

Deborah Kay Phillips

# METAL MUSIC, MASCULINITY, AND MASS SHOOTINGS

A Cis-Woman's Autoethnographic  
Account of Concerts, Culture, and PTSD

Gender Studies

Collection Editors

**JAN ETIENNE**

&

**REHAM ELMORALLY**

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# Learning objectives

- Processing my experience as a witness to mass violence by exploring how trauma affects me personally, identifying healthy coping strategies that work for my situation, and developing a framework for ongoing healing and for sense-making of a chaotic event.
- Critically examining how women navigate, shape, and find belonging within heavy metal culture, including the challenges they face, the spaces they create, and the ways to both conform and resist masculine-coded genre expectations.
- Critically analyzing how heavy metal culture both reinforces and challenges traditional masculine norms and examining specific ways these interactions can be empowering, limiting, or harmful for individuals and communities.
- Analyzing how digital and conceptual metal communities transcend geographic and demographic boundaries, examining specific ways these “imagined communities” create opportunities for diversity in both the performers and participants of metal culture.

# I Concert chaos



# 1

# Just another

# Wednesday

I glanced at my watch anxiously as I continued to listen to speeches as part of our Speech and Theatre Department's scholarship competition. Five students are delivering persuasive speeches as part of a scholarship program where myself and two other judges will decide who will get first through fifth place scholarship prizes to be awarded next semester. The competition seems particularly slow today or maybe I am just in a hurry to get home. I am supposed to meet some friends at the Alrosa Villa, a small concert venue where the new and increasingly popular metal band Damageplan featuring rock icon and guitar legend Darrell "Dimebag" Abbott and his brother and drummer Vinnie Paul are playing. However, I still have an hour-long drive from the college where I work back to Columbus, where I live and where the Alrosa Villa is located. I always like to arrive at concerts early so I can stake out a prime location near the stage for taking pictures of the band.

December 8, 2004, is a date I will never forget. I realize that many people also know this date as the day when John Lennon was assassinated over forty years ago, but on this date another famous musician was also needlessly and brutally murdered.

According to Futty (2005), Darrell “Dimebag” Abbott and three other individuals lost their lives that night, not counting the gunmen: Jeff “Mayhem” Thompson, head of security for Damageplan; Erin Halk, a worker at the Alrosa Villa; and Nathan Bray, a 23-year-old fan of Damageplan.

After December 8, 2004, Columbus would forever be known as the city of Dimebag’s demise and the Alrosa Villa as the venue of his death. The world would be deprived of one of the greatest metal guitarists to ever play a guitar, and there would be no chance of a future reunion of the legendary band Pantera as many fans had hoped one day would happen.

The overall purpose of this book is to share my personal narrative about this tragic event and how it intersects with metal music culture, the gender dynamics within the metal community, and its connection to gun culture and mass shootings. My story is based on firsthand accounts of the events of December 8, 2004, as well as the numerous concerts that I have attended before and after this mass shooting and how this event has changed my attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of such events. I do not claim to be an expert in any of these areas, but as a firsthand witness I hope to offer a different perspective than that of general academic research about gun culture, mass shootings, and metal music culture and gender dynamics, although I include sources to aid or refute my personal narrative. Finally, since I do not think the number of mass shootings will decrease anytime soon, I hope my narrative will help others who have found themselves (or could find themselves) in similar situations.

There are six sections of this project. The first section examines the details of the events of December 8, 2004, from the lens of a

heteronormative, college educated, white cis woman with a love for metal music. In this autoethnographic account, I describe the events I witnessed around me before, during, and after the tragedy based on my own participant observations. I examine how this information was processed and how this unique, tragic, and chaotic event developed, unfolded, ultimately ended, and how it continues to influence me years later. While revising this chapter over twenty years after the event, I realize that sadly the uniqueness of witnessing a mass shooting is more common today than it was back then. Today, mass shootings happen in many places once considered to be safe spaces such as schools and universities, churches, malls, and even grocery stores. However, this event was still unique, in that it occurred during a live music performance, although at the time I did not know one of the worst mass shootings in U.S. history was yet to come when a gunman would kill about sixty people during a Las Vegas country music festival just thirteen years later.

