

Nostalgia, authenticity and writing Goth histories: ‘Would you carry the torch...?’¹

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Biography:

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Abstract:

¹ The Sisters of Mercy (1997), ‘Torch’, *Floodland*. Merciful Release.

In 2023, three books were published that professed to be histories of Goth: John Robb's *The Art of Darkness: The History of Goth*, Cathi Unsworth's *Season of the Witch: The Book of Goth* and Lol Tolhurst's *Goth: A History*. Together, the books and the discussion surrounding them indicate a struggle for meaning around a shared past, occasioning what Svetlana Boym has called 'reflective nostalgia', a nostalgia that 'dwells on the ambivalences of longing and belonging' (Boym 2007). Reflecting on the tendency of Goth histories to locate nostalgia on the 1980s, this article asks what it means to write subcultural history, and what histories are sidelined or left untold in such popular revivals. It interrogates the relationship between history-writing and subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), identifying the conflicted subject-position of the subcultural historian, who must establish both objectivity and authenticity. It suggests that historical narratives tend to represent Goth as a subculture that is in decline, privileging a masculinised music scene over a feminised adoption of Goth style. Contrasting the works of Robb *et al* with Leila Taylor's memoir *Darkly* (2019) and Andi Harriman and Marloes Bontje's visual and oral account of the subculture, *Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace* (2014), the article finds that self-proclaimed Goth 'histories' often consolidate subcultural capital in the familiar figures of white male musicians, while marginalising women, people of colour and a younger generation of subcultural participants.

Keywords: Goth, subculture, history, historiography, nostalgia, authenticity, 1980s

Introduction

The year 2023 offered a particular moment of reckoning for Goth subculture. Three books were published that professed to be histories of Goth: John Robb's *The Art of Darkness: The History of Goth*, Lol Tolhurst's *Goth: A History* and Cathi Unsworth's *Season of the Witch: The Book of Goth*. Robb and Tolhurst overtly claim the word 'history', although their titles

are differentiated by their use of the definite and indefinite article, the former suggesting a definitive history and the latter a more personal or speculative one. Unsworth's book makes no such claim, but gestures towards temporality through the word 'season'. It is, moreover, more conventionally 'historical' than either of its rivals, through its placing of Goth in a broader social and political context and its establishment of a carefully constructed teleological narrative. Each book directs its focus primarily on the 1980s, constructing the decade as the heyday of the subculture and thus the locus of contemporary subcultural nostalgia.

The three books, published within a few months of one another (Robb in March, Unsworth in May, and Tolhurst in September), rode a wave of popular interest in and demand for material associated with Goth. The same year, Demon Records released *Young Limbs Rise Again: The Story of the Batcave Nightclub 1982-85*, a six-disc vinyl box-set with accompanying book of visual memorabilia documenting the legendary nightclub in which the Goth scene coalesced. Meanwhile, iconic Goth musicians from the 1980s including Siouxsie Sioux, The Cure and The Sisters of Mercy announced tours. Over the previous couple of years, a series of international exhibitions had set Goth within a longer tradition of radical aesthetics and subcultural dissent: *Goth: Designing Darkness* (October 2021-April 2022) at the Design Museum den Bosch, the Netherlands; *The Horror Show: A Twisted Tale of Modern Britain* (October 2022-February 2023) at Somerset House, London; and *Death and the Devil: The Fascination of Horror* (September 2023 – January 2024) at the Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, subsequently touring through Germany. Around the same time, the media proclaimed a new generation of celebrities and designers taking inspiration from Goth style, controversial with many self-identified participants in the subculture.² This cultural moment

² Goth trends are serially announced by the mainstream fashion press on a regular basis. A major revival occurred in 2021-2, but this was extended by the popularity of Netflix's *Wednesday* (2022), prompting a rush of Gothic style features. As it is the business of fashion

was distinguished, then, not only by the more general impulse to revive past styles that informs both the fashion system and a Gothic aesthetic, but also by a more specific one to look back at the past and assess it *as* the past – to demarcate it as ‘history’.

