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## Somos Sordos

### *Countercultural Noise Practice in Contemporary Powerviolence*

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**ABSTRACT** This autoethnographic study examines powerviolence in the predominantly Hispanic unincorporated area of El Rio, California, from the perspective of a drummer in a local powerviolence band. The unique human geography of El Rio, characterized by its demographic composition, urban layout, and cultural practices, shapes sonic cartographies and influences how individuals understand sound. Situating powerviolence as a form of “borderlands noise-music,” this article investigates the intersection of sound perception and cultural identity, particularly for Chicano noise musicians. By exploring how powerviolence subverts dominant music constructs through its sonic, linguistic, emotional, and iconographic elements, this article highlights the transformative potential of noise-music in marginalized communities. Drawing on a sonic lineage from hardcore punk to powerviolence in California, commonalities among hardcore punk, thrashcore, grindcore, and powerviolence are illuminated, providing a basis for understanding powerviolence through sound. Furthermore, this study foregrounds the significance of powerviolence and noise-music as accessible forms of expression, particularly for aspiring musicians who lack the means to pursue formal study. By amplifying voices that may otherwise go unheard, powerviolence allows noise musicians to feel audible to dominant capitalist society.

**KEYWORDS** *powerviolence, noise, punk, sound studies, borderlands, emotion, human geography, amateurism*

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With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion.

—Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

### WELCOME TO THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

In 2011, a relatively new variant of hardcore punk roared through Ventura County, California. My friend Eduardo, whom I will refer to as “Eddie,” approached me with a proposition: to play drums in his new powerviolence band—a style he characterized as noise. With my interest piqued, I dug deeper, only to learn that his band would defy the laws of tradition by omitting a guitar player, relying on the minimalistic instrumentation of bass, drums, and vocals. Though I had considerable experience playing hardcore punk, powerviolence was uncharted territory for me. Eddie sent me some sample tracks that he created using MIDI and electronic instruments in a digital audio workstation. Upon receiving the tracks, my initial reaction was that of bewilderment. I thought to myself,

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“How can I play drums to this? It’s just noise and pure chaos!” Eddie’s powerviolence seemed to lack many of the essential elements of what I knew to be music. I could not hear any distinct pitches, nor could I decipher any musical form. Rhythm was evident but the bass and drums felt arrhythmic, as if they were intentionally written to sound out of time. Eager to expand my musical horizons, I decided that I would attempt to play drums in Eddie’s powerviolence band. Thus, as I forayed into this “noise-music” and began to contribute my own ideas, I sought to understand this community from the inside, as a drummer in a powerviolence band.

On an overcast day at an abandoned parking lot along the beach in Oxnard, I arrived at the location of our second concert.<sup>1</sup> I was surprised to see a crowd of about 30 people all dressed in typical punk attire. I had been previously acquainted with many people in attendance from other concerts in the hardcore punk scene in Ventura County. The setting was not much different from the hardcore punk shows I had been playing throughout my teenage years, but soon enough I would discover that a vastly different philosophy of sound was emerging from this community of noise musicians. This instance was our first “generator show” that employed the use of a mobile generator as a power source, which enabled concerts to take place nearly anywhere. This location, often called “Perkins,” would become one of the key sites to debut the new wave of powerviolence in Ventura County. The term itself, “powerviolence,” emerged as a sonic description rather than a subgenre name. It is a self-reflexive description of a specific sonic phenomenon found at the fringes of hardcore punk. Therefore, powerviolence is a description of sounds deemed sonically powerful and violent. The circulation of this term over time then transformed this sound into the subgenre also known as powerviolence.

In the band’s early days, as I learned how to play powerviolence with Eddie’s guidance, I began to realize that powerviolence embodied a radically different sonic philosophy than I had encountered before. I frequently asked about song structure, transitions, tempo, and other musical elements to better understand and learn his songs. Despite trying to apply my knowledge of hardcore punk to learn powerviolence, I found it less effective than anticipated. At the time, I was missing the point of noise-music by trying to fit powerviolence into the Eurocentric musical conventions found in popular and classical music. This realization prompted me to reconfigure my notion of music into one sympathetic with noise—one in which I could escape the control of music. In powerviolence, disorder was idealized, and it would take me years to grasp even a sliver of the diverse perceptions of sound within the broader community of noise musicians.

This article interrogates the often statically defined terms of noise and music from the perspective of the Chicano noise musicians in the unincorporated area<sup>2</sup> of El Rio, California. Drawing from Deborah Vargas’s *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music* (2012),

1. Our first concert was played in the backyard of a friend’s house in El Rio. To my knowledge, this was a private concert, and it was not promoted at all. For this reason, I begin my account with the second concert which we considered to be our first “real” concert.

2. An unincorporated area is a town or region that is not governed by a local municipality and is instead governed through the county.

I situate powerviolence as a type of “borderlands noise-music” to acknowledge and expand the “canonical formation of what is considered ‘Chicano,’” and to portray the juxtaposition of noise and music.<sup>3</sup> While El Rio may not typically be understood as a borderland, part of what I hope to accomplish here is to expand the concept of borderlands so that we might better understand how human geography influences perceptions of sound and the sonic characteristics of music. Building off of Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia,” Josh Kun draws a connection between sound and transnational borderscapes in his term “audiotopias,” which can be understood as “sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, with Kun’s formulation of the audiotopia, we can understand the borderscape “as a kind of ‘transnational hyperspace’ divorced from geography.”<sup>5</sup> In the context of this discussion, we might think of powerviolence as constitutive of an audiotopia that, when heard, can reveal how borderlands noise-music “enables, constructs, and imagines the mapping of new places and cartographies of possibility.”<sup>6</sup> As we listen to the aural border, we can begin to decipher the sonic cartographies produced by powerviolence.

The audiotopia also allows one to think of El Rio as a sonic space of juxtaposition, otherness, and conflict. For the moment, my interest lies in understanding what El Rio’s powerviolence sounds like from the other side of the border. In Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s (formerly Stoever-Ackerman) theorization of the “sonic color-line,” she considers noise “a shifting analytic that renders certain sounds—and the bodies that produce and consume them—as Other: different, out of place, dangerous, ignored, and/or what Cornel West describes as ‘incomprehensible and unintelligible’ under white supremacist epistemologies.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, she notes that “noise is invoked in direct connection to (or metonymic stand-in for) people of color.”<sup>8</sup> Although Stoever’s “Splicing the Sonic Color-Line” situates sound as the Other of noise, in the context of this article, I understand music as the Other of noise rather than sound. Since El Rio’s demographics can be described as predominantly “Hispanic,” the sonic color-line serves as one way of understanding why Sordo’s Chicano powerviolence is perceived by those outside of El Rio’s powerviolence community as noise rather than music.<sup>9</sup> It is with this understanding of

3. Deborah R. Vargas, *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: the Limits of La Onda* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), x.

4. Josh D. Kun, “The Aural Border,” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 6.

5. Alejandro L. Madrid, ed., *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59.

6. Kun, “The Aural Border,” 6: “In the space of songs themselves and in exchange between producers and listeners, music enables, constructs, and imagines the mapping of new places and cartographies of possibility; it draws maps that otherwise might not be possible in the real time of political realities.”

7. Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, “Splicing the Sonic Color-Line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York,” *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (March 15, 2010): 67.

