

**Strong People Don't Need Strong Leaders:
Intentionality, Accountability, and Pedagogy**

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(Ultra-red)

What Now?

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For 20 years, the members of the international sound art collective, Ultra-red, have undertaken militant sound investigations alongside and within political communities. This work involves developing and sustaining long-term collaborations with specific constituencies and political struggles in the cities where we live. Ultra-red explore how practices of intentional listening can support long-term political organising. While we consider how listening is addressed in political theory and philosophy, our work is first and foremost about practice: how do we organise our politics and what form does listening take in the organising process? These efforts are intended to complement the ways in which speech, imagery, gestures, and many other operations are used to advance political struggle. Far more attention has been given to these operations than to the literacy of listening at the level of social action and organising.

Ultra-red formed in 1994 when musicians involved in the AIDS activist movement in Los Angeles helped establish and run harm reduction programs for people who inject drugs.¹ Three years later community members in Union de Vecinos (United Neighbors) based in East Los Angeles joined Ultra-red and initiated efforts to support struggles for affordable housing.² The collective's membership expanded again in 2001 to include social researchers and educators embedded in the struggles of migration and anti-racism in Germany. In 2007, the collective launched long-term initiatives in the United Kingdom with constituencies involved in anti-racist, (im)migrant rights, and housing struggles.³ Finally, in 2009, Ultra-red members in New York built on decades of organising within the city's black and Latino/a transgender, lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities to initiate projects in support of collective struggles for racial, gender, and economic justice.⁴ The initiatives in Los Angeles, New York, London, the southwest of England, and Berlin continue to this day and are the primary source of Ultra-red's political and methodological practices. We share our process and outcomes with collaborators and allies in our home cities and the many constituencies we collaborate with elsewhere on short-term projects.⁵ Ultra-red present these practices as a modest contribution to the widespread field of militant inquiry, by which we mean the organising of radical political movements that seek to negate the oppressive structures of capital, racism, gender oppression, nationalism, and imperialism.

The first aspect of collectivity I would like to underscore is that it is an intentional practice. Members of collectives learn how to operate and sustain their collectives through dedicated effort. This means that collectives spend a portion of their time together reflecting on how they are organised and operate. They make explicit the protocols used to guide their efforts and, when useful, draw on and adapt tools developed by other collectives. Thus, Ultra-red, in addition to evolving as a collective and learning from that process also explore and draw on practices employed in participatory democracy, pedagogy, and various forms of economic cooperation and collaboration. We focus specifically on how practices of intentional listening are developed and employed in these various forms of collectivity and how they are used both to listen to how the collective functions and as part of the collective investigation process. By rooting the collective investigation in listening we stall or perhaps foreclose the

temptation for movements to seek out and rely on intellectual patrons to define the terms of struggle, which ought to emerge from the combined efforts of every member of the collective.⁶ An investigation based in listening ensures: (1) the development of widespread literacy within the collective; (2) ongoing learning through the phases of reflection, analysis, and action that define political struggle; and, (3) that the collective's primary form of leadership is its shared practices, knowledge, and principles.

A second essential dimension of collectivity concerns the shared commitments and political investments that bind members together. In *Ultra-red*, we refer to these as the "terms of accountability". Accountability is the overarching intention of collectivity. For *Ultra-red*, the question of political listening attains urgency because of our commitment to the needs and interests of specific constituencies. Entering into relationships of accountability can bring the objective characteristics of our political investments, the principles that inspire our activism, into conflict with the day-to-day work, the slog of struggle. This may register, for example, as a contradiction between the principles for which we struggle and how the collective is organized. When this contradiction reaches the point of crisis we experience an acute disjunction between our individual desires and investments and the collective's commitments and procedures. We may find ourselves thinking: "I love the cause but I hate the struggle, especially some of the people in the struggle." The tension between ideals and practice is often most challenging for those of us who hold to petite bourgeois notions of intellectual and creative freedom and the entrepreneurialism and individualism they support. From within such a framework, collectivity, even when a part of one's everyday life, confronts the individual as one's opposite. Either one is an autonomous self or one is bound within a collective. What are in fact mutually constitutive terms become thought of and experienced as mutually exclusive and even antagonistic. How we analyse the contradictions in which we find ourselves will determine how we act—either we leave or we invite others in the collective to explore, to listen to the contradiction with us.

