

# ORDINARY SOCIAL LISTENING IN A PSYCHOTECHNOLOGICAL AGE

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## **Abstract**

The politics (*la politique*) that brings social change and not just the politicking (*le politique*) that modulates the existing social order depends, Alain Badiou asserted in 1985, on the “*interruption of the ordinary social listening.*” While Badiou refuses to abandon this commitment to the possibility of radical rupture and of the extraordinary event, I investigate—in a nod to Emily Apter’s recent work on unexceptional politics—the micropolitics of all-too-ordinary listening. Noting how neoliberal power continues to transform itself beyond a Schmittian-Agambenian biopolitics of the sovereign exception by putting to work cognitive and affective labor, by means of psychotechnologies and smartpolitics, and by managing risk through big data, I analyze the role of digital listening technologies in neoliberal subjectivation. Developing the ideas of Bernard Stiegler, Byung-Chul Han, and Bifo Berardi, I argue that digital assistants, new generation slot machines, forensic audiology, affective listening software, and the listening posture of politicians on electoral campaigns all exhibit a general fetishism whereby the capacity to be heard, now severed from its communal and representative purposes, becomes a condition of alienation and disenfranchisement.

Moreover, I argue that the progressive response to such co-option of our ears does not necessarily demand an exceptional auditory power, an unexpected audio-technological revolution, an anarchic uproar, or a refusal to listen. Rather than its interruption, small-p politics requires the harnessing and redirection of ordinary social listening, which already contains within it the possibilities for deflecting, reorganizing, and obstructing. Examining the activism of sound-art collective Ultra-red, I extrapolate how their community-based and spatially-grounded militant listening investigations might be extended along the vector of globalized new media, connecting local precarization with the transnational geopolitics of migration and postcoloniality. As a case study and drawing upon my fieldwork in Paris, I examine how both hip-hop culture and the demonstrations and riots in the *cités*, via their imbrication with new media such as Twitter and Periscope, lend to the practices of ordinary social listening in the *banlieues* new mobilities and modes of civil participation.

## Bio

A graduate of Selwyn College, Cambridge and King's College London, Naomi Waltham-Smith is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Pennsylvania. Sitting at the intersection of sound studies, continental theory, and digital humanities, her work explores the politics of listening in various contexts. Her first book, *Music and Belonging Between Revolution and Restoration*, was published last year by Oxford University Press and she is currently finishing a book on *The Sound of Biopolitics* for Fordham University Press's Commonalities series. Her current projects examine the transformations of listening under neoliberalism and include an archive of field recordings, *Listening under global Trumpism*, to be hosted by the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia, and a DH project entitled "Cart-otographies of Cities: Soundmapping Urban Political Economies" that explores the (in)audibility of precarity.