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Whitman's Compost:
The Romantic Posthuman Futures of
Cascadian Black Metal

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Abstract

This essay draws parallels between the adaptation of the originally European genre of Black Metal in the USA in the 21st century and the transformation of European to American Romanticism about 150 years earlier. Black Metal has always been concerned with Romantic topics such as individualism, rebellion, irrationality, spirituality, nature, etc.; like Romanticism, this has also led Black Metal to politics of nationalism, elitism, and essentialism. American Cascadian Black Metal, however, espouses leftist ideologies paralleling those associated with the varieties of non-conformism in American Romanticism, foregrounding especially ecological issues. My essay is concerned with two bands in particular, Wolves in the Throne Room and Skagos. I argue that their lyrics invoke a sense of a futurity that parallels that of Walt Whitman's poems. They expand his philosophy of "compost" to include apocalyptic tropes, invest his largely optimistic view of futurity with contemporary issues of (un)sustainability and environmental (non)conservation, and imagine a posthuman future ecology.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Aufsatz zieht Parallelen zwischen der Adaption des ursprünglich europäischen Genres Black Metal in den USA im 21. Jahrhundert und der etwa 150 Jahre früher stattgefundenen Transformation der europäischen in die amerikanische Romantik. Black Metal hat sich immer schon zutiefst mit romantischen Themen wie Individualismus, Rebellion, Irrationalität, Spiritualität, Natur usw. beschäftigt; wie die Romantik hat dies auch Black Metal zu einer Politik des Nationalismus, Elitismus und Essentialismus geführt. Der amerikanische Cascadian Black Metal vertritt hingegen oftmals linke Ideologien, die mit dem Nonkonformismus der amerikanischen Romantik assoziiert werden, und stellt dabei besonders ökologische Themen in den Vordergrund. Der vorliegende Aufsatz befasst sich insbesondere mit zwei Bands, Wolves in the Throne Room und Skagos. Ich argumentiere, dass ihre Texte einen Zukunftsentwurf beinhalten, der dem in der Lyrik Walt Whitmans gleicht. Sie erweitern seine Philosophie des „Komposts“ um apokalyptische Motive, fügen damit seinem weitgehend optimistischen Zukunftsbild zeitgenössische Themen von Nachhaltigkeit und Umweltzerstörung hinzu und entwerfen zuletzt sogar eine posthumane zukünftige Ökologie.

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Whitman's Compost: The Romantic Posthuman Futures of Cascadian Black Metal

1. Futurity, Environmental Criticism, and Cascadian Black Metal¹

Conceptions and considerations of the future have virtually always been integral to the field of American Studies, given that the discourse of America is so heavily invested with notions of beginnings and newness. Within this larger field, science fiction studies can probably claim the most thorough and continuous interest in futurity, yet in recent years, it has been especially the theory and practice of environmental criticism that makes issues of futurity its particular domain. Environmental criticism has arguably always been cultural criticism, but it nevertheless has its roots in literary studies, and so has come only gradually to consider music as an object of scrutiny.² While my approach in this essay is admittedly much closer to literary studies than musicology, I nevertheless hope to indicate and discuss a cultural field – a complex musical genre and subculture – that is as much of interest to environmental criticism as it has been so far ignored by it,³ even though it is very much in the tradition of American Romanticism on which environmental criticism focused in its early stages. In the following, I will consider what is to me one of the most productive developments in the global culture of Metal music in recent years: the migration of the Black Metal genre from its European (especially Norwegian) foundations to the USA, and especially its adaptation and appropriation by bands in the Pacific Northwest that are (somewhat controversially) labeled as Cascadian Black Metal.

As I consider the aesthetics of Cascadian Black Metal ranging from visuals, interviews, and music to lyrics especially, my argument will be twofold. First, I will argue that the genre, in this transatlantic movement, parallels the transformation of European to American Romanticism about 150 years earlier, along with certain important ideological differences that relate not only to politics and ecology but also to futurity; Cascadian Black Metal espouses leftist ideologies that correspond to those

¹ I would like to thank the guest editors of this issue *ACT. Zeitschrift für Musik und Performance*, Jeanne Cortiel and Christian Schmidt, as well as Knut Holtsträter and the anonymous reviewer of my essay, for their helpful advice and criticism. A much earlier and shorter essay on this ongoing research project was published in German under the title of “Green is the New Black (Metal): Wolves in the Throne Room, die amerikanische Romantik und Ecocriticism,” in: *Metal Matters: Heavy Metal als Kultur und Welt*, eds. Rolf F. Nohr and Herbert Schwaab, Münster 2011, pp. 263–277.

² For example, while the journal *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) has published its issue 6 on “Audio Visual Culture” in 2005, it was only in issue 15 (2011) that it truly addressed “Ecomusicology.” Exemplary studies such as David Ingram, *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music Since 1960*, Amsterdam 2010, or Bernd Herzogenrath’s “The ‘Weather of Music’: Sounding Nature in the 20th and 21st Centuries,” in: *Deleuze/Guattari & Ecology*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath, Houndmills et al 2009, pp. 216–232) date from 2010 or 2009 respectively. A brief history of ecomusicology is available at <http://www.ecomusicology.info/> (accessed 10 June 2015), a website operated by the Ecocriticism Study Group of the American Musicological Society and the Ecomusicology Special Interest Group of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

³ For a singular (if not precisely ecocritical) exception that is sketchy yet insightful, see Timothy Morton, “At the Edge of the Smoking Pool of Death: Wolves in the Throne Room,” *Helvete: A Journal of Black Metal Theory* 1 (Winter 2013), http://blackmetal-theory.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/03_smoking_pool_morton.pdf (accessed 10 June 2015).

associated with the varieties of non-conformism of American Romanticism. Second, I will argue that the lyrics of bands such as Wolves in the Throne Room and Skagos invoke a sense of a futurity that parallels that of Walt Whitman's poems, espousing a philosophy of "compost," of a cycle of catastrophe and regeneration. At the same time, they balance his all too optimistic nineteenth-century Adamism with a more pessimistic outlook on human futurity, finding instead a positive vision of the future in a deep-ecological perspective on a posthuman age.

2. *A Very Brief History of Black Metal*

Even the most slightly positive sense of futurity seems to be completely at odds with the musical tradition of Black Metal, and it may be indeed one reason why some fans might deny that the Cascadian variety is Black Metal at all. The genre⁴ has its roots in the 1980s, with Venom's album *Black Metal* starting the 'first wave,' combining fast-paced thrash metal with Satanic lyrics and a well-orchestrated performance of 'evilness.' The 'second wave' in the 1990s is what is still most commonly associated with Black Metal today, due to a radicalization that was musical as well as ideological and, ultimately, political. Norwegian bands such as Mayhem, Darkthrone, Emperor or Burzum explored the extremes of Metal like none before, in various ways: heavily distorted guitars with plenty of high-speed tremolo picking, blast beat drums, vocal performances ranging from high-pitched screams to hoarse whispers, and productions that often gave new meaning to the term 'low-fi.' The lyrics probed further into misanthropy, Satanism and paganism, mythology, and the uncanny in general, thoroughly lacking the self-irony of earlier bands and thus claiming to be much more serious in their non-conformism and, a very important term, to be 'true.' This claim to (and staging of) authenticity in art was soon underscored by very real events. In the 1990s, a history of violence provided this white male middle-class subculture its foundational myths, which are as problematic as they are persistent in their power to define and frame the way this subculture is viewed: the suicide of Mayhem singer Dead in 1991, a series of church burnings starting in 1992, and the murder of Mayhem guitarist Øystein "Euronymous" Aarseth by Kristian "Varg" Vikernes of Burzum. The latter has risen to infamy as he was at the spearhead of a politicization of black metal that ultimately resulted in subgenres such as National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM). Vikernes and others instrumentalized Black Metal for an extreme right-wing ideology of an ethnic nationalism that mixed anti-Semitism with paganism.

This does not mean that Black Metal itself is always (extremely) right-wing, and this politicization is indeed countered by (extreme) left-wing positions, but it can be inscribed as such. As Tobias Winnerling argues about Heavy Metal in general [my translation]: "Metal does not have a message. [...] This does not mean that it cannot

⁴ For a history of Black Metal, see Dayal Patterson's massive *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult*, Port Townsend, WA 2014.

have a message, on the contrary: Heavy Metal can be ideologically charged in an arbitrary way, it can be the medium for ideological-political contents of all kinds [...].⁵ As such, Black Metal is no different from, say, Country or Pop. “Black Metal itself is a deliberately fractured field, a field of perpetual war between different articulations of consistency,”⁶ especially as it now has become a global phenomenon. I argue that the reason why Black Metal can be exploited for right-wing ideologies, and why it even lends itself to such exploitation to a certain extent, is that it is basically a Romantic genre, and that its developments parallel those of Romanticism, for better or worse.

