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**BLACK METAL RAINBOWS, DANIEL LUKES AND
 STANIMIR PANAYOTOV (EDS) (2022), DESIGNED BY JACI RAIA**

Binghamton, NY: PM Press, 439 pp.,
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Black Metal Rainbows describes itself as ‘an anthology of radical, queer, and leftist writings and artworks that uncover black metal as a genre of openness and inclusivity’, which presents black metal as

a vibrant and revolutionary paradigm [and] reveals its ludic, carnival worlds animated by spirits of joy and celebration, community and care, queerness and camp, LGBTQI+ identities and antifascist, antiracist, and left-wing politics, not to mention endless aesthetic experimentation and fabulousness.

(PM Press 2022: n.pag.)

The first several essays point out repeatedly that the project of the book is not to suggest ways to somehow ‘make’ black metal queer or do subversive queer readings of the subgenre’s hallowed texts. Instead, the idea is to show that black metal has always been queer, has always involved, represented and afforded queer subjectivities and intensities. In Lukes and Panayotov’s opening essay, they argue that black metal ‘was always a shining rainbow’ (14); after titling the next chapter ‘Putting the fag back into Sarcófago’, Drew Daniel quickly makes clear that the fag was *always* there, not (necessarily) in the particular sexual identities of the musicians, but more broadly: ‘black metal does not need the work of theoretical queering because black metal is already “in queerness” all unto itself’ (37).

The book relates to but is not defined by Black Metal Theory. *Black Metal Rainbows*, in part, extends that body of work and, in part, responds to a lack in it, as in Daniel’s piece: it begins with a quote from his talk at the 2015 ‘Coloring the Black’ *Black Metal Theory Symposium* in Dublin (that several other contributors here participated in) before critically reflecting on and updating his thoughts. Panayotov’s ‘Rainbow forest’ thinks more abstractly about the rainbow having always been present in the dark forest (reminding me of the cover of Norwegian band Kampfar’s self-titled 1996 album); and Langdon Hickman’s piece on the Dialectical Satan similarly challenges received assumptions, constructing an extremely comprehensive argument that Satanic theology is not inherently right-wing. Steven Shakespeare’s combinations of philosophical-mystical thought with black

metal are always productive, avoiding reducing either to being 'explained' by the other: here examples of black metal's 'melodic, harmonious, and/or dreamlike direction' (283) are treated alongside Hegel, Schopenhauer and Schelling in an exploration of 'blackened naivete' (285). And immediately following Bogna M. Konior's reflections on 'deep-learning metal', Kenji Siratori's piece 'Black metal information: Cybernetic resonance of gloom series' is perhaps one kind of endpoint for speculative abstractions, or for the relation between written text and black metal. To take a sample: 'gigacross certified disbelievers conjugation conditions basically unbaptized person enshroud enchanted characteristics burial deathless witch unchained wind predefined forever scissors metal time' (380) ... this goes on for pages and pages in an intense barrage of words that refuse semantic sense but add up to an overload somehow akin to the experience of black metal noise.

Another bridge between Black Metal Theory and rainbows is, of course, Hunt Hunter-Hendrix of the band Liturgy and writer of perhaps the most notorious Black Metal Theory article, 'Transcendental black metal' (2010). In that piece and this one about Queer Traditionalism, I read the idea of transcendental black metal as about Liturgy's music as considered by its creator, rather than a prescriptive concept about black metal more generally. As a result, interest can be taken in these critical reflections on a personal relationship with whatever 'black metal' might be without accepting all the provocative claims about the music, or indeed, politics: my strong disagreement with Hendrix's line 'Personally, I don't believe that leftism is possible without theism' (387), for example, can be largely set aside given the qualifying first word of the quote. The piece seems surprisingly Christian, while any approach to Traditionalism these days needs to explicitly disavow the extreme reactionary associations of Julius Evola and his pseudo-intellectual acolytes in black metal. As Hendrix notes, 'it is necessary to add that the growing cultural penumbra of "neoreactionary", "alt-right", or "anti-woke left" art and thought is a *false* simulacrum of authentic transgression, given that in these cases the transgression is reinscribed into a "conservative" stance' (386, original emphasis). Similarly Christ-haunted is the next piece, Benjamin Bianciotto's chapter about 'holy unblack metal': thinking about it, this is another obvious yet provocative choice when it comes to assessing the colourful diversity of black metal and its tangle of reversals and reversal-reversals. Reminding us that bands as far back as Horde in 1994 dared to 'invert the inverted cross' (398), the chapter presents this relationship with Christ as one of many areas in which black metal accommodates radical opposites.