The second section reflects upon my past concert experiences and my understanding of the event that took place at the Alrosa Villa on December 8, 2004. This section deals with my quest to find the answers to how and why this tragedy happened. I felt that I would not be able to put these issues behind me until I understood what really happened through introspection and reflection of this event and its effect on heavy metal culture. This section also deals with the history and my relationship with the fans, employees, and the employers of the Alrosa Villa metal community. Based on conversations and research, I tried to understand the motives of the shooter and reason for this carnage. The shooter, his motive, and his background were the variables that I tried to analyze in my attempt to make sense

of this chaos as well as exploring some of the feelings I experienced from this event such as guilt and helplessness which I later learned were some of the symptoms of PTSD. In his book *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*, Arthur Frank (1995/2013) explained that when presenting a chaos narrative (which is how I would describe this event) there is little for the storyteller to reflect upon since they are in the process of telling the chaotic narrative. Frank (1995/2013, p. 98) adds: "Lived chaos makes reflection, and consequently story-telling impossible. But in the lived chaos there is no mediation, only immediacy." Therefore, this section attempts more of a restitutive narrative where the author is able to reflect, research, and revise the raw chaos narrative from section one.

Section three focuses on the definition of the controversial term toxic masculinity and examines the relationship (or lack thereof) with heavy metal music and violence. Some of the traits and characteristics of toxic masculinity are analyzed as they relate to heavy metal music by contrasting academic research with my own personal experiences. Some of the traits I attempt to contrast include violence, misogyny, sexism, and gun violence. This section attempts to understand whether the case of Nathan Gale and the shooting of Dimebag was the result of toxic masculinity, gun culture, metal music or something else. Additional concerts I attended along with my observations, between 2007 and 2025, serve as the informal data for this section of the book.

Section four chronicles my journey into the metal music culture. It focuses on my transition from the love of my parents' country music to my love of the controversial nu metal subgenre, and the never-ending contentious debate within the metal community

about what is and is not considered heavy metal music. I discuss my musical preferences from grade school to recent times and compare my experiences to those mentioned in Deena Weinstein's book *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (1991/2000). I provide an overview of the history of heavy metal music, including the development of subgenres, and how and when I became a part of metal culture. I also examine some of the more controversial subgenres of metal such as nu metal based on the responses of fans, critics, and academic works. Finally, I look at the future of nu metal and its possible ties to a more diverse metal music community.

Section five explores the question of whether a person can be a feminist and a metalhead? I examine what is a feminist and how and why I identify as a feminist. I look at some of the existing research that deals with feminism and heavy metal culture. I draw upon the concerts I have attended, especially since the 2004 shooting of Dimebag at Alrosa Villa in Columbus and the new Columbus festival initially called Rock on the Range but later renamed the Sonic Temple Art + Music Festival. I take an informal look at the data from the festivals of the ratio of male- versus female led bands and discuss how this is or is not changing in popular metal music festivals. Finally, I discuss some events in 2017 that retriggered my possible PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and insecurities regarding concert attendance. My concert experiences for this section are from 2007 until 2020 or until COVID-19 shut down all concert venues in the country, including the Sonic Temple Art + Music Festival in Columbus. I hope to demonstrate how I can position myself as a feminist with my identity as a fan of heavy metal culture

despite the opposing ideologies of these two important components of my identity.

Section six deals with how I finally reached a type of closure with the Dimebag saga, and includes data and observations from music festivals that I attended from 2017 until 2025. I readdress the issue of mass shootings and concerts, toxic masculinity, gun violence, PTSD, and COVID-19's impact on the metal community as well as popular culture's attempt to return to normal after a contentious period of isolation and political division. Finally, this section examines the reaction of myself and the metal community to the reunion tour of Pantera without founding members Dimebag and his brother Vinnie Paul.

