"Record Store Guy's Head Explodes and the Critic is Speechless!"

Questions of Genre in Drone Metal

Owen Coggins

Abstract

This article examines questions of genre in the translocal and marginal music culture of drone metal, a radically slow and extended form of metal founded on extremes of amplification, distortion and repetition. I examine the tentative formation of genre in connections forged between musicians and between recordings, establishing sonic and symbolic conventions. I note the deliberate associations with bands (notably Black Sabbath) which situated this music as metal. I then turn to the role of listener discourse in constituting genre, attending to listeners' experience of and communication about the key terms 'drone' and 'metal'. After noting the importance of vagueness and ambiguity in genre designations, particularly in drone metal's translocal marginality, I show that relevant genre characteristics for listeners include not just musical sounds, but also affective, experiential, embodied and conscious subjective states. Finally, I suggest that treating genre as a constellation of points, viewed in different but related ways from different standpoints, is particularly useful in understanding drone metal as a loosely constituted genre with fragmented, disparate and intermittently connected audiences.

Introduction

The 'questions of genre in drone metal' in the title of this article immediately betray a tension, in implying that drone metal is already a thing that can be coherently discussed, even if genre is to then be questioned. Genre relates to issues of origins (Brown, 2015), and is always a matter of ongoing contestation and negotiation of boundaries which include and exclude (Frith,

1996, p. 88), and perhaps especially so in metal (Weinstein, 2000, p. 14; Walser, 1993, p. 6-7). Drawing upon a remark by Fredric Jameson about genre as constituted by points or stars (Jameson, 1982, p. 322; noted by Robert Walser in relation to metal, 1993, p. 27), I extend this stellar metaphor in thinking of genre as constellation. Situating genre as discernible amidst a network of points, 'constellations' allow for different perspectives and standpoints to produce plural, distinct, yet related understandings of particular genres, their canons, boundaries, practices and values. This is especially useful for understanding drone metal, a marginal and translocal metal subgenre which, unlike many (or even most) metal and popular music genres, has never centred around a local scene (such as, for example, Death Metal in Tampa, Gothenburg, or Belo Horizonte; or Black Metal in Oslo, Brittany or the Pacific North West). Deena Weinstein has commented on how decentralized contemporary media have affected the development of metal genres in the twenty-first century:

> Though there aren't any new (at least widely agreed upon) genres in metal in this century, it is important to add that naming and having names stick for sub-subgenres is more difficult in the present environment, given the lack of centralized metal critics writing for a few magazines, and the publicists and record stores that used their categories (Weinstein, 2015, p. 19).

While I suggest that drone metal is a new metal genre in metal this century (though the first recordings retrospectively recognized as drone metal emerged in the 1990s), this case confirms rather than refutes Weinstein's observations about the tentative levels of agreement about nascent genres and their appropriate names, in a particularly fragmented, translocal, marginal and decentralised discourse on genre.

Methodology and Structure

This article emerges from my doctoral research project examining religious discourse, ritual practice and reports of mysticism surrounding bands like SunnO))), Earth, Bong, Sleep and Om. Between September 2012 and September 2015, I collected and analysed data from a variety of sources on drone metal, using a mixed methods approach which centred on listener discourse and experience. Already a longtime listener, I examined sound recordings, surrounding artwork and packaging, and promotional materials. I also compiled many thousands of critical and amateur reviews and other coverage from online sources, focusing on recordings and musicians widely considered important from the last twenty-five years, together with new recordings released during the research period. These sources of discourse around drone metal were combined with participant observation ethnography at a total of 91 concerts and music festivals featuring drone metal or other relevant metal or experimental styles. Between September 2013 and September 2014 I collected survey responses via paper or online flyers from fellow attendees at drone metal concerts by Gravetemple, Dylan Carlson, Bong, Om and SunnO))), as well as for Nazoranai (drone/noise), Ufomammut (psychedelic doom) and Tim Hecker (drone electronica) concerts for related comparisons. From the 430 total survey responses, I arranged 74 interviews, conducted in person or online. Interviews were transcribed and I conducted discourse analysis of themes which emerged throughout the research.

I used "drone metal" as a nominal genre label throughout the research, based on usage from my prior participation as a listener rather than as a result of broad consensus: some other people used some other genre terms, though drone metal was generally understood. Genre designations of bands understood here as "drone metal" are understood slightly differently in the (sparse) academic literature too: SunnO))), Earth and Sleep are described as drone doom bands (Piper, 2008, p. 67), with SunnO))) elsewhere aligned with the harsh noise of Merzbow (Thacker, 2014, p. 192), implicitly situated as black metal (Ishmael, 2014, p. 140), included under the heading of post-metal (Wright, 2015), or described as a band who 'play music at the fringes of the avant-garde' (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 133).

Musicians (in metal and elsewhere) often seek to avoid genre terminology, perceiving it as reductively categorising artistic expression. Dylan Carlson of seminal drone metal band Earth, for example, states 'by the time there's a genre tag attached, I'm long gone. I'm doing something else' (Carlson in *Within the Drone*, 2006). Genre labels are often associated with the perceived taint of marketing structures, for instance in noise music (Novak, 2013, p. 121) and black metal (Stosuy, 2012, p. 49). Listeners, too, reject genre as restrictive labels and discrete boxes, as limiting artistic creativity, and by extension, limiting the (sub)cultural capital displayed and performed in their own music taste. Nevertheless, even if placed under suspicion, genre categories are still widely used, and have even been described as practically indispensable in talking about music (Holt, 2007, p. 2).

