

11 | Exclusion and Inclusion in Australian Metal

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Introduction

On the surface, Australian metal music can be read – quite fairly – as a white, working-class, hypermasculine phenomenon.¹ With further excavation, however, the way metal music materialises in local Australian scenes around the country in various ways reveals its power in negotiating complex structures of identity and belonging. As is also the case with local country and folk music, metal scenes operate at a self-conscious distance from the bulk of the Australian music industry, which serves as ‘a sign of the authenticity of the music’ and ‘of the authenticity of the music’s relationship to its audience’.² In piecing together the scenes and the actual lived experiences of metal musicians and fans, we see how Australian metal music as a discursive practice, like most cultural phenomena, hosts a spectrum of inclusionary and exclusionary politics that operate in often contradictory and paradoxical modes.

In this chapter, we use the terms inclusion and exclusion to understand a multi-tiered practice in which subjects are considered ‘at odds’ with normative hetero-masculine Australian nationalism; through this prism we interrogate the production of metal music scenes. We recognise the value of Australian metal music as it has long been constructed as a frontier space – a space sitting ‘on the edge’ both geographically and politically, wherein metal’s tendency for extremes – its celebration of brutality, and its perpetuation of hegemonic white masculinity – is only matched by its potential for counter-hegemonic politics, radical change, and boundary-pushing.³ The Australian frontier functions symbolically here, both as a space dominated by the centralising figure of the colonial white man but also as a precarious space in which women’s resilience and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s agency in pushing back against colonial normativity rise to destabilise the accepted narratives of invasion politics.

Although metal music is largely considered an ‘outsider’ genre to this day, it maintains a strong and passionate fan culture across all Australian states and territories, with a particular presence in Melbourne and Sydney. Australian metal music grew out of the early pub-rock scene

that valued loudness and masculinity above all else. Paul Oldham recounts that '[t]he key characteristics that eventually came to be considered Australian "heavy metal" emerged between 1965 and 1973'.⁴ Early influences, or what Oldham calls 'proto-metal' bands, were the likes of Lobby Lloyd and the Coloured Balls, AC/DC, Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, and Buffalo. These acts set an early bar for intensity, guitar-driven riffage and sheer ear-piercing volume. Oldham goes on to explain that '[b]y the 1980s . . . self-consciously metal acts emerged across Australia in response to the growth in popularity of heavy metal scenes and music worldwide'.⁵ In Australia, these were bands such as Sydney's Slaughter Lord and Boss and Heaven; Melbourne's Bengal Tigers and S.A.S.; Adelaide's Almost Human and Escape; Perth's Black Alice and Saracen; and Tasmania's Tyrant.⁶

More recently, Australian metal music has been the focus of elucidating critiques and interrogations by a range of popular music scholars. This recent focus perhaps culminates in Catherine Hoad's edited collection *Australian Metal Music: Identities, Scenes, and Cultures* (2019) and, even more recently, Hoad's sole-authored work in *Heavy Metal Music, Texts, and Nationhood: (Re)Sounding Whiteness* (2021). In this work, Australian metal is understood as having its own discursive tradition that draws on frontier mythology throughout its many roots and branches. Hoad explains that:

The story of Australian metal is, much like the dominant narratives of Australia itself, a tale of isolation. The frontier myths of national belonging are reflected in the chronicles the nation tells itself; the propagation of nationally revered histories of struggle, courage and triumph. These coalesce in the creation of a discursive outpost which locates Australia, and Australians, as unique within an undifferentiated field of Otherness. Such narratives have circulated and prospered in Australian heavy metal. Australian metal is imagined as a scene on the outskirts of the global metal community, marked by a fierce independence and a tenacious do-it-yourself mentality. Such sentiments echo a wider national imaginary in which Australia is positioned as a remote settlement; a precarious frontier removed from society, situated alone at the Southern edge of the world.⁷

