

REFERENCES

- Appiah, K. A. (2006), *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: Norton.
- Brown, A. R., Spracklen, K., Kahn-Harris, K. and Scott, N. (2016), *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, London: Routledge.
- Davidson, P. (2005), *The Idea of North*, London: Reaktion.
- Gilroy, P. (2004), *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Milton Park: Routledge.
- Hjelm, T., Kahn-Harris, K. and LeVine, M. (2013), *Heavy Metal: Controversies and Countercultures*, Bristol: Equinox.
- Kahn-Harris, K. (2007), *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Poole, S. (2016), 'Retro rock and heavy history', in A. R. Brown, K. Spracklen, K. Kahn-Harris and N. Scott (eds), *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, London: Routledge.
- Scott, N. (2013), 'Heavy metal and the deafening roar of the apolitical', in T. Hjelm, K. Kahn-Harris and M. LeVine (eds), *Heavy Metal: Controversies and Countercultures*, Bristol: Equinox Press.

QUEERNESS IN HEAVY METAL MUSIC: METAL BENT, AMBER R. CLIFFORD-NAPOLEONE (2015)

London: Routledge, 166 pp.,
ISBN: 9780415728317, h/bk, £95

Reviewed by Keith Kahn-Harris, Leo Baeck College and Birkbeck College

One of the central preoccupations of the rapidly emerging field of metal studies has been challenging the (still) widespread perception that metal is overwhelmingly dominated by white heterosexual men. This has involved two interlocking projects: first, researching the historical and contemporary experience of those, such as female and non-white scene members, who are often ignored in discourse about and within metal scenes; second, exposing and challenging power and hierarchies within metal scenes. There is a degree of tension between these projects as if discriminatory and exclusionary practices in metal are emphasized too much, then those who have been marginalized in metal discourse can be (usually unwittingly) re-marginalized and patronized.

Amber Clifford-Napoleone's study of queerness in metal might superficially appear to be a continuation of metal studies interest in metal's minorities. However, it quickly becomes clear that Clifford-Napoleone is suggesting nothing less than a radical rethinking of what metal is and could be. The story she tells in *Queerness in Heavy Metal Music* is not one of a largely silent, invisible and oppressed subgroup on the fringes of metal

scenes, but of an intrinsic – yet rarely recognized – connection between queerness and metal.

Part of this story looks like a more conventional account of any other metal minority. Clifford-Napoleone shows how a fixation with black leather was imported into metal from post-war gay subculture. She discusses the experience and importance of gay metal artists, from Rob Halford to Otep. She draws on a large online survey of gay metal fans to ensure that their voices are heard. Throughout, the author's considerable scholarship, her deep familiarity with both metal and gay culture, and her engaging writing style make *Queerness in Heavy Metal* a pleasure to read.

But Clifford-Napoleone goes much further. Criticizing the implicit and explicit assumptions in much of metal studies that metal is overwhelmingly heterosexual and heterosexist, she offers a radically different reading:

The heavy metal world [...] is inherently a queer world of BDSM style and symbolism, leather subcultural cues, overt visual and lyrical images of 'abnormal' sexual behavior, and performers who defy heteronormative cultural norms of appearance and behavior. The performed masculinity of the heavy metal scene is nothing more than a drag show. (11)

This is *not* the same as arguing that metal is camp – in fact, as the author shows, queer metal fans usually reject camp. Rather, metal's apparent hyper-masculinity is so 'fantastic' (my term, not the author's) that it somehow fails to 'essentialize' (again, my term) itself:

[...] queerness in heavy metal is not the mirage but the reality. It is masculinity that is the mirage, the shimmering image we interpret as the reality. We simply never get close enough for the mirage to fade away, and as the tumescence of heavy metal masculinity rises, we keep our distance and allow the masculinity mirage to become accepted reality. (12)

Clifford-Napoleone, and the queer metal fans she writes about, functions to some extent as the child pointing out that the emperor has no clothes. When gay metal fans discuss which metal fans are closeted – and whom they would like to be queer – they are undermining the pretensions to substance in metal performances of masculinity. To me, this is a deeply attractive notion and it often convinces. I particularly enjoyed the glee with which Clifford-Napoleone's informants (and the author herself) speculate whether behind Kerry King's notorious homophobia, a classic 'bear' lurks.

At the same time, much as the author repeatedly emphasizes that queerness in metal is not a marginal phenomenon but an essential part of metal itself (insofar as a post-essentialist concept like 'queer' can be an essential component of anything, but that is a debate for another review), the argument sometimes reduces itself to more modest proportions. The book draws on the suggestive concept of the 'queerscape' (initially developed in architectural scholarship to which Clifford-Napoleone adds a Deluzian twist) to describe that space created by queer engagement in metal scenes that allows them to 'reterritorialize heavy metal' (19). This would seem to return the book towards the more conventional metal studies goal of documenting how metal's

minorities function within metal scenes. The author does try and resolve the contradiction between depicting metal as inherently queer and depicting queer fans as a minority within metal, arguing, for example:

Queer heavy metal fans and performers do not exist outside the mainstream or solely inside a queer enclave. Instead, they occupy a space, both literally and figuratively, of uncertain desire-zones in the queer-scape. (20)

Clifford-Napoleone does not ignore homophobia in metal scenes. Her argument is that while metal is inherently queer, scene members and metal studies scholars may not recognize it as such (and, she might have added, much of queer subculture may not as well) – but that is ‘expected’ (45). In any case, the experience of the author and her survey respondents seem to suggest that homophobia is much less of a problem than some would expect and that metal culture is generally welcoming for those who understand it. There is an invigorating defiance to Clifford-Napoleone’s argument:

To paraphrase Sam Dunn’s conclusion in *Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey*, if heterosexual, heteronormative and masculinist heavy metal folk do not get that, it is OK. The queer fans of heavy metal have Halford and they do not need you: you need them. (45)

In any case, the author argues that homophobia is much less of an issue in metal than ‘effeminophobia’:

This is why heavy metal fans tell ‘I always knew Halford was gay’ stories. This is why queer metal fans are so quick to demonstrate how tough, hard and brutal they are. This is why sexism and the abuse of women [...] are still a problem. (136)

Unfortunately, Clifford-Napoleone raises the issue of effeminophobia only a few pages from the end of the book. It begs all sorts of questions about whether metal’s postulated inherent queerness is a limited kind of queerness that still exclude some sorts of queer bodies. Further, the book does not discuss ‘intersectionality’ and how the intersection between queerness and racialized, classed and other kinds of bodies works in particular contexts. It is also worth pointing out that, while her survey included respondents from across the world, the consideration of metal scenes outside of America is limited in this book.

But then, no one author or study can do everything. *Queerness in Heavy Metal* is an exciting book that challenges the reader to overturn well-worn assumptions about what metal is. It should be read by anyone interested in the scholarly study of metal. In fact, it should be read widely within the wider metal world.