain more frustration. Here, Martin is expressing irritation at his schoolmates’ close-mindedness and lack of musical knowledge. A few moments later in our interview, Martin and Carl explain their feelings regarding non-Christian music and the existence of overtly Satanic heavy metal:

**MARTIN:** I honestly don’t really care because if you are not worshipping God, what are you worshipping? If you are not for God, than you are against God. That’s basically it, like if you worship about Satan, than you worship him, if you sing about like only girls, like rap if you sing about all that stuff, like drugs…

**CARL:** Material things…

**MARTIN:** Material things…you are basically worshipping Satan. Like, that’s my point of view because if you are not for Him you are against Him. That’s just my way of thinking. If you are not worshipping God…people tell me all the time that the music I listen to worships Satan and then I show them the lyrics and all the lyrics are worshipping God and the music you listen to all they talk about is uh…drugs, sex, girls; that’s what Satan wants, so that’s…I tell them, Satan’s music right there. You are actually listening to Satan’s music.

Martin and Carl feel that, ironically, while their peers are accusing them of listening to Satanic music, it is, in fact, their accusers who are listening to genuinely Satanic music. For Martin and Carl, it is not harsh vocals or blast beats that constitute evil and Satanism, but worldviews that privilege materialism and sensual pleasure over spirituality and God. While Martin and Carl seem to enjoy creating cultural noise for
their parents and other authority figures, their attitude towards their peers who are ignorant of both heavy metal subculture and Christianity is much more infused with hostility.

It is very significant that at no point in my conversations with this particular group of informants did they express irritation or hostility towards other metalheads within the O‘ahu scene, regardless of their religious worldview. They complained about people outside of the scene, and hardcore kids who drink and become violent at local shows, but the metal scene itself was spoken of in terms of inclusion and acceptance. As we have seen elsewhere, the O‘ahu metal scene must carefully navigate these treacherous cultural waters in order to maintain itself in the face of ideological and religious diversity. Although tensions, confusions, and occasional hostilities do become manifest when religious perspectives come into conflict, all relevant parties struggle to diffuse these problems once they have come about.

My Christian informants often describe Satan and evil to be closely associated with materialism and sensual pleasures, like sex and drug use. My non-Christian informants tend not to see the figure of Satan in this way; this understanding of Satan seems to be heavily influenced by religious leaders and other official, authoritative voices. What both my Christian and my non-Christian informants seem to agree on is Satan’s association with chaos and loss of control. My informant Mike spoke to me at length about the tension between his Christianity and metal’s valorization of chaos. While he described the chaos and wildness of the mosh pit as, “bliss,” he also spoke of the trepidation and suspicion he felt towards this loss of control:
Yeah, cuz I don’t know….I think it says in the bible that you can drink but you can’t overly do it…but I don’t know….because you don’t want to be like making bad decisions because you kind of want to be in control….and that’s the whole Christian thing so…..I don’t know….it’s kind of hard about where to draw that line….yeah like the whole mosh pit thing and like playing Christian music…because you are playing Christian music and there is a mosh pit going on…you are like kinda: are you for it or against it kind of a deal….107

Mike perceives something both attractive and potentially un-Christian about the chaos represented by the mosh pit. While he hopes that Christian metal might be a venue through which Christians can express their religious feelings and even preach to the unconverted, he also suspects that there may be something irreconcilable between Christianity and heavy metal. My non-Christian informants largely agree with Mike; metal is freedom, rebellion, and chaos. Virtually all of my informants associate Christianity with order, control, and restraint, attributes that most feel are very difficult to reconcile with heavy metal subculture.

Part Three: Satanism, anti-Christianity, and Imperialism

One of the most unique aspects of the metal scene in Hawai‘i is the tendency of my informants to associate authority, religion and social control, elements that are railed against throughout heavy metal subculture in different ways, specifically with imperialism and colonialism. While metalheads in Manchester or Seattle might describe religion as “brainwashing” or in other general terms, my informants, most of whom are from Asian or Pacific Islander ethnicities, reorient metal’s preoccupation with Satanism, Christianity and the occult to explain the experiences of Hawai‘i and the Pacific.

107 12-15-2009
Although the O‘ahu scene rarely confronts political or social issues directly, themes concerning religion and the supernatural serve as venues for my informants to discuss these issues covertly. Satanism and occultism are provocative and confusing to outsiders, but as Ellis argues, occultism, “functions as a way of subverting power structures. For this reason, it is often associated with adolescents, particularly females, whose power roles are precisely the most debatable.”

One of my informants, whom I will call Laura, grew up in an indigenous family on the island of Saipan in Micronesia. At the time that I knew her, Laura was in her early 20’s and still adapting to life in Honolulu. Extremely intelligent and very interested in exploring metal outside of the fairly closed off world that she grew up in, Laura was one of my most personable and enthusiastic informants during my fieldwork. During our conversations, Laura described to me the pleasure and uniqueness she felt at being the only female metalhead on the entire island of Saipan within a small, close-knit group of male metalheads. For Laura, Christianity represents both the restrictive, sometimes oppressive social rules that young women on her home island are expected to conform to, as well as the atrocities committed against her people by the Spanish. When I asked

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Laura about why, in her opinion, religion was such a fixation for metal, she responded in the following way:

I am actually Catholic, well I am agnostic now, but I grew up in a Catholic … uhmmm…the culture…we pretty much got raped by the Spanish when we were, like in the 1500s. And uhmmm…the Chamorro culture has adopted uhmmm Catholicism so it’s really forced upon you until you are about 18, until you have a choice. From Autumn to Ashes, they like to play…they are not a religious band at all they are not anything like As I Lay Dying or even Coheed or something where they are a Christian band, but they do like to not necessarily mock religion but point put the fact that it does influence people to do crazy things and to think crazy things and just…that religion can completely form people into different things. I think religion plays a huge part in metal, especially like black metal…where like in Norway I think, where they burn churches and they are like Satanism…stuff like that.109

We see here that for Laura, Catholicism represents both the frustrating restrictions placed upon her growing up, and the injustices committed against her ancestors by the Spanish. She describes a band that she likes, From Autumn to Ashes, who criticizes the coercive and misleading capabilities of religion. For Laura, and for the majority of my informants, Christianity represents control and despotism. The bands and perspectives that Laura favors tend to criticize the social role of religion, as opposed to the more extravagant blasphemies that are commonplace in metal subculture. Although Laura finds intellectual critiques of religion more to her liking than the provocative, hyperbolic heresies of bands like Deicide or Mayhem, she finds the legend of Norwegian black metal to be intriguing and attractive. Although Laura herself would never burn down a church or join a Satanic organization, she finds the possibility of such extremes to be empowering.

109 10-14-2010
Satan tends to be associated with unrestrained freedom in heavy metal subculture rather than with cruelty, hatred or violence. Although none of my informants are Satanists, many of them find the figure of Satan fascinating and empowering. A few moments after the quote given above, Laura described her feelings regarding Satan:

I feel like especially with Christianity, there are so many restrictions that they put on you, there are so many things you can’t do. I think Satan is just a symbol of doing anything you want to do and being human and you know, it’s human nature to want stuff and want to do things and envy and everything. Religion and Christianity especially, really tries to restrict you of that. And I feel like when Satanism comes into play in metal it’s really…it’s really the freedom to do what you…are to do, because you are human so just act on it. Yeah…but I don’t really listen to black metal or anything…I know a little bit about it but not too much.110

Here, Laura explains that Christianity pathologizes human desire; specifically those associated with Christian sins. Her statement, “Satan is just a symbol of doing anything you want to do and being human,” is very telling, and highly representative of how my non-Christian informants understand the figure of Satan. Although this understanding of Satan has been influenced by Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan, it also draws from Romantic poets like William Blake, and the writings of John Milton.111 This conception asserts that Satan represents physical pleasure, sensual indulgence, and a lack of constraint. It is perhaps this last attribute that is most significant for Laura and for my other informants; Satan represents the abandonment of restrictions, both social and psychological. In a very interesting statement Laura suggests that Satan is, “the freedom to do what you…are to do.” Here, Laura describes Satan as a kind of Nietzschean self-

110 10-14-2010

111 Baddeley1999, 67.
becoming; the realization of one’s true humanity that Christianity tries to obscure. Laura concludes this statement by mentioning Norwegian black metal as an example of what she is talking about, one that serves as a compelling example, albeit a radical one that she does not fully embrace.

My informants Amy and Donna feel that Christianity is responsible for much of the social injustice and suffering that they see in the world. They explained their perspective to me in the following way:

**AMY:** Religion has played like a huge role in every country or society since the beginning of whatever. It’s always been one of the major issues, so much blood has been spilled over it. People have been punished, just our country, just America, *one nation under God.* Just…it’s always there.

**DONNA:** It’s like the exact rule book we want to go against, everyone is like, “oh, you have to do this,” so we want to do the opposite.¹¹²

For Amy, religion represents both violence and, very tellingly, the embodiment of American nationalism. For Amy, the notions that America is a singular nation, and that all Americans are enthralled under a single God, are inextricably tied together. Both of these identities, national and religious, are unacceptable for Amy, linked as they are to oppression and violence. Donna concurs, and adds that religion represents coercive authority in all of its forms. She explains that religion is a useful guidepost for what *not* to do; if Christianity tells me I must be *this* way, then I will be *that* way. It is important to acknowledge here that while Amy and Donna use the fairly neutral term *religion,* they mean Christianity. Through the framework of heavy metal, religion becomes the blanket discourse through which all other forms of authority can be attacked. A few moments

¹¹² 4-27-2011
later, Donna and Amy explained the pleasure they take in provoking and frightening
Christians through the framework of metal subculture:

**DONNA:** Yeah and just to piss everybody else off! Just to piss them off
(laughs)!

**AMY:** It makes them afraid. And… I love scaring people. I just…I love
it.113

Donna and Amy acknowledge that making outsiders feel angry and frightened is
highly enjoyable for them. Amy’s statement that, “And… I love scaring people. I just…I
love it,” is very significant. Her pauses emphasize the way she feels about this issue; she
does not just enjoy being able to frighten Christians, she *loves* it emphatically.

Although most of my informants see the Christianity-baiting tendencies in metal
to be a reaction against social injustice, my informants Hank and Roger openly
acknowledge that metal and conservative Christianity have a long-established cultural
dialogue:

**ROGER:** I might be wrong about this but that whole dark feeling of…of
…of it’s not just metal, when rock music first came out they deemed it as
Satanic. And people eventually started playing off of it.

**HANK:** Yeah! It was a bigger fuck you.

**ROGER:** A bigger fuck you.

**HANK:** You know, hard rock AC/DC as far back as Elvis people were
like, “Oh this is the devil’s music! Hard rock!” And all this stuff…and
just as time goes on people were like, “oh we can do it better. We can piss
you off even more.”

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113 4-27-2011
Here, we see that Satanism and anti-Christianity are not simply a rejection of mainstream values, but a product of them. Metalheads respond to what their parents, church officials and law enforcement agencies require of them; if they want the devil’s music than they will give them the devil’s music. While many of my informants understand metal to be a reaction against coercive power, Roger and Hank acknowledge that this relationship is far more symbiotic than a simple Us vs. Them dichotomy. Metalheads are playing with authority figures, albeit in a rather belligerent way.

My informants use Satanic and occult themes in a number of strategic ways. They use these kinds of contents to disrupt the expectations of others, to create cultural noise. Christianity serves as the embodiment of coercive power and imperialism; Satan becomes its inverse. They often deploy Satanic content in order to frighten or disturb the uninitiated or the easily offended. In this context, Satanic imagery conveys identity through the rejection of what the participant is not, in a way that mirrors the tactics used by Thornton’s club kids.¹¹⁴ My informants are also playing a cultural game with dominant cultural authorities; posing as the devil-worshipping teenagers that their parents seem to fear and desire in equal measure. But my informants are not just performing for outsiders; the figure of Satan does usually mean something empowering and evocative for metalheads. He represents excess, serving as a stand-in for Dionysus. Satan articulates freedom and boundarylessness. Borrowing from LaVey’s ideas, metalheads often assert that Satan evokes human indulgence; the acceptance of essential human desires. In a very Miltonian way, Satan also represents rebellion and the rejection of

authority. Like many aspects of heavy metal subculture on Oʻahu, Satanic and occult themes complicate the identity of the participant. Empowerment comes from multiplicity. Satan has a mercurial capacity to be simultaneously a joke, a God, a red herring, and the embodiment of freedom itself. My informants live in a very complicated society, filled with contradiction and uncertainty. Satanic heavy metal, cloaked as it is in the arcane, the malevolent, and the absurd, allows my informants to combat and disrupt these contradictions, even if they are unable to resolve them permanently.

Part Four: Death, Abjection and Monstrosities

I am sitting by myself at a table at Bar 35 in Honolulu’s Chinatown waiting for my informant Lowell to show up for an interview. It is a weeknight, and Lowell is just getting off work. He is a little bit late for our meeting and texts me to apologize for his tardiness. His first text message says something like, “Sorry I’m late. Had to murder someone on the way over.” I respond, “No worries. That happens to me all the time.” Lowell replies, “Burying dead bodies takes forever.” I text back that, lately, I have been resorting to cannibalism in order to save time when I have to dispose of a dead body. Lowell promises to give this method a try next time. To the casual observer, this exchange might seem like two very immature men in their thirties sharing a macabre, tasteless joke about cannibalism that one might expect to hear in a junior high school cafeteria, and it is certainly that, but it is also a subculturally specific line of discourse. Although our interview has not started yet, we are already talking about heavy metal. And in metal subculture’s own, unique way we are also talking about religion and the supernatural.
While many of my informants take pleasure in addressing religion directly, many others prefer exploring supernatural themes that are not directly connected to established religious traditions. When asked why they celebrate or condemn Christianity in their musical performances, my informants who I have previously described in this chapter usually have fairly well articulated reasons for why they focus on religion. But my informants who obsess over zombies, cannibals, vampires, or simply death itself are more reticent to articulate their motivations. Death, chaos, and apocalypse tend to dominate these themes, regardless of the specific supernatural beings involved. Although deliberately offensive, transgressive themes are fairly constant, morbid and supernatural lyrics and imagery in heavy metal must be seen as a continuation of metal’s more general preoccupation with religion, rather than simply as obscenity for obscenity’s sake.

Consider the following three names of local metal bands on O‘ahu: Survive Till Sunrise, Dawn of the Onslaught, Corpus Black. The first two indicate some kind of large-scale supernatural conflict, possibly involving vampires or zombies. The third brings to mind a decaying corpse, possibly reanimated. All three evoke death, violence, and morbidity. But why should a youth culture be so interested in death? Where is the pleasure in ruminating over descriptions and images of putrefaction, trauma, and monstrousness? It is important to remember that supernatural and morbid themes in metal are read as fun and playful by the vast majority of metalheads. These descriptions are not necessarily meant to be experienced somberly or seriously by the audience; they are intended as Halloween-like, carnavalesque, play. However, these very same themes are often intended to be taken quite seriously, at the same time that they are meant to be
silly and playful. Here we see another example of metal’s delight in misdirection and ambiguity; we are completely joking and dead serious at the same time.

Songs, images, and utterances concerning death, morbidity and the supernatural are whimsical, albeit gruesome, gestures that are designed to deliberately alienate outsiders, while also providing a venue for metalheads to imagine death, the after-life, and the inner-workings of the body. Khan-Harris observes: “Death, killing, and mutilation provide a constant source of inspiration within the scene, particularly, of course, in death metal…and album covers often depict scenes of torture and suffering.”

Although Khan-Harris acknowledges that these themes come in many forms and are interpreted in different ways, he suggests that these discursive tendencies do, in fact, often glorify death and violence. I have never met another metalhead who sincerely desires violence, death, or apocalypse. In the example given above, Lowell was really asking me: “How far can a push you without offending you?” And my response was, “Pretty far.” Lowell was, among other things, testing my transgressive threshold; attempting to establish my familiarity with this particular line of subcultural discourse. Lowell takes great pleasure in pushing people’s buttons, in mischievously provoking people outside of their comfort zones. Metal’s fixation with extreme morbidity is one way, among many others, that it asks participants: What does it mean to be dead? What does it mean to be alive? How far is too far? What happens when we get below the surface and see what’s going on beneath appearances?

115 Khan-Harris 2008, 35.
Georges Bataille calls the kinds of pleasures that metalheads derive from themes and images of extreme morbidity and supernatural violence *eroticism*. Humanity, Bataille posits, is torn between the painful isolation of individuality, what he calls discontinuity, and the terrifying thought of being subsumed within a larger macro-self after death, what he calls continuity. In his book *Erotism*, Bataille explains: “Existence itself is at stake in the transition from discontinuity to continuity. Only violence can bring everything to a state of flux in this way, only violence and the nameless disquiet bound up with it. We cannot imagine the transition from one state to another one basically unlike it without picturing the violence done to the being called into existence through discontinuity.” Metal subculture strives continuously, and in numerous different ways, to achieve the loss of control that Bataille calls eroticism. The hyper-violence, excessive morbidity, and fixation with supernatural monstrousness that metal subculture obsesses over are all attempts to transgress taboos and confront death. Much of the pleasure available through metal is derived from temporary loss of isolated selfhood, and the Dionysian ecstasy that follows.

Bataille’s understanding of eroticism is closely tied to Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. For Kristeva, the abject is repulsive and fascinating in equal measure. The power of abjection comes from a sense of loss of self, and loss of control. Kristeva writes: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and

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real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.” Metal subculture has made the celebration of abjection one its primary activities. My informants in the O‘ahu metal scene regularly tease one other with jokes concerning cannibalism, murder, and even necrophilia. Band names, song titles, lyrics, and imagery routinely revel in abject descriptions of decay, extreme violence, and the undead. These kinds of thematics serve the dual purpose of repelling the squeamish and uninitiated, as well as allowing participants to approach the threshold of their own sense of self and experience the giddy, nauseous pleasure that Bataille calls eroticism and Kristeva labels abjection.

Although my informants are often very candid and articulate when discussing other subjects, they have often expressed uncertainty when discussing metal’s fixation with death, morbidity and hyper-violence. When I asked Lowell why we were joking about murder and cannibalism earlier in the evening, and why metal seems so preoccupied with death, Lowell responded:

That’s a very, very good question. And I know by saying that I am just buying time to come up with a good answer uhmmm….because I honestly couldn’t tell you. It’s uhhhh….people have their fetishes, people have their interests. I don’t know what it is about death that’s involved with metal, I mean, there’s a whole subgenre of metal that’s dedicated to death: death metal. So…I wish I could explain it but I can’t. I just think that…you can’t enjoy life without death, and you know death is creeping around the corner so you better live it up. And then when you finally do die, somebody is going to dig up your body and fuck it (laughs).118

Here, Lowell expresses a certain amount of reticence in explaining why metal, and his subgenre of choice in particular, spends so much time and energy fantasizing

118 2-16-2011
about extreme morbidity. When considering Bataille and Kristeva’s understandings of these subjects, it should not be surprising that Lowell cannot explain his interest in these themes. Abjection, in many respects, is beyond language and human comprehension. But Lowell’s unwillingness of offer a more detailed explanation is also an example of what Khan-Harris has described as reflexive anti-reflexivity within extreme metal.119 Khan-Harris argues that metalheads will pretend to avoid particular lines of discourse, not because they do not comprehend their significance, but rather because that significance must only be expressed in certain ways and at certain times. To circumvent the cold light of outright reflexivity, Lowell concludes his statement with another crude (but well timed) joke about necrophilia.

Conclusion

Metal subculture is completely fixation with death and religion; they are metal’s proverbial elephant in the room. As with most other aspects of metal subculture, religion is used in different ways for different contexts and different audiences. The figure of Satan in particular serves as an enigmatic signifier that can mean many different things at the same time. It is this very ambiguity that gives metal thematics and imagery its sense of mystery and dynamism for participants. Metal t-shirts, one of the most important methods of signification for metal subculture, usually project a sense of drama and violence, while simultaneously depicting esoteric images and indecipherable scripts that only well-versed metalheads can comprehend. At first glance, many metal t-shirts are deliberately offensive and provocative for outsiders, but a closer examination reveals

119 Khan-Harris 2007, 144-145.
multiple, deeper levels of significance for those who are educated in heavy metal iconography. Most of these images deal with religion, the supernatural, or hyper-morbidity. They are designed to confuse and frighten the uninitiated, while conveying complex worlds of meaning for participants who have taken the time to learn the codes.

Religion in metal subculture jumps back and forth between sincere social commentary, fantastical speculation, and playful jest. In any particular image, song, or performance, all three of these perspectives might be employed. Heavy metal is constantly shifting and altering its apparent motivations; much of its attraction for participants comes from this mercurial ability. Heavy metal, however confrontational or pugnacious it way be, is a deeply romantic subculture. Songs about an idealized pre-Christian past have as much to do with J.R.R. Tolkien as they do with history, but such fantasies are also meant to criticize the coercive, sometimes violent tendencies of Christianity in the real world. Songs glorifying the power of Satan are meant to be mini horror films, designed to both titillate and offend, but they are also profound, emotionally charged attempts to imagine the sacred. These attempts to simultaneously perform to several audiences is a form of playful sincerity; a method of conveying multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings at the same time.

