



## Research article

Peter J. Woods\*

# Mapping Critical Anthropocene Discourses in Musical Artefacts: Whiteness, Absence, and the Intersecting “-Cenes” in Prurient’s *The History of Aids*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0048>

Received February 19, 2019; accepted September 13, 2019

**Abstract:** In critiquing the humanism of the Anthropocene, scholars have proposed multiple “-cenes” of their own (i.e. the Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Necrocene). However, authors often consider these formations in isolation rather than considering the intersection between them. To address this oversight, I propose the use of musical artefacts as a site of examination as the forces behind these “-cenes” embed traces of themselves into these recordings and performances. Power electronics, a subgenre of noise music, provides an exceptionally fruitful area of research because of its tendency towards disruption as both a musical and ideological gesture. This inclination creates space for artists to evoke non-dominant narratives, allowing for new forms of interaction between “-cenes” to emerge. By way of example, I analyse the album *The History of AIDS* by power electronics artist Prurient. Utilizing Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome as a framework for interaction, the album evokes the sexual and racial politics within the Capitalocene, Necrocene, and Plantationocene, allowing space for audiences to consider all three formations simultaneously. This manoeuvring between various “-cenes” highlights the ways in which music acts as a “-ceneic” meeting ground and implies new directions for research.

**Keywords:** anthropocene; necropolitics; whiteness; power electronics; genre work; queer theory

## Introduction

First proposed by scientists Crutzen and Stoermer, the Anthropocene has taken root within multiple disciplines ranging from art history and philosophy to anthropology, geology, and the social sciences (Haraway et al. 536). However, this increased excitement and attention has also engendered multiple critiques with scholars claiming that the Anthropocene as formation misplaces the force of ecological disaster within the individual or the human while ignoring the real forces driving ecological change (McBrien 119). If this line of critique holds, it raises questions of how the multitude of disciplines employing the Anthropocene as a space for thought and critique should work within and on this formation, if at all. The same holds true for cultural studies: as researchers begin to explore the Anthropocene in and through cultural research (broadly defined), these same writers should investigate how their understanding of the Anthropocene informs and restricts their thinking towards our current condition. Extending this line of thought, cultural studies may also reverse this role, allowing scholars to investigate the growing multitude of challenges to the Anthropocene and more fully develop this understanding of humanity as a driving ecological, environmental, and social force.

---

\*Corresponding author: Peter J. Woods, UW-Madison, Curriculum & Instruction, Madison, WI 53715, United States of America, E-mail: Pwoods2@wisc.edu

By way of example, I will use this paper to argue for cultural studies's role in unearthing and exploring sites of intersection between the various “-cene” formations proposed by scholars. As Haraway et al. argue, the multiple ways of framing intersecting social and ecological forces (such as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulucene, Plantationocene, etc) all hold the ability to inform each other and even, at times, exist simultaneously within a given discourse (557). More specifically, I propose musical artefacts as an object of study, one that allows for these intersecting “-cenes” to emerge and respond to each other. I make this proposition under the assumption that larger formations of genre evoke and respond to contemporary cultural understandings through musical composition and performance, with a given musical tradition providing a context and the musical artefact creating a window into the worldviews behind that framework. Utilizing what Nowak and Whelan describe as genre work, or “an empirical investigative framework for exploring and analysing how local statements and practices work to assert, dispute, or finesse a particular and singular meaning and coherence for a musical style” (452), to define a given cultural space, scholars and audiences alike can interrogate intersecting “-cenes” within a given musical context.

To further develop this proposition, I will begin by providing a brief overview of some of the critical responses to the recent turn towards the Anthropocene. This theoretical context will primarily focus on the notions of the Capitalocene (Moore 6) and the Plantationocene (Haraway et al. 557), both of which rely on Mbembé's assertion that modern social forces increasingly rely on necropolitics (39). This assertion, in turn, engenders another “-cene” to think through: the Necrocene (McBrien 117). Once established, I will turn to the album *The History of AIDS* by power electronics artist Prurient. I have specifically chosen an album from the power electronics genre, which is itself a sub-genre of noise music, because of the common understanding of noise as a form of musical disruption (Hegarty 3). This theorization of noise as disruption lays the groundwork for noise and power electronics to act as a theoretical disruption as well, challenging listeners to think beyond current understandings of the world to newly formalized interrelations between the individual and social/ecological forces. Moreover, I chose *The History of AIDS* because of the album's influential status within power electronics and, more broadly, noise (Ryce). Through this analysis, I will argue that *The History of AIDS* evokes a multitude of worldviews rooted in the sexual and racial politics of the Capitalocene, Necrocene, and Plantationocene simultaneously by utilizing what Deleuze and Guattari define as a rhizomatic approach to the thematics surrounding the album (30). This realization points to the overlapping nature of these various “-cenes” and challenges scholars to imagine how these driving social forces not only strive for dominance but also interact with and influence each other.

