

## Book Review

Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger and Paul D. Greene, eds. 2011. *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 381pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4733-0 (pbk)

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**Keywords:** heavy metal; music analysis; genre

It is rare to find an anthology that realizes the possibilities of the form. We tend to regard our edited collections as lesser siblings and forget their special value. But, at times, a subject seems to require an edited collection much more than it does a classic monograph. So it is with the subject showcased here, which concerns the global circulation, performance and consumption of heavy metal. This is a relatively new and emerging body of work, hitherto scattered disparately within the broader popular music studies, but quickly gaining status as a “studies” with the establishment of a global conference, a journal and publication of this anthology, all in recent years.

*Metal Rules the Globe* took the editors a decade to compile. That they have thought deeply about the collection shows through in the book’s thoughtful arrangement and design, and in the way in which they draw on the contributions herein to develop for the field a research agenda that will take it forward from the “power trio” (9) of classic scholarly books about heavy metal published in the early 1990s by Gaines (1991), Walser (1993) and Weinstein (1991).

The book excels in two ways. First, it presents a strong introduction that anchors the contributions to an emerging research agenda. Second, the editors have arranged the chapters in such a way that enables them to converse with one another, and not just with the research agenda outlined in the introduction. This is something that editors of collections often hope to achieve, but rarely do.

Composing an introduction that firmly anchors the collection is also a commendable feat. Having undergone a gestation period of ten years, it is not surprising that the introduction is neither hurried nor thin. But nor is it *overwritten*, packed too full with glittering insights or grasping to out-sparkle the contributions.

The introduction kicks off by relating the globalization of metal to some well-grounded reviews of theories of modernity and globalization (Appadurai 1990; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; and Tsing 2005 feature here). It then builds to a climax by entering into a dialogue with Deena Weinstein's chapter, which follows the introduction. As the editors point out, Weinstein argues that extreme metal is a "key music of the global proletariat" (16), but other contributions contradict this hypothesis. For example, the Nepali metal-heads that Greene analyses come largely from white-collar backgrounds. This simple contradiction has deep implications for the ways in which the editors are framing the cultural dimensions of global capitalism and metal's place in them. It is suggestive of the complex socio-cultural terrains in which global metal germinates. Such complexity makes the task of setting a research agenda for the study of global metal a delicate and difficult one.

The agenda the editors propose foregrounds analysis of musical sound. As they point out, musical analysis has occupied a too small corner of popular music studies, but it is important that heavy metal scholars maintain a sense of the form and coherence of the genre as subgenres continue to evolve and as metal incorporates pre-existing local forms. The introduction and many of the chapters include enlightening descriptions of sound.

The second item the editors propose is continued analysis of meanings of those sounds, which vary according to the languages people access to produce and listen to them.

The third pertains to scene analysis. The editors outline a trajectory of "metallification" (20), which entails the blossoming of sub-genres and the linguistic localization of metal performances. The scenes presented in the collection exist at various stages of metallification.

The fourth item is analysis of identity performance within metal. In general terms, the editors suggest, to be an enthusiast of metal's "affective overdrive" (10) is to vent frustration with modernity's failures. However, how these failures are understood to manifest varies greatly and warrants ongoing investigation.

The second virtue of the book pertains to the way in which the editors have arranged the chapters. Thankfully, they have refrained from organizing them into geographic areas. Rather, they fall in pairs or trios under five themes—metal, gender and modernity, metal and the nation, metal and extremist ideologies, metal and the music industry, and small nation/small scene case studies. Here, they engage in intimate conversations, like found objects in little pockets, clinking as they strike one another.

This kind of dialogue is well exemplified by the section on metal and the nation, which includes Greene's ethnographic exploration of the Nepali metal scene and Avelar's textual and musicological analysis of Brazilian band Sep-

ultura. Greene argues that the particular cultural meanings of metal sounds that inform Nepali performance can only be understood in the context of a Nepalese narrative of nationhood. In the middle of the twentieth century, the state sponsored the development of the Nepali *lingua franca* through popular music broadcasts on state-run radio. These popular music forms, *adhunik git* and *lok git*, stressed a clearly enunciated vocal style. When heavy metal was first performed in Nepal by the band Cobweb, it followed this tradition of “ensuring that the vocal line was well and clearly heard” (115), drawing the genre onto dominant narratives of nationhood and tempering its transgressive potential. “Nepali listeners heard the music variously as happy, energetic, dance-inspiring and sad; for many the music had no transgressive or dangerous force at all” (115). It was not until more extreme forms of music emerged within the scene, in which the vocal line was more or less indistinguishable, that metal became confronting for many Nepalis. This allowed Nepalis to use metal to vent their frustrations. The “blood” metal band Ugra Karma attributed these frustrations to religious strictures and injustices within Hinduism, while the thrash metal group X-Mantra attributed them to political violence in the country:

The political situation? That’s true. The situation is bad in Nepal. So we would like to scold these politicians, and tell everyone what they are like. They are corrupted. It is about corruption. We cannot say in simple language. So in heavy metal we express and scold and just use bad words. (129–30)

Whilst Greene’s chapter welcomes us into the rhythms and intonations of Nepali metalheads’ speech and locates those rhythms in the specific, rather bounded context of Nepali political violence, Avelar’s chapter analysing Sepultura reminds us of how metal performers in the South need not be conceived of as people utterly defined by larger political realities at national scale which they protest against by taking flight into a global space of metal fandom. They can also be conceived of as political actors with the capacity to bring into question some of the fundamental dichotomies that underlie dominant narratives of nationality. “For large sectors of the urban youth of post-dictatorial Brazil, heavy metal became at the same time a metaphor for the absence of a nation with which they could identify and an antidote against that exclusion” (151–2).

