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Five djentlemen and a girl walk into a metal bar: Thoughts on a ‘metal after metal’ metal studies

ABSTRACT

As a nascent academic field of study, it is an optimal time for metal music scholars to fashion a metal (music) studies focused on (heavy) metal’s status and development as genre, as tradition, as culture – in other words, as subject/object of broad scholarly enquiry – that productively resists orthodoxies not only by maintaining metal scholarship’s current multidisciplinary, which I applaud, but also by expanding the notion of ‘metal musician’ and ‘metal music culture’. The first idea is a relatively noncontroversial position to assume; however, I want to push on the second idea through a discussion of two performances of the composition, ‘Aviator’, which demonstrate some of the limits within current metal studies. Before turning to ‘Aviator’, however, I will take some time to outline the broader discussion within metal studies around the issue of academic legitimization.

KEYWORDS

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subject/object of broad scholarly enquiry – that productively resists orthodoxies not only by maintaining metal scholarship’s current multidisciplinary, which I applaud, but also by expanding the notion of ‘metal musician’ and ‘metal music culture’. The first idea is a relatively noncontroversial position to assume – who doesn’t want a more expansive and inclusive metal studies? – however, I want to push on the second idea through a discussion of two performances of the composition, ‘Aviator’, which demonstrate some of the limits within current metal studies. Before turning to ‘Aviator’, however, I will take some time to outline the broader discussion within metal studies around the issue of academic legitimation including sketching out a number of significant parallels in the formation of jazz studies as a cautionary tale for metal music scholarship. I take this circuitous route in order to map out some of the stakes at play in thinking through a ‘metal after metal’ metal studies at a moment of accelerating coalescence into an academic field.

I take as my jumping off point an attempt to respond to, at least in part, Andy R. Brown’s question that ends ‘Heavy genealogy’, his comprehensive survey of the major metal studies literature from 1978 through 2010 (2011). Brown asks, whither now, metal studies, and while I will avoid prognosticating or advocating a specific direction beyond a general call for maintaining an inclusive range of research methodologies and disciplinary orientations, I am also thinking of Keith Kahn-Harris’s admonition to construct *reflexive* metal scholarship – an idea I endorse. In fact, I hope this article serves as a focused companion piece to Kahn-Harris’s keynote speech titled ‘Metal after metal: What happens next?’ at the Heavy Metal and Popular Culture conference held at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. Kahn-Harris offered four aims for metal studies concerned with ‘things that metal studies can do that are difficult to do within the metal scene itself’, which would facilitate a ‘promotion of reflexivity’ (2013: 2). While he was primarily concerned with the formation and future of metal studies within a current crisis of abundance – too many recordings, too many bands, too much online and offline criticism, not enough time, energy or interest – I will focus on his provocation to think of ‘metal after metal’. While Kahn-Harris was contemplating dissembling music from metal in order to think about fashion, literature and other creative expression within the broader metal culture, I want to sort through the complications of a ‘metal after metal’ – metal studies in terms of race and gender as a way to keep the body visible to metal scholarship in order to highlight who remains external to metal studies discourse *despite* bodily presence. Or, to turn the question around, are there ‘new’ bodies performing ‘metal’ in this ‘metal after metal’ metal studies?

There is no reason to believe, nor do I personally desire, that a consensus or even a majoritarian ethos need prevail in constituting ‘metal studies’. This does not mean, of course, that larger disciplinary trends or even broader social concerns outside the academy have no impact on metal (music) studies. As Brown delineates in ‘Heavy genealogy’, there have been successive waves of scholarly attention to metal music culture though a current visibility of metal (music) studies dominated by social science and humanities disciplines (sociology, anthropology, musicology, history, philosophy) obscures a longer history of earlier work in social psychology undertaken to determine the nature of the pathologies of heavy metal audiences and producers.

My focus here, though, is the less discussed notion of metal’s relationship *with* – and not merely, or necessarily, in *opposition to* – popular music more broadly defined. I do not intend to foreground a ‘mainstream pop’ or ‘mainstream metal’ (whatever that might be) straw argument as is often

done in metal discourse. Rather, as mentioned, I want to remain attentive to the ways in which various metal styles and musicians are *not* given much attention within metal studies but whose inclusion upend long-held verities within metal culture which have helped determine the limits of metal studies. Nu-metal research, anyone?