We know from experience that movements sustain themselves in large part through their capacity to develop useful listening protocols. These protocols may be created by and for the collective or adopted from existing social practices, such as those used in classrooms, or by families, church groups or other movements. We have witnessed how the absence of deliberative procedures for collective listening results in all manner of obstacles within a movement and its contestations with state power and class masters.

Intentional listening brings speaker and listening into a dialectical relationship. Another way of saying this is that collectives constitute knowledge through their shared exchanges rather than as a result of each individual contributing something particular and unique to the process. When a collective functions in this manner, the voice of its members is realised through the syncretic action of the listeners. Listening in this way means that the action of speaking and listening are not complete until the question, "What did you hear?" is asked and answered, and a dialogue is produced. The dialogue moves beyond the reiteration of established terms

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for a struggle by placing those terms in relation to the changing conditions of the base community, the constituency, and the lived experiences of the collective's members. The estrangement of established analyses through collective dialogue presents great opportunities for the development of dynamic political voices.

Organisers, activists, and base communities may resist intentional protocols of listening because they feel inauthentic or unnatural. That resistance can reveal conflicts between competing protocols and even the friction between underlying ethical systems within a movement. The sociologist Francesca Polletta has pointed out that movements organised around the informalities of friendship can find intentional processes inauthentic.⁷ Protocols demand a reorganisation of relations and even a shift in ethical foundation from affinity between friends to a concern with the stranger or outsider. Through these, often painful, episodes of transition and re-examination, the existing protocols of listening come under scrutiny and risk seeming strange and unnatural. It could be said that listening as a political practice is always an encounter with the stranger or an invitation to the strangeness in our midst.

A third dimension of collectivity involves the question of pedagogy. The move to collective listening can be an opportunity to diminish or dilute the tendency for a collective to be organised around a single personality or particular authority. Related to this issue is the difference in the roles individuals can play within collectives. A particularly important distinction to be made is between the individual as organiser and the individual or collective as the protagonist of struggle.

In Ultra-red's consideration of leadership, we often turn to the legacy of the civil rights era educator and organiser, Ella Baker.⁸ In the 1930s, Ella Baker directed the Young Negroes Cooperative League and helped organise Harlem's Own Cooperative that provided milk and other basic groceries to residents in the neighbourhood. Later, as an organiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) she helped increase membership exponentially. However, it was her work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that was truly innovative. Under Miss Baker's guidance SNCC members developed a practice of disciplined attentiveness and active questioning.⁹

Working closely with poor, rural communities in segregated Southern states, SNCC activists used active listening to assist communities to build leadership from within in order to solve their own problems. Even when the work of SNCC consolidated around voter-registration campaigns, the primary aim was to develop and reproduce leadership within and among the community itself. SNCC activists were not the protagonists of the movement; they were its organisers. When asked about the role of Ella Baker in the movement, SNCC alumni talk of how she listened and questioned, compelling the movement to be clear about its methods and goals. This pedagogy of listening equipped SNCC field organisers to be organisers rather than leaders with the aim of building local, autonomous communities that could make their own decisions regarding whether and how to participate in the national civil rights movement and transform the country's racially defined class structure.

Ella Baker's practice was informed by forms of horizontal and participatory democracy in US political movements that extended back to the early anti-slavery movements of free Black men and women and their allies in the Quaker-dominated abolition movement. These deliberative procedures would, in time, inform the early labour movement. In labour colleges such as Brookwood Labor College in the 1920s and 1930s, deliberative processes would serve as the basis of experimentation with democracy, often to the deep consternation of the trade union hierarchy who saw democracy as a threat. As part of her training at Brookwood Labor College, Baker came to a lifelong commitment to the inextricable relationship between community pedagogy and organising where the link between the two articulates a specific notion of the political protagonist within the base community.