On O‘ahu, the need to convey multiple meanings and maintain an ambiguous sense of religious identity is, by necessity, even greater than in other scenes. The discription that I started this chapter with exemplifies the ways in which the O‘ahu scene must play to a number of different audiences, while never being quite sure exactly who they are performing for. Overt Christian proselytizing might go over very well for a
particular crowd, but it might also provoke derision or hostility. Offensive or Satanic commentary might be just the thing to get the crowd excited, but it might also create the anger and confusion that it did in my opening example. There is an uncertainty and an unspoken tension regarding religion within the O‘ahu metal scene that contradicts the often asserted “metal ‘ohana” mythology. There is a face-to-face cordiality within the scene that obscures, but does not dissolve, the very real tensions that infuse the religious discourse of the O‘ahu metal scene. In his deeply insightful analysis of ethnic relations in Hawai‘i, Jonathan Okamura explains the sometimes superficial ways in which diverse groups of people interact in Hawai‘i: “This cultural norm, popularized as the ‘aloha spirit,’ is more significant in interpersonal relationships than in ethnic group relations. Its emphasis on face-to-face interactions, and because it can be experienced directly in those interactions, may well obscure the ways that ethnic groups relate to one another in unfair and intolerant ways.”¹²⁰ This tendency for particular groups of people in Hawai‘i to assert a sense of social harmony, and to perform that ‘friendliness’ in small ways, often camouflages the very real divisions and hostilities that exist within the O‘ahu metal scene, and indeed, throughout Hawai‘i

¹²⁰ Okamura 2008, 11.
Chapter Three
The Military Factor

Angry Fucking White People

I am standing in front of my apartment building in downtown Honolulu on a muggy afternoon in early October. A gargantuan Chevy Suburban dominates the curb in front of me. Glenn Beck’s quavering, hysterical voice booms out of the car’s stereo, seeming to harangue passersby with messages of doom and encroaching socialism. One of my informants, who I will call Patrick, stands grinning next to his motor vehicle. Patrick is a very large, powerfully built Euro-American man in his late 20’s who is originally from Utah. He has fought in Iraq, and will be deployed to Afghanistan soon. His blonde hair is styled in a severe buzz cut, and his neck is easily twice the circumference of mine. He radiates a boyish, convivial friendliness that puts me at ease, in spite of the fact that I have only met Patrick a few times before and do not have a clear idea of what I am getting myself into. Patrick is here to pick me up and take me to the military base in central O‘ahu where he and his band live, work and rehearse. We shake hands and I thank him for coming all the way into town to pick me up. As soon as I have clamored up into the remarkably high passenger seat of Patrick’s Suburban he asks me: “Hey! Do you like talk radio? Man, I love it. Listen to it all the time.” I mumble something about how I like to listen to This American Life sometimes, but that I do not get to listen to the radio much.
We make our way through the dense mid-afternoon traffic that clogs Bishop Street. We push towards Ala Moana Boulevard and away from the downtown area. Patrick and his band members have all been deployed multiple times and are likely to be deployed again in the near future; they seem to speak of this inevitability with a combination of anxiety and resignation. Their band is currently recording a demo that they hope to send off to several of the myriad independent record labels that specialize in the crushing, mosh-friendly metalcore that his band creates. I have been invited to watch the recording process at their small, on-base Pro-Tools studio. They have only played a few small shows thus far, but hope to play a few larger ones before being deployed. None of the band grew up in Hawai‘i, and most of them have only spent staggered blocks of time on O‘ahu between deployments. I have never visited a military base before, and this will be the first time during my period of research that I have watched a recording session. Patrick and his band-mates are all of Euro-American descent, except for one of their guitarists who is Latino. In most respects, Patrick expresses himself with an earnestness that contrasts with the informality that I have become accustomed to in the O‘ahu metal scene. As we leave the city and make our way towards our destination, I cannot ignore the feeling that I am leaving the environment that I have been conducting research in for nearly two years and entering a very different cultural space.

As we drive along the suburban sprawl surrounding Honolulu, Patrick describes his lyrical motivations as a metal vocalist. He tells me that America is reaching a crisis point; socialists are attempting to subvert American values and rob the nation of its vitality. He reserves particular rancor for President Barack Obama, whom he sees as the prime architect of America’s impending demise. Environmentalists, too, are enemies of
what Patrick refers to as, “real Americans.” He tells me that global warming is a massive, conspiratorial lie designed to instill fear and confusion in the American public. Patrick hopes to communicate his anger and frustration regarding these issues through his lyrics. He tells me about a concept album that he is planning regarding a group of “real Americans” who mobilize a guerrilla army against America’s internal enemies. These internal enemies, Patrick tells me, are a far greater threat to America than any of its external enemies. I am growing increasingly uncomfortable with this line of discussion, as I strongly suspect that I myself might fall into the category of “internal enemies” if Patrick were to get to know me better; however, I do not wish to alienate Patrick so I choose my words very carefully. I attempt a Socratic strategy, asking questions rather than offering my own opinions. “What about the media?” I ask. Patrick tells me that Fox News is the only TV news outlet willing to stand up to the liberal/socialist conspiracy.

As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Patrick feels that America has drifted away from God and must be set back on the right path again. He feels that metal is the perfect medium to express the rage and hostility that all “real Americans” feel towards socialists and environmentalists. As we arrive at the entrance to Patrick’s military base, a guard casually checks my ID before waving us through. We enter what looks like a clean, neat housing project filled with identical three story apartment buildings; it could be any recently built, low-income housing block in California or Texas. We park in front of one of these apartment buildings as Patrick concludes his explanation by saying that soon, a second civil war will be necessary in America. I have no idea what to say to this.
As we climb the narrow stairway leading to the third floor apartment studio, the sound of metal drumming becomes increasingly louder. Patrick leads me into a living room that looks not unlike most mid-sized, two-bedroom apartments lived in by 20-something college students except for the massive drum set that dominates the main sitting area. Perhaps a half-dozen different microphones are placed strategically around the drum set; this is clearly a recording session rather than a rehearsal. I greet the members of Patrick’s band whom I have met before, and they introduce me to the members and studio technicians whom I have not previously met. I thank them for their hospitality, and they seem genuinely pleased to have me there. For some minutes after my arrival the band stand around talking, joking, and drinking soda. It is obvious that these men spend a great deal of time together, as their humor is rife with arcane, obviously inside jokes that are mostly lost on me. After a little while, the band decides to take another shot at recording.

The band explains to me that today they are working mainly on recording drums. Many of their songs are very technically complicated and they have been having some difficulty getting the drum parts right. I and several of the band members stand around the drum set, while the studio technician and the guitarist return to the Pro-Tools console that is set up in the master bedroom, and the drummer settles himself behind his drum kit. For roughly the next hour the drummer attempts take, after take, attempting to play a particularly complicated section that, while only about a minute and a half in length, is highly demanding technically. We watch in anticipation as the drummer psychologically prepares himself, and then launches into a series of amazingly fast rhythms, fueled by the duel kick drums that are one of extreme metal’s calling cards. As I am unfamiliar with
the song in question I do not know when he has made a mistake, but the other band members know right away when something goes wrong. Groans of frustration become more audible as the drummer fails to perfect each take, with no one more annoyed than the drummer himself. I feel as though I am watching a high-energy, physically demanding sport rather than a musical performance; perhaps an Olympic gymnast attempting to master a difficult routine. Over, and over, and over, the drummer pummels his drum kit, flying along the snares and toms, before inevitably failing to achieve the intended part. Drenched in sweat, and becoming ever-more enraged by his lack of success, the drummer is forced to take several breathers before trying again. His band members mutter words of encouragement and pat him on the back between takes; it is clear that no one holds his lack of success against him as long as he keeps trying. Finally, after nearly an hour, the drummer is nearing the completion of his section, when suddenly he loses his grip on one of his drum sticks and the nearly perfect take falls to pieces. The drummer erupts into a fit of rage and consternation, kicking over one of his kick-drums and throwing his sticks across the room. He bellows at the top of his lungs: “AHHHHHH!!! ANGRY FUCKING WHITE PEOPLE!! THAT’S WHAT WE ARE: ANGRY FUCKING WHITE PEOPLE!!!” There is a moment of complete silence after this declaration, and then the band bursts into laughter, consoling their drummer with reassuring embraces and promises of future success.

The band eventually gets a drum part that they can use, and a few successful guitar parts, and it is getting late. I tell the band that I promised my girlfriend that I would be home for dinner and ask if anyone would be willing to drive me home. Patrick graciously volunteers and everyone thanks me for coming, as if I were the one doing
them a favor. As we drive back to Honolulu Patrick tells me about an upcoming show that they have planned and his concerns about being accepted by the local metal scene because of their status as military personal; the trepidation between military personnel and locals within the metal scene is something that concerns Patrick, but he does not pretend to understand where it comes from. I tell him, truthfully, that their musical competence should speak for itself. Patrick drops me off where he picked me up and I tell him that I am really looking forward to seeing them perform live, since in spite of the fact that I have been hearing them perform all afternoon, I never got to hear one of their completed songs, or the band perform all together. We shake hands, and I return home feeling utterly exhausted by the afternoon’s events. Unfortunately, I never got to see Patrick’s band perform. A few months after the recording session, Patrick got deployed to Afghanistan. A few months after that, several of the other band members who comprised the band also got shipped off to Afghanistan. I don’t know what happened to the demo that they were recording on the day in question, or even if it was ever completed. I can only hope that Patrick and his band mates are safe and doing well, as they were very kind to me when they had no particular reason to do so.

The perceptions, assumptions, and strategic maneuvering of both military personnel and locals within the scene frequently take precedence over the reality of scene interactions, and often contrast with how individuals see themselves and the groups that they belong to. Both military personnel and local metalheads construct narratives around the opposite group, imposing discursive elements that explain the mutually felt tension, and exonerating the narrator’s own group. Much of the anecdotal and interview material that I have collected on this subject is an example of this kind of discourse. My
informants seem less inclined to speak of their own first-hand experiences, and more
inclined to talk about the fabled, “friend-of-a-friend” or to speak in more abstract terms
about the interactions between military and local metalheads. Both sides bring myriad
assumptions, prejudices, fears, and anxieties to the table when making this particular
social encounter, and for this reason these encounters are wrapped in more layers of
narrative discourse than less stressful topics.

Patrick and his band mates come from very different ethnic, regional, religious,
educational, and vocational backgrounds than my informants who grew up in Hawai‘i. They
present different versions of masculinity; the military men whom I met on O‘ahu
tended to perform a much more macho, traditionally tough interpretation of manhood
than my local informants. The military personnel that I met on O‘ahu tended to express
very different political perspectives, veering far more to the right than my local
informants. They have had radically different life experiences; Patrick and his band have
been moved around a great deal, been to war, and confronted the very real prospect of
their own deaths. Military personnel have invariably reported feeling alienated,
homesick, and unwanted in Hawai‘i. They also come from different corners of metal
subculture. Patrick and his band mates reside within the hyper-masculine, often
politically conscious realms of metalcore and so-called “tough guy” hardcore. These
subgenres usually eschew the fantastical, supernatural elements that characterize much of
the rest of metal, for a much more “real life” oriented perspective that relies heavily on
the aesthetics, history, and artistic sensibilities of hardcore punk. I have argued
elsewhere that metal is not as violent and angry as it appears to be from the outside;
however, metalcore and hardcore are much more inclined to be vehicles for anger and
violence than other forms of metal. Particularly on the continental United States, I avoid hardcore pits as they can be unpredictably violent.

This tension between the ritualized chaos evident in most forms of metal, and the very real, visceral violence that characterizes the metal most closely aligned with hardcore speaks to the differences between local and military metalheads on Oʻahu. The outburst from the military drummer described above would have been very unlikely from one of my local informants, and his characterization of himself and his band mates as “angry fucking white people,” would have been even more improbably coming from my local informants, as most of them are neither angry nor white. But more significantly, and perhaps ironically, my local informants are far-less likely to use metal as a vehicle for anger, indignation, or feelings of victimization. The thematic scenario described to me by Patrick of a right-wing revolution in America would be unthinkable coming from my local informants. Power, control, perfection, and rage were all evident in the musical and social performances that I witnessed at the recording session described above, and such values contrast sharply with the more communal, fantastical, playful attitudes expressed by my local informants. It is important to keep in mind that these are not unambiguous reflections of who my informants “really are;” they are social performances designed to lay claim to particular kinds of power, and strategically position themselves within the scene.

The tensions that exist between military personnel and locals within the Oʻahu metal scene run deep, but they are also complex and ambiguous. I have felt these tensions at every metal show in Hawaiʻi that I have been to where military personnel
were present, and every single one of my informants has acknowledged this tension to one degree or another during our interviews and in informal conversations. Both of these two very general categories, locals and military personnel, dislike being essentialized and pigeonholed. I remember one incident very early on in my research where I attended a local show at Anna Banana’s where one of the best metal bands in Hawai‘i made up entirely of military personnel finished a rousing set, and I approached them saying something to the effect of, “Wow! Military metal!” The guitarist looked at me gravely and said, “Dude…do not call us that.” I sheepishly apologized. Both locals and military personnel make numerous strategic attempts to prevent the reduction of their identities to simple, overly simplistic quantities. Metal serves as a venue through which to perform these acts of evasion and disruption; however, from any particular vantage point within the scene, it is both possible and common for scene members to essentialize outsiders, as well as one another. Patrick’s far-right rhetoric and his band’s embrace of their “angry fucking white people” identity would probably alienate most local scene members severely. It is also likely that, as I am a male of Euro-American descent, Patrick felt more comfortable sharing these views with me than he would with scene members from other backgrounds. Political, religious, racial, ethnic and sexual tensions brood just beneath the surface of any large metal show on O‘ahu. For many local metalheads, military personnel are the personification of these tensions.

The great majority of military personnel whom I have befriended through the O‘ahu metal scene were not born and raised in Hawai‘i. In addition, they are overwhelmingly white, causing a noticeable contrast between themselves and the local scene members who mainly come from Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities. In addition
military metalheads are usually older than local metalheads. Shows where both military personnel and local metalheads are heavily in attendance tend to be fairly segregated. Military personnel are thought to drink more than locals, and have a greater tendency to start fights and become overly-violent in the pit. My informants Carl, Martin, and Will, who were born and raised in Hawai‘i and are not in the military, shared the following story with me:

**MARTIN:** They get really drunk and just, they’ll swing their arms in the pit…I don’t know I didn’t really see what happened.

**CARL:** They maybe go out looking for fights I’ve noticed.

**MARTIN:** Yeah.

**CARL:** At our last show there was a fight in the pit because these two military guys where just like out there with their fists up like this (raises fists) like trying to actually get in a fight. And they found one.

**WILL:** Security had to come in and like, take them out and everything.\(^{121}\)

There are a number of different ways to interpret this story: it could be a factual, unbiased recounting of what took place, with drunken military metalheads making trouble for everyone. However, this could also have been a misunderstanding derived from the stylized, mock-violence common in pits on the continent and familiar to military personnel, being misconstrued as actual violence by bouncers and local metalheads, neither of whom being necessarily familiar with typical, continental U.S. pit behavior. The most likely explanation is that the incident that took place on the night in question was a combination of these two possibilities, with some misunderstanding, and some

\(^{121}\) 6-29-2010
genuinely inappropriate behavior on the part of military personnel; as I was not present on the night in question, I cannot say for sure. What is not really debatable is that the story recounted by Carl, Martin and Will is very representative of how local metalheads perceive military metalheads and the dangers that they are felt to embody. Metalheads on O‘ahu, both local and military, construct narratives around themselves and one another; these narratives may be informed by real events and typical behavior, but they are not necessarily contingent upon them. The mutual anxieties, stereotypes, and social tensions that exist between locals and military personnel take on a life of their own, and cannot easily be proven, disproven, or permanently overcome by anyone.

The negative perceptions of military personnel are a combination of truth and stereotype. My research has suggested that a lively drinking culture exists among military personnel out for a night on the town, and the few fights that I have witnessed at metal shows on O‘ahu have all included military personnel. On the one hand, there is the image of the hostile, military haole who just wants to get drunk and start trouble, which many local metalheads hold regarding military personnel within the scene. On the other, there are the self-descriptions of homesick, metal-starved young men looking for a scene and a community that they can be a part of and an outpost of the subculture they knew back home to give them a sense of place in Hawai‘i, which my military informants have repeated to me throughout my research. Many of my military informants come from much larger, better established metal scenes on the continent. Their subcultural identities are deeply entrenched and, as their personal lives have been made so unstable by being active members of the military during a time of war, metal subculture is often seen as the only family that they have, regardless of where they find themselves. My military
informants have regularly spoken to me about longing for a metal scene to participate in, and their struggles to uncover the metal scene on O‘ahu. The metal scene is small and not particularly well publicized in Hawai‘i; if a metalhead were only listening to the radio or keeping an eye out for fliers, it would be easy to miss. Once they do discover the O‘ahu metal scene, they enter an uncertain subcultural space filled with ethnic, cultural and regional tensions, few of which are addressed directly, but which inform all of the interactions between military personnel and locals.

Anxieties and hostilities between locals and military personnel have a long and difficult history in Hawai‘i. One main problem between locals and military personnel on O‘ahu today is the fact that locals are painfully aware of the social, economic, and cultural difficulties that result from the ubiquity of the military in Hawai‘i, and many military personnel are often quite oblivious of these problems. For this reason, interactions between locals and military personnel in Hawai‘i are often fraught with misunderstanding, incomprehension and trepidation. Military personnel have regularly explained to me their feelings of anger, alienation, and rejection at being categorized at unwanted haole outsiders. Locals have described to me many times their fears of the violence and aggression that military personnel represent to them, as well as their resentment of the overwhelming presence and influence of the military in Hawai‘i. Conversely, both groups have articulated to me, invariably and consistently, their desire for metal subcultural identity to triumph over the very tensions which they are describing.

One particular group of my military informants, who I will call Jerry, James, and Andy, explained to me one evening coming back to Hawai‘i from Iraq to discover that a
local metal scene had blossomed on Oʻahu in their absence. Jerry, James, and Andy are all haoles from the continent. They are in their mid-to-late twenties, and have experienced numerous different metal scenes throughout the United States. The period in question, the Summer of 2008, is coincidentally also the same time in which I first arrived in Hawaiʻi and began exploring the local metal scene. Their comments are worth quoting at some length:

JAMES: Yeah so we had such a great scene in Florida and we get out here and we’re like: “Where’s the metal at?”

BHO: What would you have wanted to see like if you could have had the kind of metal scene that you wanted what would it have been like?

JAMES: Like the mainland…We had always been in great cities with great metal scenes and it had always been really easy to find you know?

ANDY: Not even if the bands were good or the music was good just a metal scene to like go and hang out with… metalheads.

JERRY: Like with people who have the same interests as you.

JAMES: Yeah, even shitty metal bands like you. Just somewhere to go…it was always a mixed bag like a couple of metal bands thrown in with a couple of other types of bands.

ANDY: That’s way we went to Corrupt Absolute because even though we didn’t really like their music, it was still a place to go and be with other metal people and it was just like…I don’t know, it was just nice hanging out with other people like that.

JAMES: What was it…after we got back from Iraq…like right before we left we played like three or four shows in a row. Like we probably left like a week later and when we got back it seemed like all these bands...

ANDY: Just blew up...

JAMES: Just came out of …it was like a dime a dozen. It was just like a completely different thing, like a night and day difference.

ANDY: When we left it was like us Green Eyes and Corrupt Absolute. The only metal bands that were playing shows really…and we come back
and they were all over the place…playing at Sand Island…Anna Banana’s was like just a strictly metal place almost.

**BHO:** So when was that? When did you come back?

**JERRY:** Middle of 2008. Because we left in October 2007 came back May 2008. It was just…it was awesome!

**ANDY:** Yeah….((band interrupting, agreeing with one another)

**JERRY:** It was good to see…uh…also younger kids too…being able to come out (murmurs of agreement from band) and play music. It sucks because of the legality of it…they couldn’t get into some bars you know underage drinking and all that other stuff it was cool being able to find some sort of venue, some sort of outlet for…to get together and play. But you know a lot of people will say, oh they’re younger kids it might not be that…that good. But uh…

**JAMES:** Some of them are awesome…

**JERRY:** Yeah….really freakin’ good. They have been playing ever since they, you know, came out of the womb, know what I’m saying?

**JAMES:** The crazy thing too is that a lot of these bands and they start playing out here, and I guarantee you that most of them have never been to like a real metal or hardcore show on the mainland. They have never seen anything like that.122

Jerry and James begin by telling a story that my military informants have repeated to me many times: they experienced fully developed metal scenes on the continental United States, and upon their arrival in Hawai‘i, did not know where to uncover the local metal scene. They described to me feeling lonely and cut-off from the subcultural world that they had grown accustomed to. Upon returning from a tour in Iraq, they returned to discover that a minor metal renaissance was occurring on O‘ahu. Their original alienation from the scene only compounded their delight at discovering a flourishing local metal scene where none had been visible previously. James and Jerry lavish praise on the younger, local metal bands, calling them, “awesome,” and, “really freakin’ good.”

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They point out that the local scene’s proficiency is all the more impressive in light of their lack of experience with seeing professional metal bands performing live. James and Jerry express elation at having their subcultural identity reaffirmed in spite of regional divisions, military deployment, and geographic isolation.