Like most meta-narratives, this 'frontier story' serves to organise and justify a set of cascading logics. In this case, the frontier mythology is an unadulterated celebration of the revered icon of the white, working-class male who values loyalty, toughness and a 'masculine emphasis on mateship' above all else.⁸ These qualities are tied to the stories of shared hardships, which echo back to 'the legend and images of egalitarian bushrangers, heroic resistance on the goldfields and wartime sacrifice'.⁹ This serves as

a particularising generic convention that helps Australian metal 'stand out' in the global industry and locate itself within identification schemas. It has been thoroughly effective in this respect, as we have seen in studies of the bands Gospel of the Horns, Bastardizer, Dark Order, Dead Kelly¹⁰ and The Furor.¹¹

However, this mythology is contingent on a national story that utterly erases anything that does not fit accepted and celebrated colonial archetypes; archetypes such as that of the 'bushranger (an outlaw living in the bush), the battler (an ordinary working-class man who perseveres against adversity) and the soldier'.¹² As Hoad explains in an investigation of the links between frontier narratives and Australian extreme metal bands, this definition can only work by excluding 'Indigenous peoples, women and migrants'.¹³ This is how and why, in general terms, Australian metal bands rely so heavily on imagery that perpetuates the lie that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, women and migrants were somehow a lesser part of the shaping of the nation.

As in most practices, however, the material reality of how metal scenes function across the Australian continent is far more complex and indeed implies far more complicated experiences of this frontier mythos. There is no one singular Australian metal scene. Rather, as many scholars have pointed out, Australian metal music is comprised of a host of localised music scenes in various towns and cities which sometimes interconnect.¹⁴ Michelle Phillipov explains how '[t]he Australian scene is comprised of a number of smaller, semi-autonomous scenes that intersect with each other in various ways. These smaller scenes are demarcated along geographic or generic lines – the Perth scene, the Melbourne scene, the black metal scene, the metalcore scene, as just some examples – that acknowledge both individual specificity and shared national context.'¹⁵ As a result, the scene's complexity lies in the ways in which those various locales engage – or do not engage – with the dominant narrative and with each other.

Adding to this existing matrix of influences is the fact that Australian metal does not exist in a vacuum. Australian metal is very much connected to the histories, legacies and trends of international movements, which are also similarly inflected by an 'outsider discourse' in various ways. Keith Kahn-Harris' seminal work on extreme metal, for example, points out that '[i]n the same way as metal guitar solos transcend the narrow confines of their musical backing, so metal fans escape the oppressive confines of deindustrialized capitalism through participation in metal culture'.¹⁶ Paradoxically, however, while metal fans may consider themselves outsiders to mainstream culture, oftentimes traditional practices of

marginalisation replicate – or even exaggerate – within the boundaries of metal music. Kahn-Harris has written extensively on the ways in which '[s]cenic minorities such as women find it more difficult to enter the scene', and further, how 'scene members compound these difficulties by passively or actively condoning sexism and racism within the scene'.¹⁷ In this chapter we extend that knowledge by looking at its specific incarnation in Australian metal politics.

Frontierswomen in Metal

For example, elsewhere, it has been argued that the frontier narrative serves as an identification schema for women musicians in Perth metal music because of the way the frontier connects to feminine rhetorical traditions of the literary gothic.¹⁸ Far from being exclusionary and anti-women, this particular metal scene demonstrates the way that women, at least more recently, have excelled as metal musicians and written themselves back into the frontier narrative following the historical trajectory of feminine literature.¹⁹ In fact, it is the legacy of the *frontierswoman* that is called into action and that women's accounts of surviving Perth's pronounced isolation manifest in bands such as Claim the Throne, Sanzu and Deadspace. Women, in this context at least, have taken it upon themselves as metal musicians and metal aficionados to claim space within the existing hypermasculine model. These musicians, paradoxically, are not only talented but well respected. This is because it is understood they have 'earned' their way into the space as a result of resilience in the face of adversity – which again echoes the masculine-coded ideal in the frontier narrative in which toughness in the face of harsh environments is rewarded with reverence.

