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WHEN LOVE AND CRITIQUE COLLIDE[1]:
METHODOLOGY, ONTOLOGY, FANDOM AND STANDPOINT IN METAL RESEARCH[2]

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INTRODUCTION

Metal studies is now into its teenage years. It has been shaped by different fields of academic study, different ideas of how research should be done, varying ideas about the kinds of questions we should be asking and even, and importantly, varying ideas of what metal *is* and what counts as metal. In this article, I open up discussion about methodology and ontology in metal studies. This is a vital discussion because it goes to the heart of what we can say about metal. My aim is to prick the consciences of metal scholars in order to inspire closer examination of our standpoints as researchers. I argue that as metal scholars we are often researching the music that we love, and this can mean that we take a defensive position. Because of this, we need to be especially attentive to how our fan positions may blind us to discussing difficult aspects of our culture such as vicious misogyny and banal nationalism.

1 This title echoes the Def Leppard title »When Love and Hate Collide«, a song in which the protagonist pesters his ex-lover over the phone and presents it as if it is a fair fight.

2 This article is a slightly updated version of the article of the same name published in Metal Music Studies 7 (2), 197-210 (2021), with permission from the editor. The change has been made to include a reference more specifically to work on violence against women in music.

In summer 2019, I finished giving a conference paper in tears. I was at the ISMMS conference in Nantes. The paper was about representations of sexual violence in mainstream rock and metal songs. In the paper, written with Heather Savigny and Daisy Richards, we argued that taking a feminist perspective enabled us to see the grey areas of sexual interaction that add up to sexual violence as a continuum. In general, it was well-received. I got some very helpful feedback. I was ready for the interrogation to be over!

Then a woman said, »can I ask you a personal question? How are you coping with doing this research?«. At which point I said, »I don't think I am coping«. I spoke about the weight of representations in the research and how they add up and then I was crying and I left the room in tears. I do not think I could have made a more powerful argument.

It was very upsetting. The topic of my research for the last two years – sexual violence at live music events, sexual violence in rock and metal – had been very upsetting.

STUDYING THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF POPULAR MUSIC

Studies of popular music and metal have tended towards examining the benefits of the music, identify formation, collective identity, political resistance. But this does not encompass the range of ways in which music plays a part in our lives. Strong and Rush (2018) argue that popular music studies needs to take violence against women seriously rather than brush it under the carpet. They argue that this has happened in part because scholars do not wish to contemplate the negative dimensions of favoured artists, and in part because popular music studies has focused on the beneficial aspects of music in order to gain legitimacy as an area of academic study. When it comes to metal, defending our much-loved, but much maligned music has been all too prevalent. I ask, is our love of the music we study getting in the way of being able to see the music and its culture from other perspectives? I say, yes. It is.

Doing this kind of work to explore the negative aspects of the music we love is not easy. It is very hard to look into the face of that which we know to be damaging. We do not want to encounter it. Many of us are privileged enough that we can switch off from nasty representations. We can turn the song off, skip it or not listen in the first place. Others of us are so privileged that we do not have to think about what we are listening to in a way that

makes us *feel* it. Maybe that is because we have never experienced such violence in our lives, or the lives of our friends and families. For me, listening to sexually violent songs is always about feeling it – and it feels horrible. It brings me out in a sweat and sends my stomach into nauseous cramps. It feels written on my body. Speaking about it makes me feel intensely vulnerable.

This matters.

It is much better for us – our mental health – to examine positive representations, like queer songs and feminist responses. But looking into the evil heart of the music we love is important work.

INSIDERS: RESPONSIBILITIES AND BENEFITS

As we work in the field of metal studies, metal scholars come from a variety of disciplines within which different methodologies hold sway. We cannot therefore talk about a »metal method«, and indeed it would not make sense to do so when even the foci of what we study differ: musical texts and performances, films and books, social media discourses, audiences, scenes and subcultures, musicians and those working in the industry, etc.

