

ARTICLE

Everyday peace in a 'post-conflict' African metropolis: Radio encounters, indeterminacy, fugitivity

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Abstract

Drawing on the ethnography of a multi-ethnic local radio listeners' club in post-war Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, the article provides an original account of everyday peace in an African metropolis. It bridges peace geographies and African urban studies to document the informal and often invisibilised practices through which residents re-make the city in the wake of war. In doing so, the article expands existing understandings of everyday peace while reaffirming the concept's radical, decolonial proposition: to seek peace in subaltern lifeworlds, rather than in institutional and interventionist programmes that too often reproduce violent power asymmetries. Through the story of the UFARA listeners' club, emerging out of radio encounters, the article shows how everyday peace articulates a response to different forms of conjunctural and structural violence, including precarity and territorial control. It also points to indeterminacy and fugitivity as lived, affective and political figurations of peace which, while eschewing the trappings of resistance, nonetheless point to the need to imagine peace otherwise.

KEYWORDS

Abidjan, everyday peace, radio encounters, subaltern practices, urban Africa, urban violence

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sometime in September 2014, in the working-class district of Abobo, north of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, a group of 40 strangers met in a *maquis* (open-air bar). The strangers had never seen each other but knew each other's voices: for several months, they had been trading salutations and banter during interactive programmes on Abobo's local station, Radio Arc-en-Ciel (RAC thereafter). Eventually, a handful of listeners suggested they meet off the airwaves. Out of this reportedly raucous first gathering emerged the *Union des fidèles auditeurs de la Radio Arc-en-Ciel* ('Union of dedicated listeners'), UFARA. The listeners' club resolved to meet every month, although more informal gatherings quickly proliferated. By April 2015, when I attended my first UFARA meeting, the club had more than 140 regular members, and twice as many occasional contributors.

Strikingly, at the time UFARA was forming, Abobo was recovering from a decade of war. Between 1999 and 2011, the district—home to more than a million inhabitants—was a conflict hotspot as competing factions vied for control of

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Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's main urban centre and heart of political power. As analysts have shown (e.g., Akindès, 2004; McGovern, 2011), the Ivorian conflict stemmed from the exhaustion of a postcolonial authoritarian model through which wealth had been (unevenly) distributed, ethnic differences managed, and opposition suppressed. In 1999, following a decade of frustrated democratisation movements, a military coup ended 40 years of single-party rule, but ramped up the militarisation of politics. In 2002, another coup failed to topple the fledgling regime of Laurent Gbagbo but split Côte d'Ivoire in two, between an insurgent-held north and a government-held south (including Abidjan). In 2010, presidential elections that were meant to provide a way out of conflict escalated into months of civil war. In the aftermath, victor Alassane Ouattara set out to reconsolidate political domination (Akindès, 2017). While overt warfare was intermittent between 1999 and 2011, conflict permeated lived spaces in Abobo through governmental repression, micro-local surveillance, paramilitary recruitment, retributive violence, and the overall entanglement of ethnic difference with political antagonism (Banégas, 2010). The latter threatened to 'fracture' (Dembélé, 2003) long-honed habits of cohabitation in a city shaped by generations of migration and mixing (Freund, 2001).

Through the story of UFARA, then, this article examines the significance of radio encounters in a 'post-conflict' city. What did it mean to meet strangers through the airwaves in the wake of war? I argue that UFARA's radio encounters can be read as a form of 'everyday peace', a concept I borrow from Philippa Williams' pioneering work in north India (2013, 2015; see also Mac Ginty, 2014; McMullin, 2022). By seeking out strangers on and off air, UFARA members were involved in a diffuse process of remaking urban sociality and reconstructing the city as a shared, liveable world. I show that the formation of UFARA was an active effort to enact new forms of mutuality and togetherness, to mitigate the effects of conflict on already-tenuous livelihoods and self-made social infrastructure. In addition, I foreground the affective work of encounters as they turned violent uncertainty into positive indeterminacy, re-inscribing hope, playful mystery, and open-ended futurity at the heart of everyday life.