8. *Ibid.*

9. According to data from the US Census Bureau gathered in 2021, El Rio is 82.8% Hispanic. Furthermore, 27% of El Rio’s residents were born outside of the United States. For more information, see <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/el-rio-ca/>.

the “incomprehensible and unintelligible” borderland of El Rio that we can now discuss powerviolence more broadly.

Powerviolence, both as a sound and subgenre name, is peculiar because it originated as an emic description of an emerging sonic phenomenon combining elements of hardcore punk, metal, and noise. Over time, the term has been interpreted in various ways, often leading to its characterization as an extremely crude and inept form of hardcore punk. This lineage of sonic description turned subgenre places powerviolence in a liminal state. Thus, the term borderlands noise-music also underscores the sonic border that powerviolence occupies—that is, a space between noise and music.<sup>10</sup> Perceived by some as meaningless noise and by others as a legitimate form of music and self-expression, powerviolence prompts exploration into how perceptions of sound are shaped by everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

David Novak further elaborates on the term “Noise Music” as follows.

In the 1980s, “Noise Music” described a broad range of “noisy” artists that could also be described as “experimental,” “industrial,” “hard-core,” “postpunk,” or “no wave” (e.g., the NYC-based bands Sonic Youth, Suicide, Glenn Branca). “Noise Music” was a loose, metageneric term for all of these diverse underground sounds that were too noisy to be absorbed into a commercial mainstream or recognized as a distinct musical movement. Noise was everything on the margins of musical genres: recordings with no consumer market, sounds that could never be confused with any kind of normal music.<sup>12</sup>

From this description, we can observe a feedback loop where criticism labelling certain artists as “noisy” spurred the creation of the metageneric term “Noise Music.” It is worth noting that even “normal music” or classical music could be perceived as noise if played at high volumes or in unsuitable contexts.<sup>13</sup> “Noise is typically separated from music on the grounds of aesthetic value. Music is constituted by beautiful, desirable sounds, and noise is composed of sounds that are unintentional and unwanted.”<sup>14</sup>

What is noise exactly? Is it simply unwanted sound, or is it something more than that? Noise’s negative connotations seem rooted in its etymological origins associating it with nausea, tumult, and unrest.<sup>15</sup> Eric Drott emphasizes an often-overlooked detail from the French title of Jacques Attali’s book, *Bruits*, noting that Attali’s inquiry was with

10. I strategically use the term “noise-music” (hyphenated) throughout this article to illustrate the metaphorical border between noise and music. Noise-music emphasizes the contested status of powerviolence as music and provides a visual representation of what I often refer to as “the liminality of sound,” in other words, a dialectic between noise and music. Many outside the community view powerviolence as meaningless noise that should be silenced. Therefore, while some powerviolence musicians may aspire for their form of sonic expression to be recognized as music, it ultimately does not seem to meet the necessary criteria.

11. Powerviolence musicians, often from working-class backgrounds (I was an apprentice electrician during Sordo’s early days), may interpret noise differently due to their everyday experiences in settings such as factories or warehouses. For them, powerviolence’s sound might evoke the clangorous industrial noises encountered at work, or other associations that some might unconsciously overlook.

12. David Novak, *Japanese: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

13. See, for example, Suzanne Cusick’s chapter titled “Towards an Acoustemology of Detention in the ‘Global War on Terror,’” in Georgina Born, *Music, Sound and Space* (Oxford, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

14. Novak, *Japanese*, 126.

15. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “noise (n.),” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9743908767>.

bruits—in a word, noises—rather than the singular noise, leaving noise open to interpretation.<sup>16</sup> “Bruit” derives from the Latin *rūgīre*, meaning “to roar,” explaining noise’s association with resistance, anarchy, and potential liberation.<sup>17</sup> It stands as a roar of opposition against not only the sublimating control of music but also the dominion of capital, which, as Karl Marx contends, “unites the masses of hands and instruments which are already there.”<sup>18</sup> Noise implies aggression into another’s sonic or conceptual territory, making interpretations of noise hinge on the question of control. If noise is forced upon me, I shudder in disgust; but if I interact with noise willingly, it becomes a nexus of possibility—a way to disrupt the status quo.

Noise is often defined in relation to music and is dependent upon cultural context. Nevertheless, noise is omnipresent as a potentiality waiting to be interpreted. “It is thus necessary to imagine radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities. Music, the organization of noise, is one such form. It reflects the manufacture of society; it constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society. *An instrument of understanding, it prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge.*”<sup>19</sup> What Attali describes here as music could also be thought of as the “thoroughly naturalized” concepts and lexicon of music circulated in institutional and public knowledge.<sup>20</sup> But even more, as Nina Sun Eidsheim discusses in *Sensing Sound* (2015), this naturalized vehicle of music may be experienced through what she calls the “figure of sound.”

Music, then, is most commonly experienced through tropes, or what I call the *figure of sound*. With this term I attempt to capture the process of ossification, through which I argue that an ever-shifting, relationally dependent phenomenon comes to be perceived as a static object or incident. It is precisely because the figure of sound is, by definition, a naturalized concept that inquiries into voice and music, which are based on it, are similarly defined.<sup>21</sup>

If music is most commonly experienced through the figure of sound, then noise-music must also be experienced through the figure of sound. Just as voice and music are similarly defined through the figure of sound, noise-music is also defined in reference to the numerous naturalized concepts and lexicon of music. Moreover, the quest to decipher a sound form of knowledge through the organization of noise can reveal a reductionist proclivity in how humans understand sound. The values assigned to music and noise rely upon a presumption that the lexicon of sound is static. What Eidsheim calls “sonic reductions,” or the construction of sonic meaning and value through “previously defined referents,” is useful in my examination of how Sordo’s

16. Eric Drott, “Rereading Jacques Attali’s Bruits,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (June 1, 2015): 738.

17. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “bruit (n.),” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3653809789>.

18. Karl Marx and E. J. Hobsbawm, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 111.

19. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 4.

20. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 8.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.

powerviolence is riven by misunderstanding.<sup>22</sup> In order to speak to new realities found in the transnational borderscape, it is thus necessary to imagine radically new theoretical forms. Powerviolence, the embodiment of the border between noise and music, is one such form.

Music, insofar as it implies organization and control, reflects the façade put forth by dominant capitalist society. “In reality, however, late capitalism is not a completely organized society at all. It is merely a hybrid and bastardized *combination* of organization and anarchy.”<sup>23</sup> Noise, as it is utilized by powerviolence musicians, is both the sound of violence and a source of power. As Attali puts it, “Noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder.”<sup>24</sup> That is to say, we might understand “powerviolence” as a channeling of the power of noise to disturb repetitive capitalist society. “Everything in our societies today points to the emplacement of the process of repetition. Because death is visible, deafening, because violence is returning, not only in war but in art, in other words, in knowledge, we refuse to take action, to assume it, and to seek a strategy to oppose it.”<sup>25</sup> Whereas powerviolence uses noise to subvert repetitive capitalist society, music—insofar as it is defined by repetitive capitalist society—differentiates and sublimates noise.