# 2

# Ethnographic research background

Before I return to my story, I start with a brief background of autoethnography and chaos narratives. Richardson (2000, p. 11) describes autoethnographies as "...highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural." The author continues, "The power of these narratives depends upon their rhetorical staging as 'true stories,' stories about events that really happened to the writer." Finally, Richardson (2000, p. 11) explains that the author is "...holding back on interpretation, asking the reader to emotionally 'relive' the events with the writer." These events and details did happen to me and the characters in my story, although the names of some of the characters have been changed in order to preserve the true identity of the individuals; those individuals whose names have been changed include Blake, Casey, Jenny, Craig, and Tim. However, most of the individuals, including myself, who witnessed these events were part of the Columbus Police Department's investigation and our accounts are part of the public records of this crime that occurred on Wednesday December 8, 2004, in Columbus, Ohio.

Background regarding work from chaos narrative was more difficult to locate. Frank (1995/2013) and Ellis (2002) were the most pivotal pieces in analyzing my own research. Frank (1995/2013) explains that "Chaos stories are also hard to hear because they are too threatening. The anxiety these stories provoke inhibits hearing" (pp. 97–98). Frank's point is well taken because it took me four long years to compose the first draft of this story due to the pain it caused me every time I reread the manuscript and reconstructed the chaotic event as though I was reliving it. However, Frank's work with chaos narratives relates more to stories of an individual's struggle with sickness and illness, while this project focuses on the chaos narrative of witnessing mass shootings at concerts. This project examines not just my personal story of chaos but the cultural and societal chaos of the many metal fans who also went through this loss, but through indirect methods such as the media due to the celebrity status of heavy metal icon Dimebag Abbott.

Frank (1995/2013) also explains and compares chaos narratives to restitutive narratives. Drawing upon Biblical narratives, Frank (1995/2013, p. 97) states "Restitution stories reassure the listener that however bad things look, a happy ending is possible—Job with his new family and cattle, basking in God's graciousness. Chaos stories are Job taking his wife's advice, cursing God and dying." I believe the first section of this book deals more with the chaos narrative while the remaining sections attempt to create a more restitutive narrative. Again, my narrative deals with chaos in terms of a mass shooting or external tragedy instead of internal chaos to the body such as an illness. Due to the increasing number of mass shootings and other tragedies that focus on

external events, I feel that a new subgenre of chaos ethnography related to mass shootings probably could encompass an entire subsection dedicated to the stories of survivors from the numerous mass shootings that the United States experiences every year. I believe a subgenre of chaos narratives that deals with mass shooting could be helpful for a number of survivors and witnesses of mass shootings who experience a lot of the same feelings, and issues that I have experienced. I am not alone with this idea; Rachael Bale in her article "The Survivors" from an AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) Special Report examined the lives of ten survivors from mass shootings in the United States in the last fifteen years. Bale states "America has become so accustomed to mass shootings that we've developed a routine" (p. 57). She identified some of the elements of the routine as shock, horror, memorials, and grief. I believe this could be a starting point to create a formula for future mass shooting chaos narratives in autoethnographic research.

It is Ellis' work (2002) with the retelling of the sequence of events she experienced while at Dulles Airport on September 11, 2001, which has most inspired me and given me the courage to even attempt to write this narrative. She described her actions and thoughts as she tried to make sense out of the string of the 9/11 events she witnessed while at the Washington Dulles Airport. I found her work to be inspirational in writing my narrative as well as helpful in developing a style, format, and organizational structure for such an article.

I realize that this tragic concert event I witnessed is nowhere near the magnitude of the 9/11 tragedy that affected thousands of people, but for those few hundred of us who witnessed this

incident, it was our own private nightmare and just as devastating to us personally as well as the thousands of fans of the metal community who were not at the concert the night of the shooting but were impacted by the sudden death of a beloved metal icon. David Draiman, vocalist from the band Disturbed, stated that the death of Dimebag was the “9/11 of rock” and that “a little of us died that day, too” (Blabbermouth, 2005d). Although I disagree with that statement and would never try to compare the two events, it was still a troubling experience where everyone was caught off guard and surprised by the sudden unexpected violence. My story does focus on the emotion, sonic, and visual experiences of the event. Perhaps these accounts are what makes it different from the Columbus police reports, the Associated Press releases, or even the handful of books published about the event by individuals who did not experience the tragedy firsthand. I am sure these books are insightful about the events with interviews from witnesses who attended the concert (I have not read any of these books yet), but it still lacks the perspective of someone who was there when it happened in 2004. This analysis goes beyond just the basic facts of the tragic event. After all, millions of people every year witness concerts but fortunately few ever experience the live assassination of one of their favorite band members. This paper is an account of these events as witnessed by me at the Alrosa Villa that night. It does not offer a solution to the tragedy, nor does it attempt to find fault or place blame; however, it does attempt to describe, reflect, and make sense of the events which led to the murder of a musician while performing on stage, and how this could relate to the bigger picture of mass

shootings, metal music culture, feminism, masculinity, and even lingering effects such as PTSD.

Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis explain the composition and some of the purposes of an autoethnography (2022). The authors explain how the autoethnography is comprised of the “auto,” the “ethno,” and the “graphy.” According to the authors, “auto” refers to the “...author’s personal experience and reflections.” (p. 3). Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis state: “We share intimate and vulnerable experiences that sometimes bring forth shame or sorrow; experiences and situations that shaped us and these events; and moments that motivated joy, confusion, conflict, grief, passion, and possibly trauma” (p. 3).

Just sharing personal experiences does not make a project an autoethnography, according to Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2022). The authors explain that “ethno” relates to “...cultural beliefs, values, practices, and identities...” (p. 3). They add that “...autoethnography brings together the personal and the cultural.” (p. 3).

The final element of the autobiography is the “graphy” according to the authors. They explain that the writing should use the same building blocks as other authors such as “...character development, dialogue, narrative voice, and techniques of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ to select, frame, organize, and represent experience” (p. 3).

Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2016) explain some of the functions of autoethnography. The authors state “Every autoethnographic story returns the storyteller to the past, and all such stories can be viewed as retroactive re-description and re-experiencing of human actions and behavior” (p. 252). Regarding the purpose

of autoethnographies, the authors explain "They compel us to want to make sense, understand, and remember our lives in a story-kind-of-way," especially since humans remember stories more than other types of data (p. 247). They add that "Most people are curious about how other people live their lives, especially what they do to get through trying circumstances" (p. 247).

# 3

# Returning to the long drive home on December 8

Well, I finally made it to the car. I am glad that the speech competition has finally ended. It is around 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday, December 8, 2004, when I jump into my black Hyundai Elantra and head west on Interstate 70 toward Columbus. I put my CD (compact disc) of Damageplan into the CD player. Damageplan's new recording is entitled *New Found Power*. I am so psyched about how good this first CD by the newly formed metal band Damageplan sounds. Damageplan includes former Pantera guitarist, the legendary Darrell "Dimebag" Abbott and his brother and drummer Vinnie Paul Abbott. I had often wondered why Dimebag had the nickname Dimebag. Darrell was given the nickname Dimebag by Pantera vocalist Phil Anselmo based on the slang term dime for USD 10 worth of marijuana because Dimebag never wanted to have more than that amount with him ("Dimebag Darrell," 2025). Originally, Dimebag was nicknamed Diamond Darrell based on the KISS song "Black Diamond" and due to their flashiness in Pantera when the band first started as a glam metal band but changed when Pantera changed their musical style to a heavier groove metal after Phil Anselmo joined

Pantera as a vocalist ("Dimebag Darrell," 2025). Groove metal is described as having "...slow or mid-tempo and down tuned thrash riffs, bluesy guitar solos, greatly emphasized drum work and harsh vocals" (Metal Music Archives, n.d.). As the story of how Dimebag got his name flashed through my mind, I realized the enormity of how Dimebag was able to switch from the glam rock genre to creating a new groove metal sound ("Dimebag Darrell," 2025).

However, Pantera no longer existed. Dimebag and Vinnie Paul eventually moved on to form Damageplan along with vocalist Patrick Lachman and bass player Bob Kakaha (aka Bob Zilla). As I listen to the first single from the debut album called "Save Me," I thought about how Damageplan represented a fresh chapter for Dimebag and Vinnie Paul after Pantera's legendary but tumultuous run. I also suddenly realize how tired I am. I had been teaching classes since 11 a.m. that morning and was awake even earlier in order to get ready for class and make the hour-long drive into work. In addition to being tired, final exams start next week and I have had a sore throat all day. Even now, I am chewing a Hall's cough drop while trying to sing "Save Me" and drive at the same time. Then I realized that the concerts at Alrosa Villa are generally over by 11:30 p.m. and I can be home and sound asleep by midnight. Besides, I can sleep late the next morning since I have no classes or meetings scheduled for the next day.

