

# BRUTAL BELONGING IN MELBOURNE'S GRINDCORE SCENE

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## ABSTRACT

*I suggest sociality depends on affective encounters between individuals in particular spaces.*

*Through an ethnography of Melbourne's grindcore death-metal scene, I examine how belonging in a music scene is constituted by scene members' affective encounters. In particular, I suggest that a "brutal" disposition is necessary for cultivating the affective intensities necessary for experiencing belonging in the scene. Using scene members' own understandings of "brutal" I shift from iconic representations of "brutality," common in other metal scenes, toward a brutal affect. Here, brutality is experienced as a set of embodied intensities, difficult to articulate, but crucial to understanding how scene members cultivate belonging – in the grindcore scene, and in scenic spaces.*

## INTRODUCTION

It seemed like, things were moving forward through ... people's hard work and you could ... really get involved and make something of it. ... There was a lot of support for new bands and just new people in general ... 'cause ... it's not really a very cool scene.

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Like, there's not a particular style necessarily, like [in] ... black metal – all like the leather jackets and jackets with denim and studs and shit. ... Then the hardcore thing with sort of like the fish tattoos and shit like that. There's not a very definable style, at least not in Melbourne anyway. Like, it wasn't really the sort of thing people get into on an aesthetic level, first off. So, if anyone did come to shows and was sort of vaguely interested if someone sort of made the effort to say 'oh hey' and made you feel welcome, it made a big, big difference on [sic] whether they'd come back and whether they'd invest any sort of their own time and effort into it. (Carsten)

Carsten's thoughts demonstrate the interdependency of shared musical tastes and a sense of belonging in a music scene. Of course, the entwining of music and sociality has been much discussed in cultural and sociological studies (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Straw, [1991] 2005; Thornton, 1996). However, many of these studies assume sociality is premised on a shared recognition of iconic signifiers: a knowledge of subcultural argot and aesthetics, and an encyclopedic savviness with scenic history. This paper contends that, while iconic signifiers remain important for scenic interaction, belonging, and the sociality it fosters, depends more on the "sense" – or affect – that music generates. By "belonging" I refer to the feelings of comfort individuals experience in relation to particular spaces and social groups. I suggest sociality depends on affective encounters between individuals in particular spaces. Belonging, then, is always in relation to space. In this case, I refer to designated "grindcore spaces" in Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria, Australia.

My suggestion that belonging is affective draws on recent work on "affect," as well as studies in symbolic interactionism. Affect is the intensities individuals produce and experience through their bodies and in relation to the world around them (Lorimer, 2008). It is more than simply "emotions," which are articulable through speech (*ibid.*).<sup>1</sup> Thus, affect is also more than the iconic order represented through subcultural aesthetics and intelligences. Further, this chapter builds on Vanini and Waskul's (2006) proposal of music as a metaphor for symbolic interaction. I have chosen a music culture as a means for exploring social interaction between people, things, and spaces. However, I also wish to tease out Vanini and Waskul's emphasis on music/sociality as processual (p. 6), as well as their claim that music's congruity with sociality is its irreducibility to linguistic representations (p. 7). This is particularly conducive to affect.

I also draw on Thrift's (2008) work on "non-representational theory" (NRT) as a useful supplement to symbolic interactionist approaches. NRT proposes a shift from reading sociality as a set of static signifiers. Instead, he calls for academia to account for the myriad, lively, and often contradictory,

sensations experienced by people through social processes. Thrift (2004) also concedes the clunkiness of the NRT moniker. He is at pains to emphasize that the privileging of affect, which NRT requires, does not assume exclusivity from “representational” elements. Symbolic interaction shares Thrift’s concession. Thrift contends affect is interrelational, between bodies, things, and spaces (2008, p. 175). Vanini and Waskul (2006) share Thrift’s contention in their claim that ‘feelings’ – interactions between subjects, materials, and scenes – build social interaction (pp. 12–13). Within this field are varied representations and signifiers, which mediate affect. An affective focus feels its way to the intensities that such signifiers cannot wholly articulate. That is, it highlights the symbolic interactionist emphasis on individuals as social actors. One can see and interpret the “visible ... outer lining” (Thrift, 2008, p. 177) of a thing, person, or space. Yet, this visibility results from ongoing affective processes and encounters that are not (re)cognized, but felt and experienced.

