

RECOLORING THE METAL MAP: METAL AND RACE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Esther Clinton and Jeremy Wallach
Bowling Green State University, USA

Abstract:

Metalheads of color are marginalized when metal is loudly claimed in the name of hegemonic whiteness, and grappling with metal and race means contending with metal's whitewashing. Scholars too often perpetuate metal's presumed whiteness even though metal music's fans are found all over the world and come in all colors; for instance, today's multi-racial Latin American metalhead population may rival Europe's. Internet searches and current research reveal the massive size of metal's fanbases in diverse places. We assess third world metal scenes' growing impact on heavy metal and its ongoing engagement with global issues of race and racism.

Race and racism in metal – Reality and perception

Introduction

When Magnus Nilsson studied metal music in Botswana, the fans asked him why, as a white person, he was a fan of this music (2009). This may seem surprising; after all, metal scholars have, since the beginning, noted the whiteness of metal music and its fans (Berger, 1999, pp. 277-289; Walser 1993, p. 17; Weinstein, 1991, pp.101-117). One of the problems with classic metal scholarship is that it tended to be based in either British or Midwestern United States perspectives from the 1980s or early 1990s, which may explain its presumption of racial homogeneity. Things would look very different from the perspective of the American Southwest (with its large contingent of Native American [see Thibodeau, 2014] and Latino fans) or American West Coast (with its Asian American and Latino fans), let alone from countries outside of the US and Europe in the present day.

Part of the complexity here is that race is a socially constructed concept and has different definitions in different parts of the world. In the US, for example, race is tied to the color of a person's skin. In other places, like Japan, race is tied to national origin. Self-definition is also tremendously important, especially in multiracial/multiethnic contexts. The slippery, culturally specific, and ultimately constructed nature of definitions of race complicates our research, in terms of both analysis and presentation. We therefore also use the term "ethnicity," which addresses national origin, ancestral points of origin, and a greater variety of identities than does the term "race."

Metal and racism

When people think of heavy metal and moral panics, they usually think of accusations of Satanism, black magic, and violence. But racism is another potent moral panic employed by metal's critics to demonize the music and its fans. Like the charges of Satanism, there is some dim truth to this. We acknowledge metal's racism and, worse, the existence of racist metal, but to focus

exclusively on this both magnifies the problem and trivializes the experiences and dedication of the *millions* of metalheads of color. There is no such thing as an inherently racist genre of music. To insist otherwise is absurd. And even if there was, metal certainly wouldn't be it, since its fans are found worldwide and come in all colors. Furthermore, metal is a culturally hybrid music that has melded symphonic orchestration, jazz rhythms, Latin percussion, Russian folk harmonies, gamelan textures, and more into its sound and still remained uncompromisingly metal. Hate metal constitutes a marginal though disturbing portion of the contemporary global metal movement and much has already been written about it (e.g., Hochhauser, 2011; Kahn-Harris, 2011; Olson, 2013). And the purportedly essential whiteness of metal is easily debunked by even a cursory overview of its history.

Prominent metalheads of color

The centrality of musicians of color to metal is apparent even if one only looks at metal's most famous groups. Kirk Hammett of Metallica is half Filipino. Tom Araya of Slayer is Chilean-American and addresses audiences in Spain and Latin America in Spanish. The Cuban background of Dave Lombardo, Slayer's former drummer, seems to have influenced his rhythmic approach. The thrash metal band Death Angel began as a group of Filipino cousins (and is therefore known by some in Indonesia as the first "third-world" metal band, even before Brazil's Sepultura).

Slash, former Guns N' Roses guitarist, is part African American. So is former Queensrÿche vocalist Geoff Tate. Chuck Billy of Testament is from the Pomo Nation and in concert often includes a "shout out" to fellow Native Americans; Joey Belladonna of Anthrax is half Iroquois.

Suicidal Tendencies' longtime African American guitarist, Rocky George, who is credited with metalizing the onetime punk band's sound, now plays in Fishbone. And, of course, Eddie and Alex Van Halen are part Indonesian, born in the Netherlands and raised in an Indonesian-American section of Pasadena, California.

These are but a few examples, not including scores of more obscure metal groups, including bands that never became well-known because of record industry racism (Fellezs, 2014), which was even more difficult to circumvent in the 20th century than it is now. Many fans of the groups mentioned above, even die-hard fans, seem to have been unaware of the ethnic backgrounds of the group's members, especially during the 1980s height of metal's US popularity, decades before Wikipedia. However, it is probable that metalheads of color identified with and enjoyed the music of these artists in part because of a sense of shared racial/ethnic identity.