Therefore, the concepts of noise and music—as they relate to interpretations of powerviolence and more “dissonant” musical cultures—could be understood as occupying two extremes of a sonic continuum, to wit, two sides of a natural border.<sup>26</sup> My work draws from Sandoval, Aldama, and García’s assertion that “it is necessary to identify, redefine, and extend terms to account for the de-colonizing contributions rising from these other, subaltern, bordered locations.”<sup>27</sup> To this, the scholars include an additional requisite for human survival, “the human need to be seen and heard.”<sup>28</sup> The need to be heard underpins the powerviolence found in El Rio as a critical form of expression in the struggle against marginalizing forces. Similarly, Attali also reminds us that “taking a share in power is thus also having one’s voice heard.”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, I acknowledge the sonic philosophies of my interlocutors, whom I will simply refer to as my friends, as developed and refined through their quotidian practices. This foregrounds the knowledge and interpretations found within the powerviolence

22. Ibid.

23. Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975), 502.

24. Attali, *Noise*, 26.

25. Ibid., 127.

26. Vargas, *Dissonant Divas*, xiv. Deborah Vargas defines dissonance as “chaos, cacophony, disharmony, commotion, or static.” The dissonance heard in powerviolence can also be thought of as tension or disharmony between the concepts that noise practitioners employ and the more pervasive, naturalized concepts found in dominant music constructs. Vargas discusses how the dissonance heard in noise-music can also exemplify music as power. “The ‘out-of-tuneness,’ as understood through the varied meanings of dissonance, commands our attention to music as power as well as to the power of music with regard to Chicana gender and sexuality.”

27. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, eds., *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 5.

28. Ibid.

29. Attali, *Noise*, 132.

community.<sup>30</sup> To echo Vargas, my friends in the powerviolence community “do not easily fit the normative parameters of subjectivity in dominant academic and public cultural narratives of Chicano music and thus have been literally and discursively unheard, misheard, or overheard.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, I will explore the Chicano powerviolence found in El Rio—as simultaneously sound and subgenre—to better understand political critiques of music, emotion, contextualized philosophies of sound, and human geography.

This autoethnographic study will focus on the Ventura County area of Southern California and will situate powerviolence as a form of sonic expression influenced by hardcore punk, metal, and Noise Music in global circulation. Specifically, I will analyze powerviolence from both my perspective and that of my friend Eddie and his band, Sordo. It is worth noting that “sordo” is a Spanish word meaning “deaf” in English. The following was my friend Eddie’s response when he was asked about the significance of the band name Sordo in a podcast interview.

The name came from family and other people reacting by saying, “that music is stupid.” “You can’t even hear anything!” “It’s just noise!” Well, okay then, “somos sordos,” we’re deaf, because we don’t know what real music is, but we’re trying to play. We are deaf to people who don’t want to listen to us. It’s meant to detract people from wanting to listen to us because you have to really sit down and hear what we are playing. It’s a joke on people covering their ears when we were playing our first live shows. It happened all the time. We would just crank everything to like 10 and people would be walking out or walking away, because they were literally going deaf.<sup>32</sup>

I will briefly digress to explain my own involvement and situation within this project. I am an amateur drummer who learned to play the drum kit through hardcore punk.<sup>33</sup> Eddie and I met in 2010 when I invited him to play guitar in my hardcore punk band. Sordo started as Eddie and his brother Gerry’s noise project and excursion into powerviolence. At its inception, Sordo consisted of Eddie on bass and vocals, Gerry on vocals, and me on drums. When I joined, I thought that Sordo would just be a temporary side project, but over time it became my main musical endeavor. I played drums in Sordo from 2011 until 2016 and have not been directly involved since then.

As Sydney Hutchinson notes that “the border is often mapped onto young Mexican-Americans” who “question their cultural authenticity,” I will briefly describe how the border can also be mapped self-reflexively.<sup>34</sup> I am of mixed ethnicity with my mother being of Mexican/Indigenous descent and my father being of European descent. In a sense, I have a border within myself. At many times in my life, I felt as if I were at an impasse. A decision

30. Marié Abe, *Resonances of Chindon-ya: Sounding Space and Sociality in Contemporary Japan* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 3.

31. Vargas, *Disonant Divas*, ix.

32. Loose Meat, Episode Six! Visit from the homie Eduardo from Sordo, 2021, <https://anchor.fm/loose-meat/episodes/Loose-Meat-Episode-Six-Visit-from-the-homie-Eduardo-from-Sordo-eudlf8>.

33. I describe myself as an amateur drummer because I am self-taught and simply play music because I enjoy it. During my time playing with Sordo, I observed that many powerviolence musicians did not have the means to pursue careers in music or pay for private lessons, so they took pride in this “amateurism” as a way of gaining musical skills separate from institutionalized knowledge.

34. Madrid, *Transnational Encounters*, 53.

needed to be made depending upon the social situation. Was I White? Was I Brown? Could I simply claim to be American? I had always felt that I was all of these simultaneously, but in many cases, I was forced into a conceptual enclosure where I would choose a single identity. Although I have always been very proud of my background, writing about powerviolence has forced me to grapple with some elements of my past interiority and has allowed me to reflect on my way of understanding sound. But no matter which perspective I view this internal struggle from, there are always forces pressuring me into the enclosure of White or Brown. I use this personal example to illustrate how the border as a concept can be employed in both micro and macro contexts. Consequently, borders can apply not only to geographical locations but also to individuals self-reflexively.

Thinking of El Rio's powerviolence as part of a larger transnational audiotopia also allows one to consider borderlands noise-music as contributing to "the critical discourse of global capitalism."<sup>35</sup> As we have already seen how noise can be understood as the Other of music via the sonic color-line, I will briefly describe what music represents for those within the powerviolence community. Specifically, I am interested in how powerviolence might be considered a sonic critique of both music and capitalism. For example, many powerviolence musicians eschew the term "music" when describing their sonic practice in favor of "noise." My argument here is that the anti-capitalist sentiment so pervasive in powerviolence shapes interpretations of the terms noise and music.

From the perspective of powerviolence musicians, music is something that is literally beyond their control. Music, as it is appropriated by capital—the violence of which constitutes the noise practice<sup>36</sup> found in powerviolence—could be thought of as "a channelizer of violence, a creator of differences, a sublimation of noise, [and] an attribute of power."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, music, considered as a capitalistic endeavor, may refer to the music industry or the dominant paradigm of music defined institutionally. Noise musicians intentionally use noise as a method to critique dominant capitalist society. This critique extends beyond sonic phenomena to encompass song lyrics, iconography, and quotidian practices. Noise presents an alternative ontological understanding of ways of life, self-expression, and perceptions of sound. In some cases, perceptions of sound are linked to affective reverberations and interpretations of emotion.

## AGAINST THE SYSTEM

Drawing from the anthropology of emotion, I will use the emotion of hate to examine lyrics, noise, and the subversive iconography used in powerviolence fashion. Sara Ahmed elaborates on hate as follows: "Hate is an intense emotion; it involves a feeling of

35. Kun, "The Aural Border," 13.

36. Attali, *Noise*, 134. My use of the term "noise practice" encompasses not only forms of sonic expression but also material manifestations in the DIY economy and everyday habits, such as the display of subversive iconography. It is a way of "composing one's life" through noise with the intention of disrupting the status quo. Regarding this notion of composing, Attali suggests that "we are all condemned to silence—unless we create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. That is what composing is." See also Greg Hainge's *Noise Matters: towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

37. *Ibid.*, 23.