## METHODS

In this paper, I attempt to access this “more-than-ness” through an ethnographic analysis of cultural practices associated with grindcore-metal music in Melbourne. I draw on interviews conducted with 25 scene members and participant observation at grindcore events between 2004 and 2009. Having been a member of the scene since 2003, in “fan” capacity, I drew on personal contacts and employed a “snowball” methodology to broaden the sample. The interviews were primarily face to face, with two exceptions, conducted via email. While the verbal medium of interviews remains representational, scene members regularly highlighted the difficulty of linguistically representing affective experiences:

It [listening to music] is sort of a [sic] unspoken thing as well. Like, you can't really explain the way you feel. (Hayley)

[P]laying live I feel like I – something different comes over me when we play ... or something like that ... it just feels intense and the vocals are really [hits a fist into his other hand twice] bang, bang. ... Something does sort of – you can feel something sort of come over you like ‘oorgh eurggh’ and, it is sort of kind of cool and it’s just [claps hands] – lovin’ it – you know? [laughs]. (Will)

Will and Hayley show the difficulty of finding the words to describe an intensity, which is beyond words. As Vanini and Waskul (2006) put it, music is “irreducible to ... language” (p. 7). It is something “unspoken,” or

“oorgh eurgghh.” Will’s thoughts are particularly indicative of the embodied intensity of affect. His description depends on physical demonstration of the intensity. Further, his phrasing that “something ... come[s] over you” shows affect’s pre-cognitive position. That is, Will senses “something ... kind of cool” in his body, which he associates with an external, rather than subjective force.<sup>2</sup> This builds on Blumer’s (1969) foundations for symbolic interaction. In particular, his notion that sociality generates from a process of interaction between people’s interiority and the external sphere of other people and things.

Before looking further at affect’s role in constituting belonging in Melbourne’s grindcore scene, it is necessary to outline why grindcore music is conducive to affective sociality.

## GRINDCORE MUSIC

Grindcore music is a type of extreme metal<sup>3</sup> music that emerged in the 1980s as a subgenre of death metal. Death metal, also an extreme musical form, is a type of heavy metal, characterized primarily by screamed, guttural vocals and fast, loud guitar riffs.<sup>4</sup> The vocal element remains the most distinctive characteristic of this genre. The lyrics focus primarily on gory, violent, and sometimes misogynist, imagery.<sup>5</sup> This aesthetic is also visible in death-metal merchandise, such as album covers and t-shirts.<sup>6</sup> Death-metal practitioners often adopt serious, even pompous, stage personas (Berger, 1999; Kahn-Harris, 2007).

Grindcore adopted death-metal’s vocal element and loud volumes, but merged these forms with punk sartorialism and politics. Bands play short, fast songs, characterized by punk riffs, extremely fast drumming (blastbeats) and screamed vocals. Unlike heavy metal, and death metal, grindcore is not melodic and usually does not feature guitar solos (cf. Purcell, 2003; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000). However, similar to death metal, grindcore lyrics are predominantly violent. Yet, grindcore’s aggression largely targets the machinations of late-capitalist culture.<sup>7</sup> Radical politics still forms a key element of contemporary grindcore music.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, there has been a recent shift toward gorier imagery, in the “gore-grind” subgenre. Here, lyrics are simply violent for the sake of violence, rather than violence with a radical message (see albums by Fuck ... I’m Dead, 2001; Undinism, 2002; Vaginal Carnage, 2002). However, gore-grind music remains in the punk style.

Like death metal, grindcore lyrics are incomprehensible during performances and in recordings. The guttural/screamed singing style disallows the clarity required to make out linguistic signifiers. However, lyrics included in liner notes and long-spoken introductions to songs at live events often compensate.

A key difference between grindcore and death-metal approaches to violence is performance. Death metallers offer serious diatribes on murder and mayhem, while grindcore practitioners engage violent and gory imagery in an attempt at, admittedly puerile, humor. The “joke” depends on how far one can push the boundaries of good taste. As many of the participants describe, pleasure arises from the presumed “shock,” which such transgressions produce in “mainstream” music fans and “serious” death metallers. Another key difference concerns the length of the composition: grindcore songs tend to be very short clocking in under a few minutes, whereas death-metal songs are lengthier.

The shock that grindcore aesthetics produce works at an affective as well as a representational level. Lyrical themes such as rape, torture, and violence and associated album and t-shirt artwork operate symbolically to outrage listeners and viewers who are not “in” on the joke.<sup>9</sup> Herein I am concerned with the affective shock that grindcore provides.

Following Dolar's (2006) work on “the voice,” grindcore noises – the vocals and instruments – disrupt the signifying chain crucial to coherent representation (p. 41). As Dolar points out, when music moves into the realm of the voice, it becomes “senseless” through a “depart[ure] from its textual anchorage” (p. 43) in lyrics. This senselessness potentially disturbs listeners; its incoherence is shocking. However, Dolar also notes that such senseless noise is also seductive (*ibid.*). Scene members feel the affective shock of grindcore's style. However, this is also what draws them to the “voice” of grindcore.<sup>10</sup> This affective experience of the voice in grindcore grants its scene members a sense of belonging in the scene's social and geographic contexts. Scene members constitute belonging through the shared intensity, characterized partly by the voice, at grindcore events.<sup>11</sup>

In Melbourne, the grindcore scene grew out of the DIY punk, or crusty, scene in the early 1990s. Blood Duster's debut *Fisting the Dead* (1993) is considered the first Melbourne, indeed Australian, grindcore album. As they were the only grindcore band playing at that time, Blood Duster performed on mixed bills, with crusty and heavy-metal bands. At this time, gigs were held in the inner Melbourne area. Gradually the scene expanded to include bands such as Shagnum, Warsore, and gore-grind bands such as Fuck ... I'm Dead and Vaginal Carnage. From the late 1990s until the early 2000s,

there were often exclusively grindcore gigs, in the same inner-city venues, as well as in the central business district (CBD) of Melbourne. In the past three years, however, a number of key venues have closed. Bands have disbanded, and there is considerably less “all-grind” show. The Melbourne scene, however, remains close knit, with scene members often referring to themselves as members of the “Melbourne Grind Syndicate.”

