Wesleyan University

Sex Metal Barbies:
Feminism and Frontwomen in the Alternative Metal Scene

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Abstract

Hard rock and heavy metal music genres maintain a distinctly masculine reputation. Beyond simply being masculine, these genres tend to be anti-feminine. Lyrics sometimes promote violence towards women, artwork features hyper-sexualized images of women, and female participants often face discrimination. Despite this, women produce and consume these musics. I investigate this phenomenon by focusing on the work of three female performers in the alternative metal genre, Ash Costello, Maria Brink, and Lzzy Hale, who toured North America with their bands throughout 2018 in an effort to promote and celebrate female-fronted heavy music. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which these performers use their feminine voices and bodies to renegotiate, exaggerate, reclaim and embrace images of women put forward by the male-dominated hard-music community. I draw on a lifetime of experience as a female metalhead to tease out the complexities of these women's performances. Through participant observation, audience interviews, extensive background research, and in-depth music/media analysis, I consider this tour’s efficacy as a feminist project.
Introduction

“If she can sing and the band can play”: Thinking about Heavy Metal Frontwomen

I stand in a tightly packed crowd, feet sticking slightly to the rubber floor. My face is damp and I have sweat dripping down my back, but now that things have settled, the room is getting cold. They must pump a lot of cool air into this space to keep the temperature down. It feels clammy. People push past each other, shimmying through the pit and trying to find an ideal position before the action picks up again.

“Sorry honey – didn’t mean to bump you,” a woman says to me after she and her husband find a spot nearby. “I promise I won’t do it on purpose when the music starts!” She asks me who I’m there to see, and I tell her I’m there because I’m doing research on women in heavy metal music. “Women in metal? I love women in metal!” says her husband, and she assures me that he truly does. “If she can sing and the band can play? Mmm!”

I want to be annoyed with this man for assuming that women who perform metal music are always singers, but his assumption does hold true in most cases. Female performers are usually singers, and they usually don’t have instruments in their hands while they sing. I can be annoyed, however, that his phrasing implied these women are not part of the band. “If she can sing and the band can play,” as if she is not one of the musicians, but rather a separate novelty act backed by a nameless group of men (“the band”) who are more conventional on the metal stage. Again, though, he is not entirely wrong. Performers of metal music are typically men, and the women who participate are often criticized for using a “novelty factor” to gain
success and popularity. Maybe I can’t be annoyed after all. At least this man is a fan of the frontwoman’s novelty, not a critic of it. I turn toward the stage and prepare myself for the frontwoman I’m there to see and the rest of her band. What are their names again?

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which female performers of metal music use their feminine voices and bodies to carve out a space in which they can assert both belonging and difference. They renegotiate, exaggerate, reclaim and embrace the often sexualized and/or sexist images of women put forward by the male-dominated hard-music community—in the words of In This Moment’s frontwoman Maria Brink, images of a “Sex Metal Barbie.”1 I focus on the vocals of heavy metal music, where much of women’s work has been, rather than taking a “guitarocentric” approach to the genre (Walser 1993: xv). I also draw on a lifetime of experience as a female metalhead to tease out the complexities of these women’s performances and to read them as feminist texts.

Early academic descriptions of the metal scene highlight its masculinist nature. Sociologist Deena Weinstein’s 1991 book, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*, greatly influenced the trajectory of metal music studies, including its treatment of gender issues. In the book, Weinstein says that the metal audience “is masculinist. That is, the heavy metal subculture, as a community with shared values, norms, and behaviors, highly esteems masculinity...heavy metal fans are deadly earnest about the value of the male identity” (Weinstein 1991: 104). The metal genre

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1 “Sex Metal Barbie” is a song title from In This Moment’s 2012 album, *Blood*, in which lead singer Maria Brink addresses the sexist things people in the metal community say about her on the internet. The song will be discussed in Chapter 2.
has been associated with men and masculinity since its origins in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One reason for this association is the demographic make-up of the community, which was and continues to be primarily male. Across the many various subgenres, the vast majority of metal performers are men, and men also typically make up the majority of metal audiences.

Beyond this, the music itself is masculine. Lyrics revolve around ideals that are commonly associated with masculinity—things like aggression, power, and individualism. Another sociologist, Adam Rafalovich, goes so far as to say that “heavy metal lyrics may be viewed as ‘ideological representations’ of manhood, demonstrating individualism through extreme domination or, conversely, extreme suffering” (2006: 20). His study analyses the lyrics of 603 heavy metal songs, revealing an overarching fixation on individualism that he connects to a traditional male identity. Importantly, metal music’s masculinity is not limited to its lyrical content. The sound of metal is aggressive, loud, and notably penetrative. In Weinstein’s words, “Due to the prominence of the heavy bottom sound, heavy metal has a tactile dimension. The music can be felt, not only metaphorically, but literally, particularly in the listener’s chest” (1991: 25). One of the genre’s most important sonic features is the virtuosic playing of the masculine-gendered electric guitar, which is situated within a longstanding narrative of male excellence and genius in music (Biddle & Jarmen-Ivens 2007: 10). The musicologist Robert Walser, who also published a book on heavy metal in the early 1990s, defines the musical sound as featuring “impressive feats on the electric guitar, counterposed with the experience of power and control that is built up through vocal extremes, guitar power chords,
distortion, and sheer volume of bass and drums,” which he relates to “fantasies of masculine virtuosity and control” (Walser 1993: 108-109).

According to early scholarship on heavy metal culture, female fans were allowed to participate either by shedding femininity and joining the scene as “one of the boys” or by adopting a hyper-sexualized self-presentation and catering to the dominant heterosexual male gaze (Weinstein 1991: 105). Otherwise, they would not be accepted as scene members. Barriers to participation are even more daunting for female performers than they are for fans. They were so daunting when Weinstein was writing in the early 1990s that she suggested women aspiring to perform metal music “abandon all hope” (1991: 64). Even when women did succeed as performers, she saw them succeeding primarily as sexual objects (Weinstein 1991: 68).

Until recent years, academic discussions of metal music have accepted the gender rules laid out in the 1990s. Sarah Kitteringham’s 2014 thesis on the treatment of women in metal points to a fundamental flaw in this approach to gender in metal music. She writes, “The latest research tells us that metal is masculinist...However, women are metal scene members, they create metal music that perpetuates specific imagery and ideologies, and they work within metal to support their music of choice. This reveals a gap in scholarship…” (Kitteringham 2014: 29). We hear over and over again that metal is masculinist and hostile to women, yet there have always been female metal fans and performers, and there have almost always been commercially successful and even famous women performing within the heavy metal cannon. Despite daunting barriers to participation, many women choose metal.
During the summer of 2018, I spent a week in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame’s Library & Archives flipping through folder after folder of publicity materials, fanzines, newspaper clippings, posters, and beyond looking for any information that might help fill the gap in scholarship on women’s experiences in the history and development of heavy music. I sorted through old photographs of Warlock, a German metal band fronted by Queen of Metal Doro Pesch in the 1980s, and Vixen, an all-female American glam metal band formed in the early 70s. I explored press kits for Girlschool, a band that rose to prominence in the late 70s with the new wave of British heavy metal, and Lita Ford, who began her career as lead guitarist for the Runaways before transitioning into a successful solo career in the 1980s.

A file on the singer and actress Wendy O. Williams shed some light on the question of hypersexualized women performers in heavy metal. Williams began her career acting in adult films and live sex shows. In 1979, she began her music career by joining the Plasmatics as singer/frontwoman. She became a solo artist five years later. Even in her musical endeavors, partial nudity was a regular feature of her performances. The file I found contained a transcription of an interview with Williams dated October 1982, where the last question asked was: “What about the sexuality of your performance? It seems to raise a lot of eyebrows.” Williams responded:

I’m just being myself onstage. Rock and roll has always been aggressive; raw and sexual in its attitude. Male rock stars have been expressing their sexuality for years, but people would rather a woman be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. There’s a double-standard there and it’s time to end it. (Capitol Records 1982)
If some heavy metal scholar from the 1990s tried to tell Wendy O. Williams she had succeeded, but primarily as a sexual object, I do not think she would have let the double standard slide. Why can’t she be a sexual subject?

Over the years, more and more women have become prominent performers in various metal subgenres all over the world, primarily as vocalists but also as instrumentalists. The 1990s saw the rise of women vocalists in symphonic metal bands like Nightwish, death metal bands like Arch Enemy, nu metal bands like Otep, and many others. Recently, heavy metal has even gained a Japanese kawaii metal band called Babymetal, which features three young girl singers who perform choreography reminiscent of other Japanese idol genres. For anyone interested in listening to more women from all across the vast metal domain, I recommend following “Sisters that Slay” on Spotify, a playlist curated by Heidi Shepherd, one of the two frontwomen who sing in the band Butcher Babies. Listening to this playlist makes the gap in scholarship Kitteringham identified in 2014 all the more real. It makes the gap in scholarship audible. With so many “sisters that slay,” we can no longer think about metal in exclusively masculinist terms.

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2 The band name “Butcher Babies” is taken from a Plasmatics song called “Butcher Baby” (New Hope for the Wretched 1980). Wendy O. Williams is one of their greatest influences.
This gap in scholarship was further explored in the 2015 special issue of the journal *Metal Music Studies* on “Metal and Marginalization,” the introduction to which sums up what we are missing when we focus on metal as a strictly masculinist pursuit: “[We leave] unasked questions of when metal experiences are not shaped by marginal positions. In what ways is metal not ‘masculinist’?...What new avenues for thinking about music, music participation, identity and power does this open up?” (Hill, Lucas, and Riches 2015: 297). Nowadays, scholars are exploring more productive avenues for understanding gendered experiences within the genre. Instead of simply “abandon[ing] all hope” for metal women, we need to look closely at their stories (Weinstein 1991: 64). In order to reflect the reality of the scene, we need a more nuanced approach to gender and sexuality that takes into account the real experiences of the women on stage and in the audience.

From 2015 to the present day, the body of scholarship dealing with heavy metal music and gender has expanded significantly. The journal *Metal Music Studies* has published a great deal of this scholarship through special issues dedicated to
marginalization (2015) and politics (2018), as well as a general commitment to making the heavy metal narrative more inclusive and more diverse. Special attention has been paid to women’s participation, practices, and experiences in heavy metal music. Additionally, scholars have addressed media representations of gender within the genre, highlighting especially depictions of metal’s (hyper)masculinity. These discussions of gender are further complicated through intersections with race, ethnicity, class, and queer sexualities—categories of difference that often go ignored within heavy metal communities. Generally, recent scholarship explores forms of resistance to the established norms of heavy metal, calling into question many of the assumptions surrounding gendered participation and representation within the genre.

A considerable amount of heavy metal scholarship published over the past five years has explored women’s understanding of sexism within the genre. In “Postfeminism and Heavy Metal in the United Kingdom: Sexy or Sexist?” Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight discuss the possibilities and limitations of heavy metal as a site of empowerment for women. Through an examination of the music’s production, they find that women are increasingly represented as performers, but “they are more objectified, more sexualized and commercialized than in previous times” (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 352). Female consumers of metal, however, consistently report a sense of equality within audiences despite an awareness of misogynistic practices, as well as a certain heavy-metal empowerment that they feel is available to any person who chooses to join the community. Rosemary Lucy Hill finds similar sentiments among female metal fans in her 2018 article “Metal and Sexism.” While Hill herself is skeptical of her informants’ claims that hard rock and heavy metal communities
might actually be less sexist than other more mainstream communities, she believes that “in accordance with feminist methodological work, it is vital to take women’s words seriously,” and therefore scholars must consider seriously the views and experiences of the women they study (Hill 2018: 265).

In her book, Gender, Metal and the Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music, Hill does just this. She uses women’s experiences as insiders in hard rock and heavy metal communities to confront the longstanding assumption that heavy music is masculine, masculinist, and for men. Gabby Riches does this as well in her article “Re-conceptualizing Women’s Marginalization in Heavy Metal: A Feminist Post-Structuralist Perspective.” Here, Riches focuses on women’s active, embodied participation in heavy metal audiences. She describes women’s mosh-pit practices as “subverting and weakening men’s hegemonic position and performances within heavy metal,” allowing female fans to “[‘do’] metal fandom in a way that is culturally intelligible on the female body” (Riches 2015: 267). Through active participation in a culture that is typically understood as male-dominated and masculine, women destabilize simplistic notions of gender and belonging.

While Riches describes women’s assertion of belonging through participation in the male-coded practice of moshing, Catherine Hoad addresses more feminine modes of participation. In her article “Slashing Through the Boundaries: Heavy Metal Fandom, Fan Fiction and Girl Cultures,” Hoad considers the ways in which young women challenge hyper-masculine representations of heavy metal through the online circulation of emotional and romantic fan fiction. She suggests that by writing feminine fiction about their favorite macho metal musicians, these girls create spaces
of resistance, recognizing “how these sites of fandom and community have allowed girls to explore issues of sexual and gender identity within a music genre that is often hostile to such discussions” (Hoad 2017: 17). The fact that these sites of community exist online is significant. In “YouTube as a Virtual Springboard: Circumventing Gender Dynamics in Offline and Online Metal Music Careers,” Pauwke Berkers and Julian Schaap explain how the rise of internet participation has given women more opportunities to become involved as performers of heavy metal. Both papers acknowledge the difficulty of entering “male-dominated offline metal scenes” as a woman and suggest that it may be easier for women to begin their participation, whether it be through fandom, musicianship, or both, in a virtual metal community rather than an actual one (Berkers and Schaap 2015: 303).

