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**Submission for MMS Special Issue**

**Metal and Marginalisation: Gender, Race, Class and Other Implications for Hard Rock and Metal**

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**‘To Holmgard... and Beyond’: Folk Metal Fantasies and Hegemonic White Masculinities**

**Abstract**

On first inspection, the metal music sub-genre of folk metal might be arguably residual white, masculine spaces. The sub-genres are not fashionable within the metal music scene. Folk metal bands are ridiculed by fans of black metal for being too mainstream and crowd-pleasing, constructing fantasies of drinking and fighting that have no authentic connection to Vikings, Saxons or other (supposed) nationalist patriarchs. But folk metal bands are not part of the mainstream of modern heavy metal, judged by sales of records and numbers of fans on social media. This paper draws on new research on folk metal and its reputation within heavy metal, using a range of internet sources and semiotic analysis of folk metal bands’ songs and images. The bands at the focus of the case study research are bands that have been deliberately selected because they are well-established in the industry, and generally known to fans of heavy metal: Turisas (Finland), Týr (Faroe Islands), Eluveitie (Switzerland), In Extremo (Germany) and Cruachan (Ireland). In this paper, I argue that folk metal is not easily dismissed as a fantasy space for young, white European men left behind by postmodernity, post-colonialism and a rearrangement of the gender order. Rather, folk metal remains central to the on-going construction of heavy metal as a form of commodified leisure that makes the power of Western, instrumental whiteness and hegemonic masculinity invisible, while ironically being in plain sight.

**Key words:** folk metal; leisure; masculinity; nationalism; whiteness

## Introduction

*I am watching Týr play at Leeds Rio's on the 2008 Paganfest tour. The club is built on a slope, so there is a balcony standing area that looks over the moshpit. I am standing there, watching the people in the pit. Some are in fancy dress as Vikings, or some vague warrior types. There is long hair and plaited beards. Everyone has drinking horns. Týr are dressed in chainmail and are wearing Thor's hammers. They look like proper Vikings, unlike the boys and men in the crowd. Týr seem to be playing mainly anthemic power metal but the crowd doesn't complain. They love Týr. And this is just one of the support acts. When Korpiklaani come on with their drinking songs, their fiddles and their stomping tunes, the pit goes absolutely crazy.*

The 2008 UK Paganfest tour brought five bands branded as 'folk metal' to the country, the first time such a tour had happened (Wikipedia, 2014a). Folk metal had been around for some years but the 2000s saw the genre become part of the metal mainstream. The bands on the 2008 bill included Týr, Eluveitie, Moonsorrow, Korpiklaani and Enisferum. The latter three bands were from Finland, where along with Turisas and Finntroll the folk-metal genre had been popularised and commodified. These Finnish folk metal bands had already appeared on the covers of mainstream metal magazines and web-sites, and had strong commercial and critical backing. In the 2000s, folk-metal was still perceived as cool, and the underground, black-metal origins of bands such as Moonsorrow and Finntroll gave them authenticity and credibility (Granholm, 2011), even if Korpiklaani and Turisas were seen to be 'cashing in' on the rise of folk metal by aiming their songs – about drinking, about being a warrior - at teenage boys (Hoad, 2013; Von Helden, 2010). The bands were already hugely popular in Europe, and their arrival in the UK confirmed this. At another of the gigs, a blogger-reviewer noted:

From the sizable JB's crowd gathered tonight the growth in popularity of folk metal can only be described as explosive...With just enough time to get your drinking horn refilled KORPIKLAANI were on and as soon as 'Wooden Pints' started so did the mosh pit which didn't stop for the rest of the night. The band was on form tonight with a blistering performance by Matti "Matson" Johansson on drums. Jonne Järvelä and Kalle "Cane" Savijärvi were equally on form and in high spirits, its (sic.) good to occasionally see a band enjoying the gig as much as the punters, reveling (sic.) in the crowd reaction to 'Happy Little Boozer' and 'Beer Beer'.

(BaconMusic, 2008)

On first inspection, the metal music sub-genre of folk metal might be explained by using a Williamsian or Hebdigian analysis to argue they are *residual* white, masculine spaces (Hebdige, 1979; Williams, 1977). The sub-genres are not seen as ‘cool’ within the metal music scene in Europe, despite being popular. For example, folk-metal bands are ridiculed by fans of black metal for being too mainstream and crowd-pleasing (see MetalSucks, 2009), constructing fantasies of drinking and fighting that have no authentic connection to Vikings, Saxons or other (supposed) nationalist patriarchs (Gramholm, 2011; Spracklen, 2013a; Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks, 2014; Von Helden, 2010). At the same time, folk metal bands are not part of the mainstream of modern heavy metal, judged by sales of records and numbers of fans on social media. But the folk metal scene and genre nonetheless is worthy of study and critique, because it shows how metal might be a space for the preservation and re-creation of hegemonic power structures. In particular, folk metal and heavy metal remain problematic intersectional leisure spaces for the construction of gendered and racialized identities. The racialization at work is the construction of national identity as folk identity, the equation of national histories with imagined, romantic, mono-racial and mono-cultural folk roots. For the folk of folk metal, this means usually means white Europeanness: white Englishness, or white Swedishness, or white Finnishness. There are folk-metal bands that draw on other, non-white, non-European folk traditions, but these bands are not celebrated in the same way as the white (northern) European bands in the European metal scene (on Greek paganism see Djurslev, 2015). They are also guilty of the same simplifications about culture and history that all folk music suffers from (Spracklen, 2013b; Spracklen and Henderson, 2013).