## BRUTAL BELONGING IN MELBOURNE GRINDCORE

Melbourne scene members experience and constitute belonging through the generation of an intensity, which I label “brutal.” Brutal is, firstly, a linguistic representation. In Melbourne’s scene, it is the ultimate commendation. To yell “brutal” at the end of a set positions the performers as authentic grindcore musicians and scene members. In gig venues, on fan forums and MySpace, “brutal” is a welcoming salutation, similar to “hello.” Further, the aesthetics of grindcore incorporate intertextual understandings of “brutality.” That is, brutal represents the aggression and violence present in, say, media accounts of “brutal” crimes. Brutality indicates grindcore’s violent aesthetics. As one scene member, Mick, points out, brutal means “punishingly hard or violent.”

However, brutality is also an affective intensity, which operates both internal and external to the individual subject, to build a sense of belonging in the scene. Anita defines it as “heavy, short, fast ... blows you away”. The articulation that it “blows you away” indicates something of the bodily sensations experienced by scene members when “feeling brutal.” That is, Anita alludes to the sense that a cognitized sense of coherent “Self” vaporizes when experiencing grindcore affects. This “blowing away” of the self allows scene members to become immersed in the scene itself, that is, to experience a potent sense of belonging and unity with other scene members, and in grindcore spaces. The process of being, and becoming, brutal lends itself to Vanini and Waskul’s (2006) “music as metaphor” model. They emphasize the immediacy of musical experience (p. 12). They suggest that such immediacy generates a quality of feeling where “‘pure’ feeling” subsumes a reflexive sense of self (*ibid.*). Identity, thus, is processual – a collection of diverse interactive experiences and intensities – rather than a fixed “Self.”

Feeling brutal, as it were, can stem from an individual sense of brutal-ness. It is partly a disposition, which allows the self to become immersed in external subjectivities and spaces. However, it is through the

externalizing – sharing – of this disposition, transmitted via affect, that belonging in Melbourne's grindcore scene is constituted. To “feel wrong” about being brutal means one cannot legitimately claim belonging in Melbourne's grindcore scene.

Being brutal also indicates something about the Melbourne spaces in which brutality is enacted and experienced. Being brutal constitutes grindcore spaces as spaces of belonging for scene members. Brutality, like affect, is fluid. It moves between people, things, and spaces (Brennan, 2004; Thrift, 2008, p. 175). As a disposition it constitutes an authentically “grindcore” self. Brutality bolsters scene members' ability to feel comfortable – to belong – with other scene members, who are presumed to be also sharing the same brutality. These social relations also generate new spaces. Brutality is not only externalized onto other scene members, but also the spaces where grindcore is produced and consumed. Scene members feel “at home” in such spaces.

### *Affective Spaces/Brutal Belongings*

Sometimes you go there [to the Corner Hotel] and – Captain Cleanoff played with Napalm [Death] and they just sounded crap – and I was like “man! This isn't a Cleanoff show! It isn't the same!” Like, it's not like at the Arthouse where everyone's going nuts and everyone's jammed in there and shit. (Carsten)

Carsten's sense that a grindcore gig's worth lies in the crowd “going nuts” in a space that encourages bodily proximity indicates the importance of brutal affect to the constitution of grindcore spaces. Fewer and fewer places cater to grindcore, or other extreme metal music, exclusively in Melbourne.<sup>12</sup> Thus, scene members “make do” with more generalized venues. This negotiation of scenic space is unable to depend on representations of brutal aesthetics to shore up a sense of collective grindcore identity. Instead, scene members have shifted toward an affective disposition that constitutes belongingness to the scene, and temporary scenic spaces through the enactment of “grindcore-ness” through a shared brutal disposition.

In this section, I demonstrate how brutal affect constitutes grindcore spaces, which, in turn, foster the sociality required to constitute belonging in the scene. In particular, I look at how brutality has shifted from material representations, such as visual aesthetics, to a brutality embodied within the practices of scene members at gigs.

## AFFECTIVE SPACES

In much “cultural turn” sociological work, space is regarded as a material and bounded *thing* (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988; Fonarow, 1997; Rose, 1993). Human agents are granted the power to subvert and resist, and even rework, space (de Certeau, 1984). However, dominant culture has always already structured such places (*ibid.*). Such arguments are important. However, I believe that space is dynamic – and that hegemony manifests in less solid and structured ways in contemporary culture.