The location of women as outsiders is a critical factor in reading metal scenes. For many women, the boundaries of femininity are restrictive and, thus, metal music offers a liminal space through which to engage with non-traditional gender practices. This idea is explored by Gabby Riches in her ethnographic study of women operating in the Leeds metal scene in the UK. In this work, Riches explains that '[h]eavy metal scenes can be considered spaces for transgressive bodies whereby women perform embodied resistance through dress, physical contact, risky behaviours and alternative bodily comportments, which subvert conventional and subcultural norms about the bodily capabilities of women'.²⁰ Riches also quotes a survey respondent, who explains that being in the moshpit made her 'feel

powerful' because she had always felt her body was too big, but when she was in the moshpit, it made her feel strong and 'a part of something'.²¹ This is useful to think about the ways in which many women enjoy practices typically coded as masculine. In the Australian context, this is echoed in the ways in which women have been recognised as rewriting and recoding 'gender politics and boundaries of activity in metal scenes'²² with growing contributions not just as musicians but also as fans, merchandising and support staff, journalists and photographers.

There are other ways in which metal has, perhaps surprisingly, rejected heteronormative trends and expectations. Perhaps the most notable is the continuing respect and admiration in the metal scene for Jaime Page, a Perth metal guitarist who has played professionally since the 1970s in such notable acts as Gypsy, Trilogy and Black Steel. Page underwent hormone therapy in the late 2010s and announced her transition to the Perth metal community in 2016, to generally widespread support.²³ Of course, this example, and many of these examples we list above stand out *because* they are unusual. For the most part, they serve as the exceptions that prove the rule. This is not only because of the totalising nature of the Australian imaginary but also because of the spectrum of metal music that hosts some of the most extreme and brutal manifestations of its kind. We are thinking here of genres such as goregrind and grindcore, which function both as part of the metal community but also as its most excessive manifestation.

Rosemary Overell's work is key in this regard. In her extensive work on the genre of grindcore, Overell unpacks the many and complicated ways that brutality functions as an overarching theme or 'affective intensity' that organises members' sense of belongingness.²⁴ However, 'brutality' is a loaded configuration and, as such, is unavoidably gendered and connects directly to notions of gendered violence. As Overell explains, the notion of brutality 'represents the masculine aggression and violence present in media accounts of brutal crimes, which generally focus on crimes by men, against women. Brutality, then, indicates grindcore's violent aesthetics, as well as the broader masculine significance of such actions.'²⁵ In addition to this, there are even more extreme versions within grindcore itself, notably 'gore-grind or 'porno-grind', much of this content having been banned by the Australian standards authorities.²⁶ However surprisingly, it should be noted that this reality does not necessarily preclude women's participation or enjoyment in these most extreme manifestations of metal music: there are in fact female grindcore fans. However, what Overell's work does is explain that the obvious misogynistic, sexist and

chauvinist surface of grindcore belies a more complicated relationship between affectivity, belonging and gender. For example, using a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, Overell unpicks the ways in which members ‘use’ the abject in order to form attachments and explore affect at the absolute limits of intensity.²⁷

No Joke

Many kinds of extremity certainly form part of metal’s aesthetic. However, and undeniably, there are metal bands operating beyond the limits of taste in order to cloak their racism within the frame of ‘larrikinism’. This manoeuvre is a common strategy in casual racism more broadly, usually operating with the modifier that something is ‘just a joke’, despite the clear and deliberate damage it may cause. While nationalism, whiteness and masculinity bring unique understandings of identity within Australian metal, the use of larrikinism injects an element of humour and non-seriousness into the Australian metal identity.²⁸ As Vallen emphasises, this allows significant themes present in music to become comical, ‘taking the piss’, and therefore, to not be taken seriously by listeners and performers alike.²⁹ The emphasis on larrikinism is especially problematic for bands that advocate extreme-right and fascist views in their music because this gives band members a means of deniability where they can argue that their music is not completely serious.³⁰

