Good Morning,

The paper I'm going to present to you this morning, is a small section of a much larger body of work wherein, through the use of gathered ethnographic material in the form of interviews with 'The Women of Doom', I analyse women's experience of doom metal as a musical genre and as a cultural and social grouping.
In this work, I use the Psychology of Leisure to analyse the experience and importance of women's friendships alongside Kristeva's theory of the abject to analyse the concept of 'safe space' through the Women of Doom's use of abject spaces such as, in their own words, 'In the bogs or by the bins'.
Furthermore, the experience of musical pleasure is examined in relation to three themes: transcendental experience (of the mind), Psychophysiological responses (of the body) and experiences related to sex and sexuality.

The paper I am going to present this morning, proceeds these analyses, focussing specifically on the doom metal genre, utilising the words of participants to explore the musical and extra musical definitions of doom through women's experience. The dominant mode of analysis in this paper is musicology. And so today I will be including a short musical analysis of Black Sabbath's self titled track from their 1970 self-titled album.

I'd like to start with a quote:

<u>Defining Doom: Deterritorialising Doom Metal Signifiers</u>

> “The liminal void that exists between the two black metal variants, where renihilation occurs, offers an opportunity to deterritorialise black metal compositional signifiers, to precede the rules through creative action and transform the subject instead of being satisfied with a template already fixed and immovable”(Shadrack 2017: 118).

The above quote is taken from a piece of musicology in Jasmine Shadrack’s PHD Thesis ‘Denigrata Cervorum: Interpretive Performance. Autoethnography and Female Black Metal Performance’. In the chapter this quotation is taken from, Shadrack engages in musicological and psychoanalytic analysis of her band Denigrata and their subversion of the existing hegemony of black metal subculture. Upon reading Shadrack’s work this quotation seemed unrelated to my own research, however, the following words were cemented in my mind:

> ‘to deterritorialise black metal compositional signifiers, to precede the rules through creative action and transform the subject instead of being satisfied with a template already fixed and immovable”(Shadrack 2017: 118).

It is at this point that I would like to reflect upon the words of Elizabeth Wilson, which incited this research, in relation to the quotation above

‘the last thing feminists need is a theory which teaches them only to marvel anew at the constant re-creation of the subjective reality of subordination and which

reasserts male dominance more surely than ever before within theoretical discourse.' (from the female gaze - find citation)

. Wilson warns the feminist researcher not to *be satisfied* with the *immovable template* of the perpetual recreation of women's subjugation and thus to ignore the rules and engage in *creative action* and *transform the subject*. Exchange the word compositional, perhaps, for cultural in Shadrack's original quotation and my research intention is realised.

Instead of examining doom metal music and culture in relation to the understandings of femininity and masculinity as part of gender essentialism, I aim, in this paper, to deterritorialise doom metal of it's various musical and cultural signifiers thus stripping it of gender essentialist connotation. The male has acted as gatekeeper for the majority of discourse in metal, ingraining gender essentialist masculinity into the understanding of the music and it's subcultures. This concept, is wholly embodied by Walser's term 'excription' (1993). Moreover, the following analysis of doom metal music, iconography and culture in relation to the ethnographic narratives of The Women of Doom exists as the antithesis of Walser's theory of excription; that of women's rescription.

Doom metal is an intriguing genre. As noted by Kitteringham, Doom is the antithesis of metal's 'long standing obsession with technicality, precision and speed' (2014: 70). Doom exists outside of metal's norm, unpretentiously regressive in it's compositional style. Furthermore, doom metal subculture and history occupies a

space dissimilar to extreme metal and metal culture as a whole. Kitteringham goes on to state that:

> ‘Doom metal is somewhat exceptional when it comes to the treatment and number of women. The past several years have seen a huge rise in female vocalists and instrumentalists in bands under the umbrella of doom, and historically bands within the genre have long featured female members’ (2014: 72).