James’ and Jerry’s comments are representative of the ambiguous, sometimes paradoxical relationship that exists between locals and military personnel within the O‘ahu scene. Cultural misunderstandings, differences in identity performance, gender roles, drinking habits, pit etiquette, and life experiences all contribute to a sense of contrast and difference between military personnel and local participants in the O‘ahu metal scene. In the above quote, James, Jerry, and Andy describe a time in which metal subcultural identity was able to flourish, and not get bogged down in either the limitations of geographic isolation, or the divisions between locals and military personnel. But like the more negative narratives concerning the drunken, violent behavior of military personnel, this more positive narrative is infused with desire and expectation; it does not necessarily represent how the scene works all the time, or how all interested parties see the scene. My informants who are in the military often describe very hopeful scenarios like the one recounted above, and at other times relate feeling rejected and isolated. Both sides of this equation blame the other for their mutual feelings of alienation and suspicion. Simultaneously, both sides will assert the need for metal subcultural identity to overcome and nullify these tensions. It became obvious to me during the course of my research that metal subcultural identity does not and cannot permanently dissolve these deeply felt divisions, which have very real cultural and
historical roots; however, as we have seen elsewhere, the desire for such an overcoming is infused throughout the O‘ahu metal scene.

**Haoles, Locals, and the Military**

The terms “haole” and “local” are ubiquitous, but deeply ambiguous terms in contemporary Hawai‘i. In order for the presence of military personnel in the O‘ahu metal scene to be put into context, some discussion and definition of these two concepts must take place. Judy Rohrer argues that while the etymology of the word haole is uncertain, the continued assertion in Hawai‘i that it indicates a “lack of breath” or lack of soul, “flags a continuing Kanaka Maoli desire to mark haole as outsiders, those to be regarded with well developed caution.”

While the original meaning of the term haole in the Hawaiian language and culture may be obscure, my main concern here is how this designation is used in contemporary Hawai‘i. While Native Hawaiians may, as Rohrer suggests, retain a more consistently negative “soul less” definition of haole, the word’s use among other segments of the population depends very much on context and speaker. As Jonathan Okamura observes, the haole concept has become reorganized to specify such categories as “local haole,” “military haole” and “mainland haole.” Although haole is undoubtedly a racial designation, its meaning is fluid and dependent upon situation and inflection. This ambiguity is part of what gives the word haole its power; it can mean any number of things, and a particular speaker can point in several directions at once by using it.

123 Rohrer 2010, 60.

The term *local* is used endlessly in contemporary Hawai‘i, and this word signifies far more than it does in regions on the continental United States where it is used. Like the term haole, the concept of *local* in Hawai‘i has altered over time. Okamura argues that in the first half of the 20th Century, *local* was much more closely tied to groups of people with roots in non-haole, working-class, plantation culture; however, the meaning of local has altered and become more inclusive since World War Two.\(^\text{125}\) Localness has lost some of its racial and ethnic connotations, while retaining an ambiguous connection to class. Openness to and awareness of Hawai‘i’s numerous ethnic cultures, the ability and willingness to participate in widely practiced cultural traditions, speech patterns, as well as having been born and raised in Hawai‘i, all contribute to an individual’s status as a local, although no definitive criteria exists and localness remains a subjective quality. Okamura worries that the concept of localness has taken on superficial and stereotypical aspects as a result of popular journalism and television that reduce local culture to, “eating Spam, wearing rubber slippers, remembering a few expressions in Pidgin English, and going to Las Vegas for Vacation.”\(^\text{126}\) This version of localness indicates a postmodern, simulated version of local culture that, while conveying certain easily identifiable qualities, lacks substance or context. This tendency to present a facile, stereotypical version of localness is indeed very prevalent in contemporary Hawaiian popular culture, but as with the term haole, the term local can mean numerous different things depending on speaker, context, and audience. Tourism, immigration, emigration, popular media, and globalization have altered the perception and signification of

\(^ {125}\) Okamura 2008, 113

\(^ {126}\) Okamura 2008, 118.
localness, and they will continue to do so, but localness remains a deeply important
discourse in contemporary Hawai‘i that conveys a powerful, if ambiguous, sense of
identity for the people who live there. “The Local” is a discourse, and as such, is
amorphous, ever-shifting, and beyond the control of any particular group.

There is little doubt that the tension between military personnel and locals within
the scene is deeply affected by discourses of race, class, and xenophobia. These tensions
mirror larger tensions that permeate contemporary Hawai‘i, but within the O‘ahu metal
scene they become complicated by subcultural discourses. Rohrer argues that, “there is
little evidence supporting widespread physical violence against haoles.”127 Although anti-
haole violence does seem to be quite rare, there is a great deal of talk and anxiety
concerning anti-haole violence in Hawai‘i. One of my informants, whom I will call
Frank, is a highly intelligent, somewhat bombastic, multi-ethnic young man in his mid
twenties who was born on the continental United States, but has lived in Hawai‘i for
some time. He plays in several different local bands, knows a great deal about metal
culture, and tends to give long, impassioned speeches concerning the local scene, Hawai‘i
, and any number of other subjects that interest him. Frank told me the following story
about his experiences with anti-haole hostility from locals on the north shore:

I don’t believe this, oh you’re local so you can treat us like shit. Because
these people weren’t alive when fucking this shit happened, you know?
And they’ve got dark skin so, oh well you know. And I have personally
seen locals beat up my white friends and leave me alone because I have
dark skin. And it’s like: dude, that’s fucked up. You know out on North
Shore everyone is like, it’s a bunch of rich haoles that took over the land
dude and put up all their churches and put up all their fucking businesses.

127 Rohrer 2010, 99-100.
And the local people are kicked out to the fucking ghetto, and then their ghettos get gentrified and soon they’re in Waianae. And that’s why I hate North Shore dude. It’s not local! And local people hate haoles because of that reason man. They are suffering. What are they gunna do? They have to give up their culture and become white Christian and all this other shit just to make it.128

Here, we see Frank illustrate the difficult class and racial tensions that exist on O‘ahu as he sees them. On the one hand, Frank sees his haole friends being beaten up by locals, while he was left alone specifically because he is not haole. Although we have no way of knowing the context of this story, Frank’s narrative highlights the widely felt tensions between locals and people who are perceived to represent mainland, haole elites. Frank is outraged by the unfairness of anti-haole violence, and perceives it as a serious problem. On the other hand, Frank is obviously sympathetic to locals who feel exploited and marginalized by wealthy outsiders, and specifically haoles. Frank feels that the anger and sense of injustice that locals feel are very justified, although he argues that across-the-board scapegoating of his haole friends is counterproductive. Frank’s narrative is less a concrete illustration of a particular situation, and more a very illuminating example of a discourse concerning race, class, and power that is discussed throughout the metal scene, particularly regarding military personnel. Problems concerning economic inequality and social injustice are indelibly wrapped up in issues concerning race, and the need for locals to defend themselves against the impositions of outside forces. Locals in the O‘ahu metal scene feel these anxieties as deeply as anyone, but their desire to overcome racial, ethnic and class divisions in favor of subcultural identity continuously reasserts

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itself. These tensions haunted the interactions that I observed between military personnel and local metalheads within the Oʻahu metal scene. The contradictory attitudes that virtually all scene members, military and local alike, reflect regarding these subjects indicates how deeply problematic they are.

Although Frank clearly feels that racial, ethnic, and class tensions are serious problems in Hawaiʻi, he argues that the metal scene is a unique space in which these tensions can be negated. Just a few minutes after telling me his rather disturbing story regarding anti-haole violence, Frank explained to me how the metal scene on Oʻahu is far more inclusive than either metal scenes on the mainland or Hawaiʻi more generally:

FRANK: I think it has more to do with bands getting a chance. Cuz when I went to the mainland I went up there to start a band and I succeeded zilch. I’d get a little jamming here and there, and then I just got fucked over by everyone, and everyone decided to move away or go somewhere. When it came to Hawaiʻi and I was here for like two years, and I am already in four bands dude. Like I’m in (local band #1), (local band #2), I’m in (local band #3), (local band #4) wants me to do some shit with them. Because it’s an ethnic scene. And you can get in there and dance around and everyone kind of knows each other like family and no one’s gunna be, for the most part, people aren’t gunna be like, “well we’re kinda looking for that white look for a record contract.”

BHO: Right. They want you to look like some European dude in fucking Arch Enemy or some shit.

FRANK: On the mainland, yeah! And (name of scene member) from fucking (name of local band), which is now (new name of local band), he said he went to the mainland and he did his thing and they told him like, they were this close to getting a deal, and the guy’s came in and said: “look you’re going to have to get some more white people in your band.”

BHO: No shit?!
FRANK: They literally told him: “you’ve got to get a white guy in your band and drop this other dude.”

Here we see a second-hand narrative that, for Frank, illustrates the deeply racist, frustrating elements within the metal scene on the continent. Franks argues that on the continental United States, whiteness is the desired commodity, and multi-ethnic people like himself and the friend in question are marginalized.

Such perceptions on the part of non-haole scene members are vital to understanding the tensions that occur when military haoles from the mainland descend upon the local metal scene in large numbers and disturb the asserted harmony of the local scene. For Frank, racism is a serious problem on the mainland, and Hawai‘i has its own problems with xenophobia, but the Hawai‘i metal scene is supposed to be a special place where these problems can be escaped. We have no way of knowing the details of Frank’s story of racial prejudice and exclusion recounted above, but the perception that metal scenes on the mainland are less welcoming to people of color is persistent among locals in the O‘ahu metal scene. We see here a subculturally specific version of the larger “model of multiculturalism” myth that is pervasive throughout Hawai‘i. Although Frank vociferously dismisses the idea that Hawai‘i in general is free of racial tension, he insists that the metal scene succeeds where other parts of island society have failed; however, the presence of military personnel complicates this situation immensely.

Most local metalheads insist that the O‘ahu metal scene is far less pretentious, exclusive, and judgmental than scenes elsewhere. While this is clearly an important part

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of local metalheads’ perception of themselves, they regularly contradict this sentiment when discussing the presence of military personnel at local shows. When asked about how locals feel about military personnel in the scene, my informant Mike articulated this tendency very candidly:

I am sure they kind of exclude them. I don’t know if they are the big white guys in the mosh pits, they probably are, but they probably cause a lot more havoc than just the regular *regulars* I guess….they kinda look down on them and in the mosh pit they kinda want to fight I guess. In a way, they don’t have control, a certain amount of control in the mosh pit. Cuz in a way they are like, “Oh I’m in the military and I can do whatever I want,” kind of like, “I’m big and you’re not,” kind of thing.130

Mike immediately correlates military personnel with “big white guys” and asserts that they, “probably cause a lot of havoc.” Military personnel represent unchecked chaos for Mike; an unpredictable and undesirable violence. Mike is a relatively small, slight, young man who has spent very little time outside of Hawai‘i. His feelings towards mosh pits are conflicted; on the one hand he finds the wildness and intensity of mosh pits exhilarating, and on the other he fears the chaos and loss of control that they represent.

Although many younger scene members’ feelings towards military personnel are characterized principally by trepidation, older, more experienced scene members tend to express suspicion and resentment, combined with a paradoxical, idealistic desire to include all metalheads in the scene, regardless of their background. The following exchange with my informants Hank and Roger express these conflicting feelings very well:

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BHO: What about the military guys? What have been your experiences with military guys in the scene, coming into contact with local kids? Is there tension there?

ROGER: Sometimes, yeah. I grew up in the punk scene and (shakes head) punk rockers hate military guys. They viewed them as these brute guys coming in just wanting to hurt people in a pit. They wouldn’t respect, I would say, the culture of it. They would just come in there and…let it all out and didn’t care about the respect that’s involved. A lot of people didn’t like it. Also maybe because they didn’t embrace the culture either…I don’t know. Personally, if I saw a military guy punching a little kid, there’s a problem. There’s no reason why a grown man should be punching a little kid (laughs).

BHO: Have you guys observed military guys doing crazy shit or inappropriate shit?

ROGER: Not lately actually. It seems a little bit more…balanced than it used to be. Maybe because I am older and I see it differently, I don’t know… there’s always a little bit of tension.

HANK: And maybe that’s why they do such extreme things: they feel like they have to earn everyone’s respect.

ROGER: That is also probably why it is…

HANK: I mean, we have had some great experiences with military guys. I mean…

ROGER: For the most part the people that we have met are actually pretty cool.

HANK: They’ve supported us 110 percent, you know? They really helped us out by telling all of their friends and bringing all of them down.

ROGER: It’s possible that they are more educated now about the whole culture aspect of it than they were ten years ago, who knows? 131

These statements from Hank and Roger are illustrative of the dualistic feelings that many local metalheads feel towards military personnel in the scene. Military personnel are believed to be disrespectful to local culture; this can sometimes mean that they simply do not express themselves in the expected, normative fashion. Roger takes

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the fairly uncontroversial position that, “There’s no reason why a grown man should be punching a little kid;” it is clear that he is using an extreme example to prove his point. I cannot fathom anyone, military or otherwise, behaving in this way at a local metal show, and Roger does not indicate that this actually happened, only that if it did happen, it would be very wrong. Although an exaggeration, this example does indicate the lack of control and physical restraint that military personnel are felt to possess. Although Hank and Roger have clearly grown up in a scene that it deeply suspicious of military personnel, they also desire the support of military metalheads for their band, and sincerely appreciate such support when it is given. This paradoxical attitude can be found throughout the O‘ahu metal scene; a comingled desire for inclusion, and exclusion. This contradictory attitude stems from the inescapability of deeply felt social and historical divisions, combined with a subcultural imperative to rise above such divisions. Neither of these impulses ever truly wins out within the O‘ahu metal scene and much of the activity that takes place between locals and military personnel within the scene is characterized by the working-through of this problematic.

The Hard Rock Café Fiasco; Confronting the Other, Devolving into Chaos

I am standing in front of the recently relocated Hard Rock Café on Kalakaua Avenue in the heart of Waikiki. It is a balmy Saturday night in mid April and Waikiki is buzzing with neon lights, taxies, and thousands of tourists from all over the world. Hired solicitors stand every few yards, pressing fliers for various activities and restaurants aggressively into the hands of passersby. Half-a-dozen different songs emanate from
surrounding bars and restaurants, most of them by Bob Marley, creating a disorienting auditory mélange that adds to the general atmosphere of confusion and sensory overload. Nowhere, with the possible exception of the Las Vegas strip, to which it bears numerous striking similarities, exceeds the over-whelming, carnivalesque, mayhem of Kalakaua Avenue at this time of the evening. I can see nothing in the vicinity that suggests that a heavy metal show is about to take place and I wonder vaguely if I have come to the wrong location. Then I spot someone who I am half-way acquainted with wearing a t-shirt that bears the logo of the local band Amarnah who I have come to see tonight. My eyes dilate with suspicious envy; I have greatly desired just such a t-shirt for some time and have been unsuccessful in procuring one. I greet the young man and shake his hand before demanding where he acquired his t-shirt. He shrugs casually, explaining that the band gave it to him and that they only made a few. I attempt to suppress my jealousy and head upstairs into the belly of the beast that is Hard Rock Café, Waikiki.

The second floor dining room of the Hard Rock Café is thronged with families eating dinner. Multi-generational, mid-western families dominate huge tables that have been pushed together to accommodate them. Adolescent boys wearing Ed Hardy shirts and leis recently given to them by their hotel’s staff upon their arrival gesture emphatically at waiters for soda refills, while their younger siblings chase each other playfully between the rows of tables. Esoteric rock memorabilia is displayed in elaborate frames and cases all around us; things like Axel Rose’s nipple ring or Mariah Carey’s sleep mask. The din in the large room is amazing, in spite of the spacious, open lanai that spills out of the eastern side of the building. Bryan Adams’ *Summer of 69* booms anthemically from the PA system, adding to the atmosphere of cacophony and over-
stimulation. I have not been to a Hard Rock Café since a deeply unpleasant school field trip to Washington DC when I was in the 8th grade, and the franchise is exactly as I remember it. The sprawling, crowded room seems too bright, filling with too many advertisements, and too much information. I wonder where the room that constitutes the Hard Rock Café’s music venue might be, and how I can get there, before spying a small stage at the far end of the room preceded by a modest dance floor. I see several acquaintances from the scene bustling around the stage, fiddling with amplifiers and plugging in guitars. Upon a closer inspection of the bar I notice several other scene members who I know. I realize with a combination of amazement, horror and glee that several of Hawai‘i’s most brutal metal and hardcore bands are about to perform right here, in this very room, for this huge group of tourists who are only here to enjoy a meal of cheese fries and bacon burgers.

Tensions begin to escalate once the skinheads begin to arrive. They are lanky, suspendered young men, all wearing the requisite Dr. Martin boots and sporting the hairstyle that gives them their name. Many are wearing t-shirts bearing the names of skinhead bands, and all are sporting some version of the distinctive skinhead uniform.132 Like other dangerous forces of nature such as tsunamis or tornados, when you see a gang of skinheads coming towards you it is impossible to mistake them for anything other than what they are. No subcultural capital is required to decode the subcultural affiliation of these young men; the tourists begin glancing over their shoulders nervously and abruptly requesting checks. One aspect of these skinheads that may be escaping both tourists and

132 Hebdige 1979, 55-56.
the local metalheads in attendance is the fact that these young men are SHARPS (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), as opposed to their more notorious, neo-Nazi subcultural cousins, whom SHARPS refer to as “boneheads.” Their patches, tattoos, and boot-laces make this clear, although this subtlety is probably lost on most of the people at the Hard Rock Café this evening. SHARPS can hail from any ethnic or racial group, but the skinheads here tonight are all haoles, adding to their air of “white power” menace. As is their custom, the skinheads immediately begin drinking heavily; I have never met a skinhead who did not enjoy their alcohol. This is not the first time that I have encountered skinheads in Hawai‘i, and they are always SHARPS. I have long suspected that most of the skinheads in Hawai‘i are in the military, a suspicion that one of my military friends confirms to me when he arrives at the Hard Rock; these young skinheads are all friends of his in the military. Skinheads are the most dramatic apotheosis of everything that local scene members find disconcerting about military personnel; white, drunk, physically aggressive, and emphatically foreign. As much as they may wish to do so, SHARPS cannot shake the aura of racism and violence that they signify to most people and their presence here makes an already awkward situation even more chaotic.

Around the same time that the skinhead delegation starts filing in, I begin to notice numerous straightedgers loitering around the stage area. They are virtually all young haoles, with very short hair and no facial hair who I do not recognize; aspects of their facticity that strongly suggests that they too are in the military. They wear t-shirts that bear slogans like “XXX: Drug Free,” and, “Straightedge For Life.” Several of them have large, black X’s drawn on their hands in permanent marker, a traditional straight edge signifier designed to show solidarity with younger attendees who are too young to
drink. The most significant and universal aspect of straightedge ideology involves abstinence from drugs and alcohol; other subcultural imperatives such as veganism, sexual restrictions, and religion are also sometimes added to the straightedge equation, but it is the “no drugs and alcohol” rule that characterizes the movement. Like skinheads, straightedgers tend to be very clean-cut, and therefore a convenient subcultural choice for military personnel. Straightedgers have always reminded me of the hyper-masculine, somewhat belligerent jocks I knew in high school except that they love hardcore punk. Also like skinheads, straight edgers have a well earned reputation for violence and intolerance, although straightedge intolerance tends to be directed towards people who are drinking, smoking, or otherwise intoxicated. I am not very surprised to see the straightedgers come out in such numbers as tonight’s headliner, Defeater, is a fairly famous hardcore band from Boston with straightedge affiliations. The show is due to start any minute, and the combination of local metalheads, skinheads, straightedgers, military personnel, and unsuspecting families of tourists has volatile, if entertaining potential.

The first band to play is the very well-liked punk/oi band 86 List, who have been playing a very enjoyable brand of chorus-happy punk rock throughout the O‘ahu music scene for a good number of years. It quickly becomes obvious who the skinheads are here to see; approximately a dozen skinheads come clomping down to the dance floor and begin “skanking” in a rough circle, throwing their elbows out to their sides and lifting

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133 Haenfler 2006, 1-5.

134 Haenfler 2006, 5.
their knees high into the air. This traditional skinhead dance is a very entertaining spectacle indeed, one that I have not had the opportunity to witness for a good many years. Although 86 List’s music is a good deal more accessible than the other bands performing this evening, the sight of a dozen drunken skinheads in mid-skank is clearly making the throngs of tourists nervous. Large, sturdy bouncers are now visible at the periphery of the dance floor, watching the audience apprehensively. By the time 86 List finish their last song and the skinheads wind-down their frenetic stomping, the Hard Rock Café is split pretty evenly between show attendees and confused, frightened tourists. For the first time, both restaurant staff and the local show promoters seem to be realizing that tonight’s event may have been a terrible mistake.

Amarnah, one of Hawai’i’s most accomplished metal bands, take the stage next. Myself, and perhaps a half-dozen local metalheads make our way towards the front of the stage. We are greatly outnumbered by the skinheads, straight-edgers, and assorted hardcore kids standing around the periphery of the dance floor, looking bored, waiting for Amarnah to finish and the upcoming hardcore bands to start playing. This is typical behavior for hardcore kids on O’ahu when subjected to heavy metal, and a source of intense consternation amongst my informants. Amarnah play an interesting combination of extreme metal styles, and while fairly melodic, are still far too much for the dining tourists. As Amarnah’s vocalist begins to bellow and scream into his microphone, the tourists begin behaving as if tear gas has been set off in the dining room. Frantic waiters dash to-and-fro, fetching checks and collecting credit card signatures; small children cover their ears with their hands, scowling and demanding recompense from their parents. Soon, a mighty surge of exiting tourists can be seen descending the stairs and
fleeing into the sultry Hawaiian night. I am doing my best to show my appreciation for Amarnah’s excellent music, headbanging and throwing up my horns mostly by myself, but between the hardcore kids and the baffled, somewhat horrified tourists, it is obvious that Amarnah are unhappy with their reception. Amarnah finish their set, pack up their gear, and slink away from the ill-fated show. I chat with the local metalhead who I originally met entering the Hard Rock Café. He tells me of his feelings of fear and discomfort with the marauding band of skinheads who have now returned to the bar. I reassure him that they are SHARPs and probably harmless, but he does not seem convinced.