‘againstness’ that is always, in the phenomenological sense, intentional. Hate is always hatred of something or somebody, although that something or somebody does not necessarily pre-exist the emotion.<sup>38</sup> The intense emotion of hate as characterized by Ahmed when used in this context involves a feeling of “againstness” toward music and its capitalistic machinations. It is possible for a general feeling of hate to exist before a distinct feeling of hate toward music and capitalism, but through powerviolence, that hate is given its specific focus for acute emotional intensity. Although hate is broadly viewed as an inherently negative emotion, it is possible that depending upon the circumstances, hatred of a system that produces and reifies negative effects on the environment and negatively impacts societies, can be productive for catalyzing a paradigm shift.

In this sense, powerviolence also contributes to the current discourse surrounding the Anthropocene by asserting the Racial Capitalocene.<sup>39</sup> In *Late Capitalism* (1975), Ernest Mandel emphasizes that environmental destruction is “an effect of the capitalist mode of production itself which cannot be overcome within it.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, he states that an awareness of the threat posed by capitalism to the environment “can be a powerful weapon against capitalism (not just in the sphere of ‘abstract theory’ but also as a ‘stimulus to action’ and mass mobilizations).”<sup>41</sup> Just as Mandel argues that capitalism’s environmental threat cannot be overcome within dominant capitalist society, I consider powerviolence’s use of subversive lyrics, noise, and DIY to be clear examples of an attempt to “compose one’s life”<sup>42</sup> in opposition to the repetitive world of late capitalism.

Early powerviolence bands aimed to cultivate an “anti-capitalist consciousness”<sup>43</sup> which facilitated a feeling of againstness through song lyrics. For example, the lyrics to the song “Draining Blood from the Land” (1988) by Capitalist Casualties criticize capitalist exploitation of natural resources: “Chop the forest & drain the Earth / Capitalists don’t care when money’s the word / Land developer? What a fucking lie / Improve your cash intake, improve your life / Draining blood from the land / All Earth’s resources traded for cash.”<sup>44</sup> This understanding of capitalism as the primary driver of environmental degradation reinforces a feeling of againstness toward dominant capitalist society. Therefore, the subversive noise-music of powerviolence can be seen as a collective outcry for change—a cacophony that challenges both conventional musical norms and societal norms alike.

38. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 49.

39. Jim Sykes, “The Anthropocene and Music Studies,” *Ethnomusicology Review* 22, no. 1 (2020): 4–5. Also, Françoise Vergès’ chapter titled “Racial Capitalocene” in Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds., *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London: Verso, 2017).

40. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, 508.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Attali, *Noise*, 132: “The only possible challenge to repetitive power takes the route of a breach in social repetition and the control of noisemaking. In more day-to-day political terms, it takes the route of the permanent affirmation of the right to be different, an obstinate refusal of the stockpiling of use-time and exchange-time; it is the conquest of the right to make noise, in other words, to create one’s own code and work, without advertising its goal in advance; it is the conquest of the right to make the free and revocable choice to interlink with another’s code—that is, the right to compose one’s life.”

43. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, 507–08: “Mass distribution of Marxist literature—even via the market—ultimately means the mass formation (or heightening) of anti-capitalist consciousness.”

44. See discography: Capitalist Casualties, *Capitalist Casualties—26 Songs*, track B8.

Criticism from El Rio’s noise musicians manifested through various forms of symbolism, iconography, inscribed language, and other subversive vehicles circulated within the DIY economy.<sup>45</sup> Elaborating on the Chicana/o practice of *rasquache*, Michelle Habell-Pallán writes that “both punk and Chicano aesthetics share a similar spirit of making do with what’s at hand, with limited resources, of expressing ideas and emotions that aren’t necessarily ‘marketable’ and of cutting and mixing cultural references and sounds to make something new.”<sup>46</sup> The DIY economy, fueled by the fecund philosophy of *rasquache*, enabled El Rio’s noise musicians to express typically unmarketable emotions and flagrantly radical ideas. For example, a common symbol within the powerviolence community is a crossed-out eighth note accompanied by the slogan “make noise not music.” Over time, the circulation of such symbols, along with interpretations of powerviolence terminology, band names, song titles, and lyrical content, formed an affective economy of hate.

“Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become.”<sup>47</sup> Hate, in this context, signifies a pervasive feeling of againstness and systematic action against music and dominant capitalist structures. Steve Waksman stresses that DIY is integral to hardcore punk, “connoting resistance to the controlling and appropriative structures of the music industry.”<sup>48</sup> The circulation of subversive symbols in the DIY economy and powerviolence’s dissonant sound both contribute to this analytical framework of hate.

Extreme dynamics, understood here as the maximization of volume output enabled by amplification technologies, were employed by each member of Sordo to create an abrasive and chaotic noise assemblage. For example, Eddie not only utilized a full-stack bass amplifier at most Sordo concerts, but he also used a fuzz pedal to create a vicious wall of noise. The extreme volume forced Gerry to manipulate his voice into various guttural inflections and sounds, accompanied by explicit lyrics aimed at destabilizing normative interpretations of American society. This vocal manipulation often rendered the lyrical content nearly unintelligible to the audience, especially at live performances.<sup>49</sup>

The combination of extremely high volumes, distortion, and vocal manipulation was perceived as sonically powerful and violent, hence the name powerviolence. Indeed, the sheer volume—so intense that it could scientifically be deemed harmful to the human ear—was interpreted by listeners as conveying extreme anger or hate. From my personal

45. Do-it-yourself (DIY) is a method of production and distribution aimed at subverting the dominant capitalist economy. In El Rio’s powerviolence community, noise musicians produced all band merchandise themselves, including records, shirts, patches, tapes, zines, and other items. These efforts were not driven by profit; any money earned only covered the costs of production and distribution, such as postage.

46. Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: the Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York, NY: New York University, 2005), 48–49.

47. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 45.

48. Steve Waksman, “California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California,” *Social Studies of Science* 34, no. 5 (2004): 677.

49. The unintelligibility of the lyrics in powerviolence performances did not diminish the importance of the voice or lyrics in any way. Although understanding the lyrics may be difficult, many fans of powerviolence bands memorize them through repeated listening. At the start of my tenure with Sordo, I was surprised to play concerts where much of the audience knew and sang along to our setlist. At that time, I did not know the lyrics to many of our songs.

experience, I can attest that after performing at powerviolence concerts without earplugs, I typically left with tinnitus.<sup>50</sup> This sonic interpretation of powerviolence, along with the tangible affective economy of circulating symbols, can be viewed through the lens of hate to better understand the multifaceted nature of noise practice.

Members of El Rio's powerviolence community prominently displayed subversive iconography in their everyday lives to express feelings of againstness toward music and dominant capitalist society.

They obstruct those regimes of visibility through which it would domesticate its specters. On most days, they do so in their quotidian habits, through a gamut of fashion, tattoos, jewelry, and other operators the spatial density of which marks certain places, like Schoneweide, as right-wing extremist.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, noise musicians conveyed their feelings of againstness through comparable means. At powerviolence concerts, congregations of enthusiasts imbued spaces with these sentiments by integrating their gamut of fashion—such as vests embroidered with patches of bands and subversive iconography, ripped clothing, tattoos, piercings, and other countercultural markers. These gatherings effectively established audiotopias, where specific locations, like the previously mentioned abandoned parking lot called “Perkins,” became synonymous with the powerviolence community. Here, powerviolence concerts left an affective imprint, imbuing these sites with feelings of againstness, while establishing them as hubs of countercultural expression.