Kitteringham suggests the reason behind the involvement of women in doom may be a result of the absence of misogynistic themes and iconography coupled with the genre’s connection with the occult (2014: 72) and therefore self empowerment and, through the figure of the witch, female empowerment. I believe these facets of doom are undeniably linked to women’s involvement in the genre and through the following musicological and iconographic analysis accompanied with ethnographic narratives from The Women of Doom, I aim to demonstrate women’s understanding and experience of doom metal music.

Who are The Women of Doom?

The Women of Doom is an informal social collective of women metal fans that spawned out of the local doom scene in Birmingham, England. The friendship group materialised through ‘the love of the riff’ in a scene that ignores and arguably excludes women from it. The following paper is informed by the experiences of six

participants who identify as members of the Women of Doom. Each of these women took part in (face to face) semi-structured interviews, each lasting on average an hour, with several follow up discussions most of which actually initiated by the participants themselves. Each of the Women chose a prefered nickname to be referred to throughout the paper and so are known as the following: Em, Vic, Soph, Emily, Ropa and Zee. The majority of these women are from the Birmingham area, with one participant residing just outside of the city but still remaining in the Midlands and another further up North in Manchester. The majority of the women interviewed identified as White British, with one participant identifying as 'Brown' British/Bengali and another as Black British/Zimbabwean. The women range from twenty-three to forty-two years old and have diverse temporal involvement in the group, including the two women who initiated the search for like minded women.

The group originated from the friendship of Vic and Em who met at a Soundgarden gig in the nineties. The Birmingham based friends began to go to gigs together where they came across local doom band Alunah fronted by Soph who they soon became close friends with, 'I met them [Vic and Em] in 2007, we played a gig with a band called Witchcraft in Birmingham. They came to see the gig, they liked my band, we got chatting and so started hanging around with each other' (Soph). When discussing the history of the Women of Doom group Em makes explicit the influence of the Birmingham doom scene on the newly forming group; she explains how there was a very cohesive doom scene in Birmingham around Alunah and other bands at the time, including another local band Grimpen Mire who sadly split up in 2015 after the death of bassist/vocalist Paul van Linden. These two bands played many local shows in the 2000s and Em reveals the Birmingham friends frequented these shows, and I

quote: ‘religiously’. Attendance at such local shows allowed Em and Vic to become part of a growing doom scene which lead to them meeting other Birmingham-based women like Soph and Emily.

Since then, these women attended gigs together and slowly expanded their friendship group by approaching other women. ‘You’d go to festivals and you’d go see bands at festivals and just bump into other women, start talking about their patches or their amazing style and chatting in the toilets’ (Em). Em explains how she would find a common ground with women she met at shows through visual stimuli, either commenting on fashion choices or finding a mutual musical appreciation through band patches and (one can assume) other merchandise.

Over approximately ten years the friendship group gradually increased from a small few in Birmingham to a large membership spread across the UK from Manchester to Wales, Stoke and London. With the ever growing number of passionate women doom fans came the name for the friendship group ‘The Women of Doom’ taken from a song of the same title from the album *Ride the Snake* by UK band Groan, Since it’s beginnings The Women of Doom has acquired women from all over the UK and is now comprised of approximately twenty-plus women (Vic) who met organically through going to doom shows. Apart from seeing each other at gigs and festivals both in and outside of the UK, the group now meets one to two times a year for a Women of Doom get-together where women from all over the UK come together for an evening.

<u>Defining doom through women’s experience</u>

Akin to metal's wider emphasis on music above any other cultural factors, doom metal assumes the same ideology. This is reiterated in the narratives of the Women of Doom; group initiator Em even perceives the friendship to have grown out of 'the love of the riff'. Ulteriorly, Em continues this speculation stating that:

'You come out on a Tuesday night to go and see some bands in a tiny little venue that stinks of piss: you're not really there for the scene, are you? You're there because you want to hear the music'(Em).

With music at the centre of doom metal culture, it is essential to engage in musicological analysis to further understand the genre and women's experience of it.