Following Fast (1999) one could argue that calling heavy metal a masculine leisure space simplifies and hides the complexity of identity work going on. It is true to say that there is nothing essentially masculine about folk metal or heavy metal. It is also true to say there are many female fans of both, and many male fans and musicians that reject the hegemonic masculinity that might be at work in metal (Hill, 2011; Overell, 2012; Vasan, 2011; Spracklen, 2010). There is a range of emerging work within metal music studies that shows the ways in which female fans and musicians engage with metal and create their own identities within it (Hill, 2011, 2014; Riches, Lashua and Spracklen, 2014; Vasan, 2011). Similarly, there are scholars in metal music studies who show just how subversive, transgressive and playful gender and sexuality can be in heavy metal (for example, see Overell, 2012; Riches, 2011). But these truths do not overturn the problematization of hegemonic (male, white) power at the heart of heavy metal: as a form of popular music it is a form of instrumental leisure, a form that

normalizes neo-liberalism, hegemonic masculinity and instrumental whiteness (Spracklen, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

This paper draws on new primary research on folk metal and its reputation within heavy metal, using a range of internet sources and semiotic analysis of folk metal bands' songs and images. In particular, I have undertaken a semiotic analysis of the band web-sites, Wikipedia, Facebook, and other metal-fan pages (predominantly metalarchives.com) where the bands songs are discussed: twelve months virtual ethnography, and purposive searches for conversations on folk metal using Google. As I have argued elsewhere, researching on-line has problems around representation (the voices are clearly not representative of the wider population: see Eynon, Schroeder and Fry, 2009; Fernback, 2007) and ethics (the nature of the semi-public space: see Eysenbach and Till, 2001), but it allows researchers to explore the ways in which a particular form of leisure might be discussed or used by some people (Spracklen, 2014, 2015). The public pages I have looked at tell us about the ways some metal fans think about folk metal – they are not representative of all fans but are *de facto* serious enough to about their fandom to post on-line. To understand why fans like any music, one needs to understand the complex interplay between the music, the lyrics and the ideologies associated with the musicians. The bands at the focus of the case study research are bands that have been deliberately selected because they are well-established in the industry, and generally known to fans of heavy metal: Turisas (Finland), Týr (Faroe Islands), Eluveitie (Switzerland), In Extremo (Germany) and Cruachan (Ireland). They have been chosen to represent different trends in folk metal and to cover the range of folk metal in Europe, the focus of the paper. They are not a representative sample but capture the diversity and of folk metal in Europe, and are indicative of folk metal's popularity and themes. In this article, I argue that folk metal is not easily dismissed as a fantasy space for young, white European men left behind by postmodernity, post-colonialism and a rearrangement of the gender order. Rather, folk metal remains central to the on-going construction of heavy metal as a form of commodified leisure that makes the power of Western, instrumental whiteness and hegemonic masculinity invisible, while ironically being in plain sight. Before I turn to an exposition of folk metal and an analysis of the bands, I need to turn to the wider theoretical framework.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Communicative and instrumental leisure*

I am interested in leisure forms and leisure spaces, and the way they can be used both to create a sense of identity and belonging, and a structure of subjugation, in the period of late modernity

in which we live. Leisure is the stuff we do in our free time, with some form of active agency. I have written about the paradox of leisure and used the work of Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987) to realise there are two types of leisure: communicative and instrumental (Spracklen, 2009, 2011, 2013b). That is, communicative leisure is something in which all humans have the capacity or potential to take part, in a way that is morally fulfilling or simply pleasurable. Leisure, I have argued, is a human need that emerged with our awareness of self, which expressed itself in the development of language, culture and art (Spracklen, 2011). The need for communicative leisure is universal. But the way in which we do leisure is profoundly shaped by the social structures that surround us. In modernity in the global North (that is, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), freedom in leisure became a privilege of the white, heteronormative (cf. Butler, 2006) elites (Spracklen, 2013b); at the same time, what I call instrumental leisure became a space for the construction and constraint of others: women, people with disabilities, minority-ethnic groups, and so on. Over time, some of those controls and constraints have been challenged, but others remain. This is the paradox of leisure today, the tension between the desire to use one's agency to be communicative in one's leisure choices and habits, while being constrained by the instrumental leisure of global capitalism and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971).