But something we do nearly all of us have in common is that we study what we love: we are fans of metal. As Weinstein (2016) notes, this sets us aside from the behaviouralist psychologists who try to understand the impact of metal on listeners from a position outside metal culture. Those kinds of studies were a response to the moral panic about heavy metal in the mid-1980s. Subsequently there has been a counter-response from people like Deena Weinstein ([1991] 2000) and Nathalie Purcell (2003), whose books set out to rebut the arguments of those instrumental in the moral panic.

So, much of the work on metal is being done by insiders – we are fans and this gives us particular viewpoints. It enables us to understand nuances, ironies and subtleties in the music and the culture. It enables us to reach groups of people that it may otherwise be hard to reach, or that may be suspicious of the academy. It helps us to understand what our participants mean when they talk to us about their lives in music.

But it can mean that we are unwilling to turn our eyes to those aspects, which are difficult.

I remember being at the *Second Heavy Fundametalisms Conference* in Salzburg in 2009. Duygu Yildrim presented research on the sexisms appar-

ent in many metal songs. Alice Cooper's »Poison« came in for specific criticism, I remember. I found her work to be convincing and attentive to the songs« subtleties. But in the questions, the first comment, which came from a man who was also a musician in the genre, was that she had focused only on the negative and was ignoring the songs that offered a riposte to such sexist portrayals. And he was angry. He was defensive. He was wrong. He was ignoring that she had a particular research question, which required deep analysis of these particular representations of gender relations. She was not seeking out the counter-discourses. That is another (and probably more uplifting) research project.

As metal scholars and fans we have a double responsibility:

To our culture:

1. We have a sense of responsibility to our culture to protect what we love – as can be seen in the work of Weinstein.
2. We have a desire to celebrate the positive aspects, especially in the face of attacks – and I think my book about gender and metal has some element of this when I consider how sexism is experienced.
3. We want to do justice to the people involved in our research by listening carefully to what they have to say and representing them accurately – even more important and also precarious when those people are our friends.

And we have a responsibility to our academic credentials:

1. We need to take a critical eye – as Heather Savigny and Julian Schaap (2018) argue, we need to be rigorously academic in our approach or risk bringing the field of study into disrepute. We need to go beyond fan writing and to take a critical eye to what we are looking at.
2. We need to ask difficult questions, which we ourselves find challenging and maybe even upsetting.
3. We need to consider what our fandoms actually prevent us from understanding, what do they obscure, for instance, what is the ideology of the fandom?
4. And how does metal fit in with the more dominant ideologies of our age (Meehan 2000)?

In his work on goth, Paul Hodkinson (2005) argues strenuously for the value of insider research. As a goth himself, he explains how clothing, speech and behaviour (e.g. dance style) were all important in projecting himself as an insider. Being an insider presents some big advantages for studying youth

cultures he argues: it greatly helps in gaining access to participants who may be suspicious of academics, and it can enable the researcher to assess theory from a different perspective to the dominant academic one as we bring our own experience to bear on it.

Yet there are things that we need to be aware of:

- We need to take care not to assume that we understand what the participant is saying – and get them to explain further.
- There is a serious risk of identifying too much with the subculture and therefore carrying over its ideologies without critical examination and not critically addressing what participants say:

> *there may be a danger that insider researchers are unable to disconnect themselves from group ideologies or that, as a result of a sense of loyalty, they begin to take on the role of what Bennett terms »subcultural spokesperson«, rather than that of critical analyst. (Hodkinson 2005: 145)*

Ultimately, then, being an insider is not the same as being an insider researcher: to be the latter requires reflexivity and a willingness to ask challenging questions of the subculture. Being an insider brings particular benefits, and in some ways, that might be a privileged perspective. But it is *not* a privileged perspective by default.

There are also risks of being an insider researcher (not just an insider). When it comes to metal scholarship, how many of us are actually doing that hard critical work, as Savigny and Schaap argue we need to be doing? How many of us are going beyond our position as insiders towards being reflexive and critical? In fact, might we even perceive a risk in doing so?