Thrift (2008) suggests that space is key to understanding power. He understands space as a network of human and nonhuman practices. Like hegemony, space is constantly shifting – its significance cannot be pinned to a singular structure. According to Thrift, spaces manifest through affective engagements between people, and people and things. This, of course, echoes symbolic interactionist imperatives, which emphasize a similar regard for the interrelations between subjects and the external world (Blumer, 1969; Csikszentmihalyi & Halton, 1981). Further, Thrift’s suggestion that affective spaces result from “affective thinking” (p. 175) parallels Halton’s (2006) symbolic interactionist analysis of heavy metal “intensities” producing “utopic” spaces.

Thrift argues that affective thinking is a different way of comprehending thought. It is neither conscious nor unconscious, in the Freudian sense. It is a thinking feeling, which occurs without self-reflection. Rather, affective thinking seems “natural” – without thought. Therein, as Thrift points out, is the political power of harnessing affect (p. 247). Governmental powers often attempt to harness affect in order to produce “good” citizens (*ibid.*). This is evident, for example, in the application of “creative cities” frameworks to ungentrified inner-city spaces. Such frameworks attempt to generate affect through the production of “cool” spaces. These make middle-class consumers and producers feel at home and encourage gentrification. Thus, this study is not simply a description of “feeling space” but an account of how spaces are experienced by scene members and the social, and hence also political, implications of affective space making.

The grindcore spaces discussed are venues: the Green Room, formerly in Melbourne’s CBD, and the Tote, in Collingwood. I also discuss a transient space for the dissemination of grindcore music and the constitution of scenic belonging – underneath a bridge in the inner-city suburb of Northcote. A brief summary of each space is necessary before moving on.

The Green Room opened in 2003, at the height of Melbourne CBD’s “cultural revitalization.” During this period, liquor and planning laws were



relaxed (Melbourne City Research, 2006). This allowed dozens of “micro-bars” to open up in office spaces left vacant by Melbourne’s shift toward auxiliary, or “creative,” industries. The new bars catered to a younger clientele, rather than the working class and public service patrons, which CBD pubs traditionally served. Melbourne’s revitalization included typical elements of gentrification. Most of the new spaces were located in “seedy” parts of the CBD, which, through the increased presence of younger, multiethnic, and wealthier people, were re-signified as “cosmopolitan.”<sup>13</sup>

The Green Room was located in such a part of town – the intersection of Flinders and Elizabeth streets. However, unlike other CBD spaces, this area did not experience gentrification or the ascent of cosmopolitan status. Instead, the Green Room area was, and in 2009, still is, the site of \$1 pizza slices, bong shops, and “liberated” bookstores. Further, the Green Room was located in the basement of “The Joint” complex – a building housing a youth hostel, bottle shop, and a disco. To indicate something of the caliber of this building, it is notable that the Green Room was formerly a Totalizer Agency Board TAB betting venue (Hicken, 2004). The Green Room was accessible by lift from the disco and hostel above, as well as stairs down from street level. Its layout differed markedly from older pub venues. The Green Room was L shaped. When you entered via the stairs, turning left yielded a small stage area and public address system (P.A.). A right turn led down to an empty passageway ending at a long bar and a “lounge area” with chairs. Most interesting were the dozens of televisions mounted on its walls – left over from the space’s days as a TAB. The Green Room was established as a live metal venue. It hosted gigs as well as metal DJs. It was open until the early hours of the morning.

The Tote hotel is in Collingwood, an inner-city suburb yet to experience wide-scale gentrification. It is located on the corner of Johnston and Wellington streets. Warehouses, public housing, and the ubiquitous \$1 pizza slices surround it. The Tote is an old hotel, which first opened in the 1870s (The Tote, nd). It operated as a working class pub until the early 1980s when it was sold and redecorated as a band venue. The Tote’s front bar still caters to many working class locals. Behind the bar is a band room with a slightly raised stage and an adjacent bar area. This room opens into a beer garden. Upstairs is a cocktail bar “The Cobra Lounge” decorated with 1950’s “exotica” (*ibid.*). It has a small, audience-level, performance space.

Unlike the Green Room, the Tote hosts various music genres. Grindcore acts regularly played in the 1990s. Lately, though, performances at the

Tote have shifted toward hard rock, downstairs, and post-rock, upstairs, in The Cobra Lounge. Grindcore bands still occasionally play there, though they are relegated to Monday and Tuesday night slots.

Scene members also mention other band venues. Pony, located in the Melbourne CBD, is an all night “rock and roll bar” with a low stage (Pony, 2009). The After-dark is a bar in the inner-city suburb of Thornbury. It also has an audience-level stage and, like the Tote, hosts a variety of acts, including grindcore. The East Brunswick Club is a renovated pub in a gentrified inner suburb. It has a raised stage and a large performance area. It also features various genres of music, including folk and reggae, as well as grindcore. The Hi-Fi is in Melbourne’s CBD. It is a large venue that often hosts overseas metal and grindcore acts. Local bands, usually in a support role, occasionally play there. It has a raised stage. During the 1990s, it hosted the “Hell” club night once a week, which specialized in extreme metal music.

