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The Second Lives of Norwegian Black Metal

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Since its first moments of relatively widespread visibility in the 1990s, black metal has become one of the most artistically fruitful styles within extreme metal, as well as one of the most contested. Its emergence into wider public consciousness was occasioned by a rash of serious crimes committed by black metal musicians and fans in Norway in the early 1990s, including a number of arson attacks against historic churches and several murders. These events, coupled with the genre's penchant for neo-fascist political extremism, provided a wealth of lurid material for tabloid journalists, cultural critics, and eventually academics. Although Norway was undoubtedly the crucible in which the black metal aesthetic was forged, the intervening decades have seen it spread across the globe, with some bands finding significant commercial success. The broader musical style itself has also become more eclectic, although many bands continue to devotedly adhere to a narrower and more rigid definition of the style. However, one aspect that has remained constant within black metal's existence as a musical practice is the foregrounding of geographic location and local cultures within both the music and the bands' visual presentation. Although black metal's aesthetic is tied to the Nordic regions in some respects, this notion has inspired bands around the globe to this day. This chapter focuses particularly on black metal as it is currently being cultivated in the Mountain West in the United States, where the musical and ideological conventions of Norwegian black metal are recontextualised into forms that honour this new location while still retaining key points of Norwegian black metal's aesthetic and worldview.

Up North

Black metal's self-actualisation as a coherent musical genre depended on a fairly insular circle of young Norwegian musicians in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who self-consciously determined to chart a path away from the increasing professionalism in underground metal production

and musicianship. Instead, the members of bands like Mayhem, Darkthrone and Immortal preferred the rougher-sounding recordings and relatively simplistic music of 1980s bands like Venom, Bathory and Celtic Frost. Although these earlier bands predated the codification of 'black metal' as a musical style and genre, they have been adopted into its history as founders. In general, the musical style is less formally complex than death metal, prizing relentlessness and atmosphere instead of rhythmic dynamism and guitar pyrotechnics. The guitar parts frequently employ tremolo-picking, a technique that involves non-stop rhythmic subdivision, while the harmonies typically change at a much slower pace. Black metal guitarists also regularly employ full triads (usually in minor) in addition to power chords, creating a much denser sound. Drummers in black metal bands also make extensive use of 'blast beats', which involves intense rhythmic subdivision akin to tremolo picking, resulting in an unrelenting torrent of sound without much sense of groove. Black metal musicians and fans tend to value DIY production aesthetics; low-fidelity or otherwise unorthodox recording qualities are typically interpreted as markers of authenticity rather than incompetence. Although in some ways this conception of black metal was riven with the sorts of rigidities that often plague retro-minded musical endeavours, it also opened the field for new conceptions of black metal in more cinematic, symphonic and avant-garde modes.¹ However, all of these developments ran alongside Norwegian black metal's brief history as a vector of borderline-terroristic criminality, which necessarily colours its legacy.

This side of black metal's history also makes it difficult to strike a balance between dutifully rehashing the genre's violent history or essentially pushing it under the rug. Although this chapter mostly concerns later developments in black metal, it is important to acknowledge that the genre's global popularity rests at least partly on the graves of Per 'Dead' Ohlin, Øystein 'Euronymous' Aarseth and Magne Andreasson. Ohlin was the singer for Mayhem from 1988 until his suicide in 1991, which Aarseth subsequently used as a way to promote the band's evil image. Aarseth himself was murdered in 1992 by Varg Vikernes, sole musician of the band Burzum and session bassist for Mayhem. Vikernes and Aarseth, along with other black metallers, had also been involved in a number of arson attacks against Norwegian churches, most infamously burning the Fantoft stave church near Bergen. Magne Andreasson was stabbed to death in 1992 by Bård 'Faust' Eithun, who was then the drummer of Emperor, after propositioning him in a park. With a few exceptions, overt criminality of this sort has been a rarity in black metal in the decades since, but this violent introduction also provided a uniquely powerful kind of publicity and notoriety.

After all, there are very few musical genres with an origin story that would be right at home on a true-crime podcast.

