

## 24 | What Has Latin American Metal Music Ever Done for Us?

### A Call for an Ethics of Affront in Metal Music

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Maybe we should begin our contribution to this book with a disclaimer. A statement on what this brief chapter aims to be, and more importantly, what it is not. It is not our intent to portray an all-encompassing picture of Latin American metal for the reader. That endeavour is too extensive to be contemplated here and merits a more extensive and comprehensive reflection that does justice to the music created in the region. For most readers, Latin America will seem, from the outside, like a monolithic region. Far from this conceptualisation, the countries, peoples and communities that make up Latin America are greatly varied and diverse, as manifested in their languages, traditions, histories and geographies. Latin America is an incarnation of plurality, albeit sometimes a systematically silenced one. We will not foster this silence with the plethora of metal scenes in the region, which are diverse and marked by varied socio-political experiences. Consequently, this chapter does not aspire to offer a summary of metal in Latin America, and we invite readers to look to the emerging research on the region for such a purpose. Instead, what we aim to do in this chapter is examine one of the endeavours Latin American music has predominantly engaged in, namely decoloniality, and use this as a bedrock to examine what we consider to be a pertinent question: What has Latin American metal ever done for the international metal scene? We believe that the answer to this question lies at the juncture of and brings forth a call for ethics in metal music, as we aim to succinctly explain throughout this chapter.

As most metal music researchers will attest, sometimes the answer to our research questions manifests unexpectedly. In a casual conversation with a fan or a musician, one comment can open up an unanticipated area of reflection. We would like to use one example to highlight this argument. While interviewing Pablo Trangone, singer for the Argentinian metal band Arraigo, our conversation on metal music veered drastically towards the topic of Latin America proper. Pablo was less interested in talking about the sounds of metal music in his country and more concerned with what metal

music was doing, or should be doing, to address the plights of local people in the wider Latin American region. He posed poignant questions: ‘what is metal if not that scream that makes visible all the people that will be struck down in Latin America during the coming years? What is metal, if it’s not that? If it’s not that . . . then it’s nothing’. Pablo’s reflection during our conversation made two things clearly palpable. First, that he saw the plight faced by local communities from a regional perspective. He was not concerned solely with Argentinian agony but rather with Latin American suffering. This suffering was currently manifested as exploitative neo-liberalism, but this just happened to be the most recent expression of a deeper experience defined by a history of colonialism. Second, that Pablo interpreted metal music as an artistic endeavour with an underlying responsibility towards its context; in this case, that meant an oppressive context. In his opinion, music demanded an agenda marked by visibility. If it did not assume this agenda, then it would be relegated to futility. This sentiment has been echoed by metal musicians in every Latin American country we have engaged with in our ethnographic work. Pablo was not alone in his call for a socially committed metal music that understood the historical plights of individuals and communities under colonialism and its ongoing effects throughout Latin America. He was, even if inadvertently, pointing to the decolonial role of metal music in Latin America.

## Decolonial Metal Music

In light of many encounters like the one with Pablo, we have argued that metal music in Latin America has engaged in critical reflections pertaining to the colonial history of the region.<sup>1</sup> It explicitly recognises that the colonial process is not over, and that its consequences remain an ongoing concern, representing a process that Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano has termed *coloniality*.<sup>2</sup> We have posited that metal confronts coloniality through *extreme decolonial dialogues*.<sup>3</sup> We define these as ‘invitations, ones particularly interested in promoting transformation, made through metal music to engage in critical reflections about oppressive practices faced by Latin American communities in light of coloniality’. We label these experiences *dialogues* in order to highlight the interaction between those who are informed about coloniality and those who have yet to, or sometimes refuse to, comprehend it. These dialogues are an exchange of information between equals, as proposed by Paulo Freire,<sup>4</sup> posited in opposition to a didactic top-down approach where only one part of the dyad possesses correct information. They are decidedly

*decolonial* precisely because ‘metal bands engage in dialogues that are concerned with the historical process of oppression faced by the region, stemming from 15th-century colonialism and its lingering effects into the present day’. Finally, these dialogues are *extreme* primarily because they are perceived as threatening to ‘those unfamiliar to metal aesthetics and sounds’ and because they address issues related to ‘death, violence, and oppression’, which tend to ‘worry unfamiliar listeners in the region; this includes politicians and the media’. They address issues of extremity (for example, violence, murder, political repression) that some people in the region would rather soon forget. These decolonial reflections in metal music have also found their relevance in metal studies throughout the Global South.<sup>5</sup>

As we continue to unpack the utility of *extreme decolonial dialogues* to better understand what metal does throughout Latin America, we wish to take this opportunity to reflect on the ethical dimensions of these dialogues. To delve into these dimensions, we will focus here on a certain quality or aura of defiance and confrontation, which we have found manifested in the ethics performed by many practitioners embedded in the region; as such, we have come to call these a *metal ethics of affront*.