First I outline a history of drone metal from the early 1990s to the present, attending to key recordings and examining the deliberate connections early drone metal bands made to heavy metal's history and to each other, in a crucial stage in forming a generic identity and situating it as metal. I then demonstrate the importance of listeners' discursive practice in these processes. Commentators question the metal status of particular performers or recordings, discuss the appropriateness of a conventional metal vocabulary, and contrast drone metal music with other music that is less controversially understood as metal. The particular ways and places in which metal status is questioned nevertheless situate drone metal as a metal subgenre, albeit one which tests the limits of such categorisation. I then show that listeners use the term "drone" not as a purely technical or sonic term, but within a specific context which draws on previous uses and contributes to the ongoing work of genre discourse. By drawing similarities and comparisons with other music, and even with other sonic and non-sonic experiences, listeners make sense of their experience of drone metal amongst related affects, feelings, listening practices and responses. Particularly when negotiating discussions of musical experience that is difficult to describe, subjective responses also become relevant to genre discourse: how the music makes a listener feel is considered alongside how the music sounds. To account for the disparate, varied

but intersecting uses of genre terminology by people who talk about drone metal, I outline an understanding of genre as constellation. This concept is exemplified by online uses of genre terms to "tag" music. Finally, I note the especially fragmented and loose genre constellation for drone metal, an effect of the particularly marginal and translocal contexts for the production, dissemination and consumption of the music as well as its surrounding discourse.

Drone Metal 1990-Present

The extreme subgenre that later became known as drone metal coalesced around a number of influential recordings made in the 1990s. These recordings, by Earth, Boris, Sleep and later followers, were situated by their sound and surrounding symbolic practice as linked to each other and related to an older metal tradition. These connections and conventions set a loose but distinctive template, enabling later bands to be understood as continuing in this sketched tradition. At first, due to the extreme marginality of early drone metal bands, recordings were more important than live performances (Carlson in *Within the Drone*, 2006). Albums left lasting if obscure documents of long-form distorted noise that could be discovered far away from years later. Any popular music genre has antecedent influences, and origins are retrospectively chosen rather than objectively observed. The 1993 album *2: Special Low Frequency Version*, by the band Earth (commonly known as *Earth 2*) is widely held as the first and most influential drone metal album, although the band had released a similar-sounding EP, *Extra-Capsular Extraction*, in 1991. *Earth 2* contained extended tracks of layered, distorted guitars and very slow riff cycles, involving little else but multi-layered, downtuned guitar distortion on its three long tracks. The cover art features a photograph of a vast blue sky and a tiny line of grass, a tent and horse, implying the expansive, minimalist but overwhelming atmosphere of the sound. The back cover displayed a number of unattributed quotes, as if from reviews but perhaps invented or intended somewhat satirically. The quotes do, however, foreshadow themes that are prevalent in drone metal

discourse: the music is imagined to offer a physical relationship with sound, a connection to other, distant times, or bodily, mental and even spiritual therapy.

> …found it difficult to think of the things that disturb me…Afterwards, everything seemed right with the world.
> A new, yet seemingly ancient kind of experience…very unusual!!
> …A PHYSICAL PRESENCE IN THE ROOM…I CAN ALMOST TOUCH THE SOUNDS.
> When I got up, I could swear I was a few inches off the ground!
> Forget drugs and alcohol…I am now very, very mellow!
> I feel alert yet very calm…Wonderful after a hard day.
> MY TENSION HEADACHES HAVE DISAPPEARED!
> Always had trouble relaxing…after auditioning Earth 2, had an incredibly deep sleep (Earth, 1993, punctuation and capitals as in original).

Two 1996 recordings then extended Earth's template in single hour-long tracks emphasising monotony, feedback and guitar noise. Californian band Sleep graduated from their more conventionally Black Sabbath-style doom metal album *Sleep's Holy Mountain* (1992a) to produce an epic hymn to marijuana in gradually-evolving slow riffs and a vocabulary of spiritual pilgrimage. Due to record company difficulties, this album-length track emerged in several versions entitled either *Jerusalem* (1996, 1998a, 1998b) at 53 minutes, or *Dopesmoker* (2003, 2012) a further ten minutes longer. Meanwhile Boris, from Tokyo, released the album *Absolutego* (1996), which opened with more than ten minutes of building feedback, amplifier fuzz and slow bass rumble, then trudged through slow, noisy and repetitive riffs for the majority of the 65-minute title track before dissolving back into noisy sludge.

Due to their scattered location, extremity and sonic contrast with ever-faster styles of extreme metal, early drone metal bands remained marginal. Earth were based in Seattle during the explosion in popularity of grunge from that area. Earth's Dylan Carlson was best friends with Kurt Cobain of flagship grunge band Nirvana, and Cobain sang on one early Earth track 'Divine and Bright,' recorded in 1990 (Earth, 2010). Earth were also signed to the record label Sub Pop, which was strongly associated with grunge: but despite these geographical, personal and institutional connections, Earth were not considered grunge, with Carlson noting that Sub Pop didn't know how to label them (Carlson in *Within the Drone*, 2006). Sleep's incredulous record company considered *Dopesmoker/Jerusalem* to be unmarketable, as it did not fit any existing categories of metal, while Boris' debut album was released on their own label and was far removed in sound from the hardcore scene with which the band members had been associated.