Popular music is a form of leisure. Historically, people made music and listened to live music for recreation and on holy days. In the modern age, popular music has become part of popular culture, a heavily contested collection of practices and industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). There is no doubt that popular music like radio and television is part of a wider hegemonic industry of control and exploitation, as Adorno suggests (1991). Popular music is produced for the consumption of the masses, ensuring docile obedience in the workplace and in the city. But popular music spaces are sites of leisure: leisure forms, practices, identities and behaviours. As such, they could be argued to be spaces for agency, resistance and communicative leisure. People make meaning in their lives through listening to music and talking about music with their friends in a communicative way. People get pleasure from the music they enjoy, by dancing or simply appreciating it in their own rooms. People find identity and community in popular music scenes and tribes, through the wearing of fashions, make-up and hairstyles (Bennett, 2000). Metal is one other form of popular music, one that claims a supposed unique ideology of individualism and alternativeness (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000), which in fact it shares with other subcultures.

Since the 1960s, alternative popular music has shaped the birth and evolution of a supposed, self-acclaimed authentic, communicative counter-cultural leisure space (Bennett,

2000). In the 1970s, Hebdige (1979) showed how a number of British youth subcultures constructed around style and popular music (such as mods and punks) were sites of counter-hegemonic resistance for marginalized (working-class) groups. But he also suggested, following the work of Gramsci (1971), that these sub-cultures were inevitably co-opted and drained of their transformative potential by mainstream culture. Following Williams (1977), Hebdige (1979) suggested that all alternative subcultures become co-opted into the mainstream, then fade away to residuality, or disappear altogether (as members of the scene die). Metal is currently thus in process of being co-opted by the mainstream – and is a space where instrumentality is at work, creating hegemonic forms of belonging and control.

### *Gender, 'Race' and Leisure*

There has been a strong empirical tradition in leisure studies that draws on structural and post-structural theories about gender. Structural feminists have argued that leisure is a site of male power, a place for the constraint of female agency (Aitchison, 2000; 2013; Scraton, 1994). Post-structural feminists take a more cautiously optimistic approach to leisure, and argue that it is possible for women to use their agency to shape their leisure lives and leisure spaces, though that agency is more or less constrained by the over-arching systems of intersectional inequality (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2013; Watson and Scraton, 2013). Along with research and theorizing about the way in which leisure constructs or constrains women's identity-making, many feminists have explored the ways in which male power, hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinities might be constructed in various leisure sites. The relationship between masculinity and full-contact team sports is well-rehearsed in the sociology of leisure. Gruneau and Whitson (1993) explore the ways in which ice-hockey is a sport in which Canadian boys learn how to be tough, Canadian men: boys learn to take knocks to fight tough, to respect coaches, to win at all costs, and to not be 'soft'. Gruneau and Whitson (1993) argue that ice-hockey constructs Canadianness and a particularly Canadian, working-class, white masculinity. The form of masculinity constructed is hegemonic, that which exists at the top of what Connell (1987, 1995) calls the gender order, the historical distribution of power between men and women. In the gender order, physical sports help construct hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity (Messner, 1992). Such social construction can be seen working in the sport of rugby. Donnelly and Young (1985) describe the bonding rituals of male, American rugby players as being central to the creation of 'correct' masculinity, rituals that have the performative character of what Butler (2006) calls heteronormativity. Pringle and Markula (2005)'s research on male, New Zealand rugby players also shows the importance of

physicality and embodiment in the construction of 'Polynesian' masculinities. Heavy metal, as a modern leisure form, a form of popular music, a product of the music industry and something subcultural, is obviously a space where gender identities are made and constrained (Hill, 2011, 2014; Riches, 2011; Riches, Lashua and Spracklen, 2014; Vasan, 2011). Heavy metal might be argued to be a leisure space where sexism and misogyny operate to keep women in their place (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Snell, 2014; Walser, 1993). And the performativity of heavy metal musicians might be seen to be constructing and validating hegemonic masculinity for male fans.

Intersecting with gender in leisure are other forms of structural and cultural inequality and oppression, such as class and 'race'. Class is important as a fundamental social structure that constrains leisure (Spracklen, 2009), and folk metal (and other forms of metal) might be perceived to be residual, working-class leisure forms. In leisure studies, there is a strong tradition of exploring the ways in which sports and other structured leisure forms perpetuate racial stereotypes, racism and racial hierarchies (Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Long and Hylton, 2002; Long and Spracklen, 2010). In recent years, the work of Kevin Hylton (2005, 2009) to apply Critical Race Theory to leisure has been particularly salient in opening leisure studies to exploring the significance of 'race' to leisure in this new century. From a Marxist perspective, Ben Carrington (2010) has been equally influential in showing how racism and racial discourses operate in everyday leisure forms such as sport and the media. This project builds on the work of Spracklen (2013a, 2013b) on the construction of instrumental whiteness in leisure. I take whiteness and blackness to refer to political forms that have no reality in biology. Spracklen (2013a, 2013b) argues that instrumental whiteness is produced in leisure spaces and through leisure activities whenever the instrumental rationality identified by Habermas colonizes the communicative lifeworld. Instrumental whiteness is a form of white identity that is constructed by instrumental leisure, which is made invisible and normal at the point of its production. That is, the post-imperial, post-modern leisure and cultural industries serve to make whiteness and blackness, through a process of identification, normalizing and Othering. For white people, their particular cultural capital and tastes become universal norms in cultural products such as music, while black people are made to feel they do not fit in such a leisure spaces and roles. Popular music plays an important role in normalizing racial discourses (Bennett, 2000; Spracklen, 2013b), as does heavy metal (Hoad, 2014; Spracklen, 2013a; Walser, 1993). As we will see below, folk-metal is also a key site for the creation of Habermasian instrumental whiteness.