3. *Black Metal and European Romanticism*

Black Metal is the continuation of Romanticism by other means. As a field of cultural production, it has always been concerned with individualism, rebellion, the irrational, spirituality, mythology, the sublime, and nature. The visuals alone are thoroughly Romantic; any collection of Black Metal music will be rife with album covers that are indistinguishable from Caspar David Friedrich paintings (or indeed simply are Caspar David Friedrich paintings). Benjamin Hedge Olson calls it “a deeply romantic movement”⁷ that is “characterized by a conflict between radical individualism and group identity and by an attempt to accept both polarities simultaneously.”⁸ Christian Dornbusch and Hans-Peter Killguss see Black Metal as

a repetition of a cultural examination of what is socially repressed and stigmatized as ‘evil’ that has been practiced for centuries. Only the form of representation varies over time. The metaphors of violence, ecstasy, blood and death have their historical precedents in the horror literature of Romanticism, a ‘literature that does not associate itself with Modernity but rather represents its repressed, excluded and tabooed side.’⁹

⁵ “Metal hat keine Botschaft. [...] Das bedeutet nicht, dass er keine Botschaft haben kann, ganz im Gegenteil: Heavy Metal lässt sich beliebig ideologisch aufladen, kann also als Trägermedium für ideologisch-politische Inhalte jeder Couleur dienen [...]” Tobias Winnerling, “‘The same song and dance.’ Kollektiver Individualismus und das Heavy Metal Universe,” in: *Metal Matters* (see nt. 1), pp. 457–476.

⁶ Benjamin Noys, “‘Remain True to The Earth!’: Remarks on the Politics of Black Metal,” in: *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Symposium 1*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro, CreateSpace 2010, pp. 105–128, here p.107.

⁷ Benjamin Hedge Olson, *I Am the Black Wizards: Multiplicity, Mysticism and Identity in Black Metal Music and Culture*, master’s thesis submitted at Bowling Green State University in May 2008, http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1206132032 (accessed 10 June 2015), p. 70.

⁸ Olson, *I Am the Black Wizards* (see nt. 7), p. 35.

⁹ “[Beim Black Metal] wiederholt sich eine seit Jahrhunderten praktizierte kulturelle Auseinandersetzung mit dem gesellschaftlich Verdrängten und als ‘Böses’ Stigmatisierten. Lediglich die Form der Darstellung variiert dabei über die Zeit. Historische Vorläufer haben die Metaphern von Gewalt, Ekstase, Blut und Tod beispielsweise in der Horror-Literatur der Romantik, einer ‘Literatur, die es nicht mit der Moderne hält, sondern deren verdrängte, ausgegrenzte und tabuisierte Seite zur Darstellung bringt.’” Christian Dornbusch and Hans-Peter Killguss, *Unheilige Allianzen – Black Metal zwischen Satanismus, Heidentum und Neonazismus*, Hamburg 2005, p. 91.

On a related note, Jan Leichsenring identifies anti-Modern tendencies in Black Metal that turn against rationalization, urbanization, technologization, secularization, and a belief in progress;¹⁰ at the same time, like Romanticism, Black Metal is nevertheless also a Modern phenomenon that is the very product of what it often turns against, and one could summarize the attitude of both as one of “with Modernity against Modernity,” as Jörg Scheller puts it succinctly [my translation].¹¹ Its Romantic concerns with individualism in relation to society, nature, or technology have led to ideological developments in European Black Metal that parallel those of European Romanticism: the celebration of the autonomous individual, the desire for aesthetic and moral liberation and transgression, the fascination with the irrational and the fantastic, the mystical celebration of nature, and the general critique of the ‘disenchantment of the world’ may pave the way to a progressive and liberal politics but also to a celebration of the archaic, the primitive, the ‘authentic,’ and the ‘Volk’ that results in ideologies of essentialized identities determined by blood and soil, of elitism, and of ethnic nationalism. In other words, European Romanticism may lead to both Heinrich Heine and Richard Wagner; European Black Metal accordingly may lead to Emperor and Burzum. Harm-Peter Zimmermann is just as right in considering “Romanticism as aesthetic Enlightenment” as is Victor Klemperer, whose judgment in 1947 Zimmermann quotes: “Because everything that constitutes Nazism is already contained as a seed in Romanticism.”¹²

Neither Black Metal nor Romanticism are singular movements, and both are always somewhat misrepresented by generalizations such as those that I offered above. Yet it seems clear that European Black Metal has also mostly drawn on European but not on American Romanticism (with the rare exception of Arcturus’s song “Alone” [1997], whose lyrics are Edgar Allan Poe’s eponymous 1829 poem), and that accordingly studies on Black Metal have also placed their focus on the former and not the latter. American Romanticism only really entered the picture with the rise of Cascadian Black Metal in the mid- to late 2000s, more than a decade after the heyday of Norwegian Black Metal, and this is what I will turn to next.

4. Cascadian Black Metal and American Romanticism

In the twenty-first century, Black Metal has become a thoroughly globalized musical genre and subculture that has proved to be very adaptable to various localities and cultural environments; for example, the genre’s anti-Christian attitude is easily transformed into anti-Islamic dissent by bands such as Seeds of Iblis in Iraq. Like

¹⁰ Jan Leichsenring, “‘Wir fordern das Unmögliche.’ Zur Formulierung und Funktion anti-moderner Topoi in einigen Metal-Subgenres,” in: *Metal Matters* (see nt. 1), pp. 291–306, here pp. 291–292.

¹¹ Jörg Scheller, “Vom Schrei zur Schreischule: Heavy Metal als Paradiesessenz,” in: *Metal Matters* (see nt. 1), pp. 279–289, here p. 289.

¹² Harm-Peter Zimmermann, *Ästhetische Aufklärung: Zur Revision der Romantik in volkskundlicher Absicht*, Würzburg 2001, pp. 9 and 12 (my translation).

Punk or Rock 'n' Roll in decades before, Black Metal has come to provide a framework for expressions of rebellious non-conformism that can be put to use in many different ways and places, and even if the genre still draws on the notoriety it gained through its foundational myths, it has by now emancipated – indeed liberated – itself from them, and one may well speak of a third wave of Black Metal.¹³ While the manifold developments in Black Metal culture around the globe would merit several research projects of their own, I consider especially its twenty-first century transatlantic migration to the US, and the ensuing proliferation of and experimentation with Black Metal, to be significant and noteworthy for its radically transformative effect. This is not to imply that there have been no American Black Metal bands before, and in fact there was a vibrant scene parallel to, and even influential for, the Norwegian second wave, including bands such as Von, Weakling, or Absu.¹⁴ What I am concerned with here in particular, however, is the development of what has come to be known as Cascadian Black Metal, a term that is both widely used and widely questioned, but which is useful precisely for its definitional fuzziness.¹⁵ It is in this particular genre that Black Metal has most explicitly made a transition that matches the transformation of Romanticism from its European to its American variety, and this is where issues of futurity – inextricably linked to issues of ecology – are negotiated most prominently. In the following, I will consider a handful of bands that are exemplary of Cascadian Black Metal and its elements of American Romanticism (and particularly Transcendentalism) which are especially pertinent with regard to the imagination of the future in relation to mankind and nature.

Cascadian Black Metal takes its name from the Cascade mountain range that spans much of the Pacific rim of the North American continent, connecting Northern California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia across the national border between the US and Canada. This transnational connectivity has given rise to an imagination of place that constructs Cascadia as a bioregion rather than a territory. It has come to be associated with environmental activism – and so-called 'eco-terrorism'

¹³ Of course, the differentiation from second-wave Black Metal bands does not mean that European Romanticism does not continue to be a fundamental source of inspiration for third-wave Black Metal bands; the most notable example in my view are the lyrics to Krallice's song "Diotima" on the eponymous album, which are a Modernist collage of fragments from several Hölderlin poems interspersed with original lines that give them a more contemporary context.

