Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Reconceptualising Hard Rock and Metal Fans as a Group: Imaginary Community

Rosemary Lucy Hill, Centre for Women's Studies, University of York

Abstract

This article sets out the case for a new framework within which to study hard rock and metal fans as a group. I argue that dominant frameworks in metal studies – subcultural theory and the concept of scene – are inadequate for understanding the experiences of women fans; the underlying gendered epistemology has resulted in a dismissal of women fans or, at best, a systematic reduction of their experiences. Utopic visions of hard rock and metal as a community, (as proposed at the Heavy Metal and Popular Culture conference in April 2013), do little to change this understanding, as they conceal the systematic discrimination that plays a crucial role in forming the specific experiences of women. I contend that a new framework is necessary that takes into account a wider spectrum of fandom and that addresses the feeling of togetherness that fans report, whilst also opening up the culture of the genre for a critique of its structures. I contend that my framework of imaginary community can bring new perspectives to studies of fans. The article is set within the context of debates about the inclusivity of metal, and in popular music studies about the usefulness of particular terms. I build upon the work of feminist popular music theorists, Cohen and McRobbie, to give a critique of masculine hegemony in stories about rock music; and upon the work of science fiction fan researchers and feminist critiques of community to argue that community is not a neutral term. I draw on Anderson's theorisation of the nation as an imagined community, extending it to develop the concept of 'imaginary community'. This concept enables the consideration of how women fans imagine themselves as part of a community without eliding the difficulties imposed by structural sexism, and brings the focus back to the pleasure in the music.

Keywords: gender, heavy metal, imaginary community, music fans, scene, subculture, women.

Introduction

This article sets out the case for a new framework within which to study hard rock and metal fans as a group. Whilst conducting my PhD research (in which I analysed the representations of women in *Kerrang!* magazine's letters pages and also interviewed British women fans) it

became apparent that dominant frameworks currently in use in metal studies – subcultural theory and the concept of scene – were inadequate for understanding the experiences of women fans. Over the last twenty years a number of frameworks that move away from subcultural theory have been proposed (neotribes by Bennett 1999; scenes by Straw 1991), but as Hesmondhalgh argues, none have proven particularly successful (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 22). I argue that the dominance of subcultural theory and (to a lesser extent) the concept of scene, and the use of a generic notion of 'fans' as frameworks for considering hard rock and metal fans has limited the scope of research; the underlying gendered epistemology of fandom has resulted in a dismissal of women fans or, at best, a systematic reduction of their experiences as fans (such as private engagements with the music, the representation of women fans as groupies, and fannish activities such as reading magazines and participating in online fora). The result is that women fans and female experiences are left out of the literature. Utopic visions of hard rock and metal as a community, (as proposed at the Heavy Metal and Popular Culture conference in April 2013), do little to change this understanding, as they conceal the systematic discrimination (such as that based on gender) that plays a crucial role in forming the specific experiences of women members. I contend that a new framework is necessary that takes into account a wider spectrum of fannish activities and that addresses the *feeling* of togetherness and shared passion that fans report, whilst also opening up the culture of the genre for a critique of its ideologically driven practices. I contend that my framework of imaginary community can bring a new perspective to studies of fans.

First, I examine the ways in which the use of the frameworks of subcultural theory and scene has lead to the experiences of women hard rock and metal fans being ignored or misrepresented. Then, drawing on feminist philosophies, I critique the concept of community, before turning to Anderson's concept of the imagined community (1991) to tease out how 'community' may yet be a useful concept. Finally I use *Kerrang!* magazine's letters pages as a case study to draw out the role that imagination plays in the formation of the hard rock and metal community.

The lack of research focusing on women rock fans

Subcultural theory has a history of being the dominant framework for studying music fans, key examples focus on identifiable groups, such as mods and rockers (Cohen 1972); skinheads (Clarke 1976); punk (Hebdige 1979, Leblanc 1999); and goth (Hodkinson 2002). Yet despite the centrality of music in drawing people together into these subcultures, the fannish passion for music is not a focus of the research. Indeed, a number of studies which are not about music fans also use subcultural theory (for example M. Geneva Murray's

discussion of roller derby [2012]), and Hesmondhalgh reminds us that subcultural theory was never about music anyway (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 31). Therefore the theory, in spite of its wide adoption in considering music fans, does not engage with music fandom *per se.*[i] In my view this is a serious failing. These studies tend to prioritize the sensational aspect of young people's fandom: clothing, meeting places, and how these comprise resistance to the parent culture. Furthermore, as McRobbie and Garber (1991) and McRobbie (1991) argue most subcultural studies focus on boys and omit girls and this is due in large part to the focus on the subculturalists' ex-domestic expressions. At the turn of the twenty-first century the theory seemed historic, yet it remains the dominant framework for studies of hard rock and metal music fans (see, amongst others, Gross 1990, Weinstein 2000, Purcell 2003, Araste 2010, Sinclair 2010, Vasan 2011). However, I am convinced that McRobbie and Garber's early (1978) criticisms remain relevant. Their arguments relate to the ways in which subcultural theory ignores the specificities of women's participation in marginal social groups and they make an important contribution to studies of girls' engagement with music subcultures. They argue that formative and influential researchers using subcultural theory (for example Hall and Jefferson 1975, Willis 1978, Hebdige 1979) theorize the activities of white working-class men in the UK, ignoring or trivialising the roles that women fans play within subcultures, and point out that subcultures themselves provide barriers to women's participation.