Hillier and Barnes’ exploration follows Hoad’s earlier arguments in which the author mobilises Michael Billig’s notion of ‘banal nationalism’. Through the framework of banal nationalism, Hoad argues that ‘the fetishization of white “sameness” and banality has enabled the exclusion of Otherness from extreme metal’.³¹ Coupled with the protection of ‘larrikinism’ and the defence that ‘just joking around’ provides, Australian metal, particularly extreme genres, harbours long-standing racist and sexist ideology.

This is not to suggest that these bands and associated politics go completely unchecked. There are at least two standout cases in which metal bands have publicly denounced either chauvinist or racist behaviour from existing or former band members. In 2019, the depressive black metal band Advent Sorrow (based in Perth) had a public falling-out on social media. The lead singer Rhys King claimed he was splitting from the band due to financial disagreements; however, the rest of the band together made a statement indicating that they were distancing themselves from the singer because of his alleged associations with national socialism.³² In the same year,

Melbourne-based group Ne Obliviscaris distanced themselves from their bassist after he was embroiled in allegations of domestic violence.³³ In Glitsos' survey of women as musicians in metal music, Fatima Curley (Sanzu, bassist) stated that she was 'particularly proud of the Australian metal scene recently taking a strong stand against domestic violence as can be seen by the recent headlines surrounding Melbourne metal band Ne Obliviscaris where allegations against their bass player and condoning domestic violence has been very damaging for their reputation'.³⁴ It is no coincidence that both examples occurred only in recent years, illustrating that, while slow and differing across various scenes, there is change and growth within metal scenes across the continent. Additionally, both cases were played out on social media, indicating that these platforms are implicated in the changing cultural climate because of the power of public forum.

This view resonates with the work of Rosemary Hill, Caroline Lucas and Gabby Riches, in which they argue that 'women's positioning within metal is neither permanent nor inactive' and it is the very conceptualisation of metal as 'outsider music' that opens up space in which to bring about destabilizations of cultural norms.³⁵ Ironically, women are often positioned as outsiders to an outsider genre – a kind of double alienation. However, coupled with this, Hill, Lucas and Riches also recognise the rapid emergence of women in the metal scene *and* women as metal music scholars, which further changes the phenomenon of metal itself and what we understand it to be. The authors note that feminist metal scholars have 'illustrated that occupying a marginal position within metal opens up temporary spaces where gender norms, both mainstream and subcultural, are transgressed, negotiated, challenged and reconstituted'.³⁶ Often, it is the very fact of a precarity within a space that can be one's point of power.

The Pub Test

Taking the above into account, Australian metal music has come a long way since its roots in Melbourne and Sydney's late 1960s hard rock scenes. Bands such as Buffalo, Lobby Loyde and the Coloured Balls, and Blackfeather paved the way for a certain kind of 'Australianness' to manifest in later heavier styles 'formed around qualities of intensity, extreme volumes, power, aggression' and rebelliousness.³⁷ As Hoad points out in the introduction to her edited collection, 'Australian metal further owes a stylistic debt to harder pub-rock acts of the 1970s and 1980s such as AC/DC, The Angels and Rose Tattoo. "Pub rock" or "Oz rock", the colloquial labels for rock'n'roll music played in

crowded inner-city and suburban pubs, is an important generic forebearer for mapping the growth of Australian heavy metal.³⁸ Still to this day, a high proportion of metal shows are situated in pubs and bars (though certainly less than previously, due to the rise of alternative options such as festivals, underage venues and privately owned spaces). It is no surprise then that the ideological conventions tied to the Australian pub – practically a sacred icon in the national imaginary – are ever-present in the ongoing discursive construction of heavy metal music. In fact, up until at least the late 1970s, Shane Homan indicates that there were ‘continued social and regulatory obstacles still evident for women within pub cultures’,³⁹ such as ‘publicans’ refusal to serve women in the front bar, the lack of female toilets in pubs and a general consensus among male patrons and male and female bar staff that the front bar was not a suitable public space for women’.⁴⁰