In the intervening decades, black metal became a relatively normalised presence within the Norwegian music industry, in marked contrast to its earlier pariah status. Black metal musicians are regularly nominated for music industry awards and sometimes receive commendations from government institutions. To take one recent example, Darkthrone's 1992 album *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* was included by the National Library of Norway in an exhibition featuring 'significant pieces of Norwegian cultural history', taking a place alongside objects like handwritten scores by the composer Edvard Grieg and a manuscript of *Magnus Lagabøtes landslov*, a thirteenth-century book of comprehensive national legislation. The Norwegian popular music museum Rockheim has an entire room dedicated to black metal, and the Norwegian government also subsidises international tours by black metal musicians through Music Norway, a programme funded by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although black metal is far from the only style of popular music to become respectable after initially being considered disreputable and dangerous, it is nonetheless striking that it has been so embraced by official cultural institutions in Norway.

Yet the official promotion of black metal as a distinctly 'Norwegian' style of music also makes a certain amount of sense, given many of the musicians' intense investment in their own Norwegian-ness. Their black metal lyrics and album covers are full of rugged Norwegian landscapes, wolves, trolls, figures from Norse mythology, and Vikings, mirroring many of the touchstones of nineteenth-century 'national romantic' artists, writers and composers, who shaped conceptions of Norwegian national identity during its drive for independence from Sweden. Although many Norwegians certainly found black metal music and musicians off-putting at best, its brand of nationalistic sentiment involves many familiar themes, particularly its focus on Norway's spectacular landscapes. Similarly, and unfortunately, the xenophobia and racism sometimes found in black metal are also regular features of Norway's political discourse, although they are generally expressed in more polite terms.² In any case, black metal relied on these existing discourses of Norwegian-ness, often intensifying them in the process, which also gave black metallers a foundation for their reputation and aesthetic that did not necessarily rely on criminal activity.

As a result, black metal's appeal beyond Scandinavia has often relied on conjuring an exotic, dangerous and magical North for international listeners, many of whom likely have few other points of contact with Norwegian

culture. This exoticised fantasy remains important even for the vast majority of listeners, who understand that Norway is not actually populated with bloodthirsty wolves and savage Vikings. The Nordic environment even infiltrated the discourse of black metal musicians, as particular types of guitar riffs and recording aesthetics are regularly described by black metalers as 'cold' or 'frosty', sometimes in a playful manner but often also with complete seriousness.³

A 2017 episode of the Norwegian talk show *Tryggekantoret* provides a few illuminating moments demonstrating how these exoticised conceptions of black metal have resonated abroad. In this particular episode, the program's host Thomas Seltzer (himself a musician in the rock band Turbonegro) joins the Norwegian black metal band Mayhem on a tour through Latin America, including stops in Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Mexico. The episode focuses mostly on Mayhem's bassist, Jørn 'Necrobutcher' Stubberud, who was a childhood friend of Seltzer. While the episode does make some jokes at the expense of these fans, including one who confidently states that 70 per cent of people in Norway are metalheads, some of them also seem well aware of the fantasy aspect. When Seltzer asks some Salvadoran fans what they think Stubberud's house looks like, one man enthusiastically replies that he probably lives in a cave with candles. Seltzer riffs on the idea by suggesting that Stubberud probably also wears a cape and plays a pipe organ, to much laughter. Metal is not always these fans' only interest in Norway either, as another Salvadoran fan notes that he enjoys the works of Henrik Ibsen and finds parallels between the play *An Enemy of the People* and the country of El Salvador. The people at Music Norway and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would likely be pleased.⁴

The *Tryggekantoret* episode also highlights how difficult it can still be for Norwegian black metal to escape the violence of its past, particularly for bands like Mayhem, who were directly affected by it. At one point, Seltzer notes that some fans treat Mayhem concerts like a travelling crime scene, tied inextricably to the violent deaths of Per Ohlin and Øystein Aarseth. For his part, Stubberud seems to have resigned himself to the fact that his international musical career necessarily involves bootleggers selling unauthorised t-shirts featuring pictures of his long-deceased bandmates. These include a particularly grisly photograph of Per Ohlin's corpse (taken by Aarseth when he discovered the body) that wound up on a live bootleg released by a label in Colombia.⁵

