LISTENING WITHOUT RESPONSE-ABILITY

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For Plato, like other critics and skeptics after him, democracy was noisy. Lacking the harmony of a well-ordered soul, the crowd was a dissonant *mêlée*, a motley rabble, likened to a large, hard-to-tame animal. Ever since, politics has always entailed distinguishing the meaningful speech that can be heard because it has reason from the inarticulate, even animal cry, which is thus rendered inaudible. But, far from being something to fear or suppress, I want to suggest in this essay that this corruption or perversion of voice is irreducible and originary rather than a belated accident. The breaking of the voice may be something that becomes more acutely audible under conditions of provocation—when the voice goes out ahead and in front—but its collapse just is the very vocation of the voice. Precisely when a voice wants to be heard everywhere by everyone—when it wants to be an absolute, all-powerful voice, just as music, for Wagner, became the mouthpiece for God on the telephone—it cracks. The voice is always already in the process of silencing itself, of biting its own lip, of choking on its words, or of turning into a scream or a murmur—which amounts to the same thing so far as audibility is concerned. Something similar, I shall be arguing, is true of listening's tendency to self-destruct, which complicates not only what democracy sounds like but also its exercise as a form of listening to one another. To the extent that democracy entails a practice of listening, what democracy sounds like is a matter of listening to listening, which turns out to be something of a blind spot in the aural field.

One way in which this perversion is made more manageable is through ascriptions of barbarity or animality, which map onto inaudibility. In the contemporary French context on which I shall focus, racialization and colonialization of the other tend to be coextensive with a certain bestialization of speech. If the politics of the voice involves the repeated redrawing of the line between human and infra-human life, racism is an exacerbation of this strategy which seeks to contain the inherent tendency of human speech to turn into a bestial cry by projecting this animality onto an externalized other. As Étienne Balibar puts it, racism's "'secret,' the discovery of which it endlessly rehearses, is that of a humanity eternally leaving animality behind and eternally threatened with falling into the grasp of animality."[1] In his astute analysis, racism is a necessary and immanent supplement to nationalism—necessary because the attempt to form a unified totality on the basis of a core authentic identity is always doomed to remain incomplete.[2] The unity of the nation can only be provisionally and aporetically secured by projecting its own incoherence onto a bestialized other whose exclusion is the sole guarantor of totality. The voice of the people is thus always from the outset unstable because it maintains its integrity only by projecting its own bestiality onto the racialized other.

This externalized bestiality, typically used to figure riots and revolts, is a matter of a less-than-human or an infra-sound. In his foreword to *The Common Growl*, Jean-Luc Nancy notes that "all forms of completeness or of saturation engender

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An African-American woman, tall and slender in a dark peacoat, moved through the crowd, holding above her head a sign calling for "solidarity, not division." On the reverse, the message was simply "hope." Screams and whistles rippled through the crowd down Fifth Avenue. In the ensuring lull, she broke out into the well-worn Occupy chant, "Show me what democracy looks like!" The crowd shouted back on cue: "This is what democracy looks like!" What followed was a vocal tour de force, lasting several minutes. Without a megaphone, armed only with a hand cupped near her mouth, her voice began to strain as it pushed itself to shout even louder. At odd moments, a few members of the choir would join in to reinforce the cantor's. But as the vocal performance pressed forward along with the eager bodies toward Trump Tower, it determinedly became a solo display, every bit as virtuosic as operatic coloratura. Pushing at the limits of timbre, her voice began to break on a word here and there. But is this – this shout-cry, feeling out its limits, testing the boundaries of sweet-toned reason – is this, I wondered, what democracy *sounds* like?

1
Étienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism," trans. Chris Turner, in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 57.

2
Ibid., 54, 59–61.

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inequalities—inhumanities, insensibilities, insanities"—to which one might add *asinanities* as another way to describe the self-defeating or autoimmune logic of totalization.[3] Locating revolt in this gap in totalization as a protest against its foreclosure of sense, Nancy concludes by lending this voice an animal character:

> Revolt does not discourse, it *growls* [*gronde*]. What does "growl" mean? It's almost an onomatopoeia. It means to grunt, bellow, and roar. It means to yell together, to murmur, mumble, grouse, become indignant, protest, become enraged together. One tends to grumble alone, but people growl in common. The common growl is a subterranean torrent: It passes underneath, making everything tremble.[4]