From the late 1990s, many more drone metal bands have emerged. Among the most notable of these are Om, a band emerging from the defunct Sleep, and SunnO))), the best known drone metal band who have also spawned other groups with overlapping personnel (Gravetemple, Burial Chamber Trio, KTL, Penntemple, and Nazoranai to name just a few). Other bands are from the US (ASVA, Robedoor), Canada (Menace Ruine, AUN, Nadja, Gates, Northumbria), Japan (Corrupted, Kawabata Makoto, Acid Mothers Temple) the UK (Bong, Ommadon, Bismuth, Greg(o)rian, Black Heath coven), Finland (Dark Buddha Rising, Horse Latitudes), and elsewhere (Orthodox from Spain; Aluk Todolo, Monarch! and Sombre Presage from France; Black Boned Angel from New Zealand). These bands and musicians have used drone structures, tones and timbres while drawing on other sonic influences related more or less distantly to heavy metal, such as hardcore, progressive rock, harsh noise[i], power electronics[ii] and kosmische music[iii], and are distributed across a continuum or constellation of commitment to and definition as drone metal or drone music.

Connections and Conventions: Musicians

While extreme, unusual, and significantly departing from existing metal and hard rock styles, early drone metal recordings acknowledged their influences from the history of metal, and from Black Sabbath in particular. At the same time, bands also drew deliberate links to similar-sounding contemporary musicians and began to develop the sonic, formal and symbolic conventions of an emerging subgenre.

Sleep had already highlighted their adherence to Black Sabbath's style in covering Sabbath tracks 'Lord of this World' (Black Sabbath, 1971; Sleep, 1991) and 'Snowblind' (Black Sabbath, 1972; Sleep, 1992b) and copying the title and sleeve design of Sabbath's *Volume 4* (1972) with their *Volume 2* (Sleep, 1991). Julian Cope added an imagined and exaggerated religious slant to this homage, describing the band's *Dopesmoker* as:

> inhabiting a world in which the first four Black Sabbath LPs - BLACK SABBATH, PARANOID, MASTER OF REALITY and VOLUME 4 – had become sacred testaments on which to base their entire belief system (Cope, 2004).

The band Earth chose their name for a sense of weighty foundations, as well as being the original name used by Black Sabbath (Carlson in Richardson, 2008). In a photograph on the back cover of *Earth 2*, founder member Dylan Carlson wears a shirt displaying the logo of death metal band Morbid Angel, identifying him as a metal listener and further asserting a visual association with extreme metal, albeit of a different style. By including a cover of 'Peace in Mississippi' by Jimi Hendrix on second album *Pentastar: In the Style of Demons* (1996), Earth also paid tribute to the influential master of distortion and feedback. Original Earth bass-player Joe Preston later joined the band Melvins, who also experimented with a slower, sludgier sound, especially on *Lysol* (1992). Boris, in turn, were named after a slow, repetitive 1991 Melvins track, and their own first album *Absolutego* (1996) also featured the same subtitle 'Special Low Frequency Version' that

Earth had introduced on *Earth 2*. Dylan Carlson reportedly responded to *Absolutego* by describing it approvingly as 'the sound of slugs fucking,' a phrase since repeated and celebrated elsewhere by drone metal listeners (e.g. DroneMuzak, 2013).

Later, SunnO))) named themselves after an amplifier manufacturer (Sunn Amps from Portland, Oregon), while also making a verbal association between 'sun' and the band Earth. They also recorded a song named 'Dylan Carlson' after the Earth guitarist (on *Grimmrobe Demos*, 2000a), collaborated with Boris (SunnO))) & Boris, 2006), and recorded highly abstract cover versions of heavy tracks by Melvins, Metallica and Immortal on *ØØVoid* (2000b), *3: Flight of the Behemoth* (2002), and *Black One* (2005) respectively. A later one-off recording was made by musicians from SunnO))) and doom bands Cathedral and Electric Wizard, who named the shortlived project Teeth of Lions Rule the Divine (2002) after a song title from *Earth 2*. In this way, a small number of bands made repeated links between each other, helping to form connections of an emerging subgenre.

Close connections between groups were also strengthened through mutually associated personnel. For example, producer Randall Dunn worked with SunnO))), Boris and Earth amongst others; and Stuart Dahlquist formed drone metal group ASVA and has also played in SunnO))) and Burning Witch. Links were affirmed when Om, SunnO))), Boris, Earth and others toured together or performed at the same events, even in some cases releasing collaboration albums (SunnO))) and Boris, 2006; SunnO))) and Earth, 2006). These symbolic, associative and personal links between each group helped to establish verbal and visual codes alongside sonic similarities, constituting drone metal as a coherent subgenre. These codes included, for some musicians more than others, the use of sounds, themes and imagery associated with spirituality, esoteric religion and mysticism. The use of images and titles associated with Black Sabbath and other groups, together with emphasis on heavy distortion and amplification, meanwhile, made strong claims for the situating of drone metal within heavy metal. Even with a small number of recordings by geographically dispersed bands, the close network of mutual influences and their

marked sonic difference from other extreme metal meant that by the early 2000s a recognisable subgenre had developed.

