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My Business is a Cloak and Dagger: The Historical and Contemporary Development of Goth Subcultures in Western Canadian Urban Centres

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PURE Award Final Report

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In her academic collection on Goths published in 2007, one year following the release of My Chemical Romance's emo-goth hybrid *The Black Parade* (My Chemical Romance), nearly three decades since the underground popularity of Ian Curtis' so called 'epilepsy dance' (Tuft, et al), and nine years after that infamous Goth-themed *Daria* episode (Perrotto), Lauren M. E. Goodlad declared Goth the "undead subculture" (Goodlad 10). She writes in the introduction to her collection, "If anything is clear about goth... it is the undeadness of its appeal even as the social and cultural formations of transnational capitalism become ever more totalizing and homogenous" (Goodlad 33); at the time of writing this report, a Google search of 'Goth is dead' reveals a parade of emaciated girls sporting T-shirts bearing the phrase in bleeding type (Dolls Kill), a result that points to the undeniable truth behind Goodlad's statement and the relevance of the subculture in contemporary culture, which remains apparent even in its negation.

Despite the closing of countless Goth clubs in western Canadian urban centers — Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon — the subculture carries on in monthly 'Goth and Industrial nights' hosted in bars across the country (Dickens Pub), in the resurfacing of 'Goth GF' memes (Caldwell) online, and in countless discussions on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram in which users, Goth and non-Goth alike, debate the conditions of its aesthetic (Russett). In 2018 Goth rose again when Canadian indie-electronica musician Grimes attended the met Gala with "minion of the robot overlords" (Gerson) Elon Musk, clad in black clothes, black lipstick and a choker bearing the Tesla label. The internet declared Grimes "Elon Musk's goth girlfriend" (Song), and like it had countless times over the past three decades Goth again invaded mainstream culture, awaiting replication, praise and critique.

In my initial PURE proposal, I was particularly interested in the ways in which Goth subculture was confronted in Western Canadian urban centers, and its intersection with mental health and LGBTQIA+ identifying communities. But as I began this research and followed it through to completion, the project took on a life of its own and became monstrous in a way that

matched my grotesque and macabre subject matter. It became increasingly clear that the scope of the research question was so broad that it addressed many important sociological and literary questions worthy of further inquiry. In analyzing Canadian newspapers, zines and other literary media, I found a disturbing tendency for writers to connect youth violence, suicide and homicide to the Goth subculture (Mulgrew). In looking at contemporary manifestations of the Gothic aesthetic in online spaces dominated by youth, I found instances of bullying and gatekeeping, particularly from elder members of the community — those so-called ‘traditional Goths’ that were particularly offended by young women of colour declaring themselves Goth without replicating an archaic ‘Goth look’. In secondary sources and academic reading on the performance of Goth I found fascinating material which connected the act of dressing up to drag performance, BDSM and queer culture (Brill). And in looking at historical examples of the Goth subculture in Canada, I discovered confessions from self-professed “Goth phreaks” in student newspapers (Gunther), a slew of inquisitive reports on the “weird” subculture from Canadian media outlets in the late 90’s to 2000’s (Hopper), and endless contemporary zines, works of art, fanfiction and music that adhere to what I recognize to be a Gothic aesthetic.

The word ‘Goth’ is itself difficult to pinpoint and explain, just as the topic of my research became much larger and more nuanced than I ever expected it to be. Throughout the course of my work I encountered cultural tension between what I would describe as ‘traditional’ Goth communities and more contemporary, intersectional and queer-focused ones. This tension can be loosely separated by periods of popularity and interest in Goth subculture — the traditional, more recognizable aesthetic of black lipstick, dark clothes, dark hair and satanic emblems is associated with a pre-2010 subculture. However, after Goth fell out of the popular imagination, it reemerged as something almost entirely unrecognizable to a mainstream audience. Today a ‘Goth’ can have pink or purple hair, wear pastel coloured lipstick, plaid shirts, or even white fabrics. The popularity of the ‘Pastel Goth’ and ‘Cyber Goth’ aesthetic on Instagram and Tumblr does not, on surface level, seem

in any way related to the traditional Goths of the 80's and 90's (Tagged: Pastel Goth); but upon closer inspection, the emergence of Goth from figures like Ziggy Stardust and Siouxsie Sioux, coupled with the subculture's interwoven relationship with queer communities (Brill), makes this interpretation and continuation of Goth inevitable.