Metal studies is a fledgling field. As I and others have noted, this field is still being shaped by the moral panic about metal and a need to defend it from claims that the genre is damaging to listeners. Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* ([1991] 2000), the quintessential defence of the genre, is cited in practically every article about metal by metal scholars since it was published. But how often is the book critically evaluated? Pretty rarely, I would say. Much of what is published treats the book as a source of truth, and yet, as Rob Walser argues, there is plenty in *Heavy Metal* to ask questions of, not least that the book is more descriptive than analytic. Here's what Walser has to say:

> *Though her book is nothing if not an impassioned defense of heavy metal, Weinstein, as a sociologist, must aspire to »objectivity«, and she even disingenuously claims not to be joining in debates over whether metal is good or bad. Weinstein's attempt to efface her own*

> *participation in heavy metal (she has long been a fan) results in a particularly strange gap in the book's coverage, for she virtually ignores women's responses to heavy metal. (Walser 1993: 23)*
>
> *Her stance hampers her social analysis seriously, for she rarely moves beyond descriptions of the pleasures of metal – musical ecstasy, pride in subcultural allegiance, male bonding – toward placing the activities of fans in the political contexts that make such pleasures possible. (Walser 1993: 24)*

Digioia and Helfrich's (2018) recent article critiquing Weinstein's later work is something of an own goal, in that their own methodology omits to consider *Heavy Metal*. But the point that both they and Walser make, that a consideration of how women fare within metal is needed, is absolutely on the money. Digioia and Helfrich's article is a brave, but unusual intervention.

But perhaps there is a sense that when we come together at conferences, or in the journal, that we do not want to »rock the boat'. I would say that metal studies has a pretty strong sense of community. Here we take each other's metal scholarship seriously, something that may not necessarily be happening in other areas of academic lives (e.g. our own departments or institutions). What then if we come along to a conference and find ourselves presenting unpopular work? Like the woman at the previous Salzburg conference. I have not encountered her at other conferences or seen her work elsewhere. Did she feel that the reception she received was too much?

As I ask difficult questions about gender, I feel lucky to have been supported in my work by lots of brilliant metal scholars. Perhaps I could have been more challenging? In my article, »Metal and sexism« (2018), I think I could. In the article, I argue that it is important to listen to what women say about experiences of sexism in metal. But here I found a contradiction: my women participants told me examples of the sexism they faced and also argued that metal was less sexist than »the mainstream«. Whilst I would not say that I took this at face value, my later research around sexual violence revealed something to me, which I did not know at the time: that it is quite common for women to regard the group they are part of as less problematic than outside. This critical perspective changes my conclusion. In the article I concluded that whilst still undoubtedly a genre built upon sexism, metal offers some respite from sexism by ignoring gender. I do not think that is *completely* wrong, but I do question my own acceptance that metal is different to the mainstream in this respect. Actually the women I spoke to were using idealized concepts of the mainstream and of metal – this is not evidence that metal is less sexist, but rather that metal is *perceived* as less sexist. Had

I made one of the mistakes Hodkinson mentions – had I identified too closely with my participants? In saying »metal is less sexist than the mainstream«, as I do in the article, am I not also then telling metal scholars who are also metal fans something that they want to hear? Important questions to reflect on, that keep pricking my conscience.

If I was wrong about metal and sexism then, what is the impact of this? One of the important questions to ask as fans and metal scholars is, how can we use our insider position and knowledge for good, or to make metal better? And better for whom and in what ways? When we protect metal, what are we actually protecting? I want to draw attention in particular to work by Catherine Hoad (2015) here. Hoad argues, in distinction to Weinstein ([1991] 2000), that the whiteness of metal is not just down to cultural groupings, but plays a role in nationalism. The expression of whiteness is different in differing local settings, yet consistently asserts the superiority of whiteness and displacement of indigenous and immigrant culture. Hoad uses three case studies: Norwegian black metal, Afrikaans metal and Australian metal. She argues that for each of these, the whiteness is mobilized in different ways:

- In Norway, bands use medieval songs and instruments to make a claim for their indigeneity, which is a White indigeneity that extrudes any immigration (she calls this »monstrous nationalism« [Hoad 2015: 18]).
- Afrikaans bands sing in Afrikaans and make music for Afrikaners. They use some indigenous motifs (e.g. the band name Uhuru), but this is tokenistic (»resistant nationalism« [Hoad 2015: 18]).
- In Australia particular versions of working class masculinity are celebrated and treated as ordinary (»banal nationalism« [Hoad 2015: 18])