As way of example, the growth of metal studies resembles the development of jazz studies, another area of scholarly interest in a once-widely popular music genre. Jazz has become simultaneously ubiquitous as a cultural marker of sophistication and marginal as a popular music genre since its commercial zenith in the 1930s and 1940s. Early jazz scholars were not simply ardent fans of particular musicians and styles but were often also meticulous archivists and knowledgeable, articulate observers whose arcane knowledge and commitment to the genre as a serious rather than a merely popular music idiom was demonstrated by the production of journals, recordings (audio and visual), and other materials. Yet for all the groundbreaking work these men (and they were men, for the most part) accomplished, contemporary jazz studies scholars continue to work to dismantle some of the long-standing tropes, stereotypes, and presumptions associated with the music, often derived from the earlier journalists' works.

Parallel movements by jazz critics to canonize certain artists and recordings – often despite musicians' evaluations or by ignoring figures who might complicate or contradict particular canonization efforts for any number of reasons, not all of which are necessarily pernicious – resulted, inevitably, in the loss of non-canonical musicians and music culture participants to a dominant narrative of 'jazz history'. Many of the early defenders of jazz music were explicitly partisan, touting favourites, diminishing or ignoring artists and bands they disliked, eventually shaping a canon that fit their own tastes and perspectives. It is a familiar problem in popular music studies literature, even (especially?) within studies bracketed by a specific genre or tradition.

In his incisive study of jazz's transformation from a popular into an art music, Paul Lopes argues that,

the greatest challenge in the evolution of jazz music in the twentieth century was in disturbing the racial hierarchy in American culture. One problem in focusing only on the high art turn in jazz is that such a narrow emphasis tends to revert to questions only of social class and aesthetics, although even here the complexity of this turn in jazz is usually lost. It ignores how a racial hierarchy was intertwined with the class dynamics in high art and popular art in America.

(2002: 9)

Although I will be focusing on djent, a style that announces a 'turn to complexity' in metal, I want to heed Lopes' recognition of the ways in which race and class intersect in treating a popular music genre as high art, which is often the corollary to cultural and academic legitimation.

Similar to jazz studies, much of the early work in what we might call a proto-metal music studies mode – discographies, critical reviews of recordings and performances, biographies of leading musicians, musical analysis and transcription – was produced largely by professional journalists and dedicated fans. These early observers of both genres deserve being acknowledged for their contributions including taking these ostensibly benighted genres seriously at a time when dominant critical discourse, both in and out of the

academy, demeaned their passions. However, similar to their jazz studies forbears, metal studies academics are burdened with the incompatible origin narratives, conflicting aesthetic standards, and often under-defined, taken-for-granted terms used to describe 'real metal music' borrowed from the work of their journalist precedents. In addition to the problem of journalist and fan discourse as foundational to a particular line of scholarly enquiry as exemplified by jazz studies outlined above, metal music scholars have tended to be metal music fans themselves, facing some of the same accusations about a lack of objectivity to their subject that ethnic studies scholars and anthropologists often confront, particularly those who study their 'home' culture.

Other problems remain. On one hand, for all the championing of heavy metal music by sympathetic writers in the face of the genre's overwhelming negative reception by critics, metal music scholars struggle with similarly dismissive perceptions from academic peers and colleagues. Heavy metal music is not a common topic of scholarly interest even within popular music studies, which tends to focus on other genres such as punk and hip hop. In a 2011 review of a trio of metal-oriented books, Juliet Forshaw notes that

[when] death metal bands such as Cannibal Corpse began singing about the pleasures of torture and the early 1990s Norwegian black metal scene exploded in real-life murderous violence, it seemed that [Robert] Walser's book [*Running With the Devil*] had come along at exactly the wrong time: just when he, along with [Donna] Gaines and [Deena] Weinstein, had validated metal within the academy, the genre found new ways to appall. As earlier heavy metal became assimilated into the musical and intellectual mainstream, extreme metal arose as a defiant response to such co-option and began its perpetual quest for what Georges Bataille called the 'extreme limit'; a state of such intensity, irrationality, and unacceptability that no conventional discourse could ever hope to pin it down.

(2011: 141)

Whither now, indeed, metal studies. I want to consider the possibilities for 'not pinning metal studies down' by suggesting that Bataille's 'extreme limit' is always in danger of being superseded. Extreme metal intensity today almost too easily becomes banal metal mannerism tomorrow – Satan eating his own tail. The extreme limit of metal culture, as Forshaw reminds us, has been breached through acts of murder and arson though one might well accuse musicians from a broad range of musical genres and traditions, including the western art music and concert traditions, of similarly trafficking in the circulation of extreme human behaviour and invention. There are also countless vernacular musical traditions in which song narratives commonly include acts of physical and psychological violence.

