

6-30-2016

# Heavy South: Identity, Performance, and Heavy Music in the Southern Metal Scene

Michael A. Mcdowell

*University of South Florida*, [mamcdowell@mail.usf.edu](mailto:mamcdowell@mail.usf.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

---

## Scholar Commons Citation

Mcdowell, Michael A., "Heavy South: Identity, Performance, and Heavy Music in the Southern Metal Scene" (2016). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.

<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/6319>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

Heavy South: Identity, Performance, and Heavy Music in the Southern Metal Scene

by

Michael A. McDowell II

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Andrew Berish, Ph.D.  
Maria Cizmic, Ph.D.  
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
June 20, 2016

Keywords: American South, popular music, scene, American Studies

Copyright © 2016, Michael A. McDowell II

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “Break it Down for Me” What is Southern Metal?	11
Southern Metal as Extreme Metal	18
Why Southern Metal?	23
Chapter Two: “You got the South and you got everybody else” The “narrating class” and Southern Metal	27
<i>NOLA</i> , Trauma, and Bearing Witness to the South’s “Heavy Blues”	42
Chapter Three: “Good Lord the South is Blind” The Blues, Southern Gothic, and the Performances of Southern Identity in Down’s “Eyes of the South”	54
Southern Metal and the Sound of the (Heavy) South	58
Conclusion	65
Bibliography	73

## Abstract

The Southern Metal scene depends heavily on the performance of a Southern Identity. While considerable research has been done on other musical genres and scenes from the American South (country music, blues, gospel music), less attention has been given to the extreme metal scene of Southern Metal. Using scholarship of Nadine Hubbs, Philip Auslander, Jefferey C. Alexander, and Keith Kahn Harris, among others, I analyze two films, *Slow Southern Steel* (2010) and *NOLA: Life, Death, and Heavy Blues from the Bayou* (2014), and one song, Down's "Eyes of the South" as cultural productions of this Southern Metal scene. In this project, I define the musical elements and scene ethos of Southern Metal as they relate to a wider, more mainstream American audience and describe how these identities and cultural forms are produced, negotiated, and embodied.

## Introduction

“Why is this so heavy?” my friend and longtime drummer asked as he and I watched *NOLA: Life, Death, and Heavy Blues from the Bayou* (2014) late one night after going to a punk show in downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. The documentary begins with the ambient, menacing, distorted feedback of Southern Metal band Eyehategod’s guitars from the song “Flags and Cities Bound.” The music serves as a backdrop to images of New Orleans as they are displayed on screen, creating a montage set to the musical dissonance. “TOURIST SHAME ON YOU,” reads one sign in the film’s montage, “DRIVING [sic] By Without Stopping, PAYING TO SEE MY PAIN, 1,600 DIED HERE” the sign concludes. As Eyehategod’s music fades, the film’s title is displayed, followed by Pantera’s hit song “I’m Broken.” This song’s bluesy riff garners my friend’s attention to its heaviness, and the documentary demonstrates its heavy prowess as it displays the lives and musical outputs of New Orleans’ heavy metal music.

My initial curiosity in Southern Metal stems from pure fascination. Prior to viewing *NOLA* and a subsequent documentary on the genre *Slow Southern Steel* (2010), I had never heard of Southern Metal, nor did I think of the South as a place with a particularly strong and notable metal scene. After viewing the films and speaking with friends who were more familiar with metal scenes, however, I was surprised to learn that the South is a hotbed of metal music. What became striking to me is how much those in the Southern Metal scene refer to their sense of place when asked about the music. And yet, to the typical fan of popular music, the South tends to be more synonymous with country, Americana, and the blues.

In both *NOLA* and *Slow Southern Steel*, the viewer is given an opportunity to engage with the music and the musicians in a more in-depth way than the tourists mentioned on the opening sign. Instead of driving by, ignoring the city's pain, the viewer is made a witness to this pain, as a part of a performed identity of Southern Metal music.

Southern Metal music is an outgrowth of Black Sabbath-influenced metal, Black Flag-influenced hardcore punk, Lynyrd Skynyrd-influenced Southern rock, and Melvins-influenced "sludge." I came to this project, not as a fan of the music, but as somebody who studies music and the South. I grew up participating in a more prototypical punk rock scene, but began noticing and studying Southern Metal as I began my master's program at USF. I became interested in the music from a scholarly standpoint because the musicians and the fans of the music participate in a performed identity that is one part Southern, one part white working class, one part punk, and one part metal.

The adaptation of these identities is entrenched in meaning and ethos; this music is so heavy, if you were to ask any musicians from the scene, because the musicians in the scene make explicit decisions to play louder, slower, and with a more deliberate rhythmic sensibility. I became interested in this musical scene, not just for the music produced by the members of the scene, but for exploring how these identities get performed (by musicians and fans alike), how this scene represents itself, how others view the scene, and how these documentary films portray the scene.

In Geoff Stahl's essay "It's Like Canada Reduced': Setting the Scene in Montreal," included in *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (edited by Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris), Stahl identifies a "spatial turn" in the study of music and music-

making that “has meant that a different interpretative schema for the study of musical practice has come to the fore, one that revolves around the more theoretically compelling notion of scene” (Stahl 51). This paper aims to be in the same conversation that Stahl identifies in that it uses influences from place theory and concepts of locality to analyze this particular music-making and music consuming culture. The word “scene,” therefore, will be used throughout to discuss the subjects of this paper and their cultural productions. The American South is a physical place on a map where musicians and fans of music live, but the understanding of this musical scene places more emphasis on the *concept* of the South and the *performance* of Southern-ness and how these concepts and performances are negotiated within a scene, rather than one’s physical position south of the Mason-Dixon line.

By focusing on a musical scene that stems from the South and performs a kind of Southern identity, this project fills a void in discussions on Southern identity and music. While much attention has been paid to music traditionally associated with the South — gospel, blues, country, and folk music — there is a noticeable lack of scholarship on Southern metal or rock music. This project will attempt to add to the discussion on performed Southern identities, notably those of white, working class musicians, who have, until recently, gone unstudied in their performance of this rock scene.

The songs performed by the musicians, with lyrical themes laden with references to self-destructive drug use, deep depressions, and feeling rejected by a hegemonic society, reference feelings of trauma. To better understand the formation of a cultural identity through traumatic events, I draw on theories of cultural trauma described by scholar Jeffrey Alexander.

“Experiencing trauma,” writes Alexander, “can be understood as a sociological process that

defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and the material consequences” (Alexander 26). Hurricane Katrina caused members of the Southern Metal scene significant pain, and post-Katrina, many of the artists focused their anxieties and depressions on the effects of the storm on the community. The storm displaced many of the musicians, many of whom members of the working class, but prior to the storm, the frequent deaths and suicides prevalent in the scene necessitate the integration of Alexander’s scholarship to adequately analyze these texts.

By approaching this musical scene and the texts produced by them and about them through the lenses of place, Southern identity, and trauma studies, with insight from performance studies, I will analyze how identities are constructed and performed in this contemporary music scene. These theoretical approaches will allow me to see how ideas of class, race, gender, and place manifest in the music and how these manifestations become embodied in a performed Southern identity. The stylistic decisions made by members within the Southern Metal scene expose an elaborate and nuanced network of values that become performed to varying degrees in the music, in the lyrics of the songs, and in the audience reception of and participation in this Southern cultural form. The Southern identity is complex and nuanced: Southerners are often cast as the racist or the bigot in public discourse. Furthermore, Southerners are often imagined as country music fans with little interest in other types of music. By exploring the Southern Metal scene, I argue that these stereotypes are not only untrue, but serve as a way for a hegemonic narrative to displace its own guilt about race, class, and gender onto an already oppressed group in the poor, white Southerner.

The musicians and participants in this music culture are constantly aware of a traumatic cultural history, one made contemporary by the destruction and government failures after Hurricane Katrina . The song's lyrics, and the subjects in the documentaries, frequently describe moments of pain and depression, often linked to an upbringing in New Orleans and in the South more generally, making trauma an intrinsic part of the identity of the Southern Metal musician.

This project aims to be equal parts musicology and Southern Studies. Much of the musicological work I'm doing about performed identities, music, and place could be done about any musical scene and any place. What makes this project important is its roots in the scholarly and popular discussion about the South, and more importantly, about whiteness and the South. Given the political and social divides that have culminated throughout the first two decades of the twenty first century, this project is not only an important contribution to conceptualizations about the South, but it is also an attempt to understand many of the performances of a white Southern identity that many simply disregard as "trashy" or "racist." The white, poor South has, once again, become a culture under critical examination in popular and scholarly texts. These debates about the South, consequently, spill over into the discussion of Southern Metal.

In early 2015, Dimebag Darrell Abbott's gravesite was vandalized - the homophobic slur "FAG" etched into the late guitarist's tombstone. The culprits - members of another metal band Nuclear Hellfrost - admitted to the vandalism, but justified their actions in a classed way that invokes a typical popular joke about the South; a joke where the South becomes the recipient of the hegemony's homophobic tendencies in the name of racially-motivated justice. The band justified vandalizing the gravesite because they "HATE [sic] pantera...with a passion. and so does the rest of my band ... we spit on his grave, stole a pair of cowboy boots, and i wrote 'FAG'

on his grave... in [sic] not a homophobe but ... FUCK DIMEBAG, buncha racist hillbillies” (Young). This act of vandalism makes explicit the publicly held disdain for Southern identities and, more specifically, the Southern Metal scene. Southerners cannot be Southerners without agitating the sensibilities of other Americans from outside the South, an adversarial relationship that Nadine Hubbs identifies as rooted in middle class attacks on the white working class.

Hubbs’ *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music* provides a theoretical point of departure that has proven to be a useful framework for this project. Hubbs’ analysis of country music uses conceptualizations of gender and class to critique the American middle class: those who claim to listen to “anything but country.” Hubbs establishes the framework of her critique in her analysis of a Foo Fighter’s video for the song “Keep It Clean (Hot Buns)”:

While this parody was performed across from a homophobic group of white Christians from Topeka, metropolitan media professionals — members of what I call the narrating class — rendered it a triumph of Good, progressive middle-class whites over Bad, bigoted working class whites. A familiar association was thus confirmed, between the provincial white working class and homophobia. Common knowledge holds that this group, often known as rednecks, has long been a prime source — if not the source — of American’s homophobic problem. (Hubbs 2)

In the same way that the Foo Fighters’ music video, an “ironic” display of rockers dressed up like rednecks performing homoerotic acts, critiques homophobia by using a homophobic joke, the vandals at Dimebag Darrell’s gravesite use a homophobic slur to critique the homophobia and racism that they feel is inherent to the Southern Metal guitarist’s identity.

While country music, according to Hubbs, uses working class and rural imagery to invoke distaste among those in the middle- and upper-classes, Southern Metal uses extreme imagery of the South (the Confederate Battle Flag, camouflage, and an embrace of words like “hillbilly” and “redneck” in song titles), and allows its appropriation of styles of metal, rock, and the blues to amplify the *sounds* of the South. Southern Metal’s blatant display of its Southernness functions in the same way that country music’s rural and working class stylistic choices function. These styles of music with an overlapping regional origins and target demographics work to disrupt the hegemonic narrative by allowing the previously unvoiced to attain their voice. Instead of allowing the words “hillbilly” or “redneck” to define them from the outside, those in the Southern Metal scene embrace these pejoratives and use them as a way to define themselves against those who construct their narrative.

I have adopted Philip Auslander’s use of the term *persona* as a theoretical framework for understanding the performance of Southern identity. Auslander’s use of the term describes performers in popular music developing a three-layered persona: “the real person (the performer as a human being), the performance persona (the performer’s self-presentation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text)” (Auslander 4). Auslander’s idea of “persona” will be used throughout the project to understand Southern Metal’s performed identities, and will be used to help analyze the character developed in “Eyes of the South” in Chapter Three of this project. Auslander’s framework defines the creation of Southern Identities and allows for nuance: members are allowed into the scene in their creation of one or more layers of their persona. A musician or fan could have been born in Canada, but they are allowed into the scene by adapting the persona of somebody in the Southern Metal scene. This distinction is important because it

removes the focus from that of an “authentic” Southern-ness, and instead recognizes that these identities are performed, both consciously and unconsciously, as a reaction to and as an embrace of what others have defined as “Southern.”

This oversimplification of the Southern identity as it pertains to Southern Metal is not without some justification, however. In early 2016, a video surfaced of singer Phil Anselmo raising his hand in a way that references Nazi Germany, yelling the phrase “white power” to a crowd of fans after the band’s set. Anselmo claims that the video captured the butt of an ongoing inside joke between the singer and a selection of fans in the front row of the venue. Even if we are to believe Anselmo’s account of the events, given the recent flaring up of race and regional relations between the South and every other region in America, his actions become a barrier of entry for any non-Southerners to try and see the South as anything but perpetually racist. This project is not an attempt to excuse the actions of those who make blatant attempts to flare up race relations and subjugate people of color any further, but rather, this project is an attempt to close the gap between the South and the non-South and between the white and the non-white.

In an extreme style of music like heavy metal, a part of the ethos is to be offensive both musically and in the imagery produced by the bands. In the case of Southern Metal, symbols of Southern identity appear, often ironically, as a way to disrupt the sensibilities of those not in the South. This distinction must be made, as I do not wish for any portion of this paper to be used in the defense of an action that purposefully demeans another person for the sake of racism. Once again, there is a possibility that in Anselmo’s case, none of us “got” the joke and the punchline was too buried for our untrained eyes to perceive, and if that is the case, I will simply address that instance as a joke in bad taste.