Hoad argues that it is imperative that researchers be attentive to how whiteness is working in metal, or risk reinforcing White power:

> *Approaches to heavy metal cultures that allow whiteness to be represented as unremarkable, and hence ignore the infrastructural power of whiteness, have facilitated the discursive and material reiteration of racial difference and hierarchies within scenes. (Hoad 2015: 19)*

Metal is not essentially White, but she argues that, »understandings of its aesthetics, practices and cultures continue to be steeped in white hegemony« (Hoad 2015: 20). For example, the rejection of a blues origin for metal. Thus when we talk about »metal« we need to start interrogating what we mean by 'metal', and we need to reflect on how what are ostensibly aesthetic judgements are predicated on ideological positions.

ONTOLOGY: WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT METAL

I want to ask what I think are a crucial questions about metal studies: who is defining metal in their work? How are we defining it? Are we thinking about what the definition means and how it shapes the work we do? What are we including and what are we excluding? What are the ideological assumptions underpinning this? How do our own unexamined positions as fans and our own aesthetic judgements influence our research decisions? Are we thinking about how our own fan positions shape our decisions about the ontology of metal?

Matt Hills (2007) argues that our aesthetic judgements about the media object of our study are implicit through the texts and fan groups we choose to study. Thus some texts/groups become canonized. Hills calls this the production of »academic distinction« (Hills 2007: 61). I argue that the lack of definition and discussion of »heavy metal« and subgenre names has implications for what we can know. Brown writes that there has been »a shift in research interest towards extreme metal« (2011: 220). What does this tell us? Why is there a trend towards studying the extreme end of metal? Certainly both Walser and Weinstein were very much interested in the wildly popular mainstream of metal in the 1980s. Is it that the extreme inspires more intriguing research questions than the popular? Is it to do with the changes in what counts as metal? So that if it is mainstream it does not, by definition, count? Is it that metal scholars want to look cool in front of other metal scholars? Is it a fan discourse of »I'm more metal than thou« infecting our research objects?

Big interesting questions! However, they are about more than just genre.

To pick up on Hoad's articulation of the banal whiteness of most metal, how do we interpret the lack of credibility of nu metal within metal studies? The nu metal subgenre was extremely popular and acknowledged to be the saviour of metal (Darby 2001) after Kurt Cobain killed it in the early 1990s (Hunter 2004), at least in the United Kingdom. Yet it has been a source of hilarity at all the metal conferences I have been to. Spracklen suggests that the omission from metal-archives.com of nu metal, and also black metal band Zeal & Ardor, may be a sign of »instrumental whiteness at work«, due to that music being »obviously influenced by African-American pop music« (2020: 180). We could and should investigate within ourselves whether our

unwillingness to take nu metal as an object of study seriously is also a result of the instrumental whiteness of most metal scholars. And we must be prepared to speak up to challenge any moments in which a critical discussion of race, racism and White privilege is about to be sidelined. To lose this analysis is to have a more meagre metal studies, and it risks demeaning metal scholars of colour, reducing their research. To leave this work only to scholars of colour is to put them in jeopardy of losing their place within any »community« of metal scholars we may have (Dawes 2015).

In my work on the positioning of emo as »mainstream« (Hill 2011), I have written about how gender plays an important role in the delineation of genre. The presence of women fans of a genre is enough for a subgenre to be regarded as »mainstream«. Meanwhile, Charlene Benard (2019) argues that the presence of a woman in a band is enough for a genre name to be attached, regardless of the sound of the band. Hutcherson and Haenfler (2010) use evidence from lyrics, clothing and talking to people at gigs to argue that the work of doing gender, in particular doing masculinity, plays a formative part in what counts as extreme metal. Is there, then, a worrying trend towards studying a version of metal, which is ideologically opposed to the feminine in the first place?