Other important overviews are provided, notably Kim Kelly's thoughtful and accessible history of black metal's ideological commitments, which, like the book overall, acknowledges and highlights problematic associations but refuses to yield the identity of the genre to those reactionary claims. George Parr's piece on rape culture is similarly clear in its analysis of poisonous attitudes/behaviour and forthright in its rejection of them as somehow supposedly important to the edginess of black metal, while Stuart Wain curates an excellent compilation of interview snippets from radical black metal artists to flesh out these positions from those involved in creating the music. On the other hand, the long oral history section of interviews with various individuals involved with the band Dødheimsgard did not strike me as particularly rewarding, but might appeal more to those who share editor Lukes's

enthusiasm for the band; likewise, the artist profile of Svein Egil Hatlevik of Fleurety (and who played keyboards for Dødheimsgard) seemed a bit stylistically flat compared to the range of other weird and imaginative topics and approaches in the book. No matter; for some readers, these might be a highlight, and as ever, the strength of the collection's diversity surely means that not all pieces need to be for everyone.

Several of the most immediately visceral yet creative pieces are broadly autoethnographic with black metal practitioners of various kinds. From musicians, we hear Margaret Killjoy of Feminazgul narrate both personal and practical reflections on activism and its necessities; Oxbow vocalist Eugene Robinson's short but vivid piece is a difficult and honest meditation on violent power and its temptations; Jasmine Hazel Shadrack of Denigrata extends previous writing that unpicks trauma, witchcraft, alchemy and restorative feminism in her experience of the 'physical composition' of black metal (108). Valuable articulations of important relationships with black metal are, of course, not limited to writings by musicians. Joseph Russo's 'experimental/ autoethnographic polemic' entitled 'Queer rot' is a feverish Texan haze of the 'perforation' of the body (142) in violence and sex that on the surface does not have the closest connection to black metal music but definitely chimes with it as the most physical gut-punch read in the collection. Espi Kvlt's piece is striking, partly for introducing the idea of black metal porn, but actually more for considering the complexities of being pushed away from music that is yours because of others' troublesome associations, before refusing that exclusion and reclaiming it. Resonating with this is Edward Blair's tale of editing *Black Metal of the Americas* zine, watching the fascist creep, being burned out and isolated, but also finally reappropriating a scornful insult ('USBM Friendship Circle') as 'partly a joke, [...] partly a manifestation of desire too' (314). Catherine Fearn's thoughts on writing about black metal in fiction novels are nominally some distance from the core of black metal production, but actually, her account of how to take on board black metal's conventions and traditions, creating something new and recognizably black metal but avoiding mere derivative reproduction of clichés, is key in music or any activity related to black metal's aesthetic.

Patrizia Pelgrift's contribution is another reflection on non-musical involvements, a memoir of sorts about 'some of [her] most thrilling moments' (222) in moving to Oslo in the early 2000s. While it is great that there is room in *Black Metal Rainbows* for all kinds of perspectives and positions on black metal, it is not clear what these memories offer to the overall project of considering the antifascist, LGBT+ rainbows in black metal, especially given that one of these 'thrilling times' is a rather crassly described (literally 'I lived to tell the tale' [226]) encounter with Emperor drummer Faust that turns knowledge of the homophobic murder he committed into a titillating backdrop for the author's excitement about danger and transgression in the scene. I was expecting more in the book than this casual take on the several homophobic murders related to black metal, or on homophobia in general, but perhaps it makes sense that the focus is more on celebration and exploration than retreading old condemnations. Another area that could relate colour to political ideology is the range of Indigenous black metal, which incorporates anticolonial critique from both progressive and reactionary angles, extending even in some cases to collaborations with white supremacists in the 'Bronze Nationalism' prevalent in Mexican black metal for example. Other topics

which I'd have loved to read about are the odd underground 'faerie metal' of Nuit Noire, or the furry anthropomorphic animal sex fantasies barely below the surface in bands like Destroyer 666 and Satanic Warmaster, who also happen to have explicit far-right leanings. The changing tides of fashion and make-up, and their relation to gender and sexuality as well as to race (corpse-paint, masks and blackface/whiteface?) would have been interesting areas to explore – Mayhem's hot pink first pressing of *Deathcrush* is mentioned (18), but not the famous photograph of Euronymous in a crop-top; Venom and Bathory's leather gear could have been highlighted, as well as the widespread ultra-serious/ludicrous metalizing of the body with endless spikes, medieval-ish armour and ostentatiously waved weapons. Again, no expectation that these ideas should have been involved, they just point to the richness of the idea of *Black Metal Rainbows* for further thoughts.