_Gender, Metal and the Media_, Rosemary Lucy Hill’s aforementioned book, also explores the role of the media in shaping the perception and objectification of women in hard rock and heavy metal, particularly with fans known as ‘groupies’ whose participation in the scene may be (or may be assumed to be) sexual (Hill 2016: 83-104). The media have shaped the perception of metal manhood, too, as discussed in Simon Jones’ article titled “Kerrang! Magazine and the Representation of Heavy Metal Masculinities (1981-95).” Much like the scholars researching women’s participation in heavy metal, Jones seeks to complicate overly simplistic ideas about gender roles within metal cultures, claiming that the “media images [featured on the covers of _Kerrang!_ magazines] can come to both reproduce and resist masculine gender norms” (Jones 2018: 459). Gareth Heritage similarly attempts to bring the discourse on heavy metal masculinity beyond themes of sexism and misogyny in his
article “Accept(ing) the Other (Metallic[a]) Hypermasculine Image: Case Studies Towards an Alternative Understanding of Hypermasculinity in the Aesthetics of 1980s Heavy Metal.” Hyper-masculinity remains a hallmark of heavy metal, but should be approached with the appropriate nuance and the understanding that it can be negotiated, destabilized, and contested.

Following feminism’s push toward intersectionality, recent discussions of masculinity and metal music are further complicated through the consideration of race, ethnicity, class, and queer sexualities. Wiebke Kartheus analyzes the depiction of war-themed heavy metal masculinity in opposition to “the Arab or Muslim other” in his article “The ‘Other’ as Projection Screen: Authenticating Heroic Masculinity in War-Themed Heavy Metal Music Videos,” emphasizing the whiteness of generic heavy metal masculinity in the United States (Kartheus 2015: 319). Karl Spracklen’s article “‘To Holmgard…and Beyond’: Folk Metal Fantasies and Hegemonic White Masculinities” criticizes the European folk-metal sub-genre’s celebration of mythologized racial purity and hegemonic masculinity. Music in this sub-genre idealizes an all-white fantasy with rigid gender roles “for those who have lost power in the recent decades: the white European, working-class men who have faced challenges to their assumed privileges from women, globalization, immigration and postmodernity” (Spracklen 2015: 373).

Most commonly, the masculinity associated with heavy metal is a heterosexual, white masculinity, but obviously it is not only straight white men who are participating in heavy metal. Laina Dawes addresses this association with her article “Challenging an ‘Imagined Community’: Discussions (or Lack Thereof) of
Black and Queer Experiences Within Heavy Metal Culture.” Dawes points to the ways in which racism and homophobia in the metal community keep certain fans from participating openly and actively. However, it is these fans who most closely identify with the anger expressed in heavy metal and who most deeply crave the empowerment provided through the music. She writes that “by consuming the music and adopting its cultural signifiers [black and queer fans] can access stereotypical ‘masculine’ power, which is often denied to them in their everyday lives” (Dawes 2015: 387). Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone also writes about queer belonging in her book Queerness in Heavy Metal Music: Metal Bent:

> For queer fans of heavy metal, desire is embodied in the hypermasculine performances and hyperfeminine video vixens of heavy metal. It is embodied in the status of heavy metal as forbidden, marginal, and taboo. Queer belonging in heavy metal means to desire power, and anger, and control, and blatant sexuality – the same desires as metal’s straight fans but with different bodies and different perspectives. (Clifford-Napoleone 2015: 2)

As Clifford-Napoleone demonstrates, heavy metal is not inherently opposed to queer experiences or queer ways of being. She challenges the genre’s heteronormative narrative with Metal Bent, boldly asserting that “metal is not, and never has been, all about the straight boys” (Clifford Napoleone 2015: 3).

> ‘Challenging the narrative,’ ‘resisting the norms,’ and ‘questioning the assumptions’ appear as recurring themes in contemporary heavy metal scholarship that deals with gender. In contrast with previous scholarship that has treated women’s positions strictly as oppressed and objectified, recent explorations of women’s participation in metal consider their lived experiences as active community members. Scholars also discuss men’s gendered experiences through projects that evaluate and complicate heavy metal masculinity. Race and sexuality are woven into these pieces,
as are queerness and minority subject positions within the metal community. For the past five years, scholars have published research that avoids simply reproducing the problems of the metal community, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. Instead, they have focused on the ways these problems can be (and often already are) contested in the daily lives of metal community members.

My thesis fits into this body of work as a feminist heavy metal media analysis and ethnography. Like much feminist work, it is inspired by personal experience. In the introduction to her 2014 book *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, Ellen Koskoff describes her own feminist awakening, which inspired her to pursue feminist ethnomusicological work. Koskoff’s awakening occurred when she read a book by Phyllis Chesler titled *Women and Madness* (1972). From this book, she learned about the sexist diagnoses and abusive practices women have faced for centuries from the worlds of psychiatry and psychology:

Categorizing and labeling them as chaotic and out of control, these doctors have created an entire class of women deemed “mad,” chronicling stories from the seventeenth-century witches in Salem, Massachusetts, to the “sexually insatiable” women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who were incarcerated in asylums (or attics), or psychiatric practices ranging from psychiatrists having sex with their patients as a form of therapy to Freud’s notion of the Electra Complex—an analogue to his Oedipal Complex for boys—developed in the face of many female patients’ memories of childhood sexual abuse. (Koskoff 2014: 3)

As I read Koskoff’s description of this book, I considered the women I am researching. They, too, are labeled as chaotic, out of control, mad, and sexually insatiable. However, unlike the women Koskoff read about, these women are self-diagnosed. They sing about their own madness with pride because within heavy metal, madness is power. Lzzy Hale of Halestorm craves chaos, screaming that “a
little mayhem never hurt anyone” and asking “when [she’s] gonna get some” (“Mayhem,” *Into the Wild Life* 2015). Maria Brink of In This Moment claims sexual insatiability when she sings, “I can’t deny, I’d die without this / Make me feel like a god / Adrenaline and sex” (“Adrenalize,” *Blood* 2012). Ash Costello of New Years Day encourages us to embrace our madness: “Don’t be afraid of all the monsters in your head / All of us are sick” (“Kill or Be Killed,” *Malevolence* 2015). These women are marked by their willingness to embrace madness, especially gendered madness.

Koskoff gives a brief overview of feminism in waves, bringing her reader to the question of where we are now. She claims that whether or not a third wave exists is contested, but if it does, it challenges “the second wave’s insistence on essentializing women for political gain; reifying binary contracts, such as men/women; and avoiding intersections between gender, race, social class, and sexuality” (Koskoff 2014: 9). Some have referred to this break with previous feminisms as “postfeminism,” a term that Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight have described as having many contradicting definitions and uses (2015: 346-347). I have heard whispers of a fourth wave of feminism, too, which is distinguished by an online presence and social media movements such as #metoo, but I have also heard this referred to as “cyberfeminism” rather than a separate wave. Trying to taxonomize feminism is like trying to pin down the waves of the ocean; the “waves of feminism”

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3 The phrase “Me Too” was coined by Tarana Burke in 2006 in support of women who had survived sexual violence. It became a hashtag-based social media movement (#metoo) through which survivors had a platform to speak and to support each other. The movement has exposed many powerful abusers. See “#MeToo: A timeline of events” by Christen A. Johnson and KT Hawbaker for more information (*Chicago Tribune* 2019).
are an apt metaphor. However, these explanatory and metaphorical terms all raise useful questions about feminism: what it does or should do, who it serves or should serve, how it’s done or should be done, how it relates to contemporary and historical social structures and other political, epistemological, and technological movements, etc. Rather than answer the impossible question of where we are now, I will explore these many questions through music and media analyses that contribute to an ethnography of one contemporary case of musical feminism.

The goals of Koskoff’s book are “that it will help its readers answer questions about the historical intersections of feminism, gender, and music; that it will inspire readers to question and critique various assumptions about these intersections; and that it will help those who question to feel more comfortable about leaving many issues unresolved” (Koskoff 2014: 11). As one who is questioning and critiquing these intersections, I greatly appreciate her final goal. Examining instances of feminism, a political philosophy that is so fraught with tension and contradiction in its own right, within the context of heavy metal, a genre whose masculinity has been documented and problematized since its inception, is daunting to say the least. The more I try to understand, the more complicated the issues appear. I raise more questions than I can hope to answer. This, however, is the nature of the beast. It is messy but necessary. I will proceed with Koskoff’s words in mind, encouraging me “to feel more comfortable about leaving many issues unresolved” (Koskoff 2014: 11).

Sexuality will be at the core of my musical analysis. I intend to treat sexuality inclusively in the same way Suzanne Cusick does: “Every human being lives in an ongoing relationship and negotiation with the drives, desires, practices, and available
subject positions to which the word ‘sexuality’ can refer” (2013: 861). The musicians I study perform female sexualities through their on-stage personas, always with feminist undertones and often with overt feminist aims. By analyzing their performances through the lens of sexuality and in the context of heavy metal music culture, I explore the ways in which they renegotiate, exaggerate, reclaim, and embrace images of (mad)women and femininity in ways that challenge an oversimplified definition of “feminist.” Additionally, in accordance with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, I treat gender as something that is repeatedly done rather than something inflexible that one has or is. I read these women’s varied performances of gender within the metal community as “[identities] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” that address and challenge more normative social understandings (Butler 1998: 519).

My thesis provides an exploration of women’s experiences in and contributions to a hyper-masculine genre. I use two mainstream alternative metal bands as case studies, both of which feature frontwomen who sing but do not play instruments. Research for these case studies involves collecting and assembling biographies, listening to interviews, watching videos of past live performances, reading popular media articles, and following social media accounts as well as analyzing recorded music, music videos, and other artistic output. Music video analysis is especially useful in the consideration of recent popular music. As Carol Vernallis writes in the introduction to her book *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*,

...the sound-image practice developed in music videos, along with new audio software technologies that meld seamlessly with visual software, help produce
a mediascape that foregrounds musical feature. Multi-tracked, heavily produced popular music, especially, provides a model. (Vernallis 2013: 5)

These new technologies allow for “audiovisually intensified” multimedia experiences that offer new meanings for originally sonic texts (Vernallis 2013: 7). Because of the ubiquity of the internet and the ease of internet-based circulation, music videos are available to almost any fan at any time. Audiovisual texts have become impossible to ignore in contemporary popular music studies.

Chapter 1, “‘It’s Kill or Be Killed’: Sex(ism), Insanity, and Violence in Heavy Alternative Music,” focuses on Ash Costello and her band, New Years Day. I reveal three major themes from within their body of work, and I examine the development of those themes as the band becomes progressively heavier in sound over time. In Chapter 2, “‘I Can Be Your Whore’: Performing Female Sexuality in a Post-Feminist Context,” I highlight the music and career of Maria Brink, lead singer and frontwoman of the band In This Moment. Analysis of their work leads to an exploration of the possibility and limitations of empowerment through sexualization. These separate, focused narratives from within the alternative metal scene raise larger questions about the representation and treatment of women in popular culture, feminism and sexualization, sonic power and empowerment, gender expectations, genre expectations, and beyond.

Chapter 3 brings the bands together with an in-depth account of my field research at live performances. Both bands traveled around the United States throughout 2018 supporting another female-fronted act, Halestorm, on a concert tour. Though each one of these bands plays alternative metal, a metal genre influenced by alternative rock and other genres that flourished in the 1990s, they also each have
influences and genre tendencies that are dissimilar from one another. New Years Day emerged from the pop-punk scene, In This Moment often incorporates electronic and industrial sounds, and Halestorm music can even sound somewhat country-influenced. Beyond this, each band’s catalogue includes a wide range of sounds and styles. They do not stick firmly within one subgenre. Musically and personally, the women I study align themselves with the women of rock, hard rock, heavy metal, and hard or heavy music in a general sense. I discuss their work accordingly, considering hard rock and heavy metal genres broadly throughout this thesis, rather than getting caught up in the divisions of subgenre as many within metal culture do.

My fieldwork takes place at five concerts in four states: Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York (city and upstate), and Maine. At these events, I engaged in participant observation; I moved and danced, threw up my fist and horns, and screamed, shouted, and sang along with my fellow audience members. I also conducted informal interviews with those around me, treating them more as natural conversations than research-driven lines of questioning. During and after each concert, I wrote down my thoughts, feelings, observations, questions, and impressions for later analysis, making my field notes an invaluable resource for my writing. The show itself provided a wealth of material for analysis, as well, as it communicated a feminist agenda both directly and through subtler artistic means. I combine my performance analysis with geospatial analysis by plotting the tour on a map of the United States and using this visual data to assess the scope of the tour’s impact. Through subjective ethnographic research at events and analyses of the spaces and places in which they occur, I evaluate this tour’s efficacy as a feminist project.
Chapter 1

“It’s Kill or Be Killed”: Sex(ism), Insanity, and Violence in Heavy Alternative Music

On May 11, 2018, I went to the Tsongas Center in Lowell, MA to see In This Moment, a band I had been researching for about eight months. I walked into the venue late after struggling to park in a garage that required cash payment. A woman with one side of her hair dyed a vibrant red and the other side dyed pitch black was running around the stage, desperately trying to engage an audience that was only half interested. Despite a lack of liveliness in the crowd, she persisted. She demanded that those who had gathered in front of the stage move, sing, and put their fists in the air. The amount of energy she and the rest of the band put into the performance caught my attention immediately, as it was comical when juxtaposed with the audience behavior at the back of the venue: people sauntered around the space, getting beers and preparing themselves for the headliners. Little did I know that the drive and persistent energy this woman was on stage demonstrating had kept her band New Years Day performing for the last thirteen years.