There is also a long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being excluded from pubs and bars. It was only in the 1960s that most states and territories repealed the prohibition of alcohol for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Subsequently, some publicans have continued to refuse service based on race.⁴¹ The inclusion of Aboriginal rock groups in the pub touring circuit from the 1980s onwards was often only at the behest of bigger-profile Australian rock groups such as Cold Chisel bringing them on tour as support acts and occasionally threatening to boycott venues who objected to Aboriginal bands playing on their stages.⁴² Pubs and bars, the typical venues for metal performances, are not necessarily welcoming spaces for women or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This adversely impacts their participation in Australia’s rock and metal scenes. The doubly significant barriers to Aboriginal women’s participation in the music are evident in Ripple Effect Band being the first and possibly still the only all-female rock band with Aboriginal instrumentalists – rather than just singers – in the Northern Territory.⁴³

Aboriginal Metal Bands

The popularity of country, reggae and hip hop music among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia has been widely documented.⁴⁴ The popularity of these genres parallels the emergence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander singer-songwriters (Jimmy Little, Seaman Dan, Archie Roach, Kev Carmody), reggae rock groups (No Fixed Address, Coloured Stone) and rappers (Briggs, Mau Power) pivotal to the broader story of music in Australia and key to increasing public awareness of Aboriginal lives. Given

the similarly widespread popularity of metal among younger Aboriginal men in regional areas, it is anomalous that few Aboriginal metal bands have sustained careers in the Australian music industry.⁴⁵

Amid the burgeoning popularity of ‘rap-metal’ and ‘nu-metal’ at the turn of the century, Alice Springs band NoKTuRNL received international attention, were nominated for ARIA awards, toured Australia with Rollins Band (USA), received enthusiastic support from Triple J Radio and were signed to Festival Mushroom Records. Frontman and guitarist Craig Tilmouth describes the sudden rise and fall of the band: ‘We went through a phase where we were hyped to the max, where everyone in the industry was talking about us being the next big thing, telling us all these great things, to then watching our profile fall all the way down to the point where we lost all support from the industry in the areas that we needed.’⁴⁶ Parramatta group Dispossessed is the last metal band with mostly Aboriginal members to gain anywhere near NoKTuRNL’s hype, sensationally hailed in *Vice* as ‘The Most Uncompromising, Unapologetic and Important Band in Australia’ and nominated for an Australian Music Award in 2019.⁴⁷

Like NoKTuRNL before them, Dispossessed are among a number of contemporary metal groups with Aboriginal members, making music with actively anti-racist intent. Yugambeh man Axel Best fronts the Brisbane band Wildheart and describes their music as dealing with both ‘issues of bigotry and racism on a more global spectrum’ and ‘issues surrounding the Indigenous people of Australia’.⁴⁸ Yugambeh/Bundjalung man Shaun Allen fronts another Brisbane band, Nerve Damage, and feels that regardless of style, the ‘next musical “trend” is going to be brutal honesty, no matter what the genre is of the music backing it’.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, metal’s extreme volume and style of presentation make it a powerful way to express social truths and call for justice. As lead guitarist Chris Wallace of Southeast Desert Metal from the Ltyentye Apurte Community says, ‘My guitar . . . is my spear!’⁵⁰