In addition to everyday practices, daily exposure to noise or high-volume sound, whether in the work environment or through consistent listening to noisy music, informed powerviolence enthusiasts about potential usable sounds for expressing feelings of againstness. This quotidian noise exposure—that is, routine exposure to noisy sounds or high-volume sounds—may have the potential to alter one's perception of noise from negative to positive. An altered perception of noise due to familiarity would then allow noise to be seen as effective and positive for conveying the message of the powerviolence community.

## ORIGINS OF POWERVIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

At this juncture, I will provide a brief history of powerviolence in California. It is important to note that this history begins with hardcore punk, which could be thought of as the seminal genre and precursor to powerviolence. The band Black Flag, beginning in 1978, can be identified as the primary instigator of both hardcore punk and powerviolence in Southern California. The band's initial releases and performances marked a shift from punk to hardcore punk. This distinction is crucial in illustrating how hardcore punk in Southern California catalyzed the development of noise-music in

50. My refusal to wear earplugs when performing was simply my attempt to hear myself perform. As the aural environment of a powerviolence concert may be filled with a multitude of sounds, it can be difficult to locate oneself “in the music,” so to speak.

51. Nitzan Shoshan, *The Management of Hate: Nation, Affect, and the Governance of Right-Wing Extremism in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 248.

Ventura County, located roughly 60 miles north of Los Angeles and often considered a suburb of the greater Los Angeles area. Steve Waksman's "California Noise" further elaborates on Black Flag guitarist Greg Ginn's exploration of guitar sound and distortion. "Ginn never had a sound ideal as defined as Van Halen's 'brown sound', but it is clear from Rollins' account that the guitarist's approach to sound, pushing volume and distortion to an extreme so that the spillover of feedback became an essential part of the music, was an integral counterpart to his angular and aggressive manner of playing."<sup>52</sup>

As sound can be considered a realm of knowledge or a "way of knowing,"<sup>53</sup> I will draw from my experience of learning about hardcore punk and powerviolence through sound to trace the origins of powerviolence. Similarly, Attali notes that "music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding."<sup>54</sup> Hence, I will first identify distortion as one way of understanding hardcore punk and powerviolence. In powerviolence, each instrument (including the voice) could be thought of as contributing to a collective noise assemblage that can be both felt and heard. "Ginn therefore emphasized in his playing, not only a sound ideal, a way of hearing, but a way of *feeling* sound, of maximizing its impact upon the body; an effect that for him was best achieved by the extreme use of amplification."<sup>55</sup> In this case, I understand distortion as an overarching sonic theme and mechanism used to imbue a concert space or recording with feelings of againstness.

Hardcore punk in Southern California during the late 1970s and early 1980s rapidly spread from Los Angeles to adjacent locales. For example, a large hardcore punk community that thrived around the time of its inception was based in Orange County, California. The bands that constituted this local scene were perceived to have a unique sound that was inherently connected to their geographical location. I understand this connection between sound and geographical location as sonic topophilia.<sup>56</sup> As hardcore punk's noise reverberated into neighboring cities and towns throughout California, new communities that embraced increasingly diverse local styles began to emerge.

An offshoot of hardcore punk that was also integral to the inception of powerviolence was a subgenre called thrashcore (or fastcore). Early examples of thrashcore can be found in the first releases of bands such as D.R.I. (Texas) and Siege (Massachusetts). In Southern California, bands such as Cryptic Slaughter pushed the already fast tempos in hardcore punk to their absolute extreme. To my ears, the musical developments found in thrashcore heavily influenced early powerviolence bands, and I often think of these bands as perhaps the starkest examples of proto-powerviolence. Notably, thrashcore's drumming styles illustrated a move toward the blast beat-oriented drumming found in powerviolence. Elements of parody and satire, which would later ossify into foundational themes in powerviolence, were exemplified by bands such as Spazztic Blurr (Oregon). Anti-capitalist

52. Waksman, "California Noise," 690.

53. See Steven Feld's chapter titled "Acoustemology" in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

54. Attali, *Noise*, 4.

55. Waksman, "California Noise," 691.

56. Nancy Guy, "Flowing down Taiwan's Tamsui River: Towards an Ecomusicology of the Environmental Imagination," *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 2 (March 1, 2009): 223.

lyrics and iconography also intensified in thrashcore. For example, Cryptic Slaughter's song "Money Talks" (1987) articulates the band's criticism toward dominant capitalist society. "So capitalism makes you free? / This is no democracy / We have no humanity / Not in this society / The disease of greed affects us / I think it always has / Because nothing talks louder / Than cold, hard cash."<sup>57</sup>

Topophilic sentiments were apparent in many local hardcore punk communities as they aspired to progress the counterculture mentality through the integration of idiosyncratic sounds and lyrical themes. One of these hardcore punk communities was established in Oxnard, California, with a style labelled "Nardcore" or "Oxnard hardcore." Nardcore was associated with the entire suburban area of Ventura County as well as smaller unincorporated areas such as El Rio. As Oxnard was close to the Pacific Ocean, many bands within the local community incorporated elements of skateboarding and surfing into their musical expression.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, as geographical locations changed with the spread of hardcore punk, the demographics of hardcore punk communities changed as well. This would alter the perception of what it meant to be countercultural or anti-establishment. The Nardcore community thrived throughout the 1980s and would lay the foundation for the sonic experimentation and subsequent inception of new communities such as powerviolence.

The hardcore punk style of Southern California would later be combined with Noise Music practices that can be further explored in Novak's monograph *Japanoise* (2013). Hardcore punk sonically evolved throughout the 1980s, and after numerous genre fragmentations, largely due to the polarizing style of pop punk, a number of new styles would emerge, such as powerviolence. As discussed earlier, powerviolence was never intended to be a subgenre name, and it was merely used as a sonic description of a new iteration of hardcore punk. Although the powerviolence community began its emergence during the late 1980s and early 1990s, no sonic or inscribed evidence as to a unifying label for this community can be found. The word "powerviolence" was first recorded by a band called Man is the Bastard in 1995 on a compilation album titled *D.I.Y.C.D.* Man is the Bastard's utterance therefore recorded powerviolence into history, which catalyzed the formation of the powerviolence community.<sup>59</sup> "Crossed Out, No Comment, Manpig, Capitalist Casualties, Man is the Bastard, West Coast powerviolence!"<sup>60</sup>

57. See discography: Cryptic Slaughter, *Money Talks*, track 1.

58. Prominent bands within the early Nardcore community, such as Ill Repute, Agression, Dr. Know, False Confession, R.K.L., and Stalag 13, cultivated a "Nardcore sound" that drew from everyday practices like skateboarding and surfing. Given that much of Ventura County lies along the Pacific coast, Nardcore was thought to embody a topophilic sound associated with life in a suburban beach town.