This suppressed force of the animal voice is the condition of possibility of popular sovereignty *and* its impossibility. When Aristotle imagines that he can make a clean distinction between the *logos* of the rational, articulate citizen and the mere noisy *phonē*, Rancière wonders if he might have forgotten Plato's characterization of democracy:

> Book VI of the *Republic* actually takes pleasure in showing us the large and powerful animal responding to words that soothe it with a roar of cheers and to those that annoy it with a disapproving racket. The "science" of those animal tamers in charge of it who show themselves within the walls of its pen consists entirely in knowing what vocal effects make the great animal growl and those that make it nice and gentle.[5]

According to Rancière's theory of the *partage* of the sensible, the metaphor of the animal "serves to rigorously reject as animals those speaking beings with no position who introduce trouble into the logos and into its political realization as analogia of the parts of the community."[6] Against this unequal distribution, which is legitimated by the police (in the specific sense that Rancière gives to this term in *Disagreement*), "democracy is the regime—the way of life—in which the voice, which not only expresses but also procures the illusory feelings of pleasure and pain, usurps the privileges of the logos." Democracy is also that which denaturalizes this division, exposing its contingency: "the simple opposition between logical animals and phonic animals is in no way the given on which politics is then based."[7]

To this extent, Rancière's analysis shares a certain affinity with the deconstruction of sovereignty and of the voice that we find at work in thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, who in different ways point to metaphysics's efforts to constrain the shattering force of the voice into a binary contradiction.[8] Rancière's affinities with Derrida become more

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Jean-Luc Nancy, "Foreword: The Common Growl," in *The Common Growl: Toward a Poetics of Precarious Community*, ed. Thomas Claviez (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), viii.

4
Ibid., ix.

5
Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Roe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21–22.

6
Ibid., 22.

7
Ibid.

8
The Platonic association of democracy with the animal cry is also an important reference for Geoffrey Bennington's ongoing project on the auto-deconstruction of the political, as he set out in "Crying," paper at the Cixousversaire, New York University, September 15, 2017.

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conspicuous in his reflections on the politics of literature where he aligns writing with this democratic impulse to introduce disorder into the *logos*. Again, Plato is the touchstone: this time the devalorization of writing in the *Phaedrus*, which characterizes writing as a perversion of living speech. Writing is both orphaned and errant, claims Rancière. First, on account of its endless repeatability, it lacks "the speech of the master: the ability to 'defend itself,' to answer when asked about what it says and thus to become a living seed that can itself bear fruit."[9] Besides this iterability, Rancière also theorizes, like Derrida, a certain errancy or adestinality of writing: "this muteness makes the written letter too talkative." Without the guidance of a father, it "drifts all over the place," "incapable of distinguishing whom it should address" and spreading outside the limits of the text.[10] For Rancière, writing's political potential lies in disrupting the logic that determines the unequal distribution of audibility. It "undoes any ordered principle that might allow for the incarnation of the community of the *logos*," thereby introducing a "radical dissonance" into the "communal symphony" that, for Plato, harmonizes ways of saying with ways of acting and being.[11]

Despite the resonance between their positions, there remains a significant disagreement between them—one that has consequences for the politics of listening. For Rancière's taste, Derrida is too quick to "ontologize a principle of the aporia,"[12] which for Rancière necessarily remains the accident of circumstances: having asserted that "the simple opposition between logical animals and phonic animals is in no way the given," he continues by arguing that "on the contrary one of the stakes of the very dispute that institutes politics."[13] Politics becomes a matter of redistributing (in)audibility: "those who do not count make themselves count and . . . blur the assigned distribution of speech and silence that constitutes the community as 'living creature' or organic whole."[14] Imagining the problem to be a deficit, or deprivation, of *logos*, Rancière reasons that it is enough for the subaltern to demonstrate their capacity to speak rationally. In this way his politics reveals the contingency of a specific distribution of speech and its irrational other, but it does not—and this is precisely what Derrida aims to do—expose the contingency of oppositionality as such. Rancière's politics is a redistribution of audibility that does not touch upon the underlying possibility of dividing audible from inaudible, only its calibration.

The consequences of leaving this oppositionality unchallenged are palpable in (post-)colonial France. Any demand for recognition and inclusion—any demand to be heard—presupposes that this disenfranchisement consists simply in excluding the inarticulate cry of the indigene—in silencing or turning a deaf ear to the voice of the subaltern—when in fact, in censuring it as noisy brouhaha, it aims to reincorporate this irrationality as an interiorized foreignness to contain its disruptive force. In this way, it turns the cry

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Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 93.