## Beyond the Anthropocene

With the introduction of the Anthropocene into the vocabulary of a vast number of discourses, the nuances of human intervention as a driving force behind ecological and climate change have finally received the attention they rightfully deserved (Moore 2). However, this understanding of our current epoch holds significantly problematic assumptions about the world. In particular, the Anthropocene relies on a false Nature/Society dualism in which scholars conveniently sever any ties between historical and social forces and environmental change (Moore 5). This conception places the locus of power to change the natural world within the individual, as opposed to the oppressive forces that shape modern life (McBrien 117). Rather than abandon the discourse on human inflected epochs, scholars from multiple disciplines have taken the opportunity to propose a host of different, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, and often intertwined “-cenes” in this newly formed absence (Haraway et al. 557). One such formation is the Capitalocene, an understanding of the world in which capital (as opposed to humans or, subsequently, human nature) exists as the driving ecological force (see Demos, McBrien, Moore). This new terminology places capitalism's drive for unending expansion, centred around the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, as the key driver of climate change and the most powerful ecological force of our time (Demos 68). The Capitalocene challenges the universality inherent to most formations of the Anthropocene: not every individual, society, or culture has affected climate change to the same degree (Demos 59) and climate change has not affected every individual, society, or culture in an equitable fashion (Mirzoeff 123). This

new formation retains the causal relationship between humans and ecological change but places the agency for these changes within the systems created and reinscribed by humans, not within a universalized understanding of the individual.

McBrien extends this thinking when defining what he calls the Necrocene. Relying on Mbembé's notion of necropolitics, in which both colonial and postcolonial sovereignty comes from the act of dictating mortality, "the Necrocene reframes the history of capitalism's expansion through the process of becoming extinction... [it is] the extinguishing of cultures and languages... it is the extinction of the earth in the depletion of fossil fuels" (116-117). This places capitalism's death drive front and centre in the discussion of what produces ecological change, still referencing man's influence in this process but situating the necropolitical force of capitalism as the primary culprit. Capitalism, under this definition, allows institutions and corporations to decide which cultures, which ecosystems, which individuals, and which resources need to die off entirely for the sake of capitalist expansion. For McBrien, the necropolitics at the centre of capitalism represent the dominant force in global climate change (116). Hence the need for the Necrocene formation, as opposed to simply relying on Capitalocene terminology.

In another, intertwined line of critique, theorists have also challenged Anthropocene scholars to consider the role that race has played within both climate change and the formation of the Anthropocene concept itself. As Klein asserts, thinly veiled notions of racial superiority have informed every aspect of the non-response to climate change so far, which has impacted people of colour with far more severity. Not only has racism (and, more specifically, white supremacy) allowed for the extended reign of climate change to go unnoticed, but the effects of that climate change have disproportionately affected marginalized communities (Demos, Mirzoeff). Mirzoeff also argues for white supremacy's influence in the discursive formation of the Anthropocene itself: "Given that the Anthropos in Anthropocene turns out to be our old friend the (imperialist) white male, my mantra has become: it's not the Anthropocene, it's the white supremacy scene" (123). Mirzoeff goes on to argue that the break between different ecological epochs connects specifically to the rise of colonialism and the actions taken by colonial settlers, both of which result from the construction of race (151). By naming and employing the Anthropocene without consideration of race as a determining factor, this discourse reinscribes white supremacy as a driving and invisible force.

Relying on this enacted understanding of white supremacy within capitalist production and extinction, Haraway proposes another epoch to frame our modern condition: the Plantationocene. According to the author, "the plantation system predates both the terms Anthropocene and Capitalocene. The Plantationocene makes one pay attention to the historical relocations of the substances of living and dying around the Earth as necessary prerequisites to their extraction" (Haraway et al. 557). Much like Mbembé's use of the colony as the anchor behind the rising dominance of necropolitics (27), Haraway utilizes the site of the plantation as the foundational mechanism through which ecological disaster emerges. The plantation relies on and engenders the extraction and relocation of resources from around the globe, including those black bodies that only exist as resources because of their denied existence as fully human. Putting the Plantationocene in conversation with Mirzoeff's critique of the Anthropocene, this places the "break" between epochs well before the industrial revolution. Therefore, the plantation both eclipses and encompasses capitalism's hold as a driving force. This becomes especially true when considering the slave economy's role in the development of the United States' economy and, in turn, capitalism's current state (Baptist). Through these various formations, an interlocking matrix of social forces rooted in capital expansion and racially defined necropolitics emerges directly from the enacted "social death" (Patterson 13) forced on the displaced slave.

While authors will continue to argue as to which "-cene" represents the modern condition most accurately, a more informed debate can occur by considering a multitude of "-cenes" and driving forces simultaneously. Cultural studies can and should play a role in this debate by providing analysis of contemporary cultural artefacts, ones informed by and crafted within these modern social conditions. Not only will this approach root the debate within contemporary understandings of our current and polysemic epoch, but careful examination can uncover traces of the epoch itself. To this end, I propose music and its surrounding scenes as a highly potent site of research by, first, thinking through Bennett & Janssen (1) who argue for popular music's potential as a form of both individual and cultural heritage and memory. This assertion overlaps with my interest in using music as a site of research into forces behind various

“-cenes” by conducting the “genre work” defined by Nowak and Whelan (452). If musicians embed musical artefacts with their worldview, it follows that the social forces that construct those worldviews will also embed themselves within the music. By unearthing these understandings, scholars can examine how these social forces interact with each other and individuals.