History of rock and heavy metal music

Rock historians traditionally have emphasized the African-American roots of heavy metal music and forebears such as Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Robin Trower, Jimi Hendrix, and Phil Lynot of Thin Lizzy. Such accounts often imply that, while crucial to metal's *prehistory*, artists of color are marginal to metal's history and present, eliding contributions of metalheads of color in the global scene, including, as we have seen, many of the genre's most celebrated musicians. Indeed, metal history has been bleached by an ideological project of musical whitening that has become shriller and more strident as "black" genres (namely hip hop and electronic dance music, viewed as hostile,

non-white competition) have commanded a larger and larger market share, especially in the US.

A review of both popular and academic literature on heavy metal since the 1970s reveals two unmistakable realities. One is the persistence of racial prejudice among white fans, including a virulent strain of anti-black racism which, as Laina Dawes has observed, is often so pronounced as to merit a category all its own (personal communication, December 20, 2014). There is reason to suspect that racism is and has been a more pernicious problem in the metal scene than sexism and even homophobia. On the other hand, a careful reading and viewing of cultural artifacts through the decades reveals the fact that people of color have always been a part of the metal scene, albeit not in large numbers (Dawes, 2012). Describing a student she met while doing ethnography in New Jersey in the mid 1980s, Donna Gaines (1998, p. 220) writes, "Mingo is a black thrasher, a metalhead who likes the dirtbags more than the brothers in his school, and who takes abuse from both sides." One might expect otherwise from a genre that celebrates the defiant nonconformist, yet these often isolated members of racial minorities have generally been unsung in the history of metal. With the 21st century rise of subcultures such as Alternative Blacks and Afro-punks, the situation in North America is changing, and metalheads of color are becoming more vocal and visible in the larger metal community.

Unlocking the Truth

A new metal band that exemplifies this shift is Unlocking the Truth, a trio of African American middle-school-aged musicians from Brooklyn who proudly defy racial stereotypes. In less than four years they have risen dramatically from street buskers performing in Times Square and on YouTube to media stars with appearances in the *New York Times* and on *The Colbert Report*. Guitarist Malcolm Brickhouse is quoted on the band's website as saying, "The truth is that kids don't realize that they can do what they want to do; they don't have to follow the rest of the crowd. We're showing them that to be yourself is the truth."

Interestingly, among the many bands for whom Unlocking the Truth has opened, a list which includes Living Colour and Motörhead, is Maximum the Hormone, a Japanese metal/alternative rock band whose sound likely influenced another important group of middle-school-aged metalheads of color, Babymetal, who rose to worldwide popularity at the same time (about which more will be said later).

Metal outside of the west

While many non-metalheads in the West are unaware of it, metal's world conquest has been going on in earnest for three decades, shows no signs of abating, and has made heavy metal more globally widespread than McDonald's, though its appeal is admittedly more selective (see Wallach, Berger & Greene, 2011). As we argue in this essay, the large number of metal fans in non-western countries makes any claim pertaining to the racial exclusivity of metal absurd. In fact we suggest that the adoption of heavy metal by peoples in East Asia and the developing world has been comparable to the original adoption of American blues and rock by British musicians with regard to historical consequentiality. Put succinctly: Rock and roll was invented in America. From those materials, British rock musicians invented heavy metal. Subsequently, musicians all over the world took heavy metal in a range of directions. This third

development is, we think, as important as that initial appropriation. In the late 1980s, Brazil's Sepultura proved that a band did not need to come from a first world country to impact the global scene; in the 1990s Taiwan's Chthonic created a new style of metal by combining Chinese folk melodies and instruments with uncompromising extreme metal; Orphaned Land did the same with Jewish and Arab music. All three bands are still recording, albeit with personnel changes. In Japan, bands with female vocalists like Head Phones President and Gallhammer juxtapose thin, melodic, clean vocals with screams and roars in ways that challenge gender norms rather than reinscribe them in the fashion of the "Beauty and the Beast" metal bands more familiar to Western audiences. This innovation reflects the large number of women in the Japanese metal scene (perhaps a larger proportion than in any other world scene), and helped give rise to the now-global phenomenon that is Babymetal.

Babymetal

Babymetal consists of three female school-aged singer-dancers (who usually wear modified school uniforms) backed up by four highly-skilled metal musicians as well as various programmed keyboards and percussion. The band, which performs an improbable combination of cheerful, melodic pop music and extreme metal, experienced a meteoric rise in popularity beginning in January 2013 with the debut of the single "*Ijime, Dama Zettai*" (roughly, "No more bullying"). Since then they have played at Budokan, where they were the youngest female act ever to perform there, as well as venues in France, Germany, the U.K., the U.S., and Canada, where they met Unlocking the Truth.