Given the complexity of the topic and the need for an interdisciplinary approach to Southern identity, I have decided to analyze two documentary films and one example of a Southern Metal song by the band Down. The methodological framework of this project is organized in a way that mimics an inverted pyramid in its focus. To begin, I attempt to define the object — Southern Metal as a scene, but also as a scene that borrows from many musical genres and shared musical histories. As the project becomes more focused, I analyze the Southern Metal scene as the subjects of films, and finally the last chapter will focus on the lived experience of the South for Southern Metal musicians as it is told through one of their songs, tightening the focus from the object, to the subject, and finally through the performance of the self.

In Chapter One, I trace the history of the Southern identity as it manifests in rock music. I define the scene both musically and in its social practices; the musical scene has roots in Southern Rock music, soul, the blues, and country music, while also balancing its working class and middle class sensibilities.

In Chapter Two, I analyze two films, *Slow Southern Steel* (2010) and *NOLA: Life, Death, and Heavy Blues from the Bayou* (2014). The first film, directed by a participant in the Southern Metal scene, attempts to give the Southern Metal musicians a chance to explain themselves on film, while the latter film produced by Vice media provides an outlet for outsiders to gaze into the scene. While *Slow Southern Steel* seems to have a more transparent narrative function, Vice's documentary allows the viewer to engage more personally with the members of the scene. These two films complement each other in their varying narrative forms and in their formal relationships with their subject, allowing for a well-rounded viewing of the scene.

In Chapter Three, I analyze the song “Eyes of the South” by Southern Metal band Down. The close reading of this song allows for the members of the Southern Metal scene to speak for themselves. I specifically found a live video recording of a performance of this song to show how these musicians speak for themselves to members of their scene at a live concert.

The complex relationship between the South and the non-South, the relationship maintained with the members of the Southern Metal scene, the relationship of the varying musical styles that help develop the Southern Metal sound, and the relationship those in the Southern Metal scene reveal a complex narrative that requires interdisciplinary approaches to this musical scene.

Chapter One: “Break it Down For Me” - What is Southern Metal?

*“What do you know about Southern Metal?”*

*“I don’t [know] anything”*

*“Man — ...”*

*“I say, break it down for me”*

*“Well Southern Metal, man, is like, the essence of Southern Metal, man, it’s like — heavy as fuckin’ shit.”*

*- Slow Southern Steel*

Southern Metal is not typically labeled as a musical genre; many of the bands are labeled sludge metal, stoner metal, and groove metal, among others, depending on which musical priorities they perform on a given song and, once again, these priorities in musical style can change from song to song. Southern Metal is used in this paper by way of *Slow Southern Steel*, which identifies this musical scene by its shared culturally performed identity, and not necessarily a complete and comprehensive adherence to a musical style. Southern Metal, therefore, is a musical scene that transcends genre. There are musical elements that audiences and musicians “hear” as Southern, but strict adherence to a musical genre is not as important as the construction of a Southern identity within the Southern Metal scene.

A straightforward musicological approach to this scene would suggest a thorough analysis of the music and sounds that compose a musical *genre*, while a purely cultural studies approach would analyze the musical *scene*. Southern Metal is a performed identity within a scene that produces music that transcends the boundaries of genre. An understanding of genre<sup>1</sup> will be used to describe the sounds produced by those within the scene, but the purpose of this project is to analyze the performative identity of the Southerner and the stakes that necessitate the creation of a Southern-sounding musical scene.

New Orleans is considered the nucleus of this heavy metal scene, but Southern Metal music is played by bands from throughout the region. As a part of a wider community of heavy metal musicians and fans, the scene is not confined to the areas South of the Mason-Dixon line; it is, after all, mass-mediated popular music, and although not “popular” in terms of record sales, it does engage in national and international distribution and touring practices like many other popular musics. These musicians draw upon cultural symbols, sounds, and aesthetics in an attempt to represent the South. While an analysis of this scene is not particularly concerned with a “fixed” nature of the South or Southern Identity, it is important to use previous analyses of subcultures to help understand this scene, as the Southern Metal scene’s fixation on place is rooted in traditional understandings of subcultures that tend to fix these cultures to a particular place and time. Southern Metal music is a cultural production and an identity performance that is

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a significant amount of material on the subject of genre and popular music and, more specifically, genre in heavy metal music. While this paper is more concerned with Southern Metal as a musical scene, and discusses some musical elements found within the scene in chapter three, the discussion of genre serves only to inform my understanding of genre and not to situate my discussion within the wider, musicological discussion of genre itself (Brackett; Holt; Middleton; Shuker; Waksman; Walser).

in conversation with, and a reaction against, a perceived hegemony that is mainstream American culture.

Given the blatant embrace of an American Southern identity, one that is popularly conceived of as abrasive and offensive, it is important to consider Dick Hebdige's discussion on style and subcultures:

Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority' which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. Our task becomes, like Barthes', to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as 'maps of meaning' which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal. (Hebdige 18)

Hebdige uses the term "subculture" to analyze style, but a blending of this use of the term subculture into a more contemporary understanding of scenes helps to understand hegemony and the subversive nature in which Southern Metal operates. A typical white, middle-class American ought to not want to identify as Southern (and embrace the blatantly Southern imagery that Southern Metal musicians use in their dress, album covers, and lyrics). Country music, for instance, embraces a rural ethos that has roots in the South, but forgoes Southern-ness for rural-ness. Attention must be given, then, to the conscious decisions made by those in the scene to embrace their Southern-ness. Those in the Southern Metal scene embrace a regionally-defined identity instead of a hegemonic national one. By rejecting the more national, mainstream

narrative, Southern Metal musicians reject normalized notions of what identity white Americans *ought* to perform: a middle-class, regionally-unbound identity.

While Hebdige describes style in the visual sense as it relates to the fashion and identity performances of individuals in a scene, the musical elements created by the musicians in the scene are equally important in creating the disruption. In the documentary films to be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, artists within the scene are asked to describe the music they create. In *Slow Southern Steel*, artists are given this opportunity during the title sequence to verbalize their understanding of their scene. “I think Southern Metal has more of a groove to it,” suggests one member of the Southern Metal scene, “it just has more soul, has more of a groove, we have more of a sway.” Another member suggests that “there’s something unique, inherent, about the Southern experience and you couple that with metal that creates, like, this sludge; Slayer with a swamp sickness in the South.”

The uniqueness of the South in musical style and in everyday experience—its claim to authenticity — is not in question in this study. What is under examination, however, is the *sense* that those in the scene understand themselves to be inherently tied to their region. The first musician interviewed in the film suggests musical vocabulary that he identifies as inherently Southern: groove, a “sway,” and soul. These terms hint at an appropriation of musical forms typically associated with black musicians in the South, with the term “soul” being the most significant. Soul music, while not exclusive to the South, had plenty of scenes in the urban, black South, with cities like Memphis, New Orleans, and Muscle Shoals, Alabama acting as hubs for this style of music.

In John Connell and Chris Gibson's chapter "National Identity, Ethnicity and Place" in *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*, they describe the use of musical elements like groove as a cultural practice of place-making throughout the black diaspora in the United States. They describe a history of an emphasis on blue notes and rhythmic components in black music from "race records" and soul to hip hop and reggae (Connell 137-42). This relationship with black music from the South has racial and classed understandings that will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but for the purpose of describing the sound of Southern Metal, the articulation of the use of soul elements can be understood as an appropriation of elements of black music, such as the use of blue notes and blues scales.

The "sway" described is a sense of "behind-the-beat" or looseness with the rhythm of the music. While many other styles of metal music prioritize virtuosic displays of musical precision in their guitar playing and drumming, Southern Metal musicians favor a looser treatment of the music's rhythm. This is not to say that the musicians cannot play with virtuosity (Pantera guitarist "Dimebag" Darrell Abbott was quite revered as an exceptional guitar player within and outside of the Southern Metal scene), but these members make a conscious decision to discard some of the aesthetic values of non-Southern metal music, and replace it with musical elements that better reflect what they understand to be Southern.

To understand an emphasis on speed in other metal scenes, consider Slayer's song "Raining Blood." Southern Metal is referred to early in *Slow Southern Steel* as "Slayer with a swamp sickness," and this "swamp sickness" slows Southern Metal down considerably. Some Southern Metal songs have moments of speed, but nowhere near the speed of Slayer's, with this song clocking in at about 240 beats per minute. To contrast this song with a popular Southern

Metal song, “Clean My Wounds” by seminal act Corrosion of Conformity is recorded at about 130 beats per minute. While 130 beats per minute is not necessarily slow by musical standards, it is considerably slower than Slayer’s music. Pantera’s “I’m Broken” is even slower at around 100 beats per minute. “It Took the Night to Believe” by drone/doom metal band Sunn O))), however, is an example of a utilization of a more atmospherically slow approach to heavy metal music. The song is set to approximately 100 beats per minute but the relative lack of syncopation, harmonic, or melodic movement throughout the song distinguishes it from Southern Metal’s slower, groove-based ethos.

The groove is another musical element that distinguishes this musical scene from other metal scenes. While many metal scenes value fast tempos (thrash, death metal, New Wave of British Heavy Metal), and others value an atmospherically slow pace (some scenes of black metal, drone metal, doom metal), Southern Metal prioritizes an attention to the “groove.” Southern Metal is commonly performed in a standard 4/4 time signature, but the vocals, guitar chords and riffs, bass guitar parts, and auxiliary components to the drum set play in rhythmic pattern that highlights the musical spaces between the beat. Other styles of extreme metal emphasize various musical aspects — death metal emphasizes speed and grunted, growling vocals, thrash also emphasizes speed and the virtuosity of guitarists, and black metal (like Southern Metal) uses slower tempos and abrasive imagery, but lacks a definitive groove that is present in Southern Metal. These other extreme metal genres and scenes overload the listener’s senses with loud, abrasive music, Southern Metal creates tension by providing rhythmic space between its notes that is emphasized by the drum set.

*NOLA: Life, Death, & Heavy Blues from the Bayou*, explores the development of the musical stylistic choices incorporated into Southern Metal. In the film produced by the pop music media company Noisey, the filmmakers document the growth of the scene and interject these observations with narratives from musicians, fans, and the interviewers themselves. The seven-part series is largely focused on Phil Anselmo, the lead vocalist for many Southern Metal bands, including Pantera, Down, and Superjoint Ritual. While the viewer spends quite a bit of time with Anselmo, the film meanders through other members associated with the scene to complement many of Anselmo's narratives. Kirk Windstein, a guitarist who is a member of Down and Crowbar, describes the style of the scene in *NOLA*:

It's like, all of the bands have something in common, a lot in common. But not all of them sound like each other, it's weird. I don't know how to explain it, I guess because so many guys have played together in so many bands and known each other for so many years, to me it's a very original sound. It runs the whole spectrum of heavy music, from doom and stoner to grind and blast beats. There's no rules [sic], it's just be original. You know, it's kinda what the whole idea was in the beginning anyway. For Jimmy [Bower, drummer and guitarist for many of the Southern Metal bands] and I it was just, kinda, we wanted something different. Everybody was playing thrash at the time. We loved it, but we also went back and started discovering other ways to be heavier. And to me, like, that's just my opinion, slower is heavier.

Windstein's description articulates two crucial components of Southern Metal's musical style. The first is that, while these musicians share quite a bit in musical priorities, the scene is not

homogenous in which musical elements they prioritize and, quite often, this variation in musical priority can change within a band's own work, sometimes on the same album.<sup>2</sup>

### **Southern Metal as Extreme Metal**

The desire to be different, both from other metal bands from outside of the scene and from other members in the scene, allows the viewer to accept any musical variation while still categorizing the members in the same "scene." The preference for some type of recognizably Southern musical style is important, but the sense of belonging to a shared performance of Southern identity is perhaps the most crucial component in tying the scene together. Keith Kahn-Harris's introduction to his book *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* provides a historiographical outlook on the studies of, and aspects that have been overlooked in, the discussion of extreme metal scenes. Kahn-Harris's introduction describes thrash, death, and black metal as extreme scenes, and I would argue that both the musical and social, performative components of Southern Metal put this scene in the "extreme" category, not as a part of the three previously explored forms of extreme metal, but as another category altogether.

In *NOLA*, traditional Southern musical styles are identified as significant influences on the Southern Metal musical style, but Washington State sludge band The Melvins is considered to be the biggest heavy music influence. Pepper Keenan, guitarist and vocalist in many Southern Metal bands, suggests that he brought a Melvins tape to Jimmy Bower, and this action became the catalyst that would most influence Southern Metal and "kinda change everything." "Formed

---

<sup>2</sup> Down's debut album *NOLA* is a quintessential example of this variance. "Temptation's Wings" is a prototypical Southern Metal song, "Stone the Crow" has more elements associated with classic Southern Rock, and "Pray for the Locust" is an acoustic instrumental song.

in 1982 in the Pacific Northwest,” a narrator explains over a montage of images of the Melvins, “The Melvins are Buzz Osborne and Dale Crover . . . They took the sounds of Black Sabbath and side-b of Black Flag’s *My War* to create an entirely new genre, sludge metal.” This sampling of styles from various genres of heavy music and Southern music demonstrates the complexity of the scene in a mass mediated society. The musicians in the Southern Metal scene borrow from genres that are distinctly not Southern, but repurpose these genres to create a new, extreme form of Southern-ness within their own scene.