By detailing the peaceful potential of radio encounters through the formation of UFARA, I provide an original account of everyday peace in a West African metropolis. The first section of the article delves into the significance of everyday peace as a concept: its origins within peace geographies, its value as a heuristic and its decolonial charge in an African context where subaltern peace-making agency continues to be denied (Daley, 2014). I also note the importance of everyday peace as a bridge between urban geopolitics and African urban studies. By conceiving peace *in and as everyday life*, rather than as a separate realm of thought or practice, everyday peace locates peace within the ordinary, infrastructural work through which residents continuously make African cities hold in the face of multi-dimensional violence (McFarlane & Silver, 2017; Simone, 2004a, 2004b, 2018; Thieme, 2017).

In the second section, I detail the ethnographic fieldwork that allowed me to meet UFARA in 2015. I touch on the methodological challenge of discerning everyday peace in activities that, on the surface, appear to have little to do with peace. Indeed, few UFARA members would have described radio encounters as peace. As I analyse in the third section of the paper, these encounters were primarily about a generalised search for opportunity; they were about extending one's spatial reach and seeking out the unknown, since the familiar had exposed its limitations. Conceptualising this exploratory process of 'popular research' (Simone, 2012) as everyday peace, however, offers a vision of peace that involves not just managing established differences and latent violence, but also reshaping the urban as a horizon of possibility and an *unsettled* ground for becoming-together. My analysis thus expands existing understandings of everyday peace by dwelling on how indeterminacy, as a relational and affective facet of urban life, can itself be peaceful and essential to the staging of 'collective life' (Bhan et al., 2020).

One of the reasons that UFARA members would not label their encounters and activities as peace is because, in 2014–16 (when I carried out my fieldwork), peace in Abidjan was conceived exclusively in interventionist terms—as something that ought to be engineered from the outside, by foreign agencies and a newly reconsolidated state. As I have shown elsewhere (Cante, 2020), dominant discourses of peace sought to blame conflict on ordinary people's pathological tendencies, as opposed to elite contests for state control. Discursively, and through its performance in urban space, institutional peacebuilding legitimised the reconstruction of authoritarianism under Ouattara by posing the state as a bulwark against an irrational, potentially dangerous population—erasing the fact that the same state, led by some of the same elites, played a central role in the escalation of political violence during the 1990s.

My decision to conceptualise radio encounters within UFARA as everyday peace is a response to the violence of institutional peace. By providing an account of peace-making 'from below' in Abidjan, I challenge the 'research and policy gaze' (McMullin, 2022, p. 73) on post-2011 Côte d'Ivoire that favours interventionist peacebuilding, itself in the service of state and international interests, and at the expense of subaltern knowledges and practices. That said, the reading of everyday peace that I put forward does not position UFARA as a beacon of resistance, or provide an easy alternative to institutional peacebuilding. As I show in the concluding section, members of UFARA adopted what I call a *fugitive* stance

(drawing on Black studies/Black geographies: Hesse, 2014; Sojoyner, 2017; Shulman, 2021), one that sought to evade the post-2011 politics of peace altogether, rather than engage in contest over its meaning. Ultimately, this desire for evasion, which was intertwined with the group's commitment to indeterminacy, led to UFARA's gradual disintegration, certainly by the time I returned to Abidjan in June 2019.

By concluding on the fugitivity of everyday peace in Abidjan, I return us to the fact that the latter cannot substitute for structural transformation. However, the story of UFARA demonstrates that ways of doing and imagining peace otherwise are being experimented with on the 'urban ground' (Amin & Lancione, 2022). That these experiments do not lend themselves easily to capture and promotion as 'good practice' does not make them any less essential for any anti-/decolonial movement toward genuine, lasting peace in urban Africa, and beyond. It is up to us, as allied researchers, to listen.