¹⁴ For a history of US Black Metal, see Brandon Stosuy's work-in-progress on an oral history of US Black Metal, parts of which have been published in *The Believer* magazine along with the highly useful introduction "A Blaze in the North American Sky," *The Believer* July/August 2008, <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200807/> (accessed 10 June 2015), and more recently in *Black Metal – Beyond The Darkness*, ed. Tom Howells, London 2012, pp. 36–59.

¹⁵ It is important to note that Cascadian Black Metal is by far not the only way in which Black Metal has been adapted by American bands, although it may have been the subcategory that had the most significant initial impact on the genre. Bands such as Krallice, Cobalt, Wolvhammer, Panopticon, or Deafheaven are all pushing the limits of what Black Metal can be, and in very different ways that have practically nothing to do with the Transcendentalist tradition; especially Panopticon's album *Kentucky* would deserve a closer look by American Studies, as it breaks new ground in a style that mixes Black Metal with Bluegrass and takes a leftist view on Kentucky coal mining culture, quite in the lyrical tradition of Muriel Rukeyser's long poem "The Book of the Dead", in: *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, eds. Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog, Pittsburgh, PA 2005, pp. 73–111. On this album, see Paola Ferrero, "U.S. Black Metal, Folk Music and Political Radicalism: Panopticon's *Kentucky*," in: *America and the Musical Unconscious*, eds. Julius Greve and Sascha Pöhlmann, New York, NY 2015, pp. 291–309.

during the 'green scare' – as well as an independence movement that seeks to secede from the US and Canada (Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* in the eponymous novel from 1975 comprises much of Cascadia). Cascadian Black Metal is embedded in this environmentalist context, and one might even (uneasily) define the term as ecological Black Metal or Transcendentalist Black Metal.¹⁶ This ecological aspect is highlighted by artists even as they distance themselves from other criteria that might define Cascadia as a place; for example, Ray Hawes of Skagos (bass, vocals) explains that

First and foremost, Cascadia represents, to me, a bioregion – economics, nationalism, homogenized cultural identity and left-wing coups scarcely enter the periphery of my definitive Weltanschauung regarding the term, and I mention them now, only briefly, to affirm my distance from any such allegiance.¹⁷

Such an imagination of place does not lend itself to an instrumentalization by essentialist ideologies that would derive a 'naturalized' or 'autochthonous' identity, and Hawes explicitly opposes it to nationalism and other attempts at cultural homogenization. Appropriately, Cascadian Black Metal itself has come to expand as a term to designate aesthetics rather than territorial origin. While the term may once have signified Black Metal played by bands from Cascadia, it is now a label that is no longer tied to the artists but rather to the works of art. In other words, anyone can play Cascadian Black Metal, no matter where they live, where they are from, or who they are – just like Black Metal more generally is an aesthetics that can be appropriated by anyone, even if some Norwegian traditionalists (not to mention NSBM bands) pretend differently. Thus the list of bands routinely labeled as Cascadian Black Metal not only includes Agalloch, Threnos, Wolves in the Throne Room, Falls of Rauros, Skagos, Ash Borer, Alda, Fauna, Fell Voices, Aylwin, or Leech, but also Altar of Plagues from Ireland or Encircling Sea from Australia, all of which are connected by family resemblances rather than the coherence of an artistic 'movement.' This openness of the term has even led critics to declare (actually more sympathetically than it sounds) that "Cascadian Black Metal is bullshit,"¹⁸ since it cannot be defined clearly either by location or aesthetics.

Musically, Cascadian Black Metal draws on second-wave Black Metal as much as on Post-Rock, Neo-Folk, and other genres, with songs often well above the ten-minute mark taking their time suspensefully to pile up sonic layers or allow for radical

¹⁶ This term is meant descriptively, indicating that Cascadian Black Metal can be considered part of Asselineau's 'transcendentalist constant' in American culture; I emphasize this to distinguish it from the term "transcendental Black Metal" that Hunter Hunt-Hendrix (of the band Liturgy) sought – and, in my opinion, largely failed – to theorize with regard to US Black Metal. As such, it is unfortunately no different from most of the other contributions in the collection *Hideous Gnosis* that sought to establish something called "Black Metal Theory," but which only ended up pretentiously indulging in obtuse academic jargon and dated poststructuralist routines – Cradle of Filth rather than Mayhem.

¹⁷ Interview with Ray Hawes of Skagos, *Hammer Smashed Sound*, 27 August 2012, <http://www.hammersmashed-sound.com/2012/08/interview-with-ray-hawes-of-skagos.html> (accessed 10 June 2015).

¹⁸ Tim Hunter, "Cascadian Black Metal' Is Bullshit," *Invisible Oranges*, 23 November 2011, <http://www.invisible-oranges.com/2011/11/cascadian-black-metal-is-bullshit/> (accessed 10 June 2015).

breaks with the song structure; in doing so, it is not necessarily original nor unique, and it is clearly rather in tune than at odds with the Norwegian tradition. However, it takes this tradition and its whole aesthetics – musically, visually, lyrically, and indeed ideologically – in a different direction, thus matching the transformation of Romanticism from Europe to America. As with American Romanticism, the central issue of all Cascadian Black Metal is nature, and this is the aspect that, in both cases, marks the continuity with its European predecessors as well as the difference from them.

While European Romanticism in part ends up using nature as an origin of fixed identities, American Romanticism – and especially Transcendentalism – sees in nature the foundation of futurity itself, the utopian element on which to build a new world and a new human society that is precisely *not* bound by prior identities any longer. Emerson's future-oriented inquiries and declarations in his introduction to *Nature* indicate this view best:

Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.¹⁹

This radically positive, even often naïvely optimistic view of a benevolent and plenteous nature (and a corresponding bright future of potential) is different from the darker European Romantic imaginations, although both would agree on its sublime qualities. For Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists, nature is the foundation of a universalist or holistic ideology that cannot but result in a politics of radical democracy or anarchism: since nature is accessible to each and every human being, and they are all integrated into this nature, all of them are equal, and they are equally constructive in the world.

Thoreau famously put Emerson's invitation to "Build [...] your own world"²⁰ and indeed a future into practice at Walden Pond as he experimented with an alternative way of life. With the battle cry of "Simplify, simplify"²¹ he opposed the dominance of society, capital and technology in a world where humans are alienated from themselves and nature due to a gradual Modernization in which they are merely "the tools of their tools."²² Like Emerson, Thoreau describes a community and continuity of

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in: *The Selected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, New York, NY 1940, pp. 3–42, here p. 3.

²⁰ Emerson, "Nature" (see nt. 19), p. 42.

²¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in: *A Week, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, New York, NY 1985, p. 395.

²² Thoreau, *Walden* (see nt. 21), p. 352.

man and nature, only in material terms: “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?”²³ Thoreau finds in nature a freedom that is not possible in society: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.”²⁴ This view of nature directly translates into a political position that differs radically from those that some European Romantics derived from their assessment of nature.

American Romanticism, one could argue, is thus the actual Romantic tradition that Black Metal has been drawing on for a long time, since it highlights the tenets of individualism even more than its European counterpart, and it finds in nature the source of limitless potential and utopian freedom that was not available in Europe. Especially Transcendentalism is a model protest movement and counterculture, deeply concerned with the future in the present, optimistic and yet fully aware of the necessity to act. Its ideals of dissent, rebellion, and non-conformity are virtually a direct match for those of the Black Metal subculture. What has often been expressed by second-wave Black Metal under the guise of Satanism or, as Benjamin Noys has it, “an unstable amalgam of Stirnerite egoism and Nietzschean aristocracy,”²⁵ is actually just paraphrasing Emerson’s words in “Self-Reliance”: “Who so would be a man, must be a nonconformist. [...] Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind [...]. No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.”²⁶ As a predominantly male, white, middle-class phenomenon, second-wave Black Metal has generally resisted the various potential politicizations that are implied by this connection, and it has shied away from democratic or anarchist perspectives, not to mention ecological or feminist agendas, instead embracing a much more simplified individualism that either pretended to be apolitical or was limited to symbolic rebellion, escapism, or blunt Satanism, paganism, or mysticism.

