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To cite this article: Catherine Hoad (2023) Significantly Othered: Limp Bizkit and the Politics of Nu Metal “Otherness”, *Rock Music Studies*, 10:2, 119-139, DOI: 10.1080/19401159.2023.2234118

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2023.2234118>



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Published online: 09 Jul 2023.



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Significantly Othered: Limp Bizkit and the Politics of Nu Metal “Otherness”

Catherine Hoad 

Te Rewa O Puanga/School of Music and Creative Media Production, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore how nu metal was problematically situated as an “Other” in response to heavy metal’s supposed crisis of identity at the turn of the millennium. Using Limp Bizkit as a central case study, I consider how the fragmented state of metal and market growth of hip hop in the mid 1990s provided the preconditions for nu metal to flourish commercially; how Limp Bizkit were marketed in response to this growth; and finally, how their reception, demise, and eventual reprisal are caught up within heavy metal’s anxieties over generic purity and the racialized terrain of the music of “Others.”

KEYWORDS

nu metal; 1990s; rock music; whiteness; masculinity; hip hop

Introduction

We’re not allowed to play “Break Stuff.” . . . They told us we couldn’t play this song, but we’re gonna fuckin’ do it anyway.

Limp Bizkit’s high-profile billing at the 2018 Download Festival in Melbourne, Australia, was a curious reminder of the power of one of music’s ostensibly most-hated bands to attract a significant crowd. Limp Bizkit’s reputation has long been one marked by public decrial, outrage, and, in their latter years, widespread mockery. Even so, by the time Limp Bizkit’s set rolled around on this humid March evening, the crowd in front of the stage was packed – even toward the back, sweaty, muddy bodies jostled for space. By the time frontman Fred Durst, resplendent in his signature red baseball cap, made the rather puerile declaration that the band were “not allowed” to play their 1999 single “Break Stuff” (a declaration that felt rehearsed in its throwaway disavowal of authority) before the opening notes rang out, there was a heavy tension nearing a breaking point in the crowd, a kind of sweaty, simmering animosity ready to break out.

It was an oddly surreal moment – I was a child at the peak of Limp Bizkit’s success in the late 1990s; they were a joking footnote in metal’s annals for most of my teens. To be standing in a crowd of thousands at a major metal festival headlined by Limp Bizkit and Korn, with both bands billed as “heavy metal legends,” particularly given Limp Bizkit’s tense relationship with the label “metal” itself, was somewhat bizarre. The crowd’s

CONTACT Catherine Hoad  c.hoad@massey.ac.nz  Te Rewa o Puanga/School of Music and Creative Media Production, Massey University, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

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eruption for the climactic line of the song – “If my day keeps going this way, I just might break your fucking face tonight” – resonated with me, not only for what this meant in terms of Limp Bizkit’s apparent public redemption but for what it potentially signaled in the context of 2018, in a paradigm in which a politics of a white, masculine “alienated anger” (Halnon 443) was resurgent across much of the English-speaking world.

In this article, I attempt what many might say is a possibly unnecessary task: to offer a revisionist perspective on Limp Bizkit. In doing so, I want to assert from the outset that I am not interested in defending Limp Bizkit, nor their frontman Fred Durst, against the charges that have followed them over their career, including misogyny, homophobia, and the alleged incitement of crowd violence that resulted in assaults and even death. The public outcry that followed these instances was deserved and warranted; moreover, the band must be held accountable. To deny the seriousness of these charges is not the purpose of this article. Rather, I am interested in the public discourse that has surrounded Limp Bizkit since the 1990s, and, moreover, I want to make a critical contribution to the field of research in metal and rock studies by expanding a conversation on the political intersections of hybridization, gatekeeping, appropriation, and virtuosity, as they coalesced around nu metal. The politics of nu metal “Otherness,” as I explore here, relied on the construction of nu metal, with its overt hip-hop influences, as an “Other” to ostensibly more “authentic” styles of metal music. Such a construction, however, often hinged on the imagining of hip hop and rap as fundamentally “inauthentic” and “thuggish” and thus antithetical to the supposed virtuosity of traditional metal and to the racialized implications of such imaginings therein. The contemporary resurrection of Limp Bizkit as a “heritage” act following their appearance at Lollapalooza in July 2021 thus reveals several curious intersections in the politics of nostalgia – the markedly different landscape for the commercial music industry, for one, but, furthermore, how such nostalgia is positioned within a resurgence of the “white working class male as anti-authority rebel” (Katz 352), as such discourse reemerged in the political paradigm of the late 2010s.

Using critical discourse analysis and textual analysis methods, in this article I consider three main points: first, how the fragmented state of metal and market growth of rap in the mid 1990s provided the preconditions for nu metal to develop and flourish in a commercial setting; second, how the nu metal band Limp Bizkit formed and were marketed in response to this growth; and third, how their reception, demise, and eventual reprisal are caught up within heavy metal’s anxieties over generic purity and the racialized terrain of the music of “Others,” as well as the wider sociopolitical contexts that have shaped the band’s public perception. Limp Bizkit’s aesthetic and politics of white, suburban “alienated anger” (Halnon 443) coincided with what Malin sees as a crisis of masculine identity for white American men in the late 1990s, and the neoconservatism of the post-9/11 zeitgeist (*American Masculinity*). Such politics underpinned Limp Bizkit’s enormous commercial success yet also became the most viable target for the widespread revilement of the band. The antipathy toward Limp Bizkit provides an excellent example of the intersecting anxieties that accompany nu metal: the hostility of extreme metal scenes to the “incorporation of other kinds of difference” (Kahn-Harris 133); the hegemonic appropriation of rap in rock contexts (Middleton and Beebe 159); and the glorification of particular brands of “thuggish,” “white trash” masculinity personified in frontman Fred Durst. Limp Bizkit’s music

represents a place for articulations of white suburban alienation and the revilement of such expressions, where the band's performances became, in *Spin*'s words, a "soul-patch minstrel show, a hissing valve for pointless Cro-Magnon boy rage" (Spin Staff).