2 | EVERYDAY PEACE: DECOLONIAL POTENTIALS

The concept of everyday peace, as developed by Philippa Williams (2013, 2015) stems from concerns within feminist geopolitics and peace geographies. Feminist geopolitics scholars (e.g., Massaro & Williams, 2013; Noxolo, 2018; Pain & Smith, 2009) have sought to foreground everyday life as an affective and embodied realm in and from which to analyse, inter alia: war, (anti-)terrorism, securitisation and post-conflict reconstruction. In this body of work, the everyday offers a situated perspective on the uneven impacts of geopolitical processes. It pushes the critique of violence and in/security toward more intersectional considerations, bringing into view power relations differentiated along lines of gender, race and class. The everyday, in feminist geopolitics scholarship, also allows critique to foreground agency in the making and unmaking of geopolitical orders. Everyday agency designates the multiple ways—mundane, imaginative, defiant, accommodating, ambiguous—that ordinary people act within and upon geopolitical processes.

Yet as peace geographers have pointed out (Koopman, 2011; Williams & McConnell, 2011), even the most incisive feminist critiques of geopolitics tend to focus on war and violence. The primary focus on violence and its effects pervades multiple subfields of geography, including urban geography and geopolitics (e.g., Fregonese, 2012a; Graham, 2004; Pavoni & Tulumello, 2020). In response, Williams and others have urged closer attention to peace as a contested socio-spatial process (e.g., Brickell, 2015; Macaspac & Moore, 2022; Megeran, 2010; Penu & Essaw, 2019). Peace geographies, as a research agenda, involves a critical scrutiny of dominant forms of peacebuilding, which often reproduce inequalities and structural forms of violence. It also involves a search for 'other securities' (Koopman, 2011), which is to say alternative meanings and practices of peace that might offer pathways toward increased social and environmental justice (Courtheyn, 2022). As a heuristic in Williams' study, everyday peace contributes to both agendas, but it is the second that I want to emphasise here. Williams demonstrates how street-level practices and vernacular discourses contribute to peaceful cohabitation in Varanasi, North India. She also shows that ordinary (Muslim) residents of Varanasi seek to deflect institutional practices to redefine citizenship on more peaceful, less violently unequal terms. Together, these manifestations of agency challenge the idea that peace is primarily made by political elites, by state bodies or by specialised organisations. In itself, this is a powerful and much-needed proposition, but I want to underscore that it is especially radical in an African context.

Several scholars, across geography and international relations, have noted that international peacebuilding on the African continent is frequently premised on the erasure of African agency (Daley, 2014; Moyo & Mine, 2016). Reasons for such erasure include, prominently, Western-liberal humanitarian logic that struggles to renounce its civilisational self-regard and interventionist reflexes (Rutazibwa, 2014). In this humanitarian logic, universal norms of peace, and the most effective procedures to achieve them, are to be found in Euro-American knowledge and 'traditions', making Western intervention an act of necessary benevolence. Often twinned to this humanitarian logic, however, are racialised 'spatial imaginaries' (Laliberté, 2016) of African 'brutality' or 'incompetence' that are inheritances of colonial ideologies, albeit fuelled by sensationalistic media coverage of African conflicts since independence. While such imaginaries are common amongst Western aid or peacekeeping agencies, they are not their sole preserve. As noted in the introduction, in Côte d'Ivoire, after the 2011 post-electoral war, *government* discourse promoted the idea that conflict could be traced to ordinary citizens' pathological tendencies, including excessive political passion. Furthermore, the erasure of African agency in the field of peacebuilding can be tied to the continued dominance of Western economic and security interests in former colonies. France continues to have a military base in Abidjan, and intervened in favour of Alassane Ouattara during the 2011 war. USAID's (United States Agency for International Development) quasi-ubiquitous presence in post-2011 Abidjan can likewise be tied to the United States' strategic interests in West Africa.

Beyond the field of international peacebuilding, African agency in making peace is also often erased in scholarship. As Zubairu Wai (2012) has shown, research on African politics—dominated by Western institutions—is not only centrally preoccupied with conflict and violence, but too often resorts to epistemologies that privilege single-factor explanations (e.g., ‘greed *versus* grievance’ or ‘state failure’). Such epistemological lenses lose sight of the variegated, complex, sometimes contradictory manifestations of African political agency, and have little to say about the agency of actors not directly involved in conflict. Similarly, at an urban level, Garth Myers (2011) notes that African cities, when they are not ignored in global urban studies scholarship, are frequently exceptionalised as places of conflict. Cities like Abidjan continue to be written about in terms of violence, actual or incipient: as spaces of ‘coming anarchy’, as overpopulated ‘barracks’ or as materialisations of the uninhabitable ‘necropolis’ (see e.g., Bakonyi et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2007; Ndjio, 2006).

