

# Reshaping the discourse on women's voices in metal music

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## Lori Burns, Professor at The University of Ottawa, walks us her research on reshaping the discourse on women's voices in metal music

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Metal music comprises a vast global market with an enormous fan base and an expanding scholarly society (the International Society for Metal Music Studies). A 2018 study of metal music reported female participation in metal bands to be at the level of 3%, with approximately half of those women in vocalist roles (Berkers and Schaap, 2018). Scholarship on metal music affirms the genre to be dominated by male performers, with female participation beginning to grow around the turn of the new millennium.

Metal scholars also point to the preponderance of patriarchal values and hypermasculinity, with the musical, lyrical, and visual content contributing to an aesthetic production of sonic power and blatant misogyny. The participation of women's voices in metal music and the music scene is often understood to be staged for the patriarchal gaze and critiqued according to sexist ideologies and archetypes. In light of these arguments, it is important to examine the expressive work of women in metal: how do they navigate this extreme genre, and how do they transform the sounds, words, and images of metal music?

Female vocalists contribute as lead singers in all metal subgenres, including heavy metal, thrash, metalcore, death and death-doom, gothic, black, power, symphonic, folk, alternative, nu, and post-metal. As the "voice" of the band, a female metal vocalist is placed in a position of obligatory engagement with the hypermasculine norms and extreme sonic heaviness of metal music.

Scholars consider the participation of female metal singers from the perspective of gender dynamics within the band scene, audience reception, and representations of gender and sexuality in the lyrics and videos of metal. Yet despite their significant impact in the domain, the expressive work of female metal vocalists is not adequately recognized in scholarly or popular literature. Female metal singers receive attention as the "queens" and "warriors" of metal, but they are not considered with appropriate attention to their musical expression and compositional work.

## Resisting oppression through musical expression

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Music has the power to convey cultural and societal values and influence how gendered subjectivities are constructed and received within both broad and specific communities. The representations and constructions of identity that circulate in popular forms must be critically analyzed to name the elements of oppressive discourses and discover points of resistance to such oppression.

As members of society who consume popular music, we must critique its messages and celebrate its innovations. An analytic approach to women's performative and creative work in popular music yields knowledge and understanding about nuanced modes of expression; such nuance includes the disruption and transformation of genre-based conventions.

In my analytic-interpretive research, I aim to reveal how specific musical expression examples conform to but complicate the discursive contexts of the relevant genre. For instance, a female artist can choose to communicate a musical-lyrical-visual (multimodal) narrative that exposes an archetypical representation while, at the same time, unsettling the workings of that representation. A critical discourse analysis discerns moments when the meaning of a video narrative defies expectations by illuminating the factors of an oppressive representation while offering expressive adaptations that reshape the norms.

For instance, the conventional 'damsel in distress' of the gothic imaginary can be exposed but nuanced to modify normative attributions of power, transforming female subjectivity in the process of presenting and revising gothic aesthetics. In addition to critical discourse analysis, an intersectional analysis will illuminate multiple layers of subjectivity by attending to issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other factors. <sup>(1)</sup>

## **The sonic, lyrical and visual spaces of an extreme genre**

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As crucial actors in the genre, female artists occupy a significant cultural space and drive aesthetic innovation in metal music. Whereas the musical techniques and strategies of metal genres have emerged from the male-dominated metal sphere, female artists can claim performative space using but also adapting those techniques and strategies.

For men and women alike, metal vocal styles encompass a range from operatic singing, theatrical belting, and sultry crooning to the harsh extremes of screaming and growling. Female vocalists can occupy the feminine space of an ethereal high-pitched soprano or the aggressive space of a brutal growl. Using the "false" vocal cords, deep guttural vocal production is not limited to the male body; some female metal vocalists switch easily from a high soprano register to the low harsh sounds.

And their vocal work is always taking place within the heavy textures, articulations, and sonic distortions of guitars, bass, and drum kit. With a versatility of vocal register, female metal vocalists inhabit a vast range of sonic spaces and timbres to convey a variety of subjectivities and emotions. The potential for innovative expression is limitless when these sonic effects are put into dialogue with lyrical and visual themes that might also venture into unconventional spaces.

## **Interpreting the messages of gendered subjectivity in extreme music**

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My research invites listeners to reflect upon female vocalists' messages from within the structures of metal music subgenres. While these bold artists deliver lyrics about oppressive themes, they might communicate fear of harm, for instance, when Angela Gossow, faced with a witch hunt, poignantly shrieks, "Am I to burn?" ("Burning Angel," Arch Enemy, 2001), or insist upon a cathartic realization of femininity, as when Tatiana Shmayluk growls, "the new me will rise to live again" ("Perennial," Jinjer, 2019), or speak against oppressive racism as when Cammie Gilbert accuses, "You crave control, a willful force, a grave injustice" ("The Adorned Fathomless Creation," Oceans of Slumber, 2020).

In all of these examples, the artists use their musical voices to develop new modes of expression, to adapt and transform cultural tropes, to critique misogynist and racist assumptions, and ultimately to claim discursive authority.

## References

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