Connections and Conventions: Listeners

Listeners also participate in the construction of genre. Repeating, reapplying and reinforcing characteristic markers such as slogans and descriptions all continue this "genre work" of drawing and strengthening connections between musicians, recordings and listening experiences. For example, this occurs when listeners repeat phrases identified with particular bands or recordings, sing along with recordings or live shows, performatively embody iconic or significant phrases, or practise a textual analogue of singing along in typing out such lines in comment threads on metal articles or Youtube postings. Through this kind of practice, listeners perform their recognition of the appropriateness or "fit" of a particular musical experience with a pre-existing understanding of a genre, itself constituted in the practices and discourse of listeners and musicians.

Just as musicians repeating phrases such as "Special Low Frequency Version" formed links between bands at the level of production, listeners also make connections across the genre by quoting lines from or making reference to one band, album track or performance, while discussing another. Thus the phrase "Maximum Volume Yields Maximum Results," included in every SunnO))) record sleeve and thereby closely associated with that band, is used in survey responses, interviews and online discourse to talk about other bands. Using repeated brackets to connote heavy amplification and drone metal sound, is also widely used beyond references to the band SunnO))), to the point of being described sardonically as 'the ancient symbol for drone music' in one review (Robin, 2014).

Asking listeners to compare performances, recordings or musicians was also sometimes telling, with some interviewees marking boundaries between support band and main band, for example ('just a shit dj, nothing like Om'; 'electronic music, kind of mesmerizing but their styles

can't really be compared'). Others drew comparisons, such as between two performances at the same event of drone which was 'soothing' and had 'folk influences' by Syndrome, and drone which was 'about dissonance and unsettling sounding music' by SunnO))), which were still both included within "drone".

In surveys I also asked listeners to describe what was similar to the specific concert or musician initially discussed. Many reported that Earth concerts were similar to Om, SunnO))) concerts were similar to Bong concerts and so on, with bands I expected to hear about. There were several references to bands I hadn't thought of including, notably Swans, Godflesh, Neurosis, My Bloody Valentine, and Godspeed You! Black Emperor. Some people responded with carefully explained similarities to other types of music, such as *Bitches Brew* by Miles Davis (1970) or Pink Floyd albums either with side-long tracks such as "Echoes" (on *Meddle*, 1971), or with continual development such as in *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973). These connections were less frequently mentioned, but made sense to some listeners in describing relations between music and musical experience.

The Questioning of Metal Status as Genre Work

Despite the overt references made by musicians and listeners to Black Sabbath and other metal bands, the status of drone metal as metal is sometimes questioned by listeners and reviewers. Pioneers Earth emerged in early 90s Seattle when the city was known as the centre of grunge, a style not generally considered metal. The experimental hardcore group Melvins were also influential on drone metal, in a context where hardcore was often defined as punk and not metal despite sonically incorporating aspects of both (Waksman, 2009, p. 12-14). Further, the changing experimental styles of even the most influential drone metal bands (such as Om, Earth and Boris) sometimes departed significantly from Earth's own classic template of very long, heavily distorted tracks. The question of whether these bands are metal, or whether drone music can be metal, has continued to a point where this ambiguity is a characteristic element of

discourse around the music. One musician (the Bug) who recently collaborated with Dylan Carlson of Earth was invited by a website to pick his favourite heavy music, and the list, featuring Earth, Om, Boris and SunnO))), was entitled 'Metal, Not Metal' (VinylFactory, 2014). Without wishing to pronounce final judgement or forward any supposedly fixed definitions of metal, the longevity and intensity of debates on whether bands or recordings "are" metal indicates the presence and ongoing importance of boundary work about the parameters of metal.

Album reviewers, for example, wonder whether to call Om a "metal" band, but with a sense of paradoxical affirmation and denial of genre categories:

> It's hard to look at Om as a "metal" band at all, at least not in the simplest sense, although their approach seems to be pursuing the Sabbathian ethos much more intricately and determinedly than most of their contemporaries (Review of Om, *Advaitic Songs*; Burnett, 2012).

> Om cannot be classified into just one group.. are they doom? are they stoner? are they metal? are they melodic death metal? are they folk metal? I will answer yes to all of the above, while at the same time saying no... ya dig? This CD is just that good (Review of Om, *Advaitic Songs*; Bruner, 2013).

Similar paradoxes appear in describing the constituent parts of the sound, such as riffs, the basic unit of metal's musical semantics:

> Gentle noodling rides atop endless fuzzed riffs (if you can call one chord a riff). Imperceptible shifts in tone arrive – the riff gets heavier (Review of Bong, *Stoner Rock*; McGibbon, 2014).

> Bass, drums and Al Cisneros' intonated vocals now blend with hypnotic cello, glossolalic tabla and Vedic chant to make something it feels almost blasphemic to describe simply as "riffs". These tracks are fragmentary facets of the true ur-music (Review of Om, *Advaitic Songs*; Zero Tolerance quoted in CircuitSweet, 2013).

The appropriateness of attributing the status of 'riff' in each case is questioned, but it is clear from the language used to deny that they are riffs, that they are in fact considered riffs, but in a way that undermines that description by exceeding it.