As a counterpoint to both unidimensional portrayals of violence, and to Western interventionism, Patricia Daley (2014) has called to ‘unearth alternative geographies of peace’ in Africa. She urges scholars to attend to the violent power asymmetries that are reproduced through interventionist peace programmes, but also to ground the search for more just forms of peace in existing activism on the continent. Answering Daley’s call to recover African agency, scholars have examined African conceptualisations of peace emerging through political leadership and/or institutional innovation (e.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016; Rutazibwa, 2014), highlighting their decolonial potential. Others have documented practices of conflict mediation or resolution grounded in ritual forms and traditional modes of authority (e.g., Marongwe et al., 2019; Kabongo-Mbaya, 2020). In urban studies, work on urban political settlements and social ecologies of de-escalation (e.g., Allouche & Zadi Zadi, 2013; Beall & Goodfellow, 2014; Branch, 2013; Büscher, 2020; Rokem & Boano, 2018) has begun to document the vital role African cities can play in absorbing, dissipating and even transforming the pressures of war and other forms of violence.

The notion of everyday peace extends this scholarship by considering subaltern agency beyond or ‘below’ the variegated forms of urban authority that govern peace in the African metropolis—be it traditional, institutional or informal authority. Analytically, this is consequential for at least two reasons. First, it provides a fuller, more fine-grained account of the *politics* of peace in cities like Abidjan. It reveals how elite discourses and programmes rub against subaltern, street-level accounts of peace, unearthing subtle but deeply consequential disjunctures. As I show below, everyday peace on Abidjan’s local airwaves was in tension with governmental and foreign visions of peace *as well as* with those visions embodied by so-called traditional authorities. In these tensions, what emerges is a micro-politics of everyday peace, as well as a subaltern counter-performance of peace.

Second, a focus on everyday peace ties peace-making to urban dwellers’ multifaceted agency in African metropolises like Abidjan. As scholars in geography and African studies have shown (e.g., McFarlane & Silver, 2017; Myers, 2011; Simone, 2004a), residents across urban Africa play a leading role in assembling livelihoods, mobilities, basic services and baseline togetherness in the face of institutional abandonment. The infrastructural role of everyday urban practice—well encapsulated in Simone’s (2004b) concept of ‘people as infrastructure’—is now established, but its contribution to dynamics of urban peace remains under-theorised. Scholarship on street-level *security* initiatives in Africa, such as neighbourhood watch schemes and night patrols, highlights these initiatives’ ambivalence, pointing to their frequent entanglement with dynamics of ethnicised exclusion, paranoid territorialisation and extra-judicial violence (e.g., Bénit-Gbaffou et al., 2012). However, everyday peace encompasses a much broader range of practices than micro-local securitisation. Everyday peace, I further suggest, should be analysed not as a distinct domain of urban activity, but discerned more diffusely in the crafting of ‘collective life’ (Bhan et al., 2020). That is, everyday peace emerges not through practices that are specifically and self-consciously geared toward peace or security, as in interventionist approaches, but in the general process of making and sustaining the everyday itself, as a necessary background for city life. This process includes practices of ‘hustle’ for economic survival (Thieme, 2017), but also of creativity and conviviality in their most mundane yet deeply sensuous and imaginative dimensions.