Southern Metal’s musical lineage is, on one hand, deeply rooted in what is traditionally thought to be Southern music, and on the other, greatly influenced by music that originates in locales that are geographically and ideologically quite non-Southern. The three bands mentioned in this narration, The Melvins, Black Sabbath, and Black Flag, were formed in Washington State, Birmingham, England, and Orange County, California, respectively. This paradoxical musical relationship, using music from the rural South and from heavy music from urban, non-Southern places comes across as pure appropriation when isolating the use of these musical styles, but reinforces Kahn-Harris’ and other scholars’ description of a scene in a post-subculture understanding of the term:

So what is the extreme metal scene? A ‘map’ of the extreme metal scene overlaps considerably with mappings of the genre of extreme metal, but is not confined to it. The extreme metal scene is a global music scene that contains local scenes within it. It also contains other scenes based on the production and consumption of particular forms of extreme metal genres, such as black metal and death metal. However, the considerable musical and institutional overlap between these scenes allows us to talk about the

extreme metal scene as a totality ... The extreme metal scene also relates in complicated ways to other music scenes ... hardcore punk has been important in the development of extreme metal. There is considerable overlap between the harder elements of punk and some elements of extreme metal. (Kahn-Harris 22-3)

Southern Metal participates in its construction in ways that are similar to its other extreme metal counterparts, but what makes the Southern Metal scene interesting is how it uses its Southern-ness as a way to construct its extreme-ness.

The glue that binds these styles together, is Southern Metal's position as a scene within the wider history of rock music and, more specifically, within the scene of Southern Rock:

Southern rock bands of the 1970s were a cultural formation that displayed racially and politically progressive views in the post-civil rights South through the cultural form of Southern rock music. Southern rock bands, such as The Allman Brothers Band, and Lynyrd Skynyrd, responded to the political and social changes in the South brought forth by the civil rights movement by reconciling pride for Southern heritage with progressive racial views through their music. The Southern rock era was essentially between the years of 1969 ... until 1977, when a tragic airplane crash took the lives of members of Lynyrd Skynyrd ... . (Keith ii)

Southern Rock's history of (at least making an attempt at) reconciling the atrocities of Southern history with a more racially progressive mindset is what allows the previous musical styles to be performed and perceived as a part of a distinctly Southern identity. Southern Rock's blatant Southern-ness, with rebel flags and kitsch performances of "redneck" identities has always been at odds with its appeal to the progressive, white middle class and this tension has been discussed

to a degree<sup>3</sup>, but Southern Rock's relationship with the victims of a Jim Crow South is made explicit in the verses of perhaps the most well-known Southern Rock song, Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama."<sup>4</sup>

Skynyrd famously asserts that white Southern musicians are equally a part of soul, and that the musicians have been desegregated long before legal desegregation. The most striking line, "[t]hey pick me up when I'm feelin' blue, now how about you?" is suggesting that the members of Lynyrd Skynyrd (and, by extension, fans of Skynyrd who relate to the song's message) have been apart of and understand soul and the blues, and these Southerners are asking their non-Southern listeners and critics if they can claim a similar solidarity with the makers of black music. Furthermore, the lyrics in "Sweet Home Alabama" suggests Southern musicians, white and black, have a shared musical heritage that transcends the racial turmoil that engulfs the South.

This relief of tensions, like so many other aspects of the South and the region's relationship with race, is not without its exceptions and caveats. In the final chorus of "Sweet Home Alabama," the lyrics "where the skies are so blue" is followed by the lyrics "... and the Governor's true." This change to the final chorus seems to fly in the face of the message of the song's previous lyrics, but this last remark is the epitome of the tension in the Southern identity. This lyric is suggesting that, although the people of the South do not enjoy how their politicians

---

<sup>3</sup> "'Luther King Was a Good Ole Boy': The Southern Rock Movement and White Male Identity in the Post-Civil Rights South" by Mike Butler in *Popular Music and Society* provides an analysis of this tension.

<sup>4</sup> The song's impact on Southern identity has been discussed to great extent both scholarly and popularly, with Mark Kemp's *Dixie Lullaby: a story of music, race, and new beginnings in a new South* and Bruce J. Schulman's discussion in his "The Rise of the Sunbelt and the 'Reddening' of America" chapter in *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* being the most prominent influences in my own discussion (Schulman 102-3).

treat their black friends, they do enjoy George Wallace's way of pissing off the non-Southerners, much in the same way that many of Southern Rock *and* Southern Metal's stylistic choices are performed in a way that is meant to piss off a non-Southern listener. This sense of agency — to be Southern and not agree with the South's politicians — puts the Southern Metal scene in direct conversation with Skynyrd.

Southern Metal, therefore, reconciles its relationship with black music from the South by its situation as the successor to, and more extreme form of, Southern Rock. Southern Metal is a cultural hybrid that borrows musical and stylistic ethos from metal, punk, black music from the South, and Southern Rock. The stylistic decisions made by members within the Southern Metal scene expose an elaborate and nuanced network of values that become performed to varying degrees in the music, in the lyrics of the songs, and in the audience reception of and participation in this Southern cultural form.

The films discussed in this paper address the performance of a Southern identity in various ways. *NOLA*, as the title suggests, focuses on the scene in the city of New Orleans while *Slow Southern Steel* expands the scope a bit to focus on the scene in other locales throughout the South. Both films navigate what it means to be Southern, and what is at stake for the performers of this Southern identity. Issues of race, class, and trauma are important to the performers and, thus, are made important to the viewer of the films. These issues are often problematized and dealt with within the films, but the heritage of the Southern identity as that of an obscene, grotesque, and maligned regional culture manifests in various ways through the songs performed by the bands.

## Why Southern Metal?

Earlier I argued for Southern Metal's inclusion into the wider discussion of extreme metal scenes, as described by Kahn-Harris. In their 2011 paper "Grim Up North: Northern England, Northern Europe, and Black Metal," Lucas, Deeks, and Spracklen discuss another musical scene that is highly offensive to the hegemonic narrative, and closely associated with its locale in Northern Europe, Black Metal:

Within the last 15 years, there has been an increasing popularity amongst metal acts of various types in the use of native heritage, history and mythology as a source of inspiration for lyrical topics, pseudonyms, and artwork ... The perception of an individual actively expressing pride in the heritage of their country or enacting the rituals of national symbolic performance garners a wide range of reactions in differing situations, from countries where such esteem is an integral part of society, to those where attachments to right-wing extremism are perceived to be only a small step away. (Lucas *et al* 287)

This description of nationalism in Black Metal could just as easily be a description of regionalism in Southern Metal. The members of the Southern Metal scene create a style that reacts to and against the perceived hegemonic mainstream. The active participation in the South's past and myth-making allows entry into the scene, excluding non-Southerners and barring from entry those who may want to participate in the scene.

This power of exclusion and inclusion is exercised in a phenomenon that Keith Kahn-Harris calls "subcultural capital." Kahn-Harris writes:

... subcultural capital is accrued in the extreme metal scene by constructing and performing various forms of discourse and identity. Subcultural capital is both endowed by other scene members in the form of prestige and power and claimed by scene members for themselves in the ways they perform their identities. To possess subcultural capital, whether by claiming it for oneself or having it endowed by others, is to gain self-esteem and a rewarding experience of the scene. (Kahn-Harris 121)

The capital exchanged throughout the Southern Metal scene is a performance of an “authentic” Southern identity that is tied up in not only regional history, memory, and ethos, but also the ethos of extreme metal and that of the working class. In *Slow Southern Steel*, Hank Williams III appears as an interviewee. The grandson of Hank Williams and son of Hank Williams, Jr., he is by all measures an exception in the Southern Metal scene in that he is not a member of the working class. His validity as a member of the scene, however, is reaffirmed by his *persona* in that the characters he creates in his songs, and his self-presentation as a “redneck” with imagery that would offend those not from the South that gains Hank III entry into the scene, and allows him to exchange this subcultural capital as a sympathizer to this scene’s values.

The answer to the question of “why Southern Metal” is a layered one. The lack of attention given to Southern Metal from outside the scene (with *NOLA* being a notable exception) might suggest that there simply isn’t anything of note to be said about the scene by those on the outside. Given the scene members’ active attempt to agitate those outside of the scene, the relatively exclusive nature of being allowed to participate in the scene (throughout both films, the Southern Metal scene is referred to as a “family,” and sharing of many members between bands “incestuous,” indicating an almost uncomfortable familiarity and exclusivity), and the

tendency for those outside of the scene to react negatively towards members within the scene (such as the anecdote detailed in the Introduction to this paper), it seems that quite a bit is happening in the scene, but those who are outside of the scene have chosen to ignore it so long as the members of the scene do not disrupt the sensibilities of those outside of it.

This lack of acknowledgement of the Southern Metal scene by those on the outside of the scene, whether intentional or accidental, is tied up in the scene's position as a part of a Southern, white, working class identity. Since such little attention has been given to the Southern Metal scene, both scholarly and popular, my attention turns to the work done by Nadine Hubbs in *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music*. In this book, Hubbs asserts that a narrating class from outside of the South, including media members, artists, and academics, constantly constructs a South that is inherently bigoted, backward, distasteful, and deviant. Although Hubbs' argument is one entrenched in gender and queer theory, the classed backbone of her argument is most useful when analyzing Southern Metal:

However irrelevant the dominant culture's misreadings of country music may be as music criticism, they reverberate in broader dimensions, further discrediting an already discredited group and serving to justify its low status. In light of these mechanisms and stakes, I especially hope to stimulate dialogue on class cultures in relation to country music and other cultural forms — including other types of music, food, style, media, and more. (Hubbs 18)

In the spirit of expanding and continuing the conversation begun by Hubbs, this analysis of Southern Metal hopes to include a music scene that has gone relatively unnoticed into the conversation. As a different style of music produced by (mostly) white, working class people

from the South, Hubbs' analysis of country music is relevant enough to my analysis to use as a backbone, hopefully adding much-needed insight and analysis to the discussion of white, working-class, Southern identities. In the same way that many fans of popular music will claim to listen to "anything but Country," as Hubbs describes, it is quite common to hear of metal fans that will listen to "anything but Pantera," or any other Southern Metal band.

## Chapter Two: “You got the South and you got everybody else:” The “narrating class” and Southern Metal

As a dobro is mixed from *Slow Southern Steel's* soundtrack, from the foreground to its background, interviewees respond to questions about what it means to be Southern. “You got the South and you got everybody else,” proclaims Rocky Gray from the band Living Sacrifice, this value of being the other within the Southern Metal scene lends itself to the title of this chapter, but also introduce’s Mike Williams’ interview. “Cuz the South gets a lot of shit, ya know,” Williams exclaims with a skull and rebel flag draped behind him, “it’s like the one place, ya know, that you can still make fun of.” “Dixie” Dave Collins echoes this sentiment in the subsequent scene: “Ya know, why do we gotta get such a bad rap,” he exclaims as he wields a tall can of Pabst Blue Ribbon lager, “when something goes bad, it goes South. That’s bullshit.” Collins’ brief, semiotic understanding of the South as bad shows that the members of this scene are incredibly aware of the constant construction of the South as negative, and are actively creating an identity that rebels against and subverts this narrative as the deviant South. Collins’ understanding of this colloquial phrase as an attack on his regionality and identity reveal how this narrative is deeply entrenched in the language, and deeply felt by the Southerners.

Southern identity in Southern Metal is constantly constructed, performed, problematized, and given agency within the scene. Conceptualizations and ideals of what it means to be Southern are used not only by those in the South to define themselves, but also by those outside

the South to define an “other,” and to identify their own position and identity. The narrating class distinguishes itself from the South and the Southern “other” within the context of American regionalism and national identity. To be Southern is not to be un-American, but rather, to be an Other-American. While a reverent display of patriotism is stereotypically Southern, a crucial aspect of Southern identity, too, is a reverent disdain for the federal government and those from outside of the South.

The most prevailing example of this Othering, then, is the necessity to include “Southern” in the Southern Metal scene’s nomenclature, something that has, too, been done with Southern Rock. Hubbs’ assertion that a Southern, white, working-class identity is imagined by the dominant middle class as perpetually and inherently distasteful and bigoted reveals the necessity for this scene’s naming structure:

A study by the sociologist Bethany Bryson in the 1990s inverted the usual perspective on taste and social positions by focusing on the relations between musical *dislikes* and social class. She found that contemporary high-status, middle class Americans distinguished themselves not by cultural exclusiveness — for example, listening only to classical music ... but rather by cultivating broad, inclusive, often global musical knowledge and tastes. Their inclusiveness, however, had limits: these powerful individuals expressly excluded musical styles associated with the least-educated audiences, including heavy metal, gospel, and country. (Hubbs 3)

By adapting both a Southern identity and the musical stylings of heavy metal, those in the Southern Metal become *doubly* classed as a working-class scene.

The prevailing narrative of the South suggests that ideas and behaviors are inherently and naturally linked to the South. If one was to survey a room full of Americans and ask them to list attributes of the South and Southerners, items such as sweet tea, George Bush, NASCAR, football, rednecks, racism, *Gone with the Wind*, and country music are likely to surface in this conversation. This deeply-rooted collection of symbols and meanings, allows for a thorough examination in the discourse of what defines the South, who defines the South, what it means to be Southern, what it means for others to define the South, and what these definitions and distinctions do to Southerners.