### **THE GREEN ROOM: BRUTAL REPRESENTATIONS**

“On paper” – that is, considering the numerous amounts of grindcore gig fliers printed – 2003 was a particularly healthy year for the grindcore scene. It was the year the Green Room opened, and frequently hosted mixed bills of grind and death-metal bands. The Green Room’s interior decor reflected its band roster. Its aesthetics foregrounded “brutal” visual signifiers. That is, the space’s position as a metal venue was bound to representations of metal-ness through “brutal” signifiers. Metal gig posters plastered the Green Room’s walls. Death-metal motifs, such as bats, often hung from the ceiling or decorated the stage area. The foregrounding of metal differed from the approaches of other general venues, which usually sidelined metal posters in favor of touts for more popular music, such as rock.<sup>14</sup> The Green Room also echoed the sexist imagery found in some death-metal album art. Its logo was a cartoon of a nude woman with devil horns squatting behind a “flying V” guitar. The image featured on the Green Room’s sign, fliers, and bar display.

The death-metal aesthetics of its logo and posters allowed death metalheads a point of identification within the Green Room space. However, this was not necessarily a taste shared by grindcore fans. For many grindcore scene members, death metal was pompous. Scene members

considered death-metal representations of brutality too “serious,” and too “cheese-ball”:

It [death metal] is sort of meant to be a bit more “powerful” and whatever. ... [laughing]  
And it just seems like the dudes that go for it are just, kind of like more cheese-ball kind  
of dudes? They have this sort of serious attitude, you know? It's weird. (Will)

Instead, scene members took pride in grindcore's perceived position as less serious:

I don't know why you would take it seriously [being in a band]. You know, it's just  
fucking around. (Will)

The Green Room's decor also reflected grindcore's less serious aesthetic. During mixed death/grind bills, the multiple television screens displayed splatter films, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977). Such imagery indeed overlaps with gore-grind aesthetics, where a love of horror movies often complements grind fandom:

I love the style and I love the music and a lot of the stuff – like, the aesthetic of that  
[sniff] ... gory artwork, like, I've always enjoyed that sort of shit ... from horror movies,  
or just like old monster comics and shit like that. (Carsten)

You know, it's [grindcore fandom] similar to loving horror movies, or something like  
that – I just love dark, evil music – or harsh, nasty music – whatever it is, it makes me feel  
good [laughs]. (Will)<sup>15</sup>

However, during straight grind line-ups, Z-grade and camp films were screened, such as *Pink Flamingos* (Waters, 1972) and *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (Wood, 1959).<sup>16</sup> Between sets, the films were often a talking point, with many scene members laughing and sometimes talking along with the dialogue. A camp appreciation for “trash” culture is the key difference between death and grind aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> In particular – it indicates the difference between death and grind notions of brutal. For grindcore fans, brutal indicates exuberance and a jokey kind of violence:

Brutal = The best; in the best possible way encompassing [sic] all elements or being the  
best. (Sean via email)

I would use it [“brutal”] to describe anything I like. Kinda like what “right on” was to  
hipsters in the 70s. (Leon via email)

Leon went on to write sarcastically that brutal also meant “good and heavy – like a brick in a cop's face.” His tone indicated he did not literally

agree with violence against police, but that he understood radical grindcore enough to be able to appropriate its rhetoric in parody.

In fact, actual violence in the Green Room led some scene members to dislike the space. An interviewee, Anita, and a user on the Australian grindcore Web forum, *FasterLouder.com*, describe:

[The problem with the Green Room was] having bouncers with attitude ... the bouncers there ha[d] a real attitude problem – yeah I hate[d] it. (Anita)

Wasnt [sic] all that impressed with it when a friend of mine copped a pot glass to the eye and ended up having plastic surgery to fix his face. (LiveFuckingWire, 2005)

For LiveFuckingWire, actual brutality – in the form of real violence – was not appreciated. Instead, for grindcore scene members, brutal signifies a distanced representation of violence. Something postured, but not taken seriously, as Will, from “The Kill” describes:

The Kill is about violence, paying people out ... just general, yeah – violence, aggression, that kind of thing. So, I have to sort of, you know – I’m generally not a very violent, or aggressive person ... It is fun [playing in the band], but it’s sort of – it’s not really about making violence. (Will)

At the Green Room, the violence represented through fliers and horror movies constitutes a blunt brutality. Despite this, scene members were almost unanimous in their dislike of the venue. In particular, scene members found the Green Room lacking in affective brutality – articulated as an “atmosphere” or “feeling.” Phil and Anita sum up:

The Green Room was a complete dump. It was cold and had zero atmosphere. (Phil)

I used to hate going to the Green Room ... ‘cause ... I just felt ... the whole space was really pretentious ... I didn’t really like it that much. (Anita)

So how is a brutal space, conducive to grindcore sensibilities, constituted, if not through the violent aesthetics of a venue such as the Green Room?