The band New Years Day formed in Anaheim, CA in 2005, but the only band member who remains from that time is the lead vocalist Ashley “Ash” Costello. Every other member has been replaced. The original bassist and primary songwriter, Adam Lohrbach, left the pop-punk band Home Grown after more than 10 years to form New Years Day in the same pop-punk style, but after the new band’s first record label went bankrupt in 2008, Lohrbach left them, too. While its pop-punk origins are still audible in some songs, New Years Day has become much heavier since then.
Through line-up changes and stylistic developments, New Years Day has transformed from a small-stage act at Warped Tour to a heavy-metal headliner, continuously embodying the fresh-start spirit of its holiday namesake.

That attitude has been crucial to the band’s survival in a harsh and often sexist music industry. During a roundtable talk with fellow frontwomen Maria Brink and Lzzy Hale moderated by *Loudwire Nights* host Toni Gonzalez, Costello remembers struggling to get signed to a record label at the beginning of her career:

> What I used to hear the most from a record label was, “We already have one girl. We don’t need another girl.” Even though I looked nothing like the girl they had already and sounded nothing like her, that seemed to be the general response I got when I was trying to get picked up. “Oh, we already have one girl. We don’t need another one. We already ticked that box.” (Hartmann 2018)

Women musicians were seen by record labels as valuable only for a novelty factor, but Costello kept trying. New Years Day has now put out four full-length albums, *My Dear* (2007), *Victim to Villain* (2011), *Malevolence* (2015), and *Unbreakable* (2019), along with a generous handful of singles and EPs. According to the website Discogs, each album fits into the broader “rock” genre, but their styles evolve from “pop rock” to “alternative rock” and finally to “heavy metal” with the album *Malevolence*. Three new singles from *Unbreakable*, “Skeletons,” “Shut Up,” and “Come For Me,” were released within the past year in advance of the album *Unbreakable*, which was released on April 26, 2019, mere days before the submission of this thesis.

Costello first realized that she wanted to be a performer when she snuck into Vans Warped Tour, a large-scale traveling alternative music festival, in 2003. She was watching the pop-screamo band The Used play “The Taste of Ink” when the lead singer did a risky stage-dive from up in the rafters. In that moment, Costello decided
that she, too, wanted to be on stage (Graham 2018). Since forming New Years Day, Costello has performed at Warped Tour several times. For her, Warped Tour is a place for inspiration, growth, opportunity, and success. For many others, however, Warped Tour is marked by sexual violence, often against underage women. In 2015, Paul Adler wrote an article titled “Warped Behavior: Sexual Violence On Tour” in which he recounts the years of misogyny and sexual misconduct that have given Warped Tour an unsavory reputation. In some cases, this misogyny manifests in non-criminal acts: Jayy Von Monroe of Blood on the Dance Floor frequently making rape threats and jokes, violent Attila lines like “punch that bitch,” or Emmure t-shirts that read “Keep Calm and Ask Your Girl What My Dick Tastes Like” and “I Will Find Your Fucking Bitch And Fuck Her Right In Front Of You.” Other cases have resulted in legal action like that against Ian Watkins of Lostprophets, who pleaded guilty to attempted rape and sexual assault of a child in 2013 (Adler 2015).

Dahvie Vanity (aka David Jesus Torres) of the electronic music duo Blood on the Dance Floor (BOTDF) is one of the many Warped Tour musicians to have been repeatedly accused of sexual misconduct. In fact, Vanity was arrested in 2009 for first-degree sexual assault of a minor, but those charges were eventually dropped (Adler 2015). Jeffree Star, a musician and cosmetics artist who was a supporting act during BOTDF’s “The Scene is Dead” tour in 2012, came forward to accuse Vanity of child molestation on Twitter: “We saw @botdmusic Davie bring underage girls to his hotel rooms an do sexual things. 100% ILLEGAL” (@JeffreeStar on Twitter 2013). In a string of tweets, he condemned Vanity’s actions and encouraged fans to
unfollow him if they continued to support Blood on the Dance Floor despite knowing about Vanity’s sexually violent behavior.

**Figure 1.1:** Screenshot of Jeffree Star’s Twitter taken from *MetalSucks* (2018)

I'm gonna speak the truth til I die. We saw @botdfmusic Dahvie bring underage girls to his hotel rooms an do sexual things. 100% ILLEGAL.

New Years Day also participated in the 2012 “The Scene is Dead” tour until being kicked off about halfway through. Costello likewise took to social media to share what she had seen of Vanity’s abusive behavior, calling him a bully on Tumblr and listing some of the incidents she witnessed:

I've seen girls cry because they have been taken advantage of and made to do things they didn't want to do. I have seen horrible and disgusting things done by a man on a throne that does not deserve to be there…Showing you ass to kids? Having kids grab your dick on stage? Telling 12 year olds your going to come on their faces? Making derogatory comments to me on stage. Hitting fans on the head with equipment? Telling my friends they are band whores ON STAGE because they wont say into the mic his cum tastes good? Watching the cops get called on tour because he was with someone under the age limit. That is just A TINY TINY TINY TINY portion of [what] I had to watch every night. Not to mention what was done to me and done to so many
other girls. It is a fucking disgrace. Its disgusting. (Costello quoted in Adler 2015, screenshots of entire Tumblr post in MetalSucks 2018)

After Costello’s Tumblr post, many girls and young women came forward to share their own experiences with Dahvie Vanity. Online pages like Tumblr’s “The Truth About Dahvie Vanity” and Facebook’s “BOTDF is Garbagecore” provide platforms for his victims to come forward. An article posted on MetalSucks.net in 2018 includes a handful of these girls’ stories in disturbing detail.

As with most #metoo moments, reactions to Costello’s Tumblr post were not exclusively supportive; others accused her of lying for attention, trying to sell records through scandal, being spiteful about getting kicked off the tour, and other such things. In early 2013, New Years Day’s merch guy, Daniel Rodriguez, came forward to address these accusations on Tumblr. He describes how Costello was abused by Vanity throughout their three tours together, from an initial incident where Vanity tackled Costello to the ground and drew on her face with a marker to Vanity physically assaulting Costello backstage, choking her and leaving her gasping for air on the floor. On stage in front of audiences, Vanity repeatedly disrespected Costello, saying things like “if you want to make it in Hollywood, you gotta suck this dick you slut!” Eventually, Costello refused to perform on stage with him. When one of Vanity’s young tour-bus visitors asked Costello why she was no longer singing with Vanity during the BOTDF set, she replied that she was uncomfortable around Vanity and advised that the girl not spend time alone with him. Then, New Years Day was kicked off of the tour. (Rodriguez’s Tumblr post quoted in full in Garza 2013)

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4 The person in charge of selling and transporting the group’s merchandise on tour is casually referred to as the “merch guy.”
Through Warped Tour and similar tours, Costello and New Years Day have experienced the danger of industry sexism and the reality of rampant sexual violence firsthand. The song “Angel Eyes” off of their 2011 album *Victim to Villain* explores sexual violence, as it tells the story of a woman’s toxic attraction to an abusive man. Costello sings that even though she knows the man is dangerous, she is “under [his] spell” and “can’t help but gravitate towards [him].” Chris Motionless of the alternative metal band Motionless in White is featured on the track singing in the role of the man. The lyrics he sings reveal him to be possessive and controlling: “I don’t care how many times it takes to get through to you…you’re fucking mine.” Their back-and-forth during the choruses furthers these ideas:

AC: Don’t you try to hide with those angel eyes  
CM: If you let me inside, I won’t hold back this time  
AC: Such a deep disguise, the devil’s right inside  
CM: More than paralyzed  
Both: Watch out the devil’s inside

Both acknowledge that behind his “angel eyes,” the man is sinister and will harm Costello if she succumbs to his charms.

Though Costello stands to be harmed by the man, she expresses a desire to be dominated and controlled: “I’m under your spell, and I don’t regret it.” She is not attracted to him despite his darkness; rather, she is attracted to the darkness itself. She sings, “There’s a darkness / I can feel it in your touch / I should get away / I want you way too much.” Costello’s desire to be dominated allows their sexual relationship to be read as BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism), or that of a dominant and a willing submissive. BDSM practices are

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5 Chris Motionless is also featured in the music video for “Whore” by In This Moment (2012), which will be discussed in-depth in Chapter 2.
easy to connect to the heavy metal genre as a whole. From visual signifiers like fashion involving leather and chains to thematic fixations on violence and power dynamics, the heavy metal world overlaps significantly with that of BDSM. The musicking itself reflects these practices as well. Sonically, musicians dominate their audiences through sheer volume, and audiences willingly submit. Audiences also find pleasure in enacting physical violence in relatively safe spaces through participation in mosh pits. As in BDSM sexual scenarios, consent is of the utmost importance; one cannot force an unwilling audience member into a mosh pit without breaking the codes of conduct (Gruzelier 2007).

In the narrative plot of the music video for “Angel Eyes,” Ash Costello and Chris Motionless meet at a masquerade party. The video begins with them getting ready for the party separately. Costello sings alone in her dressing room wearing only black lingerie, setting a sexual tone at the outset. Once each is dressed, masked, and at the party, they lock eyes from across the room (0:50). They give each other knowing looks, then Costello turns and walks away, clearly expecting him to follow. He follows her through the crowd of people and the sheer, shimmering curtains that hang from the ceiling. Eventually, they meet in another room. As soon as they are together at 1:35, people around them start to vomit blood, symbolizing the pervasive and damaging effects of their toxic relationship. When they are together, they are like poison. Chris Motionless stands behind Costello as they sing the chorus of the song. Without Costello noticing, he takes out a syringe. He then injects something into her neck as he screams, “Oh it’s the chase you like.”
At 1:50, Costello wakes up in another room handcuffed to a chair. Based on her facial expressions, it is clear that she is confused and does not know how she got there. Chris Motionless has drugged her and moved her to an unfamiliar location. Instead of sheer, shimmering curtains, plastic sheets hang from the ceiling to protect the walls from the coming blood spatter. He enters the room speaking in a low, ominous voice before he screams in her face, “You’re fucking mine.” Suddenly, the video cuts to footage of the two characters in bed together. Shots of him brutally beating her while she is handcuffed to the chair are interspersed with shots of them having what appears to be consensual sex. At 2:16, he backhands her across the face, causing her to hunch forward and spit up blood. Then, in the next shot at 2:18, he is kissing her cheek and neck tenderly. In a climactic moment at 2:25, he punches through her chest and rips out her heart. He then puts the heart into a briefcase, where he has a collection of seven other hearts.
The song takes a dramatic turn at around 1:45—when Chris Motionless injects a mystery substance into Ash Costello’s neck. Until this point in the video’s narrative, the two characters have seemed approximately equal in terms of power. Costello has been playful and active in sexual pursuit, using her own allure to get Chris Motionless where she wanted him (CM: “Oh it’s the chase you like”). The turn from playful to sinister begins when bystanders start to spit up blood (1:35). Something is clearly wrong. Within the next 10 seconds, Chris Motionless takes all power and control away from Costello by drugging her. Vocally, he delivers his first fully screamed line at this point. He has used screaming to decorate earlier lines (e.g. screaming the word “back,” the highest note in the primarily melodic line “I won’t hold back this time”), but he has not yet prioritized this distorted vocality over melody. As he takes narrative power, he uses excess power to force sustained distortion in his voice.
The setting and musical sound both change at this point. Costello wakes up in a new room away from the party, the guitar melody feels anticipatory and withheld, and Chris Motionless speaks in a low voice: “I don’t care how many times it takes to get through to you. This is a force that not even God can stop.” Here, he puts himself into a power position above that of a divine higher power, saying that his own will dominates that of God. Then the music explodes with energy, releasing the previously withheld sonic power, and Chris Motionless screams his most aggressive and possessive line yet: “You’re fucking mine.” This sonic explosion coincides with a narrative release of physical tension, both sexually and violently. Visuals shift between a sex scene and a violent beating as Costello sings, “You have this power over me and there’s no way to fight it.” Her clean, melodic vocal delivery maintains her submissive position in relation to Chris Motionless’ screams, which come in between and overlap with Costello’s lines. Right before he literally rips her heart out, Costello sings softly: “Take my breath / baby reach inside my chest.” In response to these lyrics, the viewer is left to ask, “Is this what she was asking for?” or, alternatively, “Was she asking for it?”

This music video offers images of both mutual sexual desire and physical assault. It moves between an idealized sexual dominance that could be played out by two consenting adults and a violent, sexually motivated murder. I read the murder as a metaphor for the effect this dangerous attraction has on Costello. By allowing this man to have so much power over her, she puts herself in a vulnerable position—one in which she could become his victim. Even if the result is not literally murder, her attraction to a possessive and controlling individual puts her in that vulnerable
position. Additionally, the sex depicted in the video does not appear to be rape (at least, not forcible rape). Perhaps this video combines images of consent and blatant assault to comment on less obvious forms of sexual violence, such as those that involve manipulation, coercion, and/or psychological abuse. In another sense, it shows a woman who “wants [a man] way too much” being taken advantage of by that man, much like a young fan can be taken advantage of by a musician she idolizes.

In the very last moments of the music video, Costello comes back to life. She opens her eyes to reveal that they’ve become black. The change in her eyes references another song on this album, “Victims,” in which she sings, “You would see a change in these eyes / but you’ve sewn yours closed / I’m not your heroine / I’m a victim to your ways.” This song shares the concept of the album title, relating a transition from “Victim to Villain.” Having been a victim of abuse, she is now transforming into a villain (“I can feel the change inside / they will be terrified of what comes next”). The narrative of “Angel Eyes” shows Costello as a victim to Chris Motionless’ ways. The final image in the music video shows that because of the abuse she has suffered, she will now be a black-eyed and literally heartless villain.