However, black metal has also evolved in various ways beyond Scandinavia, even as many black metal musicians continually return to its initial stylistic well. Along these lines, it is possible to speak of a 'late' black metal style or

constellation of styles, following Dominic Fox's conception of 'late' or 'belated' black metal that turns towards introspection, and in which the genre is defined by aesthetics instead of actions. Even though the earlier violence becomes mythologised and even hallowed, there is no desire to return to it.⁶ The music of 'late' black metal musicians, particularly those from outside Scandinavia, has further potential to be reflective and self-aware since the genre's history may not hang over them in the way it does the genre's progenitors. To be sure, many black metal bands around the world continue to adhere to the original musical aesthetic, with stylistic mimicry becoming almost like a cycle of tribute and renewal. As with genre fiction and cinema, the repetition of familiar materials with only slight alterations is a significant and lasting part of the appeal. Yet black metal has also proved to be quite elastic, allowing it to reflect the cultures and concerns of fans and musicians around the world and to foster individual and idiosyncratic musical explorations.

Black Metal in the Mountain West

One of the hallmarks of black metal music globally is that the musicians regularly foreground their geographic location and specific local cultures and histories in their lyrics, visual themes and musical style, no matter where in the world they are from. The Norwegian bands provided a model of sorts, and their interactions with mythology and folklore, languages and local dialects, historical events, landscapes and traditional rural ways of living proved to be quite adaptable for use in a variety of new circumstances. Some black metal bands go so far as to include traditional instruments as a part of their ensemble, a kind of fusion that is often categorised separately as 'folk metal'. The intentions behind the bands' interests in local culture vary from place to place. In some instances, the emphasis on local culture has an undercurrent of chauvinistic xenophobia, but it can also signal resistance to commercial and political forces of globalisation or support for indigenous communities.

Black metal's fascination with and even reverence for locality and associated customs and cultural memories also frequently intersects with modern neopagan and animist religions, in which physical environments are imbued with sacredness as opposed to locating the sacred in an unreachable heavenly realm.⁷ This reification of nature is at least partly an echo of nineteenth-century Romanticism, itself a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, but the assertion of local identities in black metal often also involves conjuring visions of a (mostly imagined) pre-Christian past. Black

metal's customary antipathy towards Christianity then often invokes its suppression of ancient local customs in addition to the acrimonious history between mainstream Christianity and rock music more generally. Specific attributes of the local landscape and its flora and fauna also figure heavily in these traditions. In the United States, however, this abiding interest in local identity and cultural memory necessarily involves more recent concerns, as seen in examples of black metal from the Mountain West region, particularly the Colorado band Wayfarer.⁸

Black metal is a relatively recent arrival to the music scenes in this region. Although American black metal bands existed in the 1990s, they were few in number and generally toiled in extreme obscurity, with the possible exception of the California band Von, whose 1991 demo cassette *Satanic Blood* became legendary in the tape-trading underground (due in part to the fact that it was so hard to find). It was not until the latter half of the 1990s that a dedicated, black metal scene began to coalesce in the San Francisco Bay Area, revolving around the eclectic record stores Aquarius Records and Amoeba Records, and the record label tUMULt, run by Aquarius Records owner Andee Connors. This scene cultivated an initial crop of American black metal bands like Weakling, Leviathan, Xasthur and Ludicra, all of which departed from the Scandinavian model in various ways. Lyrically and thematically, many of these American bands had little interest in the Satanic, Nordic or mythological conceits of their European forebears, writing instead on 'real-life' topics like alienation, mental distress, philosophical despair, self-harm and suicide.⁹ Most also tended to eschew the elaborate theatricality, costumes and stage names common in European black metal, at least in part because many of the musicians first cut their teeth in DIY punk scenes.¹⁰

In the wake of the San Francisco scene, a small coterie of younger black metal bands formed in the Pacific Northwest. The Portland band Agalloch, in particular, crafted a musical aesthetic that revolved around long and drawn-out songs and influences from post-rock bands and art-house cinema. Their lyrics often continued to mine the wilderness themes of Scandinavian bands, with a thread of Romantic-era melancholy that finds solace, refuge and healing in the wilds.¹¹ Other 'Cascadian' black metal bands like Wolves in the Throne Room and Fauna underscored this wilderness aesthetic with references to animist spiritualities and shamanism. Wolves in the Throne Room often explicitly connect their music with their local forests, such as when the drummer Aaron Weaver describes synesthetically hearing an orange-red 'vibrational frequency' during recording, which he connects with the colour of decomposing