This collection of symbols that have come to represent the South reinforce, through semiotics and stereotypes, an “everyday” and “natural” experience for the members of the Southern Metal scene. Kahn-Harris writes:

The concept of everyday life draws attention to the ways in which individuals, who may spend their lives moving within a plurality of contexts, may nonetheless experience these contexts as part of a seamless flow. The experience of the scene is not necessarily an exceptional experience and, therefore, cannot always be considered as separate from the experience of everyday life. At the very least, the experience of the extreme metal scene may affect the experience of everyday life outside the scene. (Kahn-Harris 55)

The members of the Southern Metal scene are told, by the narrating class, what it means to be a Southerner, and what it means to be apart of a heavy metal scene. Since this barrage of symbols is constantly pushed onto Southerners, they understand their own? performed identity to be one that is natural and inherent to the South and the working class and in response to this narrative.

This metal scene disrupts the dominant narrative, and thus becomes an extreme scene, in its proud embrace of both the Southern identity and that of the extreme metal identity.

This display of a Southern Metal identity is an embrace of the three aspects of the *persona*, but perhaps the only aspect of this identity that is a conscious performance is the extreme metal aspect of the identity. That is not to say that these identities are not a performance, but that the identity and persona of a member of the Southern Metal scene are so entrenched, both within the South and from outside of it, that this identity only appears to deviate from the “norm” for a Southerner in its extreme metal incarnation. That is, Southern-ness seems second nature to the performers of this aspect of the identity, but the extreme metal aspect is what allows the scene members to have agency over the construction of their identity and their scene’s narrative. By reclaiming the power in constructing their own narrative, members of the Southern Metal scene reveal the purpose and power behind their subversion; it is the narrating class that deems itself worthy of and responsible for the construction of the hegemonic narrative. By embracing the symbols that are created by and for the American South, but repurposing these the symbols in a proud, loud, extreme metal musical style, the members of the Southern Metal scene disrupt their given place in the classed hierarchy.

Queer readings like Hubbs’ work well because, in some ways, the white Southern identity is endowed with the same type of shame that has historically accompanied other marginalized identities. Obviously these identities are not a one-to-one correlation, but given the similarities in how these identities are, or have been, expected to be performed, it provides a working model to analyze the Southern identity in a way that, say, a racially-informed reading could not provide for. In the same way that a person who identifies as queer can repress their identity (by being

forced to remain “in the closet”), conforming to the ideal that the hegemony establishes as appropriate for their gender or sexual orientation, a Southerner can (and is often told that they should) put their Southern identity “in the closet” and choose to embrace a more “mainstream” identity performance.

It is harder to understand the South from a racial standpoint, considering racial oppression often occurs with visual stereotypes that are much harder to store in the proverbial closet. Obviously, the Southern identity and queerness do not share the same historical baggage, nor have they experienced the same types of systemic oppression. There are plenty of instances where Southerners have campaigned to oppress those with queer identities, but, as Hubbs points out, the narrating class has found a new acceptance of queer identities (one that historically occupied the same classed space that the working class Southerner occupied), a tolerance the narrating class has yet to find in the Southern identity.

Writing about the glam rock scene, scholar Philip Auslander writes “[g]lam rock’s central social innovation was to open a safe cultural space in which to experiment with versions of masculinity that clearly flouted social norms” (Auslander 228). In many ways, Southern Metal participates in this same type of subversion, but in an inverse way. Glam rock subverts the hegemonic narrative by altering its ideal of masculinity and identity performance; by embracing a queered notion of masculinity, this persona disrupts the “authentic” male performance and, thus, problematizes and deconstructs it. In the case of Southern Metal, the identity performed is exactly what the hegemonic narrative imagines it to be, but the subversion happens when the Southern Metal scene is allowed to speak for itself and embraces a performed identity that is “supposed” to be shameful. Once those in the Southern Metal scene can disrupt one narrative

created by the narrative class (the South as a shameful identity), it can succeed in problematizing, deconstructing, and eventually dissolving many of the other stereotypes and narratives created for the South.

“This documentary is on the American South,” *Slow Southern Steel*’s YouTube description suggests, “[m]ore specifically, the dirty, deep, sludge of the South. This [is a] commentary on the history of the South and how it has impacted the metal community ...” The filmmakers’ aim is to position their narrative as a description of the entire South and Southern experience by giving a detailed account of the South’s heavier, underground metal music scenes. The film is created by a member of the Southern Metal scene; this film in itself is a disruption of the narrative class’s desire to keep the Southerner in the position of the voiceless other<sup>5</sup>.

In the opening moments of *Slow Southern Steel*, Eyehategod singer Mike Williams poignantly identifies how deeply entrenched the disdain for a Southern, white identity is in contemporary American culture. The scene opens with a dobro guitar sliding on a bluesy vamp, with a montage of imagery that signals to the viewer that they are in the South: an abandoned gas station, a trickling, slow-moving stream, and a rusty vintage pickup truck are flashed in front of the viewer’s gaze. The rural, natural imagery of the South is juxtaposed with subsequent montages that show various bands from the scene performing at dingy, dark metal bars (often with a Southern state’s or Confederate flag draped somewhere in the image).

The South’s history of being a place where notoriously racist activity exists allows for this myth to perpetuate and remain relevant; it’s much easier to keep stereotypes alive if the stereotypes are of a people from an area that has a history of racism, slavery, and far-right

---

<sup>5</sup> James C. Cobb’s *Away Down South* argues that the South’s difference began as a byproduct of New England’s pride, one that has historical roots in the colonial era of American history.

conservatism. Even if the “real life” people from the South do not and did not participate in the dubious activities, their association with their home region, by default, sets them up to be recipients of the stereotypes and their negative results and connotations. John Shelton Reed calls these performed stereotypes “social types.” Reed describes these stereotypes as pervasive in both fiction and in reality. “The image,” writes Reed, “helps them organize and deal with the reality they encounter. It lets them sort people out and pigeonhole them ... And because it is a *shared* image, it helps people communicate with each other” (Reed 6). Reed suggests that these ideas about what it means to be Southern, what being Southern should look like, and what the ideal Southerner is becomes psychologically embedded in a person and culturally expected of the person. These performed identities, according to Reed, allow for a cultural, albeit mediated, communication of types and ideas between participants and each other and among participants from outside the social type.

Reed’s work attempts to catalogue and identify these types as they manifest in reality and in fiction. Reed defines three social types of common, Southern, white men: “the good old boy, the redneck, and the hillbilly” (34). Reed’s description of these three types of Southern men adds nuance to the performances of Southern identity. Not only are Southerners expected to exist outside of the realm of non-New England America, but they must also adhere to character types created for and mediated to them within their own social type. *Slow Southern Steel* casts the members of this scene as the redneck: their skulls, overuse of Confederate imagery, and other extreme aspects allow them to exist simultaneously in the realm of extreme metal and in the performance of the redneck.

Since *Slow Southern Steel* documents a musical scene that operates against both mainstream American identity and against certain aspects of mainstream Southern culture, the most fitting classification for the musicians in the film seems to be Reed's redneck type. "The redneck has an outlaw quality that the good old boy lacks," writes Reed, "although the distinction is not hard and fast ... social types are like that. But the redneck as a *type*, as distinct from the men who more or less inhabit it, is an undeniable villain ..." (38). The type of redneck as villain is embraced by those in *Slow Southern Steel* in many instances, but problematized and rejected in many other instances. What's important is not that the subjects of the film perform the ideal type exactly, but rather, that the subjects understand that this type exists and is expected of them. "The redneck's essential characteristic is *meanness*," writes Reed, "[t]he good old boy will certainly fight if he has to ... but the redneck fights because he wants to *hurt* somebody, often somebody helpless" (40). Not only does a member of the Southern Metal scene perform an already deviant Southern identity, but they often perform the worst variant of this identity: the redneck.

The "somebody helpless" in Reed's description is certainly understood to be the black Southerner, or any Southerner who is the subject of conservative oppression. Southern Metal musicians tend to reject this particular aspect of the redneck identity. "Everybody doing it is doing it because, they [sic], it's love," suggests Dixie Witch member Trinidad Leal, "it's not hate, it's love, man. As hard as these heavy rockers, some of 'em talkin' and shit, you know, it's love." Leal addresses both the stereotype and the rejection as a partial participation in the performance of the redneck stereotype. Leal acknowledges that some members of the community perform a portion of the redneck persona by "talk' shit," but the "meanness" that is used to harm

“somebody helpless,” is rejected. Instead of positioning themselves as villains, the members of the Southern Metal community adapt a character type that is more similar to an anti-hero than that of a true villain, they consciously embrace the outlaw aspect but not the villain aspect of the redneck identity.

The embrace of love as a motive instead of hate or meanness shows an intentional desire to reject a stereotype and assert their agency over an ideal that these musicians carry around in their heads. Mike Williams, again, addresses the issue of racism and discrimination in his interviews. “People in the South, it’s just, it’s like a whole other animal man,” Williams explains, “and it’s not like anybody’s prejudiced or anything like that. We’re just trying to live and just be. Just do this and just don’t fuck with me, ya know?” While Williams’ may be generalizing by suggesting that no members of the scene are racist or prejudiced, the film portrays the rejection of racism and prejudice as a means to accrue subcultural capital. The targets of Southern Metal’s aggression are not other oppressed minorities, but the narrative class that places the members of this scene in a similarly-oppressed situation.

The film continues this binary of what is and what isn’t part of Southern Metal culture (and thus the South as a whole), often engaging the topic by creating discussions of “in the South, x happens” or “living in the South doesn’t mean that somebody does y.” This creation of a binary is a conscious manipulation and articulation of the social type. The film defines its musician subjects as both a part of and an unwilling product of the South. This tension is resolved by the fact that musicians are a part of a culture that exists counter to mainstream, middle class white America. Although, as the film would argue, the aspects of their performed identities are inescapable and tied to the South, there is a level of agency: the musicians make a

choice to perform slower, with blues-influenced musical techniques instead of faster metal, the musicians reject many tropes associated with the South, some of the members choose not to identify with the South but are from the South, while others are not natives of the South but have been allowed into the community, among other instances of agency against the performance of a type.

*Slow Southern Steel* is (loosely) organized thematically. The film begins by defining the South, both physically and ideologically. Remarks like “must be all the sweet tea” are used often and without much questioning of their source and act to reinforce the symbols that have come to represent the South. This is employed, for instance, at the beginning of the film when it is suggested that one can be “born anywhere, but few are born in the South.” This rhetoric suggests a sort of fulfillment of destiny in performing this Southern identity. “Back asswards,” says Noah Ray, “and proud fuckin’ of it.” The embrace and use of the stereotype as shock value (the shock being that nobody *should* be proud to be backwards, but Ray is) functions as an explicit embrace of a performed identity.

At about two-thirds into the film’s narrative, the viewer is shown an off-center, worn metal-and-wood barn in a background, and a field of deep green, un-mowed grass in the fore. As the camera’s lens comes into focus, and music from the previous scene fades to silence, a young boy in blue jeans and a blue shirt carries the Confederate Battle Flag into view, and seemingly marches from the foreground to the background with the flag’s jarring red field juxtaposed against a cloudy, bright sky. Out of the silence, an electric slide guitar wails against the feedback of its own amplifier, creating a palpable tension for the viewer. A narrator’s voice breaks this

tension, his voice overcoming that of the electric slide guitar, his noticeable drawl reassuring the viewer of their safety while bearing witness to this jarring, albeit iconically Southern, imagery:

There's a stigma attached to Southern bands, especially when they travel outside the South. The same could be said for individual Southerners. For some reason, the effect is magnified when vans full of bearded, tattooed longhairs travel outside the invisible regional bounds. Some people assume we are illiterate, ignorant, and violent. Of course, this is usually not the case. In reality, there is a lot of racism in the South, and those who grow up here see it. But musicians are inevitably thinkers, and racism does not stand up to thought. Nevertheless, Southern musicians often feel the sting of judgment from those who do not understand the complexity of life here. Perhaps the most obvious symbol of this disconnect is the Confederate Flag, an image contaminated by years of pain and suffering. To some, it represents hatred and ignorance, but to others, mainly Southerners, it may simply be a reminder of home, a familiar image that many have seen since birth. In truth, it is a powerful image, one that has been used for evil and good. But if you see it worn or used by any musicians in this film, trust that it is done to reclaim a symbol stained by hate.

This reclaiming of a symbol that the film understands as problematic for the purposes of identity is, again, discussed by Eyehategod singer Mike Williams in a subsequent interview:

And not that I even support the flag, the rebel flag at all, but, 'cuz I've changed a lot of feelings about that in the past, ya know, twenty years but [sic]. I had one on the back of my jacket, when I first got off the Greyhound, ya know, in Manhattan, ya know. And the girl that met me there was like 'you better take that off right now. You can't walk around

with that up here.’ And I’m like ‘why?’ ... ‘Cuz, I’m not a racist, I never have been and I didn’t see how it was racist. A lot of people down here don’t see how the flag is racist ... And I don’t go around flyin’ it and stuff ... it’s more of just a sense, of like, who we are ... I know it means a lot of bad shit, ya know, and I don’t agree with any of that. The coolest one I ever seen [sic] ... it was just a camouflage green, so I was like ‘man, that’s cool cuz, like, there’s no blood on it’ ya know?

