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Special Issue of Metal Music Studies – Metal and Marginalization: Gender, Race, Class and Other Implications for Hard Rock and Heavy Metal

Dedicated to Sheila Whiteley, a formidable popular music scholar.

Metal and marginalization: Researching at the edges of exteriority

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The relationship between heavy metal and marginalization has been central to academic debates within metal music scholarship. Metal scholars such as Phillipov (2012), Walser (1993) and Weinstein (2000) have discussed how the musical genre continues to occupy a position that is culturally, academically and spatially marginalized. Yet, metal's marginality is woven around contradiction. As self-proclaimed 'outsiders', a rhetoric of inclusion is frequently mobilized to establish an oppositional relationship against the 'mainstream'. However, despite the significance of metal's discursive construction as an inclusive space outside of the mainstream, the symbolic boundaries of metal are strictly policed. Heavy metal's borders are performatively marked and reified in its categorizing terminology, in behavioural norms, through social relation and the organization of its spaces. This contributes towards the establishment of a dominant framework of a classed/gendered/sexualized/racialized identity, marking belonging to the 'imaginary community' (Lucas et al. 2011; Hill 2014) of metal. Within a culture that prides itself

on being transgressive and alternative to mainstream norms, internal practices of marginalization within metal act to preserve and (re)produce hegemonic power structures.

In regard to heavy metal research, gender remains a prominent analytical focus in examining practices of exclusion and marginalization. Embedded within these debates is the underlying acceptance that heavy metal is not just male-dominated but masculinist; it is a community with 'shared values, norms, and behaviours' that value hegemonic masculinity (Weinstein 2000: 104). Meanwhile, assertions that typical metal fans are male, white and working class (Walser 1993; Weinstein 2000) have been taken forward as unproblematic by some scholars (e.g. Gruzelier 2007), and, despite some critique, this archetypal fan still haunts metal scholarship and provides a number of problems for academic understandings of metal.

Aiming to expose metal's problematic ideas about gender, many researchers have explored the proliferation of sexism that results from the reification of masculinity in the genre. Walser kicked off with his discussion on the absence of women (1993), and more recent research has centred on the gendered spatial distribution at metal gigs (Hutcherson and Haenfler 2010; Krenke and McKay 2000), and the need for women to accept male-encoded norms of metal behaviour (Vasan 2011; Nordström and Herz 2013), media representations of women fans (Hill 2011), anti-feminine discourse (Overell 2011), continued gender segregation of creative roles (Dawes 2012; Hill 2013), the exclusion of women from social activities (Kahn-Harris 2007) and misogynistic imagery in artwork and lyrics (Kahn-Harris 2007; Overell 2011; Vasan 2011). Kahn-Harris (2007) argues that practices of exclusion within extreme metal are typically unspoken and subtle but remain powerful mechanisms that ensure minorities, such as women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities, have difficulty in obtaining high levels of involvement and visibility within metal. Of the practices that affect these minorities, those that impact women

have received attention and those that affect other minorities comparatively little (but see Dawes 2012; Lucas et al. 2011; Spracklen et al. 2014). The result is a richly developing vein of research into how gender operates in metal. Inequalities are not simply a list of “additions” but are multiply constitutive, complicated and complex (Taylor 2011). Moreover, metal identities do not exist in isolation; rather they are constituted by intersecting social formations and broader social and cultural relations. The process of constructing identity is never complete, and involves struggles and resistances as well as acceptance, pleasure and desire. A better understanding of how race, sexuality, age, forms of capital and class and other identity positions interact is badly needed in metal studies, and some accounts have begun to explore this area (Dawes 2012; Overell 2014). The work to address these issues has only just begun.