Nu Metal: A Brief Overview

"Nu metal" (sometimes stylized as Nü metal) typically designates a musical style, often classed as a form of alternative metal, that emerged in the early-to-mid 1990s. The style that eventually came to be known as "Nu metal" grew from developments in alternative and funk metal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where early progenitors drew heavily on influences from alt-rock, industrial, funk, and hip hop, mixing downtuned guitar riffs with sampling, and later turntabling, and alternatively rapped, screamed, and sung vocals (Kahn-Harris, 134–35). Jonathan Pieslak offers a definitive description of nu metal's musicality thus: "Nü metal, in short, can be characterized by aggressive, rap-influenced, angst-ridden and pitched yelling vocals, hip-hop style beats or drum samples, and heavily distorted, detuned guitars playing largely syncopated, riff-based music with a distinct absence of solos and overt displays of instrumental virtuosity" (37).

Korn's formation in 1993 is often taken to be the "birth" of nu metal, though the term itself still took several years to come into wider circulation. Early accounts of nu metal's emergence refer to it quite literally as "the new metal;" Udo argues that the term "nu metal," as it gained circulation in the 1990s and early 2000s, "essentially describ[es] *new* metal" (201, my emphasis). Such nomenclature of the "new" has an immediately temporal aspect that marks nu metal as both an extension of and a distinct response to the rock and metal styles extant by the 1990s. Chris DeVille, for example, refers to nu metal as a "weird outgrowth of the Lollapalooza-era alt-metal scene;" for others, nu metal was a much more distinct rebellion against the commercial hard rock and metal market. Pieslak notes that nu metal was

appropriately titled ... since many fans and critics felt this music revived the larger categories of hard rock and metal during a time when grunge had overstayed its mainstream welcome. Just as grunge had replaced "heavy metal" in the early-to-mid 1990s, nü metal overtook grunge's position of popularity towards the end of the millennium. (36–37)

By the late 1990s, nu metal had become a powerful market force with mainstream visibility. In this period, *CMJ New Music Report* referred to nu metal as the focal point of the "1990s new metal zeitgeist" (Sciaretto 1). Leading nu metal bands achieved significant commercial success, with multiple albums charting at number 1 on the *Billboard* 200 and receiving platinum certification several times over;¹ nu metal acts Linkin Park, Korn, and Limp Bizkit all feature amongst the 150 highest-selling artists of all time in the United States (Teitelman). In addition to these commercial sales, nu metal acts were very much a part of a wider music and media culture in the U.S.A. in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Nu metal bands toured extensively on international circuits and featured heavily on major festival lineups in multiple countries. Korn, Limp Bizkit, and P. O.D were regular guests on music television, particularly MTV, and became a fixture in the wider media zeitgeist of the turn of the millennium. Korn featured in a 1999 episode of *South Park*, for example ("Korn's Groovy" video), and Limp Bizkit frontman Fred

Durst's entanglement in wider celebrity gossip was immortalized on Eminem's 2002 track "Without Me."

Whilst nu metal experienced enormous commercial success throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, it has been curiously under-researched in studies of metal and popular music more generally. Deena Weinstein's addendum to her 1991 monograph, written in 2000, briefly muses on the "hybridization" of metal in the 1990s, where she argues that "the use of rapped vocals became rather popular later in the decade, although few bands that used them could be called metal" (288). Weinstein hence asks "why call it metal rather than hiphop, alternative, or some other term that doesn't mention any of its constituent genres?" (291). One potential answer, she says, may be that "calling it metal gives the hybrid a more familiar, and perhaps a more white and more rock, image" (292). Weinstein's early treatment of nu metal as something "Other" than "real" metal shapes much of the scholarly discourse surrounding nu metal. Keith Kahn-Harris's work from 2007 argues that "[a]lthough nu metal . . . does draw on elements of extreme metal, it is not part of the extreme metal scene" (104). In a 2013 piece, Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine acknowledge the "fierce debates over the legitimacy [of] nu metal" (9); and Damion Sturm briefly alludes to the metal community's dismissal of nu metal in his 2015 discussion of extreme metal's elitist gatekeeping.

Sustained analyses of nu metal are relatively scarce: Scott Wilson theorizes the "non-specific frustration or rage and general negativity" (12) of nu metal in exploring the relationship between the music's production of negativity and supercapitalism; while Karen Bettez Halnon has offered critiques of nu metal in the context of millennial alienation. The musicality of nu metal has also been explored by Jonathan Pieslak in his work on the interrelation of sound, text, and identity in Korn's "Hey Daddy," and in Mark Marrington's recent explorations of the technological aspects of nu metal, sampling, and turntabling in response to the notion of a metallic "code" ("From DJ" 251) and genre transgression ("DAW" 52). Metal Music Studies has engaged with and often maintained the same politics of "Otherness" that have shaped wider scenic discourse around the genre; such work and its various nuances have thus established the preconditions for (re)examining nu metal as it emerged in a transitional period for metal in the 1990s.

Death, Decapitation, and "New" Metal in the 1990s

There are two main possibilities that may account for the pronounced industry embrace and subsequent enormous success of nu metal music in the late 1990s and early 2000s – the apparent "death" of heavy metal, and the market growth of hip hop. The first of these, the common narrative of heavy metal "dying" circa 1993 (Weinstein 277), often pinpoints the success of grunge music and later hip hop as a major factor in heavy metal's demise. Grunge's emphasis on alienation and emotional despair was taken as an antidote to the self-indulgence of hard-rock acts such as Guns N' Roses or to the heavy artifice and showmanship of glam and hair-metal acts. Metallica's mainstream breakthrough in the early 1990s was also accused of enabling a "knife in the back murder" (Weinstein 277) of metal. The apparent disarray of metal's "mainstay" bands – Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and Black Sabbath – in the 1990s through a combination of major lineup changes,

personal issues, substance abuse, and lawsuits is similarly noted by Weinstein as “deserving serious scrutiny” for the commercial demise of heavy metal (280).