Williams’ attempt to reconcile the flag’s positive aspects (as outlined by the film’s narrator), while shedding its racist symbology is an attempt to reclaim agency over what it means to be Southern. The film admits to the problematic nature of the Confederate Flag, and in this case the Southern Metal scene is attacking both the non-Southern narrative about what it means to be Southern, and the South’s own narrative on what it means to be Southern. Williams and many others in the scene desire to reclaim the flag as a symbol of their own regional heritage, removing the symbol from the grasps of the more affluent whites in the South, and from the judgment of the non-Southerner.<sup>6</sup>

What is important about this film’s pivot to address the issue of the Confederate Flag is the fact that the film is speaking to the non-Southerner, or at the very least, a viewer from outside of the scene who does not know how this particular symbol functions within the scene. Informing an uninformed viewer has been the film’s goal throughout its narrative, but this motive is made most apparent during the scenes about the Confederate Flag. If the film assumed that the viewer was already apart of the scene, a lengthy explanation about the Confederate Flag

---

<sup>6</sup> Angie Maxwell’s *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority, and the Politics of Whiteness* offers a historical account of the development and historiography of whiteness in the South and its layers of regionalism and class-influenced conflict.

would be redundant, the viewer who is already apart of the scene would have the understanding of the symbol's meanings and associations within the scene's ethos.

The film itself is acting as a disrupting agent: by giving a voice to Southerners who are typically absent from the narrative-making process, it is directly subverting the narrating class's own medium and allowing the South's story to be told. By picking, perhaps, the most striking and controversial symbol of Southern identity, the film's aim is to capture the viewer's interest and invoke a strong reaction. Furthermore, the placement of this segment nearly two-thirds of the way through the film (the Confederate Flag has been displayed throughout the film until this point) reveals the reflexivity of this action: if the film was genuinely concerned about the non-Southern Metal viewer's sensitivity to the imagery, the film would have placed the disclaimer much earlier in the narrative. The film, instead, wanted the viewer to be allowed into the scene and to make the Southern others into Southern humans with their own narratives to tell. The film's goal is to use the narrating class's narrative power to subvert and redistribute power to the Southern Metal scene.

It is also suggested throughout the documentary that living in the South is a traumatic experience. "Musicians that have worked to create [Southern Metal]," the narrator says "often vent their frustrations, worries, pain, and torment. Many of these emotions are a direct result of the Southern Experience." The trauma associated with living in the South allows for the participants to become unified while still maintaining a level of individuality in the musical styles with the variance in heaviness, adaptation of punk ethos or metal ethos, acoustic or electric, etc., but it is all situated firmly within the Southern Metal community.

The film uses Hurricane Katrina as a symbol for this unity and of the trauma of what the film calls the Southern Experience. After Katrina, the Southern Metal scene in New Orleans became stronger and more unified. “Nothing tested, and ultimately reinforced the family bond,” suggests the narrator, “of the underground Southern Metal community than the chaos that began the morning of August 29th, 2005 ... New Orleans was hit particularly hard, and many of the bands there lost everything. It took some time to recover, but these same bands eventually demonstrated [that] nature’s worst couldn’t kill the music.”

The use of Hurricane Katrina as an embodiment of what “nature” can do to residents of the South is full of more nuanced meaning. As a symbol of trauma, the hurricane causes physical and emotional pain to the residents of New Orleans and the Southern Metal community. The Southern experience is, or so the filmmakers would like us to believe, inherently tied to trauma, pain, and torment. Hurricane Katrina becomes both a scapegoat and embodiment of the environment that allowed Southern Metal music to flourish to begin with. In the same way that Katrina brings pain and torment to the musicians, it also brings unity and solidarity. The Southern Metal scene forms community by sharing their pain and expressing their pain.

When using Katrina as a metaphor, it becomes easy to see why the Southern experience seems so natural that it reinforces the discourse on the South as different from the rest of America: it is true that hurricanes and other instances of traumatic natural disasters can happen anywhere else in the United States, but hurricanes of this magnitude and level of destruction tend to happen more in the South than in other parts of the country, at least in recent memory. This meteorological reinforcement of the discourse is paired with a politically-charged reinforcement: the lack of substantial federal help in the aftermath of Katrina made the hurricane a much more

traumatic experience than it needed to be. Although Washington, D.C. is geographically in the South, as the capital of America it is the city that perpetuates the political aspects of the hegemonic ideals that define *real* America from *other, deviant* America. Washington's (mis)treatment of Hurricane Katrina's victims is much more damning in retrospect; the capital seemingly forgot New Orleans after Katrina, but did not suffer the same blunders when the more recent, northern-based Hurricane Sandy happened. While the facts of the differences between the two storms could help explain why Katrina was significantly more traumatic than Sandy (if that is even the case in reality), the myth-making and the perception of the event as traumatic is a narrative inherent to the Southern experience.

The entire documentary attempts to participate in the discourse about the South while subsequently problematizing it: while the film agrees that there is something about the South, whenever it mentions something typically associated with the South, it problematizes that association. In this way, the film itself is a discussion on the discourse of what it means to be Southern. The historical trappings of what it means to be Southern cause certain behaviors to manifest in a seemingly "natural" way (such as playing slow, bluesy music or drinking sweet tea and bourbon), allowing the participants to suggest their association and identity with the South. The film does, however, problematize the stereotyping and "Othering" that often occurs in the creation of discourse: by interviewing "real" Southerners and showing the diversity in opinions and actions of the Southerners, the film dismantles the idealized Southerner and replaces him with an actual person with a performed identity.

These stereotypes become problematic when an entire region's people are expected to conform to these particular traits constructed by the narrating class. By eliminating the ideal,

deconstructing it, recognizing its existence, and demonstrating agency within the confines of an established social construction, *Slow Southern Steel* makes human and artistic what was once expected to be ideal, and goes to great lengths to explain how these triumphs and forms of class and regionally-influenced oppressions become imbedded in the scene, and manifest in ways that seem as natural as a hurricane.

### ***NOLA, Trauma, and Bearing Witness to the South’s “Heavy Blues.”***

*NOLA: Life, Death, & Heavy Blues From the Bayou* is another documentary film about Southern Metal, but this film focuses on the New Orleans metal scene more specifically. The film is produced by media company Noisey, a company founded in Montreal, and the film is directed by Fred Pessaro, parent company Vice’s Editor-in-Chief, and Jimmy Hubbard, a New York-based photographer and filmmaker.<sup>7</sup> This film follows many of the same musicians that *Slow Southern Steel* documented, and tells much of the same history that the former film told, but its notable difference is the film’s decision to focus only on the city of New Orleans, the lack of emphasis placed on the scene’s Southern-ness, and the attention given to the trauma felt within and described throughout the film about the Southern Metal scene.

This film is suitable for this study because, in a rare attempt by a media conglomerate from outside of the South to tell a nuanced story about the South and a metal scene from the South, the film notably removes any Southern imagery and replaces it with New Orleans imagery. This reveals and provides an amazing example of the aversion those in the narrating class have towards discussing the South and Southern identity with any nuance or agency given to their Southern film subjects. By focusing on New Orleans (a city that is well known for artistic

---

<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing, Pessaro’s information can be found at <http://noisey.vice.com/author/Fred-Pessaro>, while Hubbard’s can be found at <https://www.instagram.com/jimmyhubbard/>.

outputs by its black residents), the filmmakers attempt to place the Southern Metal scene in solidarity with other working class, often African-American, scenes from the city. The conflict in the film between those in the Southern metal scene and those from outside it, subsequently, evolves into a conflict that reads as “New Orleans against the rest of the nation” or sometimes even “rural against the rest of the nation,” but these binaries are superficial substitutions for those being denied a chance to speak: the American Southerner. In its avoidance of calling the scene blatantly Southern, however, and in situating the film’s setting in the urbanity of the city of New Orleans, the film inadvertently places the white, Southern Metal subjects within the realm of the poor black subjects that often occupy adjacent spaces within the city, creating a sense of solidarity among these two different cultures. The film accomplishes this displacement of the Southern Identity by replacing it with a culturally traumatic identity.

The narrative of the film functions as musical place-making; by associating the music made in the film with the city of New Orleans, the film attempts to legitimize this claim by introducing the “experts” on this topic—the musicians who helped to cultivate this particular musical scene (many of these musicians have already been mentioned in previous parts of this paper). The film ultimately serves a function of place- and identity-making, and the use of music in the film is crucial to this construction of place and identity. “We wanted to find out what gave these New Orleans bands such a unique take on what can be a very formulaic genre,” the narrator claims as he establishes the film’s mission statement nearly two minutes into the narrative, “[a]nd so we set out to this fabled and much troubled city to meet the people behind the songs.” *NOLA* stakes a claim that New Orleans is both a fabled and a troubled place, and asserts that to understand what gives New Orleans these traits, the filmmakers (and ultimately the viewer) must

travel to the place itself and interact with the participants in the New Orleans metal scene, establishing the methodology that legitimizes the film's narrative.

Positioning the film's musicians as inherently tied to the city itself contrasts with typical binaries that demarcate the "traditional" music from the "popular." "When Adorno and others railed against 'the culture industry' in the industrialized world," writes John Connell, "ethnomusicologists offered recordings of distant peoples, far removed from the recording industry, radio, corruption, or commercialization" (Connell 20). Connell continues to argue that this distinction of "traditional" against "popular" is a constructed one that relies on "fixity" and does not account for music's malleability over time and place (21). While the binary is helpful in that it does allow for examination and preservation of music that seems to be created outside the confines of the culture industry, the distinction is a rather arbitrary one. The positioning of a music that operates relatively within the confines of the culture industry, like that of New Orleans metal music, as inherently tied to being in the city, then, becomes legitimized when the distinction between the traditional and the popular is discarded. Furthermore, since the film aims to place its white subjects in a city with a history of traditional black music making, discarding the distinctions between the "traditional" and the "popular" serve the film's purpose. Connell writes about this phenomenon in rock music:

A common element of popular music literature, particularly evident in the discourse that surrounds 'rock' music, is a tendency to search for links between sites and sounds, for inspirations in nature and the built environment, which inadvertently build on early ethnomusicological traditions. Journalists and others have invariably asked musicians what it was like to record in a particular place, what influences their home town may

have had on their musical career and their songs, or how they feel about the ‘scene’ or ‘sound’ that they identified with . . . . (Connell 91)

Connell argues that this particular type of place-making in popular music is the result of a marketing effort “as the basis of particular commercial enterprises” (97). Connell argues that the nature of the sounds had, traditionally, been fluid and “not always successful,” but focused on the site of commercial production nonetheless (99).

Since many members of the Southern Metal scene control their own distribution and touring channels, Connell’s reading of how place is made in popular rock forms can be seen as a way that those in the Southern Metal scene demonstrate and reassert their power. Since they have been left out of the wider popular music narrative, and since they choose to embrace a Southern identity that disrupts the perceived hegemonic narrative, they successfully find a way to side-step the commercialized place-making process and, instead, allow themselves to participate in their own place-making.

The film opens to the dissonant feedback over a straight-ahead rock drumbeat, performed by the band Eyehategod. The viewer is shown the courtyard of a New Orleans church, a “Voodoo Spiritual and Cultural Center,” an American flag that oversees a graveyard, a bayou, a shipyard, and shotgun homes destroyed by (what is later explained as) destruction from Hurricane Katrina. The music fades to introduce the title: “NOLA.” The feedback abruptly ends, and the count-off to Pantera’s song “I’m Broken” blares through the speakers as the narrative aspect of the film begins. Although Pantera is from Dallas and not New Orleans, the film suggests that lead singer Phil Anselmo’s move to Dallas to join Pantera, and his subsequent introduction of the New Orleans sound into the band’s established sound, is what catapulted the band to become a well-

known metal act. Anselmo, the film suggests, brings New Orleans' "broken" sound and influences the Dallas band's sound. The film uses Phil Anselmo's retelling of the events as an expert account of how the New Orleans sound "traveled" to Dallas, but fails to account for (as *Slow Southern Steel* had) the shared Southern identity that would make Anselmo's addition to Pantera fit into the band's sound.

"I'm Broken" serves as the theme song for the city and the musicians in the film, and allows the viewer to understand that this music scene is tied to a traumatic mindset. By including the blues in the film's title, the film positions this musical form as an ideological successor to the blues. This inclusion of the blues serves the function of placing metal music within the same tradition as a style of music that is already tied to the city of New Orleans. "I'm Broken" could just as easily be the title for a New Orleans blues song as it is for a New Orleans metal song. This ties not only the musicians to a previous era of New Orleans blues musicians, but it also allows these musicians to become the inheritors of the emotionality of the blues.

If somber, broken feelings are inherently linked to this type of metal, and metal music is inherently tied to New Orleans, which is also renowned for its blues music that is associated with cultural trauma and somber, broken feelings, the film establishes this musical style's legitimacy as a part of New Orleans' musical lineage. "Cultural trauma," writes Jeffrey C. Alexander, "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness ... changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 6). This also situates the emotions as being inherently *from* New Orleans, playing upon the same invocation of the natural that *Slow Southern Steel* relies upon: if musicians separated by time can perform music with

similar emotionality about the same traumatic place, then New Orleans (and, subsequently the South) must be the source of these emotions.

The ties to the blues do not end at emotionality and song title: the musicians in the New Orleans metal scene, while choosing to forgo the traditional twelve-bar blues pattern, embrace the major and minor pentatonic scales. While the songs performed in the documentary obviously feature a considerable amount of distortion and heavier vocal stylings, the blues's musical influences cannot be ignored. This relationship may be indirect—many of the musicians featured in the film cite metal and punk bands as influences—the musicians that influenced this scene were undoubtedly influenced by the blues.