What is at stake in this repositioning of Goth as ‘history’? Firstly, it makes a claim for cultural legitimacy; it associates what is usually understood as an underground movement or alternative scene with a prestige genre. At the same time, the identification of Goth as a proper subject for written history tends to relegate the subculture to the past, suggesting that it has come to an end or at least is in decline. While this is by no means an inevitable corollary of history writing – history, after all, is continually being made – this is the impression given by all three books to a greater or lesser extent. Finally, history interpellates a historian – an individual who is responsible for collating and reviewing sources and weaving them into a narrative. This takes on especial resonance in relation to subcultural history, because it raises questions of authenticity and belonging: who has the right to speak about Goth, to gather information about it, to claim Goth identity? All three books are framed by this problem, whether or not they overtly acknowledge it. The marketing paratexts and reviews generated by the books, moreover, return to these questions explicitly or implicitly. Together, the books and the discussion surrounding them indicate a struggle for meaning around a shared past,

journalism to predict trends, stories run in late 2022 and early 2023 commented on clothes that would be on sale in 2023. British *Vogue* alone ran stories including Anders Christian Madsen, ‘5 Things to Know About Versace’s “Dark Gothic Goddess” SS23 show’, 24 September 2022, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/gallery/versace-ss23>; Joy Montgomery, ‘Wednesday’s Goth-Girl Mood is Perfectly on Trend’, 2 December 2022, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/goth-trend>; Alice Cary, ‘Billie Eilish Shows Us What Goth Style Looks Like in 2023’, 11 January 2023, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/billie-eilish-goth-style>; Celia Ellenberg, ‘Rodarte’s “Goth Fairy” Eyeliner is the First Breakout Look of NYFW’, 13 February 2023, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/rodarte-aw23-beauty>. (All accessed 30 March 2024.) A reflective response to style appropriation from within the Goth community can be found at The Blogging Goth, ‘Dark Wash Recycle – “Gothcore” and high fashion’, 15 January 2022, <https://theblogginggoth.com/2022/01/15/dark-wash-recycle-gothcore-and-high-fashion/> (accessed 30 March 2024).

occasioning what Svetlana Boym has called ‘reflective nostalgia’, a nostalgia that ‘dwells on the ambivalences of longing and belonging’ (Boym 2007).

As this article unpacks the implications of the struggle for meaning in the writing of Goth histories, it pays close attention to the stories that are sidelined or left untold. In order to do so, it contrasts the works of Robb, Unsworth and Tolhurst with two slightly earlier works that offer different takes on subcultural history: Leila Taylor’s memoir *Darkly: Black History and America’s Gothic Soul* (2019) and Andi Harriman and Marloes Bontje’s visual and oral account of the subculture, *Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace: The Worldwide Compendium of Postpunk and Goth in the 1980s* (2014). It finds that self-proclaimed Goth ‘histories’ often consolidate subcultural capital in the familiar figures of white male musicians, while marginalising women, people of colour and a younger generation of subcultural participants. It argues that the contradictions between the media accounts of a Goth revival and the subcultural embrace of Goth histories lies in the distinction between the construction of Goth as a style subculture and as a music subculture, and that this itself reinforces gendered views of the movement. Finally, it reflects on how the writing of subcultural ‘histories’ shapes the way we understand the meaning of ‘subculture’ in the twenty-first century.

Subcultural capital and the Goth historian

The historian traditionally occupies a position of authority in western culture – one gained through the process of diligently gathering data, objectively assessing sources and constructing convincing interpretations of the past. History, as I have already remarked, is a prestige genre; it denotes seriousness. In the later twentieth century, however, the nature of history as a form of *writing* has increasingly been emphasised by scholars. Although, as Linda Hutcheon points out, ‘history has traditionally been structured by positivist and

empiricist assumptions' that 'set up the "real" as unproblematic presence to be reproduced or reconstructed', this idea has come under considerable stress in the wake of Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism (Hutcheon 1988: 95). History, these scholars claim, is not objective or neutral but informed by the viewpoint and ideological preoccupations of the historian; historiography does not only document but also creates the way readers experience the past.

The role of the public historian underwent significant shifts in the 1990s and early 2000s, taking academics out of the ivory tower and into a space in which traditional markers of what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital' were blurred with the attributes of celebrity (Bourdieu [1979] 2010). In *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Jerome de Groot suggests that 'increasingly through the 1990s "History" became part of a media culture less interested in the factual than in narratives and personalities', describing the rise of television historians on multi-million-pound contracts such as Simon Schama and David Starkey (De Groot 2009: 17). The new popular history, he notes, was even described in *The New Statesman* in 2007 as 'the new rock'n'roll' (De Groot 2009: 17). As a result of this popularisation, he proposes, 'History becomes part of a discourse of leisure' (De Groot 2009: 17). This in turn gave rise to a kind of celebrification of history, in which celebrities and journalists increasingly gained access to the world traditionally inhabited by academics. As De Groot concludes, 'Historical authority is something that can be acquired by the cultural figure or celebrity, and increasingly the *actual* historian is replaced by the famous, the good-looking, the seasoned journalist with gravitas, or a combination of all three' (De Groot 2009: 27).