cedar stumps and a feeling of literal 'rootedness' within the forest.¹² The California band Botanist, notable also for relying on a distorted hammered dulcimer rather than guitars, invokes similar themes along a quasi-Lovecraftian path, tracing a concept across multiple albums involving semi-sentient plants reclaiming the earth from humanity.¹³ A number of philosophers, theorists and other scholars have also made connections between black metal and deep ecology, an anti-anthropocentric current of thought that posits revoking any special moral consideration for humanity (as opposed to more traditional environmentalism) and disavowing the philosophical divide between human and non-human.¹⁴ But painting black metal's love of natural environments as idyllically pastoral is too simplistic; the distorted, frenzied and irrevocably industrialised modern music also speaks to feelings of alienation from nature and the impossibilities of utopian idealism.¹⁵

Given that Cascadian bands' geo-musicological focus often resembles that of Scandinavian black metal, it is worth noting that the landscapes of Scandinavia and the Pacific Northwest can be quite similar. Both regions are renowned for spectacularly rugged wildernesses full of forbidding mountains and misty forests. John Haughm of Agalloch has mentioned that the evocations of Northwestern forests and landscapes in their album artwork were initially interpreted by fans as an attempt to mimic European black metal bands, which, to be fair, seems like a reasonable first impression.¹⁶ Their artwork may not be a direct copy, but it is clearly a variation on the theme. However, in both cases, these landscapes are also conceived as largely devoid of human civilisation and cultivation, with survival requiring rugged self-sufficiency and an individualistic, even misanthropic, temperament. However, this Edenic conception of the American West as 'virgin wilderness' conceals the fact that the region was purposefully emptied of its original American Indian inhabitants through government campaigns of genocidal settler colonialism. Indeed, this kind of rhetoric has been a crucial part of those campaigns, as land cannot be considered to have been stolen if nobody was living there.¹⁷

Wayfarer and Cowboy Mythology

While the Cascadian bands tend to focus more broadly on ecology and environment, the Colorado band Wayfarer explores this more specific regional history of colonial exploitation and national myth-making. These themes run through their recorded output, particularly the albums *Old*

Souls (2016), *World's Blood* (2018) and *A Romance with Violence* (2020), and are evident in their album art, lyrics and musical styles.

The artwork on these three albums engages with this history in varied ways. The cover for *Old Souls*, by the Las Vegas artist Adam Gersh, is a sepia-toned black-and-white lithograph of a mountainous landscape featuring a figure emerging from the lower corner pointing at the distant mountains. He has a pair of feathers tied around his bicep, and instead of a head, there are two branches growing from his neck, forming a wooden frame for the web of a dreamcatcher. The dreamcatcher also features a profile of a mountain range within its design. Feathers figure heavily in American Indian design and religious symbolism, as well as serving as cultural markers of honour and bravery. The dreamcatcher likewise is a protective charm with connections to the mythological Spider Grandmother, a benevolent Earth goddess who figures in numerous traditions across American Indian cultures.¹⁸ Gersh's artwork for posters and merchandise for Wayfarer and their Fire in the Mountains festivals typically involve similar iconography. Given that feathers and dreamcatchers are regularly appropriated by non-Natives in fashion and home décor, it is perhaps worth noting that none of the members of Wayfarer nor Mr Gersh claim indigenous heritage to my knowledge, or, at least if they do, it is not part of their public artistic presentation. Since their use of these symbols is fairly non-specific and highlights their connection to Native cultures rather than divorcing them from their context, they perhaps sidestep potential concerns over cultural appropriation, although opinions might vary. Wayfarer's last two album covers are derived from historical photography. Their 2018 album *World's Blood* uses the photo *The Scout in Winter, Crow* (1908) by Edward S. Curtis (Figure 16.1), a photographer and ethnologist whose work focused on American Indians. Curtis produced a massive and valuable corpus of arresting and haunting photographs, along with other accounts of American Indian life in the early twentieth century, even though his work definitely fed into the narrative of American Indians as a vanishing people. Finally, the cover art for *A Romance with Violence* uses the photo *Temporary and Permanent Bridges and Citadel Rock, Green River, Wyoming* (1868) by the railroad photographer Andrew J. Russell. The photo features a steam locomotive on a raised trackbed, with the butte Citadel Rock in the background. On Wayfarer's cover, the original is given a dark red tint, with gold filigree patterns in the corners.