A topic that may always remain central to metal studies in some sense is the defining and redefining of '(heavy) metal music' in order to ascertain the new 'extreme limit'; however, I will not be pursuing that particular set of questions here. The central point from my conference presentation remains: at this still-nascent period, avoiding the formation of a metal studies that replicates the parochial border-policing of other areas of study, especially as metal studies is institutionalized, and to self-consciously maintain an inclusive theoretical, methodological and disciplinary breadth is an important intervention metal music scholars can make into academic scholarship writ large.

On the other hand, there has been research into metal outside of North America and Northern Europe in places such as Egypt and Turkey as evidenced by presentations at the first international metal conference in Salzburg, Austria in 2008, the 2011 publication of the anthology, *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*, co-edited by Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger and Paul D. Greene, and Sam Dunn's film documentary, *Global Metal* (2008). Moreover, these global metal studies reveal the political register of much of non-North American and European metal as films such as *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (Moretti and Alvi, 2007) and *The Distorted Island: Heavy Metal Music and Community in Puerto Rico* (Sepúlveda, 2015) also make abundantly clear.

Similarly, scholars such as Laina Dawes, Rosemary Lucy Hill, Rosemary Overell, Michelle Phillipov and Lauren Weibe Taylor have contributed scholarship highlighting the ways in which gender intersects with race, nationality and language to articulate within metal music culture both a resistance to as well as a compliance with broader social norms. My point is that despite recent work that has expanded the limits of metal studies, scholars of metal music culture face indifference or worse from fellow academics due to a perception of metal music as politically reactionary or problematically apolitical, bereft of high (or any) aesthetic quality, and ideologically nihilistic or simply ridiculous. But as Kahn-Harris noted in his keynote speech, 'Nurturing [reflexivity within metal culture] is about more [...] than simply defending metal against attack' (2013: 3).

I will now turn to two primary concerns regarding a 'metal after metal' metal studies before tackling 'Aviator'. Briefly, I provide an overview of the critical reception of heavy metal music through the example of a ubiquitous online meme, the 'Best/worst guitarist in genre X listicle'. Then, I briefly contemplate virtuosity in terms of race and gender within metal music culture as a way to ascertain new sorts of metal subjects/objects, as a way of considering possible 'metal after metal' metal studies projects.

METAL MUSIC AS MUSICAL

In 2013, *Village Voice* columnist, Nate Jackson, wrote a column listing the 'Top 10 douchiest guitarists of all time'. Six of the guitarists on the list perform music arguably within some style of metal. Regardless of whether you enjoy their music or not, each of them possesses a technical ability as the result of years of practice, focus and determination. Except for self-conscious efforts at musical naiveté such as found in garage rock bands or musical genres in which musical virtuosity is looked askance such as punk rock, most professional musicians continually strive for ever higher levels of technical mastery of their instruments as limned by whatever tradition(s) or repertoire they perform (including punk musicians despite a rhetoric denigrating conventional standards of musical technique). In addition, as I discuss below, heavy metal virtuosos often face opprobrium from those who are sympathetic as well as antagonistic to heavy metal music and culture.

The six heavy metal guitarists – I am admittedly playing fast and loose with any definition of 'heavy metal guitarist' – include some of the usual suspects (from lowest ranked to highest, according to Jackson's poll results): Yngwie Malmsteen, C. C. DeVille (Poison), Wes Borland (Limp Bizkit), Joe Satriani, Michael Angelo Batio, Eddie Van Halen and Steve Vai. This group of guitarists represent a wide range of musical styles yet share a common characteristic of

'douchiness'. The comments were split among various fans and detractors of the listed guitarists. Beyond the usual 'you missed Guitarist X' (Ted Nugent received a huge number of 'votes' in this regard) or 'the writer is a douche, these guitarists rock', was a lengthy diatribe by a writer whose clever handle, BloughMee, betrays its own 'douchiness'.

Nonetheless, BloughMee speaks for a lot of critics of heavy metal, particularly of the virtuosic line of metal styles from neoclassical to shred and djent, when he writes:

In general, you can take the entire genre of 'Shredders' and place them in a gigantic rubber Douche Bag. 'Shredding' reduces the most expressive, emotional instrument on the planet (IMO), the guitar, to pretty much nothing more than a math-a-mechanical tool for mental masturbation. They don't play music, they spew notes until they blow their load [...] it's all so predictable. Tap, Sweep, Dive-bomb, Squeal [...] rince [*sic*] and repeat. I studied actual Baroque music in college, so any of the 'neo-classical' crap those guy [*sic*] spew makes me especially ill. They know the notes, and they play 'em fast – but it's sort of like painting a colonial farmhouse bright yellow or something. Inorganic and wrong-headed. They couldn't recognize the pieces they're ripping off if their lives depended on it.