By re-emphasising the peaceful potential of everyday city life in Abidjan, I do not wish to romanticise the everyday as a non-conflictual realm, nor to abstract it from structures of domination and violence. In their responses to Williams’ writing on everyday peace, Ipsita Chatterjee (2019) and Jazeel (2019) question the limits of the concept. Chatterjee suggests that to speak of everyday peace is to overplay the possibilities of ordinary agency in a context of structural, state-led violence. Worse, she suggests that by focusing on everyday peace, we (as critical scholars) risk becoming complicit in *normalising* a violent state of affairs. Jazeel, in his commentary, wonders whether to speak of everyday peace risks diluting the normative charge of peace, as an ideal that might be opposed to the structural violence of injustice. How, in other words, can we legitimately write about everyday peace in a context like Abidjan where authoritarianism, state predation, neocolonial extractivism and socio-economic devaluation continue to press upon and to brutalise subaltern lives? Chatterjee and Jazeel’s important critiques help to underscore the cautious and dialectical use of everyday peace

in Williams' work (2013, 2015, 2019)—and in my own extension here. They help to clarify that everyday peace is not the absence of structural violence, but a response to it. As such, everyday peace and pervasive violence are co-constitutive, and it is impossible to understand one without the other. It is also ill-advised to reduce one to the other. Just as violence, in its explosive or entrenched forms, does not erase everyday life-, self- and city-making agencies, so peace, as a contested socio-spatial process, articulates itself within and against violence. It is possible in this understanding to retain the normative power of peace *both* as a horizon for structural change, and as a value—again, openly or implicitly resistant, fleeting or habitual—that emerges in the embodied, iterative, imperfect and fragmented realm of everyday practice.

3 | ETHNOGRAPHY, RADIO GEOPOLITICS, AND LISTENING FOR PEACE

My encounter with UFARA took place in the context of my PhD fieldwork, which examined local radio as an urban infrastructure in Abidjan. Between November 2014 and April 2015, I spent four months embedded in four stations across the city, including RAC in Abobo. It is through RAC that I was introduced to UFARA, with whom I spent another four months, attending official meetings and hanging out, individually or in small groups. I was keen to include listeners as part of my ethnography of radio because audience perspectives remain marginalised in research on media in Africa (Willems & Mano, 2019), and in popular geopolitics (Dittmer & Gray, 2010).

Because UFARA members and I met through radio, it is necessary to briefly outline local broadcasting's specific geopolitics in Abidjan (Pinkerton & Dodds, 2013). I provide a fuller account elsewhere (Cante, 2024). Suffice to say here that stations like RAC occupied paradoxical ground. Local radio in Cote d'Ivoire was authorised in 1995 as a concession to democratisation movements. As a result, stations like RAC are non-commercial and community oriented; in 2014–16, they continued to offer opportunities for popular participation that were unparalleled. However, local radio is also heavily policed, subject to vague regulation prohibiting 'political content' and to close municipal surveillance. Being cash-strapped, most stations—RAC included—depend on funding from international agencies and NGOs, which set their own agendas and scripts. These complex power configurations make the local airwaves rife with (self-)censorship, even as they allow interstices of autonomy and critique. At the time of my fieldwork, RAC was managed by a self-professed 'civil society activist' who used 'development' campaigns to push back against municipal pressures. This gave RAC's programming—a typical combination of popular music, religion, 'development', news, talk and call-in shows—a subtly oppositional ethos. Yet the station did not substantially depart, in style or content, from others I worked with. Crucially, while UFARA members valued the fact that RAC was not officially politically aligned (see final section), none were under the illusion that they could speak freely on air. As will be clear, what they valued in radio was the opportunity for social connection, not self-expression. In fact, most phone-in shows, on RAC and elsewhere, limited caller input to a minimum (greetings, answers to a question, translation ...). This did not deter callers precisely because radio was a pretext for encounters; some UFARA members even called on shows dedicated to African languages they did not speak, just to say hello.¹