Lukes and Panayotov point out what, for me, is a key issue that is often glossed over: how exactly black metal *music* (not just lyrics, titles, interview statements, behaviour and personal associations of musicians) can relate to ideology: 'Burzum is often characterized as NSBM [National Socialist Black Metal], but their early albums and their music in general is not explicitly political, even by "apoliteic" standards' (21–22). On this point, Wain mentions something of a reversal: Republicans who love Rage Against the Machine, arguing that 'some listeners will take political messages from bands to heart, other fans will not' (72): I'd suggest instead that this shows the much stranger, more interesting and complicated phenomenon of listeners putting the same music to powerfully affecting but ideologically contrasting uses. When, for example, Donald Trump fans danced around and sang along to Rage Against the Machine's 'Killing in the Name', the widespread laughter prompted by such video clips was understandable given the explicit contrast between the 'Blue Lives Matter' flag worn by the individuals and the furious critique of white supremacist police violence in the song's lyrics (see Stolworthy 2020). Yet people do not always (or even often) listen to songs (especially metal songs) while following the linear narrative of the lyrics; and all the mockery obscured the fact that the song really did have a real and powerful political use and effect for those Trump fans, who were using it deliberately for that purpose, regardless of what Tom Morello or anyone, or even the very lyrics of the song they're singing along to, might say about it. Thinking through this in different directions, I'd be interested in a treatment of what it might mean to listen to black metal in anti-fascist ways, or indeed use it for antifascist purposes, even if it was not 'intended' for that or has associations directly counter to progressive ideals.

A musician's political identity or beliefs cannot totally determine the spectrum of potential affordances that their work might provide to listeners, nor the political implications of those responses. Underscoring this point, among other (so far!) unimpeachably progressive, queer and/or anarchist extreme metal bands, Venom Prison and Violet Cold are mentioned in *Black Metal Rainbows* (355–56, 323–28), having been celebrated (respectively) for introducing feminist takes on violent death metal lyrics, and a simple but provocative juxtaposition of rainbow flag and Islamic crescent-and-star on a black metal album cover. However, since publication, both bands have attracted ire for expressing reactionary social media views after all: Venom Prison's frontwoman Larissa Stupar's anti-trans social media interactions and Violet Cold musician Emin Guliyev's NSBM-excusing posts and self-pitying

misogyny (both bands covered in ThrashNKill 2022). Of course, this is not to criticize the authors or editors for their inclusion (nor to weigh in on those specific cases either), but instead to highlight the inevitably shifting sands of contemporary political identity discourses, and the – in my view necessary – decoupling of the ideas and behaviour of the creators from determining the politic meanings of music as it sounds in the world and is heard and used by listeners.