If history is 'the new rock'n'roll', rock'n'roll is also now regarded as a suitable subject for history. Serious journalism documenting subcultures and music scenes emerged in the 1960s, with books like Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* (1967), Tom Wolfe's *The*

Pump House Gang (1968) and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) providing dispatches from the counterculture.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of what Wolfe dubbed the 'New Journalism' (Wolfe [1973] 1996), these books attempted to capture scenes as they were happening and, for all their experimentation with form and content, were rooted in traditional journalistic methods of oral interviews and direct observation. Likewise, the academic studies of subcultures produced by the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century and the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in the 1970s engaged in sociological or semiotic analysis to analyse current or extremely recent practices. Books that assessed subcultures retrospectively and relied on a combination of written and oral sources emerged later in the 1980s, with works such as Jay Stevens's *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (1987) and, perhaps most influentially, Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming: The Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (1991). Written by journalists rather than academics, these books combined claims to authoritative knowledge of their subject-matter with accessibility of style, courting a broad readership.

In the tradition of Wolfe, Savage and their peers, therefore, subcultural historians tend to be journalists, sited uneasily between the authority of the academic scholar and the authenticity of the subcultural participant. If subcultural histories offer histories aslant of 'official' history, and benefit from a wider popularisation of historical discourses in the late twentieth century, they also occupy an ambivalent position in relation to subcultures themselves. Subcultures are particularly vexed by questions of belonging: the construction of insiders and outsiders. Belonging can be signalled through commitment to a lifestyle and community or through what Sarah Thornton calls 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995). Subcultural capital, an adaptation of Bourdieu's 'cultural capital', is an alternative system of prestige that operates within a subculture, based on (for example) musical knowledge or other

niche skills and expertise. Subcultural capital confers status within a subculture and is regarded as a marker of authenticity.

In subcultural histories, conventional kinds of historical authority – education, adherence to scholarly convention, methodological consistency – are less important than perceived authenticity. In a review of the three books in *The Telegraph*, Nicholas Blincoe assesses the writers on this criterion, noting that Unsworth ‘found Goth as a teenager, which gives her the most intimate connection to a style created and owned by its fans’, while Robb knows his interviewees ‘through a long career on the alternative music scenes as a musician, producer, impresario [*sic*], and writer’. Tolhurst, however, ‘is the best placed to tell this story: he was there’ (Blincoe 2023). The phrasing is telling: the voice that is most highly regarded by subcultural participants – and often or even especially by outsiders – is not necessarily one that is rigorous but *one that was there*.

Writings about subcultures in any genre navigate this to one degree or another. In academic scholarship, the construction of an authentic voice is particularly problematic, as the act of gathering knowledge about a subculture immediately places the researcher in a position of power that distances them from that subculture. When researching my PhD on Gothic literature and fashion in the late 1990s, my supervisor advised me not to write about my own lived experience of subcultural identity, as the attempt to establish subcultural capital in this way was so liable to backfire, coming across as embarrassingly gauche or ingratiating and diminishing the scholarliness of the thesis. As Sarah Thornton notes, ‘Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard’ (Thornton 1995: 12). More broadly, as Sara Martin explains in an early essay calling for attention to Goth subcultures within Gothic Studies, text-based methodologies have been traditionally inhospitable to the incorporation of lived experience (Martin 2002). This attitude still lingers, although it is beginning to shift in texts such as Leila Taylor’s *Darkly: Black History and America’s Gothic*

Soul (2019), which uses the memoir form to explore the relationship between growing up as a Goth of colour in Detroit, and the role of Blackness in American Gothic literature and film. Here, the identity and lived experience of the writing self is crucial to the understanding of the topic.

Ethnographic accounts of Goth using methodologies of participant observation allow more opportunities for the researcher to position themselves in relation to their object of research. Paul Hodkinson, for example, writes in *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* that his ‘relatively unambiguous position as a long-term genuine participant of the goth scene’ enabled privileged insight into his topic and yet was not, on its own, sufficient:

Subjective experience and meanings... required critical interpretation... and were complemented by more distanced forms of observation and analysis. This required that I become a *critical insider*, continually taking mental steps back so as to observe, compare, contrast and question as well as to experience.’ (Hodkinson 2002: 4, 6)

Dunja Brill’s *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality and Style* articulates a still greater ambivalence in the relationship between the participant observer and the subculture:

the fact that my long-standing relationship with the subculture has always been somewhat conflicted may have made it a bit easier for me to look at Goth from a relatively detached perspective. Never having been a very dressy person... I felt slightly out of place on the dimly lit yet highly scrutinised catwalks of Gothic style to which many of the scene’s spaces amount. (Brill 2008: 2)

Crucially, these authors do not vaunt their own subcultural credentials but articulate the difficulties in inhabiting an ‘authentic’ subcultural position, and the critical advantages that distance affords.