By the time local hardcore stalwarts Die Slow hit the stage, most of the tourists have vanished, but several groups are still finishing up their meals and standing perplexedly at the bar, watching the metalheads and hardcore kids gather. I can see one of the shows promoters arguing animatedly with one of the restaurant’s managers; there has clearly been some miscommunication somewhere along the line this evening. As Die Slow plunge into their set of howling, crushing, old-school hardcore, the straightedgers, hardcore kids, and skinheads who have been waiting in the wings come flooding to the front of the stage, turning the dance floor into a mosh pit. There are very few women here tonight; hardcore, far more so than metal, is very much a boy’s club. As Die Slow’s vocalist bays messages of rage and frustration into the crowd, the assembled young men pile on top of each other, creating a precarious tower of sweating, writhing humanity. Although the dance floor is large enough to accommodate all of the moshers, they carefully arrange themselves in a tight circumference in order to recreate the physically intimate, claustrophobic vibe traditional to hardcore pits. The vocalist offers the
microphone to various audience members, giving them the opportunity to scream lyrics into it, another traditional hardcore practice. The Hard Rock Café staff is frankly horrified by what is taking place; they clearly did not understand that a giant, threshing mosh pit would be enacted in their establishment, and are clearly worried that it might soon spiral out of control. The mosh pit only briefly subsides As Die Slow finishes and tonight’s headliners, Defeater, take the stage. We are treated to an emotional, blistering set by a well-honed professional hardcore band. The straightedgers and hardcore kids in particular go completely berserk. I stay on the pit’s periphery, enjoying the music and taking notes. As the show concludes, I observe expressions of visible relief on the faces of Hard Rock Café staff. I pile myself exhaustedly into a cab and head for home very satisfied with the night’s field work.

This turbulent, in some ways disastrous show could have happened nowhere else in the United States other than Hawai‘i . In any other city or region both restaurant managers and promoters would have had the foresight to have avoided the more obvious pitfalls associated with this event, and both would have had the luxury of choosing other options. In Hawai‘i , venues friendly to metal are ephemeral entities, going in and out of business with dizzying speed, or abruptly deciding to book more lucrative, less volatile acts. Although the Hard Rock Café was perhaps not an ideal choice for local promoters to put on a show, it does not surprise me that they took what they could get. Why the Hard Rock Café consented to hosting the event without looking more closely at the bands that would be performing is less clear; someone in charge of booking clearly dropped the ball on this one. But it is not simply a scarcity of venues that makes this event unique to Hawai‘i ; the tableau just described shows in a particularly dramatic way the intersections
of tourism, local culture, and militarism that ferment chaos and social tension throughout the O‘ahu metal scene, and in many ways, throughout Hawai‘i more generally. The local metalheads who attended the Hard Rock Café show hail primarily from Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities. The military personnel, including all of the skinheads and most of the straightedgers, were almost exclusively haoles, as were the dining tourists. For reasons unknown, I saw few Japanese tourists eating at the Hard Rock Café on the evening in question, although Japanese make up a large percentage of tourists to O‘ahu.

The skinheads in attendance were, based both on my own observations and the testimony of my military friends, all military personnel; in many ways, skinheads are perceived by locals as the most dramatic and unambiguous example of military personnel more generally. Although ostensibly anti-racist, SHARPS still inspire anxiety and discomfort among locals, for most of the same reasons that military personnel on the whole stimulate trepidation; skinheads are seen as military guys in their purest form. Although I did not have the opportunity to chat with any of them, I got the distinct impression that the tourists were equally uncomfortable with the skinheads’ presence. In a very important sense, skinheads are an exaggerated version of military personnel more generally in the eyes of locals: mainland, haole, brawny and menacing in appearance, and dubiously belligerent. As Hebdige notes in *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, skinheads emerged from the confluence of working-class, post-war British youths, and recent immigrants to England from Jamaica.\(^\text{135}\) Although the original 1960’s skinheads drew as heavily on Jamaican culture as on English culture, contemporary American skinheads, particularly SHARPS, evince an unmistakable Anglophilia and have, with the exception of their love

\(^{135}\) Hebdige 1979, 55.
of ska music, shed most of their Jamaican roots. Even to a mainlander like myself who has encountered skinheads elsewhere, skinheads in Hawai‘i seem oddly out of context; extravagantly haole, and implicitly, if unintentionally, racist. The tension and confusion brought on by their presence is a heightened version of the tension and confusion brought on by military personnel wherever they appear in the local metal scene.

My local informants often cope with tourists and the tourism industry through avoidance; local metal shows in Waikiki are not particularly common. Local attempts to deal with the presence of military personnel are more varied, as attitudes on both sides are more ambiguous and complex; impulses towards inclusion and exclusion exist simultaneously. There is a widespread desire within the O‘ahu metal scene for subcultural unity to overpower other kinds of social distinctions, and few things are more divisive in contemporary Hawai‘i than the division between locals and military personnel. But this desire for unity is tempered by mutual suspicion, antagonism, and perhaps more than anything else, misunderstanding from both ends of the equation. The event at Hard Rock Café brought together three very different segments of the metal and hardcore worlds that usually do not mix: skinheads, straightedgers, and metalheads. In addition to this subcultural mix, tourists and the tourism industry, as well as the overarching tension between military personnel and locals, were added to the already perilous equation. The result was frustration, confusion, and disappointment on all sides. The Hard Rock staff were definitely not happy with the situation, and the local metalheads whom with I spoke with during and after the show described feeling awkward, unappreciated, and out of place; frightened of the skinheads, annoyed with the tourists, rejected by the hardcore kids and straightedgers. The straightedgers and hardcore kids
seemed to enjoy themselves well enough once the tourists had been driven away, but they still had to cope with the intrusions of the Hard Rock staff, which kept the mosh pit in check, and the very real threat that the show might be shut down. While the O‘ahu scene’s desire for unity is very sincere, the Hard Rock Café fiasco illustrates in a very dramatic way the potential for that desire to collapse in a fit of subcultural misunderstanding, racial tension, and irresolvable mayhem.

The Hard Rock Café fiasco would not have occurred in San Diego or Ft. Lauderdale; the often unspoken mistrust between military personnel and local metalheads takes on a very unique form in Hawai‘i, and this discomfort is amplified when tourists and the tourism industry are unexpectedly thrown into the equation. The tension that exists between local metalheads and military metalheads is, to a certain degree, racial tension. Military metalheads are often perceived by local metalheads as, in the words of my informant Mike quoted above, “the big white guys in the mosh pits,” who, “cause a lot more havoc than just the regular regulars.” This phrase “the regular regulars,” is very telling indeed; it strongly implies that there is something deeply alien and unnatural about military personnel, and Mike has no qualms about connecting their otherness to their whiteness. In a very important sense, military haoles are seen as haoles amplified to a greater degree, and skinhead military haoles embody every threatening, unpleasant aspect of whiteness to the highest possible degree. This is not to say that the tension between military metalheads and local metalheads is simply the result of racism or anti-haole sentiment, as behavioral, cultural, physical, and age-gap oriented factors are deeply important; however, racial tensions bleed into and inform these other factors. What occurred at the Hard Rock Café on the evening in question was whiteness, in numerous
different forms, that had not been in any way acclimatized to Hawai‘i; skinheads stomp ing and strutting, oblivious to their effect on locals and tourists alike; uncomprehending haole tourists whose needs are apparently more important than anyone else’s; straightedge military guys terrifying the local bouncers and club owners with their simulated violence. The military personnel involved were guilty of insensitivity, the club owners were guilty of poor planning and forethought, the local metalheads were guilty of failing to engage with the strange, unfamiliar outsiders and trying to understand where they were coming from, and the tourists were mostly just guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time; the result was generalized discomfort and narrowly averted disaster.

Few people within the scene have done more to include military personnel than Lowell. His following comments concerning the interplay between subcultural identity and those aspects of participants’ lives that are outside of the subcultural environment tells us much about Lowell’s hopes for what can happen in the O‘ahu metal scene:

**LOWELL:** I think the military metalheads are a very, very good thing to the local metalheads. Because the local metalheads don’t know what the hell is going on on the mainland; it’s the only way they can keep up with the times. MTV doesn’t reflect anything anymore. MTV used to be about music, it use to reflect the times. Now it’s nothing, it’s useless garbage. And uhhhh…it’s like Puff Daddy decided to wear his doo-doo stained drawers on his head, you would see half the motherfuckers wearing it at school the next day. But the military metalheads coming in here, they kind of let people know what’s going on on the mainland. They’re like, “I just saw the Faceless in Anaheim.” Or whatever. And people are like, “Oh the Faceless!?” Because metal bands don’t come here. Thanks to Underworld we get *some* metal bands here; Between the Buried and Me, Black Dahlia Murder. They’re even talking about bringing Whitechapel here.

**BHO:** But how do you think military people and locals see each other?
LOWELL: From what I have noticed, they get along great. But it certainly depends on what kind of music that they are into. If their band following is the same, like this guy...if they all like death metal...if they are into death, that’s their common ground. If they are into hardcore, that’s their common ground. Like uhhhh...even among the military guys, like two of my buddies they were arguing at 4Play and like my buddy (name) was like, “I was trying to start a pit and everybody pussied out! Fucking fag hardcore shit!” And then the other guys is like, “I am not trying to hurt nobody and shit!” And he was like, “I’m not going to hurt you and you are not going to hurt me!” And then they were like in each other’s faces and shit. And I was like, “(name), this is (name). (name) this is (name). You guys shake fucking hands right now.” But music brings the masses together, as long as the genres are the same, as long as they like the same kind of music, they have a common ground, they become friends. But I see it all the time, all the time at the shows. It’s...there’s no local this or GI that. If those guys are in the same kinds of bands and are into the same kinds of music, than those guys are cool with each other. It doesn’t really matter where you are from.\textsuperscript{136}

Lowell argues that local metalheads need military metalheads as subcultural ambassadors; by sharing their experiences in other scenes with the O‘ahu scene, military personnel can serve a vital function. Lowell asserts that media outlet like MTV are insufficient and unreliable sources of subcultural information; face-to-face contact with more experienced metalheads is a far better option. Military personnel and local metalheads, “get along great,” according to Lowell, as long as their subcultural affiliations match up. This is a very telling aspect of Lowell’s perspective; it is not the extra-subcultural divisions, like locals vs. military, that matter, it is the inter-subcultural distinctions, like those between death metal and hardcore, that matter. Aspects of identity such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and nationality are rendered irrelevant within the subcultural sphere, according to Lowell, and any tensions that may exist in that privileged

\textsuperscript{136} 2-16-2011
realm stem from things like pit etiquette, subgenre preferences, and other subculturally specific discourses.

However admirable, positive, and even productive these sentiments may be, they do not correspond to much of what I observed within the Oʻahu metal scene, and much of what my other informants have said to me. Although actual violence and open hostility are quite rare, trepidation and simmering tension between locals and military personnel are extremely common. Lowell is expressing his desire for scene unity, for a “metal ‘ohana” that may be subject to subculturally relevant problems, but which is beyond the reach of mundane issues like race, ethnicity, regionalism, and xenophobia. Lowell’s desire for locals and military personnel to work together to build a unified, inclusive scene on Oʻahu is commendable, and he seems to be achieving some success. By the time I concluded my research in May of 2011, locals and military personnel were playing music and attending shows together with greater ease than when I first arrived in the summer of 2008. What Lowell’s comments and efforts illustrate is a deep, widely felt desire within the Oʻahu metal scene for the dissolution of racism, regional chauvinism, and exclusivity, however; that desire cannot be fully realized through heavy metal alone.

All of my informants in the Oʻahu metal scene navigate their worlds through the use of narrative discourse. They construct webs of signification around one another, and spend a great deal of time and energy attempting to free themselves from the webs of signification that have been spun around them by others. The metal scene as an idealized community is sought after by both military personnel and locals in an attempt to simultaneously experience a sense of belonging, and to problematize the aspects of their
identities that have been imposed upon them from the outside. When my informants, whether they are military or local, talk about their interactions with one another, they are talking about their fears and desires; they are not necessarily reporting what actually takes place at the average local metal show. Both sides may sometimes essentialize one another in fairly negative ways, or they may idealize their relationship in a way that does not take into account the tension and mistrust that permeates the scene. These tactics are active, creative processes that will continue into the future, and participants in the scene will continue to vie for power, pleasure, and dynamic, versatile identities; however, this process may sometimes include denying those very attributes to others.
Chapter Four

Gender, Power, and Performance in the Scene

Chaos and Subversion

I am standing at the periphery of the packed, seething main stage of Anna Banana’s near Puck’s Alley in Honolulu. Today is the 2009 incarnation of the annual Hawaiʻi Metalfest. Metalfest is the biggest day of the year for the scene, and this is my first time in attendance. Scene architects have managed to pack three stages into Anna Banana’s fairly cramped environs: one stage in the downstairs bar, one in the upstairs stage where shows are normally held, and one stage in the outside courtyard. Anna Banana’s is something of a subcultural institution in Honolulu; even at times when shows are not being held there, it oozes with dive bar/punk rock/heavy metal atmosphere. Today it is packed to the gills with local metalheads, military guys, and large collections of curious music fans who would normally be absent from smaller, less widely publicized shows. In addition to local favorites like Phoenix Rose and Corpus Black, Maui’s much heralded death metal aficionados Gulch of Rot have made the trip, as well as mainland headliners the Warriors.

On this special occasion, ages, genders and backgrounds range widely. I see two local women in their late teens or early twenties decked out in black metal style regalia, a sight that is fairly uncommon in Hawaiʻi. They are wearing spiked armbands and heavy black eye-liner. One is wearing a t-shirt depicting the logo of the infamous Norwegian
black metal/neo-Nazi band Burzum. Although Burzum’s music is respected by metalheads who are unsympathetic to their politics, and the sight of someone wearing one of their shirts would not be uncommon in a predominantly white audience on the continental United States, it is odd indeed to see a local woman of Asian or Pacific Islander descent sporting their logo across her chest here at Hawai‘i Metalfest 2009. My curiosity gets the better of me and I approach the young woman, asking about her Burzum shirt. She tells me hesitantly that few people in Hawai‘i have any idea of who Burzum are, and that she has never been given any flak for wearing it. I ask her what her favorite Burzum album is, and she tells me that they are all good. I strongly suspect that this young woman herself has only a vague concept of who Burzum are, and purchased her shirt on-line without being aware of its political and racist connotations. I ponder the peculiar manifestations of globalized metal subculture in Hawai‘i for a moment, before leaving the young woman alone to enjoy her Metalfest free from ethnographic interrogation.

I am brooding over the set schedule in order to ascertain which stage seems most fruitful when a young man rushes up to another young man standing near me and clarifies my decision by shouting excitedly to his friend, “Dude, that gnarly metal chick is on!” He is pointing almost frantically towards the outside courtyard downstairs. The two young men rush down the outside stairwell, and I follow close behind. As we race down the rickety wooden stairs that descend into the courtyard, I can see an enthusiastic mob of attendees leaping about, waving their horns in the air, or just gazing amazedly up at the stage. During pervious sets, attendees have been standing around, bobbing their heads, or sheepishly attempting to start mosh pits with little success. Now they are innervated,
expressing not just appreciation, but wonder. Very little of the typical push-moshing is being attempted; the audience is packed tightly against the stage forming a monolithic mass entity that seems to tremble with earnest excitement. Several stand literally gaping, open-mouthed, at the performance unfolding before them.

The subject of their awe is obvious: a young woman stands in the center of the stage, screaming like a demonic mountain lion into the microphone clenched in her hands. Her actual words, if indeed she is uttering actual human syllables, are unintelligible, but the distinctive combination of agony, exaltation and joy that she conveys does not require any translation. Around the vocalist, her male band-mates buffet the audience with waves of surging, melodic metal, but it is undeniable that it is the vocalist herself that holds the audience in thrall. The young woman is slightly built, of indeterminate ethnicity, and wears no distinctive metal clothing. In another context she might not seem particularly imposing or intimidating; here she seems superhuman, endowed with the power to instill terror and ecstasy in her audience far beyond the capacity of everyday life. Her eyes are huge and wild, filled with the intensity and pain that continues to howl and rage from her throat. Many mediocre male harsh vocalists keep to the safer and easier to perform low end of the tone spectrum; the young woman before me now utilizes a much wider vocal range, vacillating from deep, monstrous rumbles to high, piercing shrieks. Occasionally she breaks out of the harsh vocal technique entirely and sings in a clear, more traditional style before plunging back into her sonorous, feral ululations once again. The audience is predominantly male, although many women have packed themselves into the stumbling, heaving entity that the audience has become. The set reaches a timeless, irrational state of fervor that will not be
reached again today; for the duration of the set this young woman holds us all in the quavering, bottomless depths of her screams and everything else is irrelevant.

Gender constitutes a perilous and complicated category for the Hawai‘i metal scene. Metal subculture is unquestionably dominated by men and preoccupied with masculinity. Simultaneously, metalheads evince a tremendous degree of anxiety concerning masculinity. As we observed in the last chapter, military personnel are often perceived as being haoles in their purest, most unsettling form. In many important respects, military personnel are also seen as masculinity that has breached its banks; violent, hyper-macho, drunken, and aggressive. While masculinity is undoubtedly valorized and even fetishized within the O‘ahu metal scene, the stereotypical military dude serves as a disturbing example of what happens when masculinity becomes malignant.

Conversely, metalheads often seem deeply disconcerted by the presence, or even the very existence, of women and femininity. Walser describes the fantasy world constructed by heavy metal during the 1980’s as, “a world of action, excess, transgression but little real violence, one in which men are the only actors, and in which male bonding among the members of a ‘hero team’ is the only important social relationship.”137 Paradoxically, women in the O‘ahu metal scene who can perform metal in a convincing, emotive way wield tremendous power over their audiences; power that is unique from that wielded by male performers. Women who are able to perform appropriate subcultural style and take part in subcultural rituals are able to acquire a great deal of

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subcultural capital. The following explanation from my informants Hank and Roger articulate this ambiguous attitude towards women in the scene:

**BHO**: How do women enter into this equation?

**HANK**: I love it when women mosh; when women go nuts.

**ROGER**: It takes a certain balls to do it though. Because it’s mostly a pretty aggressive driven dance floor (laughs).

**HANK**: But if any girl can stick around in the pit for more than five minutes, she’s got my thumbs up (laughs).

**BHO**: But do you think that a woman’s presence in the pit affects how it works?

**ROGER**: Sure, I actually do. Because I mean, you don’t want to…most of the time they can be more delicate.

**HANK**: Yeah.

**ROGER**: Yeah and I think that’s just genetic.

**HANK**: I mean are we talking about women in general? Or are we talking about the women specifically who are in the mosh pit?

**BHO**: Just in your experience. What you’ve seen…what you’ve…

**HANK**: Well yeah definitely…if you are at a very diverse show like there’s one metal band, one hardcore band, one alternative band, there’s going to be those women around that do love the music but just don’t want to be part of that whole craziness. And you’ve got to walk around them. You know, and try to walk around them.

**ROGER**: You notice that most at those larger shows where there is a huge group of people and everyone is different.

**HANK**: But I mean… if you are going to a Slipknot show…then there are no rules. You are a girl? Who cares. You know, you are at a Slipknot show…sorry. Like, I mean I don’t care if you…for me personally, I don’t care if your boyfriend brought you and you don’t like this music…he should take you…that’s his responsibility. He should take you somewhere where you are not going to get hit. And if he’s a real metal fan he’s going to know not to bring his chick into the pit.

**BHO**: If she doesn’t want to be there.
ROGER: Yeah. Because there’s a level that’s going on in there…you’ve got to be aware of.

Hank and Roger begin by asserting that they very much appreciate it when women take part in mosh pits, but only under appropriate circumstances. While they approve of women moshing in theory, they point out that, “most of the time they can be more delicate,” and are unable or unwilling to, “go nuts.” Hank and Roger articulate that major metal shows, such as one by the famous band Slipknot, are lawless, chaotic, sometimes violent places, and women must accept this fact or not participate. Men who bring their female companions to shows, Hank and Roger explain, must take responsibility for her and protect her from danger. Such sentiments reflect both a belief in female naiveté and weakness, as well as the necessity for benevolent paternalism on the part of men. In order to understand Hank’s and Roger’s statements, we must acknowledge their conflicting desires to both include women who can, “go nuts,” on the one hand, and exclude and protect women who are weak and unaware on the other. Women who can perform metal appropriately, which usually means co-opting masculine gender performances in particular ways, are give great respect. The underlying assertion states that women who are unable or unwilling to cope with the Dionysian, ecstatic, sometimes violent fervor of heavy metal must be marginalized, or the intensity and freedom that male metalheads experience may become diluted.