As a few astute observers have pointed out, other Japanese artists combined J-pop, dance pop, and metal long before Babymetal did. *Guardian* music critic Brad Nelson describes its debts to *visual kei* and the Japanese industrial metal band Blood Stain Child (Nelson, 2014). Many metalheads in Japan and elsewhere no doubt would blanch at the notion that Babymetal represents a major Japanese contribution to world metal. On the other hand, while the response to the group has certainly been divided, Babymetal has its ardent supporters in the metal world. In an article on the metal news site Metalsucks.net grandiosely titled "Twelve Reasons Babymetal Are the Single Best Thing to Happen to Metal in the Past Decade," author "Vince Neilstein" writes, "I haven't been this excited by a new metal act in a loooooong time. I was initially completely baffled and even averse to the concept, but I've come to embrace it over time and you should too" (Neilstein, 2014). In fact, Babymetal fans are found worldwide, and the band's popularity attests to the size and presence of the global heavy metal scene.

The metal map controversy

In February of 2012, a jpeg file of a world map was circulated on websites devoted to music, maps, and popular culture. This map shows two correlated variables: world population statistics and the total number of heavy metal bands per nation according to Encyclopaedia Metallum (Grandoni, 2012). While the resulting map of metal bands per capita brought deserved attention to the size and enthusiasm of metal scenes in Nordic countries, it also diverted attention from large scenes in developing countries with much larger populations, such as Brazil, Indonesia, and Chile. The Encyclopaedia Metallum (hereafter EM) was also an imperfect data set, as not every country makes extensive use of it. For instance, in her study of Chinese metal bands, Yu Zheng found 175 bands on EM and 86 more with at least 50 internet fans (nearly half

as many) on Chinese-language websites Douban and Xiami (n.d., p. 2). But the most troubling consequence of the metal map is summed up by the following comment from Chris Jordan, which appeared on the website BigThink: “Umm, no, the obvious point of this map is not so much the prevalence of metal band lovers in Scandinavia, but rather how closely this map resembles a global density map of white people. Not all white people love metal bands, but damn near all metal band lovers are white :).” While this poster clearly misunderstands the purpose of the map – it measures numbers of bands, not fans – it is not hard to see how, as a cultural representation, the map is easily enlisted in the ideological project of metal’s musical whiteness.

We agree that there is a dearth of and a need for quantitative work in metal studies and are intrigued by the metal map. But the metal map, like all maps, is far from a neutral, objective rendering of the facts. In fact, though we doubt this was the intention of its creator (who is identified only by a Reddit screen name, depo_), it represents a significant step backward for the study of metal’s multiethnic present. The fact that many countries in the Global South have enormous heterogeneous populations that are still significantly agrarian and millions of metal fans without regular internet access means that a map based on information from EM that looks at bands per capita will underplay the significance of scenes in those countries. The issue is not just over-emphasizing first world countries, but underemphasizing important metal scenes dominated by people of color, like the scenes in Brazil, Indonesia, Nepal, Bolivia, and Peru in the developing world. The association of metal with global whiteness is a dangerous fallacy that is reinscribed by the metal map.

Google Trends search of heavy metal and subgenres by country

An intriguing alternative way to obtain quantifiable data on the relative enthusiasm for metal music in different countries can be obtained from Google Trends, which, among other things, measures the total volume of searches for specific terms by country. Obviously this still privileges populations with reliable access to the internet, although by focusing on comparative volume rather than raw numbers, Google Trends attempts to address this bias. Even given this limitation, the results are intriguing and at least suggestive. The following results were gathered on March 23, 2015. They are similar but not identical to results gathered on July 5, 2014, and December 30, 2014.

The term “Heavy Metal,” with the qualifier “musical genre,” garnered the following results in March 2015: 1. Indonesia, 2. Chile, 3. El Salvador, 4. Costa Rica, 5. Paraguay, 6. Nepal, and 7. Mexico. All of these countries are in the developing world, two in Asia and four in Latin America, and the list includes countries large and small. In the July search, Nepal was at number 5 and Guatemala replaced Mexico. Nepal was absent in the December search, which meant that only one Asian country, Indonesia, was listed, and the last two countries were Bolivia and Nicaragua. The three searches, conducted over the span of eight months, show remarkable consistency.