Each of the three Goth histories published in 2023 navigates the tensions between historical authority and subcultural authenticity by positioning their author in a different way.

Lol Tolhurst, a founding member of iconic rock band The Cure, has the least to prove, yet is also the most reflective about his relationship to the project. In a lengthy Afterword, he contemplates the thought processes that informed the volume:

At first, I approached the subject matter of *Goth: A History* in a more traditional way; I felt I should write a comprehensive encyclopaedia of the times... I finally realized I am no historian and neither do I want to be one. It's too pernicky for me, with absolutes that shouldn't be absolutes. Always just one person or one culture's view... I am also aware that writing such a book will never make everyone happy. Someone will protest that I didn't include their favourite figure, and they will be absolutely correct... I determined that my best course was to write a historical memoir of sorts, the memoir of a subculture, if you will. (Tolhurst 2023: 225)

Tolhurst's account is deliberately, avowedly subjective and that is part of its appeal: filled with opinion, gossip and a partisan version of events, it offers a privileged glimpse into a fabled time: 'you're in luck: I was there!' (Tolhurst 2023: 225). Tolhurst describes the books he read, the gigs he attended, his friendships with other iconic figures such as the Banshees' Budgie, All About Eve's Julianne Regan and The Cocteau Twins' Liz Fraser and Robin Guthrie. He divulges secrets: drunken nights out, behind-the-scenes fights, his authorship of some of The Cure's early lyrics. If the title of the book might be better formulated as *Goth: A Memoir*, the constant and insistent presence of his own authorial persona makes this book more critically self-aware of the problems of writing history than either of the other writers.

Unsworth, a crime novelist and journalist, takes similar care in positioning herself within the text. In a Prologue, she describes growing up in the 1980s, reading Dennis Wheatley's lurid novels about satanism and listening to John Peel's radio show, the primary source of alternative music for teenagers in a pre-internet age. Siouxsie Sioux, she explains,

provided a figure who condensed her feelings of nascent feminism, resistance to Thatcherism, small town escape and dark glamour:

It was Siouxsie who led me through the abyss of the '80s, the imaginary cool-and-hard best friend I didn't have in life. Siouxsie and a subsequent coven of women – and androgynous, unconventional men – who wore their hair in spiked shards or ringed coils in shades of raven black or flaming red and looked to the future through kohl-rimmed eyes. The unique strand of music they made and the glamour they cast about themselves brought me and many other little misfits solace, intrigue, kinship and inspiration of the journey from child to adult, bringing with it the enlightenment that being different was, in fact, a good thing. Thanks to them, I became part of a society so secret its name could not be spoken, not even by its highest adepts.

I became a Goth. (Unsworth 2023: 4–5)

Rather than a musician and therefore producer of the scene, Unsworth positions herself as a fan. Fandom is not constructed as a parasitic practice, however, but rather confers on her the role of an initiate to a secret society, a different kind of insider. As her description of her admiration of Siouxsie suggests, this insiderdom is expressed through visual style: hair, make-up, 'glamour'. This sets the tone for a book that routinely considers the look as well as the sound of Goth. Like the sociologists discussed above, Unsworth articulates a difficulty in associating herself directly with the scene, in this case occasioned by the scene's own resistance to labels, 'so secret its name could not be spoken'. This enables a personal epiphany occasioned by the act of writing the book. Unsworth concludes:

Forty years on, I think it's time for the curse to be lifted and the words spoken in darkness to be heard in the light.

I am a Goth. (Unsworth 2023: 394)

The book's journey is therefore also a personal one, from exclusion to self-acceptance. In a clever twist, the act of writing a history of Goth facilitates the production of Unsworth's own subcultural identity.

The importance of 'glamour' for Unsworth in constructing a Goth identity is reinforced by the author photograph inside the back cover of the book, which shows a striking woman with immaculately coiffed, 1950s-style hair and make-up – a kind of 'corporate Goth' look befitting a professional older woman. The author photo is used as what Gérard Genette calls a paratext, a supplementary material that frames a written text and contributes to its meaning (Genette 1997). In the marketing of the book it is used as a means of verification, a kind of passport to subcultural identity. It is a gesture equivalent to Tolhurst's 'I was there!' Tolhurst's author photo, intriguingly, takes up more space on the book jacket (befitting his fame) but other than moody lighting effects, does not affect a Goth appearance – he does not need to, because he was there. Robb, on the other hand, goes one step further than Unsworth – accessorising his spiky punk quiff and dandyish pinstripe suit with an actual crow.