This understanding of metal in the 1990s as having lost its identity and existing in a state of “decapitation, inactivity and disarray” (Weinstein 281) is problematic for two central reasons. Firstly, such an understanding of metal’s power as defined through commercial success in the West, and particularly Anglo-American contexts, denies the dynamic and complex ways in which heavy metal was experienced throughout the world in this period. Japanese and Latin American scenes, for example, experienced considerable domestic growth in the 1990s, and heavy metal maintained a significant market share in these regions (cf. Weinstein 282; Kawano and Hosokawa 247). Such an understanding of metal’s identity as tied to the West underscores the second reason: that this understanding of metal as “dead” relies on rigid and dogmatic definitions of what constitutes “heavy metal” as both an aesthetic and cultural form. Seeing heavy metal’s features as represented through the traditions of Anglo-American bands who relied on a central set of defining characteristics – “a core of music that could be called, indisputably, heavy metal” (Weinstein 22) – extenuates metallic hegemony and does little to call into question heavy metal’s self-imposed boundaries and limitations. Such readings undercut the possibility of plurality within such features and therefore reinforce metal’s “patterns of practice” (Berger 75) as fixed, monolithic, and inflexible, rather than open to deconstruction and recontextualisation (Marrington, “From DJ” 251). These rigid constructions of metal also have the crucial side effect of maintaining the tacit, and occasionally explicit, racialization of metal as a “white” genre (Spracklen, “Nazi Punks;” Spracklen, *Metal Music*), a factor that remains a central point of interest for interrogating how the gate-keeping of metal and its hostilities toward nu metal were underscored by an anxiety over the cultural forms of “Others” entering into metal’s spaces and aesthetics.

This apparent “death” of heavy metal music also coincided with the commercial viability of hip hop in the early-to-mid 1990s. When rap began to attract a large white adolescent male audience in the 1990s, it became a “resurgence of youth music for a new generation” (Weinstein 279). Middleton and Beebe argued that the popularity of rap-rock hybrids emerged as a response to anxiety over the apparent decline of rock in the 1990s and the market growth in musical styles explicitly (and hegemonically) coded as “black,” specifically hip hop (160). This argument potentially overlooks that by the mid 1990s there was an established market for rap-rock hybrids: Anthrax and Public Enemy, and Run-DMC and Aerosmith released collaborations; there was a longer history of hip-hop acts sampling metal tracks, and bands that hybridized styles such as Faith No More, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Rage Against the Machine had achieved commercial success. However, much of this success had arguably unfolded within a market where rock was a dominant force, and the interpolation of rap, groove, and funk operated within the dominant-aesthetic codes of rock-music performance. The rise of acts such as Kid Rock and Limp Bizkit, argue Middleton and Beebe, was representative of musical “borrowing” and reappropriation into white suburban contexts, allowing for a reassertion of white masculine hegemony by both producers and consumers (160). Such discourses may account for an industry interest in nu metal, which readily appropriated from hip-hop culture in ways that largely occluded its nuances, histories,

and contexts and instead repackaged an aggressively narrow stereotype of “urban” masculinity as white suburban alienation.

Limp Bizkit – Formation, Style, and Marketing

This model of anger and alienation became a major identity marker for nu metal, which Kahn-Harris argues built on grunge and punk’s emphasis on personal pain and social alienation (1). Nu metal’s emphasis on emotional affect, which Kahn-Harris sees as something frowned-upon in “traditional” metal (136), also invited substantial hostility from metal acts and audiences. Nu metal was often dismissed as “mallcore” (Udo 16) in deference to its mainstream commerciality, or the more immediately damning “whine-core” (Udo 16). Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails dismissed the perceived “insincerity” of nu metal thus:

When I’m asked what do I think of a lot of the nu-metal bands that are out there, my response is that it seems really insincere to me. “I’ve had a really shitty childhood and I’m really upset and I’m really ugly and I’ve put a lot of make-up on and I’m harder and faster and my voice sounds more like the cookie monster’s than yours does.” To me it all comes across as being comical, as being a parody of itself. (“Trent Reznor Slams”)

Reznor’s characterization of nu metal as emotionally insincere, infantile, and comically puerile echoes much of the wider discourse that surrounded nu metal in the peak of its commercial success in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The backlash against nu metal’s puerility in the early 2000s found arguably its most visible target in Limp Bizkit, a band described as exemplifying the “dumbest end of commercial metal” (Northmore); Rage Against the Machine’s Tim Commerford similarly described Limp Bizkit as “one of the dumbest bands in the history of music” (Bowar). Despite topping the charts in multiple territories, album sales exceeding 40 million records, and countless platinum certifications internationally, in 2012 *Spin* magazine appointed Limp Bizkit second position on their list of the “30 biggest punching bags in music,” while in 2013 *Rolling Stone* readers voted them the third-worst band of the 1990s (Spin Staff; “Readers” Poll”).

The third-worst band of the 1990s was formed in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1994. Frontman Fred Durst, an enthusiastic amateur rapper, and bassist Sam Rivers met whilst working at Chick-fil-A in the early 1990s and bonded over their mutual interests in skateboarding and music. Both Durst and Rivers were focused on forming a group that combined elements of rap and rock (Devenish 15), eventually recruiting Rivers’s cousin John Otto on drums. Limp Bizkit’s early incarnations developed an underground following, largely in Jacksonville’s punk scenes. Otto’s high-school friend Wes Borland, a devoted death-metal and grindcore fan, joined the band as the sole guitarist in 1995. Intent on drawing further hip-hop elements into the band’s music, Limp Bizkit invited DJ Lethal (Leor Dimant, formerly of Irish-American hip-hop act House of Pain) to join the band in 1996, thus completing their best-known and most-successful lineup.

The musical influences upon Limp Bizkit’s two most-prominent members, Fred Durst and Wes Borland, were split firmly between metal and hip hop. Fred Durst had a definite interest in metal and hard rock, having been a devoted Kiss fan as a child and a fan of Metallica and Pantera in his teens (Devenish 3). Durst considered Rage Against the Machine his greatest influence, describing them as “the rap-rock band

that started this shit” and subsequently “changed [his] life” (Newman). Nonetheless, Durst’s forms of adolescent socialization were largely situated within hip hop culture – “When hip hop came out to the world in the 80s, I was feelin’ it, and then I just became a part of it – bustin’ rhymes, break-dancing and everything when I was like twelve or thirteen years old” (Devenish 4). Durst’s musical development was largely mediated through hip hop, where he learned to beatbox, rap, and deejay in his teens. In contrast to Durst’s long-term interest in rapping, break dancing, and deejaying, guitarist Wes Borland was a devoted metal fan with little to no interest in hip hop until the release of Anthrax’s collaboration with Public Enemy on “Bring the Noise” in 1991. Borland’s father was a Presbyterian minister and folk musician, and Borland learned to play guitar surrounded by country music in Nashville. As a teen he was heavily influenced by thrash and hardcore punk and later developed an interest in death metal and grindcore, citing Ministry as his biggest influence in creating the “darkest, fastest thing,” alongside the “crazy electronic” music of Depeche Mode and the Cure (Northmore).