While such critiques and explorations of metal’s practices and ideologies are absolutely crucial for understanding the culture of the genre (and for pulling it towards gaining its currently only imagined equality [Brill 2008; Hill 2014]), only thinking about the ‘problem’ of gender, race, class, etc. constrains the types of questions we can ask (see also Phillipov 2012). This fundamentally misunderstands the multiple experiences of metal’s participants; it ignores the pleasures that may be found in marginality and overlooks everyday experiences in which intersecting subject positions and relations of power constitute marginality. It overlooks the productive and mutually dependent relation between the constitution of the limit and its ability to be transgressed, that what is perceived as marginal requires authentication by the mainstream to validate its outsider status (Lucas et al. 2011). Further, it leaves unasked questions of when metal experiences are not shaped by marginal positions. In what ways is metal not ‘masculinist’? What happens when the assumption that metal is straight, white, and male (and western) is challenged?

What new avenues for thinking about music, music participation, identity and power does this open up?

Some work is beginning to address these questions, to contest the monolithic portrayal of metal's participants, and to challenge the normalization of the straight, white, male metalhead that has been adopted from the work of early scholars (Weinstein in particular, but also Walser and, later, Kahn-Harris). The Society for Metal Music Studies has become a truly 'International' body (ISMMS) that is not only a testament to metal's global reach, but offers the potential of productively disrupting academia's Euro-centric, western-centric voice (Wallach et al. 2011). Ethnographic research of metal scenes in Malaysia, Puerto Rico and Kenya offers a different perspective to notions of marginalization by illustrating how experiences of everyday racial and religious discrimination actually serve to foster and sustain a sense of unity within localized metal communities (Ferrarese 2014; Knopke 2015; Varas-Díaz et al. 2014). However, Hecker's (2012) research on the Turkish metal scene highlights how there can be even greater constraints for female metal fans within Muslim societies, whereby many of the behaviours, practices and gestures (such as public displays of emotion, anger and drinking) are seen as unacceptable for women and hence incompatible with femininity.

Feminist metal scholars have illustrated that occupying a marginal position within metal opens up temporary spaces where gender norms, both mainstream and subcultural, are transgressed, negotiated, challenged and reconstituted (Hill 2013; Riches et al. 2014; Riches 2015; Vasan 2011). These accounts highlight how women's positioning within metal is neither permanent nor inactive. By examining women's participation in moshpit practices, Riches (2015) observed that female fans dynamically resisted and challenged their spatial and scenic marginality through transgressive bodily comportments. Similarly, Dawes (2012) suggests that

investigating the embodied and corporeal experiences of metal fandom through the ‘marginal’ body can move us beyond rigid understandings of female metal fandom, which views women’s engagement in male-dominated subcultures as an ‘either-or scenario’ (Krenske and McKay 2000; Walser 1993; Weinstein 2000). Shifting concerns to the ‘ambivalent temporalities’ of culture (an idea suggested by postcolonial scholar Bhabha [2004]) focuses on the everyday lived ‘present’ of identification, liberating identity from its position caught between the originary authority of history and the legitimizing narratives of collective destiny. Focusing on the notion of affect, Overell’s (2010) ethnographic work on grindcore scenes suggests that a sense of belonging, for both male and female metal fans, emerges through an embodied engagement with the music and intimate bodily encounters with other scene members. Furthermore, marginal scene members such as black women and queer metal fans resonate with the music because it expresses and embodies an exterior position that they themselves occupy within mainstream culture and the wider heavy metal scene (Clifford-Napoleone 2015; Dawes 2012). Heavy metal can therefore provide a means of survival and a pathway to imagine something better for the future. Can’t it?

It was with these questions and contradictions in mind that we organized the 1-day symposium *Metal and Marginalisation: Gender, Race, Class and Other Implications for Hard Rock and Metal* (<https://metalandmarginalisation.wordpress.com/>) in conjunction with ISMMS and the Centre for Women’s Studies at University of York in 2014. The day included scholars from around the world working in diverse disciplines and fields. The majority of papers focused on the relationship between metal and gender, with class being notably under-represented. The presentations showed that sexist and racist practices are not only damaging in themselves but also play a fundamental role in constructing what metal is perceived to be (see also Hill 2014).