## **BRUTALLY AFFECTIVE SPACES: STAGES AND BRIDGES**

When asked to nominate a favorite grindcore venue, participants chose spaces where something more than representations granted the venue brutality, that is, spaces of brutal affect. As Sean and Leon’s definitions

of brutal, above, indicate, brutal also refers to a pleasurable intensity experienced through participation in grindcore music. Carsten's quotation, suggesting a gig's authenticity, hinges on the crowd engaging with the music attempts to account for brutal affect. Such engagement, as Berger (1999) notes in his phenomenological account of metal, is highly affective (p. 166). According to scene members, a venue becomes brutal when this intensity is externalized onto the space where it is experienced. Participants singled out venues with a low or audience-level stage as encouraging crowd engagement, and "fun ... energy":

I reckon Pony is definitely my favorite ... it's chaotic. ... There's a nice, low stage at Pony ... it's just a fun night, you know? People really get into it. (Will)

If you're playing in ... the After-dark where it's sort of a bar space where they put a band in but it's not traditional 'stage/audience' set-up there's more energy – it's more fun. (Joel)

Such venues enable intermingling between the crowd and the performers. Crowd members are often offered the microphone to sing along with the band.<sup>18</sup> Proximity with fans is crucial for generating affective brutality:

People go a bit more nuts sometimes, you know? Like people are up the front just going "rrrrr-rrr-rrr" [laughs]. And, ahhh, yeah – that's nice, but it gets just – nah, people just love it when it's fast and intense and brutal. ... Similar sort of reaction to me with that [watching bands]. (Will)

Thrift suggests that bodily proximity is more conducive to affective encounters than mediated contact.<sup>19</sup> Thrift discusses "contact improvisation" dancing where participants move between partners – their movements dictated by "responsive" (Albright *op cit.* Thrift, 2008, p. 142) contact with another's body.<sup>20</sup> According to Thrift, in such dance, there are no "steps," simply responses to the bodies surrounding participants. Music occasionally forms the background for contact improvisation "jams." As one adherent notes:

[D]ancers are not required to move in a way that mimics a particular audible beat. Instead, the timing of the dance may be set by a kind of internal physical and emotional rhythm. Thus, anything that inspires an emotional or physical response can in principle help to guide a dance. (Burke, 2003)

That is, engagement with one another, rather than the music, is of key importance. To return to grindcore, the contact between fans, and fans and musicians is crucial to a venue's brutal value. In fact, some participants

disliked venues with traditional, raised stages because it meant separation from the crowd:

If you play The Hi-Fi and places like that ... it's just weird – like, playing, the bigger the stage gets, the more out we feel. But, if – when you go to The Tote – you can just drink with the owner or, you know, everyone working there. (Leon)

If you play at The East Brunswick Club, which is you know, it's supposed to be this beautiful venue but ... it's not a really enjoyable experience playing there 'cause you, you know, you're completely isolated from ... it seems to lack a bit of atmosphere because you're up on this big stage. (Joel)

Leon and Joel's responses indicate the difficult task of articulating the affective sensation of playing proximate to the crowd. Joel attempts to account for affect through the nebulous articulation "atmosphere." Both scene members' use of negatives to attempt to account for brutal affect – the East "lack[s] ... atmosphere" and Hi-Fi is "weird" compared with the Tote – also indicates the difficulty of the task of symbolically representing affect.

The "weird"-ness of playing on a high stage belies the DIY punk roots of grindcore music. Melbourne DIY, or crusty, punk is still chiefly played at warehouse home/gig spaces where makeshift stages are often on level with the audience.<sup>21</sup> Most Melbourne grindcore bands begin playing at DIY spaces, with DIY bands, then move on to pub venues.<sup>22</sup> After playing "lounge room" sets in warehouses, the height and, indeed, seriousness of a stage, becomes unsettling. One way of dealing with such "weirdness" is to flout the stage's barrier and interact with the crowd, as Tommo describes:

I remember playing The Tote – there wasn't many people there, and I ... worked out I had this really long lead – and because ... pretty much everyone's just standing, you know, and there's only about ten people there: "we don't care". And I'm walking off the stage – I was in the crowd going to people and putting an arm around [and screaming] "Arrrrrghhhh." (Tommo)

Tommo's story is interesting because his band, Fuck ... I'm Dead, was playing at a rock event where theirs were the only grindcore act. The band enacted their standard "brutal" image through representations of violence. They donned lab coats covered in fake blood and announced every gory song title ("Slowly Raped with a Chainsaw"; "Bury the Cunt in Shit") with relish. However, it was only by forcing proximity between himself and the audience that Tommo felt he made the space "grindcore." He yelled his trademark "ARRGH" growl into the faces of punters as a

way to “bring them into it,” that is, to constitute and share a new, affective space:

The rock fans were laughing – they thought it was great, you know? Afterwards [they were] coming up to me going “I don’t usually listen to this – but you’re fucking all right!” So, I mean, you just gotta bring ‘em into it. (Tommo)

The Tote is otherwise empty of any grindcore signifiers. Framed posters of “Oz rock” stars adorn the walls and the jukebox blasts The Clash and Jane’s Addiction between sets. However, by crossing into the audience and performing grindcore’s brutal growl, Tommo transformed a rock space, with a raised stage, into an affective and proximate grindcore space.