Another example of a contestation of metal status, that nevertheless suggests drone is metal in an important and extreme way, is the repeated comparison made between drone metal and Slayer. The thrash band is frequently discussed by interviewees, survey respondents and music reviewers in describing what drone metal is not. But by talking about how drone bands are completely different from Slayer's fast-paced aggressive attack, both drone metal and Slayer's thrash are placed implicitly within a paradigm of comparing forms of extreme metal.

> Instead of attacking you like Slayer does with a very fast-paced drumbeat, [Bong's music] slows you down and it makes your head wander off (Ethnographic interview about Bong, 2013).

> Because you can describe Slayer […] But then it comes to [Bong's] music and its getting hard to describe because the innate feeling is about feeling it and listening to that boringness (Ethnographic interview about Bong, 2013).

This contrast is also used in online postings. A Youtube user posted a sound clip with a famous Slayer track drastically slowed down, together with an image that added the 'O)))' design associated with SunnO))), and by extension drone metal, to Slayer's jagged name logo (*Slayer – Angel of Death – 800% Slower!!!*, 2010). Commenters referenced SunnO))) and drone metal, while also suggesting that it sounded like hell or the voice of Satan. Here, the radical differences in speed between SunnO))) and Slayer are noted, but at the same time a commonality in metal timbres is recognised.

Fig I. Screen capture of Youtube video, showing Slayer logo with added reference to SunnO))).

While extensive discussion of genre terminology also occurs in other subgenres, some ways of talking about genre appear to be specific to drone metal. Going to a SunnO))) concert for 3 hours, or listening to hours of monotonously repetitive Bong records can be an unusual, even extraordinary experience. This distance from the ordinary makes it difficult for listeners to find an appropriate language for their experiences, and at the same time marks the music as an

important thing that people to want to communicate about, in humour, hyperbole, and a rhetoric of intoxication and ecstasy through drugs, sound and spirituality. This is one way to understand the prevalent religious vocabulary surrounding drone metal, as appears in this irreverent Youtube exchange about Om and genre:

> -What genre is this?
>
> -Hindu ancient hardcore.
>
> -Christ metal?
>
> -Hinducore
>
> -Islamodrone
>
> -No, I think it's Buddhastoner.

(Youtube comment responses to *Om – Advaitic Songs (Full Album)*, 2012).

Listeners attempt to speak about unspeakability using a networked constellation of genre labels, which can include subjective characteristics of musical experience. As Aliza Shvarts notes of SunnO))) listeners:

> Among some of the longer haired people I know, a question circulates that is both endless and imperative: is it metal? […] At what could either be construed as the esoteric fringes or innovative core of the genre, this question constitutes metal's very substance, posed by the music itself (Shvarts, 2014, p. 203).

"Drone" as Ambivalent Genre Term in Sound and Experience

Just as the term "metal" is the focus of some contestation, so too the word "drone" is used in differing ways. On the drone music blog entitled 'Draw a Straight Line and Follow it' (named after a famous La Monte Young composition), the following comment was posted,

evidently in response to what the commenter perceived to be a misunderstanding of genre and terminology.

> What people think drone metal is:
>
> -take progression
>
> -hold the chords and only play each one on the first beat
>
> -slow it down a bit
>
> -drop tuning
>
> What drone metal actually is:
>
> -metal with fucking drones in it (DroneMuzak, 2014).

However, actual uses of the term drone in the musical culture under discussion are varied and broad, and even technical definitions of drone can be contested. Instead of attempting to form a preliminary definition and then fitting examples to that framework, I have tried to understand what listeners and musicians mean when they use the term "drone," by directly or indirectly asking interviewees, and analysing closely the contexts in which the word is used across different areas of discourse. This showed what kinds of sounds and what kind of sonic experiences are understood as related to "drone". Sometimes the word drone came up instantly:

> OC: Why did you decide to go to the Gravetemple show at Roadburn [2013]?
>
> IN: […] the Sunn O))) gig in 2011 was an earth-crushing experience. The whole 013(venue) building was jiggled by the massive drone sound of Sunn O))) […] After 60 min. my girlfriend leaved the show with these words: "I have to go out,

otherwise my skull is droned away!" For this reason I had to attend this Gravetemple show. I want this experience again.

OC: What were your expectations of the Gravetemple performance?

IN: My expectations of the Gravetemple performance were to see a loud, heavy drone show that reduces your bones into the right spot (Written interview about Gravetemple performance at Roadburn, 2013).

As well as the particular band (in this case Gravetemple) being designated drone we can also trace which other qualities are associated with the term: loudness, heaviness, mass, and intense physical experience.

Using a similar strategy, I might pick up on a phrase that an interviewee had used to describe an important experiential aspect of music, and ask whether that feeling could be found elsewhere:

OC: That's good way of putting it, being engulfed by the music…Is that something that happens with other kinds of music, or other concerts that you've been to?

IN: A lot of the music I listen to has these drone elements, if we were to define it as… this repetition, slow repetition of certain parts. And I'd say that *that's* sort of where I really become engulfed, where the music has time to… basically has time to allow me to be engulfed by it. (Interview about Bong concert, 2013).

