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‘Power has a penis’: Cost reduction, social exchange and sexism in metal – reviewing the work of Sonia Vasan

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Abstract

In this short article I review Sonia Vasan’s contribution to understandings of women’s negotiations of sexism within death metal. Women’s experiences and identities as metal fans has been a growing area of interest amongst metal scholars, and Vasan’s work makes a very useful contribution to this field. Her work on group behaviour from a social psychology perspective brings new insights about how the death metal scene remains fairly static in its male dominance.

Keywords: cost reduction, death metal, sexism, Vasan, women

It is with deep sadness that we communicate the recent death of one of our metal colleagues, Sonia Vasan. Sonia Vasan was an inspiring and provocative metal scholar, working on death metal and sexism. She gained her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology for her thesis *Women's Participation in the Death Metal Subculture* from the University of Houston in 2010. She also wrote lyrics for Anubis Gate and was a metal DJ. Her research interests ranged beyond metal to architecture, religion, Japanese and Finnish culture, and others areas. Her most recent metal publication is ‘Gender and power in the death metal scene: a social exchange perspective’ (Vasan 2016) in *Global Metal Music and Culture* (Brown et al.

2016). Here I offer critical reflections on her work and its impact, putting it in the context of recent work on metal and gender.

It is clear from Vasan's work that she had a conundrum in mind when she wrote about death metal: why would any woman enjoy death metal when much of the genre is so blatantly sexist? This question shaped her research and led her to investigate how women fans negotiate the sexism they face. This approach is not without its challenges, but the question is a crucial one that is in the minds of many scholars examining metal and gender (not only metal scholars, but those in less sympathetic fields too). Vasan's research is part of a broader academic shift in metal studies. This shift is a movement away from considering men fans' experiences as the template for all experiences, and it is also a movement away from defending metal from detractors (the legacy of the PMRC, senate hearings and associated psychology research in the late 1980s and early 1990s). Whilst a number of the psychological studies about metal dealt with the accusations of the genre's sexism, more sociological metal studies did not do a very good job of addressing it. In part this was due to defensiveness (scholars wanted to affirm the value of their favoured genre), but a major reason was the lack of interest in women's experiences, inside or outside the genre. Vasan, along with a number of other researchers (Gabrielle Riches, Laina Dawes, Jamie Patterson, Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight, myself and others), put women's experiences at the heart of the research. This brought the sexism with which the genre had been charged by the PMRC into focus.

Two of Vasan's central concepts have been especially influential and valuable for developing an understanding of death metal as a patriarchal scene, how women are treated within it, and how they negotiate the sexism they face: her theory of cost reduction; and the delineation of the identity positions of den mother and band whore. More recently Vasan's published work attends to how power and group behaviour shape what can and cannot be done to counter the scene's misogyny, offering new perspectives.

Sexism and cost reduction

In her book chapter, "'Den mothers and band whores': Gender, sex and power in the death metal scene' (2010), and article, 'The price of rebellion: Gender boundaries in the death metal scene' (2011), Vasan uses a framework of social exchange theory in order to understand why women are involved in death metal in spite its evident misogyny, which she highlights through lyrics and stage performances. She argues that women participate in the death metal scene in Texas because their 'emotional, aesthetic, or social' needs are unmet elsewhere, with the result that they 'gravitate toward death metal' (2011: 340). Death metal frees women 'from the constraints of mainstream society' (2011: 342), particularly from conformity to normative standards of personal care and proscriptions of loudness. They may find solace from 'psychosocial turmoil' (2011: 343) or sexual violence and find, like Jeffrey Arnett's interviewees (1996), that listening to 'darkness and anger' (Vasan 2011: 343) can be helpful. This brief discussion of the value of death metal in women's lives, however, is cast into the dark by her astute and carefully theorized examination of the misogynistic practices that loom over Texan death metal scenes.