They assert that it is difficult to judge whether women are as absent from subcultures as research suggests, because existing research and media reports emphasize 'male membership, male focal concerns and masculine values' (McRobbie and Garber 1991: 4). Considering the 1950s teddy boy subculture, the authors posit that girls were less visible members because financial dependency and concerns about sexual reputations kept them off the streets and out of the cafés (McRobbie and Garber 1991: 5). Yet women *did* exist and were involved. McRobbie and Garber suggest that young women participate in subcultures in their homes: listening to music, reading magazines, wearing subcultural fashions, trying out make up and hair-styles and socialising in their bedrooms (McRobbie and Garber 1991: 5-6). These behaviours are different from those (acknowledged) behaviours of male subculturalists, and because they take place in the home they reduce women's visibility as subcultural members. This marks an important distinction between on-street and off-street behaviour and what McRobbie and Garber show is that subcultural theory itself is problematic: employing it as a framework for the study of music collectivities leaves half the population out, reifies particular forms of activity (those associated with men) and sidelines other (those associated with women).

The concept of scene has also been widely utilized for examinations of hard rock and metal fans. For example, Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) uses the concept to explore how extreme metal is experienced around the world; Karl Spracklen (2010) employs the term to group together black metal fans online. Striking in these studies is the way in which music-making, a key feature in Will Straw's (1991) definition of the term, is absent. When Rosemary Overell (2009) denotes the local group of grindcore musicians and fans in Melbourne a 'scene', there is some reference to music-making, but in the main the concept of scene as a way of examining musical practice is not really prominent in these studies. McRobbie and Garber's criticisms of subcultural theory are also applicable to the concept of scene in some ways, and Sara Cohen's 1997 critique of male dominance and sexism in the Liverpool indie music scene of the 1990s makes a number of the same points. The concept of scene focuses on activities that coalesce around public music venues and thereby it is more particularly about musicians and scene workers, although it does cover fans, to an extent. Typically the focus is neither on the music nor the fans, but on the relationships of scene members, primarily those involved in the production and promotion of the music, and the processes of making music. Thus the experiences of fans rather than musicians or scene workers are rendered less important. Like subcultural theory, the concept of scene retains the focus on public engagement with music, and this, I contend, is problematic. Cohen argues that such scenes are often male dominated for a number of reasons: men have greater access to money and time to devote to participating in a scene; women face obstacles to participation in scenes due to lack of disposable income, sexism and sexual harassment from male scene members, childcare commitments and the perceived safety implications of late nights in empty town centres (Cohen 1997: 20). In describing these difficulties Cohen is critical of the male dominance of the scene itself, rather than the concept of scene. Yet I judge that her critique offers valuable insight into why using the concept to consider fan experiences is inadequate.

Because subculture and scene rely upon public expressions of fandom, and, since men are able to move more freely outside the home, the two concepts privilege male fandom, leaving more private means of expressing fandom unconsidered. McRobbie and Garber argue that modes of being fans that are undertaken in private houses are more available to women, but the emphasis in work on music fans that uses subcultural theory or scene does not take this into account. Such work therefore structurally ignores ways of being a fan that are more open to women (McRobbie and Garber 1991: 11-14). Indeed, Deena Weinstein's very influential book *Heavy Metal: The Music and the Culture* (2000) is a key example. Weinstein acknowledges that she is describing only a portion of metal fans: young white working class men in the USA (Weinstein 2000: 98) and she has little to say about women fans. She tacitly acknowledges McRobbie and Garber's work, commenting that women fans enact their

fandom in their bedrooms (Weinstein 2000: 134), but she does not discuss such bedroom culture. I will discuss *Heavy Metal* further below, but note here that its subcultural framework has set the tone for much later work on hard rock and metal.

When I consider McRobbie and Garber's assertion of the importance of bedroom culture for young women, alongside my own experiences and those of my interviewees (for whom most music listening took place at home, in cars or on headphones: i.e. in intimate spaces), it is clear that private activities are more integral to a passionate engagement with music than has hitherto been theorized. This means that those who are able to participate fully in the public life of the subculture or the scene become the dominant representation of fans, although there is no overt definition of 'fan' which suggests it must be an outdoor or public activity. One of the few definitions of a fan in hard rock and metal literature comes from Rob Walser. Walser is not working within a framework of scene or subculture, yet his definition of a fan also relies in part on ex-domestic forms of fandom:

> The fans I surveyed claimed, on the average, to buy a new metal recording every week, even though many of them have little money. Heavy metal fans are loyal concertgoers, too. (Walser 1993: 17)

Although this definition retains the importance of public fan activities, it also begins to make a case for private activities (collecting records). However, those private activities are described in terms of consumption, and I argue that it is the passionate response to the music that makes a fan, rather than what they are able *do* in reference to it. My own definition of a fan is therefore somewhat different to Walser's and implicitly recognizes the importance of bedroom culture.