The combination of Durst’s background in hip hop and Borland’s interest in metallic eclecticism established the crucial preconditions for the development of Limp Bizkit’s aesthetic and for their distinct contribution to nu metal. Limp Bizkit built upon the groove, heavy syncopation, and downtuned riffs favored by Korn and added further, pronounced hip-hop elements – rapping and scratching – that later became defining characteristics of nu metal. The support the emergent nu-metal scene provided to Limp Bizkit in their nascent years went beyond musical inspiration. Limp Bizkit met Korn whilst supporting hardcore punk band Sick of It All and persuaded Korn’s bassist, Reginald “Fieldy” Arvizu, to listen to a demo. Korn subsequently added Limp Bizkit to two tours, and Limp Bizkit also secured a support slot with Deftones. The band were well-received and subsequently signed to Flip, a division of Interscope Records that became notable for signing several successful nu-metal acts. Limp Bizkit’s first album was produced by Ross Robinson, the “Godfather of Nu Metal,” who was crucial to the development of their sound. Robinson encouraged the band toward heavier riffing, made Lethal’s scratching more apparent in the mix, and encouraged Wes Borland to experiment and improvise on the recording.

Limp Bizkit’s ascent thus unfolded largely within the emerging scenic infrastructure of nu metal, rather than being positioned within established trajectories of heavy metal. Limp Bizkit were able to capitalize upon an existing audience for rap-rock hybrids, toured with established bands in this scene, and were buoyed by the mid ’90s market success and strong MTV presence of Korn, with whom they shared a producer in Robinson. They also received notable support from their parent label, Interscope, which aggressively marketed their debut album *Three Dollar Bill, Y’All\$*, paying a Portland radio station \$5,000 to guarantee that the album’s lead single, “Counterfeit,” would be played fifty times (Devenish 51). The move reignited controversy over payola yet also speaks to Interscope’s investment in the band’s success (to this end, Durst was eventually appointed Senior Vice President of A&R at Interscope). Limp Bizkit’s first album, *Three Dollar Bill, Y’All\$*, went double-platinum and was buttressed by a further two chart-topping albums in *Significant Other* (1999) and *Chocolate Starfish and the Hot Dog Flavored Water* (2001), the latter of which was the first rock album to sell one million copies in a single week (Wright).

Despite the huge sales Limp Bizkit attracted, the band were routinely panned by music critics. Initially unable to rely on the promotional support of large segments of the music press, Limp Bizkit instead turned to MTV for their earliest media exposure (Beato), during a period when other big-selling alt-metal bands actively avoided being associated with the channel. MTV in turn played Limp Bizkit's single "Faith" on heavy rotation, which led to increased album sales. In the lead-up to the band's second album, *Significant Other*, Limp Bizkit became staple studio guests on MTV's video countdown program *Total Request Live*. At the peak of their fame Limp Bizkit played live shows specifically for the purpose of MTV broadcasts and Fred Durst became a regular face on the channel.

Limp Bizkit's commercial success and public visibility, largely thanks to the heavy rotation of their videos on MTV, meant that the band were thought to be spearheading a North American rock revival in the form of metal's "new wave." They became a focal point around which the term "nu metal" came into widespread usage. The front cover of *Hit Parader's* October 1999 issue features Durst front and center, with the phrase "Metal's Next Wave!," while a 1999 (#32) issue of *Guitar Legends* shows Wes Borland alongside the headline "The New Metal." Much of the band's marketing and public image revolved around the notion that Limp Bizkit were "shaking up" metal's old guard. *Circus* (#191) thus refers to them as a "band on the move." Limp Bizkit also symbolized "a reclamation by the United States of rock and roll as an exclusively North American form" (Udo 24), leading *The Guardian* to cite them as the vanguard of an American movement who "toppled the British establishment" and had "the world at their feet" (Taylor).

Limp Bizkit's "Americanness" – and, more specifically, their performance of a particular imagining of whiteness and white masculinity – was played on by media more overtly than it had been for bands such as Korn and Deftones.² Much of the marketing and media attention given to Limp Bizkit focused on Durst himself, whom *Kerrang* labeled "Pretty Fly for a White Guy" on their June 1999 cover, whilst *Q* (July 2000) celebrated an "overamped, oversexed" Durst in the headline "All Hail the Dude of Rude!." Limp Bizkit's lyrics and stage shows were often juvenile. Their performances in the late 1990s, for example, featured the band emerging from a giant toilet bowl, which was also used to flush cardboard cutouts of pop performers. Stunts like this led *Rolling Stone Australia* to call them "America's Sickest Band" on their February 2000 cover. Such performative antics emerged alongside reactive lyrics in their better-known singles threatening violence against those who would "talk shit about me" ("My Generation") or "laugh at me, look down on me" ("My Way"); or in the more simple declaration that "everything is fucked, everybody sucks" ("Break Stuff"). The "Limp Bizkit prototype of alienated anger" (Halnon 443) emerged in adjacency to a renewed emphasis on the "white working class male as anti-authority rebel" in popular culture as the world looked to the beginning of the twenty-first century (Katz 352).

The 1990s, Brent Malin notes, were an "interesting and conflicted moment for traditional white masculinity" ("Memorializing" 239). The millennial (re)turn to white, working-class men as heroic social archetypes emerged in the U.S.A., Malin argues, as a backlash against identity politics from the 1960s onwards that had rigorously questioned and troubled social categories of gender and race ("Memorializing;" *American Masculinity*). The attempt in news and entertainment media cycles to "reestablish a version of traditional white masculinity" (Malin, "Memorializing" 241) worked not only to reassert the "normality" of hegemonic masculinities but also to position those

same white masculinities as victims of political discourses that would ostensibly deny them a voice and identity. Music scenes and cultures were intriguingly situated in this nexus – there is, at once, the appropriation of hip hop by white performers amidst the waning of genres traditionally coded as white that Middleton and Beebe point to; further to this, Kyle Kusz argues there also emerged an emphasis on white male victimhood in alternative music scenes in the late 1990s (390). For Kusz, alternative rock represented “one of several sites of contemporary American popular culture in which one encounters images and narratives of victimized young white males” (391). Here he argues that the “the white male as victim trope” appeared in a “1990s popular music context in which we hear a number of songs by White male artists who express a desire for alterity and make claims of being disadvantaged and victimized” (390).