However, BloughMee reverses his position at the end of his post, implicitly acknowledging that class and social relations might provide another order of evaluation: 'Many of the 80's "shredders" – the ones with the wackiest get-ups and worst, most ego-centric [*sic*] personas are actually VERY good to their techs and crews, so they get a pass for that reason alone. Cheers!' (original emphasis).

Apparently, being a good employer negates 'douchebaggery'. Fair enough. I do not intend to spend time debating the merits or demerits of these specific guitarists or lists such as Jackson's, which function more as grist for pub arguments than springboards for deep analysis (though I confess that 'pub analytics' have often proven deep and illuminating). The more salient issue is the over-representation of heavy metal guitarists on such lists (indeed, there are countless webpages devoted to lists of 'The greatest/worst guitarists' of mostly rock genres; overwhelmingly, the lists are part of larger, more broadly concerned guitar technique sites). While the *Village Voice* may not represent the hippest rock criticism today, Jackson's column represents a popular music-wide dismissal of metal musicians *as musicians* (read Pitchfork, for instance). This critical dismissal of their musicianship – particularly striking when used to denigrate musicians involved in subgenres such as neoclassical or shred that privilege hypertechnical displays of instrumental prowess – speaks to the wider dismissal of the heavy metal genre writ large.

Linked to this broad dismissal of metal musicians is the role race and gender intersect within metal discourse, including within the field of metal music studies, in which black and female metal musicians effectively disappear from view. I borrow Pierre Bourdieu's term, *field*, to indicate the terrain on which metal music studies has arrived presently, including: the presence of academic conferences such as the aforementioned Heavy Metal and Popular Culture and Metal and Cultural Impact conferences; the inaugural meeting of the International Society of Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) at the Aalto University School of Business in Helsinki, Finland, in 2015 (there have

been regular heavy metal conferences in Europe, beginning with a meeting in Salzburg, Austria, in 2008, already mentioned); the publication of *Metal Music Studies*, a peer-reviewed academic journal in 2014; and a growing attention from the world of 'legitimate' culture exemplified by the *Home of Metal* series of events held in Birmingham, England, in 2011. Heard in this light, metal music has achieved a certain purchase on cultural legitimacy and critical attention. However, as Jackson's list makes clear, this is far from stating that those outside of metal are convinced that metal musicians deserve respect – even those whose technical gifts are the main aspect of their music's rationale and appeal. What is also obvious about Jackson's list is its racial and gender exclusivity – all of the guitarists are white males – reflecting the overwhelming presence of white males within the heavy metal imaginarium. It is also an outdated list as it features guitarists whose creative and commercial heyday occurred in the 1980s at the height of heavy metal's commercial success.

METAL MUSIC AS CULTURAL

As Jackson's list indicates, assumptions about metal music exclude black and female metal musicians. Again, while there have been recent recognition of non-white participation in metal, the dominant discourse in metal music culture continues to marginalize non-white, non-masculinist efforts. In *What Are You Doing Here?* (2012), Laina Dawes discusses how black female fans and musicians have received little to no attention, let alone acclaim, within metal discourse. Dawes's work helps us understand that the silencing of black females' perspectives in the metal scene is not simply a sin of omission within metal discourse but is the result of the sexism and racism in metal (music) culture (not *all* of metal culture, nor *every* metal musician or audience, of course).

The recent surge of media interest in the black musicians of the hardcore metal band, Unlocking the Truth, is due to their young ages and the novelty of young black musicians from Brooklyn attracted to metal instead of, say, hip hop. Tellingly, perhaps, a year after signing a five-album contract with Sony potentially worth almost two million US dollars, the trio is negotiating to leave the label. While the group and their representatives have declined to state publicly why the band wishes to leave Sony, the story indicates the ways in which age, class, race and genre intersect in young black musicians' involvement with the music industry, which may not always be in the best interests of young black musicians (more cynically, the group may simply be pawns in a contractual war between powerful music industry interests). The way race operates in metal discourse can also be deduced when contemplating the careers of older Black American metal artists such as Tony MacAlpine and Greg Howe who remain fairly marginal despite their longevity in the metal scene, their substantial recording histories, the recognition of their professional peers, and a fan base sizable enough to continue to support performing and recording careers as instrumentalists. Yet MacAlpine and Howe have all but disappeared from metal magazine covers and feature stories and their recordings rarely garner reviews today.

Again, I will be using the term 'heavy metal guitarist' somewhat loosely since black female guitarists Bibi McGill and Malina Moye are not exactly making their names in metal per se. While McGill claims Randy Rhoads as a main influence, she has achieved her highest recognition as the hard rockin' lead guitarist for Beyoncé. McGill has served as musical director for Queen B's last five tours with one of her highest profile performances as a

fireworks-toting guitarist in Beyoncé's 2013 Super Bowl halftime extravaganza. I am certainly not arguing to stretch the definition of 'heavy metal' to include Beyoncé, but it may help to expand the range of likely places we might find metal musicians, particularly those who fall outside of conventional definitions of the category, 'metal musician'. Beyoncé's all-woman backing band also includes bassist Divinity Roxx who fronts funk-metal band, the Roxx Boxx Experience.