Figure 1.4: Screenshot from the “Angel Eyes” music video (2:54 – 2:58)
The next album, *Malevolence*, picks up where *Victim to Villain* left off. Costello has officially transitioned from victim to malevolent villain, and New Year’s music has become the heaviest it has ever been. As Jeffrey Easton said in an album review on *Metal Exiles*, “*Malevolence* is what heavy music should be. Thick, dirty, disturbing and as they so eloquently put it, Sick” (Easton 2015). Here, he references the opening track’s chanted line, “sick, sick, all of us are sick.” This track is called “Kill or Be Killed,” and it was released as a single while the band was on Warped Tour during the summer of 2015. Unlike in “Angel Eyes,” Costello is the aggressor in this song. She is still in the position of someone who has been wronged, but she is now ready to fight back. Lines like “my vengeance is a curse” and “I want to watch you bleed” show that she will no longer take the abuse she has been taking; rather, she will be the one to dish it out. As we hear in the chorus, she has been pushed as far as she can be pushed:

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Back against the wall so
It’s kill or be killed
No other choice then blood’s gonna spill
Back against the wall so
Forget or forgive
But after all this I never will
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Costello does not scream during this song, but her melodic vocals are not entirely clean either. She distorts the tone of certain words more than others, especially at the ends of lines (e.g. “bleed” in “I want to watch you bleed”). Where screaming would mask her gender, she instead incorporates a rasp into her voice, performing a sort of masculinized femininity. She harnesses the power associated with distorted sound without sacrificing the womanliness of her tone and melodic range or the integrity of her pitch accuracy.
The chanted line, “sick, sick, all of us are sick,” occurs three times throughout the song. I read this line as an allusion to the longstanding connection between the metal community and mental health issues. In the introduction to their recent article “Contextualizing the Mental Health of Metal Youth: A Community for Social Protection, Identity, and Musical Empowerment,” psychologists Paula Rowe and Bernard Guerin briefly review the history of metal’s negative public image in terms of listeners’ mental health. They discuss the ways in which psychological research has “followed these public opinions and contributed to them,” stating:

The media commentary and moral panics fueled by metal’s conservative detractors gave rise to a more political and academic research preoccupation with the ‘problem of metal’ (Brown 2011) and the pathologizing of young people’s metal preferences, rather than talking with and observing the people involved and finding out about their actual practices. (Rowe and Guerin 2018: 430)

According to Rowe and Guerin, scientists have relied on correlational and experimental research to make inferences about heavy metal’s effect on its listeners’ mental health without taking into account the actual lived experiences of metalheads themselves—a problem that is exacerbated when popular media stories distort research and draw conclusions that are not necessarily there. Through long, informal interviews with twenty-eight metal fans, Rowe and Guerin found that metal identity formation did not cause, but more likely protected individuals from mental health problems. Those suffering psychologically find community in heavy music, where “all of us are sick.”

This line is also performed with gang vocals, meaning that the listener hears a group shouting the words rather than Costello singing them alone. This indicates that during live performances, audiences will be expected to shout along, presumably with firsts pumping into the air. By participating, you become a member of the line’s “us.”
All of us, including you, are sick. This adds to the idea of metal community formation as refuge from internal strife caused by mental health issues (or at the very least, refuge from the stigma surrounding these issues). “Metal community life” is significant given that the genre itself revolves thematically around notions of alienation and isolation. In his study of 603 metal songs, sociologist Adam Rafalovich writes that “individualistic narratives in song lyrics, depicting the self as willingly or unwillingly set apart from others, became visible in the initial analysis and were a unifying thread for most of the data set” (2006: 22). He connects this fixation on individualism to a traditional male identity and the idea that a man finds strength in himself rather than through relationships with others. Individualism, for Rafalovich, is a marker of the genre’s masculinity. Outside of the chanted sections, lyrics to “Kill or Be Killed” are consistent with this trend. The title itself references a survival-of-the-fittest mentality that rejects communities of care and protection, which are traditionally gendered feminine.

In the book *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Thomas Turino describes music’s unique ability to combine the personal and individual with the social and communal. Because of the physical nature of sound, musical experiences simultaneously happen within us and all around us, inspiring a certain interpersonal interconnectedness. Turino writes that “good music making or dancing is a realization of ideal—Possible—human relationships where the identification with others is so direct and so intense that we feel, for those best moments, as if our selves had merged” (2008: 19). The lyrics of metal music may emphasize individualism and isolation, but when a group of people come together to experience music in a space, they are automatically connected in significant ways. I would argue that this is even
more true to the experience of heavy music, whose penetrative physicality causes it to “be felt, not only metaphorically, but literally, particularly in the listener’s chest” (Weinstein 1991: 25). Moments of inclusivity and participation are especially powerful in heavy music because it reaches the most internal, isolated parts of listeners through both thematic content and sheer sonic force.

Moreover, it sounds like it is primarily a group of men who are shouting “sick, sick, all of us are sick” on the “Kill or Be Killed” recorded track. Perhaps it is the men in the band who are shouting along, as they certainly outnumber Costello. These forceful male voices remind listeners of the community’s collective masculinity and the power associated with the genre’s male-gendered sound. This collective masculinity does not exclude women or diminish the inclusivity of the gang-vocal style; rather, women are invited to identify with the aggressive sound and to hear themselves as part of the powerful masculine collective. The music video further emphasizes the inclusive nature of this participatory gang-vocal section. Even though we do not hear Ash Costello’s voice at the forefront of the sound, we see her lip-syncing along with these lines, as if the voices of the heavy metal community are being channeled through her feminine body (1:54 – 2:02).

Visuals throughout the music video emphasize performance and stylized imagery, and there is no identifiable narrative plot-line. It can be split into three different settings: (1) the band performing in a warehouse, (2) Costello and a mysterious group of men in black hoods marked with white X’s, and (3) Costello backed into a brick corner (as in the lyrics, “Back against the wall so / it’s kill or be killed”). Costello is seen singing in all three of these settings.
Other images to note include recurring close-up shots of one of the mysterious hooded men, whose mouth is stained with black liquid. It appears as if he has been spitting it up. Another is that of one of the guitarists spitting out blood during the second chanted section (2:40 – 2:49). Both of these images indicate physical sickness, which acts as a visual metaphor for the kind of mental sickness the song is about. At 2:49, Costello begins singing over the shouted gang-vocals: “My sanity slid far from me / Provoked by rage, it’s driven me insane.”

Figure 1.6: Screenshots of sickness in the “Kill or Be Killed” music video
Costello plays the role of madwoman in many New Years Day songs, using insanity as the source of her strength and power. This is visible in the 2014 music video for the song “Defame Me,” for example, in which Costello performs in a straitjacket. In New Years Day’s latest single, “Come For Me,” Costello uses her insanity to pose herself as a danger to others:

You think you know me?
You haven’t seen my type of crazy
Don’t think I’ll put up a fight?
I fucking dare you
I fucking dare you to try!

This section of the song is spoken softly, almost whispered at points. Costello spits out each word through clenched teeth, withheld energy threatening to spill over with every syllable. Her voice is unstable and unsettling, adding weight to the words “you haven’t seen my type of crazy.” On the final line, she builds her vocal delivery from restrained speech all the way to a high-pitched, heavily distorted scream, releasing the power she had kept inside for the previous four lines. The final word is sustained with this scream: “I fucking dare you to try.”

Figure 1.7: Screenshot of Costello from the “Defame Me” music video
Costello teased the release of “Come For Me” on Instagram with subtly moving images and brief audio clips, one of which featured the abovementioned portion of the song. She captioned the post with the hashtag “#girlscanscream,” drawing upon the idea that listeners might not expect women to use such a brutal vocal technique:

“You think you know me? You haven’t seen my type of crazy” #comeforme out in 2 days. Another track reveal from the upcoming album #unbreakable out 4/26... you guys asked for heavy, I told you to be patient. This heavy enough for ya???? And you were all worried we left out the face melting heavy [riffs] on this album, never EVER doubt us again ❤️ #girlscanscream shit just got really real. Photo @jeremysaffer (@ashcostello on Instagram 2019)

“Come For Me” was released on April 5, 2019—two days later—to get fans excited for the album Unbreakable, which was released three weeks after this teaser post.

The imagery that accompanies the single’s teaser posts and the lyric video that was released with it shows Costello from the waist up, nude and covered in blood. She covers her nipples with her hands as she looks menacingly into the camera, a slight smile visible at the corners of her mouth. The words “New Years Day” are written in blood above her breasts, and “Come For Me” is written below. They look as if they have been carved into her skin, which someone else may have done to her or she may have done to herself. It is hard to say from the image alone. However, @punkish.rogue jokingly commented on the Instagram teaser, “Ash I hope you’re okay...You seem to have lost quite a bit of blood...I’m worried...CAN’T WAIT FOR THE RELEASE THOUGH ❤️❤️” and @ashcostello jokingly responded, “@punkish.rogue you should see the other guy 🤷‍♀️,” implying that whatever violence occurred should not be read as entirely self-inflicted.
Like the single’s artwork, the musical sound and lyrical content combine insanity with violence and sexuality. Even the song title “Come For Me” can be interpreted both as aggressive, telling someone to confront you, and as a sexual demand. The lyrics to the chorus expand on these two possible meanings:

Come, come for me
Say it to my face when you talk about me
Come, come for me
I’ll have you screaming when you
Come, come for me...
“Say it to my face when you talk about me” is delivered on a pitched shout, while “I’ll have you screaming when you” is given a light and sensuous melody, vocally highlighting the difference between the former antagonistic command and the latter sexual boast. What could be New Year’s heaviest track yet combines three factors that are central to the band’s identity: rage induced insanity, insanity driven violence, and violent sexuality.

The cover story for the 353rd issue of Alternative Press magazine, published in December 2017, was Ash Costello’s rise to prominence in the heavy alternative scene. In it, Costello talks at length about her transformation from “victim to villain.” She and her band had been taken advantage of from the very beginning of her music career. Almost as soon as they began, they lost their label, several of their bandmates, and the rights to their music. Depression kept her from continuing in music for some time, but when she did, she was taken advantage of yet again to the point where she was owed hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even the clothing line she started turned into a lawsuit because her partner brand only paid her a portion of what she was owed while using her image and designs for other lines. Costello was a victim for a large portion of her career. In her own words,

I feel like I’ve recently discovered how to be this powerful person. It’s crazy to even describe myself as a ‘powerful person’…I want to say that I’ve always been like this, but I haven’t been. I lived a lot of years being really weak and letting people walk all over me and living my life to make other people happy rather than myself. (Whitt 2017: 53)

Through therapy, Costello was able to connect these problems to the experience she had with an emotionally abusive (and later, absent) father. Confronting her father set
her on a mission to speak out in all matters, as she did against Dahvie Vanity’s abusive behavior in late 2012.

Costello’s music career can be analyzed in tandem with this personal progression toward power: thematically she transforms from victim to villain, while sonically she evolves from pop-punk to heavy metal. This can also be read as a trend toward masculinization or a move away from femininity, but important elements of Costello’s performance serve to complicate this gendered understanding. Within the masculine context of heavy metal, Costello maintains a feminine vocality and expresses a feminine sexuality, as well as a feminine “type of crazy” (“Come For Me,” Unbreakable 2019). This confluence of gendered sounds and themes allows Costello to assert both belonging and difference. It allows her to assert both her power and her womanliness, proving that one does not have to come at the expense of the other. The author of the Alternative Press feature describes her as simultaneously dominant and sensitive:

She projects strength and wears her scars as a reminder she has survived and is not to be fucked with. But there’s a much softer, more instinctive part of her nature that she expresses to fans. Perhaps the most impressive thing about Costello is that none of what she has faced has hardened her. She doesn’t hide what she’s been through. It’s important to her to discuss her various battles, within the industry and within herself, to show fans that one can overcome obstacles and that she can relate to them on a deeply personal level with her own struggles with depression and anxiety. (Whitt 2017: 58)

Her story and her music show how hardship, like that a woman faces in a sexist and violent male-dominated music industry, can shape you into a “powerful person” (Whitt 2017: 53). While she uses the images of villains, sickness, madness, and sexual aggression to symbolically represent herself as powerful within metal culture, she maintains sensitivity, compassion, and openness as sources of true strength.
Chapter 2

“I Can Be Your Whore”: Performing Female Sexuality in a Post-Feminist Context

When I was nineteen years old, I saw the band In This Moment for the first time. I hated it. They were opening for Stone Sour, a band my brother and I had loved for years, at the House of Blues in Boston. Neither of us expected to see a woman dressed in lingerie sing about sex with a pair of scantily clad back-up dancers that night. Neither of us wanted to, either, but that’s what In This Moment gave us. I was particularly irritated by the performance. Having only seen a few women on stage in ten years of metal fandom, I took this as an exemplar of women’s place in the community. I wanted her womanhood and mine to blend in, not stand out. I remember complaining to my brother, “Why can’t she just wear a t-shirt and jeans like everyone else?”

Scholarship from the 1990s suggested that there are two options for women in metal: (1) Abandon femininity and join the scene as ‘one of the boys,’ or (2) adopt a hypersexual self-presentation to appease the predominantly heterosexual male audience’s gaze, which “projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 1975: 62). Women who choose the first option will be allowed to blend in, for the most part, while those who choose the second will be judged and ridiculed as well as ogled and objectified. The psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett even used the insulting term “neoprostitute style” to describe girls’ fashion in the

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6 Sarah Kitteringham notes in her thesis that some of the harshest judgements women face in the metal scene are those that come from other women (Kitteringham 2014: 105).
metal scene (Arnett 1996: 9). Without knowing it, I had internalized these expectations and judgements, and I was participating in their perpetuation.