However, shifting from popular music to a power electronics context, as I am proposing here, complicates this relatively straightforward connection between artistic intent/worldview and musical artefact. Since power electronics artists often avoid “providing a clear stance or simplistic answers” (Stevenson 181) within their music, understanding the intent of the artist proves both more difficult and less valuable in analysing a given work. Rather than articulate the opinion of the performer, power electronics artists often utilize recordings and performances as a means for challenging audiences to grapple with an (often troubling or problematic) aspect of society (Woods 93). But the creators behind these artefacts still respond to and enact the driving forces behind the modern condition, creating sites of interaction that inherently contain those forces embedded within them (or, at least, provide a means for analysis or commentary). The somewhat ambiguous approach to the thematic content within power electronics subsequently allows for a rhizomatic understanding of this music, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, by allowing for a multiplicity of readings and thematics to exist within one work (30). Suddenly, the musical artefact does not embody the worldview of the artist but a complicated set of relationships that represent a broad and multi-layered representation of the contemporary condition. To quote Deleuze and Guattari, “music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many transformational multiplicities, even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it” (34) and power electronics as a genre provides no exception. This subsequently creates opportunities to unpack and explore enacted results of various “-cenes” as they interact, co-exist, and fight for dominance.

To this end, I will now turn my attention to the album *The History of AIDS* by power electronics artist Prurient, the stage name utilized by musician Dominick Fernow. I have specifically chosen this album for two reasons. First, the disruptive nature at the core of noise as a musical gesture (Attali 24; Hegarty 3) allows space for artists to challenge dominant narratives. Novak (6) builds on this assertion by defining noise as a form of circulation in which artists constantly move between socialized understandings of music (and culture more broadly) and either “meaningless noise” or unsayable assertions. This constructs both noise music and power electronics as genres constantly in dialogue with larger, culturally situated worldviews and allows for a rich exploration of enacted (and potentially overlooked) social forces within the work that could provide a framework for future investigations. Second, I have chosen to analyse Prurient in particular because of his influential place within noise and power electronics scenes in the United States. He achieved this status in part through multiple high-profile albums and his work as the organizer behind the highly regarded Hospital Productions label and festival. However, his work remains almost entirely untheorized despite this influence. This paper will therefore take the first step in thinking through Prurient’s work by examining *The History of AIDS*, what Ryce describes as one “of noise music’s landmark releases” (despite the dearth of writing about the album). However, before that analysis can occur, a description of the album and, more specifically, the instrumentation used to create this work needs to occur.

## Feedback as Enacted Necropolitics

Through the heavily distorted squalor and thick electronic drones that dominate the album, an overarching (but thematically elusive) musical gesture emerges from the instrumentation used to create *The History of AIDS*. According to the label’s write up (one of the only pieces of publicly available text about the album), the album presents “massive, textural, throbbing, destructive, electronic, feedback-drenched power electronics and industrial noise with heavily processed vocals and field recordings dealing with vulnerability. [The album] uses some of the thirteenth century love poems of the Persian poet Rumi as lyrics” (Fernow). With this brief description, the scant liner notes, and the album itself as the only guides, I contend that the interaction between the various forms of feedback, vocals, and field recordings provides the foundation for the album’s central gesture. Regarding feedback, the sonic material on *The History of AIDS* suggests

that Fernow utilized two different mechanisms to create these recordings: first, an external feedback loop created between an amplifier and a microphone (which generates piercing high frequencies) and, second, internally within a mixer or some other type of electronic device (which creates lower, blown out textures). Although the mixer could act as its own self-contained instrument when plugged into itself, the inclusion of various inputs into the feedback system alters the sound created by the loop. Outside inputs shift not only the final output of the sound, but the feedback loop itself. What finally emerges on the record comes from this highly iterative and constantly evolving process.

But how does this constitute an artistic gesture beyond some sort of abstract meditation on technology or dark aesthetic mood? I contend that Fernow addresses this challenge in both the label's write up and the liner notes in the album's packaging. Fernow feeds "field recordings dealing with vulnerability" (Fernow) and the love poems of Rumi into the multi-layered feedback system created through and within his equipment, a system which endlessly cannibalizes those sounds. These interlocking feedback mechanisms amplify and repeat those sound sources until a snarling mess of electronic noise emerges. Put into conversation with the title of the album, a meditation on the nature of sexual partnership, romance, and interpersonal relationships develops within this process. The idealized nature of romance present in Rumi's poetry transforms in the contemporary moment into a terrifying and hideous monster through the saturated repetition created within and through Fernow's collection of electronic devices (devices that sit in for technological or capitalist advancement). Approached from this angle, *The History of AIDS* represents a terrifying reality in which the AIDS virus, aided by the machinations of capitalistic excess, has distorted romantic love beyond the point of recognition. However, the simplicity of this gesture, along with the lack of explicit guidance beyond those elements mentioned, allows for listeners to explore a multitude of perspectives and relationships in relation to the work. I will do so throughout the paper, but this initial reading deserves a bit more analysis.

