

FILM REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE FILMS

Decolonizing Metal Studies: The Documentary Films of Nelson Varas-Díaz and Puerto Rico Heavy Metal Studies

González-Sepúlveda, Osvaldo, dir.
Nelson Varas-Díaz, Executive Producer;
Eliut Rivera-Segarra and Sigrid
Mendoza, Associate Producers. 2015.
***The Distorted Island: Heavy Metal
Music and Community in Puerto Rico.***
Distributed by Puerto Rican Heavy
Metal Studies.
DVD/CD. 158 minutes.

González-Sepúlveda, Osvaldo, dir. Nel-
son Varas-Díaz, Executive Producer; Eliut
Rivera-Segarra, Sigrid Mendoza, Rafael
Bracero, Xaymara Díaz, Carlos Vélez,
and Andrés Rivera-Amador, Associate
Producers. 2017. ***The Metal Islands:
History, Culture and Politics in Carib-
bean Heavy Metal Music.*** Distributed
by Puerto Rican Heavy Metal Studies.
DVD/CD. 138 minutes.

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While other metal scholars tend to make sweeping, ungrounded generalizations regarding the genre's positive impact, Nelson Varas-Díaz and his research team carefully substantiate their claims with empirical data. Such methodological rigor is of immeasurable value, particularly as their studies concern the Spanish Caribbean, where metal music culture, while longstanding, is not well known to outsiders even within the region. The results have

been remarkable: in book chapters and articles, Varas-Díaz and his co-researchers have produced valuable studies of race, gender, religion, community, and postcoloniality in Caribbean metal (Varas-Díaz and Rivera 2014; Varas-Díaz *et al* 2014a, 2014b; Varas-Díaz and Mendoza 2015; Varas-Díaz *et al* 2016a, 2016b, 2017). In addition to their writings, they have produced two full-length documentaries based on their work in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (a third on continental Latin America is nearly completed). These films, *The Distorted Island* (González-Sepúlveda, dir. 2015) and *The Metal Islands* (González-Sepúlveda, dir. 2017) are among the most important films ever produced on metal culture outside the Anglo-American mainstream.

The films, each bundled with a two-CD compilation of local heavy metal bands, consist primarily of interviews interspersed with performance footage, and are in Spanish with English subtitles. While most of the interviewees are bilingual, and some of the metal musicians interviewed do sing in English, conducting all conversation in the everyday spoken language of the region ensures maximal clarity of expression.

The Distorted Island employs a stark black-and-white colour palette and emphasizes dark interior spaces, in marked contrast to the stereotypical bright colours and lush outdoor landscapes that characterize most cinematic representations of the Caribbean. "In the eyes of the world, Puerto Rico was, and still is, known for *salsa*, *bomba*, and *plena*, a Caribbean paradise of tropical rhythms,"

according to the opening narration of *The Distorted Island*. Yet the nearly two hours that follow present a heavier version of Puerto Rican community that does not conform to such clichés. The film depicts how an indigenous metal culture emerged over many years through the testimony of scene participants: writers, musicians, promoters, deejays, and fans.

The Distorted Island begins with a history of the Puerto Rican scene, starting with the island's first major heavy metal band, Cardinal Sin. A number of subsequent early bands in the scene, such as Xacrosaint and Nonpoint Factor, were motivated by Protestant Christianity, and are thus part of the global Christian metal movement (see Moberg 2015). The prominent role of Christian metal in a scene with similarly conspicuous sacrilegious and pagan factions reveals a great deal about its social dynamics. Indeed, a general ethos of tolerance and inclusiveness appears to characterize the Puerto Rican scene and is likely responsible for both its longevity and continued vitality — a paradigmatic example, in other words, of what Bryan Bardine and Mika Elovaara call “unity in disparity” (2017).