59. According to an interview with Chris Dodge (founder of Slap a Ham Records and bassist/vocalist for Spazz) in 1997, the word "powerviolence" can be traced back to Matt Domino and Eric Wood of the band Neanderthal in 1989. The sonic manifestation of the word "powerviolence" came about when Wood later co-founded Man is the Bastard. Furthermore, Slap A Ham Records was arguably the most influential label contributing to the emergence of the powerviolence community. See: Chris Dodge, "Slap A Ham Interview with Chris Dodge May 1997 (Reupload)," [https://youtu.be/EXNR3suFlls?si=lxSDCH4\\_u4Jh8maX](https://youtu.be/EXNR3suFlls?si=lxSDCH4_u4Jh8maX).

60. See discography: Man is the Bastard, *D.I.Y.C.D.*, track 13.

Over time, this descriptor began to be used as a subgenre name and would include numerous bands, such as Infest, Spazz, Charles Bronson, Man is the Bastard, and Eddie's band Sordo. Powerviolence in the 1990s would emerge as a hyper-condensed and extreme interpretation of later styles of hardcore punk, grindcore, and noise. For example, grindcore shares many similarities with powerviolence but is typically considered a descendant of metal rather than punk.

Grindcore adopted aspects of death metal's singing style, some of its aesthetics, its vocals and loud volumes, but merged these forms with punk sartorialism and politics. Bands play short, fast songs, characterised by punk riffs, extremely fast drumming ('blastbeats') and screamed vocals. Unlike heavy metal and some death metal, grindcore is not melodic and does not feature guitar solos (cf. Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000). Violence predominates in grindcore lyrics as it does in those of death metal. However, in grindcore this aggression mainly targets the machinations of late capitalism, and identities that are seen as complicit with dominant culture.<sup>61</sup>

The first iteration of powerviolence could be characterized by short song durations, highly distorted instruments, and polarizing tempo changes (from blistering fast to sludgy slow). Its lyrics often focused on themes highly critical of dominant capitalist society, satire/parody, straight edge ideologies, or community building. The original manifestations of what would come to be known as powerviolence in the late 1980s and 1990s did not maintain an upward trajectory of popularity in the hardcore punk community and fell into relative obscurity by the early 2000s.

It is important to make note of external factors that contributed to the development of powerviolence throughout the later 2000s. The primary factor was the ubiquitous use of the internet by individuals to communicate and access knowledge. A second factor could be described as the numerous technological advancements in methods of distortion, which allowed for a wider array of sounds to be employed in noise-music. The third factor was the palpable influence from digital music and its production. Digital elements can be found in powerviolence recordings in the form of samples. One such case is Sordo's album *Tactical Precision Violence*, where cacophonous noise-music is juxtaposed with samples from video games, cartoons, movies, and other forms of popular culture. In the perpetual cycle of experimenting with new noise creating technologies, the acoustemes of powerviolence incessantly persist in a liminal state, constantly being altered by the immediate community's preferences and intended message.

## THE LATINO EDGE

Powerviolence bands such as El Mariachi and Sordo incorporated Spanish into noise-music and the DIY economy to better differentiate Ventura County's powerviolence as willing to embrace a transnational Mexican identity that extended far beyond the borders of the United States. To better understand the importance of Spanish in powerviolence, we might

61. Rosemary Overell, *Affective Intensities in Extreme Music Scenes: Cases from Australia and Japan* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

recall that powerviolence as audiotopia can be situated within the “transnational hyperspace” of the borderscape. In relation to the greater powerviolence community, Sordo’s use of Spanish in song lyrics not only allowed for collaboration beyond borders, but also allowed for the proliferation of anti-capitalist consciousness. As hardcore punk has generally struggled with White supremacy, powerviolence and noise musicians have employed Spanish as a concise marker to deviate from reinforcing White supremacist tendencies. Similarly, Spanish was used by the Chicago-based hardcore punk band Los Crudos, who influenced many groups within the noise sphere.

My friend Eddie summed up what was described as “the Latino edge” in a recent interview.

I can say this much about ethnicity for myself. When we were starting Sordo we were really influenced by Los Crudos. So, that guy Martin Sorrondeguy [singer for Los Crudos] had this documentary called “Beyond the Screams,” and he was talking about how in the city he grew up in, it was really rough and tough. You couldn’t really do anything except join a gang or go to work. Where we grew up, it was pretty much the same thing, you wouldn’t be looked at or talked to if you weren’t some rough and tough guy. Where we lived was El Rio, which is an unincorporated part of Oxnard where all the farmworkers are at. So, for me personally, I was floored by the fact that there were so many punk bands with members who were Mexican in the scene, but nobody sang or spoke in Spanish. For me it was a little hard to walk around hearing bands say they were proud of their background ethnically, but they wouldn’t talk about it. It was just kind of a little caveat like, “Oh yeah I’m Mexican or Latino but don’t worry about that.” You would see that a lot, especially in the Ventura area, there were a lot of white supremacists in that area. As for the Latino element, another thing we tried to set ourselves apart by was singing in Spanish. It was just to let people know that it’s not just White guys playing this kind of music. It’s everybody, this music is for everybody. The whole point is that people are bored everywhere, people are angry everywhere, even violent everywhere. I’m proud of who I am, I’m proud of where I come from, I’m proud of the fact that I can speak two languages, that’s about all I can say right now.<sup>62</sup>

As Eddie explained, ethnic groups were primarily segregated in Ventura County. With Ventura being predominantly White and Oxnard being predominantly Hispanic, the powerviolence of El Rio allowed for the disintegration of ethnic boundaries to form a community that was able to embrace a multiethnic identity.

Powerviolence’s subversiveness was not only targeted at dominant capitalist society, but also sought to subvert tropes established within the greater hardcore punk scene. As Eddie stated, this primarily manifested through language. Sordo and many other powerviolence groups—in California and Mexico, among other places—began to fully embrace a highly specific dialect of Spanish that connected Southern California with Mexico.<sup>63</sup>

62. Loose Meat, Episode Six! Visit from the homie Eduardo from Sordo, 2021, <https://anchor.fm/loose-meat/episodes/Loose-Meat-Episode-Six-Visit-from-the-homie-Eduardo-from-Sordo-eudlf8>.

63. For example, Sordo reconceptualized the word “powerviolence” and its abbreviated form “P.V.” to reflect their Chicano identity. Sordo adapted “P.V.” to signify “paisano violence” rather than “powerviolence.” “Paisano”

This method of reclaiming an element of difference and propagating it within the very community that marked this difference, is a common theme found in powerviolence. Although punk in general is often considered a counterculture that champions difference and nonconformity, there are many communities where racism is a serious issue. For Sordo, promoting Spanish undermined the sonic color-line apparent in Ventura County’s hardcore punk community and further conveyed to listeners that “this music is for everybody.” The linguistic diversification in Sordo’s powerviolence simultaneously broadened the potential audience of the powerviolence community and emboldened those who may have felt unheard in their form of sonic expression.

Race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, etc., are all key constituting factors in shaping an individual’s perception and understanding of the world. In the powerviolence community, the world is perceived as a system of order and repetition that is interpreted negatively. This negativity sparks curiosity, prompting individuals to question epistemological constructs. Such questioning enables them to draw subjective conclusions about the world, which fosters feelings of againstness within them. This againstness is expressed through quotidian habits that incorporate elements of self-expression, such as musical creativity. This creativity, channeled through sound, manifests as noise and disorder, and is self-reflexively labelled powerviolence. Amidst the tumult of society, powerviolence unsettles the established order, creating its own relation with the world by stridently asserting the right to make noise.