Avelar’s method is a musical analysis of metal and a textual analysis of Sepultura’s oeuvre, which comes to rest on a particular song, ‘Ratamahatta’, from the album *Roots*. Like the affective overdrive to be found in metal sound, Avelar saturates the reader with dizzying interpretations, offering a 360-degree view of the band, the context from which it emerged and its political trajectory. At one point, drawing upon Berger, he describes the genre into

which Sepultura inserts itself; its tempos, tonalities and timbres. At another, he fondly relates a further dimension of Sepultura's aesthetics—that of the “darkish, nightmarish monstrosity” expressed in drawings on the covers of the band's albums (143). At another, he favourably compares Sepultura's relationship with the Xavante people, with whom the band collaborated on *Roots*, with Paul Simon's apparently more exploitative relationship with South African musicians who worked with him on *Graceland*. And at yet another, he has the reader on the edge of their seat as he analyses ‘Ratamahatta’ in a style that resembles the song's delivery: terse and unforgiving.

Biboca/garagem/favela [shithole/garage/slumtown]  
Fubanga/maloca/bocada [hodgepodge/hut/hideout] (148)

“The chorus's overall effect is a pan-national, youth-inflected portrayal of Brazil from the jungle to the city, one that emphasizes oppression and struggle” (149), he writes, as he explores the song in order to illustrate how these Brazilian headbangers worked through some of the dilemmas faced by met-alheads from the South.

[N]ot only [did they] have to prove to the usual guardians of musical standards that theirs was a genuine music and not sheer noise; nor did they only have to prove to the usual guardians of morality that their message was not immoral and did not incite violence; they also had to prove to the then influential guardians of political meaning that theirs was not a futile and alienated form of protest against the country's still grim reality. (136)

One cannot help concluding from Avelar's piece that Sepultura did so admirably; they left the critics stumbling and stuttering as they blithely evolved from wonderful incarnation to the next wonderful incarnation.

Other sections of the collection twin chapters in equally successful ways. There is not enough space to write about all of them here, but another good example is the section devoted to metal and the music industry, with a chapter by Steve Waksman on Western metal bands' global tours in the 1970s, and by Kei Kowano and Shuhei Hosokawa on the internal dynamics of the Japanese music industry. Waksman's chapter considers changes and continuities in the Western global imaginary effected by Kiss's and Led Zeppelin's global tours in the 1970s. Japan, the world's second biggest market for popular music, was particularly important to Kiss, and Waksman examines how Kiss's tours there remediated Japan, in some ways augmenting the exotification of it. Gene Simmonds's sexual exploits are particularly important to Waksman's discussion of how accounts of the band's tours drew on stereotypes of Asian women as “awaiting libidinal conquest” (230).

Kowano and Hosokawa's chapter, however, shows another side to the story, that this was not a one-way process of exotification, but rather one that

entailed a dynamic interaction between global and local industry players. The Japanese popular music market, that is, did not naturally pre-exist, laying in wait for Anglo-America to descend. It was heralded into being by the concerted labour of local industry figures and the local music press, particularly the Japanese metal magazine *Burrn*. In other words, global metal tours did not just work to exotify Japan. They also set processes in train that enabled Japanese writers to chronicle global metal.

This is a well-considered collection, which is timely. However, one small part of it troubled me. My disquiet bubbled up when I reached p. 7 where the editors state that “in every case discussed here, heavy metal serves as a viable cultural and affective alternative for disempowered youths, one that is often just as critical of globalization’s tendency to bring with it crass consumerism, class divisiveness and uneven development as it is of the authority of traditional norms of behaviors”. I felt rushed to this conclusion, as if I had been pushed into buying an ill-fitting dress by a too attentive sales attendant. Did it suggest, I wondered, that the editors had become ensnared in the metal scene’s own mythologies about itself?

I thought about Indonesia and how “cultural and affective alternatives” there like heavy metal not only attract disempowered youths, but also a great many privileged ones. What are we to make, for example, of the fact that key Indonesian metalheads hold plum positions in the mainstream music press, positions that issue directly from their identities as metalheads? A looser interpretation, one that positions metal at the margins of popular culture, making it more amenable to those eager to experiment with the messiness of the present, rather than as the property of the disempowered, might have opened new avenues for the editors to deconstruct and hold to account some of the various strands of global metal. Some fascinating insights are touched upon in the introduction, but by rushing to endorse the “alternate and disempowered” hypothesis, many of the avenues that could have been explored have been bypassed.

First, the editors highlight how “metallification” differs from the diffusion of Western pop idioms around the world in that it retains a very strong global imaginary. At a time when the horizons of pop settle, increasingly, at national and subnational scales, metal culture retains a very strong sense of transnational community. Why is this so, and to what may it be compared? Is there any other form of expressive culture that is equally global in its sense of “we”?

Secondly, as an expressive form, the editors point out, metal is musically saturated. The editors simply state that the foregrounding of music suggests that metal culture is aesthetically complex. But what implications does musical saturation hold for metal’s capacity to extend or problematize modernity?

How does this compare to expressive cultures that may be more sartorially or visually oriented?

Thirdly, across the board, metal enthusiasts tend to identify their music as antithetical to convivial pop culture, or “light entertainment” (8). Therefore, the editors suggest, metal must be understood as an ethical response to the failures of modernity. But is it not possible that participants of those expressive forms the metalheads identify as “light entertainment” also see themselves as ethical subjects, more feminized or feminine perhaps, but not simply hedonistic? Is it not possible that the spectre of light entertainment is not a concrete social reality emerging from a political economic base but simply a phantom, albeit an enabling one, upon which a variety of globally expressive cultures may lean as they vent frustration about the present, or express hope for the future?

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