Feminist scholars Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight find post-feminist theorizing to be the appropriate tool for better understanding the complexities surrounding women in the metal scene, “where traditionally gendered power structures may be rendered more subtle and nuanced, and available to challenge, than monolithic discourses may suggest” (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 342). They define post-feminism with the following ideas and questions:

The term ‘postfeminism’ has been used to signify an era where feminism is seen on the one hand as both no longer necessary (the earlier goals of feminism achieved) yet on the other as urgent as ever (McRobbie 1994); where women are constructed as ‘empowered’, while at the same time this empowerment becomes more and more narrowly positioned around their sexualization (cf. Gill 2006; Banyard 2010). Is it possible for these two seemingly mutually exclusive theoretical (and material) positions to coexist? And if they do, what tensions and issues do they raise? (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 342)

Their study considers the different ways in which women can participate in metal music and culture, and their conclusions are more positive for fans than for performers. “While women are making it onto the stage...at the same time we might also argue that they are more objectified, more sexualized and commercialized than in previous times” (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 352). Savigny and Sleight point to the contradiction between the sexist treatment of women in the production of metal and the empowerment found through the consumption of metal by female fans. I will continue exploring these tensions and contradictions of by looking in-depth at the work of In This Moment—a metal band with a particularly sexualized frontwoman.
In This Moment is an alternative metal band from Los Angeles, CA. Maria Brink, the lead singer and lyricist dubbed 2010 “Hottest Chick in Metal” by *Revolver Magazine*, is the band’s main feature (Mistress Juliya 2010). Brink has achieved success with In This Moment by presenting herself in a way that coincides with the second option for women in metal: adopt a hypersexual self-presentation. Her case may help us address the question about these women posed succinctly by Savigny and Sleight: “Sexy or Sexist?” (Savigny and Sleight 2015). On the surface, Brink’s provocative costumes, choreography, and lyrics seem to subscribe to an image of women put forward by the male-dominated metal community. I argue that Brink’s self-sexualized performance stylings instead renegotiate, exaggerate, reclaim, and embrace this image in ways that challenge an oversimplified definition of “feminist.” While the surrounding culture pushes a certain image onto its women, Brink engages with those expectations in a voice that is overtly female.

In This Moment formed in 2005 after a mutual friend told Maria Brink that guitarist Chris Howorth was auditioning singers for a new band. Brink went, but when Howorth saw that she was a woman, he refused to let her try out. A short time later, Brink heard that he would be holding an informal jam session, so she decided that she would get the audition she wanted by showing up and singing. Howorth was blown away by her performance and apologized for his behavior. They have been working together ever since (Petruzzi 2011). Their first band, Dying Star, did not make it very far. Howorth quit after only two gigs. He said that he did not want to work with Brink, but Brink refused to let him quit working with her. As a compromise, they started an entirely new project called In This Moment. They began
touring with only Myspace and a van as support, eventually generating enough interest for Ozzy Osbourne bassist Rob “Blasko” Nicholson to offer to manage them and to get a record deal with Century Media (Wiederhorn 2008). Despite facing many obstacles in their twelve years, In This Moment has secured international recognition among today’s hard rock and heavy metal communities.

Their first three albums, *Beautiful Tragedy* (2007), *The Dream* (2008), and *A Star-Crossed Wasteland* (2010), neither hide nor exaggerate Brink’s female identity. Videos of live performances during that time show Brink acting like any other metal singer; she grasps the microphone, head-bangs, and delivers aggressive powerhouse vocals to a run-of-the-mill metal audience, sometimes even getting inside the mosh pits she organizes (larrystillday 2009, Schmidt 2009, zedo99 2009, Kristine R 2010). Still, she wears a dress. During this period, Maria Brink appears to occupy a space that theoretically does not exist in the metal community. She has certainly not shed femininity to conform to the genre’s masculine codes (Weinstein 1991: 105), yet she does not behave completely according to the expectations of women. She falls somewhere in between hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine.

In 2012, In This Moment took a turn toward overt sexuality with the album *Blood*. The lyrics to the album’s title track include:

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Blood, blood, blood,
Pump mud through my veins.
I’m a dirty, dirty girl.
I want it filthy.
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The music video shows Brink naked, covering her breasts with her hands and hair. Other scenes have her seated in a throne surrounded by nearly naked women in
masks. Their nipples are concealed with flesh-colored tape, which is seen most clearly when the video cuts to close-up shots of their muddy torsos as they touch each other sensually. The following song, “Adrenalize,” communicates Brink’s carnal desires without any subtlety; she requests, “Let me tell you how I want it,” and commands, “Make me feel like a god / Adrenaline and sex.” A sexy nurse character is featured at the beginning of the music video, who forces Brink to take a mysterious pill while she is restrained, apparently causing her to writhe in sexual pleasure. The majority of the video is shamelessly orgiastic, as Brink dances with a crowd of nearly naked but masked men and women as they, again, touch each other sensually. Masks, near-nudity, and body-to-body contact are common between both videos.

Figure 2.1: Screenshots from the music videos for “Blood” and “Adrenalize”

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7 These women are introduced as the “Blood Dancers” in the 2014 concert DVD, Blood at the Orpheum. Brink reveals on the DVD that the band was resistant to the idea of incorporating dancers into the show. To this day, the Blood Dancers perform with In This Moment and appear in their music videos.
Brink’s vocal style is marked by shifts between vocalities: a hoarse and brassy chest voice, a high-pitched and distorted scream, an airy, moaning tone which may or may not be melodically pitched—everything except the low growl of extreme metal genres. For example, the chorus of “Blood” is delivered on a hoarse, pitched shout until the last word of the phrase, which drops to a soft, descending moan (e.g. “Blood, blood, blood...I want it filthy,” where everything before “filthy” is shouted and only filthy is moaned). “Adrenalize” likewise features a range of vocalities; verses are sung in a soft, raspy, moaning voice, choruses are delivered in a stronger chest voice, and the bridge is shouted and screamed without clear pitched melody. I use the word “moan” repeatedly here to bring attention to a sexual tone that marks much of her vocal delivery. It is particularly recognizable on both “Blood” and “Adrenalize.”

The song “Whore” off of Blood is one of the more direct addresses Brink makes to her own sexualized female body. Analysis of its lyrics, sound, imagery, intention, reception, and performance allows for a focused exploration of the tensions and contradictions Savigny and Sleight identify within post-feminist theory (2015). In the chorus, she sings:

I can be your whore.
I am the dirt you created.
I am your sinner, I am your whore.
But let me tell you something, baby:
You love me for everything you hate me for.

Here, Brink points a finger at the listener: “I am the dirt you created,” or, you produced this image of me. We can imagine that she is addressing the metal fan culture Deena Weinstein and other scholars described in the 90s that forces women to choose between blending into masculinity or becoming hyper-sexual objects.
Additionally, Brink suggests that this is what the listener sees in her because it is what the listener wants from her (“You love me for everything you hate me for”). Those who call her a “whore” are those who want her to be just that. Brink suggests that the next time they “cast [their] stones” with demeaning words, they “take a look in a mirror” and recognize their own fault. Through these lyrics, Brink projects power and strength to confront anyone who would dare use such words to degrade her based on her sexuality.

Brink’s vocal delivery is notable here as well. She screams the first line of the chorus, “I can be your whore,” and the following lines are sung in a rough yet still melodic tone. As Walser wrote in 1993, vocal extremes like screaming bring about the experience of power and control (Walser 1993: 108-109). Even though she is referring to herself with a demeaning word, she is clearly positioning herself as powerful. Her scream is relatively high in pitch as opposed to a low growl, so it does not obscure her gender with distortion and mannish lowness. She performs complex femininity through sounds that both conform to and contest sonic elements of gendered expectations, drawing upon the vocal extremes that Walser relates to “masculine virtuosity and control” but keeping them within the high-pitched realm that signifies a feminine gender (Walser 1993: 109).

The accompanying music video places additional emphasis on Brink’s sexuality. Its main narrative is constructed around black and white footage of Brink sitting on a stool wearing a provocative school girl’s outfit. She also wears a dunce

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8 Lyrics from the second verse of “Whore”: “So maybe next time when you cast your stones / from the shadows of the dark unknown / you will crawl up from your hiding place / take a look in the mirror, see the truth in your face” (Blood 2012).
cap with the word “whore” written down it, showing that she is being shamed for her sexuality. The video begins with a man⁹ following a “girls girls girls” sign into a seedy establishment. Two masked women (Brink’s back-up dancers) receive him at the door, give him a mask to wear, and bring him inside. They seat him in front of a stage, and he becomes the audience for Brink, a performer and presumably a sex worker there. Brink delivers her vocals from the stool, wearing her “whore” cap with pride and stroking a yardstick in her hands suggestively. These segments can be interpreted as a statement against outdated ideas about female sexuality; her punishment for being a “whore” is supposed to make her feel shame, but it clearly does not. By the time we get to the end of the video, the tables are turned. Brink reclines in the man’s chair, smoking a cigarette, and the man sits on the stool in the “whore” cap. Again, we see that Brink is the one in control.

Figure 2.2: Screenshots from the “Whore” music video

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⁹ The man is played by Chris Motionless of the band Motionless in White, who collaborated with New Years Day on “Angel Eyes” (discussed in Chapter 1) the same year the “Whore” video was released.
Throughout the video, large amounts of camera time are spent on her open mouth, often while she uses her fingers to toy with her teeth and lips, calling to mind the possibility and temptation of oral sex. At the same time, these camera shots communicate Brink’s eroticism as a threat to men. Sheila Whiteley, author of the book *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity*, interpreted this mouth-focused camera shot as suggesting “the fetishistic, that her commanding presence is threatening and that her mouth represents the *vagina dentata*, the castrating female organ…” (Whiteley 2000: 128). This interpretation is especially applicable here because in many shots, Brink’s mouth and fingers appear to be covered in blood. She also dances provocatively with the two masked women throughout the video, using their equally sexualized bodies as supportive props to convey generic heterosexual male fantasies of female sexuality (e.g. school girls in trouble or sexy maids). This furthers the idea that the assumed listener is the dominant, heteronormative heavy metal masculinity. Brink is saying that your whore, “your” being an address to an oppressively masculinist community, is made up of these images.

**Figure 2.3: Screenshots from the “Whore” music video**

Commenting on the meaning of the song, Brink says the following:
[“Whore”] is like a super empowering song. That is like a woman with her chest out and her head up and she’s just proud, and that’s what that song really is…when somebody else tries to pull you into their hell or degrade you or belittle you or attack you …that’s their perception. It really has nothing to do with you. Because if you know who you are and you know what you exude…that won’t matter to you. So it’s kind of a sarcastic, like, “That’s right, baby, I’ll be your fucking whore”…It’s basically saying, “I know who I am. I’m proud of who I am…Do what you want, say what you want, but you can’t take anything from me.” (Brink in Blood at the Orpheum 2014)

Weinstein wrote that “seemingly the best that women [in metal] can do is make fun of the sexism while embodying it” (Weinstein 1991: 69). With “Whore,” Brink is embodying the sexism (“I can be your whore”) and making fun of it, but doing so does not seem as insignificant as Weinstein’s tone suggests. Rather, Brink finds it empowering.

As written in a blog post on Lambgoat, “I’m not sure if she’s a hero or a hypocrite” (2013). The author of this post (known only as Mr. Lambgoat) discusses Brink’s attempt to rebrand the word “whore” with the acronym “Women Honoring One another Rising Eternally” while posing nude for the single’s album artwork. In this image, Brink sits on the stool in her dunce cap, but she is naked and has the word “whore” written down her back. She believes that by doing this, she is “taking the power from a disgusting and degrading word and turning it back around on the accuser” (Brink 2013, quoted on Blabbermouth.net). Still, it appears to some that she is knowingly using her sex to sell records, and observes like Mr. Lambgoat are skeptical. The anonymous comments on this blog post are especially disheartening, three of which read: “what a whore,” “I wish my face was that seat,” and “Just do porn already because your band sucks” (Mr. Lambgoat 2013). By capitalizing on her own sexuality, Brink walks a fine line between empowerment and exploitation.
In This Moment regularly translates elements of their recorded albums, artwork, and music videos into their live performances, creating an elaborate and theatrical stage show. Sets, costumes, extra-musical audio events, effects, props, and choreography often come directly from artistic media they have released. When performing “Whore” after *Blood* was released, for instance, Brink wore her school-girl costume and dunce cap. The performance of “Whore” on the concert DVD *Blood at the Orpheum* provides a good example: Just as she does in the video, Brink sits on the stool and waves her yardstick around as she delivers her vocals (Century Media Records 2014). While this is familiar, there is something much more visceral about seeing her sexual theatricality played out on stage in front of a live audience. Instead of watching her perform for one man, as she does in the music video, we watch her perform for hundreds of supporters. I will discuss seeing “Whore” performed live during the 2018 Halestorm + In This Moment Co-headlining Tour in Chapter 3.
The 2012 album *Blood* ends with a cover of “Closer” by Nine Inch Nails, the chorus of which repeats the infamous line, “I want to fuck you like an animal.” When performing this song live, Brink fully digs into her erotic persona. She begins by serenading and sensually caressing one of her masked dancers, then she crawls across the stage, flaunting her thigh-high patent leather boots as she goes. Her dance moves are reminiscent of burlesque performers or striptease artists. At one point, she straddles a chair, writhing against it as she flips her hair around. The two masked women grab her thighs and thrust them open before she climbs up onto the chair, moaning “I want it” repeatedly. She keeps these words soft and weak at first, her tone raspy, ascending slightly in pitch with each repetition before screaming the first line of the chorus “I want to fuck you like an animal.” The performance is more than suggestive; it is sex (SiriusXM 2014).