While the contemporary interest in Goth culture has transformed in digital communities, traditional Goths and media have not yet caught up to this drastic change. Upon visiting Yonge street in Toronto this summer — a historic site for Goth culture in Canada — my supervisor casually asked some local residents whether Goths were still around, to which they replied that the community had been consumed by other alternative subcultures such as punk, industrial, and grunge. Yet the undead nature of Goth is pervasive in massive global digital communities that reach beyond the limitations of everyday, lived experience.

In spending months diving into this complex, insular and at times cruel community, I have come to believe that to be 'Goth' is a state of mind rather than any particular aesthetic. Being Goth is not about having pale, white skin, wearing black lipstick and dark clothes; on the contrary, in contemporary communities this aesthetic has been outed as an archaic attempt to uphold Westernized beauty standards, and has even been criticized for its white supremacy (Nittle). As Catherine Spooner writes in her book, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*, "Post-millennial Gothic demonstrates in some cases a continued preoccupation with the imminent destruction of the world as we know it, but also, in others, a significant change of mood to one of comedy or romance" (Spooner 6). In reading contemporary digital spaces as texts that reflect the rise of post-modernism and the post-millennial, the Gothic state of mind continues in cynical attitudes towards political and environmental crises, the rejection of gender binaries and embracing of alternative identity performances, and a general fascination with what a patriarchal, capitalist and heteronormative culture deems whimsical, macabre, grotesque — and ultimately — 'Other'.

Goth always has been (and remains) a rejection of the mainstream in favour of embracing the dark, the deviant and the dismal (Goodlad 33). But as sociological and political concerns have changed drastically since the late-90's, so too have our ideas of what constitutes 'deviant'. Contemporary Goth does not resemble what it once was because it cannot hope to; with the rise of intersectional feminism, internet culture, diversity awareness and the legalization of gay marriage in America (to name but a few advances) the very definition of 'alternative' has changed drastically. Goth is not dead, but it has transformed into something that many deem unrecognizable.

There are a number of questions I would like to explore further, and I believe that my initial research will lead me on a path of inquiry that may last years. The history of the Goth subculture in Western Canadian urban centres is worthy of comprehensive, long-form analysis. While the Goth subculture has been thoroughly examined in urban centers such as L.A., New York, Chicago and San Francisco (Goodlad), its history in Canada has been neglected in academic research. Toronto and Vancouver remain epicenters of Canadian Goth communities, but the subculture also persists in smaller cities such as Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg despite its lack of documentation. Much of the existing content exists through oral history and snippets of collective memory in digital spaces, such as OGREMIND, a website dedicated to Goth culture in Winnipeg (Banicevic), sparse forum posts lamenting 'when all the Goths disappeared' (u/deepinferno) and various Goth collective Facebook groups which struggle to keep the tradition alive in these prairie cities.

The link between the online True Crime and Goth communities is a fascinating albeit disturbing topic that remains pertinent to the current political climate and discussions surrounding gun control. While historically Goth has been (at times unjustly) demonized for instilling violence in teenagers, the historical connection between the Columbine shooting in 1999 and Goth music created the conditions for True Crime communities and Goth culture to intersect (Moore). The similarities of a traditional Gothic site like OGREMIND and the aesthetic of True Crime Tumblr pages

that pay homage to teen shooters such as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Columbine-1999) are apparent and uncanny. While Goth music and culture may not be the cause of violent acts, their aesthetic connection in online communities is undeniable and deserving of further deconstructive and comparative analysis.

By utilizing a lateral research methodology, I have been successful in interpreting a wide array of multimedia data and I look forward to critically disseminating this research through submission for publication in such journals as the *University of Calgary Journal of Undergraduate Research and Inquiry* and the *Gothic Studies Journal* published by the International Gothic Association, along with future interdisciplinary conferences on youth cultures. I hope to continue my research in the completion of a Master's thesis in Canada or abroad, and I look forward to utilizing the research skills I have gained this summer in future postgraduate endeavours.

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