The term “Thrash Metal” garnered the following results in December 2014: 1. Chile, 2. Paraguay, 3. Costa Rica, 4. Columbia, 5. Mexico, 6. Ecuador and 7. Guatemala. The March 2015 search was nearly identical except that Ecuador and Mexico switched positions. All seven of these countries are in Latin America. Alex Skolnick, guitarist for the thrash metal band Testament, told Wallach that Chilean audiences were his favorite (personal communication, November 5, 2014).

The term “Doom Metal” garnered the following results in December 2014: 1. Chile, 2. Finland, 3. Peru, 4. Greece, 5. Mexico, 6. Columbia, and 7. Brazil. Again, Latin America dominates this list, with Brazil a new addition. We also have the introduction of two European countries: Finland, where we know metal is very popular, and Greece. The March 2015 search added another European country, Poland, in place of Brazil.

The term “Death Metal” garnered the following results in both the December 2014 and the March 2015 searches: 1. Indonesia, 2. Chile, 3. Costa Rica, 4. El Salvador, 5. Finland, 6. Mexico, and 7. Sweden. Indonesia’s position is no surprise given the enormity of the Ujung Berung scene in Bandung, West Java, which is perhaps the largest death metal scene in the world. We also have two Nordic countries – Finland, again, and the newly introduced Sweden. The presence of Nordic countries on this list is significant, as it suggests that it is not only “neophyte” scenes that incorporate metal subgenre terms into internet searches, though it is also worth noting that most Latin American scenes have existed since the 1980s.

The term “Black Metal” garnered the following results in December 2014: 1. El Salvador, 2. Indonesia, 3. Nicaragua, 4. Honduras, 5. Guatemala, 6. Bolivia, and 7. Chile. Again, we have here six Latin American countries and one Asian country, Indonesia. In the March 2015 results Indonesia and El Salvador switched places and Ecuador replaced Chile.

In December 2014 the term “Folk Metal” garnered the following results: 1. Chile, 2. Mexico, 3. Colombia, 4. Brazil, 5. Poland, 6. Argentina, and 7. Italy. The results in March 2015 were identical except that Poland and Brazil switched places.

This last category is striking given that folk metal is a relatively new subgenre that is most commonly associated with central Europe, a fact that could explain Poland’s appearance on the list, although we had previously seen Poland listed under “Doom Metal.” We also have the addition of a new European country, Italy. A variant of folk metal often called “pre-Hispanic folk metal” is wildly popular in Latin America (exemplified by Peruvian band Ch’aska and Guahaihoque from Colombia), which may explain the presence of five Latin American countries on this list. Interestingly, while the Spanish-language Wikipedia entry for folk metal contains a lengthy section (under the subheading “*Folk metal latinoamericano*”) devoted to this variant, the English-language entry omits it entirely.

From these data, it is easy to see why so many international heavy metal bands have begun to tour both Southeast Asian and Latin American venues more extensively, with Iron Maiden going as far as to customize a jumbo jet (dubbed “Ed Force One”) for the band to facilitate their ability to perform in far-flung destinations (Dunn & McFadyen, 2009; Matthews, 2012). Certainly the above search results are controversial and subject to multiple interpretations. However, they cannot be dismissed. After all, Latin America’s population is approximately 600 million people, among whom there seem to be a lot of metalheads. This conclusion, at least, seems undeniable.

Metal and race in global perspective

Determining the “racial” makeup of metal scenes in Latin America is a complex matter. Nelson Varas-Díaz and his research team asked members of the Puerto Rican metal scene what race they identified as, and found that 58.4% identified as “white” (Varas-Díaz, Rivera-Segarra, Medina, Mendoza & González-Sepúlveda, 2014, p. 94). This figure, combined with anecdotal evidence and observation, leads us to conclude that Latin American scenes cannot be considered *a priori* to be composed of a majority of metalheads of color. Instead they are better viewed as multiracial scenes not unlike those in the United States. The largest *majority-nonwhite* scene by some reckonings is Japan, depending on whether you include the wildly popular indigenous genre of *visual kei* as “real” metal or not (Maguire, 2014, p.161). But in either case, Japan is indisputably a first-world nation. Thus the data support the conclusion that the largest majority-nonwhite national heavy metal scene in the developing world is in Indonesia.

Metal in a third world Asian nation

Ever since Deep Purple played Jakarta in 1975, Indonesia (current population approximately 250 million) has been a Metal Republic, and many no longer regard the music as particularly foreign. Since the late 1980s there has been a country-wide network of underground metal scenes located in towns and cities throughout the Indonesian archipelago dedicated to the grassroots production, distribution, and consumption of metal music (Wallach, 2008). In fact, Joko Widodo, Indonesia’s recently elected president, is himself an outspoken heavy metal fan.