In this way, without dictating my own definition, or even asking people directly for theirs, I was able to compile a network of related terminology that form a set of family resemblances between terms often mentioned in relation to sound and drone. So 'drone' (and also 'droney,' 'droning,' and 'droniness') for listeners includes drone in the technical sense of sustained notes at a constant pitch, and also other sonic aspects such as slowness, repetition, loudness, limited tonal range or monotony, downtuning/lowness/bass, distortion, continuity, extension and length, as well as more affective experiential qualities.

When I asked interviewees about similar experiences to the performance under discussion, I deliberately didn't limit the question to only include other music or musical experience. I received a number of striking responses that situated drone metal in relation to non-musical experiences.

> Q: What other experiences (musical or other) are comparable or similar in any way?
>
> R: Sauna. Very good marihuana :)
>
> R: Sex, rollercoaster, horror movie. Haha I don't know.
>
> R: Meditating and sleeping
>
> R: A big fat chili with lots of red peppers and hot sauce
>
> R: I guess extreme forces of nature.
>
> (Responses to the same question on Om, SunnO))) and Bong surveys, 2013/2014).

Listeners' descriptions also provide similarly interlinked constellations of attributes and descriptors. Features most frequently mentioned in interviews were repetition, slowness, extension, monotony or a limited tonal range, down-tuned or bass-heavy guitars, loudness, feedback, distortion and gain, and drones (in the sense of extended continuously-pitched

sounds). These broadly musical or sonic characteristics were frequently used in combination with more affective, experiential descriptors, such as endurance and difficulty, meditation, catharsis or transcendence, evocation of journeys, a ritualistic atmosphere, or reports of spiritual, religious, and mystical experiences. For listeners it was neither easy nor desirable to extricate experiential from sonic qualities (endurance bearing close relation to extension and loudness, for example). These descriptors, mystical and musical alike, were sought-after and valued aspects of listening experience.

Disavowal and Genre Uncertainty

Drone metal listeners' uneasy relation with genre is indicated by attempts to avoid genre tags, or use of genre names under explicit caution. Interviewees often did this by tentatively naming a genre then retreating from it. Often genre terms were followed by deliberate acknowledgements of ambiguity or difference in convention: 'this meditation type of music, or whatever you call it' in one interview conversation about Bong. In other cases, the specific naming of genre was avoided by talking about 'this kind of music,' 'bands in this genre' without actually saying the name of a genre. These ways of talking about genre appeal to the social nature of the construction of terminology: 'or whatever you call it' recognises and calls attention to the dialogic negotiations of what names "we" give to "it." Similarly, mentioning 'this kind of music' assumes both interlocutors share a frame of reference and discursive competence, again emphasising that construction of categories takes place between people in communication.

Many listeners posit a kind of transgeneric genre, drawing together music which for them shares a certain quality or feel, but which they perceive has been assigned different genres, presumably by other audiences such as critics.

> A lot of music that I listen to comes from supposedly different genres [but] still shares this element, that takes its time, that allows the good parts to repeat for a while (Interview about Nazoranai and drone metal, 2013).

These claims implicitly recognise the communicative usefulness of grouping music together, but suggest an estrangement from genre headings as understood and applied by others, who implicitly do not recognise or value what the listener hears or feels as similar. These common statements are also markers of translocal marginality, where listeners feel distant from perceived mainstream audiences and their understandings and usage of genre terms.

Difficulties in settling on genre terminology are a specific instance of the issue of ineffability, where drone metal is (to a certain extent paradoxically) described as being indescribable. The challenge of genre names (how to name and draw boundaries around a group of sounds that is loosely connected and whose audience is fragmented and dispersed) is closely related to this reported indescribability (how to name sounds which are unusual or difficult to compare or talk about in language that has been accepted to function in describing other music). This sometimes results in the two problems appearing side by side:

> [Horseback, a musician] incorporates Drone into some sort of Doom Metal/Sludge whatever you want to call it with a black metal voice (i can't describe it, but that really give[s] an idea of the vocals), you really have to check this record (Review of Horseback, *The Invisible Mountain*; Edgar, 2011).

Listeners frequently associate this unstable naming and difficulty in description with language of the mystical and transcendent.

> Doom, Sludge, Stoner, Drone, whatever you want to call it, is meditation music, a form of chant or kirtan as powerful as any mantra. The slow, minimal, echoing chords evoke the transcendent as sure as any Gnawa ritual or throat singing effort (Blog column about drone music; Wood, 2013).

> It's hard to explain, because it's such a mystical, whatever you want to call it, experience… (Interview description of Gravetemple Roadburn performance, 2013).

In this way, drone metal experience is situated by listeners amidst a range of other experiences, musical and otherwise, all of which are considered relevant for understanding drone metal despite difficulties in description.

Genre as Constellation

Within the ongoing discourses around the music, listeners continue to construct genre around experience of sound. These comparisons and links to other musical and non-musical experiences and characteristics therefore together form a network of different points which listeners apprehend in slightly different formations, as if viewing the same constellation from different angles.

Despite the sonic and symbolic affinities drawn by musicians and listeners between instances of music described as drone metal, there are difficulties in attempting to delineate the boundaries of this subgenre, particularly since it is marginal, non-scene-based, and deliberately strains the possibilities of metal forms. This defined and limited categorisation of genre is also the aspect of genre that is viewed with suspicion by musicians and listeners. Deena Weinstein has written that:

> the term "metal" refers, at most, to a "super-genre" comprehending all sorts of musical styles and hybrid genres which bear little resemblance to each other musically or in their cultural and social contexts, yet bear some connection with what has been called "metal" in the past (2011, p. 244).