In contrast, Cascadian Black Metal is often openly associated with leftist ideologies that result from explicitly voiced environmentalist sensibilities, and its eco-anarchism can be placed in the Transcendentalist tradition of Emerson and Thoreau, with a band such as Walden exhibiting this lineage already in its name. Other bands use Black Metal as a tool of environmentalist propaganda; for example, the one-man project Wild’s Reprisal does not use original lyrics for its songs but rather recites excerpts from canonical environmentalist texts by Aldo Leopold or Rachel Carson, but also Theodore Kaczynski’s “Industrial Society and Its Future.” Yet in the following, I

²³ Thoreau, *Walden* (see nt. 21), p. 432.

²⁴ Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in: *Collected Essays and Poems*, New York, NY 2001, pp. 225–255, here p. 225.

²⁵ Noys, “Remain True” (see nt. 6), p. 105.

²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in: *The Selected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, New York, NY 1940, pp. 145–169, here p. 148. This emphasis on individualism is what allows Diarmuid Hester to convincingly point to Emerson and Thoreau in his very brief essay as, in his poignant inversion, Black Metal artists; see Diarmuid Hester, “Individualism above all: Black Metal in American Writing,” in: *Black Metal – Beyond The Darkness* (see nt. 14), pp. 78–83.

will focus on two bands that in my opinion exemplify best the Transcendentalist undercurrent that characterizes Cascadian Black Metal, and whose imagination of futurity heavily draws on and modifies that of American Romanticism, and of one proponent in particular: Walt Whitman.

5. *The Whitmanian Imagination of Futurity: This Compost*

No American poet is more relevant to a consideration of futurity than Walt Whitman; no other poet has been more concerned or even obsessed with issues of beginnings, newness, and the relation between past, present, and future, clearly privileging the latter over the other terms. For example, in his classic study *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis singles out Whitman as the exemplary writer who has proffered the “fullest portrayal of the new world’s representative man as a new, American Adam”;²⁷ Lewis also already draws attention to the problematic aspects of this unconditional orientation towards the future at the cost of the past, since Whitman’s Adamism and his celebration of creative destruction could also be understood as the ideological justifications of manifest destiny and genocidal colonial and imperialist politics. Throughout all the transformations *Leaves of Grass* has undergone in Whitman’s career, it is always full of beginnings, and the book itself always aims to begin – to begin America, a new world, but also a new age of democracy in which individualism and mass society are reconciled. Yet especially the first edition from 1855, in many ways the most uncompromising version, and indeed one of the most radical and experimental works of art in American culture, is highly important for its universalist philosophy that is not yet marginalized by the nationalist focus that comes to more prominence in Whitman’s poetry after the Civil War. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman proffers an imagination of futurity which is based on an optimistic belief in progress that is neither naïve nor elitist; instead, it is based on a recognition of universal connectedness, of a holism that imagines all progress as part of a cycle of renewal. He is not only “a great poet of the joys of life, but he is equally a great poet of death,”²⁸ even if the exuberant tone of his poetry may distract readers from that aspect. This is not the place to embark on a detailed discussion of Whitman’s poetry; I will rather focus on one particular aspect of it that corresponds to the lyrics of Cascadian Black Metal, arguing that both share in a common imagination of futurity that combines an engagement with death with a vision of renewal.

While Whitman celebrates the individual like no other poet, he also always considers the individual as embedded in a social, political, and ecological environment (including not only nature but also urban settings), and as part of a universal whole without losing its individuality. The famous opening lines of “Song of Myself” indicate this connectivity, embedding the addressee in a poem and recognizing him or her as an equal while asserting the individuality of the speaker:

²⁷ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, Chicago, IL 1955, p. 28.

²⁸ Harold Aspiz, *So Long! Walt Whitman’s Poetry of Death*, Tuscaloosa, AL 2004, p. 1.

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.²⁹

Whitman strives for a maximal unity of anything that exists, working especially hard to deconstruct the binary opposition between humans and nature; in “Song of Myself,” he includes in his perspective the speaker, the text, the reader, as well as mineral and organic existence, city and country, good and evil, Earth and the whole universe, in order to create a total material and spiritual environment without dissolving its particularities. In doing so, for all his focus on humans as individuals and in society, Whitman can be said to espouse Arne Naess’s philosophy of deep ecology or “biotic egalitarianism”³⁰ before the term or theory existed. No other text than *Leaves of Grass* offers such positive images of constant cyclical regeneration that steer clear of any pastoral escapism or naïve idealization but instead derive a radically democratic philosophy from a holistic view of nature that is able to integrate the alleged futurelessness of death and its endings into an imagination of continuous life and its perpetual beginnings. Whitman does so by offering *Leaves of Grass* as a whole as a future-founding document of regeneration. In short, one could describe this aesthetics and ideology as one of ‘compost,’ taking a term from his 1856 “Poem of Wonder at The Resurrection of The Wheat” that he later called “This Compost.”³¹ In this poem of “respect for the terrible thingishness of the earth,”³² the speaker admires it for its ability to transform and regenerate dead matter into a living and nourishing substance:

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseases’d corpses,
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.³³

²⁹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, in: *Poetry and Prose* ed. Justin Kaplan, New York, NY 1996, p. 27.

³⁰ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Malden, MA 2005, p. 137.

³¹ On “compost poetry” as a literary genre – and indeed a genre that may well include Cascadian Black Metal – see Jed Rasula’s *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry*, Athens, GA 2002.

³² M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman & the Earth: A Study in Eco-poetics*, Iowa City, IA 2004, p. 48. Available online at <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/anc.00162.html> (accessed 10 June 2015). Together with Christine Gerhardt’s *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*, Iowa City, IA 2014, Killingsworth’s study offers the best ecocritical reading of Whitman’s poetry, and I can only point readers towards its insightful discussion of the complexities of Whitman’s notion of compost here. Killingsworth’s readings are particularly striking when he contrasts these ecological views and imperatives with later poems such as “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” which, “[i]n linking manifest destiny to a view of nature as a boundless resource base for human expansion, [...] can only offend the sensibilities of modern environmentalists and proponents of environmental justice” (ibid., p. 64).

³³ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), pp. 496–497.

In “Song of Myself,” he famously celebrates the grass as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves”³⁴ for similar reasons, as the outward sign of an ongoing cycle of death and renewal in which life is only nourished and perpetuated by death and is therefore limitless:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.³⁵

The poem ends as the speaker himself dissolves without vanishing, embedded and reborn in the world of which he is part: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.”³⁶ The final lines of the poem – “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop some where waiting for you”³⁷ – do not end with a period; the poem hardly ends at all, but maintains its future-oriented openness formally by simply refusing to signal its ending. Even though these lines may imply through their use of the first-person pronoun that the speaker has retained his human individuality beyond his dissolution, “Song of Myself” as a whole does not suggest “life after death” for the individual in any such sense, but rather understands life much more generally and universally, and not necessarily human at all. (After all, the original title of “This Compost” announced the resurrection of the wheat and not the individual.) In the following readings, I hope to show that this Whitmanian philosophy of compost is indeed the particular Romantic (if not strictly speaking Transcendentalist) tradition on which Cascadian Black Metal draws with regard to both nature and futurity, and that the bands I discuss adapt and update it to their own twenty-first century context especially by emphasizing its deep-ecological and posthuman aspects.

6. *Compost Metal: Wolves in the Throne Room*

One band in particular has brought Cascadian Black Metal to the attention of a wider audience in the Metal scene, and its constitutive role for definitions and understandings of the genre is significant: *Wolves in the Throne Room*. Hailing from Olympia, Washington, the band achieved prominence especially with its second album *Two Hunters* (CD, Southern Lord Records, sunn 83, 2007), on which I will focus in my analysis here since it offers what I consider the most consistent adaptation

³⁴ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), p. 31.

³⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), p. 32.

³⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), p. 88.

³⁷ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), p. 88.

of Romantic/Transcendentalist ideas and aesthetics in Cascadian Black Metal. Importantly, *Two Hunters* offers not merely Whitmanian lyrics; Muriel Rukeyser's judgment still holds true that Whitman "cannot be imitated" but only "parodied," adding that while he also cannot be "extended," it is "always possible" to "go on with the work he began."³⁸ *Two Hunters* can be considered such a continuation of his beginnings: while it embraces a Whitmanian philosophy of compost, it also updates it by including the more contemporary notion of apocalypse in its cycle of regeneration, thus suppressing somewhat the optimism and Adamism that are often associated with Whitman's poetry and his outlook on the future, and complementing his faith in beginnings with a sense of (potential) endings that threaten rather than further life and futurity itself.