World’s first metal president

“Democracy has worked, and the good guy has won. The good guy just also happens to be a fan of Lamb of God and Napalm Death!” (Utomo, 2014). When Joko Widodo (nicknamed Jokowi) was elected in July, 2014, he received congratulations via social media from Dave Mustaine of Megadeth, Randy Blythe of Lamb of God, Anthrax, and Ron “Bumblefoot” Thal, former guitarist for Guns N’ Roses (Hussain, 2014; “Metalheads,” 2014). Metal media around the world carried the story, and pictures of Jokowi giving the heavy metal horns salute, and/or wearing Metallica, Napalm Death, and Lamb of God t-shirts were widely circulated. To mark his election, British magazine *Metal Hammer* co-sponsored an interview with the new leader (Purahita, 2014) and released an online playlist of Indonesian artists, including Seringai, Burgerkill, and The S.I.G.I.T. (“Metalheads,” 2014).

Born into humble circumstances in Central Java, Jokowi was a self-made businessman who earned a degree in forestry before starting a political career. He became a metalhead around the age of 14 when he saw local Solonese band Terancam (“Threatened”), a thrash metal group known at the time as the “most noisy in Solo!” (Purahita, 2014). Later, as mayor of Solo, central Java, Jokowi oversaw (and attended) heavy metal concerts (including a show by the current lineup of Death Angel), and has recently stated his intention to support local Indonesian heavy metal bands such as Burgerkill, Jasad, and Seringai (Purahita, 2014). As journalist Zakir Hussain explains, “The genre [of heavy metal] aptly expresses fight for change, a key aspect of his [Jokowi’s] platform” (Hussain, 2014). According to Jokowi, “Rock music gives me motivation, gives me spirit about the environment, about the corruption, about justifi-

ce... The beat of the drum – boom, boom – gives me spirit” (Blake and Moestafa, 2014).

Prior to running for president, Jokowi served as the governor of Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital and largest city. Among his many accomplishments during his brief tenure was presiding over Metallica’s return to Jakarta after twenty years, in August 2013. The infamous 1993 concert and the civil unrest that accompanied it were covered in the film *Global Metal* (Dunn & McFadyen, 2008). There was no riot in 2013, due in part to the decision to project the concert onto a large screen outside the venue for those who could not afford to enter, and Jokowi himself attended the concert, mingling with the rest of the audience (Blake and Moestafa, 2014).

Most of the world has been more concerned with Jokowi’s leadership acumen than his musical taste, and the mainstream media has sometimes been apprehensive about him. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran this cautiously hopeful headline prior to the election: “Indonesia’s Likely New President, President Joko Is a Megadeth Fan, But This Is No Cause for Alarm” (Bachelard, 2014). In fact, now that he is president Jokowi appears to be an effective and progressive leader. Since his inauguration in October 2014, Jokowi and his administration have attacked corruption, cut wasteful subsidies, planned the building of needed infrastructure, and promoted economic growth.

The Economist (a publication not known for its idealism) has asserted that Jokowi “is the proof democracy works” (“Mr Joko,” 2013). We would add that, as the first heavy metal president, he is also proof that metal can be both global and democratic. It is difficult to overstate the significance of Jokowi’s rise to power – Indonesia has the fourth largest population of the world’s countries, is the world’s largest majority Muslim nation, and just seventeen years ago was under a military dictatorship. The story of Jokowi and the Indonesian metal scene indicates that the untold story of metal’s significance in the Global South is at least as important as the oft-told tale of the appropriation of heavy metal music by white supremacist hate. At least, that’s the way it might look from the perspective of Santiago, San Salvador, Katmandu, or Jakarta, circa 2015.

Coda

Sang the white Briton Bruce Dickinson in 1982: “White man came/Across the sea/He brought us pain/And misery” (Iron Maiden, 1982). Thirty years later, Native American Chuck Billy responded with “Whenever I stumble/Whenever I fall/Whenever my back's against the wall/This white man's world/Won't tell me what to do” (Testament, 2012). The point is not just that metal has a long history of songs about the bitter historical experiences of Native Americans, but also that many Native Americans have in turn long been ardent metalheads (see Thibodeau, 2014). Metal music and its culture, now in their fifth decade of existence, have always grappled with race and ethnicity in one form or another. It’s past time scholars did their part in illuminating the startling complexities and possibilities of this ongoing, tumultuous, and tense encounter as it continues to unfold on the global stage.

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