The artwork also reflects the broader lyrical content of these albums. *World's Blood* (2018) conjures visions of a haunted landscape in which ghostly riders meld with thunderstorms, while the closing track, 'A Nation of Immigrants', explicitly channels the violence and death of



Figure 16.1 The Scout in Winter, Crow (1908) by Edward S. Curtis. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Edward S. Curtis Collection [LC-USZ62-1206] (© Edward S. Curtis)

the West's subjugation and exploitation. *A Romance with Violence* (2020) shifts the perspective to the settlers and, in particular, a lone gunslinger figure, the Crimson Rider, murderously paving the way for the railroad's Iron Horse. The final tracks on the album, 'Masquerade of the Gunslingers' and 'Vaudeville', invoke the way in which historical

violence becomes the stuff of entertainment, thus obscuring its brutality. With a little squinting, it is possible to see parallels between these American colonisation narratives and Nordic black metallers' obsessions with pre-Christian Nordic cultures and religious practices. Indeed, some Nordic black metallers regularly depict the region's conversion to Christianity as a colonisation. The analogy is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, however, since Native communities continue to suffer real deprivation and marginalisation in the Americas while the Norwegian metallers sometimes seemed to be searching for a form of 'grievance authenticity'. But both cases propose a drastic re-evaluation of their regions' respective national mythologies.

Wayfarer's musical references to the American West are somewhat more elusive, as they often rely heavily on lyrical themes and visual presentation rather than obvious 'Western' musical tropes. The general musical style across their albums is heavily indebted to the Cascadian models of Agalloch and Wolves in the Throne Room in their mixture of intense black metal sections, meditative 'post-rock' excursions and instrumental interludes. Yet there are points of reference with musical traditions associated with the American West, although tracing them requires a trek through the worlds of mid-twentieth-century film music and the Rocky Mountains' alternative country music scene.

The music of the American West has a tangled history, including musical pieces that evoke the West (like Aaron Copland's 1942 ballet *Rodeo*) and the songs and scores of Hollywood Westerns. There's little doubt that current conceptions of the 'Wild West' were profoundly influenced by television and film in the mid-twentieth century, particularly concerning the much-mythologised cowboy or outlaw figure.¹⁹ The films of the actor John Wayne, whose cowboy characters were typically taciturn loners uncomfortable with regular society, were particularly influential. Wayne's run of successful Westerns and war epics made him an enduring American icon, who embodied for many a certain strain of ruggedly individualistic and politically conservative masculinity.²⁰ Beyond Wayne, the American cowboy embodied a mythic and heroic stereotype standing in for closeness to nature, freedom of movement, and nationalistic sentiment while also operating as a law unto himself, dispensing violent individual justice as he sees fit.²¹ Further, the view of history promoted by classic Westerns provided rationales for America's expansionist foreign policy in the 1950s while also promoting American exceptionalism, white superiority and male dominance.²² The allure of these films has also clearly not faded in the intervening generations and continues to be regularly called upon by politicians and other public figures.

While *A Romance with Violence* (2020) explores this mythology in its lyrics, the music itself also employs several references to cinematic music, particularly the short introductory track ‘The Curtain Pulls Back’. This piece functions as a prelude for the album while also providing a sonic *mise en scène*, somewhat akin to a radio drama. Such tracks are a common inclusion on black metal albums, often involving sounds of medieval battle, wolves, whooshing wind, and sometimes choral or instrumental music in a more ‘classical’ mode. However, the convention is put to slightly different use on *A Romance with Violence* because its title suggests an audience watching a theatrical performance, rather than a literal setting. This framing implies a sense of distance from the subject, like a metaphorical proscenium arch. The track is produced to sound like it is being played from an antique phonograph, beginning with a few seconds of vinyl noise, transporting the listener to the past by invoking the sonic materiality of old records. The main instrument is a slightly out-of-tune piano, which conjures not only the stereotypical saloon pianist but also the piano accompaniment often found on releases of silent movies. The final seconds before the band enters on the next track include a few record ‘skips’, again highlighting the imagined phonograph while also implying fragility, malfunction, and possibly a measure of artifice.