Being introduced to UFARA by RAC hosts helped to get accepted into the group. I want to dwell, however, on how race and gender influenced interactions, and on the research decisions I made to mitigate this influence. First, as a White researcher, most participants immediately assumed I was an aid worker.² This sometimes loaded my presence with vague promise, but mostly with expectations of a very particular, instrumental kind of scrutiny. The fact that I am French only heightened anticipations of surveillance and extractive interest. I was assumed, at best, to be collecting testimonies of victimisation and evaluating the 'success' of peacebuilding efforts; at worst, I was a spy, allied with the post-war Ouattara regime. To address these geopolitical anxieties, I emphasised that my research was not about peace or conflict, but about the everyday life of radio. I deliberately avoided asking questions about conflict years during interviews. This was to avoid triggering trauma, and to avoid making participants feel like they were being investigated for what they had (not) done in a time of war. More generally, I wanted to avoid making participants feel like their lives were only interesting because they had survived catastrophe. Conviviality was key. As Katherine McKittrick (2020); also Hirsch & Jones (2021) has recently reminded us, attending to everyday stories, to beauty, laughter, imagination, and the sonorous minutiae of aliveness, is one way to avoid reproducing as researchers the violence of victimisation. Making the resonances of music and the pleasures of chatter central to the research encounter helped establish relations that were rooted in something shared, indeed the same pleasure of mutual discovery that animated UFARA as a collective.

Rose,³ who will appear as a protagonist below, played a significant role in helping me build trust and friendships across the group, but especially with the women of UFARA. A single mother in her early 40s, Rose was one of the main architects of the listeners' club. She appeared to know all members personally, and—without me asking her—took it

upon herself to introduce me. We spent days together walking across Abobo to meet other listeners; her small hair salon, from which she also sold produce and SIM cards, became a base from which I carried out interviews and focus groups. She reassured married women that they could be seen having conversations with me. She also made a point of asking about ‘my wife back home’ in public gatherings to deter potential advances. Rose consistently refused to be paid as a research assistant, though through her continued presence she became a participant in most of my conversations with UFARA members, and someone with whom I found myself reflecting on the content on these discussions. This explains why she is one of the most often-quoted UFARA members in the following sections.

As mentioned in the introduction, few UFARA members referred to their own practices as peace. When peace did come up in conversations—it was a ubiquitous word, including on RAC—participants struggled to talk about it in ways that did not reiterate government and international agency sponsored content, about which they had little to add. Most discussed peace as something that ought to be inculcated through external intervention, rather than immanent to existing life and habits. The conception of everyday peace that I propose below is thus my own interpretation of UFARA members’ collective performance, rather than a coherently articulated counter-discourse. I propose this interpretation so not to speak for UFARA, or to designate them as a ‘good practice’ example, but in solidarity with people trying to remake their lives in a context where dominant meanings of peace contributed to the perpetuation of certain kinds of violence. I also do so with a belief in ethnography as a way to amplify meanings hidden in the currents of the everyday. It is one of the powers of ethnography to be able to listen for unspoken processes, to pick out the unarticulated hum of reconstructed liveliness, and to compose new juxtapositions, where the seemingly insignificant detail forces us to re-narrate (or forego) the ‘whole story’.

4 | MAKING EVERYDAY PEACE: ENCOUNTERS, INDETERMINACY, FUGITIVITY

The UFARA listeners’ club was born out of radio encounters in Abobo. Strangers met first on the RAC airwaves, as regular callers, and later off-air. The rest of the article is composed of four sections that consider the significance of radio encounters as everyday peace. I begin by discussing the fact that these encounters were *practices*, in that they were actively sought out and staged. I situate the staging of encounters through RAC as part of a broader process of *popular research*, in which Abidjanais residents worked to extend their spatial reach and grow their social networks. Local radio was only one of the venues through which they did so, but it was prized for its sociability, anonymity and connective affordances.

I then delve into the peaceful dimension of popular research. By describing the dynamics of the UFARA listeners’ club, I argue that radio encounters were about the remaking of collective life and mutuality, and about the resignification of indeterminacy. Both processes pushed back against structural and conjunctural forms of violence, encapsulated in the permanent threat of ‘crisis’. The remaking of collective life sought to undo the effects of crisis as economic precarisation, while the resignification of indeterminacy worked against historic processes of territorial control and socio-spatial segmentation. I conclude by highlighting the *fugitivity* of everyday peace in Abidjan. That is, everyday peace was less an overt form of resistance against political-economic violence than it was an attempt to refuse and evade the political-economic conditions that produced and reproduced violence.