## **Folk Metal**

Wikipedia is not the most reliable of websites, but its user-generated content is okay when assessing the popular or 'folk' knowledge (that which everybody thinks is the truth) of something in popular culture. According to Wikipedia (2014b):

Folk metal is a fusion genre of heavy metal music and traditional folk music that developed in Europe during the 1990s. It is characterised by the widespread use of folk instruments and, to a lesser extent, traditional singing styles... The earliest folk metal band was Skyclad from England. Their debut album *The Wayward Sons of Mother Earth* was released in 1990. It was not until 1994 and 1995 that other early contributors in the genre began to emerge from different regions of Europe as well as in Israel. Among these early groups, the Irish band Cruachan and the German band Subway to Sally each spearheaded a different regional variation that over time became known as Celtic metal and medieval metal respectively. Despite their contributions, folk metal remained little known with few representatives during the 1990s. It was not until the early 2000s when the genre exploded into prominence, particularly in Finland with the efforts of such groups as Finntroll, Ensiferum, Korpiklaani, Turisas, and Moonsorrow.

The genesis story of folk metal provided by the power of the internet is essentially correct. There is no mention here of Bathory's turn towards Viking metal, nor earlier attempts to mix folk music and rock in bands such as Horslips. The received truth is that folk metal appears in a pristine form in the shape of Skyclad, the English band that combined pagan themes and imagery with borrowed Celtic and English folk instruments and stylings. Skyclad were part of a wider pagan, Celtic turn in alternative culture in England in the 1980s, drawing as much on the 2000AD comic strip *Slaine* as much as any deep reading of actual pre-Christian history (Letcher, 2001). The dash of paganism plus violin/fiddle/bodhran approach to folk metal has been adapted by many folk metal bands. The paganism seems to be an essential part of what is considered folk in folk metal – in Europe, this paganism is drawn equally from the Celtic and the Scandinavian/Germanic mythological systems. The musical styles/instruments of folk – Irish folk, English folk, Finnish folk – is not as essential for the sound of folk metal bands, despite the claim made on Wikipedia. There are bands that use a lot of folk instruments, and some try to be authentic in their use of instruments, arrangements and songs. But many folk metal bands just sing about Vikings and dress like Vikings, and do not stray from the limited formats of heavy metal, be it power or death or black metal (Von Helden, 2010). The

important point about folk metal is that there is a pretence that the bands are drawing on older folk music and pagan myths to make music that is authentically local and national: this is the myth of purity at the heart of folk metal. And the myths that are celebrated are generally myths of masculine prowess and the warrior's search for glory in a world without the insecurity of neo-liberalism, globalization and the need to ask girls out nicely.

There is a perception that folk metal achieved mainstream success in the 2000s, and this flirtation with the instrumental mainstream of the metal industry somehow made folk metal less authentic, which in turn has led to a reaction against folk metal by those who once championed it. On one metal forum on 25 February 2014 someone asked the question 'Is Folk Metal in Decline?' and got the following response:

..it clearly is in decline (and probably dead by now) from the moment bands like Korpiklaani, Eluveitie and similar junk got so popular (the kind that always sing about drinking, adventures and myths and are n°1 on Nuclear Poop roster), with the subsequent appearance (sic.) of folk metal bands every-fucking-where (each more boring and repetitive than the precedent). Other side would be the not so "typical folk" (mixed with black, pagan, atmospheric, etc.) still make great stuff... Like Falkenbach, Agalloch, Manegarm, Moonsorrow and similar, ya know.  
(Vombatus, 2014)

But although folk metal bands have been signed to big labels such as Nuclear Blast and Spinefarm (part of EMI) it could be argued that they are not yet part of the mainstream of modern heavy metal, judged by sales of records and numbers of fans on social media. The following table (Table One) shows that folk metal bands (highlighted on bold) in general seem to be liked on Facebook reasonably well enough to have enough dedicated people buying merchandise, tickets and records to keep the bands going. They are certainly doing much better than three of the bands from the northern English black metal scene that I have researched previously (Winterfylleth, Wodensthron and old Corpse Road at the bottom of the table – see Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen, 2011; Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks, 2014). Even Winterfylleth, with their critical acclaim and themes common to many of the folk metal bands, have struggled to attract the same level of likes on Facebook, and are still well adrift from the last-popular folk metal band in this sample. That band, Cruachan, in turn is well adrift of the other folk metal bands. In turn, the folk metal bands struggle to rise to the heights of bands considered to be part of the mainstream of metal such as Opeth and Machine Head, who number their Facebook

likes in millions. These in turn come nowhere near the two bands that probably represent the metal/rock industry's globalized centre: Metallica and Guns n Roses, who each have between thirty to forty million likes. So folk metal is not in the mainstream of heavy metal, but it is shaped by it, and it is big enough in turn to influence discourses, norms and perceptions in heavy metal and the music industry.