As is the case with many bands in popular music today, the music of Wolves in the Throne Room is heavily linked to the public image they create for themselves (or have created for them). This is especially relevant for a subculture that values authenticity as highly as (Black) Metal, regardless of how such a sense of authenticity may be constructed, cultivated, and communicated. One might argue that Whitman is a perfect role model for such a production of authenticity, since no other American artist until then was so interested (and successful) in creating a poetic persona for himself along with actual works of poetry that are irreducibly connected to that persona. Parallel to this construction, Wolves in the Throne Room produce a public image of themselves that complements their artistic production as well as the spiritual-ecological ideology that informs it. On its official website, the band locates its beginnings during "the Summer of 2002 at an Earth First rendezvous in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State," and they are undeniably Thoreauvian in emphasizing their subsequent move to "a dilapidated farmstead on the outskirts of Olympia, WA" where "during the first long, dark winter [...] the band developed their trance-inducing sound and solidified the burning intent that would animate the band's music."³⁹ The importance of this emplacement for artistic production is highlighted further by the band photographs, which focus on the farm rather than the musicians:

³⁸ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, Ashfield 1996, p. 79.

³⁹ Wolves in the Throne Room, "Biography," <http://www.wittr.com/bio> (accessed 10 June 2015).



Figure 1. Promo shot, <http://www.wittr.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Group-Night-1-400x400.jpg> (accessed 10 June 2015).

In general, Wolves in the Throne Room minimize the presence of humans in the images they use; the pictures published on their website as well as on their albums are mostly of natural scenes in which human figures are either absent or barely recognizable as such. One image in particular is noteworthy for its ecological subtext, as it combines this reduced human presence with a mournful and accusatory visual proof of human intervention into nature:



Figure 2. Promo shot, <http://www.witr.com/bio> (accessed 10 June 2015).

In this vein, one may take it as a programmatic gesture that the cover of the first album, *Diadem of 12 Stars* (2006), like many other Cascadian Black Metal covers, does not even display the name or logo of the band along with its photograph of a mountain landscape – maybe reminiscent of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that also found it unnecessary to acknowledge its author on its cover.

The band exhibits connections to American Romanticism not only in such self-fashioning but also in a number of interviews, of which one particularly striking example will have to suffice here. In a 2009 interview, the band rejects the European Black Metal tradition in a way that could be taken directly from Emerson's *Nature*:

I'm not interested in the idea of trying to reclaim something from the past, and again, this is because I'm an American, and we don't have a past, necessarily. It feels much more honest and natural to me to seek transcendence in the natural world, in a more unmediated kind of way. It's never been important to me to have ancient symbols involved in that spiritual practice. To me, it's enough to go into the woods with the intention of communicating with some higher power, and it will communicate with you. There's no need to do some kind of Wiccan ritual, with this incantation and this cauldron and this dagger, or whatever. I think that it's accessible to all people.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Interview with Drengskap, "If this Dark Age Conquers, We will Leave this Echo," *Heathen Harvest*, 15 February 2009, <http://hh.heathenhideout.com/article.php?story=20090209095537452> (accessed 10 June 2015).

This short paragraph contains some of the major motifs of Transcendentalism: the possibility of newness in a place without traditions, the immediate experience of nature leading to a democratic or anarchist world view and politics, the unity between humans, nature, and the mystical, as well as finally the reference to an American culture that offers such potential in opposition to a European culture caught in its history. Yet while such views are clearly based in Transcendentalist ideology, they do not entail the Adamist ideas that surrounded similar claims in the nineteenth century, which considered America a 'tabula rasa' where colonization and colonialism were justified by notions of manifest destiny. On the contrary, *Wolves in the Throne Room* rather poignantly indicate how the ideologies of European Black Metal that welcomed church burnings for the sake of more 'primitive' and 'original' communities might be transposed most appropriately to the US: "[...] we are interlopers in this land. The logical thing would be for some disaffected youth from the local Indian nation to start a black metal band and burn my house down."⁴¹

As Black Metal thus grows out of its European tradition, it finds an ideological context that redefines its attitude towards ecology, spirituality, and politics, but which nevertheless does not alienate the genre from itself but rather develops its potential. While second-wave Black Metal is often blind with rage, these new ideological concerns transform it into a purposeful philosophical and political art that turns against a rational and anthropocentric Modernity in which it is embedded, suffering the same torn existence as Romanticism as it both decries the failures and losses of Modernization and at the same time participates in it. Both poles of this ambiguity negotiated in and by Black Metal are future-oriented. On the one hand, "[Black Metal has] to do with destroying the worldview of modernity, destroying the way that it makes you think and the way it makes you perceive the world, and the way that it affects your spiritual being"⁴²; on the other hand, in Thoreauvian fashion, "[e]veryone must decide how much of their soul they will sell to the modern machine. [...] It is impossible to deny modernity totally. [...] It is a slow process to remove one's self from the grid."⁴³

I will consider this ambiguous attitude towards the future in the following as I read *Two Hunters* for its Whitmanian imagination of compost. *Two Hunters* presents a cycle of destruction and regeneration, both lyrically and musically. The band describes the album as a "mythic story about an apocalypse; two forces, hunters in their own ways, battle and destroy each other in respective attempts to protect and control the world. Themes of rebirth and transformation will always be at the center of *Wolves in the Throne Room*."⁴⁴ While the trope of apocalypse had already been a

⁴¹ Jason Jordan, "Wolves in the Throne Room – Black Metal on Their Own Terms," *Ultimate Metal*, 24 April 2006, <http://www.ultimatemetal.com/forum/interviews/238052-wolves-throne-room-black-metal-their-own-terms.html> (accessed 10 June 2015).

⁴² Drengskap, "Dark Age" (see nt. 40).

⁴³ Brandon Stosuy, "Show No Mercy," *Pitchfork*, 26 September 2007, <http://pitchfork.com/features/show-no-mercy/6697-show-no-mercy/> (accessed 10 June 2015).

⁴⁴ Stosuy, "Show No Mercy" (see nt. 43).

favorite of second-wave Black Metal, *Two Hunters* presents it in different categories that are closer to the apocalyptic scenarios imagined by contemporary ecological writers, since nature assumes a central role in it and becomes an actor instead of merely a background for destruction or a mere symbol of misanthropy. In its apocalyptic imagination, *Two Hunters* works out especially the non-anthropocentric aspects of the Whitmanian notion of compost, gradually integrating the human individual into nature until he or she completely dissolves in it in a positive posthuman vision of holistic balance and connectivity.

Two Hunters opens with the instrumental track “Dea Artio,” whose title refers to the Celtic bear goddess and, I would argue, to her most well-known artistic representation which is held by the Historisches Museum Bern in Switzerland.⁴⁵ The title thus alludes to a pagan tradition of nature worship as well as an artistic representation of the goddess as both animal and human at the same time, blurring the line between the realms of nature, humanity, and the divine. Although without lyrics, this first song nevertheless introduces this holistic concern with the natural world by opening with the sounds of crickets and an owl before the guitar joins in. This beginning presents nature as the foundation of the whole album, and *Two Hunters* will end in a similar way to show that this beginning was actually part of a cycle, and that it conceives of futurity not in a linear but a cyclical way.

The second song, “Vastness and Sorrow,” harshly breaks with the layers of sound that have gradually accumulated in “Dea Artio” with slow rhythm and melody, which now give way to the unmistakable trademarks of Black Metal: tremolo picking, blast beats, high-pitched screams. This violent rupture corresponds to an apocalyptic scene in the lyrics:

Behold the vastness and sorrow of this empty land
A dark and fell rider clad in garments of shadow is the lord of this place
A cruel and wanton king, a priest of a black religion is he

The hoof beat of the rider's steed pound a mournful drumbeat upon the dry cracked earth
To this rhythm the world moves

The sun blasts down upon the earth
Until the soil turns to powder and blows away

Lifeless chaos is the order for the rider has mastered the seasons
Ancient kings' cairn now have been defiled
The gates of strongholds long breached left swinging lifelessly in the fetid wind
The pillars of holy places lie dead

⁴⁵ Cf. Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann, *Dea Artio, die Bärengöttin von Muri: Römische Bronzestatuetten aus einem ländlichen Heiligtum*, Zürich 2002.