**Figure 2.5: Screenshot from In This Moment’s 2014 performance of “Closer”**

*Black Widow*, the album released in 2014, follows along the same path with song titles like “Sex Metal Barbie” and “Sexual Hallucination.” At the same time, many tracks seem to have a more obvious feminist agenda. “Dirty Pretty” opens with an old-sounding clip of an exaggeratedly exasperated southern belle saying, “You
don’t know how hard it is, being a woman. How will I ever live up to your expectations of pretty?” The audio begins with the sound of flipping through radio stations and static before landing on one with Brink speaking over vintage-sounding country music. Sonic signifiers like music genre, recording quality, and vocal accent and delivery all reference the antebellum era in the American South, suggesting that the words being said are dated and conservative. Then, the song begins. Melodic and rhythmic patterns, as well as the grainy spoken delivery of “dirty pretty, dirty pretty,” are reminiscent of Marilyn Manson’s “The Beautiful People” (1996), furthering the critique of a “culture of beauty” (Manson 2005, quoted on Blabbermouth.net).

Lyrically, the song conveys the message that Brink, a modern woman, is “more than you’ll ever see / more than just your dirty pretty.”

The album’s title song, “Black Widow,” also begins with an audio clip, seemingly from a vintage educational radio or television program:

Yes, the dangerous black widow is to be approached with caution, as the black widow’s bite can cause death. The black widow is easily recognized by her coal black body and red hourglass marking. She encases her victims with silk, and then kills with poison from her fangs. The male spider is not considered to be dangerous. (Black Widow 2014)

Here, In This Moment references the comparative strength of the black widow spider to her male counterpart, allowing the listener to draw parallels between this species’ gender roles and those of humans. The narrator’s voice is mixed into the track throughout, saying things like “dangerous,” “kill, eat the male,” and “kills with poison.” The voice from the opening clip returns at the very end of the track, stating, “Man has much to learn.” Brink’s vocals move between a rich, melodic tone and a high scream that does not erase her gender as a lower growl would. During the
bridge, she puts on the voice of a young girl, making herself sound less threatening. Her shifting vocality, as well as the arachnological reference and the lyrical narrative (from “Hey lady killer, come right in” to “Love me ’til you’re dead, this is what you get”), tells a siren’s tale: She lures men to their destruction. Less morbidly, it is the story of a “man-eater,” or a sexually dominant woman. “Black Widow” equates feminine violence, like that of the black widow spider, with feminine power and control (“You want control, I disapprove”).

Beginning in 2014, Maria Brink co-directed all but one of In This Moment’s music videos; the outlier is “Sex Metal Barbie,” which Brink directed on her own. It is easy to see the significance of this particular song coming straight from Brink herself. To write its lyrics, she read all of the negative things people were saying about her on the internet (Blabbermouth.net 2014). As Kristy Loye wrote in her opinion piece “Metal’s Problem With Women Is Not Going Away Anytime Soon,” “Female metal bands are rarely booked on national tours and practically ignored by the media — and worse, the ones who make it that far get ridiculed or sexualized” (Loye 2015). “Sex Metal Barbie” proves the truth of the latter statement. The song opens with some of the rumors people spread about Brink:

Excuse me, can you tell me what you’ve heard about my life?
Maybe a dirty little fairytale, a girl of the night.
I heard that I grew up filthy, a trailer park queen,
Drop-out, pregnant, statistical teen.

As she does in “Whore,” Brink addresses her harshest critics head-on. She tells them to “go ahead” and say these things about her because “[she’ll] be the villain [they] can blame,” but she also points out their hypocrisy (“Still you hold your hands in the
air screaming my name”). If, as people say, “[she doesn’t] belong in this scene,” then why is she so successful as their “sex metal barbie, homicidal queen?”

**Figure 2.6: Screenshot from the “Sex Metal Barbie” music video (0:25)**

The music video opens with an announcer saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am now proud to introduce you to the one, the only...In This Moment!” This introduction is met with a chorus of boos from an unseen audience, then the song begins. Brink stands at a bright pink podium, wearing all pink, a crown, and a sash that reads “Sex Metal Barbie.” Again, Brink reminds us of “Whore” by sporting an accessory with the title of the track, which is also the label to which she is responding—an artistic decision that is subtly reminiscent of *The Scarlet Letter*’s “A” for “Adultress” (Hawthorne 1850). From her pink podium, she delivers a message to her attackers. She does this in the live setting, too, resembling something between an elected political official and a punk-rock Miss America as she addresses the masses. In both the music video and the choreographed live performance, Brink puts her middle fingers up as she lists insults people use against her: “sex metal Barbie, whore, attention fiend.” Notably, she punctuates the word “whore” with this action.
While many In This Moment songs, like “Whore” and “Sex Metal Barbie,” show Brink to be an aggressive, strong, and confident woman, other tracks reveal that she is also vulnerable and insecure. “Into The Darkness,” the second to last song on Black Widow, provides a poignant example of this vulnerability. The first minute of the recording is a softly spoken conversation between a man and a woman:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Voice</th>
<th>Maria Brink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You repulse me.</td>
<td>I am beautiful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hate you.</td>
<td>I love you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can you even love yourself?</td>
<td>I am worthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You disgust me.</td>
<td>I am pure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m letting you go now.</td>
<td>Please don’t go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’ll burn in hell.</td>
<td>I will float to mortality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no God.</td>
<td>God is inside of me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No wonder your father left you.</td>
<td>He should have protected me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just take a closer look.</td>
<td>I will not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>You’re a whore.</strong></td>
<td><strong>I forgive you.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the next two minutes, the listener hears Brink crying. Then, the track ends. In a jarringly intimate moment, she lets us into the private (coded feminine) realm, where we are allowed to witness an internal battle. The final exchange in “Into The Darkness” enables the listener to connect this song with the others I have examined. The man says, “You are a whore,” and she responds, “I forgive you.” Brink has shown her listeners strength, weakness, self-assurance, self-doubt, harshness, softness, anger, forgiveness—all through reactions to the label “whore.”

In This Moment’s most recent album Ritual came out in July 2017, three years after Black Widow, and it is strikingly different. Brink said the following about the new album: “Sometimes, I can be very suggestive. However, I wanted to show our fans that this is the most powerful side of myself and it's without overt sexuality” (In This Moment Bio 2017). While Ritual may be without overt sexuality, it is certainly not without overt femininity. The band’s 2017 biographic statement on the Atlantic Records website opens with the following:

Throughout history, art rejoices and revels in the wisdom of women. Within a deck of tarot cards, the High Priestess serves as the guardian of the unconscious. In Greek mythology, the old oracles celebrate the Mother Goddess. William Shakespeare posited portentous prescience in the form of MacBeth’s “Three Witches.” On their sixth full-length album Ritual, In This Moment...unearth a furious and focused feminine fire from a cauldron of jagged heavy metal, hypnotic alternative, and smoky voodoo blues. (In This Moment 2017)

Song titles like “Joan of Arc” and “Witching Hour” demonstrate the album’s commitment to female lyrical content, but the focus is no longer Brink’s sexuality. According to her, the album revolves around “this idea of me being burned as a witch in a past life for teaching people to be free” (In This Moment 2017). It is significant
that she was inspired to write on this subject by a Halloween trip to Salem with all the women in her family.

Brink was sexually abused when she was a child. She was abandoned by her father, and she had to help her mother go through rehab for drug addiction. She gave birth to her own child when she was only fifteen years old. She dealt with depression and suicidal thoughts before finding meaning through motherhood and music. By writing and performing music, she works through her anger and pain, and she hopes that others are able to do the same by experiencing to her art. Toward the beginning of her career with In This Moment, Brink would even speak with her fans after shows and hand out crisis hotline numbers to those in need. She told Inked Magazine in a 2008 interview that she intended to open a center for abused children, like her, when she could (Wiederhorn 2008). Whether or not she still intends to open this center is unknown to me.

Despite the many trials she has faced in her life, Brink is not cold. On the contrary, she cares deeply about others. One way she demonstrates her compassion is by protecting her audiences from individuals who are being excessively violent and disrespectful. In a video from July 2017, she stops a performance to confront a man in the crowd who is being inappropriately aggressive, saying, “You gotta be respectful...I know you want to get fucking wild. I want to get wild, too. But you gotta make sure you’re not slamming into people that don’t want to be slammed into” (Wickid J-Dog 2017). Another video shows Brink standing behind her pink podium and addressing the racist and misogynistic behavior she sees in the audience. “I’m about love and I’m about mutual respect,” she says as she waits for security officers
to handle the “racist stuff” going on and the men who she sees groping girls in the crowd (webozzy21 2016).

Brink has given extra attention and care to the women in heavy metal audiences. In a 2010 interview with *BareBonesRadio*, she speaks on women’s participation in mosh pits.\(^\text{10}\) Guitarist and co-founder Chris Howorth attempts to describe the brutality of the circle pits at Mayhem Fest by saying, “It’s not like a bunch of girls are gonna be running in a circle around us.” Hearing this, Brink immediately jumps in with “I think it could, though,” and she goes on to describe why all-girl pits are not only possible, but are also extremely valuable for women who want to be involved in the metal scene (barebonesradio 2010). Brink had already established a routine in which she organizes all-girl pits for In This Moment audiences (larrystillday 2009, Schmidt 2009), stating that “girls want to do that and they want to come out and have fun without being afraid of getting killed by like Spartans and bikers and stuff, [or] getting kicked in the eye…” (barebonesradio 2010). She wants to create a space in which women have opportunities to enjoy metal music in the same ways men do.

Brink reflected on the decision to tone down her sexuality for the album *Ritual* (2017) during a roundtable discussion with fellow frontwomen Ash Costello and Lzzy Hale:

> I’m known for being more sexual with some of my old stuff, so on that last album that I did I actually went into it saying I’m gonna do this particular album showing an empowerment side of myself without the sexuality to show

\(^{10}\) Gabby Riches writes about female moshers in her article “Re-conceptualizing Women’s Marginalization in Heavy Metal: A Feminist Post-Structuralist Perspective,” concluding that many women in her study “refuted their marginalized positions by continuing to engage in moshpit practices, which are physical acts that work to destabilize men’s hegemonic position and power within heavy metal” (Riches 2015: 268).
women who love me, who come to my shows half-naked sometimes. I’m like, ‘Oh no, this girl is like 13 years old. Why is she wearing this outfit right now? She’s trying to impress me... so I was like actually conscious of that, so when I went into the last album I was like I’m covering myself...[to] show that without that side of myself, I can be even more powerful and fierce. (Hartmann 2018)

Her concern is not for herself; rather, it is for the example she is setting for her young fans. She wants the girls in metal audiences to see her as empowered beyond her sexuality. Without taking steps to pursue this more nuanced empowerment, girls might react to her hyper-sexuality with imitation, as she mentioned, or hatred and judgement, as I did when I was nineteen. Brink wants there to be more than these two options for women in metal. She wants to create a heavy-metal femininity than can be sexual but does not have to be.

According to Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight, “we have moved away from a politics of equality and liberation, towards a politics of identity...a move from a concern with the collective to the individual is a hallmark feature of the contemporary neo-liberal project” (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 346). This, they say, feeds into post-feminist theorizing. Instead of fighting for equality as a group, women are now fighting not to get lost within the group. We want to be seen as individuals who find ourselves empowered in different and unique ways. At the same time, Savigny and Sleight find that “in a post-feminist context…empowerment and freedom are largely restricted to their predication on individual sexualization” (Savigny and Sleight 346). A woman is empowered to the extent that she can own her own objectification.

My analysis of Brink’s performance conventions and stage persona reveals that she is not simply a sex object to be ogled by a masculinist metal community. She is like an illustration of a woman depicted in some generic sexist album artwork who
one day stepped off of the CD cover and used her voice, and with her voice she attempted to relate the multi-dimensional complexity of being a real live woman to heavy metal audiences all over the world. She is still sexualized, but she is self-sexualized. She owns her own objectification, which Savigny and Sleight find to be “empowerment” in a post-feminist context, but she also proves that concern for the collective and concern for the individual are not mutually exclusive. She uses her power and voice to stand up for those who are marginalized in heavy metal culture, including herself. She is able to say, as she does in one of her songs, “Shut up, shut up, shut up / you’re gonna listen to what I say this time” (“You’re Gonna Listen,” Blood 2012).

Savigny and Sleight identify a persistent problem female performers face in heavy metal: “While women are making it onto the stage (so making progress in earlier feminist terms in their descriptive representation) at the same time we might also argue that they are more objectified, more sexualized and commercialized than in previous times” (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 352). The nature of Brink’s performance career with In This Moment does support this argument, but I respond to it with a quote from Sheila Whiteley: “If women exist only in men’s eyes, as images, then they should take those images, magnify them, and reflect them back. Conformity to image, to representations of established femininity can then become so exaggerated as to become confrontational” (Whiteley 2000: 122). If nothing else, Maria Brink certainly accomplishes this. She takes the power away from those who objectify her by taking their images, as well as their words, and using them how she sees fit.
Chapter 3

“I Get Off on You Getting Off on Me”: Touring as a Traveling Feminist Project

When I was in high school, my brother showed me this new band he found called Halestorm. They had a female vocalist and I was a female vocalist, so my hopes and expectations were high. The second track on their self-titled album stuck out to me: “I Get Off.” The vocalist sang about having a voyeur watch her at night and how she found it sexually gratifying:

You don’t know that I know you watch me every night
And I just can’t resist the urge to stand here in the light
Your greedy eyes upon me, and then I come undone
And I could close the curtains, but this is too much fun
I get off on you getting off on me...

