

Theology in Scotland on arts and culture

Faith, creative practice and facing injustice in counter-cultural music

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My creative practice as singer and lyricist in the metal band Pyre of the Earth¹ allows me to explore life's possibilities. Engaging with a counter-culture of subversive voices allows me to participate in the construction of a community that empowers those who are excluded and disenfranchised to challenge the status quo. This compliments my theological research into Simone Weil and her conceptions of injustice. Both my research and my creative practice allow me to explore what we can all do to make the world a better place.

When I attended church as a child I was particularly fascinated by the concepts of omniscience and omnibenevolence. He (and back then God was always described to me as 'He') knew how many hairs were on my head and He knew when I truly wanted forgiveness. He knew people's true

¹ All of the pieces within this article are from our upcoming album *Pyre of the Earth* which we will self-release in 2022, except for "Binge-watching the World Collapse" which is yet to be set to music. Our demo can be found here <https://pyreoftheearth.bandcamp.com/>.

feelings and intention, the difference between a mistake and an injustice. Therefore, faith in God also meant faith in justice, since His creation was founded on His perfect truth and goodness. By my teens, Christianity no longer aligned with my beliefs as I lost faith in this possibility and I developed a connection to counter-culture in metal music and gothic aesthetics. I remain deeply involved with extreme metal culture because it is not afraid to explore the alternative or even negative aspects of cultural and moral hegemonies – such as evil, darkness, suffering and injustice.

I recently graduated and chose to write my dissertation on Simone Weil. I found it inspiring how she sacrificed her bourgeois lifestyle to know directly the experiences of the oppressed, including the suffering in both terrible factory working conditions and the frontlines of war. For her, ‘the Creation is an abandonment’ since in ‘creating what is other than Himself, God necessarily abandoned it. [...] God is absent from the world, except in the existence in this world of those in whom His love is alive.’² For her ‘religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith: in this sense atheism is a purification.’³ This means that in order to love our neighbour, we must not allow ourselves to have any deceptively comforting beliefs about the spiritual work that God requires of us. For example, allowing ourselves to view poverty as some kind of personal fault rather than an inherent feature of a society that has been founded on putting profit and economic growth before people’s wellbeing, or the murder of George Floyd being justified because he was a criminal who ‘deserved it’, rather than it being a peculiarly modern form of sin – a social sin – caused by systematic racism. Commentators have attempted to irrationalise her sacrifice for others by attributing her radical philosophy to mental illness and anorexia, but this deceptively plausible explanation allows us to turn away from the aforementioned social sins and deny both their reality and causes. My own creative practice could be described as spiritual in this way, since it aims to challenge the status quo and encourage others to imagine that things might be different from how they are – that another world is possible.

When I left the church, it could be said that I replaced one patriarchal

² Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 103.

³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von de Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 115.

culture for another since extreme metal culture is also known for being male dominant, even more so when I was a teenager. By depicting male fantasies of empowerment, often set against the presumed passivity of women, Jasmine Shadrack⁴ has described how it actually reinforces society's dominant cultural values associated with masculinity and femininity. Metal culture is known for its 'brutal sonic quality' and has a 'brutal aesthetic' to match, which can become problematic when it reinforces the negative effects of the power dynamics of the status quo with songs about rape and other forms of violence.

Therefore, despite being a counter-culture which purposefully tries to subvert the mainstream and to push the boundaries of what is acceptable to the extreme, its overarching narrative remains in conformity with patriarchal society due to the prevailing dominance of male voices.⁵ However, this counter-culture has allowed me to develop as an artist since it also provides a space for subversive voices to explore unjust aspects of our society that are hidden by cultural norms. These subversive, creative expressions have the potential to challenge the dominant narratives and provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of the oppressed in our society. In my song, "Pyre of the Earth", I attempt to empower myself by imagining myself as a mystic receiving divine knowledge and rejecting the status quo or 'natural order':

For the sky is mine
And the earth exists
For me to burn
My soul to it,
The ring that spins
On the balance
Sits on my crown:
Encompassing all,
Knowing the end.

⁴ Shadrack is also the guitarist and frontwoman for black metal band *Denigrata*, as well as being a Senior Lecturer in Popular Music at the University of Nottingham, a gender theorist and an activist.

⁵ Jasmine Hazell Shadrack, "From Enslavement to Obliteration: Extreme Metal's Problem with Women", in *Under My Thumb: Songs That Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, ed. Rhian E. Jones and Eli Davis (London: Repeater Books, 2017), 170–73.

Keep your Mother Earth,
The natural order,
Mother Earth,
Pyre of the Earth.

One persistent form of systemic societal injustice that is especially motivating for me is violence against women and girls. Kristin Hayter, who performs under the name *Lingua Ignota*,⁶ is an artist who directly addresses these issues by drawing on her own experiences of intimate partner violence. She hopes to empower and give a voice to survivors by creating cathartic music where her voice switches between a classical and metal style, creating beautiful and furious sounds. Her lyrics explicitly appeal to God to spiritually or emotionally punish her abuser: ‘May your own shame hang you/ May dishonor drown you/ May there be no kindness.’⁷ In his book, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, David R. Blumenthal writes that we have a duty to God to express the righteous anger that comes from injustice. This is because the covenant between God and his children is defined by its mutuality and genuine love, and genuine love cannot entail injustice.⁸ At the same time Ally Moder writes that a survivor’s relationship with God can become distant because God can be reimagined as a punishing male figure who allowed their trauma.⁹ However, instead of imagining a female forgiving God, could a God who is angry with their abuser be what brings comfort to their suffering? Anger is a normal, in fact inevitable, reaction to abuse and turning away from that anger maintains the privilege of those at the top of the gender hierarchy since silence only serves to maintain the status quo. Even without faith in God, expressions of righteous anger can lead to relieving the suffering of other survivors by helping them to feel less alone and to illustrate the often obscure and confusing mechanisms of abuse

⁶ A name inspired by twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen.