10
Ibid., 93–94.

11
Ibid., 95.

12
Jacques Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics," in *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2011), 15.

13
Rancière, *Disagreement*, 22.

14
Rancière, "Literary Misunderstanding," trans. Mary Stevens, *Paragraph*, 28, no. 2 (2005), 98.

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into another kind of silence. In his brilliant study of language's imbrication in French colonialism, Laurent Dubreuil observes a number of overlapping strategies: the colonized were not only denied the faculty of language but, moreover, elements of indigenous speech—Maghrebi-Arabic loanwords or phonemes, non-conforming usage of French—were incorporated into French as nonetheless inassimilable exotic savageries and barbarisms. This position of being "one *and* the other," "speaker and outsider," is part of colonialism without being unique to it.[15] On the contrary, "so-called Western thought was *never* confined to an exclusively rational logic," with the result that the cry or the scream, as much as they are "powerful signs of refusal," in themselves do not disrupt logocentrism: the "supposed irrationality is not productive in and of itself."[16] The politics of speech already anticipates and indeed relies upon its transgression. It maintains the fantasy of a pure voice, its demands clearly audible and directed to the right addressee, by locating the racket entirely in the externalized other. To the extent that this exclusion is constitutive it forms the threshold condition of the Derridean quasi-transcendental or what Agamben has famously analyzed as the state of exception.

This metaphysical operation, which constrains diversity into a binary opposition, has determined what (post-)colonial France sounds, the parentheses indicating precisely that threshold condition of the inclusive exclusion. As Dubreuil observes, "the dominant description of the sound of *banlieue* is shared by diverse protagonists (intellectuals, scholars, rap singers, witnesses, journalists), which conforms to the function of a *parlure* aiming to situate these suburbs as an external inside of *La France*."[17] The "*cri de la banlieue*," that demand for help ("*appel au secours*," "*cri de détresse*"), ruptures the "law of silence" that otherwise surrounds the *quartiers populaires*. This restrictive opposition draws the *banlieusards* into an arguably futile cycle of contestation and counter-violence against state violence, especially insofar as it is inflicted through police brutality. Careful to note that this is a discourse imposed upon the *quartiers populaires* through "techniques of (inter)diction" to mold and appropriate the speech of colonized subjects, Dubreuil cites an article in *Le Monde* quoting a *jeune* who describes burning cars and other spectacles of property damage as the cry provoked by an inability to speak.

Silence or Molotov cocktails: that is the false choice into which the sound of the *banlieue* is confined. What Dubreuil does not note, however, is that this is a way to avoid confronting the autoimmune character of the voice, which tends to splinter and shatter itself in striving to be heard. This dispersive quality of the voice and a similarly distracted condition of listening threaten audibility, of course, but they also give it its political force. This chancy, unpredictable kind of audibility retains the capacity to surprise. But it feels all too risky. It is easier to play the state's game, which is premised on a faith in the possibility of being heard—on the belief that one would be heard if only one

15
Laurent Dubreuil, *Empire of Language: Toward a Critique of (Post)colonial Expression*, trans. David Fieni (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 109–10.

16
Dubreuil, "Notes Towards a Poetics of Banlieue," *parallax* 18, no. 3 (1998), 102. On pronunciation and elocution, see also Ana María Ochoa's *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Columbia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

17
Dubreuil, "Notes," 103.

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There is one recording I've made that I never want to be heard. For a long time, I could scarcely bring myself to listen to it for I knew what I would hear. I would hear the shame of my own voice reduced to an animal yelp. It was May Day in Paris 2017, which fell between the first and second rounds of the Presidential election. A sizable cortège de tête had formed in front of the main union march. We began to move forward, quietly a first, and then a few chants broke out, but it wasn't long, little more than ten minutes, before the CRS (riot control police) began to try to decapitate the march, to cut off those elements deemed unruly rabble rousers. They had effectively kettled us on a stretch of the artery between République and Bastille. A minute or two beforehand a Molotov cocktail had been hurled toward the front lines of the police, which gave them the necessary excuse to go on the offensive. As I had come to realize from my time in the field, this trigger almost certainly came from undercover police who would regularly form fake black blocs

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spoke up, if only they listened… It is increasingly recognized that audibility is not simply a function of speaking out but is also dependent upon the ears of those addressed by the call. And yet the belief in the possibility of being heard completely—of an absolute audibility—remains an obstacle to political change. This is partly the effect of sound's dispersive and promiscuous character, which means that it tends to disseminate, compromise, and distort itself in autoimmune fashion—what in my forthcoming book, *The Sound of Biopolitics*, I want to call *shatter*. It is also, though, due to the ambiguous relationship that listening has to democracy. Listening is both inside and outside democracy. It is a metaphor for what democracy is—or ought to be—in practice. And there is listening to what this democracy sounds like.