I define music fans as individuals who love music, who have strong emotional reactions to it, and for whom music is very important in their everyday lives. Often the passion is centred upon a particular musical genre and/or band. This is true of rock fans, and they often enjoy music from across the breadth of the genre, although often focusing on bands within one or two subgenres. Being a fan is about more than just owning one or two or even all albums by a band; it is not just about being a consumer. A fan may not own any records by the object of their fandom (although this is probably unusual). What a fan does have is an intense response to the music, an emotional attachment to it and, in some cases, to the idea of the artist (which may or may not focus on the musicians themselves). A fan may attend performances by the object of their fandom, or they may not. My definition, which I write from my own experience of being a fan and from reflecting on my interviewees' descriptions of their fandom, is quite removed from Walser's, and takes into account activities and emotions

which are hidden in research using subcultural theory and the concept of scene. The difference between the two definitions has an important impact on what is being studied and what is being left out, and it has gendered implications which mean male fans and a male model of fandom is the focus of a disproportionate amount of attention. This is a disadvantage not only for studies of women fans, but also for considerations of the personal experiences of all fans. Moreover it deters reflection upon the different experience that women and men have; it obscures the structural disadvantages that women face when participating in fannish activities.

Examples of the way in which women's experiences are omitted are in the work of Deena Weinstein (2000) and Natalie Purcell (2003). Walser is critical of Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: The Music and the Culture* (2000), arguing that she omits women's responses to metal (Walser, 1993: 23). But I do consider her book a woman's response to metal: her love of the genre is apparent throughout. However, her discussion of female fans is brief and she does not reflect upon her own position as a gendered fan. When women do appear it is within the constraints of a subcultural reading, thus they are at concerts and Weinstein's focus is upon clothing:

> Females who do not flaunt their femininity, that is, who dress in jeans and black T-shirts, and who even more importantly display a love of the music, are often welcomed and treated as equals at such events as concerts. Open hostility of various sorts is displayed toward females who do not conform to the dress and behaviour codes. Women who dress in "provocative" attire, such as miniskirts and high heels, are either denounced as sluts waiting to have sex with the band or are ogled as obnoxiously as they might be by the most chauvinistic construction workers. The distinction made by the metal subculture between women who dress and behave according to the masculine code and those who fit feminine stereotypes indicates that it is the culture of masculinity, not biological differences, that is of greatest significance. (Weinstein 1991: 105)

It seems to me that Weinstein uses the fact that male metal fans only discriminate against *femininity* as evidence that the 'subculture' is not sexist because sexism is based on 'biological differences'. She uses the different treatment of very feminine and less feminine women to argue, therefore, that sexism is absent, rather 'culture' is the grounds for discrimination. Weinstein does not problematize the culture's attitude towards femininity, nor is there deep analysis of what it is like to be a female fan of a genre that values masculinity and disdains femininity. Reading *Heavy Metal* leaves the impression of male fans at concerts and, exceptionally, women, who either aim to be 'one of the guys' or are visually

extraordinary and positioned by their sexual attractiveness. In this *Heavy Metal* does what McRobbie and Garber highlight in the studies of Willis, Fyvel and others: it presumes a male participant and positioning the author alongside those male participants.

Purcell's book *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* (2003) does not explicitly state that her research focuses on men (unlike Weinstein) and she does include some data from female interviewees. Yet she omits to consider the specificity of women's experiences as metal fans. Purcell draws on a psychoanalytic framework whilst using 'subculture' as her chief term of description. In her desire to reposition the subgenre as a positive cultural force, she does not contemplate the gender-specific problems that women fans encounter, although she hints at them in her epilogue. Here she reflects on her research experiences and notes the 'sexism' in the death metal 'community' (Purcell 2003: 187). More suggestively she states that, 'placing trust in the wrong persons and taking risks based on idealistic assumptions about other human beings landed me in more trouble than I care to discuss' (Purcell 2003: 193). Had she incorporated her experiences into the book we would have a different picture of death metal fandom from the glowing 'community' she portrays. As it is, Purcell positions her own experiences as just one of those things that could occur in any 'group, scene, or culture' (Purcell 2003: 193). Thus, as in Weinstein's account, a male fan experience is assumed as the norm, with women's experiences being sidelined, even in the face of the author's own experiences.

Whilst Weinstein and Purcell do not consider the specificity of women's participation in metal, Kahn-Harris's *Extreme Metal* (2007) does examine what it means for women to enjoy the genre. However, the assumption that the male experience (or rather an idealized version of the male experience) is the norm and again positions women's experiences as extraordinary. In using the framework of scene, experiences and activities outside the home in the public space of the concert, club and festival are the focus of his study. He first offers nuanced discussion of the causes of women's marginalisation (few role models, exclusion by male fans, pornographic images [Kahn-Harris 2007: 74], lyrics of sexual violence [Kahn-Harris 2007: 76], and sexism from other scene members [Kahn-Harris 2007: 160]. This creates a sense of the extreme metal scene as hostile to women, which goes some way to explaining why women are not involved in the scene in greater numbers. However, the assumption that it is a *male* scene is evident.