The role of the pedagogue-organiser is to nurture leadership within the community as a whole, by listening and questioning. This was in sharp contrast to more traditional forms of community organising, which sought to identify strong personalities within the community and raise up those individuals as leaders who stand in for and represent the whole of the community. Miss Baker's assertion that "strong people don't need strong leaders" is as good a definition of collectivity as one could wish for and has been taken up by countless organisers committed to long-term struggle. The emphasis on collective leadership is realised in Ella Baker's conviction that the pedagogical process has the capacity to locate political education at the centre of organising and thus contributes to the transformation of the community as a whole and not just one talented individual or vanguard. The irreducible practice of that pedagogy is collective listening.

How collectives arrive at their deliberations is as diverse as the situations in which communities organise themselves. Yet in each situation, there remains the need for a protocol for deliberation; that is, a protocol for organising collective listening. Even when the protocol takes as its object the written word, a text, an image, theatrical sketch, video or film, choreographed movement, farming or any other form of labour, or any other object, listening becomes crucial as the collective begins to reflect upon and analyse its experiences. What we hear swiftly becomes a lesson in how we hear. This fact is often overlooked in the rarefied discourses of art and sound art theory that, by aligning with the analytical proposition of art (art that interrogates the ontology of art), asserts the priority of the idea over experience. This extends the modernist project while refusing to address the problem of practice in its material conditions, including its class contradictions. Hence a final concern: as the art world becomes increasingly interested in collectivity, will these practices too become reified in order to circulate as abstractions in the global flow of exhibitions, biennials, and surveys? Will they be confined to relationships of representing or looking at, rather than transforming or practicing with? There is a world of political difference between these forms of engagement.

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1. Listen to "An Archive of Silence", <http://www.publicrec.org/archive/2-04/2-04-002/2-04-002.html>
2. See Leavitt, Jacqueline, "Art and the Politics of Public Housing", *Planners Network: The Organization of Progressive Planners*, 24 October, 2005, <http://www.plannersnetwork.org/2005/10/art-and-the-politics-of-public-housing/> and listen to "The Debt", <http://www.publicrec.org/archive/2-03/2-03-011/2-03-011.html>
3. Listen to "Border Sounds", <http://www.publicrec.org/archive/2-02/2-02-005/2-02-005.html>; "Play Kanak Attak", <http://www.publicrec.org/archive/2-02/2-02-003/2-02-003.html>; "Eurodac Express", <http://www.publicrec.org/archive/2-02/2-02-002/2-02-002.html>
4. View "Vogue'ology!", <https://vimeo.com/25758841>
5. A comprehensive overview of Ultra-red's current work, including extensive methodological tools are available in Ultra-red, *URXX Nos. 1-9: Nine Workbooks, 2010-2014*, London: Koenig Books, 2014. Ultra-red has also made available a three-part, instructional video that introduces the basics of militant sound inquiry. These videos were commissioned by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) as part of the "Practice Sessions" initiative on artists' practices. The videos are available at <http://welcometolace.org/lace/practice-sessions/ultra-red/>
6. See Benjamin, Walter, "The Author as Producer", *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz ed, Edmund Jephcott trans, New York: Schocken Books, 1978. As Walter Benjamin describes it in this essay, conventional activist-art stages an encounter between an intellectual in possession of a specific political analysis and a viewer who receives that analysis. This intellectual or ideological patron concerns herself or himself more with that moment and mode of delivery than with whatever effects it may produce. This partition provides the intellectual with an alibi for whatever actions her or his ideas may generate out there. Hence Benjamin asks intellectuals to think less about where they stand on an issue, which leads to representations of suffering, than to think about their "position in the process of production", how their labour is directed, for example, to the reproduction of the class system. "This reflection leads, sooner or later", Benjamin writes, "to observations that provide the most factual foundation for solidarity with the proletariat" (p 236).
7. Polletta, Francesca, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
8. See Ransby, Barbara, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
9. In his recounting of this process, John Lewis writes: "We were meeting people on their own terms, not ours.... Before we ever got around to saying what we had to say, we listened. And in the process we built up both their trust in us, and their confidence in themselves." Lewis, John with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.