So far, I have looked at venues – that is pubs, clubs, and warehouse spaces, which in some way, makeshift or otherwise, are established to accommodate live music. Finally, I turn to the “bridge gigs” held in Clifton Hill. Bridge gigs are an example of Thrift’s proposition that affective spaces are often transient spaces (p. 175), that is, temporary expressions of a collective identity or idea, which are only shortly visible (that is *represented*) but individually, or collectively felt beyond the space’s initial constitution. These take place intermittently underneath an overpass between Northcote and Clifton Hill, in Melbourne’s inner North. The overpass spans four lanes, with a small traffic island in the middle. The bridge is made from bricks and concrete and crosses the Merri Creek. Underneath the bridge is a riverbank covered in sand, dirt, and weeds. Access underneath is difficult. One must enter from a residential street, navigate a steep, muddy slope and make one’s way through building works and a gap in a cyclone wire fence. Once on the bank, it is a short walk to directly enter underneath the bridge.

Bridge gigs are often spontaneous eruptions – decided upon the morning of, or a few days preceding, the event. Organizers carry amplifiers and P.A.s down to the riverbank and set up using a generator. There is no advertising for bridge gigs, as they are illegal. Instead, details circulate via instant messaging on mobile phones. There is no cover charge and patrons bring their own alcohol. Though illicit, such gigs have never been shut down. The bridge and the traffic above incubate the surrounding area from hearing the loud music.

Despite their erratic occurrence, scene members fondly recalled bridge gigs, categorizing the space as “grindcore” despite its lack of material signifiers of grindcore, or “brutality.” Indeed, it does not even materially indicate a live music space.

However, the presence of grindcore fans enjoying music and mixing with one another crafts the bridge area as grindcore space. Joel explains:

It's good fun playing under the bridge, that's great fun. ... I think with those kind of "venues", you get people who go to the shows 'cause they really wanna go. There are less people there who just happen to be in the pub anyway who are thinking "what the fuck's that noise going on?" You know everyone there is interested in being there and interested in music and say, you know, that way you've generally got more of the audience engaged in what's going on. (Joel)

Joel's reference to the commonality, and engagement of grindcore fans at bridge gigs suggests that it is affective encounters, which constitute the space as what he goes on to describe as "usually better" (*ibid.*) than pub shows. Bridge gigs are not "brutal" because of the application of violent aesthetics. Brutality at such shows is expressed through the peculiarly grind usage of brutal, meaning, in Leon's words, "right on".

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have suggested that sociality in music scenes is not solely dependent on a shared culture of representations. Instead, I have foregrounded affect as an alternative mode for understanding music scenic sociality. Through the example of Melbourne's grindcore scene, I demonstrated that affective intensities – dubbed "brutal affects" – were crucial for scene members to cultivate scenic belonging. This builds on work in symbolic interactionism and NRT, which presents sociality as a network of intensities generated through subjective interactions with other subjects, things and spaces. Through a comparison of scene members' responses to a number of grindcore venues, I showed that material representations of a "brutal aesthetic" were less than mandatory for scenic sociality. Instead, scene members cultivated brutal affect through an embodied engagement with the music and other scene members at gigs. My traditional ethnographic methodology also demonstrated the difficulty of accounting for affect through symbolic representations, such as speech.

The intangibility of affective encounters makes it important for academic engagement. Studies of sociality dependent on linguistic and iconic representations provide neat accounts of social phenomena. However, life is not so neat. Affective intensities suffuse representational encounters, particularly in music cultures, where embodied sensations are interpolated through noise and "atmosphere." Here, the division between Self and the



world of representations – or, indeed, the Self constituted through identification with particular representations – is not enough. As one scene member points out in relation to her favorite venue, brutal affects go some way toward account for the complex constitutions of self in relation to music cultures. Here, the divide between subjectivity and surrounds is not so clear:

[W]hen you start going somewhere all the time it just becomes a part of you, so, ummm, yeah, it's all about ... um, you know, feeling comfortable in a place ... just, I don't know, how to explain it (Anita).

## NOTES

1. See also Massumi's *Introduction* to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). He defines affect as a "pre-personal intensity corresponding to ... an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act ... an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body" (p. xvi). This differs from emotion, which is the outward display of feelings. Massumi also rejects a synonymy between affect and feelings – citing that feelings are a "personal" sensation premised on one's history (*ibid.*). His emphasis is on precognitive – or personal – intensities, what he labels "affect."