‘The Curtain Pulls Back’ also subtly interfaces with music used to depict American Indians across generations in American films and other media. Its main musical theme begins with a short descending motif on the scale degrees 1 – $\flat 7$ – 5, invoking the minor pentatonic mode, along with a prominently dissonant tritone later in the theme. Descending minor pentatonic motifs like this one, along with increased dissonances, were regular tropes employed by twentieth-century film composers for scenes involving American Indians, almost always accompanied by tom drums played in a four-beat ‘THUMP-thump-thump-thump’ rhythm. The title sequence of the 1948 John Wayne movie *Fort Apache* portrays this music’s function clearly. Cowboys, cavalymen and other white characters are accompanied by peppy, patriotic-sounding music, but whenever a group of Natives are onscreen, the music shifts to a minor-key descending melody with blaring horns, high trilling strings that seem to invoke war whoops, and the requisite thumping drums.²³ It creates a marked contrast and clearly identifies the Natives as the film’s villains (even though at this point they are just trotting leisurely across the prairie on horseback). While ‘The Curtain Pulls Back’ is only played by a piano trio, its minor pentatonic theme bears more than a passing resemblance to these earlier film music tropes, and its main motif is also nearly identical to the beginning of the controversial ‘tomahawk chant’ sung by fans

of the Atlanta Braves baseball team.²⁴ It is unclear if this was an intentional choice by Wayfarer, but it certainly aligns with the album's concern with how colonial violence gets repackaged as entertainment.

However, other 'Western' musical touchstones employed by Wayfarer in the album reference a more complicated conception of the West with roots in Italian composer Ennio Morricone's iconic scores for Italian 'spaghetti westerns' like *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). These films featured distinctive twangy, jangling electric guitars that quickly became a new musical signifier for a much bleaker and more ambiguous vision of life in the West. This side of Western film music also became a key sound for 'alt-country' or 'Americana' bands beginning in the 1990s, with Denver, CO, in particular hosting notables like 16 Horsepower, Wovenhand, Slim Cessna's Auto Club and Jay Munly. Their music often employs guitar sounds reminiscent of Morricone's scores, with lots of twangy baritone guitars and spring reverb, along with various mixtures of traditional country music and alternative rock. As opposed to the anodyne country-pop music from Nashville, these bands often inflected their songs with sombre tales of religious apocalypticism, mental illness, violence and gothic weirdness. Such country influences are less overt in Wayfarer's music, but their softer and more meditative moments feature guitar licks and flourishes reminiscent of country styles. For example, the beginning half of 'Vaudeville' from *A Romance with Violence* (2020) features minor-key acoustic slide guitar licks and handclaps that would fit neatly in an alt-country context.

Wayfarer are also not the only American black metallers to take an interest in traditional American folk music styles like bluegrass, blues and country and to utilise it to reflect on local histories. Probably the most well-known American black metal band to explore what might be called 'Americana' black metal is Panopticon, a one-man project by multi-instrumentalist Austin Lunn. His 2012 album *Kentucky* famously mixed black metal with traditional Appalachian folk music, archival recordings and strike songs like Pete Seeger's 'Which Side Are You On' (1940) to portray the history of labour and environmental exploitation related to mining in the Appalachian Mountains. Lunn continued this artistic trajectory on *The Scars of Man on the Once Nameless Wilderness* (2018), which includes several songs in the style of Appalachian folk music. As with bands in the Western region of the country, Lunn's music unearths hidden and suppressed regional histories that have left deep and enduring psychological and ecological scars that continue to echo in the present.²⁵ Also, beginning in 2014, the Swiss-American musician Manuel Gagneux began experimenting with combining black metal with African-American spirituals, Delta blues and work songs in his band Zeal and

