

## **Heavy metal, gender and sexuality: interdisciplinary approaches**

FLORIAN HEESCH AND NIALL SCOTT

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Heavy metal has a reputation for hypermasculinity, violence against women, male dominance and exclusivity. How far is this reputation justified? *Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality* places that question under the microscope, collecting together essays showcasing the ongoing research that interrogates this outrageous genre. The book began life at one of the first major conferences on heavy metal in 2009, the Metal and Gender International Congress in Cologne. It therefore presents an interdisciplinary and transnational snapshot of research, proving that metal is an intriguing subject for gender analysis, and that the scholarship in the field is vibrant and various. Some chapters present a picture of the thinking on metal in 2009, others make more substantial interjections into ongoing debates. Three main themes drive the book's investigation: (one) masculinity/ies; (two) challenging orthodoxies; and (three) women's role in metal, and sexism.

A number of chapters in the book focus on masculinity/ies in metal: e.g. Sarah Gerk's analysis of the meaning of Detroit for Alice Cooper, and Mollie Ables' discussion of Mötley Crüe's use of typical 'masculine' behaviours in generating an aura of authenticity. Some of the chapters approach masculinity in a fairly uncritical way, using the concept as if it were a straightforward collection of attributes. Fortunately, Amber Clifford-Napoleone's chapter, 'Metal, Masculinity and the Queer Subject', starts from the Butlerian position that masculinity is constituted only through its performance. This is exciting as it immediately refutes any attempt to understand masculinity as a set of attributes, or as attached only to

‘male’ bodies. It is a brilliant starting point for understanding metal, particularly when it comes to taking irony into account, as Heesch and Scott in the introduction argue needs to happen. Building on this queer framework, metal is much better understood, Clifford-Napoleone insists, as a many-layered scene in which different marginalised identities – ‘metal’, ‘gay’ - can be layered together. Within these layers there is a space in which queerness exists, a ‘queerscape’. Thinking about the genre in this way enables us to understand the genre’s multitudinous meanings for different fans and musicians. Clifford-Napoleone therefore outlines a new theoretical approach to metal which provides scholars with a glimpse of a new avenue to pursue, one which starts from the position that metal is polysemic and unreduceable to its media stereotype.

Throughout the book metal orthodoxies are questioned and found wanting. This occurs in relation to the idea that the genre represents an idealised white working-class masculinity (Thorsten Hindrichs on the significance of Body Count’s challenge to white culture); that masculinity has a well-defined relationship with power (Niall’s Scott’s riposte to Walser (1993), although I would disagree and argue for Scott to engage more closely with the scholarship on women’s participation, and barriers to it), for instance. Coming back to the central question of the book, Sarah Chaker’s chapter asks ‘What is “male” about black and death metal music?’ (147). Drawing on interviews with festival goers, she takes on gendered ideas of value, conjectures of different tastes between women and men fans, and fans’ instrument playing. In doing so she provides very useful empirical data as well as countering gendered assumptions about the genre. In particular she finds that women and men use only slightly different language to describe what they get from death metal and black metal music and so are ‘hardly distinguishable’ (158) – disputing the idea that women are more inclined

towards softer or more harmonic music (Walser, 1993; Kahn-Harris, 2007). In a refreshingly different perspective, Chaker posits that socialisation is a key part of understanding gender in metal. Thus Chaker provides good evidence for the predominance of masculinity in metal, but also how wider practices of gender socialisation are at play when it comes to the devaluing of femininity and the lack of women on the stage. This chapter is a very welcome addition to existing work on gender and metal fans.

The 'Interlude' – in which German metal singers Angela Gossow, Doro Pesch, Britta Görtz and Sabina Classen discuss sexism, finding space as performers, writing practices, aggression, violence and female role models – shifts the book's focus to a discussion of women's place in metal and the barriers to participation. This theme is taken up by Chaker and also by Andy R. Brown in his chapter on media representations of women musicians and female fan responses. Two chapters on women and violence stand out for me: Marcus Erbe's chapter on deathcore focuses (sometimes too viscerally) on violence against women (VAW) in the lyrics and music videos of Emmure and Carnifex. He discusses how the bands narrate the portrayals of violence as being individual responses to getting hurt, rather than part of a genre discourse in which VAW could be seen to be characteristic. I'm not very convinced by Erbe's argument that Maris the Great's parody of the violence can be read as gender bending; a stronger conclusion that returns to how VAW is a vital symbol within the genre, and asks questions of how it fits in with male frustration would have given the chapter more depth. On the other hand, Luc Bellemare's chapter on Tori Amos's cover of Slayer's 'Raining Blood' considers how metal can be used to challenge patriarchal violence. In Amos's cover the central image of the song becomes a giant sky borne vagina pouring menstrual blood down on women's abusers. What Bellemare doesn't discuss is what Amos's reimagining of

'Raining Blood' does to metal: it challenges assumptions about metal and violence as suitably masculine topics, by revealing how violence can be both a apposite feminist topic (VAW) and an apt response to male violence (the vagina raining blood). In Amos's song, metal's violence is the perfect vehicle for feminist anger. This is an exciting prospect that is prompted by, rather than apparent in, Bellemare's analysis. That both of these chapters conclude prematurely, begs questions of what does it take to see the world of gender relations differently? Here a more specifically feminist standpoint would likely have been valuable.

*Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality* is a book of contrasts: there are chapters that exhibit too little critical gender and sexuality theory; there are chapters which inspire the reader to fresh perspectives on existing ideas; and there are chapters, such as that by Clifford-Napoleone, which change understandings of what gender within a metal context means to people and what metal means. The book makes visible areas where more research is needed: on metal's meanings for male fans and musicians, on how femininity works within metal, on how race and whiteness intersect with gender, and feminist perspectives on the violence of metal. So how far is metal's reputation for hypermasculinity, violence against women, male dominance and exclusivity justified? Pretty far. And this is exactly what makes the genre such a fascinating and rich topic of investigation.

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