Now, there is some amazing work on metal and gender, e.g. Amber Clifford-Napoleone's (2015) work on queer and metal, Sonia Vasan's (2010, 2011, 2016) work on death metal and women fans, Jasmine Shadrack's (2021) autoethnography of surviving domestic violence through black metal, for instance. And yet there is still work being undertaken on the topic of »gender«, which does not take a particularly thoughtful approach to how gender is theorized or what it means to study »gender« at all. Just as we need to deeply consider what we mean by »metal«, we need an approach to an ontology of gender in metal that enables us to ask those difficult questions about metal.

CRITIQUING GENDER ONTOLOGY

At the Nantes conference, Christophe Guibert (2019) presented work using surveys with people going to festivals. The main question was why do women go to metal festivals (well, one festival, Hellfest, in particular)? The presentation was framed in terms of the proportion of people that liked metal music and this was split by gender. This was then compared to the number of people by gender that went to the festival. And the number of women who went to the festival was lower than the number of women who

liked the music. Their main question was why do women go to the festival? And so it seemed very curious to me as to why they had asked the question: why do women go to the festival? When clearly it was the case that women were choosing *not* to go to the festival. So why do women not go to the festival? We do not know. I think I can probably tell you why women would go to a music festival: to listen to music; to see favourite bands; to hang out with their friends. I feel pretty confident that these are some of the same reasons that men would give, and that there is no difference in the main reasons people go to festivals. However, in asking the question 'why do women go to the festival', what the researcher had not done was think about what they were actually assuming about the festival and the genre of metal.

What the researcher was assuming was that metal is music for men. If women like metal then they are extraordinary. Now this is not the first time that this position has been raised. Sonia Vasan (2011) also asked the question, why do women like death metal? But when Sonia Vasan talked about this problem, she laid out the grounds for metal being misogynistic and she had good examples from death metal music and culture for the extreme violence that is sometimes directed towards women. In this sense, there is a very good question to ask: why one would listen to music in which your own gender is presented as being violated.

This was not the position that the researcher asking the question about festivals was coming from. In fact their first point was to list a lot of socially constructed ideas about what women are: gender stereotypes. Ontologically then, the researcher was on shaky ground: they assumed that one can talk about gender with nothing more than so-called »common sense« ideas of the everyday, as if that tells us everything we need to know about what gender is. But we know it is these »common sense« ideas of everyday gender difference that get in the way of equality projects like feminism and are used as part of a backlash to assert that biological difference should determine our social lives (even when the biological differences are very tiny, if they are there at all [Fausto-Sterling 2002; Fine 2010]).

Is this example I want to highlight how we can ask research questions in good faith, but actually those questions themselves reveal our own assumptions. In this case, it is the inadequately considered ontologies of both gender and metal, neither of which help us to understand metal, festivals or gender in the context of heavy metal or metal in the context of gender. And in fact, as is the case with this example, the research itself can put back any aims we might have to better understand how we might improve access to music for women.

If that is indeed our aim. And if we are ideologically invested in extreme metal as fans and this slides through unquestioned into our work, then I have to ask, do we really give a shit about women? About people of colour in European and anglophone contexts? About non-western expressions of metal? About LGBTQ people? Or are we just defending the genre for what it is?

So. How do we move on from this?

CALLS FOR RIGOUR

In a previous issue of *Metal Music Studies*, two articles made calls for greater theoretical rigour in studying heavy metal. In addition to the aforementioned article by Savigny and Schaap (2018), Brown (2018) argues that metal scholars need to be more reflexive about their own *classed* position. He posits that we need to know the history of cultural studies to understand why it matters when we bring metal into the academy and try to give it legitimate status. As metal has become a more middle-class subculture, he argues, the genre has appeared in the academy – because most scholars are middle class. In distinction to other scholars, Brown says that our role as academics is not to translate understanding of metal into academic language or to advocate for the genre. Rather it is to, »interrogate the classed-cultural relations that both connects/divides the intellectual/class/formation from its object of desire/disgust« (Brown 2018: 360).