Ardor. Thematically, his music mixes occult religiosity with poignant references to racist violence and murder, both historical and contemporary.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that several American black metal bands with indigenous members are also writing music exploring Native identities and history, notably Nechochwen from West Virginia, Pan-Amerikan Native Front from Illinois, and Yaotl Mictlan from Salt Lake City. Nechochwen are a duo whose music calls to mind the expansive songs of Opeth and Agalloch, with extensive classical guitar sections, and deals primarily with the histories of Eastern tribes such as the Shawnee and Seneca.²⁶ Their song 'He Ya Ho Na' from the album *OtO* (2012) also includes a brief interlude featuring sung vocables, non-lexical (but not meaningless) syllables that are used extensively across many Native music traditions.²⁷ Pan-Amerikan Native Front play fairly traditional black metal with a low-fidelity aesthetic, but with album art and lyrical themes referencing the history of Native warfare against colonial expansion. Yaotl Mictlan are focused more on pre-Christian Mexican and Mesoamerican cultures, and their music employs a number of traditional instruments and indigenous chants. But as Nechochwen's eponymous songwriter has noted, this kind of specificity honours the fact that the history of indigenous cultures in the Americas is entirely too vast and diverse to be reduced to any generalised representation.²⁸

Conclusion

These specific invocations of the troubled past of the American frontier and the 'Wild West' also fulfil a fundamental role common across metal music of all stripes. Metal music often aims to transport the listener to other places and to imagine other lives, whether based in reality or not. Whether taking cues from fantasy literature, science fiction, biker subcultures, ancient mythology or historical events, metal has always been fascinated with evoking 'elsewhere'. Music often provides both a window into other time periods and cultures while also acting as a mirror reflecting one's own culture. These American black metal bands, however, attempt to briefly open a sliding door into perspectives on American history that have been deliberately neglected and suppressed. Panopticon unearth ongoing histories of class struggle and environmental destruction, while Nechochwen et al. use black metal to celebrate and explore their own Native heritage, in the process reminding listeners that they are not a conquered or vanished people.

However, an important aspect of this lingering myth of indigenous ‘disappearance’ is that American Indian cultures have also long been used by mainstream American culture as symbolic stand-ins representing closeness to nature, an echo of the Enlightenment-era ‘noble savage’. These notions turn up variously in the ceremonies of the Boy Scouts of America, off-road vehicles named after American Indian tribes, famous environmental advertisements, and the numerous new-age movements that have liberally borrowed from indigenous traditions. Given black metal’s general fascination with the natural world, pre-Christian traditions and romanticised pasts, it would perhaps be unsurprising to find non-Native black metal musicians unconsciously reproducing these tropes. In the case of Wayfarer’s albums, though, there is thankfully a deliberate anti-romanticism at work that mitigates against such trite (and premature) eulogies, pulling back the curtain on the way the American West’s founding mythologies have been carefully curated in order to appear appropriately heroic, just and innocent.

Notes

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20. See Gary Wills, *John Wayne's America* (Simon & Schuster, 1997).
21. Marshall W. Fishwick, 'The Cowboy: America's Contribution to the World's Mythology', *Western Folklore* 11/2 (1952): 77–92; Tristram P. Coffin, 'The Cowboy and Mythology', *Western Folklore* 12/4 (1953): 290–3.
22. Stanley Corkin, 'Cowboys and Free Markets: Post-WWII Westerns and U.S. Hegemony', *Cinema Journal* 39/3 (2000): 66–91.
23. Hollywood composers of the time regularly used music with similar qualities as a shorthand for 'savages' of all ethnicities, as in Max Steiner's score for *King Kong* (1933). The music in *Fort Apache* and other Westerns also predictably bears little resemblance to actual American Indian music.
24. There is a long history of American sports teams whose names reference Native tribes and cultures, including slurs like 'redskin', along with stereotyped caricatures as mascots. Some of them have been changed in recent years, but significant resistance remains in other cases.
25. Olivia Lucas, 'Kentucky: Sound, Environment, History: Black Metal and Appalachian Coal Culture', in Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki (eds.), *Modern Heavy Metal: Markets, Practices and Cultures* (Aalto University Press, 2015), pp. 555–63.

26. Matt Solis, 'The Serpent Tradition: An Interview with Nechochwen', *Decibel* (15 October 2015). www.decibelmagazine.com/2015/10/15/the-serpent-tradition-an-interview-with-nechochwen (accessed 20 August 2021).
27. Charlotte J. Frisbie, 'Vocables in Navajo Ceremonial Music', *Ethnomusicology* 24/3 (1980): 347–92; David P. McAllester, 'New Perspectives in Native American Music', *Perspectives of New Music* 20/1–2 (1981): 433–46.
28. Solis, 'The Serpent Tradition'.