At two minutes and twelve seconds into *NOLA*, and as a reoccurring scene throughout the film, the viewer is shown Phil Anselmo's home and his practice space. There, the viewer sees the writing and performance of a Southern Metal song. The viewer is given non-diegetic music throughout the film, and the break in this practice occurs only when the viewer is in Anselmo's practice space or when the viewer is shown footage of a live performance of a song (this live performance footage almost never seems to be professionally shot and is almost always from a single camera, probably fan-produced shot, furthering the claim to authenticity and a punk and metal rejection of artificiality).

When this narrative technique is first introduced, the viewer cannot be sure where the source of the music is from: the music up to this point has been diegetic, but the volume is considerably lower, the drums are at the forefront of the mix, a dog is heard barking, and the camera moves to show various aspects of Anselmo's front yard and practice space. The sound quality is considerably worse once the viewer is allowed to enter the practice space, the drums

clip the filmmakers' microphone and the sound lacks the overall clarity that has become standard even by this early point in the film's narrative. The authenticity, then, is created by allowing the viewer to gaze into the musicians' everyday lives. By allowing the viewer to see these musicians in "real life," not at a performance but in the writing process, the film uses its claims to authenticity as a rhetorical device to imply a historical and objective factuality to the narrative. Furthermore, in an attempt to put authenticity on display, the film inadvertently creates a more intimate experience of the Southern Metal scene than *Slow Southern Steel* did. The viewer is not only a viewer, or an audience member, as they frequently are in *Slow Southern Steel*, the viewer is now able to penetrate the walls that often keep outsiders from becoming part of the scene.

Once the authenticity is established by showing the viewer the practice space, *NOLA* continues to assert its narrative by interwoven parts of both interviewed narration and in musical performance. Immediately after the initial practice space scene, an instance of professionally recorded drums and guitars segues the viewer into the narrative arch of the film, where Anselmo describes and defines the New Orleans/Southern metal sound to the viewer. Since the film has already committed to the assertion of Anselmo as an authentic purveyor of this style of music, his description of what is and isn't New Orleans metal is presented as an authoritative one.

The integration of this narration over a musical backing accomplishes a few things. For one, it keeps Anselmo (and eventually other interviewees) sonically connected to the music by allowing his voice to be featured with the music. Secondly, it places the interviewee's voice at the forefront of the musical mix, allowing the opinion to be tied to the music and to stand out from it and explain itself. The music itself does not explicitly explain its roots, implications, or the band member's ideas or biographies (this can be seen as a filtering method for keeping any

Southern-ness out of the narrative), but the interviews do. While the music is important enough to stand on its own (and warrant a documentary that explores the lived experiences of those who produced the music), what's crucial in this narrative tactic is establishing the musicians as just as vital to the narrative as the music itself. In this way, the film attempts to transcend the music for music's sake and instead operates as an insight into a culture that just so happens to perform Southern Metal music.

This privilege given to the musicians' wellbeing and insight is highlighted when the film delves into topics involving the deaths of musicians in the scene. The moments of death are considerably striking; the film uses feedback and music recorded by many of the bands being discussed, as well as the instances of showing music-making, but it is only when the topic turns to death that the viewer hears music composed for the film and not by the musicians in the film. By musically revealing the creator's hand in crafting the film's narrative, the film tells the viewer what they are meant to understand: the viewer is supposed to empathize with the film subject's traumatic experiences.

The first mention of death happens at around eleven minutes and thirty seconds into the first segment of the film when Jimmy Bower and Phil Anselmo touch upon the sudden suicide of guitarist Mike Hatch. The film makes a notable change in timbre - from loud metal music to soft, thoughtful-sounding synth pads that outline the shift in the emotionality of the film's narrative. The synthesizers marry Bower's and Anselmo's retelling of the events by playing through both of their testimonies, but eventually fade from audibility and succumb to silence.

The silence gives way to perhaps the most emotionally stirring part of *NOLA*—Phil Anselmo's retelling of the event surrounding Pantera guitarist "Dimebag" Darrell's death. The

band had broken up due to musical differences, and Darrell had been shot onstage by an audience member. Due to the circumstances surrounding the band at the time of Darrell's death, Anselmo was not invited to any of the funeral proceedings, and the viewer sees Anselmo's crying testimony and memorial to his late bandmate. The silence is striking because it is utilized for the first time in this scene. As the viewer witnesses Anselmo's account, a slow, minor-key piano accompanies his description of events and his memory of Darrell's life. The professionally shot scenes and images give way to Anselmo's own video recording; this video was made after Anselmo discovered that he was prohibited by Abbott's family from attending the guitarist's funeral. This formal move by the filmmakers prioritizes the personal over the professional: Anselmo's personalized plea to Abbott's family captured on video allows the viewer to witness an intimate moment with a band member that is rarely captured on film or in a song.

The silence followed by a piano accompaniment returns in the second segment of the film when discussing drummer Joey Lacaze's death and serves, yet again, as a noticeable change in mood from the film's earlier musical storytelling techniques. This technique draws the viewer's attention to the event. In a film about music that features a considerable amount of music in the film, the silence and subsequent soft piano playing lure the listener into the scene where they can focus on the artists remembering the fallen musicians. The inclusion of, and notable attention given, to narratives of death reaffirm the belief within the film's narrative that death, much like the blues, is inherently tied to New Orleans and, thus, inherently tied to those who make music in New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina returns in this film to give meteorological evidence to these somber claims about the city of New Orleans. The failure of so many federal agencies in the storm's

aftermath are highlighted in Eyehategod's song "New Orleans is the New Vietnam," harkening back to a similarly abysmal government failure. This song is a musical manifestation of the cultural construction of trauma and a performance in how one is expected to react to a traumatic event. This song allows the wider American audience who may not understand what Katrina did to New Orleans to understand what kind of trauma the residents have been subjected to, again reinforcing Alexander's description of cultural trauma and traumatic memory. That is, most Americans understand the cultural and moral toll that the Vietnam War took on Americans and Vietnamese alike, and Eyehategod's song creates a parallel that allows those outside of New Orleans to empathize with their newly minted traumatic identity.

By embracing this identity rooted in trauma, both the musicians in the film and the filmmakers assert that the New Orleans sound (a cultural manifestation of what New Orleanians are) is not only a product *of* New Orleans, but a lived experience that is *subjected onto* New Orleans, be it by hurricane, government failure, or depressions (mental and economic) and drug use. These musicians cannot control what is done onto them anymore, the film asserts, than they can control the sound of the music produced by them as residents of the city.

In the first few minutes of episode four and episode seven (the final segment), the viewer is presented with images of crawfish and sounds of zydeco music. This use of yet another traditional music synonymous with New Orleans once again situates the members of the scene as cultural heirs to the sounds of New Orleans. The consumption of crawfish, and the part of the documentary that teaches the outsider viewer and filmmakers how to eat crawfish, establishes the scene as exclusive in its knowledge of how to consume crawfish and how to participate in a quintessentially New Orleans practice, while simultaneously being inclusive by inviting the

viewer and the filmmakers to participate in this cultural practice. The crawfish scenes function as a concentrated form of the film's tone throughout its narrative — these Southern others have been found, interviewed, and explored by the filmmakers, and are now showing the interviewees and the viewers how to become more like these Southerners.

At two minutes and forty seconds into the sixth segment, Pepper Keenan describes the newer musicians in the scene as “just as greasy and as fucked up as it fucking was ten years ago ... I think you got [sic] something that's legitimate.” Keenan's assertion that newer bands are continuing the traditions established by his era of musicians breathes life into the scene, articulating a thriving and living music scene that embodies what it means to be from New Orleans. In creating this place sonically, and by having it viewed through the medium of a documentary film, these musicians and the music and narrative style of delivery used in the film create a place that has become consciously and subconsciously tied to death, life, blues, zydeco, trauma, and authenticity, cultivating a collective cultural memory of this Southern Metal scene in the city of New Orleans.

*NOLA: Life, Death, & Heavy Blues from the Bayou* provides a voice and an intimate sense of understanding of the New Orleans Southern Metal scene. While the film fails to address the scene as a product of the South and a performed Southern identity, the scenery, interview, and the correlations made between this scene and the blues function as symbols to invoke a sense of Southern-ness without making it explicit. By focusing on a more concentrated, intimate version of the Southern Metal scene, situating the scene as an inheritor of numerous Southern musical styles, and highlighting the traumatic events that justify the scene's blues-based heritage, the film situates New Orleans as the capital of this scene.

The opening sequence mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this project begs the tourist not to drive by without bearing witness to the anonymous New Orleans citizens' pain. By describing the history of the scene in the city, and showing the musicians in the scene in their everyday lives, the film allows the viewer to bear witness to this trauma in a way that had previously gone unrepresented. This intimate retelling of events in the capital of the Southern Metal scene only becomes more intimate and personal when the power of narration is given to a member of the scene in a form of a song.

### Chapter Three: “Good Lord the South is Blind”: The Blues, Southern Gothic, and the Performance of Southern Identity in Down’s “Eyes of the South”

Down’s song from their 1994 album *NOLA* incorporates crucial elements of the blues to portray their performed identity as traumatized Southerners. The song also functions as a crucial case study of the scene for many reasons. Down is a Southern Metal supergroup: the song was recorded by Phil Anselmo (Pantera, Superjoint Ritual) on vocals, Jimmy Bower (Eyehategod, Superjoint Ritual, Crowbar) on drums, Pepper Keenan (Corrosion of Conformity) and Kirk Windstein (Crowbar, Kingdom of Sorrow) on guitars, and Todd Strange (Crowbar) on bass. As a supergroup, the band features musicians from other standout acts in the genre, and as such, the musical outputs and cultural ethos performed by members of Down function as a more concentrated performance for the scene as a whole. Their debut album, *NOLA*, was critically and popularly well received, and “Eyes of the South” provides for an explicit reading of phenomena that occur elsewhere in the scene.

The band’s name, and the song’s name, function as embodiments of the topics discussed throughout this paper, as well as an embodiment of the methodological form of this paper. Down, while commonly used to describe a position lower to the ground, also functions as a positional marker for the band: the band is Southern Metal band from “Down” South. The metal music they play, which features detuned guitars, is lower in pitch than other styles of rock. Finally, the word “down” is frequently used as a synonym for somebody who is “feeling blue,” or depressed and traumatized. The simple one-word name of the band, and the album’s title of *NOLA* (the

colloquial acronym for New Orleans, Louisiana) signals to the listener that the band is a part of, and an embodiment of, the ethos that defines the Southern Metal scene.

Down's "Eyes ..." explicitly and implicitly negotiates the blues as songs of the working class undergoing emotional turmoil, and as the narrative of the blues existing outside of hegemonic America and in the American South. Given the self-reflexive nature of Anselmo's own Southern identity, and his demonstrated knowledge of Southern identities and Southern history throughout the the documentary films, this could be understood as a reworking of W.J. Cash's *Mind of the South*, a seminal book that has been influential in how the South is understood by both those within it and those outside of it. In the song's title alone, the audience can perceive that the character created and performed by the band is telling the story of the Southern experience from his point of view—through his *eyes*. While the "eyes" in the song certainly belong to the character created in the song, the eyes are simultaneously possessed by all of the South, implying a solidarity with the song's character and the emotions of the rest of the American South. This performance and link to the history of the South allows for Southerners to speak for themselves, appropriating the power of narration typically denied to them by those outside of the South.

Down's work, and the work of other Southern Metal bands, functions as self reflexive, "subversive humor" that not only borrows from Southern Rock, but a longer literary tradition in the Southern Gothic<sup>8</sup> literary genre (Wyatt-Brown 129). This adaptation of the Southern Gothic

---

<sup>8</sup> In an edited collection by Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner titled *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture*, Southern Gothic literature and other cultural productions are analyzed through lenses of whiteness, regionalism, and subversive humor. Throughout these analyses, words such as "doom," "dead," "ghosts" appear as descriptions for these literary forms. What's striking is how many of the words used to describe the Southern Gothic can be used to describe Southern Metal.

tradition is made most explicit in Corrosion of Conformity's best selling album, *Wiseblood*, an album that shares a title with a novel written by Flannery O'Connor,<sup>9</sup> but occurs throughout the scene in varying degrees. "Eyes of the South" also embraces the traditions of the Southern Gothic in the song's lyrics:

This time it's real  
It's a love that I feel  
I may be tainted but God knows  
It's good to me, could you see?

I leave my woes  
At strangers road dispose  
And let the sun back on my face, whoa

It's a soul sense of pride  
Good Lord, the South is blind  
But she gives me so much suffrage with my pain

I feel the strain  
When I get behind a big slow day  
I've fucked it all  
Was that down? Was that family?

I leave my woes  
At stranger's road dispose  
And let the blood back in my veins

It's a soul sense of pride  
Good Lord, the South is blind  
But she will never let me go insane

Please let me die there  
(Please let me)  
Cold war leaves me there  
(Cold war, yeah)

---

<sup>9</sup> For other examples of the use of subversive humor and the grotesque in Southern Metal, consider albums by Eyehategod *Confederacy of Ruined Lives* and their self-titled full-length album, Superjoint Ritual's *Use Once and Destroy* album, and Pantera's *Beyond Driven*. The songs on the album and the imagery used on the albums' covers invoke classic Southern Gothic themes of the grotesque and the subversive.