## A Metal Ethics of Affront

The debate over the ethical and unethical use of music, its sounds, lyrical messages and accompanying imagery has always cast a long shadow over metal music. We would be repetitive in discussing the censorship of the music espoused by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in the United States during the 1980s. Still, it is important to note that these perceptions are very much still present in some places of the world as we write this chapter. The legal battle between Behemoth’s singer, Nergal, and the Polish government over accusations of blasphemy would be just one example of current concerns over the unethical dimensions of metal music.<sup>6</sup> Still, as scholars, we are aware that the call for an examination of the unethical uses of music has not always been based on moral panics, but rather on very fair concerns over the ways music can be utilised to oppress people and trample on their well-being. The work of Steve Goodman highlights, for example, the use of music during warfare.<sup>7</sup> The same could be said of Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan’s reflection on the use of music as part of State violence.<sup>8</sup> These contributions serve today as important invitations to continuously reflect on the ethical dimensions of music. But how useful are ethical conceptualisations of music in our understanding of metal in Latin America and its decolonial endeavour?

This question has received little attention in metal scholarship, and we understand the field is prime to finally engage it.

An examination of two important publications on music and ethics is useful to understand how an ethical approach stemming from metal music in Latin America would benefit from a new set of conceptual tools. The first is Kathleen Marie Higgin's book on music and ethics, entitled *The Music of Our Lives*.<sup>9</sup> In it, she offers an important and comprehensive analysis of the ways music can impact our lives in an ethical manner. Still, throughout her work, there is an almost homeostatic view of ethics and music. By this, we mean that music is seen as an alleviator of conflict. For example, she proposes that listening to music 'gives us a very immediate sense of enjoyably sharing our world with others'.<sup>10</sup> This idea is driven home by an idealised view of the world when she posits that music 'involves a sense of sharing life with others'.<sup>11</sup> These positions reflect not only a particular view of the relation between music and ethics but of the world itself, one where the world and life itself are enjoyably shared with others. This conceptualisation might stem from her overall view of ethics as a way of 'living at ease with one's environment' and how music 'develops our ability to approach others in a nondefensive, noncompetitive manner'.<sup>12</sup> Although these views on ethics, music and the sharing of life with others might seem useful for some readers, we posit that they are particularly idealistic. They seem to present a homeostatic view of the world where balanced and just interactions amongst people are achieved. They leave little room to understand how music, used in an ethical manner, has little to do with homeostasis, and is more closely linked to challenging historical patterns of oppression through confrontation. In a homeostatic social scenario, the need for social change seems like a chimaera.

Subsequent reflections on music and ethics have pushed back, to an extent, on these homeostatic views. For example, in their book entitled *Music and Ethics*, Marcel Cobussen and Nannette Nielsen explore music as an artform to encounter the other; those who are different from oneself and therefore experience the world in a dissimilar manner.<sup>13</sup> Although they cement their reflection on multiple views on ethics, it seems particularly significant to us that they reference Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualisation of ethics as 'being *for* the other' in light of the oppressions presented by the European modern project on particular populations.<sup>14</sup> Although this is an important step away from the more homeostatic view on music and ethics outlined earlier, we still feel it is too ambiguous to understand the ethical dimensions of metal music in Latin America. The other is presented as an indistinct figure, devoid of a specific context, political geography, particular history and precise oppressive experiences. For example, in their reflection

on the ethical role of music, the colonial experience is not mentioned outright. It remains a moot point.

We would like to posit that metal music in Latin America, particularly that which has a decolonial tone, dominant or inflexion, provides its listeners with a radically different ethical experience; one that is less concerned with fostering homeostatic relations and prefers to explore the tensions generated by social oppression. In essence, metal in Latin America posits an ethics that is strengthened by its specificity regarding the oppressive experiences people live through and the tensions generated in the encounters between the oppressors and the oppressed. The reflections generated by this ethical approach have little to do with enjoyably sharing life with those who oppress us or living at ease with the effects of coloniality. Instead, what we see is an ethics of affront. An ethics that recognises everyday life as a constant struggle for liberation from oppression and uses the arts, in this case metal music, to practically and symbolically confront this positionality via sounds, images and practices that disrupt the illusions of social homeostasis by generating emotional discomfort. We wish to identify three of its guiding principles while simultaneously recognising that there could be, and should be, many more.