I did not like this song. I wondered, “Is this supposed to be sexy? Sexy for whom? Are men going to think I like it when they spy on me? Does she really like being the victim of voyeurism? Is she saying that so she can get attention?” I didn’t care about how commanding and impressive her voice sounded or how powerful she seemed with her electric guitar – only how sexual her lyrics were. I think I felt threatened. I did not listen to their music again in earnest until I learned that they would be touring with In This Moment in 2018, while I was doing my research on women in metal music. It wasn’t until then that I heard this song as an attempt to take control through an expression of pleasure in what would have otherwise been a power-imbalanced sexual situation. It wasn’t until then that I heard its performance as a feminist act.

Halestorm, In This Moment, and New Years Day spent large portions of 2018 performing together around the United States. These three bands are very different
from one another, but there are three obvious points of connection between them: (1) They are from the United States, (2) they each play a genre of rock music that is considered heavy and can fall into the broad genre category of heavy metal,\(^{11}\) and (3) they are female-fronted bands. The latter similarity—the fact that they feature frontwomen rather than frontmen—is the main reason they toured together at all.

According to the artists involved, the tour’s purpose was to support and celebrate female-fronted hard rock and heavy metal. Therefore, I am considering it a feminist project within the male-dominated, masculine (and often masculinist) culture of heavy metal music.

In the initial announcement of the Halestorm + In This Moment co-headlining tour published on *Loudwire*, an American online magazine that covers hard rock and heavy metal music, the three frontwomen involved in the tour are all quoted stressing the importance of their line-up being female-fronted. Halestorm’s Lzzy Hale refers to herself and her colleagues as “a few of the hardest women in rock” who “support and love each other” while “representing [their] genre,” calling the line-up “a beautiful display of what it means to be a strong female example for rock fans everywhere” (Hartmann 2018). Maria Brink of In This Moment calls it “an empowering, divine, female-fronted tour” and adds, “Let the Amazons rise!” (Hartmann 2018). Like Hale and Brink, New Years Day’s frontwoman Ash Costello says that she is “beyond thrilled to be sharing the stage with such strong women” who are “such powerful

\(^{11}\) More specifically, they each play alternative metal, a metal genre influenced by alternative rock and other genres that flourished in the 1990s. However, they also each have influences and genre tendencies that are dissimilar from one another. New Years Day emerged from the pop-punk scene, In This Moment often incorporates electronic and industrial sounds, and Halestorm music can even sound somewhat country-influenced. Beyond this, each of their catalogues includes a wide range of sounds and styles. They do not stick firmly within one subgenre.
forces” during her very first all-female-fronted tour (Hartmann 2018). Right from the start, it is abundantly clear that these women are performing together because of their gender’s marginalized status within rock—especially within their more specific genre category of hard rock/heavy metal.

At first, the Halestorm and In This Moment co-headlining tour was scheduled to last less than a month, from the end of April to mid-May in 2018. Before they had even begun, however, they announced a second leg of the tour to occur between July and August. Once the summer segment had come to an end, they announced yet another tour leg to take place during November and December. These three bands have circulated around the United States in three seasonal segments, performing together in nearly 50 cities in 28 states all across the country. Next year, in November 2019, they will take their collaboration abroad for ten concerts in Europe and the United Kingdom. Given the way this tour has been so far, I expect that they will announce more dates and locations in the near future.

The three maps pictured below visualize their 2018 US tour, showing the location of each of the concerts they have played together this year. The spring leg of the tour is in green, the summer in blue, and the fall in red. Clusters of high activity can be seen in the northeast and the eastern portion of the Midwest, as shown by a density map of the tour data (Map 2), but this arrangement makes sense when mapped onto the population density of the United States. Though it is difficult to represent long periods of circuitous travel on a map, Map 3 attempts to do so by showing the connections between each of the stops. The very beginning of the tour is marked with a black star, as is the very end. Internal beginnings and endings are marked with
colored stars. Adding travel lines between the stops clutters the map, making it difficult to understand at a glance, but a chaotic map arguably represents the musicians’ winding and zig-zagging lives on the road more accurately.

Map 1: Concert locations for 2018 Halestorm + In This Moment tour of the US

Map 2: Density map of concerts for 2018 Halestorm + In This Moment tour
In the words of Jennifer L. Lund, mapping “[illustrates] the interrelated complexities of music, musicians, audiences, and the world in which they thrive” (Lund 2007: 266). The maps I’ve discussed illustrate these interrelated complexities, creating a visual representation of the tour’s national impact. As Lzzy Hale said in the *Loudwire* tour announcement, these women are representing women in their genre for fans everywhere (Hartmann 2018). The more audiences they reach, the larger their impact will be on the representation of women in heavy music. The maps I have created show this feminist intervention in a network of US cities, but they fail to communicate the local, embodied concert experience hundreds of people have at each individual point. I conducted field research at five of these points, indicated with black flags on Map 4 below, to better understand the individual events that make up this tour. The first concert I attended was in May at the Tsongas Arena in Lowell, MA. The next three were back-to-back during the summer—at Mohegan Sun Arena, in Albany, NY, then in Portland, ME. The black lines on Map 4 show the connections
between those three cities. Lastly, I went to the concert in New York City in late November. To bring my objective, data-driven geographical analysis to life, I will describe the significant, subjective experiences I had while attending these shows.

Map 4: Locations of my concert fieldwork

New Years Day was the first of the three bands to play. As I waited for them to take the stage, I looked around at the crowd. Every audience was basically the same; it seemed to be equal parts men and women with an approximate age range of 20 to 60, and it was almost exclusively made up of white people. While the racial make-up of the crowd did not deviate from other metal shows I had been to, the
apparent gender equality in numbers struck me as unique to this female-fronted endeavor. Many people wore t-shirts supporting Halestorm, In This Moment, or New Years Day (or this particular tour), and many others wore other bands’ t-shirts, as one typically does when attending a metal show. In New York City, the people standing around me wore Metallica, Black Label Society, Misfits, A Day to Remember, Five Finger Death Punch, A Perfect Circle—shirts that represented many heavy bands, but none that featured women other than those who would be performing that night. This fact was mirrored in the comments of a young woman standing to my left, who told me that even though she was a rock vocalist herself and was moving forward with heavier projects, she did not follow any other heavy bands that featured women. Even female fans tend not to prioritize listening to women performers.

Sparse, spooky music reminiscent of a horror movie soundtrack began to play through the speakers as the stage was lit up in red, signaling that the band was about to enter and calling our attention forward. I noticed then that the stage backdrop for New Years Day depicted the band name and Ash Costello’s signature half-head hairstyle on a crowned skull: the right half of the hair dyed a vibrant red and the left half dyed pitch black. Given the fact that Costello is the only band member who remains from the time of the band’s formation, it is no surprise that the band’s visual marketing draws upon her half-head hairstyle, which is her most recognizable feature.\textsuperscript{12} New Years Day’s image is Costello; she is not only the frontwoman, but the very essence of the band. This was further established when she entered the stage and ascended her ego-risers, putting her physically above the other band members.

\textsuperscript{12} Fans can join her “half-head army” by dying their hair in this style and posting a photo of it on social media. @ashcostello often shares these fan photos on Instagram.
During their first song, “Kill or Be Killed,” Costello fought hard to raise the energy in the room, repeatedly encouraging us to get our hands up or put our fists in the air. As she explained later in the set, it was their job as the opening band to make sure that we, the audience, would be moving and making noise for In This Moment and Halestorm. The music was heavy enough, but it did not inspire very much noise or movement in the crowd. The only people I could see who obeyed in full-force when Costello demanded participation were the two young women standing in front of me in New York City, both of whom were clearly dedicated fans. They sang, danced, and screamed along to New Years Day’s entire performance. When Costello would grasp the railing of her platform and swing her hair around, these two young women would imitate her, whipping me in the face with every other beat. People frequently told me that they were there to see either Halestorm or In This Moment, and they had not heard of New Years Day before this concert tour. Attending a concert on this tour further developed their knowledge of other female-fronted acts, hopefully inspiring them to follow and support more women.
Throughout their sets, Costello would emphasize the two most important aspects of their identity as a band—that they are metal and that she is a woman. She would introduce their second song, a cover of “Fucking Hostile” by Pantera, by telling us to “join [them] in a ritual to the metal gods” and “get both horns up.” By covering Pantera, one of the most famous American heavy metal bands from the 1980s through the early 2000s, as an act of devotion to metal’s (patriarchal) history, they asserted their belonging within this narrative. Though Costello asserted belonging, she did not erase difference. Each night she reaffirmed the purpose of the tour: “I want to thank each and every one of your for supporting females in rock and heavy metal music.” She does not erase femininity from her performance, either. Admitting that dancing would be a challenge to the masculine conventions of live heavy music, Costello said, “I know we’re at a rock show, but I don’t give a fuck. I want to see you dance with me on this one.” By simultaneously reinforcing the band’s heaviness and her own womanhood, Costello confronts and defies metal’s masculine reputation, negotiating a space for women to embrace heavy metal empowerment.

While we waited for In This Moment in Lowell, MA, a woman in the crowd repeatedly shouted, “Show me your tits!” She told those standing around her about how badly she wanted to see boobs. “This is what I do,” she said. She would trade weed to see boobs. She’s married, and she doesn’t give a fuck. She loves her husband. Show her your tits! All the while, I was thinking about Savigny and Sleight’s “Postfeminism and Heavy Metal in the United Kingdom: Sexy or Sexist?” which discusses the different ways in which women are asked to show their breasts at concerts. Women projected on screens might be expected to flash the camera, a
musician on stage might point out an audience member with “great tits,” or audiences might holler at female performers to “show us your tits” (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 349-350, 352). These comments are all assumed to be coming from what is considered the community’s dominant group: heterosexual white men who “are deadly earnest about the value of the male identity” (Weinstein 1991: 104). But what does it mean when a presumably straight woman requests that other women show her their breasts? Is she rejecting the dominance of the male gaze in this setting, or has she internalized these heteromasculinist codes of conduct?

One of the many sexist anonymous comments I found on a blog post about Maria Brink read, “I once shouted ‘show us your t*ts’ at a show one time. She didn’t do it. Must not be that committed to the cause” (Mr. Lambgoat 2013). The cause the anonymous commenter refers to is Brink’s attempt to redefine the word “whore” in a way that is empowering for women, which I discussed in Chapter 2. As Savigny and Sleight find, in this context, “empowerment and freedom are largely restricted to their predication on individual sexualization” (Savigny and Sleight 346). A woman is empowered to the extent that she can own her own objectification. In a recent roundtable interview with Loudwire, Brink remembers “incidents like Ozzfest”: “I remember there was like 300 people at the same time like ‘show us your tits,’ like chanting to me” (Loudwire 2018). These incidents do not happen as often anymore, she says, because she has grown more confident. She thinks that the crowd used to feed off of her insecurities. Brink does not see herself as owning her own objectification; rather, she is coming into her own power.
In This Moment’s audiences certainly revel in the sensuality and femininity of Brink’s performances. For example, before she took the stage at Mohegan Sun, someone yelled, “Bring the sexy bitch out!” Based on the tone and the environment, this was not the degrading sexist comment it would have been in other contexts. Instead, it was an expression of admiration. Throughout the set, Brink wore many different costumes and performed highly choreographed dances with two masked women who were dressed to look exactly like her. Though sensual and feminine, the costumes were less “sexy” than in previous years. Instead of corsets, lingerie, and leather, Brink wore long, flowing robes with slits that would blow open in the artificial wind, revealing the nude body suit she wore beneath. The stage was also consumed by fog and flashing lights, creating a spectacle in which visuals were simultaneously emphasized and obscured.

Like New Years Day, In This Moment as a band is defined by Brink and her distinct brand of femininity (or, more accurately, the various femininities she performs). The show is always about her. However, during this tour, there was a special moment in the set that was just for the men on stage. About halfway through their set, Brink would introduce the band and leave the stage so that they could play an instrumental medley of Metallica songs. The men in the band would use this time to prove themselves as metalheads and capable musicians. By covering Metallica, another one of the most famous American heavy metal bands, they asserted their belonging in the metal scene. This was also their only opportunity to exercise virtuosity through guitar and drum solos, which are typically hallmarks of the genre. It is significant that Brink was offstage for these moments. When she is onstage,
everything happens according to her own uniquely feminine brand of heavy metal, which prioritizes sensuality, theatricality, and choreography.

Before In This Moment’s final song, “Whore,” Brink made her feminist agenda known more clearly. A podium with the word “SIN” written down the front was brought onto the stage. While it was being set up, audio clips from famous speeches about equality and civil rights played through the speakers. The clips were muffled and overlapped with each other, so I could only identify Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s voice, but the nature of the other clips was obvious to me from the context. The final audio clip was much easier to hear. It was Brink reading a passage from the Bible, John 8:7, in a weak and vulnerable sounding voice: “So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself and said unto them, ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” As the audio played, the two masked women stood on either side of the podium holding signs that said “SHAME” in big red letters. Then, Brink approached the podium and delivered a variation of this speech, which I recorded at Mohegan Sun Arena on August 2nd:

Ugly, stupid, worthless, trashy, dirty little whore. You see, this is what I was told, ladies and gentlemen, when I was just a girl. That I would amount to absolute shit. That I would become nothing at all. So you see, this next song by us, this last song by us, is about rising above other people’s expectations of who and what we should be. This song is about taking something dirty and degrading and turning it into something powerful and liberating. So tonight, if I can help inspire just that, then I am proud to say to you…I will be your whore!