This is particularly noticeable in his discussion of the 'autonomy' of scene members. He argues that because women 'enter the scene' (Kahn-Harris 2007: 74) with groups of friends or partners rather than alone, they lack autonomy when compared to men. This raises the question of what he means by 'autonomy': it is implied that being with friends or a partner

limits personal freedom. He states that active participation in extreme metal does not depend on attendance at public events (such as concerts) and that it can be done from the home (Kahn-Harris 2007: 74), but when describing entrance to the scene he seems to be talking precisely about concert-going and not about the unspecified home-based activities. What, then, does it mean to 'enter' a 'scene' 'autonomously'? There is the implication that male scene members go to concerts on their own, rather than with friends or partners (although he does not offer any evidence)[ii]. If men do go to concerts alone more frequently than women do, then it is men's mode of entry to the scene which is positioned as the normal method. Furthermore autonomy seems to require that the individual not be 'defined by their sexuality' (Kahn-Harris 2007: 74), a position that is likely to be accessible to men, but less so to women. 'Autonomy' thereby presumes a male subject, and it is required in order to be a participant in the scene: women participants are therefore anomalous. His discussion of women fans, then, treats them as abnormalities rather than as full members of the scene. The latter position is available to men, and the archetype is drawn up with the male participant in mind.

As Stanley and Wise argue, just introducing women in to existing frameworks is not enough. It is important to 'take women seriously' (Stanley and Wise 1993: 18) and to give their experiences consideration. This is why just 'adding women in' to studies of music fans that rely upon subcultural theory or the concept of scene will not do. Even before starting, those frameworks diminish women fans' experiences and neglect those women whose primary fan activities occur in the privacy of their homes, cars or headphones. My own experiences, my reading of *Kerrang!* magazine, and my interviewees' comments signal that a framework is needed that can take into account private fan behaviours and which allows for the consideration of the different experiences of the genders (e.g. the impact of male-dominance and one-dimensional representations of women fans on women fans). Such a framework should enable clear-thinking and not be clouded by idealistic views as if the world of hard rock and metal is superior to other groups of fans or enthusiasts (we need to be critical). Nor should it be focused on the problematic elements of the genre to the neglect of the pleasures that such music presents to its fans. The beneficial aspect is equally as important as that which is detrimental.

The term 'community' has been utilized by some metal scholars to denote the unity of hard rock and metal fans. Most conspicuously this was via the roundtable entitled Heavy Metal and Community at the Heavy Metal and Popular Culture conference in Bowling Green, 2013. The naming and presence of the roundtable itself suggested that there is such a thing as a heavy metal community, but the panel did not define it. Indeed members of the panel

expressed a sense of community as something which exists outside the constraints and inequalities of mainstream society. This idealized perception of one's own group (most attendees were also hard rock and metal fans) is not unanticipated, but a more critical engagement with the concept of community itself is needed if it is to be useful. Work on science fiction fans becomes a valuable paradigm here, due to recognition of the personal aspects of fandom and the engagement with the fan-object. I begin by discussing the way in which researchers on science fiction fans have discussed the communities of fans before turning to feminist work on the conception of communities and theoretical work on the role of the imagination in constructing communities.

A new framework: imaginary community

'Community' is rarely applied to music fans, although the term 'musical community' is brought into play when describing music-making groups, as outlined by Will Straw in his theorisation of scenes (Straw 1991). Thus, a *musical* community does not extend to include fans. However, 'community' does have a precedence in studies of fans: the term 'fan community' is found in the work of Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) and Henry Jenkins (1992) regarding science fiction fans. For both it functions as a useful structure for discussing a diverse range of fan activities that do not only occur in public spaces. 'Community', therefore, can open up understandings of groups of fans to allow for other modes of being fans such as passionate engagement with the fan-object, communication with other fans, reading magazines or writing fan fiction. Significantly, the science fiction fan community discussed by the authors is female dominated. But although 'community' provides a way to go beyond existing frameworks that focus on the public, Bacon-Smith and Jenkins do not embark upon defining or critiquing their concept. At the Heavy Metal and Popular Culture conference in Bowling Green it became apparent that such a utopic assertion of hard rock and metal fans as a community was problematic and that such a concept was in desperate need of interrogation.