Doom metal can be characterised as 'slow, low and loud' (quote from participant Emily). What Emily is conveying here, is that doom demonstrates it's extremity through these compostonal signifers. Slow, refers to the extreme tempos and extended song duration, while low and loud an amalgamation of down-tuned guitars, bass-heavy composition and the use of guitar distortion.

As part of the Women of Doom ethnographic study, each of the women participants were asked either how they would describe doom or what it is about doom that they liked. The majority of the answers concentrated on the 'heaviness' of the music, often referring to the bass or down-tuned guitars and the slow tempos and song structures:

> ‘[I like] how heavy it is. How slow it is [...] it’s the bass particularly. I love the bass in doom’ (Ropa).

> ‘It can be as slow as you want; it can be one song for an hour... It’s amazing!’ (Emily).

> ‘To me, I like certain music that sounds dirty [...] yeah, dirty, low bass, I think bass has got a lot to do with it’ (Vic).

> ‘[Doom is] metal that’s slowed down. It’s much more about the riff and the groove than it is about how fast or how much you can shred or how technical you are’ (Em).

These women seem drawn to doom by the genres extremities of tempo and pitch and, as the last quotation explains, the musical anthesis of doom to other subgenres of metal. Certainly, it is undeniable then that the experience and connection of these women to doom metal is somewhat influenced by metal’s affiliation with performative masculinity. Metal’s obsession with technicality, high tempos and guitar solo virtuosity has been established in the discourse as a performance of power and (therefore) masculinity. These musical tropes are then projected onto the culture and can be seen in every aspect of metal from the fashion, behavior and cultural activities to the lyrical content and iconography **(Walser 1993; Leonard 0000; Whiteley 0000; Hill 0000; Shadrack 2017).** While this research rejects the essentialist notion of metal

as masculinist it is useful in this specific case to highlight this concept momentarily only to demonstrate how doom and, through the genre, women reject it.

The musicological definition of doom metal as low, slow and loud is very vague in terms of analysis, illustrating only the outline of the genres composition. However, offering a simple and uncomplicated sketch is befitting to the genre as, similar to the other genres of extreme metal, it is divided into various (sub)subgenres all with differing musical characteristics. Vocal delivery varies from mournful howling to deep rumbling growls while guitar composition alters from bluesy solos and groove-driven riffs to drone-esque chords with extreme slow-harmonic-progression. Therefore, instead of mapping a convoluted musical definition of doom, a detailed musicological analysis is preferred.

Black Sabbath are universally cited as the fathers of metal, however, their music and thematics are the origins of doom metal[1]. The band's title track 'Black Sabbath' from their self-titled debut album released in 1970, is often cited as the first ever doom song (Irwin, 2012). This is due to an amalgamation of compositional signifiers, thematics and lyrical content, however, the former is of greater significance. The song commences with a sample of heavy rainfall and the tolling of a church bell[2] which, as the succeeding text indicates, resembles the death knell. Immediately the thematics of doom are realised as the pathetic fallacy of the rainfall with the anticipated omen of the death knell provoke discomfort and dread within the listener as a warning of the impending *doom.*

[1] It is contested that Jinx Dawson and her band Coven are the initiators of doom metal, however this is based mainly upon occult themes and iconography rather than musical composition. See Kitteringham (2014) for further research.

[2] We can assume that this is a church bell as the lyrics of the songs main theme revolves around the Christian imagining of the devil.

The main riff of the song is centered in G minor and consists of three notes: the tonic, the octave and the augmented subdominant. The second interval: the octave to the augmented 4th creates a tritone, also known as the 'diabolus in musica' or the devil's interval. While the use of the devil's interval was prohibited in medieval music, it is used in modern Western music to evoke unease and discomfort in the listener who is expecting consonant and resolving harmony. The tritone is often resolved to either a perfect 4th or 5th, however, within *Black Sabbath* the augmented 4th is held to the end of the phrase before the motif is repeated again in entirety. The dissonance of the augmented 4th is further emphasised through the use of a trill on every other phrase throughout the intro, highlighting the unpleasantness of the interval by contrasting it against a perfect 4th which does not resolve.