This is where it becomes aporetic, for a truly democratic grasp of what democracy sounds like would require listening to listening—that listening be audible to itself. Any absolute listening—that aspires to be heard everywhere, by everyone, to be heard *democratically*—would have to self-listen. And yet this is precisely what we cannot do *alone*, for it already demands that we are listening, if not to some other, then to ourselves as other. We hear our own listening only through the reactions of someone who something else—for example, the facial expressions and sounds of the person to whom we're listening, or in transcriptions—which is why Derrida will say that listening is always "the ear of the other." Listening is a *response* and a *response-ability* to and from the other.

Listening becomes more audible—or audible in its absence—precisely when this response-ability is missing. When politicians, for instance, engage in listening exercises, such as Macron's *gran débat*, or make repeated promises to listen, far from being a sign of democratic health, it typically reflects a crisis of legitimacy. Such performances and metaphorics, alongside the increasing demands for the ruling classes to listen with the rise of populist variants of neoliberalism, suggest that listening is seen as a panacea for all of representative democracy's ills. On the contrary, the phantasm of a pure, unadulterated listening precipitates its crisis because it drives wedges in the aural field between audible and inaudible, and between silence and cry.

The word Plato uses to describe the democratic state and the state of the people's soul, and which might be translated as "motley"—*poikilon*—also has the sense of "manifold" or "variegated." It was, for instance, commonly used to describe a garment woven of bright, multi-colored threads, as Derrida observes in *Rogues*.[18] Elsewhere, he will speak of negotiation as a knot in order to describe the bind or injunction of responsibility.

to make it appear as if protestor violence were more severe or unprovoked. The police immediately retaliated, if that is even the right word, with tear gas and flash-ball grenades. But I was unprepared, my goggles still in my pocket. I gathered up against a doorway with two other women and a young girl caught unawares. As the tear gas began to burn our breath, we huddled closer to the ground. Plumes of smoke were rising around us and a group of *banlieue* youths shouted to get down and threw themselves over us.

Then suddenly there was another bang, loud and now only about a meter away. The two young men nearest to me grabbed me, one by each arm, and shouted at me that we had to move. "Are you okay?" I could only manage a pathetic howl in response, the gas scalding my lungs: "I can't breathe." "You're gonna be okay" they reassured me. "Breathe!" They kept pulling me forward – where I couldn't exactly tell with all the tears and snot streaming down my face. "Spit," they yelled over the sound of all the grenades and exploding projectiles, "spit it all out!" They sat me down at the side of the road and found a field medic who hosed me down with saline solution. They asked me why I was there if I wasn't prepared and advised me to get back with the CGT (major labor union federation) carnival unless I was ready to show solidarity. I wasn't so easily discouraged. I wouldn't have to smash any bank windows, but if I was in the cortège de tête, I had to be ready to help others out of danger and not to give anyone away to the police. It was another ten minutes before I regained my composure and was ready to put my goggles on and rejoin them. My black jacket now streaked white with a mixture of saline, saliva, and mucous, I realized that the recorder in my pocket had been capturing it all, even as the binaural mics had fallen out of my ears in the commotion and were hanging by my side. No one is ever going to hear that, I resolved. And yet these are the only sounds that the metropole hears of its internalized colonies – bangs, howls, scurrying feet, gasps, spits, choked breaths, helpless cries.