In Hawai‘i this impulse towards masculinity becomes more complicated as local men must compare their own versions of manhood with that of military personnel from the continent, and vice-versa. The ubiquitous presence of tourists on O‘ahu also presents myriad different forms of masculinity, and the complex, often tense interactions between
locals and tourists suggest numerous, often conflicting gender norms to local men. Hawai’i is also one of the most ethnically diverse places in the United States, and numerous different attitudes towards gender exist simultaneously as a result of this plurality. The discourse of paradise asserts that local men must be “easy going,” “laid back,” and generally accommodating; this often comes into conflict with a competing cultural imperative exemplified by local catch-phrases such as, “Defend Hawai’i,” and, “Respect the Culture.” Heavy metal subculture proposes a novel solution to this ambiguous problem with masculinity; it suggests the possibility of a vital, primal, pre-modern version of masculinity that is both transcendent and empowering. This understanding of masculinity often attempts to avoid any confrontation with femininity in any form, at least within the boundaries of the subcultural space. In Hawai’i, this understanding of a romantic metal masculinity is used in an attempt to reconcile, or at least temporarily escape, the competing gender imperatives that are often imposed upon young men. This “metal warrior” version of masculinity is often coded in Hawai’i, more so than elsewhere, as being distinctly foreign, European, medieval, and connected to fantasy literature. As we have seen elsewhere, heavy metal in Hawai’i is attractive to young people explicitly because it seems as if it does not belong there.

Superficially, metal asserts the value of control and domination, but hot on the heels of this assertion is the question: What happens when these values spiral out of control and dissolve into chaos? Nonetheless, metal often asserts hegemonic values concerning gender normativity, with a heavy emphasis on the empowering, cathartic value of certain kinds of masculinity. The ecstasy and exaltation that metal celebrates is invariably tied, in one way or another, to traditionally masculine values like strength,
aggression, and triumph; in order for women to engage fully in the empowering aspects of metal subculture they must perform masculinity in significant ways. Although the hyperbolic, “warrior-hero” version of masculinity valorized by heavy metal subculture is quite distinct from the forms of masculinity that are usually emphasized in Hawai‘i, many of the underlying values remain the same, most significantly the essential value and dominance of masculinity itself. Heavy metal subculture is relentlessly iconoclastic, testing the limits of human emotion, experience, and individuality; the fact that masculinity remains the only constant, relatively uncontested aspect of identity is deeply telling.

The unaffected awe with which Hawai‘i Metalfest 2009 greeted the performance by the female harsh vocalist described above was possible because she was able to present herself as being intoxicated with power; overwhelmed with the searing, exalting strength of heavy metal. This understanding of power is indelibly caught up with the performance of masculinity; this is not to say that women cannot utilize this power, but they must do so on masculinity’s terms. My informants Amy and Donna describe their experiences as female performers in the scene in a way that corroborates this assessment:

**DONNA:** Yeah, they are super like, “Oh, don’t they know that this is what uhhmm.” One of our friends in the audience when we first played at Anna Bananas as a threesome one of the guys was like, “Don’t they know this is a metal show?” And they were all super doubtful and like didn’t know. So they are probably…maybe they feel a little strange because…

**AMY:** Like we are invading their territory or something.

**DONNA:** Like a big guy wants to rock out to two little girls? Like all of a sudden we are rocking like this big thing and that might…I guess that would feel weird, “I’m gunna rock out to these two little girls,” you know (laughs), “they rock but I’m this big guy.” Maybe it makes them feel a
little, “this is weird.” Like I am jamming with my grandma or something, you know, like it’s just so different.

AMY: Jamming with my sister…

Donna speculates that male metalheads feel ambivalent, or even hostile to women utilizing the framework of metal for their own purposes. Her rhetorical question, “Like a big guy wants to rock out to two little girls?” is very telling indeed; men in this case are big, women are, “little girls.” Here, Amy and Donna are utilizing sexist notions concerning feminine weakness and frailty by contrasting those concepts with the strength and toughness of their metal personas. As we have seen elsewhere and in other contexts, metalheads on O‘ahu frequently hold up disempowering stereotypes that have been imposed upon them in order to contrast those attributes with the robust, larger-than-life aspects of their metal identities, using irony and juxtaposition in order to render these disempowering stereotypes untenable. Although Donna is using exaggeration and irony to make her point here, her statement clearly illustrates her perceptions of where power, strength, and authority lie within the metal scene. The presence of powerful, skillful women playing metal music adds an element of, in the words of Donna, weirdness or uncertainty to an otherwise comprehensible social performance; however, as we have seen in the example of the vocalist described above, and in the success of Amy’s and Donna’s band, women can and do utilize the power of heavy metal subculture, if not necessarily on their own terms.

Women comprise an unusually high percentage of the local scene’s membership compared to most metal scenes on the continental United States, although they are still dramatically outnumbered by men. There is no single explanation as to why
women in Hawai‘i are more active in the local metal scene, but here are a few of the more significant contributing factors that my informants have often voiced to me: Shows in Hawai‘i tend to be less violent, or at least they are believed to be less violent, than shows on the mainland, resulting in fewer women being alienated by violence. The scene’s small size requires non-metal bands to frequently play shows with metal bands, allowing for women who were initially interested in hip-hop or indie rock to be exposed to metal. In many deeply significant ways, metal is often perceived as alien and European by people in Hawai‘i, making it a useful method of rebellion and self-transformation for young women hoping to frighten their parents and alienate their peers. My informants have told me innumerable times that metal seems wildly out of place in Hawai‘i; therefore, women hoping to distance themselves from their surroundings and the expectations placed upon them during adolescence are understandably attracted to heavy metal. But perhaps more than anything else, as Judas Priest’s Rob Halford famously and astutely opined, metal signifies power, strength, and invulnerability; the fact that this form of empowerment is ineffaceably linked with masculinity does not, for many young women in Hawai‘i, detract from its attractiveness.  

Women in Hawai‘i have fewer subcultural options available to them than their counterparts on the continent, and those that are available tend to offer women fairly passive, traditionally feminine identities; therefore, it should not be surprising that women in Hawai‘i who are looking for a tougher version of themselves might gravitate towards heavy metal.

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138 Walser 1993, 1.
Although heavy metal subculture is infatuated with masculinity, this does not mean that masculinity is unproblematic, easy, or unambiguous for metalheads. Metal is intensely concerned with strength, violence, power and control; in a more profound way, metal is concerned with the failure of strength, with what lies beyond violence, the limits of power, and what happens when control is lost. Aesthetically and thematically, metal clothes itself in exaggerated masculine signifiers; gestures so superfluous and caricatured that they sometimes deconstruct masculinity, betraying its futility and artificiality. By exposing masculinity, metalheads can achieve the heady, if temporary, loss of self that provides metal’s most intense and distinctive pleasures. As concerned with masculinity as metal clearly is, it is also deeply uncomfortable with masculinity. This discomfort sometimes takes the form of hyper-masculine overcompensation; one that attempts to mask the contradictions and problematics of masculinity through the familiar tropes of toughness, anger, and violence; however, metal subcultural performances can deconstruct, satirize, and sometimes successfully subvert traditionally constructed notions of masculinity.

A Brief History of Gender Performance in Heavy Metal

During the early years of metal’s existence, the distinctions between metal’s musical and performative characteristics and those of the related hard rock genre often blurred into one another. One of the most formative distinctions was the tendency of early metal pioneers like Black Sabbath, AC/DC, and Judas Priest to eschew overt love songs. Early metal bands focused either on themes of alienation, damnation, and
psychological turmoil, or on themes of power, intoxication, and hyper-sexuality.\textsuperscript{139} These early progenitors avoided everyday, mundane subjects like real-life human relationships in favor of exaggerated celebrations of masculine sexuality, strength, and narcissism. Judas Priest in particular took the macho posturing prevalent throughout earlier rock music to triumphant, absurd extremes. Judas Priest vocalist Rob Halford’s use of leather, whips, metal studs, and biker imagery in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s was directly inspired by gay S&M culture, and his lyrics often betray thinly veiled homoerotic references, but such connections were either lost on, or went mostly unspoken within Judas Priest’s mainly heterosexual fanbase.\textsuperscript{140} In the formative days of heavy metal subculture, women were either non-existent, or objectified. Masculinity reigned supreme, often in total isolation from femininity. During the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, metal attempted to resolve the problem of gender relations by cutting masculinity off from anything that might problematize it. Although this tendency has changed form and mutated somewhat, the essential drive to isolate masculinity from elements perceived as weakening or restricting has remained throughout heavy metal subculture.

As metal’s popularity grew, and its sound and imagery became more distinct, its gender performances became more complex and ambiguous. As the movement known as The New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) began producing the first generation of true heavy metal bands, the thematic content of bands like Iron Maiden,

\textsuperscript{139} Christe 2003, 68-69

\textsuperscript{140} Kahn-Harris 2007, 73
Mercyful Fate, and Venom began swerving further away from topics that concerned everyday life, and as a result, gender performances became more distorted and fantastical, although not necessarily any less androcentric. In the early 1980’s, glam metal began developing an overtly androgynous visual style that combined feminine signifiers like lipstick, fishnet stockings, eye make-up, and feathered hair, with lyrics and music video content that were deeply misogynistic and objectifying towards women. This rather baffling gender paradox was wildly popular during the mid 1980’s until the early 1990’s, boasting metal’s only sizable female fan-base. Walser offers the following interpretation of this phenomenon:

If male heavy metal fans and musicians sometimes assert masculinity by co-opting femininity, what they achieve is not necessarily the same kind of masculinity that they sought, as the conflicting demands of masculinity and rebellion are mediated through new models and the free play of androgynous fantasy shakes up the underlying categories that structure social experience.141

Glam metal evoked a potentially highly subversive tactic for representing rebellion: androgyny. As metal sought the outermost limits of transgression, the possibility of transgressing masculinity itself was explored, however; the subversive potential of this act was mitigated by glam metal’s reassertion of masculine power through its thematic obsession with the sexual domination and objectification of women. It seems that glam metal’s flirtation with androgyny was too precarious to be maintained for very long; by the mid 1990’s glam metal was considered a pariah by virtually every corner of the metal world and has made no signs of reasserting itself since that time.

141 Walser 1993, 134
In his brilliant analysis of mainstream heavy metal during the 1980’s, Robert Walser emphasizes metal’s desire to escape gender anxiety both through male homosociality and the reaffirmation of masculine power. As Walser was publishing his book, metal was transforming itself through the various extreme metal subgenres, and becoming a very different beast; however, the beast in question was still fixed in numerous ways with masculinity. In her excellent text *Heavy Metal: the Music and Its Culture* Deena Weinstein suggests, “The barriers confronting women in heavy metal are more fundamental than those encountered by blacks…No racist themes match the macho ideology of the genre. The anti-female posturing of heavy metal stars relates less to misogyny than to a rejection of the cultural values associated with femininity.”

As we have seen elsewhere, heavy metal fetishizes strength and power as such. Weinstein astutely points out that metal attempts to negate femininity during the 1980’s have less to do with hostility towards women per se, and more to do with a desire to distance themselves from the perceived weakness and passivity which dominant culture associates with femininity. Weinstein’s assessment pertains primarily to the more popular versions of metal during the 1980’s, but while extreme metal after this period adopted a more varied and often whimsical attitude towards gender, metal has never lost its suspicion of, and tendency to avoid, discursive elements connected with femininity.

The treatment of masculinity offered by classic heavy metal bands and glam metal bands during the 1980’s were very much based on traditional notions of masculine hyper-

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142 Walser 1993, 112-120

143 Weinstein 1991, 67
sexuality, even when they were flirting with androgyny.144 Bands like Mercyful Fate, Iron Maiden, and Venom suggested a much more radical break from everyday life and mundane identities during the 1980’s that would be developed by later extreme metal movements into subcultural styles that asserted a prodigious, often romantic aesthetic that drew on horror and fantasy genres. This aesthetic marked a dramatic break from the “sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll” aesthetic that heavy metal had retained from the larger rock culture until this time. The hyper-macho, sexual conquest themes that were commonplace within heavy metal during the 1980’s virtually vanished within subgenres like death metal and black metal, although the tendency towards homosociality remained. In the case of gore-fixated bands like Cannibal Corpse, Autopsy, or Carcass, sexuality emerges only in a deeply distorted form such as lurid, semi-erotic descriptions of zombies having sex, violent disembowelments, or obscure medical terminology. In the case of Cannibal Corpse, violent descriptions of women being raped and tortured were often included, although such themes were by no means commonplace throughout metal subculture and were often harshly criticized. In my experience, metalheads do not read such content as sexual; these often disturbing, violent fantasies are transgressive and abject rather than overtly sexual. Black metal bands like Emperor, Abruptum, Immortal, and Mayhem ignore sexuality altogether; indeed, the fantasy worlds that they inhabit attempt to distance participants as much as possible from the concerns of everyday life, including those of gender and sexuality. These aesthetic developments and subcultural performances attempt to assert a larger-than-life, inhuman form of identity, although they retain the familiar desire to escape the weakness associated with femininity through

144 Weinstein 1991, 102-105
homosociality. Gender becomes abstracted and ambiguous within subgenres like black metal, but the discursive elements associated with masculine strength and feminine weakness continue to play themselves out. Throughout the 1990’s, as religious, political, and musical content moved evermore towards the outer-margins of the ideological spectrum, gender became an increasingly unstable category, although masculinity has never ceased to fascinate heavy metal subculture.

The convergence of hardcore and metal during the late 80’s and early 90’s also altered metal’s gender performances, but often in a peculiar, contradictory way. Hardcore, particularly in the mid-to-late 1980’s, often exemplified a hyper-macho, tough guy mentality. Straightedge hardcore bands like Youth of Today, Judge, and Earth Crisis presented very traditional, belligerent forms of masculinity that attempted to reassert an authoritative, unambiguous version of manhood. These masculine gender performances bled into much mainstream metal during the 1990’s, most notably the wildly successful metal/hardcore hybrid Pantera. Conversely, other sectors of hardcore youth culture also bequeathed to metal during the 1990’s an interest in progressive politics, feminism, and environmentalism. The former tendency was far more visible in the 90’s, giving rise to major label successes like Pantera, Limp Bizkit, and Korn. The latter category, while less commercially successful, has had a deep lasting impact on international metal subculture. The social awareness of influential extreme metal bands like Napalm Death, Carcass, and Brutal Truth opened the door for the critique of

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145 Haenfler 2006, 103

146 Mudrian 2004, 127-134
masculinity, and gradually, the inclusion of women in metal. Grindcore pioneers Brutal Truth included songs such as *Anti-Homophobe* and *Stench of Profit* which espoused both socially progressive attitudes, and an anti-Capitalist economic agenda. Napalm Death and Carcass both emerged from England’s anarchist punk scene railing against economic inequality and militarism, and advancing anarchist and animal rights perspectives.147 These competing tendencies within metal and hardcore since the 1990’s have given rise to an uncertain, often incongruous character within contemporary metal regarding gender roles. Indeed, this lack of consistency and stability regarding the roles of women, and what forms of masculinity are appropriate, exemplifies the treatment of gender within contemporary metal, and the metal scene in Hawai‘i in particular.

Contemporary metal consists of numerous sites of contestation, and metal scenes are areas in which these contests take place. Gender presents myriad difficult problems for metal subculture which cannot be permanently resolved. Today there are numerous highly respected women within international metal such as Julie Christmas, Angela Gossow, Morgan and Mercedes Lander, Yasuko Onuki, and Sabina Classen. The number of women in contemporary metal is far greater than twenty years ago; however, metal continues to be dominated by men to a greater degree than most other forms of popular music. Masculinity continues to be one of metal’s most obsessive fixations, although the conclusions that particular bands or subgenres come to regarding the problem of masculinity vary greatly. Gender remains a subject of profound confusion for contemporary metal subculture; a subject that fascinates and disturbs in equal measure.

147 Mudrian2004, 25-45
Although problematic, and sometimes unsettling, masculinity, and the values connected with it, remains one of the most significant and indelible components of metal subcultural performance.

**Part Three: Good Friendly Violent Fun: Liminality, Masculinity, and Transgression**

I am striding briskly through the crowded shopping mall within Aloha Tower on a Saturday night in September. Aloha Tower is one of the primary docking areas for cruise ships arriving in Honolulu harbor and caters almost exclusively to tourists. I pass dozens of stores selling ukuleles, commercial art depicting sickly-sweet, romantic Hawaiian landscapes, and macadamia nuts. Nothing in the vicinity suggests that a local heavy metal concert is about to take place, and I have never attended any shows in this venue previously. I know that Aloha Tower often holds large concerts in their outside arena, mainly mainstream bands on tour from the mainland, but the show I am hoping to attend tonight is supposedly a smaller rented space deep in the bowels of Aloha Tower itself. I spy a group of teenagers loitering towards the back of the mall wearing metal and hardcore t-shirts, so I make my way towards them. They are standing in front a large, unmarked space that looks as though it had been intended to house a restaurant or a bar that has since gone out of business. Inside, perhaps one hundred teenagers and assorted grown-ups are milling around a small stage or sitting in folding chairs. I notice several scene members who I am acquainted with and realize that I have come to the right place. I pay the higher than usual cover charge and enter. I greet several of the scene members who I know as they are hurriedly setting up their instruments. They return my greeting and say that they are about to go on. I wish them luck, and wait patiently for the show to
begin. There is no bar, and this is clearly a family-friendly, all-ages event. Perhaps a
dozen young children are chasing each other around the room, paying no attention to the
band on stage. Numerous middle aged adults, obviously parents and family members of
the bands, sit in the folding chairs placed about ten feet back from the stage. Several of
the other bands that will be playing tonight mill around towards the back, along with
friends and girlfriends.

As the band begins playing, a large portion of the teenagers and twenty-
somethings move to the front of the stage where I am standing. The band begins to
disperse their very satisfying melodic extreme metal, with some black metal influences.
The band in question are local young men just out of high school and have only played a
few shows, but make a very enjoyable racket. Around me stand perhaps a dozen young
people, all men, looking awkward and self-conscious. They scarcely move, and do not
seem to know what to do with themselves. I attempt to instigate a mosh pit by stumbling
around the middle of the dance floor, bumping and pushing the young men playfully.
They respond with a combination of amusement, annoyance, and confusion, but do not
reciprocate my mosh-happy gestures. Eventually I give up, feeling foolish. Just as I have
resigned myself to a more reserved form of audienceship, a tall, lanky body hurls itself
into the group of young men whom I had been attempting to mosh with. They scatter like
bowling pins, and for several second chaos reigns in Aloha Tower as the invading
participant thrashes and contorts in the wake of his violent entry. The young anti-
moshers seem mildly terrified, and I am too busy observing the incident to join in. I
know this man; I have seen his wild enthusiasm before. I observed his habits of
instigating pits at local shows several times during my early days in Hawai‘i and mentally
gave him a title: The Pit-Master General. I have since made his acquaintance and learned
his real name, but my personal name for him still seems appropriate. The Pit-Master
General concludes his one-man mosh-pit when the song ends, leaving the baffled
younger men in peace.

Several other fairly excellent sets follow. A melodic hardcore band that seems to
be quite popular with the local teenagers causes a flurry of two-stepping on the part of the
timid young men who refused to mosh during the previous set. The two-steppers
dance in clear, regimented lines; they look like some type of aerobics class. The style of
music is not exactly my cup of tea, and the dancing is not something that I have
experienced outside of Hawai‘i, but the crowd is obviously enjoying themselves.
Eventually the headliners of the evening reach the stage, with the Pit-Master General on
vocals. Most of the young children and parents have gone home by now, leaving the
scene to itself. The band explodes into an intimidating set of metallic hardcore and the
first genuine pit of the evening ensues. Myself and perhaps a half-dozen twenty-
somethings flail and toss one another around the dance floor. The Pit-Master General
bays and hollers, lurching towards the audience with ferocious intensity. He is a young
Asian man, over six-feet tall, lean and wiry. At the conclusion of the first song, someone
towards the back of the audience yells, “Tall Asian hardcore!” The Pit-Master General
breaks into a sunny grin, and says, “I like that!” The band launches into another song and
the Pit-Master continues to whip himself into a rampant state of elation, raging into his
microphone as he roams into the audience. The set’s intensity grows as it continues, and

148 For an example of both this style of music and the “two-stepping” dance style, observe the following
clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4jE8RH5yAY
the Pit-Master General’s agitation escalates. Towards the end of the set the Pit-Master
General begins to beat himself about the head with his microphone. He delivers several
horrible blows to his forehead which make amplified, stomach-turning thumping noises
as they make contact. The Pit-Master General is directly in front of me as he does this,
and I can only watch in mixed horror and fascination, caught up in the excitement of the
moment myself. When he concludes his self-flagellation, his microphone is broken and
blood is dripping down his forehead. The Pit-master General seems more concerned
about his damaged microphone than his potential concussion. The band finishes their set
with a barely audible microphone, and a stunned, but admiring audience.149

Mosh pits provide a unique venue for the performance of masculinity. This is
true for both musicians and audience members; the performer/audience dichotomy is far
more fluid and reciprocal in metal subculture than in other forms of popular music.
There are a number of aspects to the ethnographic account that I have just given that shed
light on particular ways in which masculinity is performed and understood within the
O‘ahu metal scene. Firstly, we see a conflict between the participants who wish to
impose order on live performances, and the participants who wish to ferment disorder,
chaos, and deindividuation. The tendency towards order and individuality stems from
straightedge hardcore and related genres that are furthest removed from metal.150 The
masculinity being performed by the anti-moshing two-steppers is one in which control,
personal strength, and regimentation are privileged. By attempting to mosh with these

149 9-25-2010
150 Tsitsos 2006, 121
young men I violated these values, resulting in annoyance on the part of the young men, and inevitably the failure of the pit to manifest while the two-steppers were in the majority. The sudden, riotous entry of the Pit-Master General marked the first signs of genuine, successful chaos being introduced into the show. Although the two-steppers where able to reassert order during their set of preference, chaos clearly reigned by the show’s end. The version of masculinity being affirmed by the two-steppers is a masculinity in control of itself and its surroundings. The two-steppers do not touch each other and they do not like to be touched. Women are often incorporated into the lines of two-steppers, but like everyone else in these carefully organized queues, women have their place and are not allowed to intrude upon the place of others. Two-stepping, as well as other forms of hardcore dancing, involves particular moves that people are expected to learn and perform correctly. Masculinity remains in control, autonomous, and inevitably, unchallenged.