In the new millennium, there was then “a market and demand for songs by white male bands expressing sentiments of being victimized and ill treated” (Kusz 391). Such a market further informed the focus on Fred Durst by music media that largely hinged on his representation as an alienated young white man who had found an outlet for his frustrations through the communicative frameworks of rap and metal. Durst saw himself as existing in a tripartite conflict between “a jock scene, a bad-boy redneck scene and a black scene” (Devenish 5), a position that informed Limp Bizkit’s musical style. The exposition of Durst as a spokesperson for the white male working class, and moreover the collision of this with a wider image of Durst as “the kind of face you see on the Jerry Springer show” (Daly) further complicated Limp Bizkit’s coopting of hip-hop styles and symbolism – particularly in the context of the alternative music scene of the 1990s, with its appropriation of language and imagery associated with “working class and underclass white cultures” (Newitz 146). Durst, alongside Kid Rock and Eminem, is thus used by Middleton and Beebe as an exemplification of the “white boy” appropriation of rap and its decontextualization for white audiences (161). Durst “embodies many of the new paradoxes implicit in the new rap/rock hybrids” (Middleton and Beebe 162). In capitalizing upon rap’s supposed emphasis on “gritty authenticity” and “imagery of a tough and dangerous life,” the attempt to market Durst as a “poor white in Florida who always shared an affinity with hip hop culture” (Middleton and Beebe 162) exploited what Hess has argued is a precarious understanding of hip-hop “realness” as class-based (372), which denies the plurality and diversity of hip hop’s origins and communities.

The failure of crude attempts to situate white performers in stereotypical, and often offensive, black-identifying roles thus meant that the marketing of Durst was enmeshed in tensions between his class-based authenticity as a “poor white” and an anti-authority discourse of alienation that reinforced dominant forms of white, patriarchal hegemony. Any attempt to situate Limp Bizkit within an “authenticity” narrative of broken home lives, furthermore, was not only a reductive understanding of hip hop and its communities but was immediately undercut by the fact that the members of Limp Bizkit had close and supportive relationships with their parents – Durst and Borland were the sons of a police officer and Presbyterian minister, respectively, leading Devenish to suggest that their home lives as young men “[seem] like something straight out of an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*” (13). Much of Limp Bizkit’s marketing instead relied on a sense of “authenticity [...] implied by Limp Bizkit’s ‘white trash’ image” (Middleton and Beebe 162), informed by the “urban settings replete with graffiti” and Durst’s “signature b-boy fashion” (163) featured in their music videos and album covers. Limp Bizkit’s music

videos, which situated Durst as both an urban rapper and rock star, “presented Durst as the master of both the rap and rock domains” (Middleton and Beebe 163): In *Rollin'*, Durst is featured in “urban” dance scenes; in *Break Stuff*, he is accompanied by Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, and Eminem to mark his “acceptance” by the hip hop scene. Yet, crucially, these were coded as rock performances much more strongly than rap performances, and this coding was executed in racialized ways – in *Nookie*, for example, Durst’s rap scenes show him being followed down a street by young women of color, yet the crowd for the “metal” performance is nearly entirely white and male.

Other musical signifiers of hip-hop authenticity within these music videos, such as the use of DJ Lethal’s turntabling, reveal the ways in which the band “appropriat[ed] the cultural capital of hip hop in a very superficial way” and ‘erased the specific contexts [and] formal qualities’ of deejaying (Middleton and Beebe 162). Lethal and his turntables are heavily featured within the visual space of the music videos, but in the music itself his contributions are oft-limited to his scratching. The semiotic function of the turntable in the context of Limp Bizkit’s music, and within the musico-visual landscape for nu metal more generally, is also notable. Nu metal, to revisit Pieslak’s definition, had been marked by ‘riff-based music with a distinct absence of solos and overt displays of instrumental virtuosity’ (37). Lethal’s turntabling was not itself necessarily an overtly ‘virtuosic’ display, however troubled such a term is, purely by virtue of the fact that he was largely limited to scratching rather than employing the range of techniques available to deejays. However, DJ Lethal suggests that joining Limp Bizkit allowed him to experiment with his turntabling technique in ways that hip hop had not permitted and that he wanted to ‘be like another guitar player’ (Devenish 42). The desire to perform as ‘another guitar player’ is of note in the context of nu metal, which was often charged with “[driving] a stake through the heart” of metal’s guitar-based conventions through its simplified riffs and disavowal of solos (Grow). While turntabling and sampling “function[ed] to expand the sound palette” of nu-metal bands and ultimately enriched the genre, Marrington argues, most nu-metal acts “tended to retain the traditional distorted electric guitar and vocal-led performance aesthetics of the live metal band – in other words, metal’s core remained dominant” (“From DJ” 259).

Much of the animosity directed toward Limp Bizkit has thus justifiably focused on the band’s fetishization of hip hop as an expression of minority urban alienation and on the marketing of parochial stereotypes of hip-hop “Otherness” to white audiences. Limp Bizkit appropriated and incorporated elements of hip hop’s cultural forms in ways that positioned hip hop’s fans, communities, and practices as objects available for consumption rather than as active, participatory subjects. Moreover, the viewing positions constructed for Limp Bizkit were mobilized through rock and metal outlets rather than through outlets such as BET that had traditionally focused on hip hop (Middleton and Beebe 167). Limp Bizkit’s appropriation and hybridization of metal and rap are thus taken by Middleton and Beebe as an attempt to “reconfigure a post-grunge landscape” to accommodate white suburban subjects, who had been “momentarily displaced” by upheavals within rock music and culture (159). This sense of displacement was crucial to Limp Bizkit’s image and to that of the wider nu-metal scene. Nu metal’s lyrical focus on affect, which Kahn-Harris argues drew on musical and discursive sources that were abjectified within extreme-metal scenes (136), was imperative to Durst’s prose, which often spoke of being bullied as a youth. In “Nookie,” for example, he raps that he “came into the world as a reject.” This sense of alienation, anger, and frustration became a central theme in the band’s music and marketing and was used to establish a sense of

solidarity with an implied audience of similarly disenfranchised young people, particularly young white men caught up in the contested terrain of white masculinity at the turn of the millennium (Malin, “Memorializing”). Limp Bizkit’s fans were invited to join an “international hate campaign” via the band’s website, whereby they could “show the world your finger” and, most tellingly, “have faces” (Halnon 443).