The term is not as straightforward as it might at first seem. Ferdinand Tönnies' theorisation of community – the *gemeinschaft* – as involving 'small-scale face-to-face relations' (Little 2002: 16) is the dominant theorisation in the 'social and political theorisation of community' (Little 2002: 17) and in the popular imagination. It is modelled against the association – *gesellschaft* – and in this oppositional relationship the idea of rural pre-industrial life based on caring selflessly for others is set against urban industrial lifestyles that are grounded in what can be gained from associating with others. This dualism places a higher value on the pre-industrial community and there are strongly idyllical overtones associated with it. However, Graham Day argues that this kind of idealistic pastoral existence was already passing when Tönnies was writing (1887), and his theory was grounded in research that celebrated folk cultures:

therefore Tönnies' empirical work is already biased as it affirms a particular lifestyle to the detriment of another (Day 2006: 7). Nostalgia for a 'golden age' is fundamental to theorisations of community: 'the expression bad *gemeinschaft* violates the meaning of the word' (Tönnies quoted in Day 2006: 14). An idealistic vision is therefore embedded within the concept of community.

Penny Weiss, Marilyn Friedman and Iris Marion Young argue that community has been theorized in distinction to individualism, in which individualism is part of a liberal ontology that presumes the self as 'whole unto itself, separated and bounded' (Young 1995: 237). In this opposition community is situated as preferable because the self is viewed as 'the product of an identity it shares with others' (Young 1995: 237). The communitarians,[iii] they argue, have relied heavily upon nostalgic visions of groups in which tradition holds great sway. These understandings of community deny difference (Young 1995: 239), ignore structural disadvantages and inequalities within the communities and, furthermore, any consideration of communities must include an understanding of the ways in which some groups are disadvantaged whilst others are privileged (Weiss 1995: 167). Friedman argues that traditional communities 'have harbored social roles and structures which have been highly oppressive for women' (Friedman 1989: 277) and that the nostalgic vision of the community does not take into account the exclusionary practices and the normalising traditions that make certain power relations appear natural and that normalize the exploitation of some community members. She suggests that the orthodox roles of the two sexes result in the exploitation of women, and that exploitation is naturalized via traditional ideologies of how that community should function. 'Tradition' is thus used to justify the structural disadvantage women face (Friedman 1995: 189). To theorize communities without considering the hierarchies within them is therefore problematic. Furthermore, difference is often not tolerated as, for the community to work, a sense of togetherness is vital and the community is ill-equipped to deal with dissimilarity.

At this point the term community sounds both promising, for it allows for considerations of a wider range of fannish activities, and disheartening, for it conceals the structural disadvantages that women and other minority groups face. Moreover, communities themselves may not exist at all (Day 2006: 14): the kinds of communities that Tönnies portrays are, Day argues, elusive and implausible. How then can the term for a potentially non-existent thing prove useful? As Pahl asks,

> If sociologists have exposed the myths and fallacies of the idea of community …
> [why] does a dead idea refuse to lie down? (Pahl quote in Day 2006: 22)

I argue that even if a 'real' community does not exist, there is evidence in both *Kerrang!*'s letters pages and in the words of my interviewees that a *sense* of a community exists amongst hard rock and metal fans. Between fans, even those who have never met and will never meet or even know of the other's *individual* existence, some sense of common feeling exists.

Moving away from 'community', a number of researchers working in the field of online fan communities have appropriated Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community to fill the gap. Anderson describes the 'community' as follows:

> It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 1991: 6)

The concept of the imagined community shifts the emphasis away from the question of whether communities exist or not, or what the qualities of communities might be, and places importance in the *feeling* of living alongside others. As Hills puts it, 'communities need to be approached not as real or imagined, but in terms of how they are imagined' (Hills 2001: 151). Thus the key significance lies in the power that the idea of living in a community holds for those who feel themselves to be members. In distinction to traditional conceptions of community, which are criticized for hiding inequalities, the imagined community of nation,

> Is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Anderson 1991: 7)

Moreover, inequalities are not hidden by the concept of imagined community, rather the way in which they are hidden by the power of the *ideal* of community is exposed. This *feeling* of being part of a community comes through the imagining of people 'consuming information simultaneously' (Hills 2001: 152), and Hills' example is of 'thousands of anonymous, unseen and unknown individuals […] watching the same television programme at the same time' (Hills 2001: 152). Key for Anderson, however, is 'the novel and the newspaper' (Anderson 1991: 25). The novel because it is structured around the idea of 'meanwhile' so that actions of different characters can be written as if they happen simultaneously (Anderson 1991: 25), and the newspaper because it recounts events where 'obviously most of them happen independently, without the actors being aware of each other or of what others are up to' (Anderson 1991: 33). Nevertheless the events are linked by date and by the reader imagining others reading of the same events on the same day in a 'mass ceremony':

> We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that. […] It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he [sic] performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the smallest notion. (Anderson 1991: 35)

Hills argues that the concept of an imagined community does not work for fans because it does not take into account the different 'coincidence' that unites them: in an imagined community 'temporality of information and consumption' (Hills 2001: 154) is the coincidence that unites individuals in a sense of community that leads to the idea of the nation, whereas for fans it is the emotional response to an object that brings individuals together (Hills 2001: 147). Hills' discussion of imagined community comes in the context of his research in online fan communities. To address the affective gap and to account for the particularities of time in the virtual world he is researching, Hills proposes the term 'community of imagination' which he describes as,