⁷ Kristin Hayter, “Butcher of the World”, from *Caligula* (Profound Lore Records, 2019), <https://linguaignota.bandcamp.com/track/butcher-of-the-world>.

⁸ David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 17.

⁹ Ally Moder, “The Changing Self: Forming and Reforming the *Imago Dei* in Survivors of Domestic Abuse”, in Karen O’Donnell and Katie Cross (eds), *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture and Church in Critical Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 229.

more deeply, as well as fighting stigma and illuminating damaging patriarchal narratives such as purity culture and victim blaming. An example of such a narrative is the common mystification of denying victimhood with the question ‘Why didn’t you just leave?’ These are exactly the kind of ideological, bad faith tropes which a new generation of artists in extreme music like *Lingua Ignota* are beginning to critique.

This growing representation of women in extreme metal has helped to inspire me to engage in my own creative practice with renewed commitment and focus. One band I feel a particularly special connection to is Dutch post-punk band, GGGOLDDD, whose forthcoming album *This Shame Should Not Be Mine* explores the singer Milena Eva’s experience of sexual assault by someone who was supposed to love and care for her.¹⁰ The artwork for the album portrays her in a suit of armour which symbolised the emotional armour that she needed to survive this trauma. For me, this is precisely how their music functions: as an emotional armour that makes me feel less alone and empowered. It gives me armour of my own because, as an artist myself, struggling with comparable issues and against the same power structures, it has been invaluable to recognise my own experiences in the creative expression of these women. A line from their song “You Too Must Die”,¹¹ struck me as epitomising how it feels to face injustice with a level of privilege as well as powerlessness, so I took the line and named my own piece “Binge-watching the World Collapse” after it:

In the comfort of my home
binge-watching the world collapse
faces focus on screens
but have to cope alone
I judge my peaceful distress
a polite but hollow need to express.

There is no time for righteous anger
a reaction rational, divine,

¹⁰ GGGOLDDD, *This Shame Should Not Be Mine* (Artofact Records, 2022), <https://gggolddd.bandcamp.com/album/this-shame-should-not-be-mine>.

¹¹ GGGOLDDD, “You Too Must Die”, from *Optimist* (Ván Records, 2017), <https://gggolddd.bandcamp.com/track/you-too-must-die>.

Faith, creative practice and facing injustice in counter-cultural music

the brokenness of being
the rupture of design.

Don't want to be difficult
Don't want to be complicit
Yeah I know how you feel
I'll be there in spirit.

Traumas experienced by those who encounter the systemic social sin of intimate partner violence, entail a profound loss of trust in others which impacts the survivors' sense of self and the limits of personal agency in the face of prevailing injustice. The lyrics of GGGOLDDD's first single from the forthcoming album, titled "Notes on How to Trust", express a lost feeling that mirrors my feelings of abandonment in the face of injustice: 'Where do I go? Who do I follow? Who'll bring me joy? Who'll bring me sorrow? How do I make sure I don't go through this again?' These lyrics exemplify what Moder describes as the damage and distancing of a survivor's relationship with God and the fear that the ones who are meant to care for and love us may abuse us or sanction our abuse.¹² However, the song goes on to describe the singer's route to healing in her declaration that 'confidence will be [her] best revenge'.¹³ Being able to identify with these lyrics helps build my confidence in my own creative practice. Similarly to how Christians can be instilled with the confidence to be Christlike by the faith that they are made in the image of God, representation of women in music gives me the confidence to engage with extreme metal culture and express my own stories.

During lockdown, in the absence of being able to play live, GGGOLDDD released demo versions and unreleased tracks; an invaluable glimpse into their creative process.¹⁴ Seeing this was like seeing inside the sketchbook of an artist whose finished paintings I had greatly admired and seemed impossible for me to achieve. It guided the way for me to construct similar artistic expressions and have faith in my own

¹² Moder, 234.

¹³ GGGOLDDD, "Notes on How to Trust", from *This Shame Should Not Be Mine*, <https://gggolddd.bandcamp.com/track/notes-on-how-to-trust>.

¹⁴ GGGOLDDD, *The Bedroom Sessions* (self-released, 2021), <https://gggolddd.bandcamp.com/album/the-bedroom-sessions> and *The Isolation Sessions* (self-released, 2021), <https://gggolddd.bandcamp.com/album/the-isolation-sessions>.

Faith, creative practice and facing injustice in counter-cultural music

ability to produce work that can deal with and challenge injustices, whether personal or societal. My song “Faithless” addresses this in the form of a warning about the dangers of misplaced faith:

Lost my faith in your agency
Tried for salvation
But you left yourself behind
Responsibility of two
Appears in shades of blue

Enough believing in you
Thoughts that shaped my days
Fractured consciousness
Now feels whole.

The central motivation to my own creative practice is to pass this feeling of empowerment on to others. Seeing myself in someone else’s lyrics helps me relate my own creativity to other people on their own journeys in life and imagine myself in new ways. In this sense extreme metal culture provides a sense of community that the church was unable to give me. This could be said to be similar to how Weil left behind the possibilities that bourgeois life offered in order to relate to people in need and explore other possibilities in an attempt to make a difference in the world. The artists that inspire me remind me of my own worth and empower me to pursue my own creative goals. I hope in turn that my lyrics will help others think in new ways about injustice and about what they can become.