The crowd cheered as the song began, and huge light-pink balloons fell from the ceiling.

13 The lyrics in verse two of “Whore” reference this passage: “So maybe next time when you cast your stones / from the shadows of the dark unknown / you will crawl up from your hiding place / taking a look in the mirror, see the truth on your face” (2012).
Like in the recorded version of “Whore,” Brink’s vocals moved between spoken, screamed, and sung. However, she chose to limit her screaming during the verses when performing live. This was probably to preserve her voice during months of touring, but it had the effect of making her vocal performance less aggressive than it is in the recording. During the chorus, the dancers flipped their “shame” signs to reveal the word “whore” when they wanted the crowd to yell “whore,” adding an element of coordinated participation to the sonic experience. After the first chorus, Brink yelled, “Let me hear my sisters!” and the women in the crowd screamed excitedly. Overall, this live performance sounded and felt much more celebratory than the recorded track and the music video, which I discussed in-depth in Chapter 2. Instead of performing for a man who objectifies her, the symbolic representation of an oppressive masculinity, Brink is performing for and with a room full of people who have chosen to support female-fronted hard rock and heavy metal.

**Figure 3.2: Maria Brink introducing “Whore” at Mohegan Sun Arena**
Halestorm’s performance style is very different from In This Moment’s heavily staged theatricality—so much so that it was disorienting to see the two groups perform back-to-back. Halestorm’s shows are more in line with traditional rock performance, where musicians simply take the stage and play. Though advertised as a “co-headlining” tour, Halestorm was clearly the headliner. They played last and performed the longest set. Their music was louder and their stage was bigger. Trying to figure out why it would be advertised as “co-headlining,” I remembered the tour’s purpose: to support and celebrate female-fronted heavy music. Perhaps it has to do with the idea of women supporting women and raising each other up into a less ego-driven, more egalitarian world. Lzzy Hale thanked us all for celebrating not just rock and roll, but female-fronted rock and roll. She told us that she was proud to be a musician and proud be a woman. The feminist agenda of the tour was restated again and again throughout the night during each concert.

Lzzy Hale is both a singer and a guitarist, which is rare for women in heavy music genres. The mere fact that she plays this instrument can be considered a feminist statement. One of heavy metal’s most important sonic features is the virtuosic playing of the masculine-gendered electric guitar, which fits into a longstanding narrative of male excellence and genius in music (Biddle & Jarmen-Ivens 2007: 10). During this tour, I watched Hale strut around the stage in leather and high heels as she performed her phallic instrument, capturing the androgyny that marked earlier eras of rock and metal performance while claiming excellence and genius for herself. The liveness of the experience greatly affected the way I received the music as well. When listening to Halestorm’s recorded music, I do not necessarily
hear Lzzy Hale as guitarist. I can hear her voice as gendered female, but I cannot hear who is playing the guitar. The guitar can produce a disembodied sound in a way that the voice cannot, given that a vocalist is dependent on the human body to produce sound and that the sound is typically gendered according to the body which produces it. Seeing her play the guitar while hearing their music live reinforced her position as the masterful musician—the woman who is playing the guitar.

During this tour, all of the lights would go down, creating total darkness in the venue except for the persistent cell-phone lights scattered throughout the crowd. We heard Hale’s voice in the darkness as she began to sing the first verse of “I Get Off” a capella: “You don’t know that I know you watch me every night.” She took her time, drawing out each word and delivering the lines with feeling and heightened drama. “And I just can’t resist the urge to stand here in the light.” When she reached the word “light,” a spotlight illuminated her on stage. “Your greedy eyes upon me, and then I come undone.” At this point, I became self-conscious as an audience member; it was my greedy eyes upon her. “And I could close the curtains, but this is too much fun.” Then the lights came up on stage and the rest of the band began to play, but they moved into “Do Not Disturb,” the hyper-sexual song off the new 2018 album Vicious, rather than continuing to perform “I Get Off.” The next lines of “I Get Off” played in my head regardless: “I get off on you getting off on me.” I realized that that’s what was happening. They, the performers, were getting off on the fact that we, the audience, were getting off on them.

This realization reminded me of Suzanne Cusick’s ideas about the musical medium itself as sexual in nature. In her response to the colloquy Music and
Sexuality, Cusick describes listening to a live performance of an operatic duet. She notes the vocal intimacy between the singers:

That intimacy was in (and with) the vibrating air, wood, gold leaf, plush, and the four thousand human bodies who listened with me, as much as it was between the two singers on that distant stage…This music—intimate, alive, in me and around me, was something like noetic union for me, and something like sex. Not only for me, I think; the house’s explosion of applause at the duet’s end was our collective cry of joy. (Cusick 2013: 862)

The sexuality of live heavy metal music is penetrative and aggressive, an overwhelming sensorial experience that is often painful but enjoyable to a consenting audience. If Cusick’s night at the opera was “something like sex,” then it was something like making love; heavy metal is a much less conservative sexual act (Cusick 2013: 862). Reading the voyeurism in “I Get Off” as a metaphor for the distant-yet-intimate relationship between audiences and performers provides another way in which we can see music production and consumption as a sexual act.

Figure 3.3: Lzzy Hale singing “I Get Off” A Capella at Mohegan Sun Arena

Lzzy Hale began performing these a capella moments with Halestorm because she found that people were not taking her seriously as a musician. In a discussion
moderated by Loudwire’s Toni Gonzalez, the three frontwomen on the tour all described frustrating moments in which people assumed they were not musicians (e.g. someone asking Hale if she was helping her boyfriend move his equipment, someone asking Brink if she was one of the dancers, or someone asking Costello if she’s the merch girl for the band). These moments further motivated Hale to highlight herself as musician on stage:

You use that as your power and your weapon because then what I ended up doing was, “Okay – let’s just start the whole show with just me. Just me a capella because no one’s expecting that at all. No one even expects me to be in the band. So, screw it. Let’s do that.” And so you use that stuff. That’s why I started wearing the high heels. Like, stick out like a sore thumb because we’re already, like, unique. (Hartmann 2018)

By shining a spotlight on herself while she is alone on stage and filling the room with her voice, she challenges the expectation that women are not musicians within hard music genres. She exaggerates the gap between her body and those of typical performers by wearing high heels, emphasizing her femininity through fashion. Hale uses her difference as “[her] power and [her] weapon,” forcing audiences to see her as the musician and woman she is.

Halestorm’s set list changed throughout the year, but it always broke the hard-and-heavy barrage of the evening with an acoustic moment. Because of their status as headliners and their more flexible genre position, they were free to perform pieces outside of heavy conventions. In the spring, Hale sat at the piano to perform a cover of Adele’s “Someone Like You” before going into her own piano ballad “Dear Daughter,” giving the audience an intimate moment centered around woman-to-girl support and communication. After Vicious came out in July, she would sing a new
love song off that album called “The Silence” while lead guitarist Joe Hottinger accompanied her on an acoustic guitar.

**Figure 3.4: Lzzy Hale singing and playing piano at the Tsongas Center**

During my own three-night tour over the summer, I traveled north from Connecticut to New York to Maine so that I could attend back-to-back concerts. I observed the effect that changing venues has on the concert experience. Mohegan Sun Arena was, of course, an arena. There was a general admission floor area for an audience to create a pit in front of the stage, as an audience typically does for any metal show, but the pit was surrounded by arena seating. While seating is good for those who cannot or do not want to stand for hours on end, or for those who want to claim some amount of personal space, it greatly decreases the degree to which the concert is a visceral, sensual experience. Far away viewers were forced to watch the
action on the screens to the right and left of the stage. Otherwise, they would not have been able to see what was happening on stage.

**Figure 3.5: Seating map for Mohegan Sun Arena taken from ticketmaster**

The following night’s concert at the Albany Capital Center took place in a very different venue; it was one large, carpeted room on one level with one crowd standing together in front of the stage. However, my vision was still mediated through screens in this context. Because everyone was standing on the same level, I was not always able to see over the heads of those in front of me. I found myself watching large portions of the concert through the phone screens of those standing in front of me and videotaping. Many people held their devices up over their heads and zoomed in enough for me to see what was happening on stage. In This Moment’s set is particularly visual and theatrical, so during their performance, I tended to keep my eyes on phone screens. I heard and felt the liveness of the music, but the on-stage visuals were shrunken down to fit between the thumb and forefinger of another viewer’s hand.
Unlike In This Moment, Halestorm prioritizes musical sound over visual theatricality. When they played, I strained less against the limiting aspects of the pit and gave in to the physicality of the experience, allowing my body to move with those around me, feeling the bass vibrating in my chest, and screaming along. The power of sound was particularly noticeable at Maine State Pier in Portland the following night. Not only was this event outside, but it was on the water. The loud music coming from the stage was audible to varying degrees throughout the city, as the water carried the sound even further than it would have gone otherwise. I could hear the concert almost perfectly from down the street. During Halestorm’s performance of “Love Bites (But So Do I),” Lzzy Hale shouted “I want to hear you!” and “somebody scream!” Our voices could barely be heard over the heavily amplified music, but they were mixed into the sonic profile of the event, which was carried over the water and brought throughout the city of Portland.
These shows and these women all demanded sonic participation from audiences. No matter where they went, they wanted to hear their fans screaming in support of their music and by extension, in support of female-fronted heavy music at large. How much they heard depended on the physical nature of the venue as well as the responsiveness and energy of the crowd. With any touring show, many aspects remain the same and many others depend on changing variables night to night. Importantly, what never changed was the musicians’ desire to engage the audience in a multisensory, participatory experience that challenged the dominant patriarchal narrative of heavy metal music.

Visualizing this tour on a map of the United States allows me to conceptualize a bigger, more zoomed-out picture, to mentally emphasize the things that stay the same, and to ask larger questions related to the impact of this traveling heavy metal feminism. Incorporating spatial analysis into my ethnographic fieldwork, on the other hand, encourages me to think of each performance as unique and to consider the changing from variables night to night. By framing my ethnography with these two modes of geospatial analysis, I develop a more nuanced understanding of these 49 individual instances of a large-scale traveling feminist intervention into the representation of women in heavy music genres.
Conclusion

“Daughters of Darkness”: Performing Heavy Metal Feminism

In This Moment’s image of “Sex Metal Barbie” leads to a productive discussion of the feminist work that Ash Costello, Maria Brink, and Lzzy Hale are doing with their music and performance stylings (Blood 2012). Barbie herself, the plastic toy woman given to American girls for play time for the past sixty years, has represented versions of feminine domesticity throughout her history. In a study of Barbie’s material culture, Marlys Pearson and Paul R. Mullins find that “the negotiation of domesticity has always been at the heart of Barbie’s dominant symbolism” and that “Mattel has attempted to structure the meaning of Barbie in very distinct ways which reproduce particular visions of domesticity” (Pearson and Mullins 1999: 228-229). Barbie has also become a beauty standard for American women: blonde, impossibly thin, perfect plastic skin and a permanent smile. Beyond this, she is an object to be played with and to be controlled. She is silent. She is voiceless.

Costello, Brink, and Hale push against Barbie’s image as an ideological feminine narrative, pursuing instead the story told in Halestorm’s “Daughters of Darkness” (The Strange Case of... 2012). They defy the expectation that women should fill domestic roles by traveling around the world not only to perform, but to lead their own bands. They’ve stepped into spaces that women do not usually occupy in hard, heavy popular musics, and they use the opposition they face as their power and motivation. As Hale sings in “Daughters of Darkness,”
We came to battle baby
We came to win the war
We won’t surrender ’til we
Get what we’re looking for

Instead of a calm smile, composed and complacent, they twist their faces into
grimaces of insanity, madness, sickness, chaos, power, anger, aggression, sexual
desire, and ecstasy. They refuse to be silent even though the male-dominated metal
world can be masculinist, sexist, and even violent toward woman. They use heavy
metal’s loudness to gain its power.

We’re blowing out our speakers
There goes the neighborhood
A little scissor happy
Little misunderstood

Rather than allowing themselves to be sexual objects, they assert sexual subjectivity.
They use an aggressive feminine sexuality as another source of power.

We can turn you on
Or we will turn on you

As in the tour discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, they are most powerful when they
work together and support each other.

Daughters of darkness
Sisters insane
A little evil goes a long, long way
We stand together
No we’re not afraid
We’ll live forever
Daughters of darkness
Daughters of darkness

Together, these “Daughters of Darkness” defy stereotypes, challenge expectations,
and fight to earn a more powerful position within heavy metal culture (The Strange
Case of... 2012).
Barbie, though subordinated by her gender, lives in a world of privilege. As Mary F. Rogers writes in *Barbie Culture*, Barbie is “heterosexual; she is Ivory-Snow white; she is middle-class; she is neither a child nor a senior citizen; she is ablebodied. Except for her gender, then, Barbie belongs to those groupings that have the upper hand or at least command respect in modern society” (Rogers 1999: 36). The women I have written about in this thesis likewise have easier access to respect and power through their race, sexual orientation, age, and ability. They are performing empowered femininity, but it is a straight, white, ablebodied femininity, a full understanding of which would require a more nuanced discussion than appears in this thesis. Within the body of musical work covered, there are opportunities for queer performance readings and analysis, for racially informed readings of whiteness and white femininity, for discussion of ability as a gatekeeper to on-stage success, and beyond. I recommend that anyone expanding upon the ideas present in this thesis give those avenues of intellectual exploration proper attention.

As is, my thesis provides a hopeful feminist account of three commercially successful women in heavy music. These “daughters of darkness, sisters insane”—these “sex metal Barbie[s], homicidal queen[s]”—show us how women can carve out a feminine space of power within heavy metal culture (*The Strange Case of...* 2012; *Blood* 2012).
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