Principle 1: Acknowledging the humanity of those oppressed by coloniality:

One of the main drivers of coloniality has been the devaluation of indigenous people, their experiences and knowledge-producing practices through systematic racism, violence and epistemicide. Indigenous people in the Americas have suffered a great burden in this process, which has aimed to deprive them of the very basic notion of humanity. The colonial experience of the fifteenth century, with its practices and laws, deprived the members of these communities of their right to be considered human, or of even being seen as having a soul. Nelson Maldonado-Torres has worked extensively on this form of colonial oppression and has labelled this mechanism as ‘the coloniality of being’.<sup>15</sup> Metal music in Latin America has challenged this type of colonisation by placing the indigenous peoples of the region, and more importantly, their plights, at the forefront of their musical endeavour.<sup>16</sup>

Some important examples include Peruvian band Kranium’s song ‘El Obraje’ (1999), which describes the exploitation of indigenous people through forced servitude. More importantly, metal songs have been able to advocate for the humanity of indigenous people by describing them as powerful, knowledgeable and, equally important, visible. Other examples include Puya’s (Puerto Rico) depiction of *taíno* ceremonial practices in the song ‘Areyto’ on *Areyto* (2019) Werken’s (Argentina) conceptualisation of Indian blood as a source of power (Sangre India) on *Plegaria Al Sur* (2010),

Yanacona's (Argentina) celebration of indigenous warriors and leaders (Tupac Amaru) on *Por La Sangre Derramada* (1999), and Ch'aska's (Peru) telling of indigenous war victories. Equally important is metal music's celebration of indigenous worldviews and ideas, as exemplified by the band Egregor (Chile) in their album *Pachakuti* (2020); it represents a term used to depict Inca legends and conceptualisations of time. These are but some examples of the way decolonial metal music recognises the humanity in others impacted by coloniality.

This ethical positioning through metal music could be best understood by relying on the conceptualisation of ethics that stems from the region itself and recognising the ongoing implications of its colonial experience. The work by Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel on ethics and the philosophy of liberation seems to us like the perfect example.<sup>17</sup> After specifically examining the oppressive practices embedded in the colonial process in the Americas, Dussel calls for a philosophy of liberation that fosters an 'ethical conscience' as a strategy to challenge coloniality. This is the 'capacity one has to listen to the other's voice' in order to understand the injustices they face. Notice how this call is not universalist in nature but rather specific to the region's experiences. Decolonial metal music in Latin America echoes this call via its *extreme decolonial dialogues* by listening to the voices of those most affected by coloniality, placing them front and centre, and amplifying not just their experiences of oppression but, perhaps more importantly, their stories of emancipation.

Principle 2: Acknowledging the reality of the socio-political context:

When Latin America is viewed by people from a Global North perspective – that is, from the geographies and worldviews that initiated fifteenth-century colonialism and foster coloniality today – some of the events that have taken place in our socio-political contexts might seem too extraordinary to be true. Dictatorships, the systematic disappearance of political activists, the extermination of indigenous populations, and government-sponsored murder of local communities are just some of the oppressive practices that have plagued the region. Some of them are so extraordinary, so distant from the comforts of the Global North, that they might seem like exaggerations, as mere artefacts of our imagination. But they are very real and, most concerning, many are ongoing.

Decolonial metal music in Latin America has aimed to make those events, and the socio-political contexts that foster them, visible to the rest of the world. An examination of the lyrical content of some metal bands will evidence discussions on colonisation and its social implications: Aggressive's (Colombia) 'Predator's Mind'; A.N.I.M.A.L.'s (Argentina)

‘Gritemos Para No Olvidar’; Dremis Derinfet’s (Colombia) ‘Cruz, Corona y Guerra’; Huinca’s (Chile) ‘América Letrina’; Hermética’s (Argentina) ‘La Revancha de América’; Ratos de Porão’s (Brazil) ‘Amazônia Nunca Mais’. Other bands have focused on very specific local events, including nineteenth- and twentieth-century regional wars and conflicts: Custom71’s (Argentina) ‘Alas de Gloria’; Tren Loco’s (Argentina) ‘Acorazado Belgrano’; Abäk’s (Costa Rica) ‘Santa Rosa’; Gillman’s (Venezuela) ‘La Batalla de Carabobo’. Perhaps the crudest and most lyrically compelling songs are those that address local massacres: Azeroth’s (Argentina) ‘Campaña del Desierto’; Demolición’s (Ecuador) ‘Noviembre Negro’. Taken together, these are all efforts from metal bands to validate their local histories, even when they might seem all too incredible to be believed by outsiders.<sup>18</sup>