#### UNINCORPORATED AREAS AT THE BORDER OF NOISE AND MUSIC

In this section, I will further examine El Rio as an unincorporated area and describe the influence of human geography on Sordo’s powerviolence. El Rio is wedged between the 101 freeway, agricultural land, and the recently constructed land development of Riverpark. According to the *Riverpark Specific Plan* prepared by the City of Oxnard, the bulk of construction for Riverpark took place between 2005 and 2012.<sup>64</sup> Residents of El Rio vehemently opposed the construction of Riverpark because it appropriated portions of El Rio’s land and established a heterotopic juxtaposition between rich and poor, White and Brown, music and noise. To this day, Riverpark is a somber reminder of the inequality generated by the expansion of capital. Thus, not only are the sounds of El Rio delimited and othered, but the space itself could be described as liminal.

El Rio, along with the concept of the unincorporated area, exemplifies what Foucault calls a “heterotopia,” which describes spaces that are other and possess “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”<sup>65</sup> Foucault further explains that the role of the “heterotopia of compensation” is “to create space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is

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can mean “fellow countryman” or, in some cases, “peasant,” indicating the demographic context of El Rio as a poor, working-class community of color—or, in Eddie’s words, “where all the farmworkers are at.”

64. [https://www.oxnard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Riverpark\\_Specific\\_Plan\\_Rev\\_Aug\\_2012.pdf](https://www.oxnard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Riverpark_Specific_Plan_Rev_Aug_2012.pdf).

65. Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowic, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.



messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.”<sup>66</sup> He illustrates this concept with the example of the seventeenth-century Jesuit colonies in Paraguay, which created meticulously arranged spaces contrasting with the supposed disorder of surrounding areas. Thus, in Foucault’s framework, Riverpark operates as a heterotopia of compensation for El Rio, which presents a space that stands in contrast to and potentially inverts the relationship it reflects. Furthermore, Riverpark demonstrates a rigorously planned space—marked by the banalities of capitalistic expansion such as strip malls and shopping centers—that counters the disorder and unintelligibility, in a word, the *noise* of El Rio. There is also an almost uncanny compensatory element to El Rio which Eddie alluded to earlier by describing it as “where all the farmworkers are at,” namely, capital’s exploitation of cheap, racialized labor in agriculture. Focusing on the geographical and social elements of El Rio, I will now examine how Sordo’s powerviolence is cultivated in the very soil of the unincorporated area.

First, one must acknowledge that El Rio, meaning “the river,” is situated along a natural border, the Santa Clara River. El Rio lies on the southern side of the Santa Clara River and is closer to Oxnard. Juxtaposing El Rio, directly across the river, lies another small community called Montalvo, which is closer to Ventura. During my time as a member of Sordo, I lived in Montalvo, while Eddie and Gerry lived in El Rio. Conceptually, El Rio, as an unincorporated area, is in a constant struggle against the hegemonic forces of surrounding municipalities. These struggles are experienced in the dramaturgy of everyday life, through racialization via the sonic color-line, and the suppression of this racialized noise. In the context of this discussion, we can understand powerviolence as a vociferous sonic practice through which the noise musicians of El Rio articulate their understanding of sound. Powerviolence constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and dissonance that make up “*the margins of a marginalized community*.”<sup>67</sup> In the unincorporated area of El Rio, marginalization takes on a deep and multilayered significance. Understanding how living in an unincorporated area affects everyday life can help make sense of this noise.

As previously stated, El Rio’s identity as an unincorporated area led its residents to harbor feelings of marginalization especially related to ethnicity. Montalvo, the area that I lived in just across the Santa Clara River, was also unincorporated until 2012 when it was incorporated into the existing municipality of Ventura. Additionally, external perceptions exert influence on internal dynamics, giving rise to the conflict between dominant forces of surrounding communities and the residents within.<sup>68</sup> To further explore the relationship between the unincorporated status of El Rio, heterotopias, and feelings of againstness, I turn to an example from Jesica Siham Fernández and Regina Day Langhout published in 2018.

In California, approximately one in every five people live in an unincorporated area (Sokolow, 2000). Specifically, unincorporated areas do not have a municipal government, and are instead governed through the county. People who reside within

66. *Ibid.*, 27.

67. Aldama et al., *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, 5.

68. Thomas Turino, “Nationalism and Latin American Music: Selected Case Studies and Theoretical Considerations,” *Latin American Music Review* 24, no. 2 (2003): 199.

unincorporated areas, however, have limited local institutionalized democratic power (Bullard & Wright, 1990; Mukhija & Mason, 2013; Rubin, Chandler, Bernabei, & Lizardo, 2007; Sokolow, 2000). Moreover, unincorporated areas are often labeled as poor, crime ridden, fiscally burdensome to the county, and civically disengaged (Bullard & Wright, 1990; Rubin et al., 2007). These hegemonic labels—overlaid with the fact that many unincorporated regions are affordable due to the lack of municipal taxes—become classist and racist because poor and working class people, as well as communities of color, often live there. The anemic political representation, when combined with hegemonic labels, becomes a challenge to communities seeking social change.<sup>69</sup>

Sordo’s powerviolence employs hegemonic labels, such as “poor” and “crime-ridden,” together with noise, to provoke social change and challenge misconceptions about this working-class community of color. An example of this can be seen in the lyrics during the breakdown section of the song “Skull Stomp”: “El Rio P.V. / The ghetto raised me / But it’s not that bad.”<sup>70</sup> Powerviolence itself is a reflexive term born with the understanding that outsiders might perceive the music as powerful and violent. Similarly, Sordo repurposes misconceptions about El Rio to counter negative perceptions of their home. Despite surrounding municipalities labelling it a “ghetto,” Sordo problematizes and undermines this hegemonic label. As an unincorporated area, El Rio lacks essential services such as a dedicated police force, schools/education opportunities, and infrastructure. This deprivation prompts social change through powerviolence, conveying messages that challenge dominant power structures and misconceptions. In the struggle to be heard, El Rio is both deafening and inaudible.

## EAR OF THE BEHOLDER

To illuminate some of the musical elements of powerviolence, I turn to Sordo’s song “Skull Stomp.” This song is one of the group’s better-known tracks and often catalyzes audience participation through singing and slam dancing at live performances. With a duration of 48 seconds, it aligns with a typical length of a powerviolence song. I should note that this analysis is based on my perspective as the drummer and therefore focuses primarily on rhythm.

The song begins with both a count-off on the hi-hat cymbals and piercing feedback noise from the bass amplifier. The feedback noise at the beginning (and end) of a song is intentional and is an integral aspect of powerviolence and noise-music. This abrasive feedback, along with digital samples throughout the course of an entire record, fills in typically empty sonic space with noise in a feedback loop. The first part of the song is the fast section, which incorporates a blistering fast drum beat called a “blast beat.” The blast beat is employed in many different styles of “extreme” music, such as death metal, black metal, and grindcore. In these styles, the blast beat may take on different characteristics derived

69. Jessica Siham Fernández and Regina Day Langhout, “Living on the Margins of Democratic Representation: Socially Connected Community Responsibility as Civic Engagement in an Unincorporated Area,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62, no. 1/2 (2018): 75–76.