The Puerto Rican scene portrayed in the film (many years before the Hurricane Maria catastrophe) is healthy and diverse, and the documentary provides a sense of the range of bands the scene had produced. A frequent contributor of screen commentary, Eric Morales is the operatic lead singer for veteran local band Dantesco, a group who records in both Spanish and English and whose compositions extol resistance to colonialism and Christianity. Puya's hybridic sounds are also featured: the most successful band from the island since Cardinal

Sin, Puya signed with a major label and played Ozzfest in 1999. Its sound is an audacious blend of Afro-Latin percussion and groove metal that deviates from the accepted practice of omitting musical references to Puerto Rican locality in local metal.

Other notable groups include the death metal stalwarts Organic (formerly Organic Infest), who play a distorted piccolo bass instead of a guitar; the mysterious black metal legends Godless; and the bizarre, Nietzschean shock-rockers Humanist (“Humanist represents that part of the human race that is evil,” explains the guitarist helpfully [González-Sepúlveda, dir. 2015]). The inimitable all-women group Matriarch (now disbanded) and its dizzyingly complex music are discussed briefly as well, and one of the founding members is featured.

Damaris Negrón, the late singer of Death Arrangement, is a poignant final subject of the documentary. Her sudden, untimely death in 2012 shocked the scene. The profound, collective mourning in the aftermath appears to have increased communal solidarity among scene participants.

The Metal Islands differs from its predecessor not only in scope (three islands rather than one) but in subject matter. The film emphasizes the intrusive role of the state in scene formation processes, especially in Cuba, and examines relations with host societies more critically. From a pedagogical perspective, the film's pace is faster and it is better suited for classroom use.

The film resembles its predecessor: its palette is a mixture of washed-out colour and stark black and white, and it is made up of extended interviews and perfor-

mance excerpts. One of the main interview subjects is Maria Gattorno, the proprietor of Maria's Patio, a government-run "Culture House" in Havana that became a haven for rockers and heavy metalers. It was later replaced in 1998 by a controversial "Rock Agency" where groups that passed a formal audition could receive Cuban state support. The film then introduces the *Avanzada Metallica*, a radio program in the Dominican Republic that ran from 2002 to 2012, that dispelled inaccurate media-fed stereotypes and diversified the national metalhead population along lines of race, gender, and class. Next is a profile of the extraordinary Cuban group *Tendencia*, a band that plays "mestizo metal" from Pinar del Rio, Cuba's westernmost province (imagine a cross between Puya and mid-1990s *Sepultura*). The Puerto Rican segments of the film, rather than focusing on the state or media, explore the metal scene's appropriations of island folklore, such as the *vejigante*, a demon intended to "scare people into church" (González-Sepúlveda, dir. 2017). The film ends with a recent event in Puerto Rico featuring Dantesco, *Tendencia*, the Dominican Republic's *Abaddon*, and a promise that trans-Caribbean metal alliances will become more frequent in the future.

Taken together, these films further the scholarly conversation on music, culture, and politics in contemporary societies. They demonstrate the important contributions of offstage institution-builders — often women — to scenic development and maintenance. Each film contains illuminating discussions of sociality, language, and politics in metal scenes.

Sadly, it is premature to depict the international metal scene as having jettisoned centre-periphery relations: despite

the success of bands such as *Sepultura*, *Nightwish*, and *Chthonic*, and outliers like the Norwegian black metal scene, Anglo-American hegemony still holds sway; moreover, *Anglophone* metal is still the default (in spite of counter-examples like folk metal and *Babymetal*). As metal scholars, it behooves us to explore beyond the metal metropolises to grasp the phenomenon's full contours, which have provided music, identity, community, and artistic expression to so many in the wider world. *The Distorted Island* and *The Metal Islands* capture the local and translocal dimensions of three indigenized metal communities, and for that reason are valuable works of engaged scholarship. Moreover, this reviewer at least hopes that their depiction of metal on the Caribbean periphery will alert metalheads in other locales to the compelling music they've been missing. 🍀

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