He rides day and night
The relentless hoof beats echoes⁴⁶

This is a good point to consider the way in which these lyrics are presented by the vocalist. If Simon Frith is right in his classic essay “Why Do Songs Have Words?” that “song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character,”⁴⁷ then what emotions are expressed by vocalists in Black Metal, and what marks of character do they transmit? It is clear that my attribution of meaning cannot be generalized to cover the whole range of voice performances in Black Metal, and even the performance in a single song will invite numerous different interpretations. In the case of *Two Hunters* and “Vastness and Sorrow” (but also Skagos’s *Ást*, NHR Records, NHRCD013, 2009), one might consider the bellowing, high-pitched screams an expression of rage, controlled only by the high-speed rhythms of the song, a relentless yet appropriate way of presenting a destroyed world. While this sense of aggression is possibly the first thing listeners who are not familiar with Black Metal will pick up, if they identify the vocal performance as such at all, there is more to it than that. These screams can also be understood as mournful ones, and they combine with the semantic level of the lyrics to lament the destruction they describe. Wolves in the Throne Room have stated that “Black Metal is a deeply sad music, it’s a heartbroken music,”⁴⁸ and the vocal performance plays an important role in expressing this despair beyond the semantic content of the lyrics, often adding an element of resistance to this misery by the aggressive delivery.

On the semantic level, the addressee of “Vastness and Sorrow” is actively drawn into the environment of the text by the imperative of the very first word. Like all lyrics on *Two Hunters*, “Vastness and Sorrow” can be classified as an “environment-poem” as Angus Fletcher defines it: “[...] an environment-poem is an environment [...] such a poem does not merely suggest or indicate an environment as part of its thematic meaning, but actually gets the reader to enter into the poem as if it were the reader’s environment of living [...].”⁴⁹ One might add to Fletcher’s strictly poetic concept that music significantly facilitates this integration into the environment and allows for an even deeper immersion than a merely visual text on a page. This emplacement occurs by telling and inviting the listener to *see*, addressing the human sense that is so central to Emerson’s Transcendentalism. Thus the nature presented in the song is always already *landscape*, something perceived by a beholder, and so the lyrics do

⁴⁶ Citation based on the lyrics of the fan site Encyclopaedia Metallum, which I corrected in accordance with the tracks on the album http://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Wolves_in_the_Throne_Room/Two_Hunters/156710 (accessed 10 June 2015).

⁴⁷ Simon Frith, “Why Do Songs Have Words?,” in: *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop*, New York, NY 1988, pp. 105–128, here p. 120.

⁴⁸ Stefan Raduta. “Wolves In The Throne Room: the new Black Metal,” *Kogaionon*, 1 December 2007, <http://www.kogaionon.com/en/kogaionon-interviews/wolves-in-the-throne-room-the-new-black-metal-by-stefan-raduta> (accessed 10 June 2015).

⁴⁹ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination*, Cambridge, MA 2004, p. 122.

not offer a pastoral idealization of a nature untouched by humans but instead address the relation between humans and nature as well as the possible futures this relation holds. They present a waste land, and with imagery of infertility and dryness they are indeed reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's modernist masterpiece, yet they do not present "the vastness and sorrow of this empty land" as a metaphor for cultural decline but rather for the decline *of* nature due to human culture.⁵⁰ The rider is described as a dark, Satanic figure with absolute power. He rules over an infertile world in which the sun does not nourish life but scorches the dry earth; this world is as lifeless as it is futureless. One can allegorically read the rider as contemporary humanity, whose actions have been so detrimental to the world that they have destroyed all earlier cultures, all spirituality, and indeed all prospects for amelioration. His power is based on his fundamental control over the natural world, by which he has broken with the course of nature and imposed his own false order on it, and along with it an unnatural rhythm that is utterly disconnected from its environment: "He rides day and night / The relentless hoof beats echoes." These relentless structures may be understood in the technological, capitalist, political or philosophical terms that characterize Modernity itself; what they all have in common is the alienation of humans from nature, as well as their control, disenchantment, and destruction of nature. This modern ideology could be the black religion preached by the rider, and its result is visible in the description of an environment that is hostile to life itself. With this apocalyptic imagery, "Vastness and Sorrow" draws on a classic trope of Black Metal and environmentalism alike, using a vision of futurelessness or of a dismal future in order to provoke or invite action in the present to prevent such a future:

Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal. Of no other dimension of contemporary environmentalism, furthermore, can it be so unequivocally said that the role of the imagination is central to the project; for the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis.⁵¹

The third song on the album, "Cleansing," describes the resolution of this crisis by way of a ritual cleansing that will regenerate the waste land and restore futurity itself to it. Musically, this ritual is introduced by a female singing voice whose melodic and meditative chant breaks with the aggressive screams that dominated the preceding

⁵⁰ The Skagos song "Anamnesis II: A Dry, Sterile Thunder, Without Rain", in: Skagos/Panopticon, *Split* (Flenser Records FRO6, 2010), is worth mentioning in this context, as it indicates that Cascadian Black Metal is (gradually) looking beyond Romanticism toward Modernism to adapt it to its own purposes, finding in it yet another intellectual context obsessed with issues of futurity, regeneration, and apocalypse. The lyrics once more describe a decaying world destroyed by humanity that presents itself to a beholder, the speaker – "All I see are saplings shackled to stone / a genocide of all we've sown" – who voices his dismay at the hostility and infertility of the world along with his hope for a catastrophic regeneration by directly quoting Eliot's "The Waste Land": "Here, one can neither stand, nor lie, nor sit. There is not even silence in the mountains, but dry, sterile / thunder, without rain. / I await the flood in rusting chains, / for a fertile thunder that reeks of rain."

⁵¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, MA 1995, p. 285.

song. It is accompanied by simple drum rhythms, melodic guitars, and the sound of rain that eventually ends in thunder. As this is followed by blast beats, the male voice takes over again, screaming not in contrast but as a complement to the singing. This harsh voice repeats the lines sung before and adds others to continue the ritual:

Yes, to the darkest place that we know
Outside of the rider's domain
To the heart of the wood
To the hidden places beyond the briar thickets

The dance must begin as dusk gathers around

Our skin drum and rattle know the tune
jaw bone driven through the skull of a great foe
bested with wooden spear
the tip hardened in fire

Bathe in the clear cold stream
Fresh water from the unsullied endless spring that flows from the mountain
We will sing the most ancient song
Spark the fire upon dry tinder⁵²

“Cleansing” first balances the absolute power of the male rider in “Vastness and Sorrow” with a contrastingly harmonious female voice that points toward possible mystical escape routes from his all-encompassing realm. Even the allegedly devastated world of the second song seems still to hold pockets of potential resistance and regeneration, “hidden places” within nature that may serve as foundations of a different future that is not apocalyptic. Importantly, the addressee is no longer merely integrated into the text as a beholder but rather – through the use of the first-person plural pronoun – as a member of a group participating in the ritual, and thus less distant from the environment than before. Regeneration is expressed by contrast: the “mournful drumbeat upon the dry cracked earth” is now the ritualistic sound of “skin drum and rattle,” and now there is water coming from the “endless” source within nature that opposes the dryness in “Vastness and Sorrow” and help restore the infertile earth. The hostility of heat is also reinscribed by changing into the generative spark from which the world will derive new energy so that dryness is no longer a metaphor for infertility and endings but rather one of beginnings and creativity.