By evoking a connection between the AIDS virus and contemporary techno-capitalism, this initial listening of *The History of AIDS* stands as a reflection of and commentary on the operations within McBrien's conception of the Necrocene (116). Through this lens, the listener can draw a direct lineage between our modern extinction, invoked here through the AIDS epidemic, and the exploitation of Rumi's notion of romantic love. The gesture of creating the defining squall of feedback within an electronic device (largely dissociated from human intervention) also points to the role that capitalism plays within necropolitics (and vice versa). Again, turning to McBrien: "the ecology of capital is constructed through attempted erasure of existing ecologies- ecologies that include humans" (117). The lack of individuals or subjects beyond Rumi and Fernow, along with the abandoned pastoral scene on the album cover, speaks to this theme of extinction that runs through McBrien's writing on the current epoch. The use of Rumi also, in part, evokes the temporal thematics within the Necrocene, since "capital appears as a species, an opportunistic detritus feeder producing mass extinction in the present through exploitation of past extinctions" (McBrien 117). The furthering of capitalism, based on its death drive towards and exploitation of extinction through necropolitical acts, relies on the deaths of humans, ecologies, and cultures. *The History of AIDS's* scorched earth aesthetic evokes this thematic.

However, the listener can only make this metaphorical connection to the Necrocene if a connection between the AIDS virus (as both biological and social force) and capitalism's death drive exists. The initial reaction (or lack thereof) to the AIDS crisis during the late 80s and early 90s makes that leap relatively easy. It starts with Butler's notion of grievability, as specific epistemological frames (such as capitalism, heteronormativity, and race) allow for some lives to be grievable upon death while others cannot make that same claim (15). This notion becomes distinctly important when considering what constitutes a life: "without grievability, there is no life or, rather, there is something living other than life" (Butler 15). By deeming only certain individuals as grievable, the frames that allow individuals to comprehend the social world mark some bodies as excessively precarious and expendable since "life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life" (Butler 14). Queer lives have always existed as precarious. Deemed ungrievable, a categorization exacerbated by what Puar would define as capitalism's need to produce distinctions between productive and unproductive bodies (16), politicians withheld the resources and funding that may have ended this growing extinction during the first fifteen years of the crisis

while simultaneously reducing the visibility of the disease and keeping its effects hidden from public view (Woubshet 13).

Under these conditions, the connection between capitalism's necropolitics and the AIDS crisis become clear. If capitalism's drive towards extinction forces the distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives, unevenly distributing precarity amongst bodies and populations, and allowing AIDS as a social force to evolve into an epidemic that ended hundreds of thousands of ungrievable (according to the state) lives, then it follows that capitalism's necropolitics exacerbated the AIDS crisis as it developed into the social and ecological force it eventually became. The instrumentation used by Fernow on *The History of AIDS*, understood in this context, evokes this reality. Without the feedback loops, which metaphorically stand in for the Capitalocene as technology-based sound devices that create the album's terrifying aesthetic outside of human intervention, the vocals and field recordings on the album would fail to evoke the same level of affect. Much like the shift away from the Anthropocene's humanist approach within Capitalocene discourses, Fernow allows the instrumentation on the album to overtake the performer. Since feedback loops, once in place, will continue to autonomously evolve and transform any sources fed into them, the instrumentation on this album independently creates the harsh and aggressive sounds that saturate the recording. It is within this instrumentation that one can find the extinction at the heart of the Necrocene.

## From the Necrocene to the Plantationocene

However, the rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 29) foundation of power electronics, one in which artists mask their intent to allow for a multiplicity of understandings to emerge within the audience, pushes interpretation beyond a singular understanding. Continuing to consider *The History of AIDS* within the framing of Prurient's gestural composition, a curious absence begins to emerge. Despite the album title's connection to the AIDS virus, the compositions fail to represent any victims of this epidemic or, more glaringly, involve any people at all. Obviously Fernow himself exists in these recordings, as well Rumi in the form of his texts, but no one else. There may be some traces of individuals in the "field recordings dealing with vulnerability," but Fernow distorts those recordings (and everything else, really) to the point of complete indistinguishability. In comparing *The History of AIDS* (within this framing) with the political works of art from the early days of the AIDS crisis, a clear divergence of approach appears. As Levine and Woubshet describe in their historical research into this time-period, the corporeal bodies of victims played an incredibly important role in both the artistic and political work of AIDS activists. Early demonstrations blended the distinctions between protest and performance art by purposefully utilizing the corporeal bodies of those afflicted by AIDS, going so far as to drop corpses onto the lawn of the White House, publicly cremating loved ones by building funeral pyres in public spaces, and even having loved ones eat the ashes of the dead during their funerals (Levine, Woubshet 14).

In *The History of AIDS*, however, the corporeal body never makes an appearance. The album instead portrays an epidemic without corpses, an abstract monster that trades in death but only in the shadows or behind closed doors. The monster is ever present, dominating the sonics of the album and producing an affective terror, but the carnage enacted by the AIDS virus, in the form of the corpse, never appears. Fernow's approach, while divergent from the corporeal nature of AIDS activism, is not surprising: positioning death outside of the corporeal body has a long history within power electronics and noise music more broadly. As Pott's notes in his analysis of Japanese harsh noise, death serves as a recurrent thematic element but only as a form of fantasy, not in the existence of the corpse (380). Similarly, Cooke describes a process of alienation and disembodiment within power electronics artist Maurizio Bianchi's album *Symphony for a Genocide*: while all the track titles from the album reference concentration camps, the sounds on this entirely instrumental record come from synthesizers. This, in turn, evokes the experience or affect of death without facing the result of death itself. An alienated understanding of death also finds a home within industrial music, a pre-cursor to and direct influence on power electronics, and the genre's fascination with the industrialized machinations of death (or, to use the language of this paper, the necropolitics of the nation state) (Bailey 16). While some power electronics artists take the corporeality of death head on (Wallis), a more disembodied approach holds a clear place within the genre.