Vasan does not waste time on the questions of whether metal is sexist (unlike Metalgaters), she quickly shows it is and gets on with discussing how women negotiate the misogyny they face. She argues that in spite of the feeling of freedom that death metal can bring, for women participation in the scene is not on their own terms. They must comply with the existing – masculine – codes of the genre, a point Deena Weinstein ([1991] 2000) also makes. Vasan posits that if women do not comply, their presence would alienate men and the scene would fall apart. In order to enjoy participating, Vasan argues that women use the technique of cost reduction to limit the ‘emotional, psychological, or moral pain’ (2011: 340) of encountering misogyny and sexism. This means they change their own values in order to better tolerate what they encounter. But the costs are high: women must limit expressions of their sexuality in order to gain respect in the scene, a situation met with frustration; they regard sexism in lyrics with ambivalence, avoiding angry responses. Vasan finds that female musicians are annoyed by the marginalization and sexism: they are assumed to be the girlfriend, they are not accorded respect, and they are denied roles in bands due to sexist ideas of their talent, sound or ability to commit. They are therefore very aware of their position as a subordinated group within metal and reflect on this from personal perspectives. This useful, albeit brief, discussion of women musicians prefigures autoethnographic work by Jasmine Shadrack (2014, 2016) about the experiences of women musicians in metal, and brings a vital new view on what it means to participate in a very active way in a male-dominated environment. However, concludes Vasan, the result of cost reduction techniques, although they allow women to participate in death metal with pleasure, is that it promulgates the sexism that ensures women are treated as less than serious in the genre. It ‘intensifies their attachment to the scene as subordinates’ (2011:

346) because the benefits to be bestowed remain in the hands of men for the bestowing (because they hold the power).

Vasan's argument about cost reduction relies on the assertion that, should non-complying women enter in very large numbers, men would leave the scene, and that the scene would fall apart. Is this a fear that women death metal fans have that keeps them speaking out about their subordination? Or is something else going on, such as a fear of losing their own precarious place? Clearly the feeling of empowerment that death metal gives women does not extend to feeling strong enough to improve their situation. Furthermore, what if more women joining re-invigorated the scene, rather than frightening all the men off? But part of Vasan's point is that we don't know the answers to these questions *because* women's ubiquitous cost reduction techniques do not challenge the male dominance of the scene. Her later work on power addresses some of these points, as I'll discuss below.

It is this assertion of the limitations of cost reduction for women – that in the end women remain subordinated – that has been especially influential, as can be seen in the work of Heidi Rademacher (2015) and Julian Schaap and Pauwke Berkers (2013) and many others. Rademacher explores the crossover between Christian ideology and heavy metal, arguing that empowerment in both is framed in masculine terms; Schaap and Berkers argue that women end up as tokens in virtual death metal scenes, using cost reduction as the backdrop to the problems tokenism could potentially engender for women. Contrarily, though, the sexism that mars Texas's death metal scene is not evident in the YouTube groups. Schaap and Berkers contradiction of Vasan's assertion needs to be understood in terms of differential sites and groups of people. It is also beneficial to think of Vasan's research as

enabling the examination of sexism by highlighting the kinds of behaviours to look out for – which can be clearly seen in Schaap and Berkers article. And as Karl Spracklen argues, with Vasan, whilst there are clearly experiences of metal in which women do not experience sexism, these ‘do not overturn the problematization of hegemonic (male, white) power at the heart of heavy metal’ (Spracklen 2015: 361)

Vasan’s 2011 article may omit to consider the music or to dig deeper into the ‘empowerment’ women feel, but it is extremely useful for offering a critique of death metal when a lot of other metal scholars are somewhat defensive. Its fundamental feminist perspective is valuable for drawing out the problems of participation for women metal fans, which were at the time overlooked in the literature by Weinstein ([1991] 2000), Jonathan Gruzelier (2007), Nathalie Purcell (2003) and, surprisingly at the Metal and Gender conference in Cologne (2009). Its overtly feminist perspective means that it goes further than Keith Kahn-Harris’s (2007) brief, but useful, assessment of the state of extreme metal for women, and it puts women’s experiences at the heart of its analysis.

One of the very important contributions of her work is that she asserts that women in the scene are aware of the sexism around them in it. Vasan therefore moves away from any suggestion that women may be the ‘cultural dupes’ of older popular culture analysis, or that they are living in a state of ‘false consciousness’, which older feminist analyses might argue (c.f. Coates 1997). This enables her to examine how women death metal fans negotiate sexism, rather than trying to account for whether they understand what sexism is. This work therefore has broader application for understanding women’s experiences and strategies in patriarchal society.