This cycle is tentatively concluded in the final song, “I Will Lay Down My Bones Among the Rocks and Roots,” which marks the climax of the album, not only in being the longest track, but also in referring back both musically and lyrically to what

⁵² Lyrics on Encyclopaedia Metallum (see nt. 46).

has preceded it, a condensed 'mise en abyme' of *Two Hunters* itself, and thus yet another emphasis of its cyclical structure. The lyrics address the regeneration after the ritual and offer the most forceful expression of the Whitmanian notion of compost:

The torment has ended
The beast has done his work
Great fires rage outside of this wooden sanctuary

But soon they will be quenched by a purifying rain
The embers of the ceremonial fire burn to ash

A new warmth stirs within the center of the earth
I am alone here no more

The wood is filled with the sounds of wildness
The songs of birds fill the forest

On this new morning
This will be my new home
Deep within the most sacred grove
The sun god is born anew

I will lay down my bones among the rocks and roots of the deepest hollow next to the streambed
The quiet hum of the earth's dreaming is my new song

When I awake, the world will be born anew⁵³

The song opens with the sound of wind that may signal the end of the thunderstorm in "Cleansing." Most importantly, it once more shifts and intensifies the perspective of the reader or listener: having moved from beholder to participant in the ritual, he or she has now vanished completely, or rather has become the lyrical I, thus reaching the maximum of embeddedness in the environment-poem. This may be read as a sign of the successful regeneration of nature, since it now offers the individual an environment in which he or she can actually be integrated to the point of total immersion and dissolution. While "Vastness and Sorrow" was marked by the alienation of humans and nature, it is now their unity that is central to the song. The ritual was successful, and the final "purifying rain" will provide the world with new energy for new life: "A new warmth stirs within the center of the earth." The album ends with the renewal and restoration of nature beyond all negativity. The rebirth of the sun god is marked musically by a distinct new movement of the song, and it is announced by the sound of living nature. This resurrection completes the reinscription of the destructive image of the sun in "Vastness and Sorrow" that was begun in "Cleansing," replacing the false order of the rider with the natural order of the sun

⁵³ Lyrics on Encyclopaedia Metallum (see nt. 46).

god. Parallel to this rebirth, the lyrical I attains a fundamental unity with nature as it dissolves, its “death” allowing for its complete integration into the environment, and eventually its own regeneration as part of a universal whole.⁵⁴ As the lyrical I is literally embedded in nature, it is not only now able to perceive the “quiet hum of the earth’s dreaming” but also calls it “my new song,” turning this I into an actor who is inseparable from nature as he, like the speaker at the end of “Song of Myself,” bequeaths himself to the dirt. This dissolution of the individual in the universal does not mark an ending but rather a beginning, changing but not destroying life in death. The lyrical I is composted; if it vanishes, then only because it has been transformed beyond the categories with which we have been able to recognize it, “human” being one of them. Nature is regenerated on *Two Hunters*, not humanity or the human individual; however, the dissolution of the human is framed entirely in positive terms, and the apocalypse in these lyrics is not the destruction of the human but rather of the lives they lead until they finally attain a unity with nature again.

The final human utterance on *Two Hunters* – “When I awake, the world will be born anew” – is once more made by the female voice, which thus provides the framework for the ritual cleansing and regeneration that opposes the male rider’s destructive power. Yet in accordance with its non-anthropocentric vision of nature, the album does not end with human sounds, but rather with those of water and the song of birds. The latter connotes the dawn while the sounds opening the album (crickets and owls) connote dusk, indicating that apocalypse and renewal have actually occurred in a single night, and may indeed occur every night. At the same time, *Two Hunters* combines this mythical level with the imagination of a destroyed world that is in need of regeneration, thus adding an important ecological dimension that allows for a reading of the album as part of a “toxic discourse,” and Lawrence Buell’s comment on A.R. Ammons’s poem *Garbage* holds true of this album as well: “If toxification is not consistently the central subject, it is central to the poem’s cultural landscape, and an energizing concern.”⁵⁵ *Two Hunters* complements the toxic vision of the second song by a more positive imagination of futurity in the fourth, an imagination that holds on to the potential for regeneration despite the apparently total finality presented earlier. While this emphasis does celebrate renewal enough to allow for a generally positive reading of the album as a whole, the strong presence of the apocalyptic and toxic on *Two Hunters* also forbids an all too optimistic interpretation of this regenerative possibility, and it prevents it from slipping into Adamism or a naïve faith in progress – a modern faith that has led to the problem rather than its solution. After all, the cycle remains a cycle and does not find a happy ending in re-

⁵⁴ It is quite instructive with regard to the differences in European and American Black Metal to compare this composting of the individual with a similar burial that explicitly prohibits a reintegration of the body into the environment; this burial occurs at the end of Emperor’s sign-off song “Thorns on My Grave” on their final album *Prometheus – The Discipline of Fire and Demise* (2001), which opens with the words: “I hereby commit my body to the ground / sterilised and wrapped in plastic foil.”

⁵⁵ Lawrence Buell, “Toxic Discourse,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998), no. 3, pp. 639–665, here p. 665.

generation; for the listener and reader, the future remains unstable and poised between the two extremes of apocalypse and renewal (though tending towards the latter), and both the potential for life and the threat of its total annihilation remain – and it is in their ongoing conflict rather than in its final resolution that the album's ecological agenda can be located.

7. *Posthuman Compost Metal: Skagos*

Wolves in the Throne Room are particularly exemplary of the relation between Cascadian Black Metal and American Romanticism, yet they are by far not unique in continuing the Transcendentalist aesthetic and political project. Two bands in particular, Alda and Skagos, deserve to be mentioned here, although I will only be able to discuss the album *Ást* by the latter in detail. Like Alda's *Tahoma* (CD, Pest Productions, PEST059, 2012), *Ást* draws heavily on Whitmanian notions of futurity and complements it with apocalyptic imagery, and in doing so both albums highlight an aspect that is present yet more subdued on *Two Hunters* as well as in Whitman's compost poetry: the apocalypse of the human is distinguished clearly from an apocalypse of nature, and the destructive aspects of death and dissolution are emphasized and explored while being integrated into a holistic, deep-ecological view of natural life.

In a deeply ambivalent imagination of futurity, Alda and Skagos both take a pessimistic and skeptical view of humanity's ability to survive, and at the same time an optimistic view of nature's ability to do so, either despite or because of humanity's demise. Remarkably, both place all agency with nature rather than humanity; while humans have done enough to destroy their habitat, they are now powerless to reverse this change, and for them the future not only looks bleak but finally determined. In other words, humans may have affected their future to such an extent that they are now unable to affect it. This situation is fundamentally different in the twenty-first century than in the nineteenth, in which the Romantics could still place their faith in human agency, and this is the desperate situation that Alda and Skagos react to in their respective music. It would be wrong to mistake their concern with the continuity of life for a concern with the continuity of human life; in their respective visions of futurity, both bands insist on separating the two in a rejection of anthropocentric ecology for deep ecology. While *Two Hunters* invites a cautiously optimistic reading as it at least somewhat privileges renewal over apocalypse and presents human dissolution as positive without dwelling on its destructive aspects on an individual or social level, *Ást* is more negative with regard to the fate of humanity. If *Ást* is about love, as the album title indicates (in Icelandic), it is love of life itself, not love of humanity. Accordingly, the cover displays a concern with the circle of life in nature that is marked by the absence of the human, instead showing a moose surrounded by the famous symbol of the *ouroboros*, a snake with its tail in its mouth:



Figure 3. Artwork by Roxana X. Dushkevich, *Skagos, Ást*, digital album, Northern Horde Records, NHRCDO13, 2009, resp. <http://skagos.bandcamp.com/album/st> (accessed 10 June 2015)

The lyrics on *Ást* embrace the Whitmanian concept of compost and present a cycle of day and night like those on *Two Hunters*, only with a less optimistic tone. While *Two Hunters* starts out with apocalypse to end in regeneration, *Ást* rather sees things go from good to very bad rather quickly in the second song. After the instrumental “Colossal Spell,” “The Drums Pound Every Night in a Glorious Celebration of Life” invites us to participate in a positive ritual and asserts us of plenteousness all around:

Cast them in to the fire,
totems of sacrifice and woe,
for the Sun god is here,
and he is generous.

The drums pound every night
in a glorious celebration of life!
The earth is bountiful and rich-
fertilized and multiplied.

The sky gives way to great storms,
a deluge that deafens all.
Game trails run as raging torrents,
and the end is fucking nigh!
The end is fucking nigh!⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Lyrics published on <http://skagos.bandcamp.com/album/st> (accessed 10 June 2015).

The third and final stanza completely changes tone, and like the storms that disrupt the ritual drumming in celebration of the continuity of life, it announces that the threat of finality has arrived in the world, using the clichéd line with which madmen usually announce the apocalypse on placards. The finality hailed by the storm is addressed further in the third song, which only seems to embrace the celebratory stance of Whitman in declaring that “Blossoms Will Sprout From the Carcass”:

We walk upon the soaked carcasses of those who once gave us life.
Be it rain, wind of the weight of finality, the cadavers fall and fall.
Day light is meek, and the night grows long and cold.
Fungi lurch forward for a final gulping breath.
All is returned to the earth and the rain will fall and fall.

Rain will fall and fall.