Returning to the concept of grievability, this alienated and disembodied understanding of death plays into Butler's notion of what constitutes a life: "specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives... then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (1). Centering on the lack of corporeal bodies within *The History of AIDS*, the album holds the potential to reject the life of those effected by the virus by failing to apprehend that which it denies. Through the exclusion of those effected by AIDS, this reading of the album evokes the looming terror generated by the discourse surrounding the virus instead of the virus itself. By engaging this tactic, Fernow, in part, mimics the necropolitical actions taken by conservative political regimes in response to the crisis, stoking fears while hiding corpses from view (Levine 13). In this sense, excluding those effected by AIDS and, in turn, refusing to apprehend these lives inherently marks those housed within queer and disabled bodies as ungrievable and, therefore, not lives at all (Butler 15). This shifts the focus of the album from the necropolitics of the AIDS virus itself to the terror inflicted by the epidemic on (heteronormative, white, abled) bodies that exist as grievable.

The lens created by Butler's notion of grievability also positions the fear of AIDS within a discourse that extends beyond the state's inclination towards homophobia to considerations of white supremacy. This shift towards race, in spite of AIDS's discursive link to queer communities, occurs through the mapping of queerness onto racialized bodies as a means of reinforcing the primacy of genealogy through sexual reproduction (Dyer 12). White supremacy maps sexual politics onto black bodies as a means of defining both white life and citizenship. "Gay and lesbian claims to imperilled domesticity, privacy, and kinship" (Bassichis and Spade 195) illustrate this practice of aligning whiteness with heteronormativity: gay and lesbian individuals only gained legitimacy within broad social structures and cultural norms through their successful claims of whiteness, a process embodied by the fight for marriage equality and various other gay rights discourses. The means through which activists accomplished this feat relied on shedding those queer bodies that could not assimilate into whiteness, including those bodies effected by AIDS, and relegating those bodies to blackness. This process of mapping, one that occurs through designating certain lives as grievable and others as not, inherently links whiteness to heteronormativity and queerness to blackness. Whiteness, therefore, stands in opposition to queerness and the necropolitics surrounding the AIDS crisis emerge out of white supremacy. Only those who can successfully argue their place within white identity can evade this opposition. AIDS victims do not qualify.

Under this framing, the thematics behind *The History of AIDS* transform from the necropolitics of AIDS to an enacted and localized necropolitics of whiteness. In the absence of the corporeal body which, in this case, acts as the carrier for the virus, any sense of fear evoked through the album's sonic or visual elements has less to do with the fear of contracting AIDS and more to do with the fear of AIDS affecting more than just queer and black bodies. This is the same fear created through the necropolitical actions of American politicians who stoked white American phobias while hiding queer bodies from public discourses. To use Wilderson's term, this necropolitics of whiteness trades in a grammar that crowds out queer and, by extension, black bodies from the suffering inflicted by the AIDS virus despite these bodies being disproportionately affected by the disease (2). By shifting away from the corporeal body that allowed for AIDS victims to speak and focusing on the trauma experienced by those who do not (and, likely, will not) suffer from the ongoing epidemic, the necropolitics of whiteness evoked through this particular reading of the album refuses to acknowledge the grammar of suffering utilized by those who lived (and continue to live) this crisis. This leads to an appropriation of death itself and reaffirms white privilege. In their investigation of the media's portrayal of trans of colour lives after death, Snorton and Haritaworn note that the "extraction of value from trans of colour lives through biopolitical and necropolitical technologies not only serves the sovereign, but also indexes a much more subtle and complex shift in power" (71). The necropolitics of whiteness therefore amasses the value accrued by suffering by shifting the focus away from black and queer bodies and, instead, finding a grievable life to be afraid for: rather than mourning the loss of an AIDS victim, this particular form of white necropolitics implores you to fear the impending suffering of the grievable. Under these conditions, whiteness can understand and access this grammar of suffering.

On a broader scale, this fear of impending grievable (aka white) deaths forms because "whiteness must constantly be yoked to the future and victimhood" (Bassichis and Spade 195). A white necropolitics thrives

on this futurity, asserting the continued existence of whiteness as a central goal while simultaneously playing victim to an illusory form of violence that threatens the comfort of white life through a reallocation of wealth, resources, and safety. This localized formation of a white necropolitics therefore evokes notions of the Plantationocene. As Haraway notes, “the Plantationocene makes one pay attention to the historical relocations of the substances of living and dying around the Earth as a necessary prerequisite to their extraction” (qtd in Haraway et al. 556). More than just redistributing resources (one of which includes black bodies defined as embodied labour), the social arrangements that emerge from the plantation system and, more broadly, colonialism redistribute access to both life and death (Mbembé 26). Of course, this extraction of resources also relies on the fear of white bodies suffering the same fate as queer and black ones, justifying this extraction in the first place. This paranoid fear of extinction, central to McBrien’s formation of the Necrocene, drives this redistribution of life and death, resulting in the reformation of social and ecological forces that then trickles down into other cultural formations.