Most of my informants are acutely aware of the distinctions between the Dionysian excess of metal pits, and the regimented control of hardcore dancing. The following exchange with my informants Sam, Bill, and Rick is worth quoting at some length:

**BHO**: So when you guys are not performing, do you ever go in the pit? Do you ever go in the mosh pit?

**SAM**: We don’t hardcore dance or two-step…we just like to fucking run in a circle.

**BILL**: I like circle pits….
SAM: Start circle pits!\textsuperscript{151}

BILL: I love starting them too!

SAM: Just start circle pits! It’s so fun!

BILL: Just run around, pull people in, now that is a rush to me!

RICK: We don’t get to do it much though because…there’s too much hardcore…

SAM: Yeah, too much hardcore…Or, I like to be right up there with the band headbanging right with them! (last half-sentence in unison with Bill) I like to get the metal-claw and just headbang…Ahhhhh! It’s just so good! It just feels right! You know?! It just feels right!

BHO: So do you think there is difference between the kind of moshing and the kind of pit activity hardcore kids do as opposed to metal kids?

SAM: Very, very different.

BILL: Metal kids touch each other! They get physical, they hit…I have seen people bleed…I have never seen anybody bleed when they two-step.

SAM: The thing is…the thing is…metal…regular metal…you just, it’s just getting in the pit and just getting wild! (affirmative murmurs from band)

BILL: You just swing man!

SAM: With hardcore, it’s a certain dance you know…if you’re not doing that dance, you are not cool, you better get out of there. If you are not doing that dance, than get out of the pit…

BILL: They laugh at you…

SAM: If you are not doing the right dance than get out of the pit…which I think is dumb.\textsuperscript{152}

Here, Sam, Bill and Rick explain that metal pits are the antithesis of carefully disciplined hardcore dancing. Physical contact is one of the primary purposes of metal moshing, and although this contact is often shrouded in violent signifiers, such contact

\textsuperscript{151}For example of a circle pit, observe the following clip: \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yMwJ79leHk}

\textsuperscript{152}3-27-2010
reflects a much deeper desire to show affection and mutual support between participants. One of the few iron-clad rules of metal mosh pits states that when a participant falls down, they must be immediately picked up by the other participants who must also make sure that the fallen comrade is not injured. I remember very clearly being at a large metal/hardcore show in Honolulu where I was knocked down in the midst of a large, wild pit and immediately felt myself being lifted by perhaps a half-dozen arms. I found myself being almost carried to safety by a group of skinheads whom I had never met, who earnestly inquired about my well-being, before quite literally tossing me back into the pit after I assured them that I was uninjured. Such encounters are carefully scripted, subcultural rituals designed to reinforce a sense of camaraderie and mutual adherence. In contemporary American culture, men are rarely allowed to show one another physical affection, particularly men who do not know each other. In a certain sense, metalheads knock each other down in the pit explicitly so that they can have the opportunity to pick one another back up.

But mosh pits are not just sensual performances hiding behind the appearance of violence. They are rituals that represent the temporary destruction of social order, and the ecstatic abandonment of everyday boundaries. Mosh pits that fully manifest are ecstatic places where physicality, experience and music envelope the participant in an altered state of consciousness analogous to religious ecstasy. It is unlikely that the Pit-Master General planned to whack himself in the head repeatedly with his microphone; the euphoric unraveling of conscious thought that takes place in mosh pits often results in impulsive, irrational behavior. In a very significant way, the Pit-Master General was saying: “In everyday life you must not hit yourself in the head for no reason; watch as I
hit myself in the head for no reason.” The Pit-Master General’s dramatic behavior was a way of signifying chaos itself; a physical, performative manifestation of the dissolution of all boundaries and taboos, even those against self-destruction. Such performances suggest to participants that if chaos is possible within the performative space, than order outside of the performative space is never stable or monolithic. The ritualized chaos enacted through heavy metal does call into question the omnipotence of social order; however, the fact that this chaos is performed and enshrined though masculinity suggests that social order cannot be fully escaped either. In another sense, the macho posturing evident in traditional metal and hardcore becomes a parody of itself during such performances, spiraling out of control, becoming caricature. In performances such as the Pit-Master General’s there is a combination of joy and despair; exaltation and rage; empowerment through masculinity and frustration with its limitations.

My informants in the O‘ahu metal scene often use the word wild to describe their experiences in mosh pits, a very telling phrase indeed. My male informants in particular utilize words and phrases that imply bestiality, primal energy, and boundarylessness. Such descriptions often depict an idealized, vital masculinity that may have thrived in the distant past, but which has been largely forgotten by mainstream culture. My informants Hank and Roger explained their experiences in mosh pits in the following way:

**ROGER:** It’s that release of…ahhhhh…all the emotions that you built up…I mean just…It’s not about hurting people it’s about getting wild. Letting the music just kinda take you wherever it goes; you don’t have a real set dance. I don’t…I don’t like set dances…I’ve never been a dancer. Running around going kind of nuts has been my thing (laughs). It feels better that way…
HANK: Especially in a society around the world where you have to abide by certain, you know, social standards, you know? Otherwise you are going to be perceived as this kind of crazy ass, you know, this weird fucking person. And you can’t get that out when you are going to work or when you are picking up your kids from school, or you are doing all this other shit, you know? So when you get there, you are there.¹⁵³

Here, Hank and Roger describe mosh pits as wild places where insanity and chaos can be experienced. Hank explains that mosh pits are the opposite of, “social standards,” and everyday life. He suggests that mosh pits are places that ground the participant in their experience, where past and future are temporarily forgotten. Hank and Roger, and virtually all of my other informants as well, employ adjectives such as crazy, weird, wild, and nuts to describe the experience of moshing; irrationality in this context is often equated with freedom and a more authentic form of masculinity. Hank cites “going to work,” and, “picking up your kids from school,” as fundamentally mundane activities that contrast dramatically with the ecstatic timelessness he associates with heavy metal. This second example of, “picking up your kids from school,” is especially telling, as it suggests a very contemporary, domestic form of masculinity that is the converse of the heroic, romantic, larger-than-life version of masculinity celebrated by heavy metal.

My informants often equate the experience of moshing with ritualized warfare. They often insist that contemporary culture suppress the natural instincts of men, and that mosh pits are places where these more essential, chaotic, sometimes violent tendencies can be let loose. A few moments after making the above statement, Hank made the following connection between masculinity, warfare, and mosh pits:

¹⁵³ 8-8-2010
**HANK:** Men...men are fucking nuts. We’re, we’re obviously totally different creatures than women. Whether you want to look at it like a nature vs. nurture kind of a thing...it’s instilled in our brains to be this sort of manly warrior, wild type of thing. You know back before...it’s only recently that...what is it called? The industrial revolution that that whole warrior thing has gone down the drain; when you can kill someone from a distance that whole craziness and wildness disappears. And maybe, maybe it has to do with the instinctual nature instilled over thousands and thousands of years of people, men, killing each other on the battlefield, you know? You can’t even begin to count how many millions and billions of people have died in warfare, real warfare. And now that you can kill somebody with a click of a button, you know, maybe that’s where metal comes in. You know, and why, why people find such a kinship with it. And especially the military dudes. I mean, you...(laughs)...obviously military dudes...military dudes are always about metal. It pretty much doesn’t matter; if you are in the military you have some appreciation for metal, I think.

**BHO:** But why would someone who just got back from Iraq or Afghanistan and has been, you know, people shooting at them, them shooting at other people, why would they come and recreate that by simulating violence do you think?

**HANK:** People are nuts. People are crazy. Probably because they are still in that mode you know? (laughs)

**ROGER:** It’s just one of those things.

**HANK:** And for me, on a personal level, the reason why I like moshing is because it’s reminiscent of those warrior days when thousands and thousands and thousands of men would charge into battle and just BOOOOOOM!! You know, and it would just be utter chaos. And that, to me, moshing is the closest I can get to that.\(^{154}\)

Hank explains in a very vivid way his associated between an ancient, visceral form of warfare, and the euphoria of the pit. Men, Hank argues, are essentially irrational and violent. Conversely, women are, “totally different creatures.” He is unsure if man’s irrationality and women’s essential difference is naturally or culturally based, but this distinction is not particularly important for Hank; reality, as he understands it, is the same

\(^{154}\) 8-8-2010
either way. Contemporary culture, and modern warfare specifically, seems unnaturally sterile to Hank. Metal and ancient, hand-to-hand warfare constitute the marriage of masculine camaraderie and death. Hank describes the ultimate disillusions of individuality and a profoundly visceral merger with one’s brothers in the experience of both death and metal. Here, the experience of the pit is the experience of losing one’s self and destroying the individuality of someone else. What Hank is describing is less an act of violent destruction, than a consummate experience of continuity, what Bataille would call eroticism. At the conclusion of his statement Hank reiterates in very telling language, that mosh pits allow for the experience of, “utter chaos,” which he finds ecstatically pleasurable. Here, masculinity envelopes everything, leaving the participant in a realm protected from weakness, fear, and uncertainty.

My friend and informant Lowell, being somewhat older than most people in the O‘ahu scene and having come of age on the east coast of the United States, has a great deal of experience with mosh pits. As I have stated elsewhere, Lowell’s is very much concerned with cohesiveness and community within the O‘ahu metal scene. He explained his feelings regarding mosh pits to me in the following way:

Let’s see, the first pit I ever went in was when I was in high school. I saw Korn when they first came out, and they were playing bars near where I lived, so I was in mosh pits since high school. And it’s a great vent….it’s better than going out and starting a fight with somebody. That way it’s sort of like you are fighting with everybody and everybody is fighting with you but it’s more in a brotherhood kind of a way. There’s some people who go out and their main focus is to hurt people and get into real fights. Those people, they get kicked out, they get identified, and those people get stomped on, those people get stomped down and kicked out. But you’ve noticed in pits, if somebody falls down, everybody

reaches down and picks them up. It’s all about love and uhhhh…it’s a loving way, it’s a loving environment to release…you know, it might be an oxymoron, but it’s a loving environment to release hate. And uhhhh….I think people should go in mosh pits more often; there would be less war. I wish politicians moshed once in a while. It’s a good vent.156

Lowell emphasizes the cathartic qualities of mosh pits. He argues that metalheads with pent up hostility can find a healthy outlet for their violent impulses through participation in mosh pits. Such an assessment is fairly consistent with a traditional understanding of masculinity; men are naturally angry and aggressive, so they need things like sports and war to vent their masculine overflow. But Lowell does not stop with such an assessment; he goes on to describe a unique form of group activity that is essentially non-individualistic, non-competitive, and focused on the experience of, “brotherhood.” Lowell insists that overt violence in the pit is severely punished, and emphasizes the ritual gesture of picking up those who have fallen down. The last several lines of his statement are perhaps the most profound: Lowell explains that mosh pits exist within an apparent contradiction between love and hate. For Lowell, this contradiction is exactly what gives mosh pits their power through the blurring of boundaries and the construction of liminal space. Lowell explains that mosh pits are, “a loving environment to release hate,” that has a lasting effect on participants. Unambiguous violence, and hatred caused by isolated, discontinuous individuality might be remedied, Lowell suggests, through cathartic, liminal states such as mosh pits.

Through the ritualized chaos of mosh pits, and the performative self-destruction described at the beginning of this section, heavy metal asserts a romantic, idealized form

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of masculinity that emphasizes ecstasy, brotherhood, and physicality. Participants in mosh pits become what Victor Turner names, “liminal personae,” and mosh pits constitute, “liminal space.” Liminal personae are, “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.” Although bodies become blurred, and the rules that govern everyday behavior may be temporarily discarded, masculinity remains a constant performative focal point. Rituals, such as mosh pits, that produce liminality allow for a powerful disruption of individuality, and essential identity, but not necessarily masculinity. The fact that masculinity is privileged over individuality itself is profoundly significant.

But the question remains: If we accept the theory that mosh pits create a temporary state of deindividuation, does the memory of this experience carry over into the participants’ everyday lives, problematizing essentialized identities such as gender? My research suggests that mosh pits, and other aspects of metal subculture that allow for the experience of chaos and liminality, can accomplish the long-term destabilization of essentialized identities, but that metal fails to do so in the case of gender. Masculinity is consistently exalted, and attributes connected with femininity are consistently marginalized. Men dramatically outnumber women throughout metal subculture, and while women play a greater role in the O'ahu metal scene than elsewhere, they are still very much a disempowered minority. Heavy metal is a highly imaginative subcultural

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157 Turner 2008, 94-95.

158 Turner 2008, 95.
framework that emphasizes ritual, drama, intense emotion, and transgression; such a framework allows participants to examine their gendered identities but does not necessarily compel them to challenge established power relationships. As Donald Grimes astutely observes regarding the lasting effects of transformative rituals:

Ritual, like art, is a child of imagination, but the ritual imagination requires an invention, a constantly renewed structure, on the basis of which a bodily and communal enactment is possible. Unlike some other forms of creativity, imagining ritually cannot transpire merely ‘in the head’ but is necessarily embodied and social. Furthermore, the imaginative is not the opposite of the real. Rather, imagining is a way of transforming and renewing the real.159

Masculinity can become more aware of itself when participants go back into the pit time and time again, losing themselves and coming back from that state of boundarylessness as more complicated people, but this does not mean that masculinity will necessarily lose its privilege, and in the case of heavy metal, it clearly does not. Women are generally excluded from mosh pits and are not offered the same opportunities for achieving liminality that men enjoy. In order for women to engage in the myriad pleasures and empowerments available through heavy metal, they must conform to the values of masculinity; in this case, deindividuation does not permanently transform gender roles or alter the predominance of masculinity.

**Power, Triumph and Subjectivity**

Many of the women in the O'ahu metal scene that I have spoken with are uncomfortable with mosh pits. More so than any other aspect of scene activity, moshing seems to be acknowledged by everyone involved as not just a masculine activity, but as a 159 Grimes 2000, 4.
distinctly male activity. One of my informants, whom I will call Linda, explained her attitudes towards moshing in the following way:

Because I have been there before and I wish could be tough enough to go in a mosh pit but…it’s kind of intimidating. Like I wish I could be able…when they play I want to be in there, I really truly do, because I love them to death but I am just like: “these guys are like hardcore.”¹⁶⁰ I mean, I would not be able to knock someone out like…tap…with an elbow or something.¹⁶¹

Here, Linda evinces both a desire to participate in the physical, transgressive space of the pit, but feels too inhibited to express the requisite aggressive behavior towards strangers. For many women in the scene, the loss of control that mosh pits represent contradicts their principal attraction to metal: personal empowerment. If males within the scene glory in chaos and ecstatic deindividuation, most of the women that I have spoken with and gotten to know within the scene focus more on metal’s capacity to make them feel strong, in control, and intimidating to others. Female metal performers are able to achieve ecstatic, cathartic states such as the one that I described at the beginning of this chapter, but they are less inclined to lose themselves in the chaos of the pit, or repeatedly seek out experiences of deindividuation. For my female informants, the pleasures they find in metal seem to emphasize their individuality and increase their sense of personal empowerment.

My informants Amy and Donna are the guitarist and bassist, respectively, for one of Hawai‘i’s most respected metal bands. Both are keenly aware of the complicated

¹⁶⁰ By the term, “hardcore,” Linda seems to be referring to the band’s intensity, rather than the musical genre hardcore.

¹⁶¹ 3-27-2010
gender politics involved in the O‘ahu metal scene, and both speak candidly about the
difficulties that they face as women involved in a male dominated scene and subculture.
When I asked Amy and Donna about how moshing might be different from other forms of dancing, they responded in the following way:

**AMY:** It’s not choreographed and it involves *injuries*.

**DONNA:** It’s physical contact.

**AMY:** It’s very physical, because metal is very… *masculine*.

**DONNA:** Like *Rawwwwr*!

**BHO:** Let’s talk about that: I had some specifically gender related questions. Do you think that metal is a particularly masculine genre?

**AMY:** Definitely…of course.

**BHO:** In what way does it reflect masculinity?

**AMY:** It’s just that…there are *so many* males dominating the music…I mean, the average girl wouldn’t automatically come up with like a metal song to express her feelings. She’s probably more like pop…

**BHO:** Why is that do you think?

**AMY:** It’s just what we are inclined to do. Like why would a little girl want a little kitchen play set? Like what would a boy want a carpenter’s play set? It’s just society…and you just learn the gender roles, whether or not you admit it or not.

**BHO:** So…metal is coded as masculine right? It expresses certain tendencies that tend to be associated with men rather than women. Uhmmm…so what is the pleasure of men getting together with a bunch of other men and celebrating masculinity?

**DONNA:** That’s the thing like when the cavemen and you know, the cavemen when they get the hunt, and then after they get it they all celebrate and stuff. (Amy is laughing, she clearly thinks this is very funny) It’s one of the *man things*. You know, they are playing their guitar it’s a phallic extension of themselves they’re fucking going *like that*, doing all kinds of stuff. People is like in their face, that’s total…it’s right there: the guitar.

**AMY:** It’s all about testosterone.
**BHO:** So where does that leave you guys?

**DONNA:** I don’t know. My friends say, if you can play metal you can play anything so…(laughs) Where does that put you? Cuz we’re not showing off our dongs you know?

**AMY:** I’m coming to terms with, like, my femininity. Like we live in a patriarchal society anyway. It’s not like I am not used to it. I’ve just learned to…I don’t know…

**DONNA:** Acknowledge…

**AMY:** Be okay with them. I think by now a lot of the guys at least kind of respect me as a musician, even though I’m a girl.

**BHO:** But why do you think you gravitated towards something that tends to express masculinity?

**AMY:** I’ve always been kind of a tom-boy in the first place. I’ve never liked girly things. It’s never…appealed to me I guess. Once I heard metal I was like, “This is pretty nice…none of that Britney Spears crap. Christina Aguilera.” It just doesn’t satisfy. Every time I listen to any other kind of music I just want to…nothing ever called to me like in my body (emphasis Amy’s).162

Amy and Donna begin this very interesting exchange by equating moshing with a very visceral, physical masculinity; a masculinity that, for them, often characterizes metal more generally. When I ask Amy if metal is a distinctly masculine genre, she responds, “Definitely…of course.” This blunt, unambiguous response is very telling; for Amy this point is so obvious that it hardly requires acknowledgement. Amy and Donna, in a very reflexive way, describe the ways in which gendered identities are imposed upon both males and females, and that metal is characterized by distinctly male-centric, masculine signifiers. As with the example given above in which Hank equates mosh pits with ancient, ritualized warfare, Donna equates mosh pits with some form of primal,

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primordial masculinity. She suggests that for male metalheads, mosh pits allow them to shed their modern, socialized identities in favor of a more essential masculinity. Hank’s and Donna’s descriptions of mosh pits conjuring up some ancient, pre-modern manhood are strikingly similar to one another, and are clearly filtered through romantic imaginings of the distant past, but these statements do indicate a belief among my informants that mosh pits tap into a more vital, primeval form of masculinity.

Donna clearly states that metal musicians use their instruments as phallic symbols; lording the physical manifestation of their masculinity over their audience. Both women openly acknowledge taking pleasure in claiming this power for themselves; a powerful attestation of the ways in which female metalheads are able to co-opt masculinity and masculine signifiers for their own empowerment. At the end of this exchange, Amy explains that metal allows her to construct a more personal, subjective version of femininity that allows her to navigate both the patriarchal world that she finds herself in, and her own attitudes towards her gender and identity. In the last line of this excerpt, Amy explains that metal speaks to her on a visceral, physical, sensual level that no other form of music can approximate. Her explanation that no other form of music other than heavy metal has, “ever called to me like in my body,” is representative of the belief that metal goes, in the words of Donald Grimes, “deeply into the bone;” that heavy metal is a more profound, emotionally serious, physically affective form of music than other forms of popular music.\(^\text{163}\)

\(^{163}\) Grimes 2000.
Inevitably, Amy and Donna do feel that participation in the Oʻahu metal scene offers women unique opportunities for empowerment, but such opportunities are fraught with challenges, contradictions, and the ubiquitous celebration of masculinity. Like many of metal’s most intense pleasures, the empowerment that Amy and Donna find in participating in metal subculture is linked to transgression. A few moments after the above statements, Amy and Donna offered the following comments:

**AMY:** I don’t know…it’s kind of fun being one of the few girls in the scene.

**DONNA:** That too…I like that tension a little bit.

**AMY:** Yeah, it’s kind of nice. I think I can hold my own.

**DONNA:** Yeah…if we can hold ourselves with men we can hold ourselves with girls.

**AMY:** I mean, not every girl would be up to like do this, like be on stage with all of these men watching. Like studying you and whatever…I think I’m comfortable enough with myself to go through with it.