They, along with homophobic and other discriminatory practices, work to reinforce and demarcate metal's boundaries so that it may retain its outsider status in contrast to mainstream cultural conventions. The papers also showed that engaging with metal music, the experience of community and the various ways that metal is represented offers the potential for transgression and freedom from broader societal constraints: in light of these perspectives, it is clear that understanding metal simply as 'masculinist' will not do. Such an assertion dramatically underestimates the heterogeneity of metal music, metal culture and metal participation. This special issue of *Metal Music Studies* furthers the work that focuses on the complexities of difference, identities, power and marginalization. As Walser argues, metal is 'one among many coherent but richly conflicted records of people's struggles to make sense of the contradictions they have inherited, the tensions that drive and limit their lives' (1993: 171). The existence of paradoxes and contradictions is central to this special issue, and we argue that grasping these nuances is crucial to understanding how peripheral metallers actively negotiate their many positions within an already marginalized music genre.

The special issue calls into question how much space metal creates for alternative forms of difference or otherness, and sheds light on how the tensions between individualistic and collective ideologies trouble metal's 'transgressive' ethos. The papers presented here are diverse in their theoretical applications, methodological approaches and research 'locales'. The authors engage with previous dialogues of marginality and 'otherness' within metal studies, while extending these discussions to other 'venues' such as UK festival sites, and virtual spaces such as YouTube, online forums and metal music videos. Berker and Schaap's article explores how online music participation offers new possibilities for women to subvert gender inequalities within metal by destabilizing the public (masculine) and private (feminine) binary. By focusing

on the production of extreme metal vocal covers on YouTube, their virtual ethnographic research illustrates that women's visibility and active engagement on YouTube work to foster a sense of belonging and subcultural recognition that is otherwise difficult to obtain in offline scene environments. Examining music videos is an under-represented area of study within metal music scholarship at present, and the work presented in this collection draws attention to the powerful contribution of visual practices in the aesthetic and ideological construction of metal. Wiebke Kartheus's paper focuses on how discourses of Islamophobia intersect with heavy metal's notions of masculinity and authenticity within Metallica and Lamb of God music videos. She suggests that larger social and cultural processes of discrimination and racism find expression through the subcultural production of metal music videos. Her article points to how representations of the racialized 'Other' in war-themed metal music videos contribute to the self-understanding and authentication of metal artists, hegemonic masculinity and whiteness.

Working alongside the contradictions of the post-feminist theory and heavy metal culture, Savigny and Sleight look to how UK metal festivals provide spaces of empowerment and constraint for female metal fans. They argue that heavy metal's marginality offers the potential to provide an escape from dominant and patriarchal structures while, on the other hand, women's empowerment within heavy metal continues to be more limited and contradictory in relation to their male peers. Processes of exclusion remain important mechanisms for the construction and celebration of identities, even in subgenres that are considered marginal to the broader extreme metal community, such as folk metal. Through the analysis of online discourses and interactions in folk metal forums, Karl Spracklen's article examines how folk metal subjectivities are constituted through the intersections of class, race and gender. He argues that, even though folk metal is not a part of the mainstream of modern heavy metal, it is a site that preserves and

normalizes hegemonic power structures and relations. In other words, the celebration of ‘folk’ within folk metal is a problematic ideology because it assumes a purity that depends on the exclusion and absence of women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals. This special issue of metal music studies aims to probe and push the disciplinary boundaries of the field. By transgressing the boundaries of academic activity and participation in heavy metal spaces, the work showcased here illustrates how metal studies is an unfolding field where intersecting differences are embodied, negotiated, reproduced and challenged.

We would like to thank the editors at Metal Music Studies for providing us a space for this special issue and express our gratitude to all contributors whose work continues to push and extend the boundaries of metal music scholarship. Finally, we declare our appreciation for all the presenters and participants at the Metal and Marginalisation symposium, whose exciting contributions inspired us with the need for this special issue.

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