In Down's first verse, the song's narrator acknowledges that he is tainted, the grotesque character featured in so many Southern Gothic stories. The character understands that the love felt is one that might be shaped by past experiences and understandings. In this song, the character is not in love with another human subject, but in fact, in love with the South. By taking on the tainted aspect of the grotesque from the Southern Gothic tradition, the character embodies what is meant to horrify the viewer, but, as is typical in the Southern Gothic, the grotesque character is often the catalyst for change (the Boo Radley character in *Too Kill a Mockingbird*), and as such, the character created in the song's narrative is appropriating the grotesque to incite change in the South that he loves.

The first verse's thesis and character construction is supplemented by the subsequent stanzas. By leaving his "woes at a stranger's roads ..." the character in the song is embarking on a journey — similar to the journeys witnessed in McCarthy's Southern Gothic novel *The Road* or O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* — to change his life for the better. This reference to a common Southern Gothic trope also has meaning in the history of the modern South. "Stranger's roads" were constructed in the South after Eisenhower's presidency, altering the makeup of the South from Cash's "New South" into its more contemporary incarnation, the Sun Belt.<sup>10</sup> As the interstate system was built in the South, the Southern way of life was forever altered in a way that would seem foreign to Southerners, like those in Down who have so much at stake in a historical ideal of the South.

---

<sup>10</sup> The Sun Belt has been discussed in varying academic disciplines and media, but the narrative that is used for the purposes of this project is what Andreas Killen calls the "southern rim" in his book on the 1970s, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of the Post-Sixties America*.

The South, or the invisible boundary that constructs the South, is blind, but Anselmo is suggesting through the creation of the song's character, that the real "eyes" of the South belong those who experience the pain of living within its boundaries. The "suffrage with his pain" is the journey undertaken in the previous verses; for the song's character to become Southern and tell the South's story, he must earn his suffrage (his ability to contribute to the South) through experiencing pain. The character's pride in the South stems from the experiences that construct his view of the place.

### **Southern Metal and the Sound of the (Heavy) South**

A bass guitar vamps on a low B note to a syncopated eighth note shuffle of "long-short-short-short," written musically as a swung quarter note-eighth note pattern in a triplet bracket (or in some instances, just as a swung pair of eighth notes). This signals to the listener the adaptation of blues rhythms and stylings in "Eyes of the South." The bass is given a moment by itself in the instrumentation, but is quickly overcome in the musical mix by a lengthy guitar solo that loosely weaves in and out of the musical rhythm.

The bass and hi-hat cooperate with this rhythm at a moderate tempo for a bar before one guitar joins them. While the bassist and drummer establish this blues-based rhythm, the guitarist's licks, free from rhythmic constraints, solidify the song and its situation within the blues' musical language. As this guitarist glides up and down the B minor pentatonic scale, a rhythm guitar enters the mix that both complements and responds to the rhythm established by the band's bassist and drummer. At first the instruments' entry into the song seems a bit jarring and cacophonous, but this tension is resolved when the musicians unify in playing the song's

signature riff, a unison that is resolved once singer Phil Anselmo's shout of "Goddamn!" completes each band members' entry into the song.

The song situates itself as a heavier manifestation of the blues tradition. With rhythms and melodic gestures steeped in blues traditions, the song is in equal parts an homage to the music of working poor in the South, and an innovation for the wider genre of blues-based rock. The song borrows some blues traditions, such as the use of blue notes and syncopated rhythmic patterns, rejects some traditions like the twelve-bar song structure and provides a new soundscape by using these elements in a heavy metal song with saturated distortion and vocal shouting. The song provides a short history of musical influences and regional identity in the introductory section, and suggests a "this is where we are now" as Anselmo's vocal parts are added to the mix.

The song is structured around the B minor pentatonic scale, with chromatic embellishments (notably with the use of the flatted fifth tone from the scale) used throughout the song to add a degree of dissonance to its heavy and disjointed tonality. The song features three main riffs that cycle twice through after the opening vamp, culminating in a breakdown that solidifies its position in extreme music like death metal, thrash, and hardcore punk.

The guitarists and drummers play through amplifiers and studio effects that emphasize the midrange of their instruments' frequencies. It is common for metal, punk, and hard rock musicians to prefer a "scooped" amplifier tone, a tone that removes midrange frequencies from the sonic "mix" and boosts the treble and bass frequencies. This sonic preference produces a different type of heavy tone; the "scooped" sound provides a more articulate tone that sounds more focused and present, whereas the midrange-oriented tone provides a fuller, warmer tone

that is a bit less articulate and focused. The “scooped” tones are a bit of a more recent development, modern recording and amplification technology has allowed musicians to have more control in sculpting their tone, vintage instrument amplifiers and recording technologies were more midrange focused, as the focus on midrange frequencies could fill a room with more sound while using less electrical power. As the technology became refined and power in the amps and recording technology became smaller and more customizable, the necessity for efficiency of loudness became less important.

This conscious decision regarding the “tone” of the guitars and drums serves to separate Southern Metal from other metal scenes.<sup>11</sup> The timbre of the instruments separates the Southern Metal sound from other forms of heavy music, but it also borrows an ethos from metal bands that came before, most notably Black Sabbath, but also from previous blues and blues-rock musicians, who also prioritize warm, midrange-focused distortion and over the scooped tones of more modern metal musicians. This ethos demonstrates a cultural habit that transcends the music itself; the musicians in the Southern Metal scene have a stake not only in what musical rhythms, notes, and lyrics are used in their songs, but they also have a stake in how these musical concepts sound to the listener. In this way, they are situating themselves in a cultural language that is deeply nuanced; using the metaphor of language, it not only matters to these musicians what words and sentences are being constructed, but the conscious construction of their identity as

---

<sup>11</sup> For an accessible comparison of a “scooped” tone to a more midrange-oriented tone, compare “Eyes of the South” by Down to perhaps the most popular metal/hard rock song of the era, Metallica’s “Enter Sandman.” The songs are produced only three years apart, and Down’s song is more current. Notice, however, that Metallica’s song has a “cleaner” tonality, the guitarists’ and drummers notes are more articulate and precise sounding, while Down’s song has a more full, yet perhaps “dirtier” tonality. The guitarists for both bands use an equal amount of overdrive and distortion, but the “clean” and “dirty” sounds are a byproduct of the frequencies favored by the musicians and recording engineers.

members of the Southern Metal scene goes as deep as being concerned with the *tone of voice* used in the construction of this cultural identity.

To make the metaphorical use of the voice more literal, Anselmo's voice in "Eyes ..." grunts and shouts, and is sometimes sung with a raspy inflection steeped in a Southern accent. The voice of the singers in the scene is probably the least cohesive aspect of the genre. While Anselmo tends to shout, grunt, and sing in Down and in his other bands (Superjoint Ritual, Pantera, etc), other members of the scene prefer screaming (Eyehategod) or raspy singing (Corrosion of Conformity). The allowance of agency in the musical articulation of the voice speaks to the level of agency allowed within the scene itself; while those in the scene have agreed to perform many of the same musical, sonic, and lyrical themes, the scene allows its singers to have an individualized voice in the performances of the songs. Attributing agency and individuality to the singers, and thus all of the performers in the scene, provides for the creation of a nuanced Southern identity that tends to be in conversation with, and in argument against, creations of stereotypes of Southernness from outside the South.

The use of blues influences places Down in what Thomas Turino calls a "cultural cohort," or "social groupings that form along the lines of shared habit based on similarities of *parts of the self*" (Turino 111). Down identifies with the cultural associations that make up the blues, and further, as a part of a musical lineage that prioritizes blues ethos of trauma, depression, and struggles as a member of a working class Southern identity. Furthermore, in using blues elements, Down positions itself among the rock bands that use the blues as their musical and performative language. While many of these bands hail from outside of the American South (most notably Black Sabbath, as they are a major influence on the bands in the

Southern Metal scene, but bands like Aerosmith and Led Zeppelin come to mind as well), Down asserts themselves as part of the lineage of rock (and Southern Rock) musicians who privilege blues aesthetics. This is important in constructing the cultural habits of this group, and other groups like it.<sup>12</sup> While placing themselves as direct descendants of the practitioners of blues and blues rock, they are simultaneously distancing themselves from metal bands that adhere to other metal styles like classical music, speed and virtuosity, or radio-friendliness.

The song's sonic Southern-ness can be witnessed visually as well. A live performance of the song, currently accessible on YouTube,<sup>13</sup> and is featured in *NOLA* during a montage that accompanies a narrative of the scene rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina. For the musicians, Down's reformation and release of a new album signaled rebirth and rebuilding after the storm. The video is set in New Orleans at the House of Blues, and "Eyes of the South" is the opening song in the band's set. The song's opening vamp begins without the presence of Anselmo on the stage. Anselmo joins the rest of the band on stage, and then interacts with the crowd of fans. Anselmo's tone is quite similar to that of a Southern evangelical preacher, he interacts with his fans by referring to them as his "folks," and encourages crowd participation, even in the back rows and balconies. Those at the show, therefore, are considered to be apart of the scene, and exchange subcultural participation by way of interacting with the band's music through movement.

---

<sup>12</sup> The other songs from Down's *NOLA* album and subsequent outputs also participate in this bluesy practice. For more examples of the adaptation of the blues in Southern Metal, consider "Self Medication Blues" by Eyehategod, "25 Years" by Pantera, "The Alcoholic" by Superjoint Ritual, and "Albatross" by Corrosion of Conformity to understand the widespread adaptation of blues elements in the scene.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJjL4sT9J\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJjL4sT9J_0)

The populist inclusion of the non-musicians into the scene proves to be valuable for the musicians in the scene; this introductory vamp and appeal for the audience's participation lasts for a little longer than three minutes — nearly half the video's length. The inclusion of the audience reveals the performative stakes in the identity of Southern Metal musicians; while the musicians have every opportunity and reason to consider themselves an exception from the audience (they are on a stage, they have amplification and microphones that privilege the sounds they make over those the audience, the audience likely paid to gain access to Down's concert), the scene's ethos dictate that the audience in their own everyday lives become participants in the performance of this identity.

“And there's really, really, really no [sic] better pleasure,” Anselmo confesses to the crowd during this introduction, “than jammin' in front of your fuckin' folks man. We're all brothers and sisters, Goddamn.” Invoking the vocal styling and a performative inclusiveness that resemble the stylings of a Southern preacher at the pulpit, Anselmo encourages his audience to become equals in the performed identity of the scene in the same way a preacher might encourage his brothers and sisters in Christianity to become equals in their acceptance of their religion. Through this populist form the scene validates its performance. The audience as human beings and as fans within the Southern Metal scene gain subcultural capital by participating in the song's performance and by relating to the characters created within the song's narrative. The audience does not have the privilege to create a narrative in the same way that Down does, but the audience can influence the reception of the narrative by interacting with Anselmo's lyrics and the rest of the performance.

In this song's performance, the members of the Southern Metal scene are given agency. In previous chapters, Southern Metal has been defined by others on their terms, but the performance of this song provides a musical articulation of the construction of Southern identity on the terms of the musicians and fans from within the scene. Through the song's lyrics, and in viewing band and audience members' style of dress and other forms of identity performance, the listener/viewer is given an opportunity to allow the members of the scene to speak for themselves.

## Conclusion

The Southern Metal scene is created through discourse and deals with what it means to live outside of the American mainstream and by being from the American South. The discourse includes other binaries: the virtuoso and the average, the narrator and the audience, and the powerful and the powerless. Through traumatic events and a feeling of exclusion and subjugation to stereotypes without nuance or room for agency, the members of the Southern Metal scene react and perform an identity that, given the historical and all-encompassing nature of the constructions of what it means to be Southern, white, and working class, seems to be bestowed onto the members of the scene.

To close *Slow Southern Steel*, a montage featuring various live performances at Southern Metal concerts is set to one of the South's most iconic songs — Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird." Closing arguments are made to the viewer about the exceptional nature of the Southern Metal scene, while enticing the viewer to further investigate this scene that has gone largely unknown outside of the South. "Free Bird" is often used as the musical symbol of the South. While "I Wish I was in Dixie" had historically served as an auditory signifier of the South and, more specifically, the distasteful, white, working class south, "Free Bird" has become the new anthem of the South, reinforcing both good and bad stereotypes in films set in the South such as *Joe Dirt* and *Forrest Gump*. By invoking the connotations what "Free Bird" has come to imply, *Slow Southern Steel* ties its own narration into the wider story of the South, allowing the viewer to

insert what they have learned about the South and Southern Metal into their conceptualizations of the South.

The power given to the members of this scene through the documentary films, and in the power given to the audience by the recorded and live performances of the songs, are gained through the ability to narrate the scene's story. The aspects of the scene that disrupt the hegemonic narrative make it offensive and frightening to this narrative, but also reveal a lack of attention given to the members of this scene that have frequently been the subjects of stereotypes and preconceptions without allowing the members to speak for themselves.

The Southern Metal scene is not asking those outside of the scene to forgive or forget the South's misdeeds throughout the region's troubled history. The members of the Southern Metal scene are not suggesting that white, working class Southerners are not responsible for some of the racial turmoil that has taken place in the South. Instead, the members of the scene ask for a seat at the table in the creation of the myths about the South. Often times this request is executed in a way that is meant to offend, and other times the offense is taken purely on the performance of a Southern Identity itself. Through their use of the blues and in their lyrics about their traumas and personal sufferings, the members of the Southern Metal scene attempt to tell a story that places them in solidarity with their black counterparts.

In a recent *New York Times* article titled "Letter of Recommendation: Cracker Barrel," the writer attempts to reconcile their love for the Southern-themed food chain with its place in the South:

Can you love the South but loathe what it was built on? Cracker Barrel and I, we try.