In addition to the harmony, the opening riff is played relatively low in pitch on the guitar with a heavy use of distortion and accompanied by dominant snare hits on each note. The tempo is slow, centring at around 63bpm with the three-note riff stretching out over a two bar phrase (in 4/4), creating the illusion of a slower tempo. This three-note riff continues, unchanged, for four and a half minutes split into two verses and reprises before a faster moving section develops. The perpetual monotony of the riff only increases the emotional discomfort of the listener with the continuous use of the unresolved tritone. This constant unease and anticipation for harmonic resolve is synonymous with dread as the lyrics narrate in the present tense first person, the horror of an approaching doom. The vocal delivery is mournful interspersed with emotional outbursts of desperation; and the vocal melody shadows the main motif, each phrase invariably concluding with the octave-augmented 4th interval.

Furthermore, the sung text is a verbal expression of the dread heard in the music and harmony. The opening line of the first verse reads: 'What is this that stands before me?'. This line alone perfectly reflects the emotions of dread, anticipation and discomfort as the listener is repulsed by the unknown, other or abject[3]. The lyrics go onto explain that it is 'a figure in black that points at me'. This figure distinctly represents a personification of death in the form of the grim reaper. The story continues with imagery of the Christian devil, hell, fear and inevitable doom.

The combination of the use of the minor, the devil's interval, the pathetic fallacy, the slow monotonous riff and the vocal delivery, melody and text all reflect the apotheosis of doom, both as a noun and as a genre. While gender-coding compositional signifiers is essentialist and altogether irrelevant, it is important to note that the music analysed represents the antithesis of the musical factors understood by metal and rock scholars **(Walser etc)** as hyper-masculine. In place of virtuosity, speed, technicality and masculine display are slow, simplistic riffs and imperfect vocal delivery with a stronger emphasis on the music and occult aesthetic than masculine performance.

It is evident from this short analysis that Black Sabbath's title track aligns with the Women of Doom's definition and appreciation of doom as slow, low and loud. However, psychoanalysis of the internal implications of this song are significant to achieving a deeper understanding of women's connection to doom metal music.

The song's themes and lyrical content are of interest, despite being a peripheral element to the enjoyment of doom to the women interviewed. A clearly recognisable theme that runs throughout the text is non-misogyny. While the Women of Doom do

[3] The theory of the abject is discussed in relation to Kristeva and Creed in the next chapter.