Malina Moye is a blues-oriented hard rock guitarist who owes more perhaps to Jimi Hendrix than to Yngwie Malmsteen but she is another black female musician whose professional career is based on virtuosic performance abilities. While Moye is also clearly selling her sexual appeal, the emphasis in her shows are on her guitar work – lengthy, expressive soloing supported by sophisticated arrangements and spectacular showmanship. I want to emphasize that I am mentioning two artists who are as mainstream and as visible as possible – rather than, say, a brilliant yet obscure female grindcore or doom musician – because I am interested in the ways a black female musician escapes critical assessment *despite any mass scale visibility* she might achieve.

It is little better for non-black female guitarists. Nili Brosh is a highly accomplished artist who chooses to compose, record and perform extremely technical instrumental metal (ironically in the context of this article, one of her more visible gigs was as the second guitarist in Tony MacAlpine's 2014 touring band). In doing so, she realizes that she may be in danger of becoming a 'musician's musician', well known to peers and aspirants but largely unknown to broad or mass audiences. Brosh insists that technically challenging instrumental rock is her preferred musicking mode, implicitly challenging masculinist norms in professional metal musicking (2015). Does Brosh, along with female guitarists such as Jennifer Batten, Orianthi, Lita Ford (Runaways), Nancy Wilson (Heart), Donita Sparks (L7) and the Great Kat (Katherine Thomas), dispute the easy assumption of masculinist values and aesthetics in heavy metal and hard rock or are they merely succumbing to them?

The answer is, perhaps, a little of both. Female guitarists do more than simply trouble stereotypical notions of race and gender in metal music culture. They also demonstrate an ability to wield sounds that are often described in masculinist terms: aggressive, confrontational, visceral – echoing a long history of desexualizing powerful women by attributing masculine traits to them (while hypersexualizing them in other contexts). While musicians are able to discuss the wide range of influences on their musicking, it is still overwhelmingly true that, for instance, metal guitarists of any gender or race rarely cite musicians of colour or women guitarists as influences. Elizabeth Cotton, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, or Memphis Minnie never get name-checked, for instance, as major influences or innovators though they were all musicians who forged individualized styles and were highly regarded by their male peers. In what ways, then, does a woman axe-wielder delink notions of 'the powerful' from masculinity, potentially transforming notions, discourses and materializations of power itself?

In attempting to answer this question, Robert Walser's analysis of virtuosity in metal provides a starting point. Walser notes,

Heavy metal musicians erupted across the Great Divide between 'serious' and 'popular' music, between 'art' and 'entertainment,' and found that the gap was not as wide as we have been led to believe [...] It should come as no surprise that such an eruption, propelled by the

social desires and tensions of patriarchy and capitalism, reinscribes familiar constructions of masculinity and individuality, even as the new meritocracy of guitar technique opens doors to female and African American musicians.

([1993] 2014: 107).

Part of that reinscription and its corresponding marginalization of female and black musicians, however, is the reliance on western art music logics of transcription and analysis. In other words, the very tools Walser mobilizes in an effort to describe heavy metal musicians' appropriations of western art music reinforce the very predicament that exercises him here. The problem is that these musicians are not mere appropriators. They are creatively manipulating the broad musical world in which we all live in today courtesy of the circulation of recordings in a global music industry and, even more contemporaneously, the overwhelming access to countless varieties of music online, which motivated me (and Kahn-Harris) to contemplate a 'metal after metal' metal studies. As I argue elsewhere, it is not simply legitimacy female and black musicians – never mind black female musicians – seek in utilizing performance practices, techniques, and tropes translated from the European concert tradition, it becomes a means to transcend and attempt to finally bury stereotypes about female and black reliance on ineffable emotionalism, beguiling physicality, and abject navel-gazing to account for their expressive and creative production. Indeed, it is critics' inability to move beyond such naturalized stereotyping that even displays of technical virtuosity can be swept beneath a race- and gender-deaf(ened) rug.