There's a nondiscrimination clause now posted in every gift-shop entryway, one reminder

among many that erasure of past sins can be redemptive. And believing in the possibility of transformation is necessary for outsiders to feel at home in the South. (Tolentino)

The pure inclusion of Southern imagery makes this outsider to the South uncomfortable. The constructed narrative is that all things Southern and working class necessarily rely on the South as a place of the eternal, original sin of racism that cannot be forgiven if those who live in the South wish to construct a different narrative about themselves. Following the Charleston Shootings of the summer of 2015, the American South came to the forefront of the consciousness of America, and subsequently attacks on the nature of the Southern identity widely circulated in the media.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the summer, many expressed a sentiment of disdain for Southerners who supported the Confederate Flag being waved at the capitol in Charleston.<sup>15</sup> While I agreed with many of these journalists and pundits that the flag needed to be removed from a state building, many in the media used this event as a way to articulate their previously held notions of what it means to be Southern. Jon Stewart, for instance, insisted that the Confederate Flag be replaced with something more symbolic of the South, and swapped the on-screen visual of the Confederate Flag out with a visual of a burning pig to symbolize the South's contribution in creating barbecue.

Once again, I am in agreement with Stewart about the Confederate Flag's place on a public building, but Stewart seems to assert that the only redeemable contribution the South has

---

<sup>14</sup> "How the South Skews America" by Michael Lind is a starting example of this construction of the perpetually violent and racist South.

<sup>15</sup> One New York Times journalist did come to the South's defense in "For the South, Against the Confederacy" by Ross Douthat.

made is its food (a sentiment that is similarly shared in the Cracker Barrel article above). While the segment is humorous and goes to great lengths to point out the ridiculous justifications being made for keeping the flag on a public building, one has to wonder if Jon Stewart or any of the others in the narration class would appreciate another region's food put on display as a symbol for their entire populace. Furthermore, this sort of narration suggests that Stewart knows enough about the South to speak for it and create its imagery, removing any possibility for the South to have a voice in the conversation.

The racist shootings certainly demonstrated the problems with race relations in the South, and as the events unfolded the Confederate Flag was rightfully removed from the capitol in Charleston and in other states throughout the South. The unfortunate aftermath of the narrating class's exercise of power is the South became a scapegoat for the entire country's racism, even while race relations in America as a whole became quite tense. The riots in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Maryland, New York City, and Cleveland revealed long-ignored racial tensions all over the country.

These riots occurred in places that never flew a Confederate Flag, yet racial tensions played out in equally violent and destructive ways. While it is a bit harder to target the racial attitudes that occur outside of the South (due to a lack of symbols that have come to represent racism like the Confederate Flag), nobody becomes visibly upset when visiting places that embody a Northern sensibility or a Midwestern sensibility. Once again, some Southerners do not make it easy for those outside of the South to sympathize when a number of them (including many in this paper) support the Confederate Flag, but the difference here is when those outside of the South engage in racist activities, these activities happen in the North, West, or Midwest.

When these events happen in the South, they happen *because* of the South, as if it is baked into the region itself.

Hubbs' reading of the Foo Fighters' "Keep it Clean (Hot Buns)" discusses how the same narrating class positions the Southern, working class white in the realm of the perpetually bigoted:

Good Whites isolate and fight homophobia *at its source* by mocking uneducated, provincial, country music-loving Bad Whites... charged intraracial contests result in a distorting and dangerous story of the causes of U.S. racism, taking the spotlight off of upper- and middle-class white people and institutions and focusing it glaringly on poor and working-class whites. ... Band members 'Jed up' in stereotypical imitations of poor and working-class whites, and commentators frame the spectacle as a victory over the people thus caricatured, indicatively the backward, intolerant, guilty party in America's homophobia problem ... it reinforces a notion that homo- and transphobia are confined to certain groups of bad people rather than systemic throughout the entire culture, and it locates the problem in a low-status and relatively powerless segment of society while ignoring the institutions — including the law, medicine, education, and the media itself — possessing the greatest power to produce and maintain, or to eliminate, gender and sexual bigotry and its effects. (Hubbs 44-5)

Hubbs uses racial understandings and applies them to gender, and in return Hubbs' gendered understanding develop the argument further and become even more applicable to the areas of race. In the Jon Stewart and Tolentino instances, these members of the media dehumanize the Southerners by replacing their personhood with food objects, and create a caricature that

functions as a way for the non-Southerner to rid themselves of any responsibility for racial bigotry, and instead concentrate it on and within the Southerner.

If the Southern working-class whites become the perpetually bigoted class, it removes any chance for the South to be anything besides bigoted. Furthermore, as seen in Hubbs' example with the Foo Fighters, the South's perceived backwardness allows for the narrating class to become the bigots themselves, so long as this bigotry is used for the "good" of demeaning a group of people that is already without a voice in the construction of the national narrative. In the same way that Hubbs argues the Foo Fighters get away with their visual gay joke, Jon Stewart and Tolentino get away with flaunting a Southern accent, making a play on Cracker Barrel's name by calling it a "container for backward white people (Tolentino)," flashing Nascar's logo across the screen, and raising a flag of a burning pig to poke fun at those in the South; so long as this classed attack on the Southerner is for "the good" of pointing out his perpetually racist character, this type of caricature making goes unchecked by those producing and consuming this narration.

Southern Metal's blatant display of its Southern-ness functions in the same way that country music's rural and working class stylistic choices function. These styles of music with an overlapping regional origins and target demographics work to disrupt the hegemonic narrative by allowing the previously unvoiced to attain their voice. These stories in the media cycle demonstrate why it is important to understand the way Americans think about the American South, and the way the American South thinks about itself. Southern Metal, in many ways, is a Southern identity performed at its most extreme levels. While county music often alludes to its rural and working class identity, Southern Metal and those in the Southern Metal scene blare

their Southern identity so that it becomes hard for those in the narrating class to ignore their cultural productions.

In the disciplines of Cultural Studies, American Studies, and Musicology, it has been common practice to unpack cultural manifestations that have gone unchecked, unnoticed, and unquestioned by those with power who stand to gain from these items going unchecked. While those in power often ignore, and in many cases make jokes at the expense of the Southern, white, working-class that is often considered distasteful, trashy, and deserving of the attacks that are launched against them. What is often not considered, however, is how these stereotypes and caricatures work to dehumanize and demoralize these subjects while ridding the creators of the narrative of their own distasteful tendencies.

To follow a metaphor made earlier, if racism is the South's original sin, then Southerners are frequently cast as the cross bearers, taking on this original sin of racism for the sake of all sinners in America who participate in and bear the same original sin that these Southerner bear. To continue the play on this biblical metaphor (one that is fitting for a South that is often damned for its religiosity), it becomes easier to understand why the South clings to another cross in St. Andrew's cross of the Confederate Flag. This paper is, once again, not an attempt to excuse the South for its racist behavior, nor does it aim to claim that the racism practiced outside of the South "cancels out" the South's racist past, but rather, this paper is an attempt at allowing Southerners explain for themselves why they cling to such distasteful iconography: if they are constantly made into the stereotype of the perpetually bigoted class, then they are subsequently unable to escape from the burden of bearing the cross of racism.

The members of the Southern Metal scene, and the documentaries discussed in this project, are an attempt by those within the scene to make the case for themselves. These films, the songs produced by the bands, and the non-musicians' participation in the scene give the Southern Metal scene a voice and a stake in the shared narrative of America through a form of extreme metal music. By asserting its own kind of power, Southern Metal music provides an avenue for explanation, one beyond stereotypes and jokes about backwardness, for those willing to allow this extreme form of music to lend its voice to the conversation about Southern-ness.

## Bibliography

### Primary

*Slow Southern Steel*. Dir. Terry, Chris. Gonzo Metal, 2010.

*NOLA: Life, Death, and Heavy Blues From the Bayou*. Dir. Hubbard, Jimmy and Pessaro, Frank. Vice, 2014.

*Deliverance*. Corrosion of Conformity. Sony, 1994.

*Wiseblood*. Corrosion of Conformity. Columbia, 1996.

“Eyes of the South.” *NOLA*. Down. Elektra Records, 1994.

“Stone the Crow.” *NOLA*. Down. Elektra Records, 1994.

*Confederacy of Ruined Lives*. Eyehategod. Century, 2000.

*New Orleans is the New Vietnam*. Eyehategod. A389 Records, 2012.

*Southern Discomfort*. Eyehategod. Eyeball, 2000.

“Cowboys from Hell.” *Cowboys from Hell*. Pantera. Atco Records, 1990.

“I’m Broken.” *Far Beyond Driven*. Pantera. EastWest Records, 1994.

*A Lethal Dose of American Hatred*. Superjoint Ritual. Sanctuary, 2003.

*Use Once and Destroy*. Superjoint Ritual. Sanctuary, 2002.

“Free Bird.” *Pronounced ‘Lěh-‘nérđ ‘Skin-‘nérđ*. MCA, 1973.

“Sweet Home Alabama.” *Second Helping*. Lynyrd Skynyrd. MCA, 1974.

### Secondary

Alexander Jeffrey C. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012. Print.

- Anderson, Eric Gary, Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner. *Undead Souths : The Gothic And Beyond In Southern Literature And Culture*. Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 2015. Print.
- Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Print.
- Brackett, David. *Interpreting Popular Music*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1995. Web. June 2016.
- Buma, Michael. "'Stand Tall, Turn Your Three Guitars Up Real Loud, And Do What You Do': The Redneck Liberation Theology Of The Drive-By Truckers." *Journal Of Religion And Popular Culture* (2006): Academic OneFile. Web. 24 Nov. 2015.
- Butler, Mike. "'Luther King Was A Good Ole Boy': The Southern Rock Movement And White Male Identity In The Post-Civil Rights South." *Popular Music & Society* 23.2 (1999): 41. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 4 Mar. 2016.
- Cash, W.J. *The Mind of the South*. New York, Vintage, 1941. Print.
- Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- . "The Necessary South." *Historically Speaking* Volume 11. Issue 4 (2010): pp. 5-8. Digital.
- . *Redefining Southern Culture : Mind And Identity In The Modern South*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999. Print.
- Connell, John and Gibson, Chris. *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Cresswell, Tim. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Print.

- Douthat, Ross. "For the South, Against the Confederacy." *The New York Times*. 24 June 2015. Web. 4 March 2016.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage, 1972. Print.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic, 1992. Print.
- Hertz, Erich. "The Anxiety of Authenticity." *The Music Documentary: Acid Rock to Electropop*, 132-141. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Web.
- Holt, Fabian. *Genre In Popular Music*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2007. Print. 23 June 2016.
- Hubbs, Nadine. *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*. University of California Press, 2014. Print.
- Kahn-Harris, Keith. *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. New York: Berg Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Keith, Brandon P. *Southern Rock Music As A Cultural Form*. University of South Florida, 2009., 2009. *University of South Florida Libraries Catalog*. Web. 4 Mar. 2016.
- Kemp, Mark. *Dixie Lullaby : A Story Of Music, Race, And New Beginnings In A New South*. New York : Free Press, 2004. Print.
- Killen, Andreas. *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of the Post-Sixties America*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2006. Print.

- Levy, Claire. "Who is the 'other' in the Balkans? Local Ethnic music as a *different source* of identities in Bulgaria." *Music, Space, and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005. Print.
- Lind, Michael. "How the South Skews America." *Politico*. 3 July 2015. Web. 4 March 2016.
- Lucas, Caroline, Mark Deeks, and Karl Spracklen. "Grim Up North: Northern England, Northern Europe And Black Metal." *Journal For Cultural Research* 15.3 (2011): 279-295. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 4 Mar. 2016.
- Maxwell, Angie. *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority, and the Politics of Whiteness (New Directions in Southern Studies)*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. Print.
- Mazza, Ed. "Jon Stewart Offers the South a New Symbol to Replace the Confederate Flag." *HuffPost Comedy*. 25 June 2015. Web. 4 March 2016.
- Middleton, Richard. *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes [England]; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990. Print.
- Murray, Albert. *Stomping the Blues*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976, Print.
- Reed, John Shelton. *Southern Folk Plain and Fancy: Native White Social Types*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1978. Print.
- Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo, 2001. Print.
- Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music*. London; New York: Routledge, 2002. Web. June 2016.

- Spracklen, Karl, Caroline Lucas, and Mark Deeks. "The Construction Of Heavy Metal Identity Through Heritage Narratives: A Case Study Of Extreme Metal Bands In The North Of England." *Popular Music & Society* 37.1 (2014): 48-64. Web. 22 Oct. 2015.
- Stimeling, Travis D. "'To Be Polished More Than Extended': Musicianship, Masculinity, And The Critical Reception Of Southern Rock." *Journal Of Popular Music Studies* 26.1 (2014): 121. Web.
- Stokes, Martin, ed. *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994. Print.
- Tolentino, Jia. "Letter of Recommendation: Cracker Barrel." *New York Times Magazine*. [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com). 28 January 2016. Web. 4 March 2016.
- Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. University of Chicago Press, 2008. Print.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Value*.
- Waksman, Steve. *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk*. University of California Press, 2009. Print.
- Walser, Robert. *Running With The Devil: Power, Gender, And Madness In Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan, 1993. Print.
- Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *Hearts Of Darkness : Wellsprings Of A Southern Literary Tradition*. Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 2003. Print.
- Young, Alex. "Dimebag Darrell's grave vandalized with homophobic slur. A metal band called Nuclear Hellfrost are the alleged culprits." [consequenceofsound.net](http://consequenceofsound.net). Web. 2015.