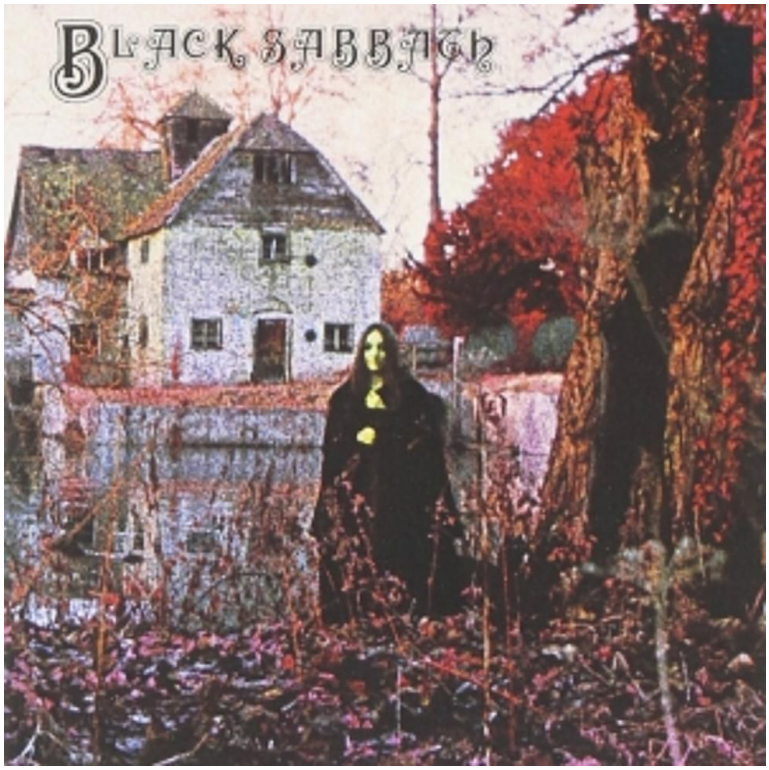
not place significant emphasis on the lyrics of doom metal, it is clear from the feminist stance of the group that misogynistic lyrics would create complications. The text for *Black Sabbath*[4] has no sex specifications, switching between the first person, and later on in the text, third person; this allows the lyrics to remain open for interpretation enabling anyone to position themselves in any part of the story. This is enhanced, perhaps, by the androgynous vocal delivery of Ozzy Osbourne, both in timbre and in range. The nasal mid-range mournful vocal is not dissimilar to the vocal stylings of jazz/blues artists such as Nina Simone and, more recently, Amy Winehouse. While there is a gap in the literature for analysis of vocal styles within popular music genres, it is clear that this nasal (and mid-range) delivery is popular within jazz and is something that was carried forward into blues-influenced hard rock and metal music. The same vocal delivery (although with a slightly wider and higher range) is used by Robert Plant in Led Zeppelin, another blues driven, male-fronted rock band.

Similarly, the text itself within *Black Sabbath* is non-misogynistic and can, in fact, be read as counter-patriarchy. The lyrics make use of the image of the Christian devil and hell flame - 'Satan's sitting there, he's smiling / Watches those flames get higher and higher' - as well as calling out to God for guidance - 'Oh! No! No! Please, God help me!' -. It is clear from the band's chosen name, Black Sabbath, that these musicians are influenced by the darker side of Christianity and with it use the imagery in a tongue-in-cheek manner and not to spread a god-fearing message. As Christianity clearly represents a patriarchal system, the playful rejection of

[4] For full song lyrics please see **Appendix --**

Christianity used in Black Sabbath's lyrics (and iconography[5]) can be read as an counter-patriarchal stance.

In addition to the androgynous vocals and complex non-misogyny and counter-patriarchy hidden within the lyrics, the album artwork that accompanies this track is analogous to these themes.



Caption

At the centre of the artwork (**see figure 0.0 above**) is the figure of a woman, dressed in black with a cloak covering her shoulders. Her hair is dark and flows down below her collarbone. The picture is grainy and her features are hardly distinguishable, what is explicit, however, is that she is not sexualised. Her figure is not visible, her clothes unrevealing and her features that define beauty blurred and unimportant. Perhaps she

[5] For example, represented in the inverted crucifix used in their album artwork.

is the ‘figure in black’ from the title song, the harbinger of death or grim reaper: a figure not often visualised as female. Regardless of intended meaning, this image is radical in popular music for it’s focus on the non-sexualised female figure, and the suggestion of supernatural power and prominence that she represents. For me, and for many women, this woman projects her power into me constructing a deeper connection and appreciation of the music that Black Sabbath create.

Consequently, the non-gendered vocals of Osbourne combined with the non-misogynistic and first/third-person text subconsciously allows women to effortlessly connect with the music without compromising their subject position, whether that be ‘femininity’, sex or even feminist stance.

The Women of Doom’s definition of doom as ‘slow, low and loud’ while simplistic, is very effective. The definition demonstrates, through connotation, how the music subverts the dominant characteristics of extreme metal and negates the performative masculinity which is ingrained in the music and culture. Doom music supplies these women with agency and the lack of masculine themes in the extra-musical material of the genre gives women a space to negotiate their identities and create meaning through their own musical pleasure.