The 'I' of Robb's book is heavily dependent on paratexts and more difficult to locate in the text itself than that of Tolhurst or Unsworth. Although there is no reflection on the author's relationship to events, the book is supported by a range of discourses that encourage readers to assume he 'was there'. Robb was a ubiquitous figure in the British media over the summer of 2023 as he promoted his book, and the book's October 2023 reissue in a new cover by Manchester University Press (itself offering a kind of academic legitimisation, even if issued through the company's trade imprint) underlines this in the blurb:

Drawing on his own experience as a musician and journalist, Robb covers the style, the music and the clubs that spawned goth culture... [The book] offers a first-hand

account of being there at the gigs and clubs that made the scene happen. (*The Art of Darkness* 2023)

In actual fact, while Robb draws on oral accounts from a wealth of participants, he does not provide a first-hand account himself. The vivid evocation of attending a Goth nightclub with which the book opens is written in the second and third person, implying a collective experience. An early reference to the experiences of ‘me and my friends’ seems to be a result of poor referencing practices, and actually the words of Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr (Robb 2023: 11). Slippage between quoted sources and the authorial voice occurs frequently enough to suggest that the authorial persona acts as a kind of sponge for Goth history, a Frankenstein’s creature patchworked together from numerous Goth voices, a monstrous embodiment of the music scene. The sources listed in the footnotes are like an address book of famous contacts, the bewilderingly comprehensive coverage of bands from the 1960s to the present organised with individual chapters for each band, ‘like they are a playlist from a trad goth club dance floor’ (Robb 2023: 1).

History and closure

The triumvirate of Goth histories issued in 2023 are not, of course, the first books on Goth. There is seemingly an endless appetite for Goth publications, beginning with Mick Mercer’s influential guides to the music scene published in the 1980s and 90s (Mercer 1988, 1991, 1997). Indeed, the range is so broad that it is impossible within the scope of this essay to list all examples. Those addressing a popular audience have included books on music (Scharf 2011), fashion (Baddeley 2010; Godman 2022), lifestyle (Voltaire 2006; Venters 2009), and comprehensive guides to the culture (Baddeley 2002; Kilpatrick 2005; Ladouceur 2011; Scharf 2014). There have been books linked to exhibitions in which Goth has played a significant part (Grunenberg 1997; Steele and Park 2008; Page 2023). Individual band

biographies and hagiographies are a staple of music industry publishing and are too numerous to mention; latterly, these have been joined by autobiographies by musicians instrumental in the Goth scene (Hussey 2019, 2023; Tolhurst 2016). Above all, there has been a wave of academic publishing beginning in the early 2000s; monographs alone have included works within the disciplines of sociology (Hodkinson 2002; Brill 2008), musicology (Van Elferen 2012; Van Elferen and Weinstock 2016), literary and cultural studies – in Spooner’s case drawing on fashion studies (Siegel 2005; Spooner 2004, 2006, 2017) and collections bringing together a range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives (Goodlad and Bibby 2007).

The Goth histories published in 2023 are both a continuation of this body of work and a new variation on it, denoting a shift in cultural attitudes. Books like Mercer’s *Gothic Rock* (1991) and Scharf’s *Worldwide Gothic: The Chronicle of a Tribe* (2011) treat Gothic as a vibrant, ongoing scene, offering themselves as expert tour guides who lead their readers to possibly unexpected corners but do not need to spend much time reflecting on its significance because – crucially – it is still happening. Conversely, demarcating something as historical implies that it has come to an end, or at least that the most important events associated with it have occurred. A history can only be written when the writer reaches a vantage point that enables them to look back. Each of the three books discussed in this article fixes Goth culture in the 1980s at the expense of a current Goth scene. While there is acknowledgement that contemporary artists continue to be influenced by the Goth aesthetic, it is presented in a way that suggests that contemporary Goth is diluted or dispersed in comparison to a 1980s heyday.

