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Let's have a Black Celebration: The Occult Yoga of Health Goth

What is it about the return of harnesses and chokers in correlation with the 2014 move from "athleisure" to the black, tattooed and moody "health goth" trend? Is it some form of nihilist answer to the dark times, or is there something more sinister at play, something which may reveal fashion under a new (dark) light?

Not only does the trend coincide with heathen, esoteric and sometimes skulls and satanic imagery, but popular brands use geometric runes as logos, revealing the deep occulture of fashion itself. The dark and introverted sport-look of the health goth also intersects with the popular "post-fetish" styles of harnesses and O-ring chokers from New York-based designer Zana Bayne, who in turn equips celebrities as well as the lesser gentry to realize the passions of E.L. James' stunningly popular book series *50 Shades of Grey* (2011). And indeed, is not that narrative of glamorous BDSM, which started as an occult fan-fiction from the vampires versus werewolves saga *Twilight*, a glimpse into the darker metamorphosis of fashion: aesthetic domination based where there is no real pleasure or gain without pain.

The name of the yoga occultist dressed in black distressed athleisure as "health goth" emerged on a Facebook page started by Portland musician Mike Grabarek (Devash 2014). With its elements of occulture and dark futurism, the look of metal-punk-meets-Pilates, follows the earlier hype of dark sportiness by Rick Owens and Alexander Wang. Indeed, Wang's collection with H&M made liquid yoga pants, leather joggers and black scuba-style crop tops hit main street, later followed by Wang's 2016 dark nihilist work with Adidas, where the very "drop" itself was a dark inversion of advertising. However, like all trends, it would not happen without a confluence of forces, and there seems to be an interesting overlap with years of Williamsburg hipsters going into black metal yoga, taxidermy, and tattooing alchemic symbols and Norse runes on their skin.

Indeed, the health goth speaks of power better than the merrily ignorant wearer of athleisure. If athleisure was casually looking-like-I-do-yoga, is a health goth puts emphasis on the darker goals of reshaping and reconfiguration of the body: the "left-hand path." Under this name scholars usually gather the forbidden and heretical practices of black magic, the traditions of tantric teachings and the Theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky, the transgressive forms of magick heralded by Aleister Crowley, and later in LaVeyan Satanism, all which oppose Man's submission to the "natural" order of the world to instead seek individual freedom and power (Flowers 2012). Thus the health goth helps expose how fashion is intimately a matter of

magic (Wilson 2004), but perhaps even more so the fluid shapeshifting between man and woman, human and beast, sin and virtue. If the magic sought by the health goth aim at a black celebration of the power residing within life unbound.

There is thus no coincidence the health goth seeks fulfilment in yoga, not only because of its esoteric history in East Asia, but also because like fashion, it is a deeply individualistic practice. It may be done in a group, but is not about seeking to celebrate the team effort, or submitting to a referee, but like magic, it seeks to transgress limitations and seek power towards liberation from collective restraints or the restrictions of the untrained body. Whereas public morality and religion, or what is sometimes called the “right-hand path,” encourages values such as equality, mercy, and harmony with nature in order to reach some form of heaven or nirvana, the magic of the “left-hand path” seeks the empowerment of the individual human, and the freedom which comes with will, power and superiority, and ultimately, the rule over one’s world, even at the cost of others. To many moralizing institutions, such ego-centered path is often considered “evil,” yet for the follower of the left-hand path, it is the very affirmation of life: to live without any boundaries. In the world of the yogi, and essential to the left-hand path, there is no team, only teacher and disciple, just like for the BDSM practitioner there is only master and slave (Flowers 2012). For the health goth there is only individual power, as in the use of social media the dark pleasures emerge from being famous and turning friends into “followers.”

Like for the esoteric yogi, the essential element of fashion is an individualist struggle for perfection, but in the realm of fashion, this translates as the pursuit of popularity and pleasure. Yet, unlike many other individualist struggles, the gains in the endeavor of fashion need the submission of others: the attention and admiration of one’s followers and the desire of a seduced audience. Fashion is a quest of power over others, and in the popular image of fashion, this power comes from the perfection of magic, of control.

The BDSM references also tie (no joke intended) the health goth towards the fetish, a common reference in the study of fashion. Indeed, the words fashion and fetish share the same Latin root; *facticium* and *facere*, which means “to do” or “to make” (Barnard 2014: 199). Both fashion and the fetish are (hand) made, but they are also imbued with agency; they grant the wearer access to figuration, of both matter and spirit, and with this comes power. Like magic, the fetish transforms beyond the realm of representation or illusion; it controls behavior.

The health goth also exposes a central paradox in relation to the idea of a “democratic” fashion, such as Wang’s collection for H&M. It exposes that the yogi may be on an individualist path to seek power and popularity, but it also has collective implications. In its explicit celebration of the perfect alchemic body, it shares with the esotericism of fascism a *völkisch* elements, that is, it is not the people (*Volk*) that selects its leaders, but the leaders who selects its people, through distinctions and hygienic measures, to preserve the exclusivity and health of the social body (Flowers 2012: 220). The expensive brands are not accessible to all, nor are the lifestyles that supports their pursuit for perfection in body and soul, with its healthy food, expensive workouts and time enough to follow the regimen of shapeshifting.

But even in our demonic times, the left-hand posing of the health goth may already be over; “according to some irate OG health goths, us mainstream narcs have already ruined it. Which probably means that — like joy, happiness, or your love of the Smiths when all the happy blonde girls started listening to them — this trend is dead.” (Davis 2014) Yet fashion’s intimate relation to the left-hand path will surely still be around.

The common trait of all left-hand-path practitioners is that they focus on their own selves as their first source of power and they seek to cultivate, develop, and enhance that separate and unique source as the surest path to happiness. That turning inward to the dark depths of one’s own self to find the light is as old as mankind. (Flowers 2012: xxi)

[image: Alexander Wang for H&M 2014]

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