Race and Australian Metal

Internationally, it is undeniable that some metal bands make subtle or more overt associations with a white supremacist philosophy.⁵¹ This, along with the overwhelming whiteness of metal performers and audiences, makes it convenient to correlate metal with racism. In his study of online Australian metal forums, Kennedy finds little evidence of overt racism in Australian metal scenes.⁵² However, Kennedy does state that ‘the naming of Black bands positions them as the non-normative other and illustrates

the existence of white privilege in online heavy metal spaces'.⁵³ Kennedy also notes how some metal fans describe their surprise that Aboriginal bands can play music at a high standard, suggesting their inability to comprehend Aboriginal people as successful musicians stems from societal discourses of Aboriginal peoples as less civilised, pre-modern and lacking the talent and commitment to put together complex musical compositions, at least to the standard of non-Aboriginal people.⁵⁴ This kind of 'casual racism' and white privilege is not isolated to metal scenes. It is typical of most Australian cultural fields, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are frequently distinguished, distanced, categorised and patronised based on race.⁵⁵

Many Australian metal and heavy bands emerging at the turn of the century, including Full Scale and Karnivool along with more recently instigated groups such as Justice for the Damned and Divide and Dissolve, espouse decidedly pro-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values. Karnivool even followed the tradition established by Cold Chisel in the 1980s, taking Aboriginal group Southeast Desert Metal on tour in 2019. Anti-colonial ideals fit comfortably within metal's anti-establishment ethos and are reflected in early influential metal tracks from outside of Australia, most strikingly in English group Iron Maiden's track 'Run to the Hills', released in 1982. Its themes of colonial violence on the North American frontier readily correlate to Australia's frontier history.

Since the late 1980s, Aboriginal youth in the isolated town of Wadeye in the Northern Territory 'have become avid fans of heavy metal, though the extensive equipment required for producing heavy metal music has prevented any metal bands from forming in Wadeye'.⁵⁶ Socially distinct metal scenes have arisen all over the world, often producing metal music imbued with local culture.⁵⁷ With few drum kits and guitar amplifiers in town, Wadeye is not home to a fringe metal scene, but 'rather a highly conventionalised metal fandom that is shared to some extent by all the young men'.⁵⁸ This fandom is mostly confined to commercially successful bands introduced to Wadeye last century via the Australian music television programme *rage* (for example, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Metallica, Fear Factory, Megadeth).

The most striking way metal fandom at Wadeye manifests itself is through the association of certain groups of metal bands – their music, logos and t-shirts – with kinship groupings among men aged up to their thirties. Rather than buying into global conceptualisations of metal as an exclusively white domain, men at Wadeye describe metal as 'blackfella music'.⁵⁹ Wadeye has 'quite firm black/white social segregation', and Mansfield explains how locals are quick to differentiate between the two

groups, 'pointing out differences such as shoe-wearing (whitefella) versus barefoot (blackfella), keeping one's tobacco to oneself (whitefella) versus sharing it freely among relatives (blackfella). There is a firm conceptual divide between the two types of people, and heavy metal falls clearly on the blackfella side.'⁶⁰ Rather than seeing music primarily in racial terms, as is so common throughout the history of music in Australia,⁶¹ Aboriginal men at Wadey identify on their own terms with the 'rebellion, freedom and licentiousness' inherent to metal as a genre.⁶²

Conclusion

What is surprising is that despite all its exclusionary politics, outright sexism, blatant misogyny and both casual and acute racism, women and people of colour can and do mobilise metal music to create some of the most important and challenging work in the genre. The exploration above highlights the often contradictory and paradoxical nature of subcultural practices. However, the site of paradox or contradiction is often the space in which hypocrisy is most exposed and ideology at its weakest and thus open to challenge. In these spaces, disenfranchised groups appropriate stories inherent in the conventions of genre and *rewrite* them for altogether different purposes.

The two authors of this chapter are performers who were associated with the 'heavy music' scene in Perth, Western Australia, at the turn of the century, before social media became ubiquitous. Due to Perth's geographical isolation, this scene was tight-knit and inclusive of many kinds of music, including metal and a range of other loud subgenres. As a woman and a Noongar man, we have first-hand experience of the ways in which a music scene can function as a microcosm of broader society, emulating the misogyny, racism and exclusion found elsewhere. We also understand how a scene fosters group identities and social bonds that can be protective against marginalisation.

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