> A community which, rather than merely imagining itself as co-existent in clocked time, constitutes itself precisely through a common respect for a popular cultural representational space. (Hills 2001: 154)

The 'community of imagination' concept is explicitly designed for theorising online communities. However, this concept can be extended to the study of individual spaces: locating the nexus of the community in the affectivity of the object of fans' affections shifts conceptions of a community from the temporal to the spatial. This is promising for my purposes, but it does not entirely fit. First, metal fans do not communicate and perform their fandom through a single communicative space, rather there is an imagined relationship between people across a broad spectrum of media platforms. Many of the ways in which metal fans 'consume information' occur simultaneously: concert attendance enables people to experience their fandom together; magazines are read with a sense that others are reading the same news (fulfilling a similar role to that of newspapers in Anderson's theory); television channels such as Kerrang enable simultaneous viewing. Secondly, Hills' concept is about the 'relationships between individual fans and the text as object of fandom' (Hills 2001: 154), for metal fans the sense of community is not only about the objects of the fandom, but also about the relationships between fans. Thirdly, the community of imagination is a way to theorize the relationships of fans to the objects of their fandom, and therefore does not take into account the ways in which communities are structured and the cultures that develop. It does not allow for the consideration of power, tradition and inequality within the group.

Drawing on Hills' assertion of the need for the affective relationship to be considered as central, and retaining the idea of simultaneity that is key to Anderson's imagined community, I propose the term 'imaginary community'.[iv] The idea of a hard rock and metal community is a powerful concept for many fans of the genre. They imagine themselves as part of a community of fans who share their taste in music, their dress sense, their values and their attitude to non-fans. It is imagined, like Anderson's imagined community, as a communion of equals, but as separate from mainstream society. Mainstream society is believed to be unequal and discriminatory whilst the community of hard rock and heavy metal fans is thought to be more equal and tolerant. In drawing attention to the way it is *imagined* as living up to an ideal, the concept opens up the community to scrutiny of its power structures and relations and their impact on women fans' lives. The active form of the verb takes in the way in which the idea of the community is continually reproduced. 'Imaginary community' accepts the sense of community that people have, but does not question whether such a community 'really' exists. It acknowledges that this idea of a community is idealistic and nostalgic and exists in contradiction with the experiences of community members so that it portrays an ideal rather than a lived reality. The concept of the imaginary community therefore helps to achieve two things: (one) it highlights the way in which the community is only *thought of* as harmonious, and the way that its 'equality' harbours biases and gendered and raced values, thus opening up the space to consider power structure, hidden ideas and discriminatory practices; (two) it emphasizes the personal and phenomenological experience of being a fan thereby refocusing attention on fannish engagement with the music and on activities that occur in the private arenas of the home and the skull.

A case study of *Kerrang!* magazine's letters pages is useful here. My semiotic readings of the letters pages of June issues between 2000 and 2008 reveal that *Kerrang!* represents those involved in hard rock and metal as fans, musicians and other industry workers, as imagining themselves as part of a community. The community is imagined to be one of equals, in which equality is measured by similarity to the category of rock and/or metal fan. This can be seen in the contents of the published letters. The letters very often express a belief in the equality of all members of the community, regardless of role (i.e. whether they are a musician, fan or other industry worker), race, gender or other difference. It is telling that this belief is often expressed in the face of an incident that challenges that conviction. For example, a letter from 'Lisa of Nottingham' exposes the divergence between her understanding of the community and the reality of life for disabled hard rock and metal fans. She relates how she broke her ankle and had to use a wheelchair and, later, crutches. She still attended gigs, but was treated as an object of fun by other crowd members, subject to

physical abuse such as being sat on and pushed over. Lisa's letter expresses her shock at the behaviour of other fans:

> I think all the rock fans I met in these incidents are hypocrites. I thought you were supposed to see people for what they are – not what they look like. (Lisa 2001: 59)

Lisa's surprise signifies that she believed the hard rock and metal community to adhere to the value of not making value judgments based upon people's looks. In this case 'looks' is her disability. In branding her fellow rock fans 'hypocrites' she emphasizes that this belief in not judging on 'looks' (which could extend to include sex, race, age, and other visual signifiers of difference) prioritizes 'rock fan' as the central category of sameness. Letters that express similar challenges to the belief of a community of equals are numerous in *Kerrang!*. They challenge the magazine's sexism: for example, Emily berates *Kerrang!* for its coverage of the band Paramore. This American rock band is fronted by Hayley Williams, and Emily responds to an article which, she asserts, focused unfairly on Hayley's gender rather than the music of the band:

> In an industry that claims to be about equality, the article tends to focus on Hayley being a FEMALE asserting some kind of leadership! Shock freaking horror! (Emily 2007: 4)

Emily's use of capitals for 'female' and the expostulation 'shock freaking horror!' signify an ironic tone. The tone highlights the fact that it *ought* to be unsurprising – certainly not shocking – that a woman can lead a band: it should not be treated as something extraordinary. There is clearly a disparity between the article and Emily's perceptions of the industry which, she argues, 'claims to be about equality'. It is unclear which industry she refers to: the music industry in general, the hard rock and metal industry more particularly, the rock press…?[v] Or whether industry is the right word at all; I infer that she refers to the broader imaginary community. I wonder where she has seen this 'claim' about equality? Hard rock and metal and *Kerrang!* do not have a constitution or manifesto, but Emily has imbibed the sense of the community as one that supports equality, imagining it to be the real condition of hard rock and metal.