More troubling is the inclusion of a piece by Marxist feminist writer-turned transphobic reactionary Nina Power, who has for several years been wading further into esoteric alt-right posturing (see especially Stupart 2019; also Anti-Reaction Research Group 2019; Xenogothic 2020; Bywater 2020; Charan et al. 2020) and more recently, explicit defence of trans-exclusionary feminism (Power 2023, i.e. published after *Black Metal Rainbows* came out). In this context, Power's piece about black metal and 'male depression' comes across as egregiously essentialist, describing Depressive Suicidal Black Metal (DSBM) as 'perhaps above all, very male' (245). In the body of the chapter and in its title, Power approvingly quotes a Twitter thread by Zero HP Lovecraft (245) about how apathy from the universe is apparently 'the component of male lived experience that is wholly inaccessible [*sic*] to women' (247), but this experience might be accessible after all to 'women of exceptional ugliness, childless crones, and FtM transsexuals [*sic*]' (248). This supposed 'cult pseudonymous writer' (245) unsurprisingly turns out to have a nasty history of racism, transphobia and misogyny dressed up in pseudo-intellectual posturing and bullshit irony: 'Women complain about being treated like objects because they wish to be treated like objects' (2023a) and 'Business idea: Whitify – Spotify but minus all the Black performers' (2023b) are just two tweets from a single day. Given the lack of originality in Power's analysis (that DSBM is sad and relates to alienation and suicide; Dominic Fox's short treatment in 2009 of the same topic and many of the same musical examples was more interesting), it feels as though the piece was written in order to smuggle in a bit of gender-binary fundamentalism and some lowkey references to esoteric fascist garbage. It is maybe characteristic of anything related to black metal that you need to be forever on guard for creeping undercover prejudice and pointing this out is not to imagine or enforce some kind of purity politics (after all, the collection includes the much more interesting and opposing idea that 'Black metal is feminine' in a contribution entitled exactly that, by Avi Pitchon). But inviting Power to represent this stuff feels like a real off note in a collection that otherwise well understands the importance of including the T in LGBTQ+ and that the defence of trans rights connects with the need to call out and stamp out edgelord cryptofascism in black metal and everywhere else. As Judith Butler has emphatically pointed out, the transphobic 'anti-gender movement is not a conservative position with a clear set of principles' but a 'fascist trend' that is deeply intertwined with racism and white supremacy (2021). And here, black metal knows what to do about trends: reject them vehemently as false!

Laina Dawes's piece on Zeal & Ardor, by contrast, is a relief to read, the author precisely articulating some of the vague unease I'd had about that project and the enthusiastic but naïve reception and framing it received in the metal ecosystem. Acknowledging that there is a certain power in Zeal & Ardor's combination of metal and 'slave music' (124), Dawes incisively points out the superficial and at times, trivializing takes on the musical legacies of transatlantic slavery, racism and religion that surround Zeal & Ardor,

including in interview comments by main man Manuel Gagneux himself. Other essays analyse specific examples in wider theoretical and ideological contexts: Aliza Shvarts's feminist response to J. L. Austin's theories about performative language via Mick Barr's experimental metal guitar (and an album entitled *The Rainbow Supremacy!*) in thinking about drones and burdens; Angel Simitchiev on ambient and black metal; and Lukes's thoughts on the bizarre and carnivalesque in black metal. Élodie Lesourd writes on the notorious photograph Euronymous took of Dead's suicide, which then appeared on the front of Mayhem's live LP *Dawn of the Black Hearts*. I'd long thought how striking it was that this most notorious of record covers was so luridly technicoloured when black metal's death obsessiveness is often otherwise so monochrome, so I was delighted to read Lesourd's meditation on death, colour and art theory in relation to that image, with the amazing title 'Flamboyant atrocity'.

Those chapters might have the clearest appeal to a specifically academic audience, though it is also important that these pieces appear among the chaotic kaleidoscope of other kinds of contributions, from conceptual artwork to paintings, drawings, a cartoon strip, and much else. While beyond the scope of this review to analyse all the artwork, some make obvious riffs on the subcultural aesthetic (Heather Masciandaro's *Love of One's Own Fate* displaying Abbath in a forest with rainbow halo, for instance; or various incorporations of corpse paint) others relate far more obliquely to black metal, if at all... I struggled to draw any connection to the music from Andrew Zealley's HIV/AIDS-focused subversion of an iPhone advert, even having read the artist's statement (215–16), other than the general themes of queerness, death and capitalism. Legendary metal logo designer Christophe Szpajdel contributes a great effort for the book title, and the font used for the titles (New Hildegard Std by Andreas Brietzke) is brilliantly chosen, a roughly pixellated kind of ornate blackletter which exactly nails the tensions between the modern and the ancient, between signal and noise in contemporary black metal worlds. The editors are keen to insist that designer Jaci Raia is given equal billing, and that is right: it is not just the juxtaposition of the art pieces that prompts productive engagement, but also the design of the book: a riotous layout of scratches and scrawls, stained with distorted colourful/black noise like video static creeping across pages, and manic scribbles that invite you to add your own annotations to the already defaced pages. While the shiny holographic cover of my paperback copy initially made me cautious about throwing it in my bag, I ended up being pleased to watch it pick up its unique scrapes and creases, proud material marks of its own clattering journeys, highlighted in the shimmering colours and illusory depths of the book's surface. As the collection as a whole exhorts: reject fake pristine safe, bloodless imaginary purity! Immerse instead in dirt, stains, scars, distortion and the impure chaotic diversity of black metal noise.

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