By analysing this album within the context of both the Necrocene and Plantationocene, I do not want to imply that this reading overturns the thematics of Capitalocene sexual politics explored in the previous section. Instead, I reengage Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome and contend that both exist simultaneously and speak to each other. This position becomes increasingly important when considering the lack of guidance coming from Fernow or others in the form of published writings or interviews: beyond the brief write up from the label and the few liner notes, writings on the album either do not exist or remain shrouded in obscurity. Again, this masking of intent through ambiguity is not surprising: as Stevenson contends, power electronics artists often obscure the intent behind a given recording or performance to challenge audiences to form their own interpretation (180). Instead of developing a singular interpretation or trying to reconstruct Fernow’s perspective, I want to use this paper to explore how *The History of AIDS* exists as a rhizome, one whose “goal is... to maintain balance in intersubjective relations, or to explore an unconscious that is already there from the start, lurking in the dark recesses of memory and language” (Deleuze and Guattari 35). In doing so, this album allows for the discourses of multiple “-cenes” to intersect and feed into each other, mirroring the feedback processes used to create the album. This happens outside of Fernow’s intention, instead relying on the invitation to interpret (or, at least, respond to) the album from a multitude of positionalities.

## On Prurient’s Inherent Queerness

I want to trace one last “line of flight” within the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 34). As discussed in the last section, the absence of the corporeal within *The History of AIDS* may enact a white necropolitics, but one can also read this tactic as a means for avoiding the common power electronics trope of co-opting the experience of suffering from the victim, as exemplified by the lyrical content of foundational groups like Whitehouse, Con-Dom, Intrinsic Action, and others. From this perspective, the lack of the corporeal takes on a whole new meaning and challenges listeners to contend with another reading of the album. To think with the metaphor of the rhizome, however, the goal then is not to choose one correct reading of Fernow’s recording but to understand multiple readings simultaneously. As demonstrated, *The History of AIDS* enacts the Capitalocene’s understanding of sexuality and the white necropolitics of the Plantationocene simultaneously, allowing audiences to engage both and understand the multitudinous ways in which these two “-cenes” interact. The question then becomes how many intersubjective relations one can uncover and balance, mapping the work across a broad artistic and social context (Deleuze and Guattari 26).

Taking this newly defined frame of whiteness that emerges through the lack of corporeal bodies in the album and putting it in conversation with Fernow’s central artistic gesture once again, I want to propose another relation. Relying on those “field recordings dealing with vulnerability” (Fernow) within the recordings, the absence of a corporeal presence may exist as just that: an absence, one that only lives within and through a specific frame, one that expects or communicates a life that should have been (Butler 15). Since field recordings are “performative, something happening here and now as well as a document of another time and place” (Gallagher 561), the use of these sound sources may stand in for those bodies and



lives that filled another time but no longer can because of that death. The album cover may serve the same purpose, depicting a pastoral scene devoid of corporeal bodies but still bearing the trace of human life (a fence and road are visible in the picture). Similarly, the poetry of Rumi that serves as the lyrical foundation points to a complicated relationship to both love and loss simultaneously (“I have fallen/unable to rise/What kind of trap is this?/What chains have tied my hands and feet?/It is so strange/and so wonderful”), speaking to an individual who should be there but is not. As Butler notes, “only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear” (14). If this loss, indicated by the absence of the individual (a romantic partner, perhaps) in *The History of AIDS*, matters, then the lack of the corporeal body may not only point to a racialized fear but also act as an artefact of mourning similar to those described by Woubshet (13).

If this album does produce an affect of mourning (albeit one buried underneath the distorted aesthetic) through the use of Rumi’s texts and field recordings, then a sense of queerness needs to accompany that affect. If not, the album would merely reinscribe a racialized appropriation of loss, suffering, and death from queer, black, and disabled bodies through the evocation of the AIDS crisis (see Snorton and Haritaworn, Puar). However, by relying on the abstracted and uncontrollable ontology of noise (Hainge 16), queerness exists in the sonic material of these recordings. As Daniel argues, sound as a material object exists as a queer entity in and of itself: by existing as an omnipresent and environmental force, one that cannot be simply tuned out, sound queers identity and the self-world boundary (44). Because of this queerness, Daniel also argues that sound exists outside of the formal structures of language and allows for the expression of the unthinkable (45). Stoever adds to this theory by claiming that noise often becomes associated with femininity and blackness (12). If noise ontologically exists as unwanted (and often loud) sound, then racialized understandings of how much sound should come from female (and specifically black female) bodies leads to noise and only noise emerging from those bodies. This reading of noise as queer, feminized, and black instils this new listening of *The History of AIDS* with a sense of queerness and allows space for queer and black mourning to emerge. Sound does not just embody fear or terror but also a grief that evades language. The absence of bodies from the music and album cover then becomes precisely the point: where there should have been people, there is an absence, a loss. The choice to not co-opt the experiences of the victim by actively choosing to not include the corporeal body in the work then becomes all the more important within this reading.