The most definitive closure on the Goth narrative is provided by Unsworth, who neatly caps the beginning and end of her account with Margaret Thatcher’s accession to the role of Prime Minister in 1979 and resignation in 1990; her final chapter is an epilogue chronicling subsequent band break-ups and untimely deaths. Opting for a tight organisational

focus rather than comprehensive coverage, she makes no attempt to continue the history of Goth into the twenty-first century, other than in her own epiphany: 'I am a Goth'. Tolhurst, on the other hand, concludes by generously presenting Goth as a continuing phenomenon: he notes that during the book tour for his memoir *Cured* he met 'true believers after all these years, and new ones... just coming into the fold'; that 'new purveyors of bleak abound'; and that Goth is 'a beautiful, bleak wave of art...that... has yet to break' (Tolhurst 2023: 222, 224). Despite these hopeful words, however, the final chapters are sketchy with regards to detail, and although he nods towards several current Goth musicians, Tolhurst's story really ends with Nine Inch Nails and the dispersal of the original Goth sound in the early 1990s.

Robb's book pays closer attention to twenty-first century Goth. In the final chapter (13 pages out of 512), Robb races at breakneck speed through an idiosyncratic selection of bands, films, television series, books and videogames showing Goth influences from the 1990s to present. Where the chapter becomes interesting, however, is in its attempt to address the effect of social media on Goth in the 2000s:

21st century goth can still be music. It can still be film. It can still be style.

It can also be Instagram and TikTok influencers with millions of followers, posting endless online photos of goth tinged styles and little to no mention of music.

What accelerated goth culture into the 21st century was this social networking...

In the twenty-first century, for good or bad, you *are* the media. (Robb 2023: 506)

Robb acknowledges the feminisation of Goth through the emphasis on clothing and visual appearance: 'Online or in the media a raft of iconic women are driving a myriad of styles' (Robb 2023: 506). He allows women's voices to set the pace and tone of the discussion, drawing heavily on interviews with academic Claire Nally and writer Kate Cherrell (although

he does not appear to have interviewed any influencers themselves). Apparently with an eye on grumpy readers, he also calls for objectivity:

Of course, goth itself had no manifesto. It was never set in stone that music had to be central to its core, it always had a style and an aesthetic. Being a retrospective term for something already happening, there were no ten commandments that stretched seductively across the black bricolage. (Robb 2023: 511)

Robb is evidently conflicted: his passion lies with the music, and yet he does not want to pass judgement on a new generation of Goths or to announce the demise of the thing he loves: ‘More than four decades after it coalesced... goth is in rude health’, he insists (Robb 2023, 512). His choice of words, however, gets to the heart of the problem of writing about the Goth scene: it is ‘something already happening’, an unplanned and messy collection of current events, which the very act of naming ‘Goth’ both historicises, requiring an act of looking back, and incurs the temptation to judgment (the allusion to the ‘ten commandments’ which are ‘set in stone’).

Despite Robb’s journalistic objectivity, moreover, in the historical narrative the book sets up, the migration of Goth subculture onto social media is figured as decline. The eschatological title of the final chapter is ‘Apocalypse Now! Goth’s End Days’ (Robb 2023: 499). As the blurb on the back cover puts it, the book ‘starts with the fall of Rome and concludes with the rise of Instagram’ (Robb 2023: back cover). In a move recalling eighteenth-century classical historian Edward Gibbon, empires fall and rise and fall again. ‘Goth’s Dark Empire’, as Carol Siegel elsewhere puts it (Siegel 2005), is implicitly entering its last days. As in previous narratives about declining empires, decadence is figured as a feminisation of a once vigorous and robust culture. By associating Goth music mainly with male musicians (women are interviewed, but men overwhelmingly predominate) and style mainly with female consumers (rather than, for example, designers and creatives), and

figuring the twenty-first century as an era where style has overtaken music as a marker of Goth identity, Robb unwittingly implies that women's influence is sapping the integrity of a once vital underground scene.

One of the features of a decadent culture is nostalgia. The distance all three books set up, in their differing ways, between the vibrant Goth scene of the 1980s and the present day inculcates a sense of longing for an ungraspable past – the 'something already happening' which the label Goth attempts to grasp and name. In this respect, all three books tap into a wider cultural trend in the early 2020s of nostalgia for the 1980s, a decade that seems to hold particular resonance for contemporary audiences.

1980s Goth and the Uses of Nostalgia

In an article published in *Fashion Studies* in 1997, Caroline Evans describes visiting the V&A's subcultural style exhibition with a group of students, and their resistance to the idea that subculture could be labelled and fixed. Subculture for these young people, she suggests, is something to be moved through. Evans's students are metropolitan, situated in a particular cultural moment at the beginning of the 1990s and, as fashion students, perhaps more likely to have a 'hip', experimental relationship with clothes. In the thirty or so years since her article was written, it has become evident that many Goths do not move through their subculture but continue to maintain a relatively consistent subcultural identity into middle age and beyond. Paul Hodkinson, for example, suggests that while life changes may affect the everyday practices of Goths in their thirties and forties in terms of employment, relationships, parenthood and physical health, the subculture as a whole continues to celebrate 'a specific set of collectively experienced tastes and practices centred on appearance, music, cultural forms and events' (Hodkinson 2011: 277).