However, there are questions to be asked here. The article makes an assumption that women ought to be offended or dislike the music because of the misogyny in the lyrics, i.e. that all women are some sort of feminists: describing lyrics that utilize images of sexual violence as undermining 'women's struggle against sexism' (2011: 335) implies that women in death metal are engaged in a struggle against sexism; but there is no evidence that they are. Of course we cannot assume women to be feminists just because they are women: they may not believe sexism exists or plays a part in their lives; we should not assume that the lyrics matter to all fans, or that sexism is offensive to all women, or that politics plays a role in all fans' music choice and social life.

In the work of Savigny and Sleight (2015) and myself (2016), and a shift across the ocean, we see a different picture. For fans of the broad genre of hard rock and metal, including festival attendees, understandings of what counts as sexism within metal are somewhat different. We argue that a discourse of postfeminism has an impact on women's understanding and depiction of behaviours and attitudes towards them that are negative, meaning that they do not necessarily see it as sexism (although sexual violence was often given as an unequivocal example). Thinking about women's feelings about sexism they encounter from this perspective offers a different kind of meaning, one which does beg questions about how knowledgeable UK women are about sexism, and of how powerful is the discourse that tells us sexism is dead and gone, the product of a past time. Of course, we could attribute this difference between Vasan's interpretation and the post-feminist accounts to the difference of genre (Savigny and Sleight and I did not restrict our interviews to one genre), to disciplinary differences (Vasan's work was in the field of social psychology, Savigny, Sleight's and mine in media and sociology) or location (Vasan in Texas, we in the United Kingdom), but what we can learn is that women metal fans negotiate the sexism they face in a range of

ways, and minimizing or re-articulating what counts as sexism could be considered a form of cost reduction.

Riches (2015) turns away from Vasan's assertions that, she argues, tie metal and masculinity together. Riches argues that metal is not essentially masculine. Rather an approach that considers embodied experiences of metal is needed to challenge and rethink frameworks that inadvertently reproduce masculinity. When metal is studied in this way it is evident that the moshpit and its permission for aggression can be a site of transgression in which women can break barriers of permitted behaviour. Strikingly, however, Riches attention is not on sexism, so whilst there is a suggestion that men in the pit are not happy about women's participation, the pit remains an empowering space. But this leaves questions – how do women have to steel themselves to enter the pit? At what point does male animosity push them out? Whilst Riches' work can aid in understanding the benefits of metallic involvement for women – as can, in some ways, Vasan's – I find it a little too optimistic, and this is where Vasan's work comes into its own, providing nuanced discussion of how women negotiate those awkward spaces and times in order to be able to find empowerment. Bringing these two perspectives together suggests there is room for a middle ground in which something that is structurally disadvantageous in some ways can also be seen to be a freeing space in other ways. Patterson's (2016a) work on how women talk about their metal lives against a backdrop of their non-metal lives is an important contribution here, as it brings context to the discussion, without which we would have a more limited part of the story.

Den mother/band whore

Vasan outlined the concepts of the 'den mother' and the 'band whore' in her 2010 book chapter. These narrow prescriptions of identity and behaviour for women, whilst not universally applicable, have proven to be a vivid image for understanding how women are disadvantaged when participating in metal. Vasan draws out the two options for women death metal fans: they can be 'den mothers' and 'dress and behave like men' or they can be 'band whores' and 'behave in a traditionally feminine manner' whilst wearing 'low-cut tops and short skirts, wear makeup' (2010: 72). The former position tends to garner more respect from other scene members; the latter to attract disapprobation and harassment.

The limited identities available to women are interpreted by Vasan as part of the masculinist code of the genre, acceding to either of which is presented as a cost of participation for women: they either lose femininity (when den mother) or respect as music fans (when band whores). We might ask whether adopting the more respected identity of den mother could not also be viewed as a form of cost reduction: it minimizes sexual harassment even though it comes at the cost of femininity and sexual expression (because adopting a more feminine identity position could free women to enjoy their sexual desires). Similar dichotomous formations between women who utilize masculinity and those who employ more feminine gender identities can be found in the work of Leigh Krenske and Jim McKay (2000), Ben Hutcherson and Ross Haenfler (2010), Patterson (2016a) and Jenna Kummer (2016).