Still, the presence of queerness does not absolve (or, possibly more accurately, resolve) the looming whiteness evoked through other readings of the album. As Muñoz describes in his research into the early LA punk scene, queerness does not act as an absolution in the face of other problematics. Instead, queerness often trades in “dark queer genealogies” that position queerness as counter-normative and not necessarily progressive (Muñoz 96). Queerness can live in the negative, allowing for the simultaneous reproduction of oppressive social norms while calling for new imaginaries and futures. For *The History of AIDS*, this enactment of queerness relies on the same affect generated from the deployment of troubling imagery used by other power electronics groups such as Genocide Organ (Stevenson 177). Although *The History of AIDS* does not even begin to approach the symbology employed by other more provocative power electronics artists, the thematic components of the record still seem to follow the same pattern of ambiguously employing aggressive aesthetics in order to create space for audiences to interpret troubling realities. However, as I have argued previously, this practice often leads to the reinscription of oppression regardless of intent (Woods 101). The multiplicity within the album, one that allows the listener to engage the work through multiple lenses or affects, positions the album as an object that operates in a number of different ways depending on the context. Rather than producing one singular reading of the album, *The History of AIDS* enacts numerous readings simultaneously, generating a multiplicity that encourages listeners to engage each individual (and, at times, problematic) strand in relation to each other by tracing multiple lines of flight at once.

## On Music's Place In (or Outside of) the Anthropocene

While the abstracted, minimal, and densely layered nature of this album encourages multiple interpretations, the rhizomatic nature of *The History of AIDS* speaks to the intersecting and interrelated nature of the multiple “-cenes” vying for attention in current scholarly discourse. Although the technocentric nature of the Capitalocene exists within the instrumentation used on these recordings, the album title and artwork intentionally evoke a worldview rooted in the Necrocene, placing extinction (or, at least, death) at the forefront of the thematics within this album. In doing so, Fernow also managed to conjure the Plantationocene through an enacted form of whiteness inherent to the album's conception of fear that contrasts with concurrent affects of loss or mourning. This again shifts the necropolitics inherent to the album away from those of the AIDS virus and to that of whiteness itself. Even under a queer reading of the album that reengages affects of mourning, these necropolitics continue to exist in parallel. The Necrocene and the Plantationocene remain at odds, connected by a sense of the necropolitical that acts as a foundation for both and allowing for nuanced understandings of each.

As shown through this example, power electronics, as a genre built on challenging audiences to construct knowledge through their interaction with musical and visual artefacts that replicate troubling realities (Stevenson, Woods), provides an exceptionally fertile space to engage these intersecting “-cenes.” *The History of AIDS* creates a discursive space that can challenge conceptions of the Anthropocene by moving beyond the humanist core of this formation and looking towards other dominating forces in ecological space. The absence of the individual within this album speaks to this truth: the snarling aesthetic comes not from human intervention, but a system of interlocked electronic devices acting almost entirely on their own. This mirrors McBrien's critique of the Anthropocene: “The Anthropocene displaces the origins of contemporary crisis onto the human being *as species* rather than *as capital*. It reinforces what capital wants to believe of itself: that human ‘nature,’ not capital, has precipitated today's planetary instability” (119). Since the fury of the album comes from the instrumentation and not the individual, Fernow manages to evoke this critique (intentionally or not) and heightens it through the use of the album's cover art.

Returning again to the notion of genre work defined by Nowak and Whelan (452), extending this analysis beyond one particular album challenges scholars working in noise music and power electronics to consider the ways in which these musical forms enact a necropolitics of whiteness. Moreover, this paper also expands on current understandings of racialized necropolitics. Extant scholarship on the intersection between race and necropolitics has primarily considered this phenomenon at the level of state violence (see Allinson, Thobani), which implies that these perspectives have failed to recognize the necropolitics embedded within contemporary understandings of whiteness as a localized and discursive force (Twine and Gallagher 7). The continued fascination with death as a thematic element in noise and power electronics (Potts, Wallis), combined with the fact that whiteness as a social force has embedded itself within the power electronics genre (Dietrich, Woods) and the gesture of noise more broadly (James 224), raises questions about localized forms of white necropolitics within noise and power electronics. Future research and genre work that explores this connection will provide significant insight into this relationship.

As this analysis of *The History of AIDS* shows, musical artefacts (and their surrounding scenes) can act as a site of exploration for the various critiques of the Anthropocene that exist within intellectual discourses. By existing as objects that evoke cultural understandings and enact contemporary social forces (both intentionally and unintentionally), these artefacts act as sites of research into the multiplicity of social constructs that define the epistemological (and, at times, ecological) frames inherent to the current condition. Allowing these objects to not only act as illustrations but embodiments of these intersecting “-cenes” and the critiques that follow, scholars can utilize forms of culturally situated music making as sites of exploration through the Anthropocene and the multitude of other epochal incarnations that have followed and will continue to follow in the wake of this discursive turn.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank Dr. Jill Casid and the rest of the Necro-crew at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Their expert, guiding hand exists throughout this paper.