As Hodkinson notes, however, the spaces in which this generation of older Goths interact (and his 2010 interviewees are now presumably in their forties and fifties) are not necessarily those occupied by younger Goths. In an article on revisiting Whitby Gothic Weekend, Hodkinson observes, ‘While goths in their teens or early twenties could sometimes be identified among the crowd, the extent to which they stood out as a result of their age in this particularly concentrated older goth environment was striking’ (Hodkinson 2012: 134). There is a distinction to be made, then, between a group of ‘original’ Goths, now in their forties, fifties and sixties, for whom Goth is linked to memories of a youth spent attending gigs, clubs and festivals between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, and a new generation that has only experienced the first phase of Goth vicariously. For these two groups, the 1980s might offer a very different kind of resource: for the one, a repository of youthful memory; for the other, a stockpile of imagery to be plundered.

What all three of the Goth ‘histories’ do is fix Goth to a specific moment in time. Straightforward enjoyment of the music and style of the era and the stories associated with them should not be underestimated, of course. However, there is something else more complex happening too, around this process of looking back. Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia promises ‘a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’ and is used by right-wing political movements to support reactionary politics of nationhood (Boym 2007). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, ‘dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity’ (Boym 2007). As Boym continues, ‘Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt’ (Boym 2007). She stresses that ‘these distinctions are not absolute binaries’, and that sometimes ‘a more refined mapping’ might be necessary in relation to specific cultural moments and texts (Boym 2007).

In the three Goth histories under consideration, restorative nostalgia – an uncritical celebration of the 1980s – gives way to reflective nostalgia. Inevitably, this takes place in each volume to differing degrees. Robb’s book opens with the restorative vision of the 1980s Goth club in all its seedy glamour and glory, building on what Boym calls ‘the sense of loss of community and cohesion’ and offering ‘a comforting collective script for individual longing’ (Boym 2007). As the book goes on, however, individual respondents call the collective narrative into question. Siouxsie Sioux, for example (quoted from an interview with Michael Bracewell) describes the ‘frightening’ experience of her look being copied on shop dummies, stating, ‘Someone asked me how it felt to be the queen of goth... I hate all that. That wasn’t what we were about at all’ (Robb 2023: 155). A critical distance is opened up between the lost object of nostalgia and the remembering subject.

Tolhurst and Unsworth go further in refusing the ‘comforting collective script’ from the start. For Tolhurst, the heyday of Goth is coincident with his slide into alcoholism. Goth music constitutes a frame for his illness that both exacerbates it – in that it leads him into situations of wilder and wilder excess – but also provides him with psychological sustenance. Ultimately, Goth offers ‘a way of dealing with the world that deals with the sad and the melancholy’ (Tolhurst 2023: 222). It is a kind of working through of which his therapist would no doubt be proud. It is also, in Boym’s words, ‘about taking time out of time and grasping the fleeting present’, reflecting on his personal past through a shared culture.

Unsworth, alternatively, uses Goth to create what David Peace calls an ‘occult history’ of the 1980s. Peace, a novelist who is one of Unsworth’s interviewees in the book, uses this term to describe his own fictional practice, in which the hidden or obscured elements of British political history are brought to the surface. As Matthew Hart expands, ‘With its connotations of haunting and ritual violence, “occult history” suggests that the political history of Britain – and the narrative form required to uncover that history – is

subterranean in more than one sense, a matter of bodies that will not stay buried as well as stories that have not been told' (Hart 2008: 578). For Unsworth, Margaret Thatcher and Siouxsie Sioux become dark doubles, each expressing in a different way the 1980s ethos of individualism. Goth comes to provide a counter-history to Thatcherism, born out of the same social and political contexts but opening up space for resistance and critique. In this way, Unsworth reflects a broader contemporary cultural sensibility regarding the 1980s. As Sorcha Ní Fhlainn argues in a discussion of reflective nostalgia in the television series *Stranger Things*, the last decade of the analogue era is presented as a 'profound juncture, or a wrong turn, in recent history', in which present fears about the pervasive politics of neo-liberalism can be explored (Ní Fhlainn 2022: 202).

Unsworth's presentation of Goth as an occult history, an alternative narrative of the 1980s, nevertheless treads comparatively familiar ground, hitting similar beats to Robb and Tolhurst's books. The bands at the centre of the scene remain the same, after all, even if each writer's approach varies. The three books collectively beg the question whether there are other Goth 'stories that have not been told'. These stories emerge elsewhere, for example in two earlier books that offer radically different takes on the subculture in the 1980s.