Table One

Band	Likes on Facebook at 10.35am 17 December 2014
Guns n Roses	31, 016, 896
Metallica	38, 886, 401
Machine Head	1, 315, 522
Opeth	1, 456, 187
<b>Finntroll</b>	<b>289, 721</b>
<b>Turisas</b>	<b>330, 345</b>
<b>Týr</b>	<b>200, 240</b>
<b>Eluveitie</b>	<b>748, 507</b>
<b>In Extremo</b>	<b>366, 109</b>
<b>Cruachan</b>	<b>61, 916</b>
Winterfylleth	11, 254
Wodensthron	5,662
Old Corpse Road	2, 672

### *Turisas*

Turisas described themselves as 'battle metal' when they were first formed, and that was the name of the first album they released in 2004. The band has existed since 1997, but did not become a regular touring band until they signed with Century Media in 2003. The band has been all male and all white with the exception of one female accordionist. They are named after the pagan Finnish God of War. The album *Battle Metal* was promoted heavily by the label, and Turisas found themselves on the covers of metal magazines dressed like warriors with red and black war-paint. At the time they were the popularisers of a particular style of Finnish folk metal alongside Korpiklaani. They used some 'folk' instruments in their recordings – accordion and violin – and ultimately employed musicians to play them full-time. The band has struggled

to maintain a regular line-up but its main song-writer, vocalist and musician Mathias Nygård has remained. The songs on *Battle Metal* are all heroically bombastic or reflectively maudlin. Most of the songs are in English, but there is a Finnish drinking song. The pattern of using English lyrics and romantic stereotypes and myths about pseudo-medieval warfare (the clashing of steel and the slaying of one's enemies with one's mighty prowess) continued into the next two Turisas albums, though the latest Turisas album has turned into something more modern and symphonic.

Turisas are best known for the 2007 album *The Varangian Way*. The album is a concept album telling the true story of Vikings (Varangians) who travelled to Byzantium (Holmgard) to become mercenaries serving the Roman Emperor. The album is full of nostalgia for the age of manly Vikings making sacrifices and long journeys, and tells the listener that the Vikings following this pilgrimage to Byzantium are true, honourable warrior-men worthy of our attention. Of course, the Vikings who attacked the West and the Varangians were not from Finland – they were Danes and Norse on the one hand and Scandinavian *Rus* on the other. But the story offers the listeners a chance to be that Viking on that quest. There is also a peculiar nostalgia for the Christian Byzantine Empire itself, and that empire's hopeless struggle to stop the tide of Islam (Gregory, 2010). The strange dissonance of celebrating both pagan Viking warriors and Christian emperors is not something that has been noticed on-line. The album's masculine fraternal mythology seems to suggest that the Byzantines might live thousands of miles away, but they are like us (the white fans in Europe who identify with the Vikings heading for Holmgard and beyond): fans are reminded that the Byzantines are white Europeans, and even if they might think paganism is better than Christianity, the suggestion becomes it is better a Christian than a Muslim.

On-line there are different reactions to Turisas. Some people think the bombast and the folk in their version of folk metal is too ugly:

Turisas are not a terrible band, and this isn't a terrible album, but it is pretty frustrating and often inept and annoying. They're one of those ever-popular, toned down extreme metal bands with symphonic overtones and lyrics about Vikings and war and battle and such, with both harsh and clean vocals - none of which are really good - and a generally midpaced (sic.) tempo. This only really sucks when the band is attempting to be heroic and epic, and otherwise it's generally decent... overall this music is far too fluffy and pompous to be of any real worth.

(Empyreal, 2008)

For others, Turisas exist to affirm their masculine, pagan warrior Viking identity:

The chorus on this one will make you want to raise a horn of mead in one hand and a sword in the other--the gang vocals are better as well, really sounding like a hall full of Vikings raising their voices in song... The whole album takes you on a journey with ebb and flow, ups and downs, and it is hard to not listen to it all the way through every time... Horns up for Turisas! This is a winner and will definitely end up on my Best Of list for 2007 easily. Now I wish they'd tour the US and help show the mallcore kids where it's at!

(Corviderrant, 2007)

Many folk metal fans, though, are suspicious of Turisas, especially since the slick videos and production of the last two albums (see review of the last album and discussion MetalStorm, no date). They are seen as inauthentic, not proper 'pagan' metal, not genuine pagans. So in the last few years other bands have risen in stature in folk metal: Týr and Eluveitie.

### *Týr*

Týr claim to be from the Faroe Islands but were formed in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, in 1998. The band is all male and all white. They were signed to Napalm in 2006, then graduated up to the bigger Metal Blade in 2012. They have released seven albums to date, with the latest being the first on Metal Blade: *Valkyrja* (2013). The key founding members of the band such as Heri Joensen are from the Faroe Islands and Denmark is the hegemonic centre to which young people from the islands migrate for study or work. Týr have a Faroese web-site and make a big play of describing their music as Faroese metal, and using Faroese themselves in lyrics and imagery. On their official web-site it states:

A distinctive trademark that sets TÝR apart from most other bands of the Viking metal genre is the authenticity of their music: "Traditional music dating back to the Vikings, that is not preserved anywhere else in the world, not even in Iceland, is passed on in an oral tradition here and it is still alive and well. That is what we build our music on and draw great inspiration from," explains Joensen.