## Works Cited

- Allinson, Jamie. "The Necropolitics of Drones." *International Political Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 2, June 2015, pp. 113–27. *academic.oup.com*, doi:10.1111/ips.12086.
- Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music by Jacques Attali*. Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- Bailey, Thomas Bey William. *Micro-Bionic: Radical Electronic Music and Sound Art in the 21st Century*. Creation Books, 2009.
- Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Reprint edition, Basic Books, 2016.
- Bassichis, Morgan, and Dean Spade. "Queer Politics and Anti-Blackness." *Queer Necropolitics*, edited by Jin Haritaworn et al., 1 edition, Routledge, 2014, pp. 191–210.
- Bennett, Andy, and Susanne Janssen. "Popular Music, Cultural Memory, and Heritage." *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 39, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 1–7. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:10.1080/03007766.2015.1061332.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Reprint edition, Verso, 2010.
- Cooke, Andrew. "Maurizio Bianchi: Symphony for a Genocide (Sterile Records, 1981)." *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*, edited by Jennifer Wallis, Headpress, 2016, pp. 19–20.
- Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. "The Anthropocene." *IGBP Newsletter*, 41st ed., 2000, pp. 17–18.
- Daniel, Drew. "ALL SOUND IS QUEER." *The WIRE*, no. 333, Nov. 2011, pp. 43–46.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, 2 edition, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Sternberg Press, 2017.
- Dietrich, Sonia. "BRUT - The Killjoy of 'White' Noise." *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*, edited by Jennifer Wallis, Headpress, 2016, pp. 219–28.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. Routledge, 1997.
- Fernow, Dominic. "PRURIENT: The History Of Aids - LP - HOSPITAL PRODUCTIONS - Forced Exposure." *Forced Exposure*, 2002, <https://www.forcedexposure.com/Catalog/prurient-the-history-of-aids-lp/HOS.079LP.html>.
- Gallagher, Michael. "Field Recording and the Sounding of Spaces." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 33, no. 3, June 2015, pp. 560–76. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1177/0263775815594310.
- Hainge, Greg. *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Haraway, Donna, et al. "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene." *Ethnos*, vol. 81, no. 3, May 2016, pp. 535–64. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838.
- Hegarty, Paul. *Noise/Music: A History*. Continuum, 2007.
- James, Robin. "Contort Yourself: Music, Whiteness, and the Politics of Disorientation." *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?*, edited by George Yancy, Reprint edition, Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 211–27.
- Klein, Naomi. "Why #BlackLivesMatter Should Transform the Climate Debate." *The Nation*, Dec. 2014. [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com), <https://www.thenation.com/article/what-does-blacklivesmatter-have-do-climate-change/>.
- Levine, Debra. "How to Do Things with Dead Bodies." *E-Misférica*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-61/levine>.
- Mbembé, J. A. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, translated by Libby Meintjes, vol. 15, no. 1, Mar. 2003, pp. 11–40.
- McBrien, Justin. "Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necroocene." *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, 1 edition, PM Press, 2016, pp. 116–37.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "It's Not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene; or, The Geological Color Line." *After Extinction*, edited by Richard Grusin, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 121–53. [muse.jhu.edu](https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2103556), <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2103556>.
- Moore, Jason W. "Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism." *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, 1 edition, PM Press, 2016, pp. 1–11.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. "'Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That' Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons." *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 3 (116), Sept. 2013, pp. 95–110. [read.dukeupress.edu](http://read.dukeupress.edu), doi:10.1215/01642472-2152855.
- Novak, David. *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*. Duke University Press Books, 2013.
- Nowak, Raphael, and Andrew Whelan. "'Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism': Genre Work in An Online Music Scene : Open Cultural Studies." *Open Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, Oct. 2018, pp. 451–62.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. 1st edition, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Potts, Adam. "The Internal Death of Japanoise." *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 19, no. 4, Oct. 2015, pp. 379–92. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:10.1080/14797585.2015.1065654.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press Books, 2017.
- Ryce, Andrew. "Dominick Fernow: Myth of Building Bridges." *Resident Advisor*, 11 Jan. 2018, <https://www.residentadvisor.net/features/3125>.

- Snorton, C. Riley, and Jin Haritaworn. "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife." *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, 1 edition, Routledge, 2013, pp. 66–76.
- Stevenson, Richard. "Questionable Intent: The Meaning and Message of Power Electronics." *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*, edited by Jennifer Wallis, Headpress, 2016, pp. 176–84.
- Stoeber, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. Reprint edition, NYU Press, 2016.
- Thobani, Sunera. "Empire, Bare Life and the Constitution of Whiteness." *Borderlands*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–30.
- Twine, France Winddance, and Charles Gallagher. "The Future of Whiteness: A Map of the 'Third Wave.'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, Jan. 2008, pp. 4–24. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:10.1080/01419870701538836.
- Wallis, Jennifer. "Object Histories. The Black (Visual) Economy of Power Electronics." *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*, edited by Jennifer Wallis, Headpress, 2016, pp. 187–98.
- Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Edition Unstated edition, Duke University Press Books, 2010.
- Woods, Peter J. "In (Partial) Defence of Offensive Art: Whitehouse as Freirean Codification." *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 90–104. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:10.1080/14797585.2018.1434042.
- Woubshet, Dagmawi. *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*. 1 edition, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.