We understand that decolonial metal music echoes practices found in regional literature that aim to validate these histories as real. For example, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier developed the notion of *lo real maravilloso* (the awe-inspiring real) as a way to describe the West’s inability to comprehend the elusive quality of life as lived in Latin America.<sup>19</sup> He aimed to reflect the idea that, to the outside world, certain events associated with the region might seem unbelievable. We believe his term, when juxtaposed with what metal music in the region does, helps us understand the relationship between Latin America and the rest of the world. It serves to stress that, for Latin Americans, the above-mentioned events are part of our history and reality. We are witnesses to them today. Therefore, we understand that metal music engages in an ethics of affront when echoing *lo real maravilloso* to account for its context against those who would deny them. What is being described in these songs is all too real, regardless of how unbelievable it may seem to others.

We would be remiss if we limited this ethical acknowledgement of the Latin American context to an examination of song lyrics. It is also intimately related to the local sounds integrated into the metal music created in the region. Thus, the incorporation of instruments like the *quena*, *zampoñas*, *batá* and the *charango* are frequently described by musicians as ways of transmitting socio-political messages to listeners in the Global North. For example, the *batá* as a rhythmic instrument has been used in Cuban metal as a way to clearly link the genre to Afro-Caribbean roots.<sup>20</sup> The *quenas* and *zampoñas* are local wind instruments integrated into metal to transmit emotions, specifically melancholy, over the oppressions experienced in the Andean region.<sup>21</sup> These sounds, alien to metal music in the Global North, serve this ethical principle by telling its listeners something about the socio-political context in which they were generated. This is vitally important since,

as Cobussen and Nielsen have argued, the ethical dimension of music goes beyond the words being sung, and includes the 'sounds penetrating the body, cutting across the duality of physical and emotional processes'.<sup>22</sup>

Principle 3: Fostering activist action as a task for metal music: A third principle that we wish to stress in describing the ethics of affront posed by decolonial metal music in Latin America is activist action. That is, the use of metal music and culture to call for engagement in social activism against the varied manifestations of coloniality in the region. This call echoes invitations from scholars and artists to engage in varied forms of 'activism', or the use of the arts as social protest, which has been called for in the Latin American context.<sup>23</sup> This has happened through various local bands' lyrical content, support for other activist communities and via direct participation in protests.

The lyrical content of metal music in Latin America has demonstrated support for social justice movements throughout its history. Two significant examples can be seen in Mexican and Venezuelan metal music. In Mexico, the band Leprosy dedicated their 1998 album *Llora Chiapas* to the Zapatista movement in open support of the indigenous people of the region. The Venezuelan band Gillman addressed the 1989 protest, known as *El Caracazo*, against the neoliberal practices of the Carlos Andrés Pérez government on *El Regreso Del Guerrero* (1990). These are examples of the most prominent ways in which metal music engages in social protest through critical reflections about the manifestations of coloniality in their settings.

Other bands have gone from singing about activist groups or events to accompanying local communities in their plights. Such is the case of the Ecuadorian band Curare, who have worked alongside communities affected by mining in the Imbabura region. They are known for being in constant collaboration with these communities and supporting them by playing music in their educational events as a way to foster the building of knowledge related to environmental exploitation. This role of support to the ongoing battles faced by communities echoes the call made by Boaventura de Sousa Santos to use the arts as a way to make visible the plights of groups impacted by coloniality and how they generate knowledge through these experiences.<sup>24</sup> In this manner, bands like Curare become part of what he has termed a sociology of emergences that aims to make visible the abyssal line dividing the world between the oppressors and the oppressed, stress the value of the knowledge produced by those affected, and highlight how they resist. Bands like Curare make that line visible, albeit sonically.