2. This supports Brennan's (2004) work on the "transmission" of affect. She offers compelling scientific evidence that such intensities are, in part, biological and move between subjects and objects through olfaction (pp. 51–74).

3. See Kahn-Harris's (2007) book *Extreme Metal* for a comprehensive account of this broad genre.

4. For a detailed outline of death metal, as well as its relation to grindcore, refer to Adrian Mudrian's (2004) journalistic account of the genre *Choosing Death: An Improbable History of Death Metal and Grindcore*.

5. Kahn-Harris provides a discussion of death metal and patriarchy in his book (2007). See in particular, Chapter 2 'The Scene and Transgression' (pp. 27–49), where he discusses Cannibal Corpse's album *The Bleeding* (1994) which includes tracks such as 'She was Asking for It' and 'Fucked with a Knife'.

6. Band t-shirts are a key component of death-metal fans' sartorial style (Arnett 1996; Purcell, 2003).

7. For example, see Brutal Truth's (1999) album *Goodbye Cruel World!* This features songs such as "Choice of a New Generation" and "Stench of Profit," which comment on capitalist ideologies, and in particular, globalized capital. This is a live album, with these tracks taken from earlier studio albums. See also Napalm Death's (1987) *Scum*, the cover of which features monstrous men in suits standing on a pile of rubble made of transnational corporate logos, such as McDonalds and Columbia Records.

8. Some Melbourne examples include Heads Kicked Off (2005), Schifosi (2005), and The Execution (2005) whose work engages with issues such as asylum seekers, the destruction of old growth forests, and consumer culture. Another Melbourne band, Roskopp (2008), focuses on feminist issues.

9. The Tasmanian government was one such group outside of “joke” lyrics by gore-grind band Intense Hammer Rage about child pornography. The album *Avagoyamugs* (2003) was seized and each band member fined AU\$500 (Derigin, 2009).

10. Vanini and Waskul (2006) might describe this seduction as the experience of “pure feeling” (p. 12) rather than cognitized “knowledge” (*ibid.*).

11. Halnon’s (2006) discussion of contemporary heavy metal reaches a similar conclusion. She suggests that participation in the intensities of metal events allows a sense of “outsider” solidarity that challenges dominant social norms.

12. Since 2005, numerous key venues have closed. DIY venues such as the Pink Palace, in Northcote, and Catfood Press, in Brunswick, were pushed out after numerous noise complaints and a tightening of planning laws (Overell, 2009). Licensed venues, such as the Green Room, closed due to lack of profits.

13. Neil Smith (1996) broadly discusses this process of gentrification. For a specific discussion of governmental uses of “cosmopolitanism” as a means of gentrification in relation to music, see Grazian (2005) and Homan (2003).

14. For example, The Corner Hotel, in Richmond, hosted Grindcore ’09. Its front windows were covered with posters advertising upcoming gigs. Although Grindcore ’08 mustered over 500 punters, the ’09 event’s poster was limited to an A4 sheet at the bottom of a full-length window, even one week before the show. Posters that were prominent were mainly rock and acoustic singer-songwriter acts.

15. Scene members’ MySpace pages support this idea, with many of Melbourne’s scene members listing “horror” as their favorite film genre. As the drummer from Super Fun Happy Slide puts it: “Horror/gore/zombie/fucked up shit abominations” (Beholder of The Brutal & Bodacious Beats, 2009).

16. There is, of course, an argument that *Texas Chainsaw ...* et al. also possess a camp appeal. However, the seriousness with which most death metalheads engage horror imagery appears to cancel out the irony necessary for a camp reception.

17. Halnon (2006) finds a similar jokiness and appreciation for the grotesque in the contemporary, more popular, heavy metal scene. Here, bands such as Insane Clown Posse and GWAR revel in “bad taste.”

18. Fonarow’s (2006) study of Indie rock music in the United Kingdom provides an interesting comparison. Building on her earlier work (1997), Fonarow maintains a strict distinction between performers “onstage” and fans “offstage.” She emphasizes the lack of physical contact between bands and fans – eye contact is even rare. Most intriguing, though, is her analysis of how live gigs also provide the “illusion” of proximity between audience and performer – chiefly through the foregrounding of relatable emotional states, represented in lyrics. Of course, in grindcore, lyrical identification is unlikely, due to their incomprehensibility.

19. He also acknowledges Brennan’s (2004) findings on affective intermingling (pp. 221–222).

20. Derek McCormack’s (2008) work on dance and dance therapy also engages with affect.

21. For example, at Irene’s in Brunswick, a former warehouse turned into collective home and gig space. Catfood Press, formerly in Brunswick, is another example. It was housed in a shop front, with residential upstairs.

22. Says Leon: “we just kind of slotted into ... punk and the crust scene ... I think the whole idea of grind is – to me – it’s more of a punk scene”. And Tommo: Probably the first band that [I played in that] had any grindcore influence was called Heads Kicked Off. ... It was very punk – it was more punk, sort of crust band.”

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