(Týr, no date)

The folk melodies used in many of the songs do come from the traditional canon of Faroese and Norwegian folk music, though how much of this tradition can be traced back to the Vikings is questionable: European folk music owes more to the modern invention of a mythical, pristine rural tradition than other traditional forms of music. That is, folk music in Europe was created by romantic nationalists seeking these pure traditions and homogenizing the mish-mash of popular music they found when they went out to record whatever poor people were playing (Francmanis, 2002; Kolb, 2013; Spracklen, 2013a, 2013b). While Týr might be using folk melodies from the tradition, their musical style is quite conventional and conservative: they play true or classic heavy metal in the style of Judas Priest or Iron Maiden, with some influences from power metal. And they sing mainly in English.

They are however claimed as authentic by the folk metal scene (Granholm, 2011; Hoad, 2013): Týr have a pagan name (another Thor-type god) and look like Vikings in their stage dress and band photographs. They use Thor's Hammers as stage jewellery and in album artwork. They have also built up a strong following in the Faroe Islands especially since they used Faroese national poetry in one of their songs. More controversially, their use of Germanic runes in their logo and album imagery led them to be accused of supporting neo-Nazism by anti-fascists in Germany, an accusation the band met with the song 'Shadow of the Swastika' on the 2011 album *Lay of Thrym* (see interview: Metal List, 2013). This song attacks the far-right for appropriating supposedly authentic heathen symbols and images associated with pre-Christian northern Europe (the symbols that have been taken to be central to the neo-pagan beliefs of the Asatru movement – see Snook, 2013). More usually, the themes in Týr's songs celebrate pagan identity, Viking identity and the hegemonic masculinity of the Viking warrior combined with the modern-day heavy metal anthem of being an individual.

### *Eluveitie*

Eluveitie were founded in Switzerland in 2002. The band uses 'Gaulish' lyrics and Celtic themes in their artwork and songs. The band is an attempt to 'honour' the culture of the Helvetians, the inhabitants of Switzerland at the time of the Romans before the area was subsumed into the Roman Empire. In a discussion article on-line about where the band name comes from, it is claimed:

Eluveitie is Helvetic Gaulish for "I am Helvetian" which is based an inscription dating to the earliest record of the Celtic Helvetii tribe from what is now Switzerland.

(MetalRiotJD, 2011)

However, on Wikipedia the name is correctly identified as being written in Etruscan to describe someone who was from the Helveti (the inscription and its interpretation can be found at Lexicon Leponticum, no date). The name is a serious attempt to associate the band and its members and its purpose with the authentic Celtic past of Switzerland. It is a studio project set up by Chrigel Glanzmann, a player of folk instruments such as the pipes and whistles, who then turned it into 'proper' band by hiring touring musicians. There have been a number of people in the band through the years, the most stable line-ups including two women as well as half a dozen or-so men. The band uses 'authentic' Celtic folk instruments alongside mainstream melodic death metal. Essentially, the Celtic folk on which they draw is recognizably Irish: that is, recognizable in their instruments, which are those used in Irish folk music (especially fiddles, tin whistles and bodhran drums), and the melodies, which come from Irish reels. How this modern-day Irish folk music has any connection to a long-vanished Celtic culture in Switzerland is clearly uncertain. Similarly, it is unclear how much of Eluveitie's music draws on the actual traditions of Swiss folk music of the last hundred and fifty years. This is the symbolic construction of imaginary community at work, where folk is reduced to a Celtic stereotype of bagpipes, fiddles and kilts – and where warrior masculinities are celebrated in the idea of resisting the evil Romans. Despite the use of traditional, acoustic instruments the band is quite 'European' in its use of production: their albums have been increasingly polished and poppy. They signed to Nuclear Blast Records in 2007 who have released the last five of their six albums.

The band draw on the usual hegemonic masculine imagery of warriors and pagan gods, albeit Celtic ones instead of Germanic ones. They sing mainly in English but use lyrics written in Gaulish in some songs. Eluveitie are the rising stars of folk metal because they play both a popular style of metal (the chart-friendly melodic death metal pop of In Flames) and a popular style of folk (Irish, which gets mixed up with Celtic, especially in mainland Europe).

### *In Extremo*

In Extremo are from Germany, and were formed in 1995. The band have released eleven albums and are on the Metal Blade label. They have a huge following in Germany and headline festivals there. The band is all male and all white. Although influenced by heavy metal and the early folk-metal turn in extreme metal, they are equally influenced by the growth in Germany of goth, neo-folk and the 'mittelalter' scene (Eckart, 2005). Mittelalter music is music from the

middle ages, which is played at medieval festivals and events around Germany. The music is acoustic folk music, played with big drums and bagpipes, along with other traditional instruments. The festival and the music are a modern attempt to find authenticity and belonging in Germany's medieval culture without reviving the Nazi ideology of *volk*. That is, the mittelalter aesthetic is a re-imagined, playfully constructed 'old-time' culture of castles and knights, travelling minstrels and plays (for similar movements in France see Haines, 2004). The bombastic music, stage make-up and costumes of the band (and the scene) owe more to Hollywood films than they do to the lived reality of medieval culture, though the mittelalter musicians sometimes follow the 'early music' path of finding authentic sources for instruments and songs (Wilson, 2013). It is a re-imagining of the *reich* of the Holy Roman Empire that carefully avoids the ways in which that *reich* and its *volk* culture was used by the third *reich* of the Nazis (see also Kolb, 2013). Mittelalter songs are found from early music collections, which in turn come from a wide range of religious (Christian) and secular sources.