Finally, it must be stressed that Latin American metal music's call for engagement in social activism has not been limited to lyrical content or signs



of support; it has called for the taking of the streets. As we write this chapter, Colombia has erupted in protests against tributary reforms that echo the most sinister agenda of neoliberalism. The government has deployed the police and armed forces to face the protestors, and as so many times in the region, violence and death have been the outcome. There have been a plethora of Colombian metal bands posting messages of support on social media and, more significantly for our reflection on ethics, taken to the streets. One important example is the band Corpus Calvary from Bogotá, who have joined protesters in marches and public demonstrations. They posted a video on their Facebook wall sending out a message in support of the national strike. It showed masked members of the band on the streets while tires burned behind them and black smoke filled the street. 'Long live the resistance', one of the members stated in the short video.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Metal fans in the Global North, particularly those who saw themselves as part of the international metal scene during the 1980s, will probably recognise, even if unconsciously, some of our conceptual positionings in this short chapter. They will surely remember that moment when they held in their hands their first Sepultura tape. There was a sense of foreignness to it. This was a band from Brazil, a place where they probably had never set foot in; therefore, it did not occur to them to think of the ways in which life played out for the youth there. They read the magazine articles describing how the band's young musicians came from poverty, used the *favelas* as backdrop images for their music, and had recently survived a military dictatorship.<sup>25</sup> One thing was clear: these people were different from metal musicians in the Global North. The band's linkages with indigenous populations later in their career would drive this point home even more. Latin America was something else, and metal music there reflected it. Of course, many would limit their gaze to this singular Brazilian band and neglect to understand that this difference was embodied and musicalized by many others in the region. Now, several decades later, we can see how these explicit differences, embodied by bands like Sepultura and many others, were initial indicators of the emerging ethics of affront we have described here.

Let us revisit the question that serves as the title for our chapter. What has Latin American metal music ever done for us? We posit that it has fostered in metal music a reflection on oppression that distances itself from the more general critiques of modernity we see in a lot of metal in the

Global North. It is a specific reflection that reminds listeners that for people in the Global South, modernity cannot be understood outside coloniality.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, metal music's examination of the social conditions lived through in the region constantly references the colonial past and its present-day consequences. In presenting these patterns of oppression, and critiquing them vehemently, metal music in Latin America called for an ethical positioning of the music genre and its practitioners. The observations posed by metal in the Global North, general in nature and seemingly devoid of any reference to our conditions, were not enough for us. The European universalist perspective, manifested in their knowledge-building practices, and therefore also in the music emanating from the North, did not account for our experience. We needed to tell our colonial history through sounds, images and words. We needed to use them, simultaneously, to challenge that colonial history. We needed them, and still do today, to believe there is a way to move beyond the colonial experience and the modern project, what Dussel has called *transmodernity*.<sup>27</sup> Latin American metal infused the international scene with a call to ethics, a specific ethics of affront that sees little room for social homeostasis in a world still dominated by coloniality.

The ethics of affront posed by metal music in Latin America also has implications for metal-related scholarship. They are a call to examine metal as more than a musical genre, more than a sequence of musical notes to be dissected, and more than a passing fad of youth. Rather, metal music should be studied as a way of understanding how people in Latin America, and the Global South in general, use extreme forms of music to learn about their context and gather a deeper understanding of the social and political forces that sustain oppressive practices. This will be key to the expansion of, and critical engagement with, some of the ideas posed by metal scholars in the Global North. For example, the sometimes tense relation between metal and politics that has been stressed by some scholars clearly comes to mind.<sup>28</sup> Something different has happened in Latin American metal, and there seems to be little room, or at least a rapidly diminishing space, for those who support metal music's 'reflexive anti-reflexivity', described by Keith Kahn-Harris.<sup>29</sup> The ethics of affront seems to be gaining ground. Its three principles (acknowledging the humanity of those oppressed by coloniality, recognising the reality of the region's socio-political context, and fostering activist action as a realm for metal music) now permeate the work of a growing number of metal bands in Latin America.

'What is metal if not that scream that makes visible all the people that will be struck down in Latin America during the coming years? What is

metal, if it's not that? If it's not that . . . then it's nothing', stated Pablo while sitting in his living room in Argentina. His question served as a call to the ethics of affront. As if his interrogation had been heard by others in the region, the answers seemed to spawn everywhere at once: Chilean metal musicians running for political office and working to change the Pinochet era constitution; Colombian metal singers being recognised by their local governments for fostering historical memory against violence; Cuban metal bands battling for State support of the arts; Venezuelan musicians denouncing the US imperialist blockade of their country; Ecuadorian metal musicians engaging in environmentalist activism. They are all participants of an ethics of affront in Latin American metal. They stand as examples of what metal in the Global North could do now. What has Latin American metal music done for us? A lot. It has shown the way. More work needs to be done. But if we are to hear the echoes of that scream, this is a pattern setting up further opportunities for sonic, physical and sociocultural and political forms of affront. Metal was always rebellious and in your face, and that remains the case. It is just that the stakes of that rebelliousness in certain sociocultural theatres are undeniably higher. In a theatre like Latin America, we are witnessing a masterclass of the type of work and transformation that is possible.

## Notes

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