While I am driving, I decide to check my voicemail and turn on my cell phone. I see that I have a voice mail from my friend Blake. Blake is a thirtyish white cis man who loves concerts as much as I do. In fact, we met several years ago at an Everclear concert, and we both usually attend most of the major and some of the minor

concerts in the greater Columbus area. In Blake's voice mail, he says that he just met Dimebag and had his picture taken with him! I am so jealous because I wanted to get to the concert early and meet Dimebag. I picked up the cell phone and called him. "Are you still at Alrosa?" I ask. Blake says that he has just left Alrosa Villa and plans to go get something to eat. He tells me that the picture he had taken with Dimebag was very interesting because Dimebag is dressed in this fur ensemble and that Dimebag had even made a comment to him that the picture would be a "classic" due to how Dimebag was dressed. I am sad because I wanted a picture made with Dimebag in his "classic ensemble." I tell him that I will just go straight to Alrosa Villa, but Blake says that the doors are not open yet and he won't be there because he is leaving to go get something to eat and to pick up his friend Casey. I don't want to hang out by myself at Alrosa Villa, so I decided to run some errands instead. I couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy hearing Blake's story, but I reassured myself that I would have my moment after the show. I imagined shaking Dimebag's hand, taking a selfie, and thanking him for the music that had been the soundtrack for so many long drives like this one.



# 4

## **Before and during the show**

Since I was not going to Alrosa Villa first, I have time to run some errands. I still hope to get to Alrosa Villa around 6:30 or 7 p.m. I decided to first stop at Circuit City to replace my stolen camera. I turn off Brice Road and into the Circuit City parking lot. I am still angry about the stolen camera which was taken out of my apartment complex sometime on Saturday afternoon. I know it must have been Saturday when it was stolen because I had the Casio Digital camera with me on Friday night at the Alrosa Villa for the Shinedown concert. I took great close-up pictures of the band on stage. After the show, I stood out in the cold until the band members emerged to sign autographs and have pictures taken with the handful of determined yet frozen fans who greeted them outside the Alrosa Villa back entrance near the tour bus—the same location where Blake had met Dimebag and Vinnie Paul earlier. I had developed those pictures at Wal-Mart Saturday morning and then left the camera lying on the table near the front door while I walked outside to take the garbage to the dumpster. It wasn't until later that night that I realized that the Casio digital camera along with a cheap camcorder were missing. After buying the same Casio camera replacement, I realized that there would not be enough time to charge the

camera before the Damageplan concert, so I also bought a disposable camera that I could carry with me into the Alrosa Villa. Finally, I drove through the drive-through of Skyline Chili and ordered my usual—a cheese and chili coney dog and some fries, and then I started toward Interstate 270 north toward the Alrosa Villa.

I finally arrived around 6:30 p.m. at the Alrosa Villa at 5055 Sinclair Road. The Alrosa Villa is a small building that sits alone on a mostly vacant lot surrounded by woods in the back and on the left side of the venue. Once inside, there is a patio to the right side of the building which is enclosed with a seven- or eight-foot fence. It is an older building that was built in the 1970s or earlier, and the weathered appearance is readily apparent. There is limited parking situated to the left side of the Alosa with overflow parking across Sinclair Road. I arrived early, so I was able to park in the limited parking space to the left of the venue. The line at the Alrosa Villa is long, but not nearly as long as it was five days earlier for the Shinedown show. The Alrosa Villa was sold out that night, and it was extremely crowded by the stage, although I still managed to get some great pictures. I hope I can get great pictures tonight despite my inferior camera. I look around and do not see my friends. I can also tell that the Alrosa Villa will not be as crowded tonight as it was on Friday when parking was more difficult to find. The energy inside the Alrosa Villa was different tonight—heavier and grittier. I scanned the room and noticed the crowd was predominantly male, which was a stark contrast to the Shinedown show just a few days earlier. I guess it is because Shinedown is a more commercially successful band than Damageplan, or maybe it is because it is not the weekend