Metal Resistance and Subcultural Capital

Limp Bizkit’s hegemonic appropriation of hip-hop aesthetics and urban “authenticity” draws attention to the ways in which nu metal ostensibly acted as a site for white suburban subjects to be accommodated within a wider music market in which rap was gaining precedence and in a political context marked by a crisis of white American masculinity. Such a discussion raises necessary concerns about the exploitation, commodification, and oversimplification of hip hop as it gained mainstream traction with white audiences, an area that has been effectively explored by Kembrew McLeod and Jason Rodriguez, amongst others. However, a straightforward dismissal of Limp Bizkit on the grounds that they were suburban white men engaging with hip-hop culture potentially obscures further, complex issues. The condemnation of Limp Bizkit, particularly within metal communities, does not much reflect a concern about hip-hop appropriation but rather speaks volumes about metal’s genre-policing and its attitudes toward “Others,” particularly as these coalesced in the late 1990s. Limp Bizkit’s close relationship with commercial outlets such as MTV and mass popularity cemented both them and the wider nu-metal scene as superficial “trend” music, antithetical to the supposed authenticity of “real” metal.

For Kahn-Harris, this removal from traditional heavy-metal scenes and a refusal to pay “due respect to the history of the scene” (136) sanctioned the inability of nu-metal bands to gain capital within the extreme-metal scene. Crucially, however, Limp Bizkit, like many of their nu-metal contemporaries, never claimed to be a metal band. In the case of Wes Borland, Limp Bizkit was never about extending the traditions of metal; rather, he viewed the band as an avenue through which to experiment with metal’s aesthetics and challenge the boundaries of the genre, which he saw as stagnant and uninteresting. Of Limp Bizkit’s position within the wider canon of heavy-metal music, he stated:

I think metal is so fucking boring that I wanna stab my eyes out with screwdrivers. In the ’90s we tried to do something with metal, to take it into a new direction, based on combining metal bands with stuff that was on the heels of the grunge movement [. . .]. That was the thought process at the time, and we didn’t know where it was gonna go. [. . .] [I]t was a time period of just experimenting and going in a certain direction and seeing what guitars did if you did this to them, and songs, and so on and so forth. And at no point were we ever claiming to be, like, *metal*. (Breihan, “Q&A”)

Borland’s desire to do something “new” with metal at once immersed him in the wider scene yet also reflects a frustration with and musical self-removal from extreme and heavy metal music. By denying any claim to being “metal,” Borland can also be seen to display a refusal to ally himself and his band discursively within the history of the scene (Kahn-Harris 136). Such tensions, as espoused by Limp Bizkit, enabled nu metal to “become an ‘other’ against which subcultural capital can be claimed” (Kahn-Harris 135).

Limp Bizkit's repudiation of traditional metal aesthetics, which Kahn-Harris argues "effectively excluded" both themselves and other nu-metal bands from gaining any kind of respect within extreme-metal scenes (135), was also buttressed by the look of the band: Limp Bizkit's members had short hair and wore baggy clothes made by sportswear manufacturers, fashions that were more closely associated with hip-hop b-boys during this period (Middleton and Beebe 163). Borland's outlandish stage costumes, which included experimental, often heavy makeup, black contact lenses, masks, body paint, and costumes that played with gendered norms, proved to be the exception to the band's aesthetic yet nonetheless coincided with his bandmates' defiance of heavy metal's established traditions of masculine performativity and aesthetics, which Weinstein argued had long traded on archetypes of long-haired, deviant, white working-class masculinity (104).

Virtuosity, Otherness, and "False Metal"

Limp Bizkit's apparent refusal to align themselves with the aesthetic traditions of heavy metal resulted in the oft-repeated claim that they were not "real" metal. However, I would also argue that attempts to position Limp Bizkit as "fake" simultaneously relied on an projection of hip hop's aesthetics as fundamentally inauthentic, violent, and lacking in musicality. This is perhaps most telling in the distinctions made between the band's two most-visible members in Durst, the "rapper thug," and Wes Borland, the "virtuoso guitarist." Durst's white-boy rapper image, underscored by frequent conflicts with other bands, tensions within his own band, and homophobic and misogynistic comments, was often contrasted with the artistry, virtuosity, and "erudite" (Northmore) character of Wes Borland. Where Durst was routinely referred to as a "thug" by the popular press and fellow artists (cf. Ali) who "[spun] testosterone fueled fantasies into snarky white-boy rap" (Devenish 67), Borland had been recognized by influential industry figures such as Bob Ezrin as a "virtuoso playing at the top of his game" (in D'Angelo). Borland had a promotional deal with Ibanez and was often praised for his experimental playing; he was ranked as one of *Guitar World's* "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time," where he was described as a "guitar innovator" and "one of the premier axmen of the millennium" (Kitts and Tollinski 3) – even in spite of his reputation as "one of those rap metal guys" (4). These distinctions between Borland and his bandmates still persist into the twenty-first century – Borland is described as "the odd one out" and "the freak amongst the frat boys" (Northmore); "in a frat-thug-dominated scene, he was the guy who wore all-black contact lenses and kabuki makeup" (Breihan, "Limp Bizkit Guitarist"). Borland is continually framed as a "reluctant" member of Limp Bizkit, who never quite took the band seriously: "He's an art-school kid and a jazz-guitar virtuoso who would rather be playing with his industrial side project. But he keeps coming back to Bizkit, presumably because it pays the bills" (Breihan, "Limp Bizkit Guitarist").