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In the *knot* of negotiation there are different rhythms, different forces, different differential vibrations of time and rhythm. The word knot came to me, and the image of a rope. A rope with an entanglement, a rope made up of several strands knotted together. The rope exists. One imagines computers with little wires, wires where things pass very quickly, wires where things pass very slowly: negotiation is placed along all of these wires. And things pass, information passes, or it does not pass, as with the telephone. Also, cables that pass under the sea and thousands of voices with intonations, that is, with different and entangled tensions. Negotiation is like a rope and an interminable number of wires moving or quivering with different speeds or intensities.[19]

Questions of composition, convergence, and representation have become especially knotty with the arrival of the *gilets jaunes* on the French political scene in late November last year. The ruling classes and media allies were keen to dismiss the *gilets jaunes* as a right-wing movement, highlighting the presence of anti-immigrant element and racist discourses among the decidedly motley gathering of people, and the far right was keen to exploit the situation to its own advantage. The *gilets jaunes* have consistently resisted any representative recuperation from right or left, but the suspicion that a largely white movement from suburban peripheries were natural constituents of the *Rassemblement Nationale* has been difficult to shrug off. Moreover, the immediate trigger for the occupation of roundabouts and toll booths was a fuel tax increase, masquerading as an environmental measure even though it in no way targeted large-scale corporate carbon-guzzling; but it allowed Macron to paint the demonstrators as anti-ecological.

Moreover, as anti-tax protests, the actions of the *gilets jaunes* were rapidly suspected of being Poujadist and far from progressive. But even if the movement does strongly resemble the bread riot of earlier centuries, it is far from clear that a struggle over the price of market goods is necessarily reactionary. What invites skepticism from some quarters is that the riots take as their terrain the realm of consumption rather than demands over the price and conditions of labor. These riots, like a long history of riots before them, are over the cost of proletarian self-reproduction. What makes the direct action of the *gilets jaunes* riotous is not that it is violent and disorderly (although there have certainly been *manifs sauvages* in Paris and other urban centers) but that it intervenes not in the sphere of production but in what Marx called the "noisy sphere of circulation." The main locations for these actions have been the now famous roundabouts in provincial small towns—places of circulation

1er mai 2017

18
Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Bault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 26.

19
Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 29–30.

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This passage captures for me something of the kind of listening I wanted to engage in when I decided to undertake an ethnography of the politics of sound and listening in the *banlieue*, not via interviews or surveys but by making field recordings. My approach—always on foot, recording everything around and about me without questioning anyone or preparing them to be heard, using in-ear binaural mics to capture the sense of space and movement and discrete enough to go unnoticed by the police—grew out of this sense of listening to the aural field an entanglement of different vibrations, rhythms, and timbres, all interwoven with one another more or less quickly, more or less intensely. Derrida expressly distinguishes this knot or "stricture" of negotiation from a dialectic in which opposing sides and contradiction are taken. When political scientists think of listening in relation to democracy, they often think of it as a (passive) counterpart to speech. Not only did I want listening to be something more active. More importantly, it needed to be ecological, attuned to the entire environment rather than privileging speech. It was a way to understand antagonisms, compositions, and convergences as they formed on the ground. Field recording in this way also gave me an appreciation of activists' tactics far different from the impression I'd formed from seeing images in the mainstream media or even from watching the Periscope streams of sympathetic journalists and videographers. It is a truism to say that you hear things you don't see, but the aural field also becomes infinitely more complex when it is directed by the eye. I documented my research

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and mobility—rather than the centrality of the factory in labor struggles. In the past few years France has witnessed a growing exhaustion of the trade union movement and there was little enthusiasm to join forces beyond the *Solidaires* (the most radical) and a few chapters of the CGT (France's largest union federation).

Onlookers have struggled to make sense of the composition of the *gilets jaunes*, which has been extraordinarily diverse, although also noticeably whiter and older than the urban riots of recent years. All motorists are required to carry in their vehicle the yellow vest from which the movement takes its name and there has been little beyond the dispossession of the downwardly mobile working and lower-middle classes to bind them together. At the outset there was much discussion about the possible mobilization of the *quartiers populaires* side by side in the street with the *gilets jaunes* and yet there was much hesitation. As a young dancer from Chanteloup-les-Vignes explained in a piece entitled "Banlieusarde, je ne suis pas gilet jaune," it was hard to identify with a struggle against fuel price rises when the poverty you faced meant that you couldn't even dream of a car.[20] There were, besides, worrying elements among the movement—racists, supporters of the reactionary anti-gay *manif pour tous* movement, and also *les casseurs*. She expresses relief that the black and Arab youth of the *banlieue* were not there because she knows that they would have been a scapegoat for the violence. Racial oppression, as the Rosa Park collective argued, was irreducible.