'AVIATOR'

Let us now consider two performances of 'Aviator' in some detail to think about another question: What does it mean to hold certain pop music ideals (melodicism, accessibility, concision) while performing music ostensibly opposed to those very ideological and conceptual predispositions? The first performance is the nearly four-and-a-half minute video of the original recording by the djent metal band, Polyphia, which features guest lead guitarist, Jason Richardson of deathcore band Chelsea Grin. The second performance features a female guitarist whose *nom de YouTube* is Li-sa-X. Li-sa-X challenges fundamental ideas about metal music, including the relationship between the embodied and musical soundings due to a combination of age, gender, nationality, and precocious technical ability, particularly as her musicking has focused on the technical end of metal and hard rock. As a resolutely hyper-technical, 'progressive' style of contemporary metal, djent provides Li-sa-X with a formidable platform from which to announce her musical presence, even if largely 'virtual' as a YouTube phenomenon.

Djent was originally an onomatopoeic term coined by Meshuggah guitarist Fredrik Thordendal to describe his high-gain, down-tuned distorted guitar sound achieved by the active palm-muting of his guitar strings. Similar to any descriptive term used as nominal shorthand for a style or genre, there is an underlying issue: does the term accurately represent a core set of bands, a sound/aesthetic or a scene? Some deny it describes a style at all or is a needless neologism for progressive metal bands. I will use the term as a descriptor for a distinct style of metal musicking as described below that emerged in the early 2000s.

Musically, I chose 'Aviator' as much for its hypertechnical demands as for its pop sensibilities, by which I mean no slight – in fact, I want to emphasize this aspect of the song as it constitutes the song and performance as 'metal after metal'. The song features common djent elements including the odd-metred duet lines shared by Henson and LePage, adept rhythmic exchanges between bassist Clay Boger and drummer Brandon Burkhalter, and intricate unison band lines whose internal logic determines the flow across and between the underlying pulse. Yet Polyphia betray a desire to achieve more than cult status among djent or metal fans, courting mass audience accessibility with an instrumental song whose charms lie in its pop-ish melodicism. Without guest soloist Richardson, the song registers at a little over two and a half minutes, the antique limit of the 45 r.p.m. 'singles' disc, the format most associated with Top 40 pop music. We can also hear the band's taste for pop melodicism in the main theme's distinction from contemporary metal riffage (though LePage's accompaniment is more consistent with conventional djent aesthetics) to consider what 'metal after metal' might sound like. We can see the band's pop ambitions even more clearly in the video for the song 'Champagne' in which the guitarists perform alongside high fashion models in a VIP lounge at an upscale nightclub, hewing more closely to the semiotics of the pop music video than the darker imagery of a typical metal video (Boger and Burkhalter are heard but not seen). Still, Polyphia's music is decidedly djent metal, as uncompromisingly complex as the music produced by decidedly less pop-oriented djent bands such as Meshuggah or Animals As Leaders.

Formed in Plano, Texas, Polyphia performs an accessible even pop style of djent, a metal style characterized by rhythmic complexity, virtuosic solo and improvisatory performances, while donning a visual style that is unlike many of their metal peers – trading leathers for suits, favourite bands' T-shirts for button down shirts, and metal pendants for ties. Musically, djent is characterized by the extensive use of palm-muting on the strings of down-tuned guitars to accentuate the high-gain distortion, a reliance on syncopated ostinato-like riffs, and displays of technical skill such as the sharing of complex unison lines among band members or showcased in individual solos. Again, in contrast to most of their djent peers, Polyphia tend to keep their recorded solos to radio friendly lengths, granting Richardson an uncharacteristically large amount of time for soloing, lengthening the recording by nearly another half-length. At the same time, the band articulates its appreciation for pop music through instrumental musicking, indicating irony, contrariness, or a lingering contradiction – in any case, it is an uncommon strategy for pop music accessibility or mass audience approval. However, there is no need for the band to desire either goal (again, I am not arguing that the band necessarily nurses pop *ambitions*).

Polyphia's video opens with an establishing shot of the entrance to a stately mansion as the music's short four-second fade-in becomes audible. When the band launches into the song proper, however, viewers are immediately inside a formal sitting room with the musicians. Dark wood panelling, hardwood floors covered by oriental rugs, antique furniture, and a stone fireplace blend with the band members' sombre black suits, shirts, ties and shoes, lending a strikingly muted presence relative to the persistent metal musicking. Bassist Gober is the most animated of the quartet, headbanging as he performs. While the guitarists move along to the music, their movements are much more controlled by comparison and even the drummer is less physically

demonstrative. Henson handles the main theme while LePage provides counterpoint, simultaneously harmonic and counter-thematic. A short twin guitar unison passage, full of syncopation and metric displacement, follows. LePage takes the first solo before another iteration of the main theme. A shorter, second theme emerges, a rhythmically taut unison line, which leads into Henson's brief solo turn. A third reiteration of the main theme, again performed by Henson, launches guest Richardson's longer solo. Unlike the members of the band, Richardson is shown outdoors for parts of his solo, signalling, perhaps, his guest status. In the final cadence, the scene blurs into the final, fading note, sound and vision trailing off into blackness.