That Borland received such esteem for his guitar playing from circles that had traditionally been hostile to nu metal further complicates Limp Bizkit's situatedness within metal's boundaries. Nu metal, as aforementioned, had often been charged with destroying a guitar culture central to metal's identity: Kory Grow argues that "in its efforts to tune down and simplify riffs, nu-metal effectively drove a stake through the heart of the guitar solo." If metal took the guitar solo to be "virtually required by the

conventions of the genre,” as Walser (5) suggests, then “most nu metal bands are clearly not ‘heavy metal’ as very few guitar solos actually appear in their songs” (Pieslak 37). That Borland was celebrated for his virtuosity, positioning him within a genre that heavily prized such displays (Walser 5), aligned him with “authentic” metal musicality and furthered the “Otherness” of Limp Bizkit’s other members. Positioning Borland as the “real” musician within the band – when he was the one with the strongest metal influence – enables a problematic divide between the hip hop-influenced “frat-boy thugs” headed by Durst, who were taken to be inauthentic impostors, and the “artist” represented by Borland, who enabled a maintenance of metal’s creative elements even within a much-criticized subgenre. Such representations undermine Borland’s own desires to escape from the rigid strictures of metal and in turn reify a dogmatic understanding of metal’s virtuosic core in ways that maintain hegemonic genre boundaries and reinforce a position for hip hop as thuggish, commercialized trend music.

Limp Bizkit’s Legacy and Decline

Limp Bizkit rode the commercial wave alongside their nu-metal associates through 2003, when longstanding tensions between Fred Durst and Wes Borland came to a head and resulted in Borland’s departure from the band. Despite the (relatively) disappointing sales of 2003’s *Results May Vary* – the band’s first album without Borland and one that marked a transition away from nu metal toward a more experimental sound – Durst was still featured on the cover of a 2003 edition of *Rolling Stone* alongside Marilyn Manson, Ozzy Osbourne, and Metallica’s James Hetfield, a curious insight into the state of metal’s fragmented identity in the early 2000s. Durst’s behavior, and several tragic incidents at Limp Bizkit’s live shows, tarnished the band’s reputation and led to their eventual widespread revilement. The misogyny of Durst’s naughty frat-boy persona was condemned following his claims to have had sexual relationships with Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears, which both women have denied. Moreover, the “alienated anger” celebrated by the band potentially led to the dangerous and destructive environments of their live shows. Limp Bizkit’s performance at Woodstock ’99 was tarred after Durst was seen to incite a destructive riot within the crowd, from which disturbing reports of gang rape emerged (Wartofsky). During Limp Bizkit’s performance at the 2001 Big Day Out festival in Sydney, sixteen-year-old Jessica Michalik was crushed in the mosh pit. She later died in hospital. Limp Bizkit were criticized for their handling of the situation, and Durst in particular was accused of making “alarming and inflammatory” statements during the attempt to rescue Michalik (“Limp Bizkit Slammed”). *Spin* subsequently accused Limp Bizkit of “single-handedly destroying all the hard work that alternatypes [did] creating a more sensitive space for heavy music;” Courtney Love simply stated that Fred Durst “brought about the worst years in rock history” (Spin Staff).

Nu metal more generally experienced a widespread decline by the mid 2000s, as many of its stalwarts suffered sharp downturns in album sales. Nu metal was supplanted by post-punk artists and “throwback” or “garage rock revival” acts such as Jet and the Darkness, both of whom were seen to reenergize classic rock for a new millennium. Nu metal’s decline also coincided with a rise in popularity for emo and metalcore, both

genres that had drawn from nu metal's emphasis on expressions of emotional affect and social alienation, and similarly experienced backlash from metal circles for their commerciality and perceived effeminacy (cf. Overell). Much of the decline of nu metal has, however, been attributed to an eventual oversaturation of the market and to the stagnation of the genre itself. Nu metal, which had set out with a mission of "newness," innovation, and boundary crossing, eventually became staid and formulaic, and its anti-authority aspirations were undercut by its corporatism, as nu-metal tracks became associated with major sporting teams, corporations, and mass-market media. Nu metal's perceived childishness and insincerity were further blamed for its decline: Lamb of God's Randy Blythe argued that "people are ready for angrier music. I think people are ready for something that's real, not, you know, 'I did it all for the nookie'" ("Lamb of God Singer").

In an MTV article analyzing the stagnation of nu metal, Limp Bizkit's members were remarkably pragmatic: DJ Lethal argued that nu metal had "milked the hip-hop-rock-beats-scratching thing . . . it's done. It's time to move on;" a then-newly departed Wes Borland stated "you can't race the same horse over and over again. It's going to get tired and die" (D'Angelo and Parry). Fred Durst nonetheless saw the stagnation of "new" rock as another opportunity for reinvention:

The fact that I am sick of this new rock inspired me to reinvent it and be one of the pioneers . . . [This is] a stepping stone for our genre, [and we want] to really help contribute to it in a positive way, the same way we contributed to it back in the day. It's time to reinvent and pull a Madonna on everybody. (D'Angelo and Parry)

Despite gestures made by many of nu metal's progenitors toward reinvention, the genre never regained the momentum it had experienced around the turn of the millennium. For bands and commentators alike, nu metal then represented a particular moment, which had tapped into the cultural zeitgeist of the late 1990s and early 2000s in a very visceral way, before losing relevance. Of this peak and decline, Durst simply stated: "Here's the deal: say in 2000, there were 35 million people who connected to this band. Twelve years later, lots of those people have moved on. We were a moment in time and it's over" (Sacks).

Fred Durst's belief that Limp Bizkit spoke to a certain "moment in time" is notable in the context of the late 1990s to early 2000s, when their lyrical emphasis on social alienation and their often-incendiary behavior directed toward women and the LGBT+ community resonated within a crisis of white American masculinity and a reprise of nationalist, conservative politics post-9/11. The antipathy toward Limp Bizkit nonetheless grew from their situatedness within such narratives of "alienated anger," as a general public distaste for the band followed them well after the waning of nu metal's popularity. In spite of their enormous commercial success, Limp Bizkit came to be reviled as the "dumbest" band of metal's "dumbest" era, with Fred Durst scorned as one of the most-disliked figures in popular music. Limp Bizkit thus remain one of metal's most-polarizing bands even two decades after the release of their first album in 1997, and their relationship to the label "metal" itself remains tenuous and contested. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Limp Bizkit on a lineup of "metal legends" for the 2018 Download Festival in Australia, the moment with which I introduced this article, represented a curious quasi-redemption for a band previously reviled by metal press, bands, and fans alike. This was also not an unprecedented moment in Limp Bizkit's revival. They have repeatedly been drawn into the "nostalgic" sites for nu metal enabled by press such as *Metal Hammer's*

“Nu Metal Retrospective” issue in 2014; touring festivals such as ShipRocked and the aforementioned Download, featuring many of their fellow nu-metal stalwarts; and a much-talked-about performance at Lollapalooza in July 2021, a performance that resulted in a huge spike in streaming and sales for the band (Lavin).