**BHO:** Do you think metal has the capacity to maybe empower women, make them feel tougher, stronger? In a lot of ways, metal is supposed to be about strength. Do you think that can translate to women as well?

**DONNA:** Yeah!

**AMY:** Definitely. I feel super confident. Not cocky, but confident.

**DONNA:** Yeah, sometimes I wish I had my bass around like, let me get by bass so I can come yell at you (laughs). You know, I think it does.

**AMY:** Some of the women that are in metal now are pretty well respected…Lacuna Coil…it just depends.\(^\text{164}\)

Amy and Donna reflect that they enjoy the tension and difficulty of being women in a predominantly male-centric scene and subculture. Metalheads revel in over-stepping

\(^{164}\) 4-27-2011
boundaries, and find pleasure in infringing upon forbidden territory. By claiming the power of a metal performer, a status that has so often been reserved for men, Amy and Donna carve for themselves a particularly subversive form of pleasure, one that takes advantage of metal subculture’s transgressive logic; however, the power that Amy and Donna claim is indelibly tied up with masculinity. The pleasures available for Amy and Donna are pleasures defined by and interpreted though the lens of masculinity. Nonetheless, Amy and Donna are emphatic that being in a metal band makes them feel stronger and more confident. Participation in the scene allows them to claim power that is often forbidden to them and in doing so, indulging in metal’s love for transgression and taboo violation, even as the values associated with masculinity and femininity go essentially unquestioned.

The pleasures that my female informants describe as participants in the O‘ahu metal scene do differ in significant ways from those described by my male informants. My male informants describe the euphoria and Dionysian joy of losing control and immersing themselves in irrationality and deindividuation. My female informants describe finding pleasure and empowerment in metal’s glorification of strength, power, and triumph. In a very important sense, my male informants take pleasure in losing control, and my female informants take pleasure in exercising control. My female informants often describe both the metal scene and the larger culture as realms governed by patriarchy. They often describe women who are not into metal as weak, passive, or artistically unsophisticated. Simultaneously, my female informants also describe being more interested in how the female members of their audience react than the male members. My female informants describe not only an intense desire to experience
empowerment for their own sake, but also to convey empowerment to other women.

Amy and Donna explained this desire in the following way:

AMY: There’s a lot of doubt. I think a lot of people don’t think I can play.

DONNA: They don’t know what they are in for…a lot of doubts, mostly from men. A lot of the girls are like rockin!

AMY: The girls are like, “Oh my God that was so awesome! You like inspire me! You guys are so amazing!” Even our last show at hard rock there was like a girl…

DONNA: We get it from girls and guys…but it’s really cool when the girls come up. But we do, I see that doubt.

AMY: We see it from young girls, older ladies, they are like, “we love you guys! We’re glad that you’re up there.”

Here, Amy and Donna articulate their belief that men often assume that they cannot play because they are women, but that women find their performances pleasurable and inspiring explicitly because they are women. The language my female informants use to describe their experiences with metal tends to focus on individual empowerment; a tendency that contrasts quite markedly with my male informants’ emphasis on states of ecstasy, chaos, and loss of individuality.

Metal subculture seeks transgression through a variety of different methods. Metalheads hope to shake things up; to destabilize, at least temporarily, the mundane order of things. In the O‘ahu metal scene gender roles are not seriously destabilized, and not only is the value of masculinity not called into question, it is consistently exalted. But the versions of masculinity most often celebrated within the O‘ahu metal scene are versions that are distinct from other versions of masculinity that are more common in
Hawai‘i. Metal masculinity is fantastical, larger-than-life, triumphant, and superhuman. As we have seen in other contexts, metalheads on O‘ahu use metal masculinity to disrupt expectations and push back against essentialized notions of Hawai‘i and local identity. At the same time, my informants invariably express a deep love for Hawai‘i and connection with local culture; they use metal subculture not to completely reject Hawai‘i, but to create their own ambiguous cultural space within it.

Within the O‘ahu metal scene women have the opportunity to claim special forms of transgressive power for themselves, but these types of transgressive power are invariably linked with masculinity. Simultaneously, the anxiety that accompanies the intrusion of women into the traditionally masculine realm of heavy metal can also produce hostility in the defense of traditional masculinity. My male informants place a great deal of value on traditional masculine characteristics like strength, bravery, and vitality, but on a deeper and perhaps more significant level, they also betray feeling constrained and oppressed by traditional notions of masculinity. My female informants tend to express disdain for most concepts that are normally coded as feminine, and strive to mold a more personalized version of themselves that emphasizes strength, self-reliance, and creativity. Both male and female metalheads take pleasure in the violation of taboos, although the taboos which males and females in the scene enjoy violating are often quite different. In a subcultural world that emphasizes the value of transgression above all else, while simultaneously being enmeshed in many of the same gender norms as the larger society, instability and confusion are endemic. The O‘ahu metal scene, while somewhat more inclusive towards women than other scenes, continues to emphasize heavy metal’s preoccupation with masculinity; however, gender is a deeply
unstable category within the scene, and scene participation can provide opportunities to examine gender and create less constrictive, more versatile forms of gendered identity.
Conclusion

Ambiguity, Misdirection and Postmodernism

The concept of a “global metal tribe” and a cultural framework beyond the ken and awareness of most authoritative forces suggests a method for evading and confusing dominant culture, rather than challenging it directly. The difficulties that metalheads on Oʻahu face, the problems that heavy metal allows them to deal with, are often very much rooted in modernity, but the tactics employed by metalheads to combat these problems are much more fluid, playful, ambiguous, and unstable, which is to say, more postmodern. Wallach, Berger and Greene crucially point out that, “metal is embedded in local cultures and histories and is experienced as part of a complex and historically specific encounter with the forces of modernity.”¹⁶⁵ In Hawaiʻi, these, “forces of modernity,” include the omnipresent tourism industry, the military, and globalized popular culture (which includes distorted depictions of Hawaiʻi itself), among others; however, the tactics that I have been describing more often than not attempt to render my informants’ identities inscrutable, mercurial, and disconcerting rather than to directly confront or challenge these systems. In this sense, heavy metal subculture is transformative on a moment to moment, tactical basis, rather than in a permanent, revolutionary way.

Regarding their first introduction to metal, my informants consistently report feeling as though they had discovered a secret world, or some form of esoteric magic.

Heavy metal is alienating and inaccessible to the majority of listeners; my informants recount their friends’ and family’s reactions to their musical tastes as ranging from deep confusion, to fear and disgust. This ability to alienate outsiders allows for a special kind of empowerment born from understanding and appreciating something that others cannot; a fortified, enigmatic world protected from the impositions, even the comprehension, of external authorities. This tendency for metalheads to cloak themselves in disconcerting, arcane signifiers takes place all over the world, but in Hawai‘i metal is invariably interpreted by everyone involved as being something profoundly out-of-place, foreign, and often distinctly European. But metal in Hawai‘i is not just perceived as something from another place or culture; it is something from another world or another time; romantic, disturbing, and evocative. Throughout the preceding chapters I have illustrated and analyzed the ways in which metalheads on O‘ahu use the framework of metal subculture to create cultural noise and spin discursive webs around their lives in order to construct meaningful identities and communities for themselves. The O‘ahu metal scene abides within numerous paradoxes and contradictions, and they often fail to manifest many of their most cherished ideals in the real world, but they are frequently successful in concocting useful tools with which to evade externally imposed identities. The tactics and desires that I have been describing must be seen as a distinctly postmodern method for abiding within fragmentation and using disjunction and paradox to create more fluid, versatile identities.

Contemporary Hawai‘i is overrun with stereotypes and prefabricated notions about what Hawai‘i is and what the people who live there are like. These essentializations are not simply sales pitches given to tourists in travel brochures; they
have infiltrated and influenced local culture in important ways. Transplants from the continental United States who have lived in Hawai‘i for a period of time and have attempted to assimilate into local culture seem particularly vulnerable to the internalization of the discourse of paradise, however much it may contrast with their everyday lives and socio-economic situations. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of ethnic, racial, gender, or regional stereotypes is their tendency to be internalized by the very people whose lives and identities are being imposed upon and exploited. My informants, from whatever background they come from, or whatever faction of the scene they belong to, use heavy metal to combat these impositions and subvert the discourse of paradise. While the imaginative world that heavy metal inhabits is every bit as much of a cultural construction as the discourse of paradise, it is one that my informants can use to their own advantages and desires; they have access to the tools and language games that heavy metal offers, while families, peers, and teachers can only look on with incomprehension.

The desire to overcome the restrictions and anxieties associated with racism, class divisions, ethnic stereotypes, sexism, regional chauvinism, and religious prejudice is nearly universal within the O‘ahu metal scene. Nearly everyone that I know and have spoken with within the scene asserts that in order for the metal scene in Hawai‘i to survive, it must be inclusive and not fall back on the divisions and prejudices that characterize the rest of Hawai‘i, and in an even more dramatic fashion, the continental United States. This desire to conquer disunion has always been an important part of heavy metal culture, but it has taken on a more earnest tone in the last ten or fifteen years as metalheads all over the world have become more conscious of heavy metal as an
international phenomenon, not simply an American or European one. Metalheads on O‘ahu tap into this sense of heavy metal internationalism, and use the framework of metal subculture to construct versions of themselves that seem less confined to the time and place into which they were born; this too must be seen as a decidedly postmodern method for dealing with the restrictions and limitations of everyday life.

In many respects, gender seems to be the most significant line of demarcation within the O‘ahu scene, and metal subculture as a whole. Quite tellingly, gender inequality also seems to be the problem that most metalheads (i.e. male metalheads) seem to be the least conscious of or interested in. Most of the male metalheads whom I have spoken with take the relative marginalization of women more-or-less for granted; their exclusion seems natural, and unproblematic. Masculinity is perceived as a joyous, if sometimes ridiculous, celebration. Women in the scene are acutely conscious of their marginalized role within metal subculture, resent it deeply, and struggle against their exclusion vigorously, although their struggles typically involve the adoption and performance of masculinity to some degree. It is through the difficult, often compelling discourse of gender normativity that the sly, versatile, tactical methods of identity construction and performance that the O‘ahu metal scene utilizes in other ways begin to break down. While there is a great deal of irony and overstatement in the performances of masculinity evident in the O'ahu metal scene, the essential value of masculinity goes unchallenged, and gender on the whole lacks the evasive, ambiguous qualities that other aspects of identity performance within the scene have.
The deeply problematic presence of military personnel is something that everyone is very much aware of. It is vital to keep in mind that within the Oʻahu metal scene, “military” is virtually synonymous with “mainland haole” and as such, deeply rooted in local tensions and anxieties. It is also important to acknowledge that the vast majority of military metalheads that I encountered in the Oʻahu metal scene were haoles. While everyone, (locals, military, mainland transplants, etc) hopes to integrate military personnel into the metal scene and gain the support and knowledge that they have to offer, cultural, racial, and class tensions make such integration very difficult. The majority of metalheads on Oʻahu, military and non-military alike, spend a great deal of time and subcultural energy courting one another, feeling each other out, and making myriad subcultural gestures designed to lay claim to subcultural capital and power within the scene. My informants who are in the military do not wish to be seen as simply “military haoles” any more than my local informants wish to be seen as any single aspect of their facticity. It is in these gestures, tactics, and performances that the multi-faceted, playful, self-consciously fragmented aspects of heavy metal identity construction take place; befuddling outsiders, and challenging one another.

Heavy metal subculture is less a sword with which to vanquish one’s foes, and more a house of mirrors designed to bewilder, misdirect, and provoke external authorities. Religion remains one of the most useful and ambiguous mirror rooms within the funhouse that is heavy metal, one which allows metalheads to point in numerous directions at once, and induce intense confusion and chaos among outsiders, and often one another. As I argued in Chapter Two, even among my informants who are deeply committed to Christianity, the pleasure my informants take in being misunderstood and
cultivating ambiguity is consistent. My Christian informants have something that is, in truth, emphatically Christian, but is misunderstood as being Satanic by the uninitiated and the ignorant; the pleasure my informants take in their own knowledge and the obliviousness of others is clear. Those of my informants who are relatively neutral towards Christianity seem to have the greatest leeway for playful, adroit, polysemic performance and identity construction. As this category is not grounded in any particular religious positionality, they are able to suggest to others, “Maybe I am a Satanist….or a Christian…or a Pagan…or something else…,” without compromising their own sense of religious identity, as they have no stable sense of religious identity to compromise. As in the Majestic Tyranny performance with which I began my dissertation, metalheads on Oʻahu who are most interested in Satanic or blasphemous gestures are able to take pleasure in iconoclasm, arcane symbolism, fear-mongering, and their ability to inspire generalized confusion among people who are unfamiliar with their genres. It is in this religious and supernatural play, which heavy metal has always reveled in, that the most mercurial, disconcerting, successfully misdirecting subcultural gestures take place.

Concepts like “the scene” and “heavy metal” and “the underground” are metaphors; linguistic units that participants use to construct and interpret their realities. In many important respects, metalheads on Oʻahu are attempting to replace, or at least add to, the identity metaphors that they grew up with (those of ethnicity, race, nation, etc) with those of their chosen subculture. It is hoped that the restrictions of being a military haole in Hawaiʻi or a working-class Filipino woman can be complicated, and perspectives multiplied, through the adoption of a metalhead identity and participation in a scene of likeminded metalheads. In describing the nihilistic, amoral, postmodern
hellscape that he perceives in Lyotard’s thinking, David Harvey writes, “Action can be conceived of and decided only within the confines of some local determinism, some interpretive community, and its purposed meanings and anticipated effects are bound to break down when taken out of these isolated domains, even when coherent within them.”

It is not possible through heavy metal subculture to completely eliminate the prescribed, essentialized identities that are imposed upon people’s bodies. The stereotypes, historical divisions, socioeconomic inequality, and casual, but insidious, assumptions which are instrumental in our perception of others, what Roland Barthes Up to a point, Harvey’s assessment of postmodern perspectivism is accurate; when universal ethics and meta-narratives are discounted, much more pragmatic, localized, contextualized methods of meaning-making become necessary. But Harvey misses the point when he suggests that any values concocted by an, “interpretive community,” lose all validity and coherence when taken outside of that community; such movement requires a shift in perspective, not the wholesale abandonment of everything previously created or understood. Such is the case for the Oʻahu metal scene; the performances, identities, and subcultural values created within the scene do not retain the same kind of meaning outside of the subcultural arena, but they do not wholly dissipate either. The evasive and disruptive tactics devised within the Oʻahu metal scene can be used as tools in participants’ everyday lives outside of their chosen, “interpretive community;” such tactics are not permanently transformative, but they are imminently practical and usable.

It is not possible through heavy metal subculture to completely eliminate the prescribed, essentialized identities that are imposed upon people’s bodies. The stereotypes, historical divisions, socioeconomic inequality, and casual, but insidious, assumptions which are instrumental in our perception of others, what Roland Barthes

166 Harvey1990, 52.
calls, “the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying,” cannot be vanquished simply by the assertion of an alternative, chosen identity.\textsuperscript{167} With that in mind, metalheads can and do invent cultural tools that help them to elude and discombobulate the perceptions of others. Metalheads on O‘ahu ferment chaos and confusion both within the scene, and amongst the non-metal actors who populate their lives. Total victory over the cultural forces that would reduce their identities to one-dimensional shadows can never be achieved; but participation in the O‘ahu metal scene allows for a venue and framework through which participants can complicate and negotiate their senses of self, even if the success they achieve is temporary, and their struggles are ongoing.

My research has shown me that participants in the O‘ahu metal scene are not able to simply replace one set of identity metaphors for another; their attempts at identity construction tend to revolve around misdirection, irony, and incongruity. On the continental United States, many metalheads suffer from a marked lack of identity; a sense of alienation bred from suburbanization, secularism, and the encouragement of Euro-American ethnic groups to abandon their ethnic identities. This is usually not the case in Hawai‘i; most of my informants have a very clear sense of their ethnic, class, religious, and regional identities. Metalheads in Hawai‘i, particularly local, non-haole metalheads, use their essentialized identities as foils for the identities which they are intentionally constructing. Participants will often invoke ethnic, religious, or racial stereotypes associated with their own group as a way of contrasting those stereotypes with whatever aspect of their metal identity that they are performing or describing. This is done on a

\textsuperscript{167} Barthes 1972, II.
micro-level when participants joke about, for instance, how their metalhead identity does not coincide with people’s expectations of a working-class Native Hawaiian man or a young Hapa woman from Kaneohe. It is also done on a macro-level when participants joke about how Hawai‘i as a state/nation/geographic location does not seem compatible with heavy metal subculture in a very broad sense. My friends and informants in the O‘ahu metal scene revel in these sorts of contradictions, and in thwarting the one-dimensional expectations of people outside of the scene. This discursive tendency is uncommon within metal scenes on the continental United States; it is specific to the historically situated realm of the metal scene in Hawai‘i. The perceived incongruity between Hawai‘i and heavy metal subculture is one of the most distinguishing features of the O‘ahu scene and constitutes the discursive tension which gives the scene coherence.

Most members of the O‘ahu metal scene are in their late teens and twenties. They are enmeshed on what is perhaps the most significant period of self-creation and identity construction that individuals in contemporary culture ever go through. Frustrations with parents, religious authorities, and dominant ideologies of all types are felt viscerally, providing observant scholars with the opportunity to study the problematics that run throughout the larger culture in an exaggerated form. Young people have both the relative freedom, and the inclination to try on alternative identities, showing us both what they hope to be, and hope not to be. In his influential ethnography of the Austin music scene during the 1980’s, Barry Shank suggests that the scene he describes is, “an environment conducive to the exploration of new identities.”

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168 Shank 1994, x.
word *exploration* is key here; Shank reminds us that subcultural identity construction is a process, a quest of sorts, an attempt to establish what resources are available.

Participation in vibrant scenes and subcultures offers a variety of opportunities for creativity, both in the artistic sense and in the context of identity construction, or self-creation. This process is never static, and the anxieties which govern everyday life regularly reassert themselves, but participants in the O‘ahu metal scene have access to powerful tools to evade, misdirect, and examine these anxieties.

I argue that metal subculture is unique in this process for several reasons: 1.) Metalheads are far more likely than other subcultural members to carry their affiliation into adulthood and throughout their lives. This is not to say that participation and dedication stay the same over time; older metalheads are less likely to be in bands, attend local shows, or commit themselves to other time consuming activities, but self-identification as a metalhead seems to translate into adulthood with much greater frequency than other youth-based subcultures. While younger participants are expected to “take up the banner” and perpetuate local scenes, older metalheads are seen as respected elders and repositories of subcultural knowledge; this is often not the case in other music-based subcultures. My informant Kevin is an excellent example of this; he is much older than most scene members, and has a great deal of experience in both the music itself, and the business that surrounds it, and he is able to provide much needed guidance to younger scene members. 2.) Metal is relentlessly polysemic and revels in irony and misdirection, and as such, it is far more versatile and adaptable to multiple cultural frameworks than other subcultures; this is perhaps the most important reason for its popularity throughout the industrialized world. 3.) Metal places tremendous
discursive emphasis on ecstasy, chaos, and loss of control; this discursive tendency
instigates environments where taboos are ritually violated, boundaries are joyfully
crossed, and the rules that govern everyday life can be temporarily cast aside.
Experiences of boundarylessness and liminality bring social structures into relief once the
liminal space has been dissolved. As I have stated repeatedly, these fervent, blissful
moments do not achieve any sort of permanent transformation, they are cognitive tools
that metalheads use in their everyday lives as reminders of the possibility of chaos and
the limitations of singular sources of power. The methods and tactics that I observed
within the Oʻahu metal scene are not likely to bring about revolutionary social change,
but they do allow participants to abide within a fragmented postmodern culture and
construct more dynamic, empowering, useful identities.