The first of these alternative accounts of Goth is Andi Harriman and Marloes Bontje's *Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace*, a collation of photographs, flyers and oral testimonies from an 80s Goth scene extending well beyond Britain and America. Harriman and Bontje 'found and interviewed both the performers and the audience in order to capture the community both on and off stage' (Harriman and Bontjes 2014: 8). They also sourced images from both personal archives and professional photographers. They mainly eschew images of well-known figures, focusing instead on minor bands, local 'faces' and ordinary individuals on a night out. The result is striking in its vivid evocation of the time and its documentation of the full spectrum of the Goth community. It is also notable for the way it expands the

geographies of Goth to reveal a vibrant international scene much earlier than is usually acknowledged in Anglo-American accounts of the subculture. Indeed, as they explain, rigidly pursuing the ‘Goth’ label can be a red herring, as the precise term used was subject to regional variation, meaning that Goth scenes in some countries have been overlooked.

The second is Leila Taylor’s *Darkly*, which addresses head-on the relative absence of people of colour in standard histories of Goth (Robb and Unsworth each devote space to Jaz Coleman of Killing Joke and Aki Nawaz of Southern Death Cult, both of British Asian heritage, but the broad approach means that inevitably these figures occupy only a fraction of the narrative as a whole). Taylor begins, like Unsworth, with her youthful adoration of Siouxsie Sioux, but she qualifies this:

Siouxsie Sioux represented a kind of dark glamor that I appreciated – a femininity that eschewed pink and politeness.... But Siouxsie was never aspirational for me, my idolatry stopped at the music and the Cleopatra eyeshadow’ (Taylor 2019: 8)

Instead, Taylor finds a role model in Lisa Bonet’s portrayal of Denise Huxtable, the alternative daughter in *The Cosby Show*. Taylor identifies as Goth, but she does it differently. Goth, for her, is always modulated by the fact that the blackness fetishized by Goth style is the colour of her skin, by the lack of an available community, and by the fact that in the racially inflected narratives of American Gothic, she represents the monster. The white mask created by classic Goth make-up never fits; she is ‘a Black version of a white story’ (Taylor 2019: 12). As in Brill’s articulation of her awkwardness in the role of participant observer, Taylor posits a distance between herself and the subculture that enables critical reflection. Nostalgia, for her, is inevitably reflective: at the end of her narrative, she notes a baseball cap made by the Black-owned clothing label Gothic Lamb emblazoned with the phrase ‘Make America Goth Again’ (Taylor 2019: 183). In its parody of Donald Trump’s infamous slogan, ‘Make America Great Again’, the baseball cap explicitly links Goth subculture with the

critique of restorative nostalgia and neoliberal ideologies. Significantly, a baseball cap is an item of clothing more associated with hip-hop than with Goth, suggesting new style hybrids resolutely moving the subculture forward rather than looking back.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I asked what was at stake in the writing of Goth history, and what stories it left out. The case studies I have examined suggest that subcultural histories face particular challenges about how to frame their author's relationship with their subject, as subcultural identity is sometimes at odds with that of the historian. Robb, Unsworth and Tolhurst's Goth histories would like to construct their subjects as embodying a spirit of critical resistance to mainstream historical narratives, as alternative or even occult histories of the 1980s. However, their organisation of their narratives through the stories of the rise and fall of a familiar group of mainly British and American bands results in a limited set of variations on a theme. Harriman and Bontjes' visual and oral history and Taylor's memoir, on the other hand, expose gaps in conventional Goth historiography, revealing unspoken privilege and cultural assumption around White, anglophone cultures. Through these smaller, more personal stories, away from the media spotlight, a fuller, more diverse picture of Goth begins to emerge.

While Goth histories do regard their subjects with nostalgia, it is a reflective one that can articulate longing for a lost past simultaneously with critical distance. Boym argues that nostalgia can be prospective as well as retrospective, that it is not just fantasy but can influence future reality (Boym 2007). Similarly, Thornton argues that media and other cultural industries – in which we might include book publishing – are not parasitic on subcultures but 'central to the process of subcultural formation' (Thornton 1995: 117). The way we tell stories about the Goth scene will have an impact on how Goth, and other

subcultures, can be imagined in the future. In this light, Boym says, we must ‘take responsibility for our nostalgic tales’ (Boym 2007). As the world heads towards an uncertain future, how we look back has never been so important.

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Submitted 4/04/2024

Accepted 12/04/2024