Nu metal more generally witnessed a resurgence toward the end of the 2010s with a new generation of bands such as Issues and Cane Hill. The adoption of nu-metal influences by artists including Grimes, Poppy, and Rina Sawayama is further taken by Kate Soloman to represent a crucial reclaiming of nu metal’s affective qualities by women, in response to the “toxic masculine tropes” the genre often represented in its prime. The resurgence of nu metal in the late 2010s, however, also raises a series of potentialities that continue to intrigue me and that lay a path for further research. There emerges something noteworthy in the renewed interest in a genre notorious for its emphasis on masculine alienation and anger that may go beyond simple nostalgia, particularly in the context of the wider political landscape since the late 2010s. Much as the 1990s and early 2000s had represented a crisis for white masculinity and a revitalization of the “white male victim trope” (cf. Kusz; Malin, “Memorializing”), the late 2010s similarly saw a “spectacle of white masculinity” (Kelly) emerge in the wake of Trumpism and international surges in hard-right nationalist politics. For me, Durst’s anti-authority discourse in the 2018 performance of “Break Stuff” took on a particular significance in this context. How nu metal’s resurgence might continue to unfold within this paradigm will remain a source of curiosity, as music navigates its own roles amidst this complex terrain of alterity and hegemony.

Conclusion

Limp Bizkit’s emergence onto the “nostalgia” circuit arguably commenced with their headlining of the ShipRocked cruise in 2015, topping a bill of nu-metal bands. Wes Borland addressed this prospect in the following statement on his public Instagram account:

Getting all packed up this week for Broatchella 2015. It’s the same as Brochella but it’s off land. Can’t wait to see me some roided out tribal tattooed spray tanned Jell-O shot filled bohunks do their best drunk MMA impressions in the top deck mosh pit. Whenever we aren’t on stage, I’ll be curled up fetal position in my cabin, palms up, while I desperately cling to the last week of my thirties as it slips through my hooked fingers. So, I’d like to give a shout out now to all the other over-the-hill late nineties/early 2000s bands going on the cruise: Let’s give these people the raging alcohol fueled nostalgia fest they’re paying for guys! I know we can do it if we tune down low enough!

Borland’s own tenuous relationship with the band, their fans, and the genre at large is indicative of the wider anxieties that Limp Bizkit continue to incite in discussions of nu metal. There is, as this article has explored, the immediate reality that Limp Bizkit, and nu metal at large, appropriated hip-hop styles and symbolism in ways that decontextualized their meanings and reimagined such signs for white, suburban, working-class audiences. Limp Bizkit’s ability to capitalize upon existing frameworks for explorations of rock-and-rap hybrids incurred enormous commercial success yet also can be seen to highlight industry efforts in the late 1990s to combat rap’s increased market growth with homogenizing appropriations.

Further to this is the late-1990s context in which Limp Bizkit gained mainstream popularity, wherein a supposed crisis of masculinity around the turn of the millennium was manifested in a market demand for musical representations of white, working-class men as victims of identity politics. Fred Durst's alienated anger can be seen to exploit nu metal's lyrical interest in affect and emotion and to channel it into a destructive rage that oversaw the mobilization of genuinely unsafe spaces within rock. However, as this article argues, much of the disparagement of Limp Bizkit must be considered in relation to metal's anxieties over the incorporation of other kinds of difference. The band's reception, demise, and eventual reprisal are caught up within heavy metal's anxieties over generic purity and the racialized terrain of the music of "Others." The condemnation of their hip-hop appropriations was largely based in representations of hip hop as inauthentic, unmusical, and thuggish, realized through the framing of Durst as a frat-boy thug, and the metal-influenced Wes Borland as an erudite guitarist. Such understandings undercut Borland's own distaste for metal, which was instead held up as virtuosic and complex, in response to the puerile and childish aesthetics of nu metal.

The renewed interest in Limp Bizkit then remains a source of curiosity, as metal more widely grapples with an evolving identity and, increasingly, a critical reckoning with its own politics. I remain intrigued by Limp Bizkit's politics of white, suburban "alienated anger" (Halnon 443), as this extends into the 2020s a crisis of masculine identity for white American men and the neoconservatism of the post-9/11 zeitgeist (Malin, *American Masculinity*). For the moment, however, as this article demonstrates, the hostility toward nu metal, and particularly Limp Bizkit, must be considered not only in light of the appropriative performance of hip-hop aesthetics that the genre exploited but also the ways in which the condemnation of the genre hinged on a framing of hip hop itself in negative terms. The antipathy toward Limp Bizkit as it circulated in the early 2000s provides a significant example of the intersecting anxieties accompanying nu metal: the hostility of extreme metal scenes to the "incorporation of other kinds of difference" (Kahn-Harris 133); the hegemonic appropriation of rap in rock contexts (Middleton and Beebe 159); and the glorification of particular brands of "thuggish," "white trash" masculinity personified in frontman Fred Durst. Limp Bizkit and nu metal at large thus continue to offer important examples of how musical hybridity incites anxieties and tensions that often enter into racialized terrain. Limp Bizkit's peak and wane, and the wider public discourse they found themselves situated within, reveal the fragmentation of the metal scene at the turn of the millennium as it negotiated the troublesome terrain of its own commercial future.

Notes

1. For example, Korn's albums *Follow the Leader* (1998) and *Issues* (1999) both reached number 1 in the *Billboard* charts and were certified 5× and 3× platinum, respectively, in the U.S.A.; Limp Bizkit's *Significant Other* (1999) also reached number 1 and was certified 7× platinum.
2. I note here that whilst much of the discourse surrounding nu metal is framed through whiteness and masculinity, nu metal did potentially offer a modicum more visibility for people of color and women within mainstream metal scenes. Linkin Park's Mike Shinoda thus argues that nu metal's nascent years were a "very diverse place" compared to the whiteness of its commercial predecessors (Bruce).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and generous feedback on this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Catherine Hoad  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7796-1051>

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