Terminology of style and genre changes with usage, and a relation with the past is important in situating music as metal. There may be genre-defining properties for metal genres, but they are not static entities, nor are such properties essential (Frandsen, 2015, p. 369). Drone metal's deliberately-fostered relation with the past is evidenced in the sonic and symbolic references to Black Sabbath and other metal bands, and also in how much a listener's own history of listening has incorporated metal.

As Keith Kahn-Harris has noted, 'Genre is both a set of musical events and the social processes and communities that constitute those events' (Kahn Harris, 2007, p. 12), with such processes including journalism and criticism (Thornton, 1996, p. 160), together with marketing, promotion and consumer decisions (Demers, 2010, p. 136). Keith Negus names the combined context of these processes 'genre cultures' (Negus, 1999, p. 29), which are described by Fabian Holt as 'the overall identity of the cultural formations in which genre is constituted' (Holt, 2007, p. 29). Holt suggests that scholars have not paid sufficient attention to experience and practice in the constitution of genres, instead overly favouring structure and object (2007, p. 9). In drone metal's very dispersed, fragmented and ephemeral genre culture, experiential elements beyond sound and music are considered important.

Religious affiliations or ideologies have been described as contributing to genre, for example occultism suggested as a bridge between genres (Granholm, 2015, p. 27-8), and Christian metal has been posited as a genre term (Wang, 2015, p. 220) or as applying across genres (Moberg, 2015, p.40). These contrasting uses together show a diversity of approaches to

what characteristics should be included, in particular regarding the question of how religiosity should apply to genre categorisation.

Fredric Jameson has written of the need to retain genre categories;

> not in order to drop specimens into the box bearing those labels, but rather to map our coordinates on the basis of those fixed stars and to triangulate this specific given textual movement (Jameson, 1982, p. 322).

However, Jameson's genre co-ordinates might imply too much fixity, given that the connotations of genre labels may gradually change. For example, bands such as Witchfinder General, previously described as "doom metal," are often now designated "classic doom" to differentiate them from later sludge- and stoner-influenced bands like Electric Wizard.

To develop Jameson's stellar metaphor, however, I suggest thinking of genre as a constellation. This metaphor recognises the gradually shifting perspectival and temporal geometries incorporating an array of points, which change over time, and may appear more densely interconnected or more distantly related depending on one's position. Understanding genre as constellation also acknowledges the multiplicity of such vantage points, and the mutually constitutive relations between people involved in the discursive construction. Use of genre terms is necessarily connected to other people's usage of such terms, but not fully defined by others' usages. This framework recognises the power structures that influence definitions of genre, but does not treat them as imposed phenomena to be determined by, for example, cultural taste-makers or the decrees of musician or record label. The constellation of "drone metal," for example, would be made up of all the points that listeners relate to drone metal experience, such as the bands, recordings and musical experiences they consider to be included. Bands that are mentioned almost ubiquitously (such as SunnO))), Earth, Om, Sleep) would therefore be more central compared with slightly less commonly recognised musicians (like Ashtoreth, Ommadon,

or Bismuth) due to their lower profiles, shorter careers, or more idiosyncratically connected sounds. More distant points would be important and recognisable for some, if not all, listeners (such as Harsh Noise Wall music; Pink Floyd's "Echoes"; Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*).

But as well as musicians, genre as constellation could include the affective responses and ways of talking about musical experience that listeners drew on in communicating about drone metal, from listening to ventilator hums, to meditating, to eating spicy food. Each individual listener would view this constellation of points from a particular standpoint, including and privileging some points of comparison above others. In addition, each constellation for each genre label can be thought of as intersecting with and overlapping with a plurality of frames representing the different but intersecting usages and understandings by varied communities of listeners.

Genre labels also appear, and are used, as constellations online. Last.fm is a website where users can search for music similar to artists they know, look up concert listings, and keep track of their listening by allowing the site access to information from mp3 players and other devices. On the site, musicians can be 'tagged' with multiple genre labels by listeners. All the tags attributed to an artist can then be displayed, with the most frequently-used tags emphasised with larger font size.