Letter writers also confront the suggestion of racism: 'Paleface Fishbone Soldier' asserts that the community is not racist, but that it also needs to work to exclude racism:

I'll admit straight away that I'm not particularly aware of the number of prominent metal musicians who are not white, as I've always tended to appreciate music aurally rather than visually.

But I can't recall seeing many – if any – rock and metal fans that were not white. Does this happen to just be the shows that I've attended, or what? I realize they're out there but they do seem to be in a minority. I recently read a football Fanzine sponsored by the Kick Racism Out Of Football campaign. In it, many black and Asian fans said they avoided football matches because they did not feel safe. In our big metal family I can't believe that's the case. Am I wrong? (Paleface Fishbone Soldier 2001: 58)

Paleface does two particular things that highlight how the idea of sameness based on appreciation for similar bands is translated into an imagined equality. The first is to assert (like the rock fans that Lisa brands 'hypocrites') that s/he enjoys music because of how it sounds rather than the look of the musicians (here 'visually' refers to skin colour); the second is to use a term with echoes of community: 'our big metal family'. Paleface is clearly invested in the idea of the community as one that treats all members equally in spite of the author's intuition that there may be problems that go unrecognized. The way in which letter writers express their shock when their experiences do not live up to their beliefs shows how powerful the imaginary is in creating a sense of community.

Conclusions

The use of subcultural theory and scene as research and analytical frameworks, both of which emphasize fan behaviours in public spaces (the gig, the concert, the club, the festival, the street, etc.) and therefore prioritize forms of fandom more open to men, means that women fans are often ignored or positioned as anomalies. This results in the assumption of particular kinds of fans and fannish activities that are based upon a model of male fans. It ignores the fact that the majority of the most crucial of music fans' behaviours – listening to music – occur in private (at home, in the car, on headphones) and it disregards other kinds of fannish activities that also centre around the home. The use of subcultural theory and scene as frameworks also means that gendered experiences of hard rock and metal fans are neglected. My definition of a fan alongside the framework of imaginary community takes into account the more personal and private aspects of fandom. Imaginary community extends our understanding of fandom as the sum of external expressions (i.e. going to concerts, wearing rock and metal fashions and other visible activities) towards a more intimate experience into which private activities such as listening to records at home/in the car/on headphones and reading music magazines can be incorporated. Those behaviours become a social activity

when understood as being carried out with other fans in mind. Furthermore, 'imaginary community' highlights the way in which a sense of a metal community as equal is ripe for interrogation as it enforces particular values and ideals. It therefore allows for close consideration of the ways in which the ideology of that community espouses specific gender relations and gendered readings of the music itself. It allows for the previously omitted subordinate position of women in hard rock and metal to be brought into focus, and it also brings the focus back to individuals' relationships with the music they enjoy enabling a consideration of fan pleasure.

References

Anderson, Benedict, (1991), *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.

Araste, Lii, (2010), 'Communication function in the Estonian metal subculture', in Rosemary Hill and Karl Spracklen (ed.), *Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal and Politics*, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 103-112.

Bacon-Smith, Camille, (1992), *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bennett, Andy, (1999), 'Subcultures or Neo-tribes? Rethinking the Relationship Between Youth, Style and Musical Taste', *Sociology*, 33: 3, pp. 599-617.

Clarke, John, (1976), 'The skinheads and the magical recovery of community', in eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (ed.), *Resistance Through Rituals*: *Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, London: Routledge, pp. 99-102.

Cohen, Sara, (1997), 'Men making a scene: rock music and the production of gender', in Sheila Whiteley (ed.), *Sexing The Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, London: Routledge, pp. 17-36.

Cohen, Stan, (1972), *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, London: MacGibbon and Kee.

Day, Graham, (2006), *Community and Everyday Life*, London and New York: Routledge.

Emily via email, (2007), Letter to the editor, *Kerrang!* 1163, 16 June.

Friedman, Marilyn, (1989), 'Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community', *Ethics*, 99: 2, pp. 275-290.

Gross, Robert L., (1990), 'Heavy Metal Music: A New Subculture in American Society', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 24:1, pp. 119-130.

Hall, Stuart, and Jefferson, T., eds., (1975), *Resistance Through Rituals,* London: Hutchinson and Co.

Hebdige, Dick, (1979), *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London: Methuen.

Hesmondhalgh, David, (2005), 'Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above', *Journal of Youth Studies* 8:1, pp.21-40.

Hills, Matt, (2001), 'Virtually out there: strategies, tactics and affective spaces in on-line fandom', in Sally Munt (ed.), *Technospaces: Inside the New Media,* London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, pp. 147-160.