Thus for Brown, the key thing that we need to reflect on as we bring our beloved metal under the scholarly microscope, is our class position, and how we might be seeking to elevate something that has previously been denigrated. We know metal has had its critiques outside the academy (e.g. the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC)), but Brown is particularly confronting the dismissal of the genre by Hebdige (1979) and other subculture scholars. Dick Hebdige relegated metal to a footnote and called headbanging »idiot dancing« (1979: 109) – he did not think it had political potential, something which Brown has challenged in his other work. Class is the only line of argument that Brown is engaging with, but privilege in the academy is clearly also related to race and gender. That said, Brown and I share the argument that what is required by all of us is greater reflexivity in our work, and Evans and Stasi (2014) make this point specifically in relation to fan studies as well.

WHAT IS REFLEXIVITY?

Studying for my Ph.D., I wanted to find out how other women rock fans enjoyed the music and how they engaged with stereotypes of what it means to be a woman who loves rock music (so often called a groupie). My Ph.D. was in women's studies, and a crucial aspect of this was a feminist methodological approach. Feminist methodology challenges the notion that the researcher can ever be objective. Feminist theorists such as Dorothy E. Smith (1974) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argue that the dominant forms of knowledge about the world, including about women, come from primarily a male perspective because men have dominated scientific investigation and have the monopoly on forms of knowledge distribution through the academy, the media, art, literature, politics, etc. This dominant perspective, however, is not acknowledged as being from a particular viewpoint; it masquerades as being objective, what Haraway calls »the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere« (Haraway 1988: 581). But of course, it is a subjective view from somewhere, and the biases and prejudices of the viewer are epistemologically and ontologically ingrained. As a counter to this, feminist methodologists argue for the researcher to acknowledge their subjectivity, their gender, race and class position and to consider how this has shaped the research they are undertaking (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Thus it is imperative that the researcher acknowledges their own subjective position and the way in which that position has determined their:

1. research question (why do or why don't women go to metal festivals?),
2. topic chosen (extreme metal or popular rock?),
3. methods (surveys or in depth interviews?),
4. theoretical perspectives (e.g. a surface knowledge of Judith Butler or thorough acquaintance with masculinities theory or materialist feminism?)
5. and how we approach the ethical considerations that go alongside any kind of research with human beings.

This is not necessarily an easy thing to do, and I think it is particularly challenging when our fan positions drive our research interests, when love and critique collide.

But there is much to be gained from taking a critical perspective towards our identity positions and our fandoms. In my book, *Gender, Metal and the*

Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music (2016), a feminist critical perspective enabled me to see discourses that women use about the metal music they love, which are quite different from those brought forward by Keith Kahn-Harris in his book (2007). Kahn-Harris's participants talked about metal as being heavy and raw. For me, paying serious attention to the ways in which women talk about music (rather than writing it off as frivolous) enabled me to understand how romantic discourses are used to describe their affection for bands and music. Women are trained in romantic discourses from birth, but when applied to music, these have typically been ignored as women *not engaging* with music seriously enough. To continue to diminish that kind of talk is to dismiss women's passion for music and plays into sexist ideas about what counts as the right kind of musical engagement (Hill 2016).

STUDYING THE MAINSTREAM

More recently, I, Daisy Richards and Heather Savigny (2021) have examined how rock and metal bands utilize the imagery of sexual violence in lyrics. Our source this time is the UK rock and metal charts. It is all Green Day and Fall Out Boy with a little bit of Maiden and Muse. Few women appear on that chart. It is a chart dominated by men. In conducting this research, our standpoint as feminists and rock fans is of crucial salience. It determined our question and the methodological approach we have taken, and it guides our analysis and identification of discourses. We are three female White feminist researchers at various stages in our careers and we are all rock music fans. We have a good understanding of the discourses, the nuances, the satires and the ironies that work within the rock genre. As feminists we understand »women« to be an oppressed group in society, held back by structures and systems that discriminate against us, and our subjectivity diminished by individual men around us. This dual standpoint has enabled us to identify the common discourses within rock music that draw upon discourses of sexual violence. And much as we love some of those bands we were analysing, we have to face up to the fact that discourses of sexual violence and domestic abuse are really prevalent in these mega-popular songs.