The hook of the main theme is a note which appears early, characterized by an exaggerated vibrato produced by Henson tapping against the tremolo bar, which briefly shakes on its own, fading as the sound of the following notes pass by. This brief moment of casual looseness in an otherwise highly arranged piece of musicking exemplifies the band's tight control of metal's noisier aspects. Djent, in particular, seems concerned with controlling metal's sonic excesses with palm-muting embodying this sense of expressive abatement. We may also hear it in the tremolo bar with its tension a self-limiting mechanism for Henson's casual tapping of the tremolo bar to initiate the wavering pitch – a key moment in the song, as mentioned, which serves to destabilize the otherwise relentlessly forward-looking nature of the song. This vibrating sound, this wavering un-pitch, appears at the beginning of the theme, as the rest of the theme hums its way underneath.

Polyphia, similar to other djent bands, re-directs some of metal's excesses into their technical lead work and the intensive arrangements which juxtapose individualized and ensemble parts, including sections with unison lines shared among band members. By eschewing vocals, Polyphia re-focuses audiences to the non-lyrical aural elements that comprise the foundation of both metal and pop musicking. Perhaps it is the band's attempt to give attention to a sense of 'the music itself' with an underlying penchant for consonant approaches to themes and tonal approaches to thematic development but for that key note, blurring an assured sense of pure tone to favour instead timbre, lending the song a limited sense of indeterminacy, a merging of pop and metal allegiances without escaping through the easy route of the typical metal 'power ballad'. The sharp, steely lead sound of guest guitarist Richardson returns meaning to the cliché, 'sailing over the rest of the band', gracing listeners with a solo that is both passionate and articulate.

Alternatively, a YouTube video of a performance by a young guitarist half-way around the world, nearly nailing Richardson's solo while performing her version of 'metal after metal', has garnered 363,246 views – almost as many views as the band's official video with 376,127 views (as of 5 August 2015). According to the YouTube video information, Li-sa-X is 10 years old when she performs 'Aviator', which is a remarkably young age to muster the technical ability necessary to perform the song. Li-sa-X is a Japanese female guitarist with a number of videos in which she demonstrates an uncanny facility on full-sized electric guitars (no $\frac{3}{4}$ size 'student model' guitars for her!), performing repertoire drawn from technically challenging bands and musicians such as Polyphia, Racer X, and postrock guitar hero Guthrie Govan. Her earliest YouTube video lists her age as seven in a performance of Imagine Dragon's 'x'. Her age is clearly a facet of her growing fan base online and whoever is uploading her videos realizes the appeal of listing her age in addition to song title, original recording artist or band, and the like. A majority of the

comments on her YouTube page appear written by older, more experienced guitarists, including Racer X guitarist, Paul Gilbert, who was so impressed by her cover of his song, 'Scarified', recorded when she was a mere eight years old, that he offered her free lessons from his online Rock Guitar School.

I want to leave aside the issue of performing covers rather than offering up original compositions to focus attention on Li-sa-X's ability to perform highly technical metal which implicitly critiques the masculinist and racialized assumptions in metal music culture. On 'Aviator', the young female guitarist opens the video with a disarmingly charming smile, wearing a black and white dress that complements her black Ibanez double-cutaway electric guitar with its white mother-of-pearl fingerpick guard. More significantly, she expertly matches the timbral dimensions of the Polyphia guitarists, including the exaggerated vibrato facilitated by tapping the tremolo bar.

Li-sa-X performs the main theme without the unison chorus moving instead to Richardson's solo and ending with the main theme's recapitulation and final cadence. In contrast to the serious concentration of Polyphia's version, particularly Richardson's no-nonsense performance in which he never looks directly at the camera, Li-sa-X periodically looks up from her fingers to smile directly into the camera, offering viewers a contrasting way to think about metal guitar virtuosity. Replacing the scowling countenances of her older professional models with a *kawaii* (cute) persona more reminiscent of J-Pop idols than metal musicians, Li-sa-X transforms the agonistic posturing of metal guitarists into a display of '*kawaii*-ness'. *Kawaii*, as it applies to Japanese popular culture, denotes youth, innocence, and cuteness through the use of primary or garishly bright colours, child-like personas, and the liberal use of *katakana* script, a Japanese syllabary used, for example, for foreign loan words but which signifies naiveté in *kawaii* culture.