In Extremo's founding members met and established themselves through performing at mittelalter festivals and markets. But it was the rock and metal influence that gave them a new sound and a route to mainstream success in the German rock charts:

At the very beginning of In Extremo, in the mid-nineties, the band was divided into two parties: those who loved rock and those who loved medieval music. It wasn't until 1998 that these two parts were put together to form one band. To this day, they have recorded eleven studio albums as well as four live CDs and DVDs. Their three works *Sieben* (2003), *Sängerkrieg* (2008) and *Sterneneisen* (2011) all reached gold status of which the latter two entered the Media Control Charts at #1.

(In Extremo, no date)

The band use 'medieval' instruments such as bagpipes alongside electric instruments that form the usual line-up for rock bands. The songs that they play are a combination of traditional medieval/folk ballads with heavy metal themes and sounds, and original pieces that combine bombastic gothic-metal with the mittelalter instruments. They sing in German and the languages of the original songs. They also do covers of pop songs, most famously the incredibly over-the-top goth-rock song 'This Corrosion' by the most-famous goth-rock band The Sisters of Mercy. The band members do not fit the folk-metal warrior mould, though their whiteness and their masculinity continues to be performed in their videos and their live shows. But they make folk music and national-folkness acceptable. What the band provides to its German metal



fans is a way to become a part of a make-believe medieval German past, while remaining sufficiently metal to be accepted as a metalhead.

### *Cruachan*

Cruachan were (and are) a self-styled Celtic Metal band from Ireland, founded in 1992 by Keith Fay, who has remained the band's key member. The band members are all white but not all male, and the band has had a female singer for many years in their line-up. The band's name is taken from the ancient capital of Connacht, named in Irish folk-tales and identified by archaeologists with a real site in Ireland called Rathcroghan. The band were inspired directly by Skyclad as well as the growing underground black-metal scene - indeed, the early songs are clearly in the black metal genre, though influenced by Irish folk-rock and Irish/Celtic myths. Cruachan use 'Celtic' instruments (such as tin whistles and bodhrans) as well as Irish/Celtic themes/myths in lyrics and album covers. Being from Ireland they have been able to make the claim they are authentically Celtic and able to use both the themes and the music. They have had long career, and have disbanded and moved between labels. They are now re-formed and signed to folk/pagan metal label Trollzorn, who have released the latest album *Blood for the Blood God* (2014) – a reference to pagan Irish mythology. As a band formed before the folk-metal trend, Cruachan suffered from not being new and not being either Finnish or Viking when the folk-metal trend emerged in the 2000s. In the artwork and promotional material for the new album they strike folk-metal poses in an imagined Iron Age Celtic warrior garb, playing the game of hegemonic masculinity and folk-whiteness. In interviews Keith Fay has been quick to claim authenticity for his band's music, and has questioned the ways in which folk music has been used by other folk-metal bands:

Interviewer: Of late, there is a tendency to interchange the terms “folk metal” or even “pagan metal” with “viking metal”. As a Celtic band, how do you feel about such attitudes?

Keith:

I don't know, to be honest. There is no real defined “Viking music”, so all these Nordic bands use “sea shanty” type tunes to match their music. A lot of these bands, especially the bigger ones, are called Folk Metal but they don't really understand what real Folk Music is; though I know this is not true for all of them... We in Cruachan have grown up absorbed in this music all our lives, steeped in its history and significance. It irritates me to see people disrespect (sic.) the genre, just to get a punchy sounding folk part into

a song... When I first started, I would have thought folk metal was the opposite with regard to the macho aspect since fiddles and flutes don't come across as very macho! Though if people automatically associate Valhalla and Odin with Folk Metal then it is like I said – wrong. There is no defined folk music that can be tied to that, hence all the “sea shanty” type music. Celtic mythology and Irish / Gaelic mythology have a real folk musical presence associated with it [unlike Norse mythology].

(Terrorizer, 2010)

For Cruachan, then, it is important to distinguish their authentic Irish-folk background from the macho Vikings and the northern European pagan warriors. They do this by having lead female vocals and songs that are not solely about battles.