There are questions to be asked here about how masculinity and misogyny are not only apparent/obvious in the genre, but how it constitutes it too. When I presented our findings in Nantes – when I had to run out crying – I was blown away by a suggestion from one colleague: that sexual violence

might not *only* be being utilized by rock bands; it might be that these songs are popular *because* they include references to sexual violence.

Let us just sit with that for a moment.

Now remember, this is the mainstream – these songs are massively popular, but they are also the songs that get radio and video play. They need to conform to the standards and regulations of the mass media. If we see these tropes here, and the songs are popular *because* these discourses are popular, then what does that tell us about what is going on with the extreme, where we hear much more explicit representations of sexual violence? That people are listening to them not *in spite* of the violence, but *because of it*?

This is a challenging idea that goes to the heart of what metal *is*, what the ideology is. It means we have to ask about the aesthetics of metal: what the escalation of extremity means in the context of how gendering processes work. Whether extreme metal is extreme because it is pushing away from a mainstream, feminized audience, and if it is extreme because those making it are engaging in practices, which exclude the symbolic feminine (or utilize banal nationalisms, as Hoad (2015) says about black metal). It means we cannot take our own aesthetic and ideological positions for granted as we carry them over from our fandom.

Brown (2018) argues, with Frith, that fan-scholars are too at risk of reading »political« onto the music they love in order to boost their own capital as researchers in the university. He argues that, in trying to make claims for metal as political, they (we) are seeking to challenge the dismissal of the genre by Hebdige and other subculture scholars. But I disagree. Brown is writing of a very specific context of metal scholarship that aims to reposition metal as worthy of study in a subcultural theory framework, and in an academic environment that values the political – when we are talking about working class politics. I think this is not the kind of politics that most scholars are engaging with now. In fact I think too few of us are actively engaging with the politics of metal.

But I am talking about the banal politics of the taken for granted everydayness, such as the whiteness and exclusivity of a White aesthetic that Hoad writes of. I note this in my own work. I am talking about the banality of

Fall Out Boy filling the 2015 UK rock and metal charts with a song that depicts sexual violence. This is the politics of the dominant. Meehan (2000) argues that the majority of fan studies are ethnographic and focused on the pleasures of fandom. This insider position means that we do not take into account the relationship between the fan sphere and the dominant ideology. Leisure, she says is a capitalist construction, and the »freedom« that seems to come along with fandom is absolutely a part of that construction. How are we to truly understand why it matters to study metal if we do not examine how it sits within the dominant ideology? Without wanting to validate Hebdige, I think we have to look not only at what is resistant about metal (because there are ways in which it offers forms of resistance), but at what is just the dominant ideology in a black T-shirt. When metal is offering vignettes of violence against women that is not radical or even extreme – that is just the banal politics of patriarchy in a black T-shirt. When Therapy? in »Loose« sing about being attracted to a woman because her mental ill health makes her an easy shag, that is the same misogynistic politics as the extraordinarily low rape convictions in the UK justice system, or Donald Trump saying »when you're a star they just let you do it«. When Damnation festival in my home town of Leeds books bands with fascist ties like MGLA, that is not an example of »free speech«, that is the same banal White supremacist politics as the UK government's »hostile environment« policy, which has seen at least 83 British citizens forcibly sent to the Caribbean, eleven of whom subsequently died, in the Windrush scandal (Rawlinson 2018).

There are the overt examples and there are the things, which should just be bloody obvious: that the people onstage, on music television, are most often men, most often White, mostly straight, so very often from European and anglophone countries. The everydayness of this hides the banal politics of identity, that we do not even talk about as identity politics. Where questions do not get asked because these things are seen as so normal that we do not even really see them. But these are exactly the things we need to ask questions of. We need to be asking these hard questions. Both of metal and of ourselves as fans and researchers. We are not one without the other. We need to look into our own hearts of darkness as fans to ask – what assumptions are we making about metal? What banal politics are we carrying through our fandom into our research? We need to be prepared to be reflexive and self-critical. Only through this work can we bring metal studies into adulthood.

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