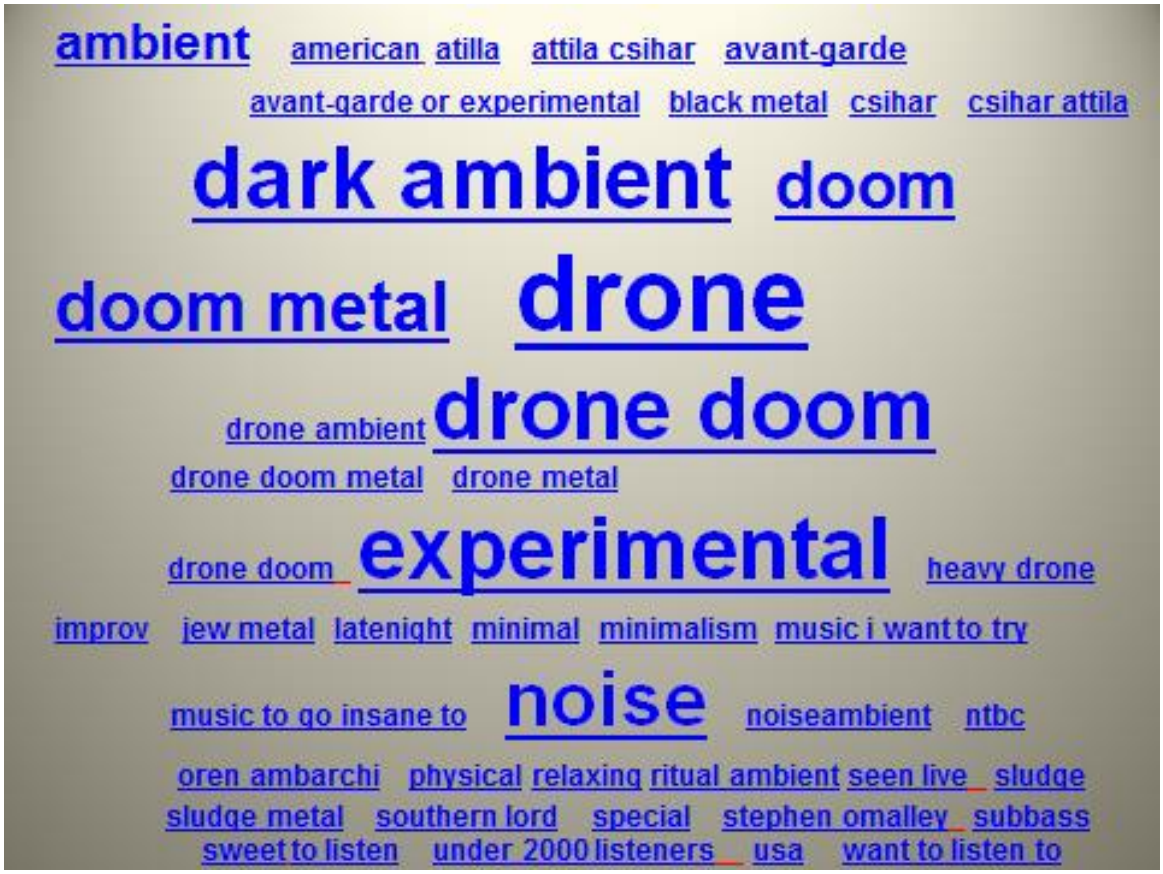

Figure II: Genre tags for SunnO))), taken from Last.fm website in 2013, with larger font representing more frequent tag uses.

In this example for SunnO))), "noise," "doom," "drone," "metal," "experimental," "ambient" and "avant-garde" are frequently tagged, and the same terms are combined in other tags (such as "drone doom metal"). Other tags denote categories less immediately recognisable as musical styles. However, while genres named "music to go insane to" may be intended satirically or humorously, in practice they function like any other tag. Clicking on that tag leads to a page collecting other artists so tagged, such as Earth and Boris, who are in turn also tagged "drone," "drone doom," "drone metal" and so on. Joke tags poking fun at genre (whether used affectionately or deprecatingly by avid listeners, or scornfully by detractors) therefore still contribute to an overall genre constellation. Online networks thus intersect with the way genre is

constructed as constellation in wider discourse, and represent some of the ways in which such terms function for listeners in communication.

Conclusion: Drone Metal's Marginal and Translocal Genre Constellation

The extreme marginality and translocality of drone metal's disparate genre culture contributes to the loose constellation of genre labels surrounding the music, and this in turn allows listeners to meaningfully relate to drone metal a wide and unusual set of other musical, sonic and even non-sonic experiences and practices. In the light of the many sonic attempts by drone metal musicians to push genre limits, I take seriously the suggestions of listeners (in response to questions along the lines of, "What is similar to band X?") that genre coordinates include other musicians and music from metal, rock, avant-garde and experimental, classical, electronic and jazz, music, but also eating extremely spicy food, going on rollercoasters, and being strangely affected by the low vibration of a workplace ventilation system.

Genre as constellation allows an understanding of the participatory constitution of a genre, of something recognised and shared between listeners as 'this kind of music,' while also making space for different listening histories, different canons, different experiences of the importance of certain recordings, musicians, performances or singular instances of listening. But even with a flexible understanding of genres as fluid, mutable and subjective constellations, the music still exceeds, causing extreme physical responses, frustrating attempts to label it for commercial or critical purposes, and escaping the language of musicians and of listeners:

> THIS MUSIC IS SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT! I guess, when music is beyond categorization....the record store guy's head explodes and the critic is speechless! (Youtube comment response to *Om – Advaitic Songs (Full Album)* (2012).

[i] Developing from early industrial music, harsh noise pursued a more explicit focus on abrasive textures and timbres, with Merzbow amongst the best known of harsh noise musicians. Harsh Noise Wall is a later development especially associated with musician Vomir, featuring completely unchanging noise timbres which continue for long periods.

[ii] Power electronics, largely developed in the UK in the 1980s by bands like Skullflower, has a similar commitment to harshly distorted sounds, though often with some semblance of rock structures.

[iii] Also known as krautrock, a form of music associated with 1970s Germany, which made use of synthesizers and other electronic equipment as well as traditional rock instrumentation. Bands included Neu!, Amon Düül II, Can and arguably Kraftwerk, while the sound was characterised by long tracks, metronomic 'motorik' percussion, and often psychedelic, dreamy atmospheres.

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