The Significance of Mosh Pits

Mosh pits are one of the most important ways that metalheads act out
fragmentation and allow chaos to manifest physically in the world. In his influential
article *The Meaninglessness of Ritual* Fritz Staal writes:

A widespread but erroneous assumption about ritual is that it consists in symbolic
activities which refer to something else. It is characteristic of a ritual,
performance, however, that it is self-contained and self-absorbed. The performers
are totally immersed in the proper execution of their complex tasks…Their
primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules. There are no symbolic meanings
going through their minds when they are engaged in performing ritual. 169

Staal’s assertion that ritual is not symbolic is relevant to mosh pits for several
reasons: There is no theoretical or ideological justification amongst metalheads as to why

169 Staal 1996, 484.
mosh pits take place or why they are fun, or indeed if they are fun at all. They are not intended to represent anything; mosh pits are meant to evoke mayhem and formlessness in a very literal way. Mosh pits are irrationality and chaos made manifest; they do not signify these concepts, they actually turn irrationality and pandemonium loose within the carefully demarcated boundaries of the ritual space. Paradoxically, although mosh pits manifest chaos, they are also, as Staal points out, obsessed with rules. Mosh pits have carefully drawn borders and a ring of “border guards” encircle the pit, protecting both moshers and non-moshing audience members. If a mosher falls down, these border guards and their fellow moshers must pick them up and make sure that they are unhurt. Intentionally punching, kicking, head-butting or otherwise trying to hurt other people is forbidden, and very real violence may occur if this taboo is broken. Larger participants must be careful not to accidentally injure smaller participants, particularly women. While these rules may be less (or more) compulsory in other scenes elsewhere in the world, they are taken quite seriously on O‘ahu. Metal mosh pits hope to achieve a safe arena in which participants can attain states of ecstasy; a ritual space where participants can feasibly lose control without hurting themselves or others. It is this experience of being engulfed in irrational, numinous, Dionysian frenzy that mosh pits are intended to achieve, not the symbolic representation of such concepts. Metalheads take these experiences with them as memories into their everyday lives, and use them as tools to demystify the apparent, but essentially illusory, sense that dominant culture and authoritative power are monolithic and omnipotent.
In her much celebrated book *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* Catherine Bell explores the power relationships involved in what she describes as *ritualization*. Bell writes:

I will use the term ‘ritualization’ to draw attention to the ways in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.\(^{170}\)

Mosh pits follow Bell’s concept of ritualization quite closely. They are carefully delineated spaces set aside both from everyday life and the rest of the performance space in which altered, ecstatic states of consciousness are meant to be achieved. As the Testament quote that I began this section illustrates, metalheads invariably use language evoking insanity, death, and timelessness when discussing the experience of moshing; indeed, the title *Into the Pit* is meant as a double-entendre designed to signify both moshing and damnation. Mosh pits are not seen as “metal dancing” or as places simply of enjoyment or pleasure; they are doorways that are felt to lead outside of mundane reality, and into a realm of visceral, tumultuous experience. My informants speak, often with fear and reverence, of the mosh pit’s power to allow the temporary escape from socialization; to achieve through ritualized physical activity the same joyous, feral madness that metalheads hear in metal music. This madness is seen as a profoundly

\(^{170}\) Bell 1992, 74.
liberating experience, one that informs all aspects of the participant’s life and identity, although on a tactical rather than a permanently transformative basis.

My informants in the O’ahu metal scene describe the ritualized insanity of mosh pits as cathartic, and emotionally beneficial, and I am arguing that such experiences provide tools that my informants can take with them into their everyday lives. But this assertion brings an important question to the fore: Are all participants in the scene allowed the same access to these subcultural rituals and liminal experiences? My answer must be a fairly emphatic no; women in particular are discouraged from participation in the pit and disrupt activity when they do become involved. I will reiterate: it is gender that dictates the most significant category of inclusion and exclusion in mosh pits, although the military/local split, as well as inter-subcultural factionalisms play important roles as well. At any given show on O’ahu, different factions within the scene show a greater numerical presence and wield varying degrees of subcultural capital, and as a result, they are able to dictate what the pit does, how it is performed, and who is welcome within it.

My informants suggest that their experiences in mosh pits belong in a category of experience that most people rarely, if ever, attain. Adjectives such as *wild*, *insane*, and *berserk* are employed in articulating the sense of freedom and timelessness experienced in pits. But we must keep in mind that these are linguistic, discursive metaphors which attempt to describe something that is, at its heart, experiential, irrational, and extra-linguistic. Mosh pits are perceived as unique spaces for escaping socialization, and the discontinuity of human bodies, however temporarily; they are a falling apart, a coming
 undone, a relinquishing of the rules and restrictions that make everyday experience both possible, and often unbearably repressive. Such experiences serve as reminders to participants that social structure exists through power relationships, not as some unshakable, monolithic foundation for all human experiences. Liminal states such as mosh pits cannot and do not totally spill-out into everyday life, drowning social structure in a torrent of writhing, howling ecstasy. But such experiences can prove to participants in a very visceral, emotional way that power and social structure are not preexistent facts of nature; they are webs of relationships that can be evaded and subverted. When my informants allow themselves to be temporarily consumed by irrationality and madness, the sanity and order which seems to govern everyday life seems far less intimidating and omnipotent upon their return.

Mosh pits take numerous different forms but virtually all of them insist upon a heightened state of Dionysian frenzy intended to disrupt rational thought and induce states of ecstasy. Perhaps the definitive metal gesture at live performances cannot really be considered moshing at all: the ubiquitous headbanging. In some ways headbanging is more symbolic than other forms of audience participation. Headbanging sends a fairly unambiguous message to other participants: my mind has become subservient to metal. Based on my own uncountable hours of headbanging, as well as the testimonies of my informants, I can attest that headbanging does induce altered states of consciousness that allow the headbanger to immerse him or herself in the intensity of the music. In his brilliant ethnographic study of the Nepalese metal scene Paul D. Greene writes, “Heavy metal, in Nepal as elsewhere, seems to inspire for its most dedicated fans experiences of intense, life-saturating transgressive, empowerment. Nepali listeners repeatedly reported
that they sought to fill their minds and their lives with heavy metal music to such an extent that it was not possible to think about anything else.”171 Headbanging is perhaps the most dramatic example of this desire to completely submerge oneself in metal; to become metal and experience a powerful continuity with other fans, the musicians, and the music itself. Headbanging is one aspect of metal participation that is not closed off to women; if one element of metal subcultural activity could be said to be universal, headbanging is probably it. There is a physical, trance-inducing quality to headbanging that marks it as distinct from more typical forms of dance; what physiological, or potentially detrimental effects headbanging may have on the brains of participants might be a subject worthy of neurological study, and there is very little doubt that headbanging too vigorously and regularly reeks havoc on one’s neck and spinal column.172

Metal performances are obviously not restricted to audience participation; musicians are an essential part of any understanding of metal experience and performativity. The musicians whom I have interviewed and spoken with often speak of their instruments becoming an extension of their body; both men and women regularly identify guitars as empowering phallic symbols. In this fairly straight-forward example, the guitar becomes the exaggerated, hyper-empowered phallus, and the embodiment of the overblown, triumphant masculinity that metal celebrates. Notions of empowerment, joy, strength, and ecstasy are irrevocably tied up in masculine signifiers. Another

171 Greene 2011, 133.

172 Two of heavy metal’s most revered figures, Slayer’s Tom Araya and Megadeth’s Dave Mustaine, have both experienced severe neck and back ailments related to years of headbanging and undergone numerous surgical procedures.
ubiquitous metal gesture, sometimes called the “metal claw” or the “invisible oranges” involves extending one’s arms outwards and cupping one’s hands around a non-existent sphere, as if holding some object of immense power. This gesture implies that the metalhead in question is somehow filled with the power of metal music, to the point where it has become a physical, tangible, force coursing through her body. Such gestures by metal musicians attempt to make the strength and power of the music corporeal, and manifest in the world.

On the whole, metal is very technical, challenging music to play. Guitarists and drummers in particular must attain a high level of proficiency in order to play metal music correctly, much more so than with most other forms of rock music. This sense of musical elitism and the emphasis placed on virtuosity are integral to the empowerment my informants feel while performing.\textsuperscript{173} The ability to impress audiences with their skill and to properly evoke the intensity of metal music are often reported by my informants who play in bands, rather than the ecstatic loss of control reported by audience members. Metal vocalists are a somewhat different story; in many ways they are the ringleaders of the audience. They are expected to express passion, rather than technical proficiency. Harsh vocalists in particular often describe states of ecstasy similar to states of spirit possession. My research suggests that vocalist have a unique bond with and power over the audience, whereas instrumentalists seem to feel more focused on their musical tasks. Although delivering a high quality performance is their first task as musicians, my informants who play in bands are acutely aware of the audience’s reaction, or lack

\textsuperscript{173} Walser 1993, 102-107.
thereof. However well-played their songs might be, my informants report feeling annoyed and frustrated when audiences do not form pits, headbang, or express intense excitement in some way. All of this strongly corroborates my argument that during live performances, a general state of heightened intensity is the primary objective for everyone involved.

The practices that I have been attempting to describe and analyze are specific to the O‘ahu metal scene, and their significance must be understood in that context. At the same time, metal, particularly since the mid 1990’s, has become increasingly perceived by fans all over the world as an emphatically international cultural framework; one which connects them to a globalized community, while offering myriad tactical opportunities for addressing locally specific tensions. As Greene astutely observes, “Metal is experienced by many fans as a globally based response to local constraints and limitations; it is a culture that strains transgressively outward towards the translocal and the global.”

174 My informants consistently express frustration with the commodified, hyper-friendly, too-bright version of Hawai‘i that has been constructed by the tourism industry throughout the 20th century. The one-dimensional versions of local identity that are expected of many young people on O‘ahu are frequently the subject of intense derision amongst my informants. Military personnel almost always relate feeling excluded, unwanted, or otherwise alienated from local culture in Hawai‘i. The metal scene on O‘ahu, and live shows in particular, provide a unique venue for addressing these locally specific problems. The notion that people are “laid back” and “easy going” is one

174 Greene 2011, 111.
of the great stereotypical clichés about local culture in Hawai‘i. Heavy metal is the opposite of “laid back” and “easy going;” it is aggressive, intense, and abrasive. Virtually all of my informants, at one point or another, have described metal as the antithesis to the vapid, Disney-esc discourse of paradise that has been built up around Hawai‘i. Perceived as emphatically international, metal seems to transcend the everyday, and the often relentless emphasis placed upon “localness” in Hawai‘i. But my informants do not reject local culture outright; they use metal to complicate and confuse how others see them, and disrupt the insipid, candy-coated discourse of paradise. Heavy metal is a weapon, an alternate universe, and a toolkit that my informants in the O‘ahu metal scene use to challenge and subvert the identities that have been projected onto their bodies and communities. As Greene points out, heavy metal gestures towards a globalized subcultural community that provides a sense of connection to and belonging with metalheads all over the world, while adapting itself in whatever location it is practiced to locally specific problems and anxieties.

Disruption, Community and Subcultural Memory

My informants’ complex, often contradictory feelings towards Hawai‘i are very significant to their relationship with heavy metal. As I have stated throughout my dissertation, my informants frequently reiterate that metal seems completely at odds with Hawai‘i, or at least people’s perceptions of Hawai‘i; exactly where perceptions start and reality begins is not always clear. I have had innumerable conversations with scene
members who describe Hawai‘i in idyllic terms worthy of the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority. Such descriptions would often be followed by condemnations of the vapidity of mainstream popular culture in Hawai‘i, and criticisms of the overly tourist-friends dominant culture. This apparent contradiction is a deeply significant one; my informants will often articulate very romantic notions of Hawai‘i, and then moments later bitterly criticize that very romanticism. Heavy metal is held up as the ultimate contrast to everything empty, shallow, and inauthentic that local metalheads perceive in contemporary Hawai‘i. It is significant that military personnel rarely speak in such terms; these kinds of ambiguous, contradictory attitudes towards Hawai‘i are invariably the purview of local metalheads. The superficiality proffered by the tourism industry and mainstream popular culture does not coincide with the sense of home, community, and lived reality that my local informants feel towards Hawai‘i, and my informants feel this dissonance painfully. These contradictions and cultural constructions lay at the heart of my informants’ attitudes towards heavy metal and how they use it in their everyday lives. My informants manipulate and reform heavy metal subculture to address their anxieties and dissatisfactions with their immediate cultural environment; metal’s polysemic qualities, its emphasis on transgression, and its numerous gestures beyond mundane, everyday life make it particularly useful for this task.

The sense of vital, emotional, authenticity that metalheads ascribe to metal music is often held up as the converse of more popular genres in Hawai‘i such as dubstep, techno, and reggae. These more dominant forms of popular culture are often described by my informants as decadent, shallow, or as fads adopted by mindless trend followers which nonetheless fit more neatly into the average person’s perception of
Hawai‘i. Reggae and jawaiian music in particular is often held up as the epitome of depthless, inane pop music, which only concerns itself with cliqued love songs, but is nonetheless passed off as “local music.” One local grindcore band has a song with the rather to-the-point title of *Reggae Sucks*. Such assertions say less about the music being criticized, and more about how my informants construct values around their own music. The contempt my informants often express towards popular genres like reggae, pop punk, or dubstep is based on the suspicion that people like these genres because they are popular, rather than the other way around. Such discursive constructions build a commanding, empowering aura of authenticity around heavy metal that is contrasted with the superficiality and commodification felt to be endemic to dominant popular music. The fact that heavy metal is not particularly popular or well-liked in Hawai‘i is a very significant part of its attraction; it is something hard to understand, appreciate, perform, or to even be aware of, and therefore reserved for the special, knowledgeable few.

As I have stated above, heavy metal delights in playful misdirection, but there is little doubt that it consciously attempts to gesture towards images and connotation of evil, destruction, and apocalypticism; such gestures are invariably polysemic, but are almost always meant to be taken at least a little bit seriously. There is a kind of strategic nihilism common to heavy metal that is closely linked to experiences of ecstasy and deindividuation. Metal is rife with slogans like, “only death is real,” “Live to die, ride to hell,” and, “never stop the madness,” that articulate a profound dissatisfaction with modernity and everyday life as metalheads know it. As Deena Weinstein vividly and accurately notes, “Death metal croaks the same damning message around the world – that all human decencies and fantasies of comfort will be subverted and overwhelmed by the
forces of evil and chaos.”175 This understanding of evil and chaos retains a paradoxically optimistic quality; a suggestion that heavy metal is more powerful and vital than the tedious, mundane, spirit-crushing realities of everyday life. There is very little doubt that heavy metal is indicative of profoundly felt frustrations. Much of the apocalyptic and nihilistic rhetoric and imagery common to heavy metal subculture across the globe articulates a deep dissatisfaction with the contemporary world and a desire to annihilate those aspects of lived experience that are hollow and asinine. Although adolescent petulance is certainly a key component of this tendency, such thematics also gesture towards an urge for something greater, more awe inspiring, and numinous. This impulse may take the form of fantasies involving Satan, or Cthulhu, or perhaps simply an apocalyptic scenario that will wipe the slate clean and allow participants to start again, but the apparent nihilism and apocalypticism endemic to heavy metal always contains within it a hope for something consummate and meaningful.

On O‘ahu, such hyper-transgressive, apocalyptic fantasies are invariably leveled against the sugar-coated, facile version of Hawai‘i promoted by, among others, the tourism industry. This sentiment is evident is local song titles like *Burn North Shore to the Ground* and *This Isn’t Paradise, This is Hell*. Like so much of what goes on within heavy metal subculture, such rhetoric and imagery is deeply polysemic. On the one hand, such sentiments express a deep sadness and sincere frustration. When metalheads on O‘ahu mock the tourism carnivals in Waikiki or the North Shore, there is a genuine feeling of loss and despair being articulated. Paradoxically, these very same gestures are

175 Weinstein 2011, 56.
meant to be read as fun, playful, and ironic. I remember once seeing a metal band from
the Big Island switch half-way through their set from their standard metal t-shirts into
absurd, stereotypical Hawaiian shirts, resulting in tremendous laughter from the crowd.
They explained to the audience, “Pink is the new black!”\(^{176}\) Performance of this kind is
meant to draw a satirical contrast between the cheery, colorful “aloha” aesthetic, and the
dark, brutal metal aesthetic. In yet another sense, these send-ups of Hawaiʻi are also
meant to be starkly, unambiguously nihilistic. Song titles like *Burn North Shore to the
Ground* are intended to be mindless, alienating, and somewhat *dumb*. Such attitudes are
intended to suggest, particularly to outsiders, that mindless destruction for its own sake is
a good thing; that metal is a world in which all boundaries and positive values are called
into question. Hyper-violent, transgressive rhetoric, imagery and performance directed
towards Hawaiʻi must be read as all three of these tendencies at the same time; to exclude
any of these contradictory aspects is to miss the point.

Scene produced fliers for local shows often communicate this Hawaiʻi directed,
transgressive, morbid sensibility better than any other medium. A number of fliers
promoting a series of metal shows on the Big Island feature an undead island girl posing
coquettishly:

\(^{176}\) 1-15-2011
NAKO A MUSIC PRESENTS

Metallaula

FEATURING...

Augustine
Old Habits Die Hard

Sex Machine

7:30 PM - 11:30 PM
NO COVER 21+
FRIDAY, SEP. 24TH
100% MOXIE

336 BROADWAY CT.

NAKO A MUSIC PRESENTS

Metallaula

August

Amerina
Old Habits Die Hard

9pm - 1am 21+
NO COVER!
We see here two images that may have been culled from an old tourism brochure or hotel promotion. The ubiquitous beautiful island girl is set against an idyllic Hawaiian paradise background of flowers, palm trees, and seascape, but her face is altered into a leering skeleton. The images retain the highly sexualized features of the genre, but distort the “exotic island girl” into something disturbing and obscene. This skull-faced island girl we see here is not simply dead; she is clearly animated and seems to ogle the viewer lasciviously. The viewer is given the impression that the girl is not just a victim of violence, but is somehow monstrous and inhuman. As with the song titles mentioned above, these images are highly polysemic. On one level, they suggest that there is something deeply sick about the discourse of paradise; that beneath the surface there is something rotten in Hawai‘i. These images speak to the exploitation, commodification, and superficialization of Hawaiian culture in a very visceral way. Alternately, these images are meant to be playful, silly, and amusingly grotesque; both titillating and slightly horrific, and humorous for that very reason. But in a third sense they are expected to be read as imbecilic and nihilistic; like a dirty word spray-painted on the wall of a public building. To understand how these images are comprehended by their intended audiences we must see them as all three of these things simultaneously; they are open-ended and ambiguous, designed to disrupt meaning as much as to convey it.

Metal is a deeply serious culture that often pretends to not take itself seriously at all. Certain gestures are intended to simply confuse outsiders, while others are intended to convey a very specific but false impression, while still others articulate a polysemic, ambiguous attitude that allows participants to evade oversimplified definitions. This complicated dance is played all over the world, and nowhere more vigorously than in
Hawai‘i. As I argue in Chapter Two, transgressive, morbid themes and imagery within heavy metal can be understood through the lens of what Bataille calls *eroticism* and Kristeva calls *abjection*, however; there is an element of silliness and playfulness that often manifests in metal that is not accounted for by Bataille or Kristeva.\(^{177}\) To ask whether heavy metal is sincere in its exaltations of death, violence, and Satan, or if such proclamations are “just jokes” would be to miss the point; they are profoundly both. Irony, ambiguity, and juxtaposition are frequently used to disrupt meaning, confound expectations, and imply that the apparently simple dichotomies that seem to govern everyday life are overly simplistic and inevitably false. At a wonderful show on Sand Island in January of 2010, Lowell began his band’s set by advising the crowd to, “Show your love by hitting someone.”\(^{178}\) This statement was meant to be read simultaneously as a.) a completely serious exhortation to show affection to other scene members through pit activity b.) an ironic joke designed to make the audience laugh and c.) a nihilistic statement insinuating that there is no difference between love and violence, and that mindless violence is cool. Lowell’s statement (and he says similar things on stage all the time) must be understood as existing within the apparent contradictions between all three of these interpretations, almost forcing the audience to abide within that ambiguity.

Although these contradictions are characteristic of metal in every corner of the industrialized world, in Hawai‘i they mirror the ambiguous attitude that local metalheads feel towards contemporary Hawai‘i itself. The discourse of paradise is the subject of

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\(^{178}\) 1-23-2010
sneering mockery within the O‘ahu metal scene, while at the same time it is sometimes invoked for strategic purposes, while at other times my informants will speak in very serious, political terms about the need for greater economic equality and decreased dependence on tourism, and at yet other times bluntly nihilistic, even misanthropic statements will occasionally be made about the need to annihilate non-metal aspects of contemporary Hawai‘i. The attitudes that my informants express towards Hawai‘i can be worked through in a very meaningful, if necessarily ambiguous way through the polysemic framework of heavy metal subculture. As other scholars have carefully documented elsewhere in the world, metal provides a toolkit that can be adapted and applied to local tensions and anxieties; my informants on O‘ahu express a high degree of contradiction and equivocality regarding their home, and their scene in general represents that tendency.

Heavy metal subculture asks its adherents to take it very seriously; in a variety of different ways metal seeks to evoke strong emotion and articulate worldviews that must be seen as more than mere entertainment. At the same time, metal is relentlessly playful and whimsical. Metal specializes in pointing in multiple directions at once, eliciting confusion and uncertainty from outsiders and allowing enormous room for creative maneuvering on the part of adherents. I began this dissertation with two difficult, interconnected questions: How does metal subcultural identity complicate or problematize previously acquired ethnic, racial, sexual, class, gender, religious or national identities? Do the meanings and identities created in the subcultural environment carry over from the mosh pit back onto the street and vice versa, and if so, in what way? Metal is successful in complicating other aspects of participants’ identities
by providing tools and tactics that make essentialization and the imposition of stereotypical models of self-hood difficult and messy. Heavy metal allows participants in the O‘ahu scene to use cultural fragmentation to their advantage; to stay one-step ahead of dominant cultural authorities, and disrupt the ways in which they are perceived by others. The contentious, emotionally charged community that metalheads have built for themselves on O‘ahu does provide a profound sense of belonging and identity, even if such feelings are unstable and always in contest. The knowledge that one belongs to such a community, that one retains membership in an underground world that most people are ignorant of, does carry over into participants’ everyday lives, making those spheres of life that metalheads have less control over seem less imposing and intimidating. The joy, chaos, and ecstasy that metalheads experience through heavy metal subculture stays inside of them as a deeply felt memory, one which can be recalled to remind participants that social order, hierarchy, and the often stiflingly tedious world of everyday life are not the totality of human experience. Metalheads on O‘ahu are able to go out into the world with the knowledge that just beyond the sight and awareness of their bosses, parents, or law enforcement officials there is something vital, magical, dangerous, mysterious, and beautiful which they have access to. Such knowledge does not necessarily change the world, but it does have the capacity to significantly change how participants perceive the world.
Bibliography


Films