At the same time, she respects the call of Assa Traoré of the *Justice pour Adama* group to join in the streets those who did not know or care about the death of her brother in police custody in July 2016. And yet the title of Yasmine's post marks her distance from Traoré's bold declaration that the *banlieusards* were all *gilets jaunes*—and long before anyone donned a yellow vest. For Traoré and the other *banlieue* antifascist groups who decided to join the actions in December, the *gilets jaunes* marked the national generalization of an experience of precarity long suffered in the *quartiers populaires*. A cry that had long gone unheard was now being amplified throughout provincial and suburban France. Convergences are not simply a matter of one group listening to another. They also involve a listening to the common of the kind that sound art collective Ultra-red, for example, have been trying to promote in their groundbreaking militant listening investigations, which invite people to come together to discuss what a given enemy, such racism or austerity, sounds like, but without organizing a single, totalizing viewpoint. On the one hand, the *gilets jaunes* represent another populist demand to be heard. On the other, the distinctive features of this emergence provide fascinating opportunities to study listening in action in their building of solidarities and the organizing of direct action.

Alongside the questions of composition and convergence,

with photographs of which a couple are shown here, but the shutter freezes the nuances of a temporally unfolding situation, however poignant, powerful, or shocking the image may be. Listening can happen at multiple different speeds and at different degrees of focus or distraction. The recording makes space for all of this in a way that a photograph does not. Because listening powerfully engages our sense of memory and of projection into the future, recordings, perhaps most importantly of all, can be reopened. Or to return to Derrida's metaphors, the field recording does not bind you absolutely. Nor is it a cut of the Gordian kind that resolves the most thorny knots by cutting you loose. It is always more or less *undone*. And it is further listening that will do the job of disentangling, loosening and retightening – in short, of negotiating.

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Yasmine M., "Banlieusarde, je ne suis pas gilet jaune," *La Zone d'Expression Prioritaire*, December 4, 2018.

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perhaps the single biggest challenge to thinking about a politics of listening comes from the *gilets jaunes*' repeated resistance to the tendentially oligarchic character of representative democracy. To this crisis of listening they have counterpoised the self-representation of mass democracy, rejecting leaders or recuperation. Some, like Étienne Balibar in a rapidly eclipsed moment of optimism, have welcomed this as a possible path towards finding an alternative to both oligarchic democracy and the populisms of the right and the left.[21] Others, though, have condemned the citizenist impulse, coalescing into the demand for the RIC (citizens referendum initiative), as a mirror of neoliberal consumerist choice that returns demonstrators to their isolation as voters and sacrifices social demands for merely political ones. The result, as Samuel Hayat rightly argues, is to iron out the internal differences in the movement, suppressing antagonisms and social divisions among the dominated.[22] Antagonism may be too Hegelian to be in Derrida's vocabulary and yet I would argue that his notion of an attunement to the different rhythms, vibrations, intonations, speeds, and intensities of democracy's entangled and differentiated voices is precisely the response-ability to a people that is always other than itself. Among field recordists there are often debates about the status of the recording along a spectrum from factual document or representation to freewheeling composition. What I want to propose is that the practice of listening we call field recording is a *negotiation* of the sonic field. Ultra-red has argued that the microphone "brings responsibility" but it is not enough "only to record the demand."[23] Rather, the response that is called for exceeds this horizon. The microphone organizes listening as a site for political struggle. As such, listening involves entering "a state of crisis at the loosening of coordinates provided by pre-inscribed demands."

The responsibility of listening unties as much as it binds threads, and the call to which it responds is unanswerable precisely because it is "multiple" and "disseminated."[24] Each call every bit other (*tout autre est tout autre*), listening cannot respond to them all. And yet the force and the fragility of the ear's response lies in the fact that it exceeds all obligation and expectation and even the capacity to respond to an infinity of appeals and demands. Its power lies in its not *having* the power to respond. This listening without response-ability—that is what democracy, if there is any, sounds like.

21
Balibar, "'Gilets Jaunes': The Meaning of the Confrontation," *openDemocracy*, December 20, 2018.

22
Samuel Hayat, "The Gilets Jaunes and the Democratic Question," trans. Hector Uniacke, *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 13, 2019.

23
Ultra-red, *Ten Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation* (New York: Printed Matter, 2008), 4.

24
Derrida and Nancy, "Responsibility—Of the Sense to Come," in *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 73.

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Listening Without Response-Ability

Paris-Banlieue contre le FN, April 16, 2017

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