It's the fury of the storm.
It's the endless falling rain.
It's the growing of the dark.
It's the thrive in decay.
It's the voice of woe.
It's the call of the moon.
It's the cold retribution of
the dark rider known as death.⁵⁷

This is as explicit a reference to compost in Cascadian Black Metal as any, yet these lyrics are hardly positive and refuse to inscribe death as a beginning that humans could accept as a comfort, even rather inscribing it as the beginning of a posthuman future. Instead, this song highlights the “weight of finality” that the universal cycle of creative destruction still imposes on the human individual, a memento mori to remind us that we will inevitably also succumb to the endless falling rain and face our personal annihilation, even if there is a “thrive in decay.” The line “Rain will fall and fall” is repeated over and over again, emphasizing the relentlessness of nature incorporating all life in its transformative system; this is a certain future from which there is no escape, and yet it is also an eventually posthuman future in which life will go on and on, but not necessarily human life. The melodic delivery of this line, in contrast to the rasping grunts and screams that vocalize the rest of the lyrics, repetitively piles harmonies upon harmonies, and this performance invites a more positive understanding of the semantic content of the line, as if pointing towards a harmonious order in nature even as the order of humanity is under severe threat.

⁵⁷ Lyrics published on <http://skagos.bandcamp.com/album/st> (accessed 10 June 2015).

Human decay continues in “Caliginosity,” with the title already indicating the deterioration of the body and particularly that of eyesight, as if to show that the Emersonian vision of nature no longer works in a dying world that has lost its natural affluence:

I behold the world through cold, dead eyes.
The womb is barren and infertile.
The sun grows shy and the night grows strong.
We are all cast down and enslaved by the ripping cold.

The field is a frozen corpse, but life seems to linger in the air, a mist both rich and void.

Cloaked in the skin of a beast,
we embrace the Leviathan as a necessity.
We assemble in caves;
we cower and wait.
My bones grow stiff and cold.

The glorious breath of flame keeps the blood from freezing.
The earth is suffocating within the ice, in a deep, cold sleep, with dreams of finality.
The freezing moon washes the world azure,
with the fog, the endless fog,
and the world grows fucking silent...⁵⁸

As “the sun grows shy and the night grows strong,” the world is facing a future of entropic decline, with only a flame resisting the increasing cold that seems to relentlessly push everything towards stagnation. This world, asleep and dreaming of finality, is going out Eliot-style with a whimper instead of a bang, and humans are doomed to passivity and inaction as they cannot do anything to revive it and actively build a future. Their own existence is reduced to the bare minimum of survival as they are doomed to live in caves and “cower and wait.” In this dire situation, humans are not only deprived of all agency but have divested *themselves* of all power, “embrace[ing] the Leviathan as a necessity” in a Hobbesian political fantasy in order to at least avoid the war of all against all; this is not only an environmental apocalypse but also a political one in which community itself has failed, and the only assembly is not for politics but for warmth.

In its bleakness, this vision of a future end of humanity is faithful to the tropes of second-wave Black Metal, yet the final song on the album adds a glimpse of hope in raising the possibility of cyclical regeneration in its title: “A Night That Ends, As All Nights End, When the Sun Rises.” The threat of finality raised so forcefully in “Caliginosity” seems to vanish with the dawn, and a new beginning after this ending seems possible, as if the lack of a vision of futurity were not due to caliginosity but merely

⁵⁸ Lyrics published on <http://skagos.bandcamp.com/album/st> (accessed 10 June 2015).

due to a temporary darkness. Yet the regeneration promised by the title and also the initially harmonious and solemn melodies of the song does not actually occur in the lyrics, which also return the music to the cold harshness of Black Metal blast beats. Instead, the stanzas that conclude the album reaffirm the decline of human civilization while at the same time asserting the continuity of life, as if to remind humans that their futurelessness is not at all that of life itself:

We, who built ourselves to paradigm.
We, who wore a colossal weight with pride.
In a niche of faunus extravagance
we ruled a tundra of malice.

Providence trades hands with exigence [sic]
as the wolves chase us in to the thicket.

Oh, the weight of it!⁵⁹

Speaking of his group in the past tense, the speaker reports on the power and agency humans once had, ruling over “a tundra of malice” yet occupying only an extravagant niche in the global ecosystem, far from commanding all life on earth as the lords of the creation, even if they have cast themselves as a “paradigm” of life. Moving to the present tense, the speaker shows how things have changed, and how humans have lost their allegedly privileged position among the animals and are now being replaced by others. The song and the album end with the sound of a fire whose symbolism remains ambiguous: one might read it as a reference to the positive ritual fire of the second song, but also as the final trace of a humanity that is now gone. The dawn of the title does indeed hail a new beginning and a future for life, but it is posthuman; the apocalypse on *Ást* is merely a human one, and the ecosystem copes extremely well with this demise of a species.

This understanding of dissolution and creation, as also expressed in different ways and with different emphases on *Two Hunters*, still corresponds to Whitman's concept of compost, but it works out more clearly what is already there in Whitman's holistic view of life, understanding the idea of compost in its full deep-ecological implications. Whitman's exuberant and celebratory tone distracts from the fact that he is not at all asserting the continuity of human life (or individual human lives) regardless of death, but that he is rather asserting the continuity of life in “perpetual transfers and promotions”⁶⁰ that will continue into a posthuman future and in fact forbid rather than invite an anthropocentric definition of life. Whitman also strongly focuses on the human in his poetry and thus balances this deep-ecological egalitarianism, yet Cascadian Black Metal bands such as the ones discussed above choose

⁵⁹ Lyrics published on <http://skagos.bandcamp.com/album/st> (accessed 10 June 2015).

⁶⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), p. 86.

not to do so in their lyrics, and they thus adapt and update Whitman's Romantic poetry of compost by carving out its deep-ecological aspects and reducing its humanist aspects. After all, a poem such as "This Compost" was written at a time in which it seemed not yet possible to "conceive of leavings that would toxically poison the air, water, soil, or body,"⁶¹ and humanity itself had not yet been identified as a toxic presence for the planet, at least not to the same extent as it would be in the twenty-first century. The notion of compost still provides a framework and an aesthetics for these bands to imagine regeneration from destruction; they refuse gleefully to celebrate an apocalypse for its own sake but rather find ways of constructing futures and new beginnings while at the same time fully acknowledging the overwhelming threats of finality that so deeply inform life on earth in their own time.

This is not an escapist retreat into Romanticism from a world that is now thoroughly modernized, but rather an adaptation of Romantic modes of rebellion and resistance to a contemporary context, with no nostalgia for a past that never was. As Skagos have it in "Smoldering Embers" (from their 2010 split EP with Panopticon): "Redemption is a ship sunk thousands of years ago: / New beginnings must be found."⁶² This last statement is American Romanticism in a nutshell, yet in Cascadian Black Metal this future-founding drive has lost its Adamist ideology that was as optimistic as it was destructive, and the future is perceived as something neither to be taken for granted nor given up on, something to be struggled for and struggled with, using an imagination of endings to provoke a concern with beginnings.

In its view of futurity, Cascadian Black Metal is particularly remarkable for its holism with regard to community, which again can be seen as a logical consequence of its indebtedness to American Romanticism. In its philosophy of compost, in its deep ecology, Cascadian Black Metal espouses a view of human existence that is not defined by essentialized identities but rather by a common environmental and temporal embeddedness: humanity is defined as a community by the very fact that it has a *common* future, and that this common future is threatened by a common finality. Cascadian Black Metal is explicitly global in its ecological outlook and its perspective on futurity, and despite its acknowledgment of its respective emplacements it is nevertheless never limited to a particular cultural or national context. It remains true not only to a future-oriented Whitmanian philosophy of compost that contemplates regeneration beyond anthropocentrism, but it also is true to his insight into the globality and universality of cognition, perception, and environmental embeddedness, and the resulting radical equality of all across time and space:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,

⁶¹ George B. Handley, *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott*, Athens, GA 2007, p. 143.

⁶² Skagos/Panopticon, *Split*, Flenser Records FRO6, 2010.

If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.⁶³

Assuming such an ecological, universal, and global perspective along with a fundamental concern with futurity, Cascadian Black Metal invests the genre of Black Metal with new political potential beyond the reactionary ideologies that have partly sought to appropriate it, making it again the musical genre of progressive critique and rebellion that it once was. Thanks to this cultural regeneration, grown from the compost of a stagnated subculture, one can now confidently add to Thoreau's famous nonconformist remark "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer"⁶⁴ that this drummer may well be playing a blast beat.

⁶³ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (see nt. 29), p. 43.

⁶⁴ Thoreau, *Walden* (see nt. 21), p. 581.