Kummer draws on Vasan's discussion of women's experiences of metal, arguing that women work hard to be accepted as metal fans and, at the same time, seek to 'other' more feminine non-metal women fans. The concept of the den mother/ band whore is clearly implicated in this process because Vasan's portrayal of the band whore is of a woman who is not regarded

as a real fan, but only interested in sex with musicians. Problematically, in Vasan's research the view of the 'band whore' comes only from the perspective of the 'den mother', who, like the women in Kummer's chapter, do not speak highly of the so-called band whores. Of course, we must acknowledge that when an identity category is a demeaned one, like the 'band whore' or the groupie, women are not very likely to want to acknowledge it as referring to themselves, as I found in my research (2016). The cost involved in the den mother identity is loss of freedom of sexual expression, for heterosexual women. Vasan's work thereby highlights how metal's provision of female masculinities as championed by Amber Clifford-Napoleone (2015b) as creating spaces for queer women, can be problematic for heterosexual women.

Power

More recently, Vasan turned her attention to power and made explicit criticisms of how power works in metal to ensure men's continued dominance and women's subordination. In her *Global Metal Music and Culture* chapter (2016), she examines women's place within death metal, using social psychology theories to understand power, prestige, authority and group behaviour. She carefully delineates each of these terms in order to determine that even if more women are entering metal and have prestige, it does not translate into power. This is due to the fact that the group behaviour means women cannot contest sexism without risking their already tenuous place in the group. This also explains how some men's voicing of feminist concerns does not translate into action or more structural change. Indeed Vasan's work shows that the strength of group feeling (which we might term community) is actually what hinders movements to make the genre a space in which women can

participate on the same grounds as men. This argument tallies well with my own work (2014) on the concept of how imaginary community champions the language of equality whilst doing nothing to bring equality about. What Vasan's theory brings, by extension, is a way to understand how metal remains dominated by straight white men, and how difficult it is to mount challenges to a range of associated oppressions for individuals from subordinated groups.

Vasan's work, therefore, provides nuanced discussion of sexist practices, women's negotiations of those practices, and how group behaviour prohibits resistances, challenges and activism to change oppressive behaviour. Although not without room for critique – as all our work is – Vasan's perspectives open up new areas for discussion and have proved to be very influential. No doubt they will continue to be so.

Personal reflections

When I met Sonia, it was at the second Metal, Music and Politics conference in Salzburg 2009. As she began her presentation I vividly remember her tucking her long, thick hair over her shoulders and saying, 'Whether in pop music or in death metal, the message is clear: power has a penis'. This wonderfully summed up many years of feminist argumentation with the added bonus of (oh puerile joy) getting the word 'penis' into a conference presentation and, later, her book chapter. I thought it was a brilliant assessment of death metal (and pop) and I loved the fierce, provocative way in which she said it. She was an emphatic, thunderous breath of fresh air and immediate ally to this very nervous postgraduate.

That does not mean that I have been entirely uncritical of her work. I was perturbed by what I saw as her lack of interest in the pleasures of metal, a concern shared by Jamie Patterson (2016b), as she focused on developing her theory that women use cost reduction techniques to enable them to enjoy what she saw as a thoroughly misogynistic genre. Little glimpses of women's pleasure and positive uses came through in her 2011 article, but on the whole the query of why would women like music that threatens them in a violently sexist way, a question which I shared to some extent, led her to discuss coping with negative aspects to the exclusion of considerations of pleasure,. Riches (2011, 2014, 2015; Riches et al. 2014), Rosemary Overell (2014) and I have worked to address this gap, but of course pleasure in metal (as in life more generally) is always tempered by restrictive gender norms, which are particularly evident for women (Hill 2016).

More recently I have come back to the question of sexism in metal. I have been influenced by the work of Savigny and Sleight (2015), who have in turn been influenced by Vasan's theory of cost reduction. I now see this theory as an important aspect of a range of work that examines gender relations in metal, alongside work by Riches, Patterson, Sarah Kitteringham, Dawes, Berkers and Schaap, Susanna Nordström and Marcus Herz, amongst others. What Vasan's work brings forward is a fundamental assertion of the sexism in death metal. This is not to be debated, rather it can be taken as read. Popularly, there is resistance to this idea, as can be seen in the Metalgate affair (Clifford-Napoleone 2015a) and the ongoing hate mail received by some metal scholars who have written about the genre's sexism (Spracklen 2016). That Vasan was prepared to be so assertive about it, in a time

where it was still unpopular to talk about 'sexism' (a state of affairs that is changing), was inspiring for fellow metal and gender scholars.

Sonia will be greatly missed by metal scholars, both those who met her and those who wanted to meet her. Her work will continue to influence and provide critical insight for up-and-coming and more established researchers alike.

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