However, Li-sa-X turns *kawaii* on its head by performing hypertech-nical metal instrumental compositions. In fact, she concentrates on the fretboard throughout most of the video and her asides to the camera are infrequent, underscoring by contrast the synthetic quality of professional *kawaii* pop cultural production. Yet her delight is obvious when she lands in time with the band at the beginning of a short breather in the solo, at which point Richardson emphasizes a melodic rather than rhythmic (riff) line. She proves capably emotive, in fact, on this section of the solo, warming to the lyrical line Richardson applied to the song. The truly technical parts of Richardson's solo get a bit away from her fingers but she is performing *at tempo* and it is churlish to be anything but amazed by her audacity, tenacity, and talent.

In his magisterial study of the electric guitar, Steve Waksman traces the genealogy of the trope of the electric guitar as phallus, the instrument articulating masculine power and dominance through guitarists' creative use of loud volume, noise (including distortion) and virtuosity. Li-sa-X trumps those significations by using those same effects to bring about a different orientation to those sounds. As already noted, where Richardson represents the no-nonsense virtuosic intruder into the pop-ish djent of Polyphia, Li-sa-X represents a different sort of outsider. Her age, which acts in combination with her girlishness, positions her immediately out of most considerations for title of 'guitar shredder'. She is, perhaps, an even better example of 'metal after metal' than Polyphia because her physical representation and performance signify everything that metal, particularly contemporary extreme metal, is not.

Let me be clear: Li-sa-X is not yet a 'great guitarist'. As Waksman notes in recalling the debates regarding the publication of the list, 'The 100 greatest guitarists of the 20th century', in the February 1993 issue of *Musician* magazine,

When judged against the weight of history, then, a guitarist's greatness was deemed to be more a matter of influence and originality than of sheer technique, and was to be measured against the context of the player's career rather than according to some absolute ideal of musical ability.
(2009: 278)

Waksman continues,

[The] values embedded in the figure of the guitar hero – virtuosity, bodily flamboyance, an aesthetics of excess in which the sonic and physical presence of the guitarist spills over the boundaries of the pop song format – are in a sense dependent upon the literal and the metaphoric amplification of the guitarist's role brought about by the incorporation of the electric guitar.
(2009: 279)

But while Li-sa-X has yet to produce the sort of original music that might be influential, she ably disturbs notions of the guitar hero.

Distilling 'Aviator' to its sonic essence, Li-sa-X creates an opening for a new 'metal after metal' guitar heroine in which virtuosity is paired to *kawaii* with aesthetic excess *undergirding* rather than 'spilling over' the 'pop song format', a format that I hear is as much a part of 'Aviator' as conventional metal musicking. Let's return to that melodic middle section of Richardson's solo, a space of both sensual and transcendent sensibilities, a prayerful sigh between jet-fuelled bursts of scalar and chromatic excess. What can a 10-year old Japanese girl express in this section of the solo, when she is so obviously delighted with the song's melodic turn? At one point in the solo (at the 1:36 mark), she smiles widely, realizing that she is nailing it – she is in sync with the music, she is not simply chasing after the notes as in the rest of the solo. This is the moment she has been waiting for, the emotional core at the centre of 'Aviator', which emerges even in Richardson's hypertechnical solo. Indeed, 'Aviator' allows at least one young Japanese girl a way to navigate her flight, slight stumbles and all, towards 'metal after metal'.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, metal's (mis)representation as a genre filled with white male douchebags may not be metal studies' most salient issue. But I hope this brief article enacts a 'metal after metal' metal music studies that grants an ever-expanding space in which to think, listen to, and engage as deeply, seriously, and cogently about all the different sorts of metal musicking, signifying, and performing occurring in the world with as many other interested individuals working in as many different disciplinary areas as possible. I am certainly not claiming that academic legitimacy is the *sine qua non* of metal music scholarship nor that issues of identity need override other considerations but since scholarly legitimization is a goal implicit in the formation of the field as I have detailed above, it is necessary to discuss the limits to metal studies in order to begin staking out just what, exactly, constitutes 'metal after metal'.

While various disciplines have attempted, to varying degrees of success, to de-centre master narratives or to forge a canon-free inter-disciplinarity, metal studies would do well to avoid the errors of fields with those longer histories and entrenched canons. One way to accomplish this is to be as non-hierarchically inclusive as possible, in terms of race and gender certainly, but also in ways that allow for discussions of nu-metal or symphonic metal to occur beside discussions of black metal or doom, for example, or positions metal in dialogue with other popular music genres. It may also grant African, Asian, Central and South American, Middle Eastern, Caribbean or any non-English-speaking metal band or artist the same level of acknowledgement taken for granted by most Northern European and North American bands. After all, as Li-sa-X and her sisters worldwide more than ably demonstrate, tomorrow's guitar god may be a goddess. And she may not even know English.

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