Hodkinson, Paul, (2002), *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture: Dress, Body, Culture*, London: Berg.

Jenkins, Henry, (1992), *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture,* New York: Routledge.

Kahn-Harris, Keith, (2007), *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Oxford: Berg.

Leblanc, Lauraine, (1999), *Pretty In Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance In A Boys' Subculture*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Lisa, Nottingham (2001), Letter to the editor, *Kerrang!* 858, 23 June.

Little, Adrian, (2002), *The Politics of Community: Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lucas, Caroline, Deeks, M., and Spracklen, K., (2011), 'Grim Up North: Northern England, Northern Europe and Black Metal', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15:3, pp. 279-295.

McRobbie, Angela and Garber, J., (1991), 'Girls and subcultures', in Angela McRobbie (ed.), *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, pp. 1-15.

McRobbie, Angela, (1991), *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Murray, Megan Geneva, (2012), 'The Unladylike Ladies of Roller Derby?: How Spectators, Players and Derby Wives Do and Redo Gender and Heteronormativity in All-Female Roller Derby', Ph.D. thesis, York: University of York.

Overell, Rosemary, (2009), '"Brutal!" Affective belonging in Melbourne's grindcore scene', Paper presented at *Heavy Metal and Gender International Congress*, Cologne, 8-10 October.

Paleface Fishbone Soldier, Hampshire, (2001), Letter to the editor, *Kerrang!* 856, 9 June.

Purcell, Natalie, (2003), *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Sinclair, Gary, (2010), 'Heavy metal rituals and the civilising process', paper presented at *Third Global Conference: Heavy Fundametalisms. Can I Play With Madness? Metal, Dissonance, Madness and Alienation*, Prague, 8-10 November.

Spracklen, Karl, (2010), 'Gorgoroth's Gaahl's gay! Power, gender and the communicative discourse of the black metal scene, in Rosemary Hill and Karl Spracklen (ed.), *Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal and Politics*, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 89-102.

Stanley, Liz and Wise, S., (1993), *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*, London: Routledge.

Straw, Will, (1991), 'Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music', *Cultural Studies*, 5:3, pp. 368-388.

Vasan, Sonia, (2011), 'The Price of Rebellion: Gender Boundaries in the Death Metal Scene', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15:3, pp. 333-350.

Walser, Robert, (1993), *Running With The Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Weinstein, Deena, (2000), *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*, New York: Da Capo Press.

Weiss, Penny, (1995), 'Feminism and communitarianism: comparing critiques of liberalism', in Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Friedman (ed.), *Feminism and Community*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 161-186.

Willis, Paul E., (1978), *Profane Culture,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Young, Iris Marion, (1995), 'The ideal of community and the politics of difference', in Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Friedman (ed.), *Feminism and Community*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 233-258.

---

[i] There are exceptions such as Paul Willis' study of biker boys (1978).

[ii] Certainly most men I know still attend concerts with friends, even if this means meeting them at the venue rather than travelling together.

[iii] Some of the communitarians they discuss are Michael Sandel, Alasdair McIntyre and Benjamin Barber.

[iv] The way in which I use 'imaginary' here is not quite the same as the way in which Lacan uses the term. I use 'imaginary' to denote the creative act of thinking about the abstract world of other metal fans, literally how fans imagine themselves to be part of a community, not imaginary in the Lacanian sense of the individual's narcissistic self-imaging.

I first presented my work on the imaginary community at the Subcultures, Pop Music and Social Change symposium at London Metropolitan University, 15th-16th September 2011, thinking I was working on the concept alone. However, that month Caroline Lucas, Mark Deeks and Karl Spracklen used the same term in the special Metal Studies issue of the *Journal for Cultural Research* . Lucas et al draw on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) and Anthony P. Cohen (1985), who both focus on the ways in which subjects are created collectively with others. For Lucas et al, imaginary community 'may be contingent with particular localities, but whose membership is bound only by symbolic boundaries, tacit knowledge and shared meanings' (Lucas et al 2011, 281). It emphasizes the symbolic rather than the actual membership and construction of the group, and suggests that the views and meanings of the group are not always considered openly. In my theorisation, the delegation of the term 'imaginary' to the community allows the hierarchies and power relations implied in this 'tacit knowledge' to be laid bare for critique. In my analysis of the myths generated by the metal magazine *Kerrang!* the way in

which the imaginary community works to protect the status quo is exposed: the values that seem to be held by the community are demonstrably only imagined to exist rather than actually doing so.

[v] It is difficult to think of the music industry or music press publishing as being 'about equality'; these industries are about making money, not about resolving problems of inequality.

Biography

Rosemary Lucy Hill has submitted her PhD thesis in the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. Her research focuses on women hard rock and heavy metal fans' experiences of fandom and community. She has contributed articles on the ideology of metal and the moral panic around emo to the *Journal for Cultural Research* and the Music, Metal and Politics series, and on the topic of subcultural theory to the BBC Radio 4 discussion programme *Thinking Allowed*.