70. See discography: Sordo, *Tactical Precision Violence*, track B5.

from the dominant lineage of musical traditions. In powerviolence, the blast beat evolves from a very basic hardcore punk 4/4 drum beat, which simply places the hi-hats and bass drum in unison on beats one and three, followed by a solo snare drum on beats two and four. This beat is then accelerated by the drummer—to quite literally the maximum speed humanly possible—to create the powerviolence blast beat heard in “Skull Stomp.”

The bass produces a granular wall of noise that is indiscernible aside from a very brief synchronization with the drums and vocals in which three distinct notes are played on the bass that echo the vocals. The vocals in this section are sparse and sung by the bass player Eddie, rather than the singer Gerry. This first “blast” section, primarily characterized by the blast beat, lasts from 0:00 to 0:10. Beginning at 0:10, the second part of the song presents a stark juxtaposition in what I would generally call the “breakdown” section. The tempo is reduced dramatically, and the bass plays a distinct groovy rhythm that employs only one dissonant chord. The vocals are switched over to Gerry and are sung in unison with the bass to emphasize the groove. The drums play a significantly slower and more open 4/4 groove that incorporates drum fills to complement the vocals. This breakdown section lasts from 0:10 to 0:25, and then the song repeats both the blast and breakdown sections. The second blast section lasts from 0:25 to 0:33, and the second breakdown section lasts from 0:33 to 0:44. The song ends with feedback noise from the bass amplifier, lasting until 0:48.

Taking “Skull Stomp” as an archetype, one can observe that most powerviolence songs are characterized by brevity and employ juxtapositions to convey disorder. These juxtapositions come primarily in the form of abrupt tempo changes. In “Skull Stomp,” these abrupt shifts are encapsulated in what I call the “blast-breakdown dichotomy.” The blast section, characterized by blast beats and erratic bass lines, functions as a hyper-condensed verse. Furthermore, the maximization of tempo in powerviolence takes an already fast verse from hardcore punk and further pushes the limits of speed, resulting in a chaotic noise assemblage. The blast section, which serves primarily to situate the song as belonging to a certain lineage of genres/subgenres, is then juxtaposed with a polarizing breakdown section. The powerviolence breakdown section is not necessarily derived from the hardcore punk lineage and is unique to powerviolence.

If the blast section can be considered analogous to a hardcore punk verse, then the breakdown section could be considered analogous to a chorus. This section often conveys the main lyrical message of the song and may also feel like a reprieve from the disorder expressed in the blast section. Breakdown sections in general can be found in a multitude of genres, such as hardcore, grindcore, and many metal subgenres. The key distinguishing factor in the powerviolence breakdown section comes from the influence of noise, which presupposes the conveyance of disorder. Consequently, powerviolence breakdown sections do not attempt to sound uniform. Recordings for powerviolence songs are usually done in one take and “mistakes” are often left in intentionally.<sup>71</sup> This makes audible an amateur sound which reinforces the concept that powerviolence is inclusive. Thus, where

71. When we recorded Sordo’s 7” *Tactical Precision Violence*, we pooled our money and spent about four hours in a local recording studio, where we recorded a whopping 40 songs. Initially, we entered the studio with only about

one may find breakdown sections of metal songs to sound similar, the major difference lies in the rhythmic transitions and the potential for “participatory discrepancies.”<sup>72</sup>

During live performances, breakdowns may employ elements of improvisation to further juxtapose the blast section. Depending on the specific musical event, the bass and drums may phase in and out of sync due to any number of contextual or extra-musical factors.<sup>73</sup> What becomes most important is the ability for the band to work together to create a sound that is effective in conveying the message of disorder. As previously stated, these participatory discrepancies may be interpreted as mistakes in recordings. Powerviolence is intended to be subversive toward dominant music constructs, and the acceptance of these discrepancies allows those listening to feel as if anyone could participate in this form of sonic expression. To summarize, this method of noise-music creation and recording is also musically reflexive, laying bare each and every mistake to be heard over and over again on recordings.

As the majority of musicians within the powerviolence community are self-taught, many of them use amateurism to distinguish sonic differences between noise-music and music. Benjamin Court defines artistic amateurism as “a characteristic set of beliefs, a body of knowledge, and a way of knowing, all organised around the principle that it is possible, and perhaps preferable, to make music without established musical knowledge.”<sup>74</sup> The artistic amateurism found in powerviolence incorporates noise and participatory discrepancies to establish an amateur sound. In powerviolence communities, many musicians do not play for money, nor do they intend to become professionals. When faced with the harsh reality that one must procure the means of subsistence, rather than submit to capital, powerviolence musicians make do with limited resources and do it themselves. For example, many bands do not have the financial means to pay for the use of professional recording studios or equipment of their own. Powerviolence bands will often network with fellow musicians or enthusiasts to set up makeshift DIY recording studios (such as in a friend’s garage), or they may simply record themselves using any recording equipment they have. The DIY ethos strongly resonates within the recordings of powerviolence bands and can be heard in the recording quality of many songs. Furthermore, Court elaborates on the use of artistic amateurism as a celebratory term. “Artistic ‘amateurism’ functions as a celebratory term only when we give such art the benefit of the doubt—that it is not mere ineptness, that it is fruitful, that it is intentional, or that it is subversive.”<sup>75</sup> In this case, powerviolence musicians intentionally convey an amateur sound to subvert dominant music constructs. For many aspiring musicians without the

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30 songs, but during our time there, we improvised (or “made up”) 10 additional songs. This is one example of how improvisation is evident in powerviolence.

72. Charles Keil, “Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music,” *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (1987): 275.

73. The majority of powerviolence concerts that I played with Sordo encouraged physical proximity with the bands during performances. In many of these concerts, there was no separation between the bands and members of the audience. Therefore, when a slam pit (or mosh pit) formed, people would often be pushed into my drum kit, temporarily disrupting the musical event. Slam pits most often formed during the breakdown sections in songs such as “Skull Stomp.”

74. Benjamin Court, “Racialising Amateurism: Punk and Rap,” *Third Text* 34, no. 1 (2020): 51.

75. *Ibid.*

means to formally study music, powerviolence presents an opportunity to feel audible to dominant capitalist society—a chance to struggle for the basic human need to be heard.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I described the countercultural noise-music movement of powerviolence from my perspective as an amateur drummer. I chose to focus on powerviolence because it plays a vital role in how I and others within the community understand sound. Therefore, I felt it was important to include my own reflections in this article. Until music is dispelled of its capitalistic machinations, powerviolence will remain in the margins—a din that sporadically comes into earshot, unheard just as quickly as it is perceived.

In sum, the noise musicians of El Rio can be characterized by an ontology of constant tension, a struggle of sound perception, code switching in language transmission, identity friction, and the struggle to be heard. These struggles shape the way sound is conveyed and perceived. For my friend Eddie and me, this has fundamentally altered our understandings of noise and music. Finally, I will conclude with one last glimpse into the pandemonium by way of the band that roared powerviolence into existence—Man is the Bastard: “Music . . . is not an industry! A philosophy for liberty, compassion, and true solidarity. Competitive egoist corporate cheat mentality. A tendency toward atrocity. Vegetarian ethic for health and humanity. ‘Enlightened interdependence is the key,’ fuck the T.V.”<sup>76</sup> ■

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76. These words are emblazoned on the cover of Man is the Bastard’s *D.I.Y.C.D.*

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