## **Discussion**

The folk in folk metal makes the music fun to listen to, and there is in the powerful songs and performances, whether viewed live or listened to through technology, a visceral pleasure that can be shared equally by men and women, and any ethnicity. But the folk in folk metal is a problematic ideology, a form of instrumental rationality about authenticity, nation and nationalism (Hoad, 2013; Kolb, 2013; Spracklen, 2013a, 2013b; Spracklen and Henderson, 2013; Von Helden, 2010). Who are the folk who have inspired this music? They are supposedly the true ancestors of the musicians playing the music. The bands in this research are all trying to identify with some reputed folk culture that existed before modern times. That folk culture is not the precedent of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural culture of nations now; these folk in the past are pure white peoples, monocultural and monoracial, who have supposedly preserved ways of thinking and being that have been transferred in blood lines down the ages to the present day. This folk metal desire to find authenticity in folk is a quest for pure and holy blood, a quest for belonging in an un-mixed, white race. For some of the folk/heathen elements of 1990s black metal, there was an explicitly racist purpose for their adoption of Thor's hammers, Odinism, Viking imagery and heroic pagan myths (Spracklen, 2006, 2009). This continues today in the outer reaches of National Socialist Black Metal. While I do not think that the folk-metal bands in this research are explicitly racist, they are romantic, conservative nationalists who sell the idea and myth of racial purity. The bands in folk metal say to their listeners that this modern world has lost its meaning and purpose because people do not understand their roots, so here are some stories about those roots. But they do not write songs that explore the messiness and complexity of identity and belonging. They reduce such complexities to simple,

imagined and imaginary communities defined by race and nation (Kolb, 2013; Snell, 2014). That is, they perform racial purity and instrumental whiteness, and allow their white fans to identify with this imaginary pure white origin (Spracklen, 2013a). In turn, listeners who cannot share the notion that they are pure descendants of Vikings (or whoever it is) are taught a lesson that they do not truly belong – you can be a citizen of Norway, say, but you cannot have that pure blood identification with the nation's past. With all this construction of whiteness comes the simultaneous attempt to hide it through protestations that all they are doing is playing with myths and telling stories that people have forgotten.

There is no doubt that women fans of heavy metal enjoy folk metal with the same kind of passion and intensity as male fans, as well as the same kind of postmodern playfulness. And there is no doubt that they find identity and belonging through listening to the music. Following Fast (1999), we can even see how the performances of folk metal bands might be the source of erotic pleasure for fans, and that performativity might be transgressive in transmission and reception. We may also take note that there are woman musicians in the bands in this research, and probably many more trying to make a name in the sub-genre. That said, there is no doubt that the performativity at the heart of folk metal is hegemonically masculine (Connell, 1987, 1995; Messner, 1992), rooted in myths of warriors and fighting invaders and others to preserve their 'pagan' ways of life. The warrior myth serves to normalize the hegemonic masculinity still in place in modernity. The performances tell fans and other listeners that before this time men lived as proper, tough men, defending their wives and their families. Men proved their worth on the battlefield. And men today are the inheritors of this tradition, this myth. Even if laws and norms have changed the status of women around the world, men still have enormous social, cultural and political power (Watson and Scraton, 2013). We still live in the heteronormative gender order in the global North and in heavy metal, where women musicians are expected to dress in short skirts and look pretty, and where sexism and misogyny are normalized codes of rhetoric even where sub-genres of metal might challenge those codes (Butler, 2006; Hill, 2014; Overell, 2012). Folk metal reminds men of their hegemony and their supposed cultural birthright: as Connell argues (1995), this is the hegemonic myth of masculinity that men behave in this way because this is how men are made – that is, men are just meant to be like this, and so equality becomes a false step (this is the argument about gender equality made by right-wing populists – that is just a scientific fact that men are better than women, and it resonates with the same sorts of essentialist myths about the scientific truth of 'race' and culture). Men, goes the myth, just are better than women at things like fighting, and ruling. Folk metal's obsession with warriors and cultural purity reduces belonging and

identity in a multi-cultural, cosmopolitan polity to a few exclusive myths. It is intersectional inequality at work (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2013), showing white men how to be white men and showing women and ethnic minorities their place in European society.

## **Conclusion**

It would be simple to dismiss folk metal as an irrelevant and marginal leisure form. Heavy metal itself is viewed as a residual form of culture by many academics and cultural commentators: it is seen as something unfashionable, stupid and relatively harmless, a music and leisure space for stupid people (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000). Folk metal itself seems to represent through its performativity the worst excesses of the heavy-metal stereotype: the swords, the fantasy, the sexism and the outrageous histrionics. Furthermore, while heavy metal has entered mainstream cultural spaces, folk metal might be seen as something like a *palimpsest* of metal's recent, outsider, white teenage male roots (for those roots see Walser, 1993). It could be argued, then, that folk metal has become something that serves as a comfortable, communicative leisure space for those who have lost power in the recent decades: the white European, working-class men who have faced challenges to their assumed privileges from women, globalization, immigration and postmodernity.

But folk metal cannot be easily dismissed as a fantasy space for young, white European men left behind by postmodernity, post-colonialism and a rearrangement of the gender order. Rather, folk metal remains central to the on-going construction of heavy metal as a form of commodified, instrumental leisure (Spracklen, 2014) that makes the power of Western, instrumental whiteness and hegemonic masculinity invisible, while ironically being in plain sight. It is part of the dominant culture – hegemonically masculine, white (northern/Western European) – that embraces the narratives and myths of neo-liberal individualism and nationalism.

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