4.1 | Radio encounters as popular research

The formation of the UFARA listeners’ club was the outcome of a deliberate desire to meet strangers. All club members I met had started phoning on RAC, and later attended their first UFARA event, because they ‘understood that through radio, you can meet lots of people’, in the words of Roger, one of the group’s elders. More than accidents of city life, radio encounters were active interventions in the city as relational field.

At the heart of these interventions lay a process of popular research, an expression I borrow from one of Simone’s (2012) many generative essays. For Simone, popular research stands for a process of urban exploration and experimentation. It designates the myriad practices of ‘probing and working out’ through which urban dwellers gain new knowledge and navigate generalised uncertainty (The Rearrangements Collective, 2023; Thieme, 2017). In Simone’s words, popular research evokes residents’ willingness to “‘step into” situations where they don’t necessarily belong and have no apparent eligibility to participate’ (Simone, 2012, p. 210), as well as their ability to ‘try on different ways of being in the city “on for size” without making definitive commitments to them’ (Simone, 2012, p. 209). While popular research is inev-

itably about making livelihoods, it nonetheless involves a broader, embodied disposition toward improvisation, playful self-authorship, attentive witnessing—and the multiplication of encounters.

The connection between radio encounters in Abobo and Simone's notion of popular research is not fortuitous. In Abidjanais slang, 'to search' (*chercher*) means to seek ways out of one's predicament, especially in moments when discernible options for survival have run out. And local radio is one amongst many venues and technologies available in Abidjan for such research. Linda, a single mother living in one of Abobo's poorest neighbourhoods, made radio's search functions explicit when she explained why she started phoning on RAC:

You have to search [*il faut chercher*]! [...] You always have to search... how to live! How to make a living! You can't stay in the house and it will come find you. So you need to go out and move. Find out what to do... How to collaborate with people so you can do projects together. So, thanks to RAC, I move a lot.

Linda's story reveals how radio encounters fit within a broader process of popular research. Forced to relocate to Abobo with her children, following a divorce, she made a living through odd jobs and petty trades. She found RAC by browsing the airwaves, looking initially for a traditional healer who might shift her luck. Instead, she found RAC's lively interactive morning show, to which she returned in the following weeks, eventually joining one of UFARA's monthly meetings. Going to meetings was difficult for Linda because she did not often have money to spend on non-essential transport. She made friends with communal taxi drivers who stopped for coffee in her neighbourhood and frequently depended on their generosity for free lifts. As such, encounters through RAC and UFARA were part of a more diffuse effort by Linda to broaden her horizons of opportunity, which required the multiplication of new social relations.

Linda's emphasis on movement is also significant. It points to the 'extensive' (Simone, 2019) dynamic of popular research, and to radio's affordances as a spatially connective technology. As Simone reminds us, residents in precarised urban worlds are often compelled to extend their spatial reach, to strike connections and venture new, risky transactions beyond the familiar sphere of residence. There are many reasons for this. In Abidjan as elsewhere, neighbourhood sociality often combines intimacy and mutual surveillance, particularly for women. Local economies of opportunity are often structured through patriarchal, gerontocratic and ethnic-majoritarian power asymmetries. And at a time of 'post-conflict' reconstruction, there was a sense that things were happening elsewhere, that the action was just beyond the corner.

As previously suggested, popular research in Abidjan was not limited to the local airwaves. Almost all UFARA members were involved in churches, mosques, home-village associations, women's organisations, and so on—through which they staged encounters beyond the neighbourhood and hedged their bets (Newhouse, 2017) on what opportunities might be worth pursuing. Yet UFARA members prized local radio for its relative anonymity (contrasting with the familiarity of neighbourhood life), and for the spatial reach across which it enabled encounters. Many UFARA members were known only by the pseudonym through which they had initially introduced themselves during on air interactions. It was impossible to know, initially at least, how old they were, whether they were married or un/employed, and what their ethno-national background was. Furthermore, a distinct pleasure of radio encounters was the subsequent ability to visit other listeners' place of residence. As Rose put it: 'Some listeners are in Yopougon [adjacent municipal district], too! And I've even been to Azagué [rural suburb, 30 minutes north of Abobo by bus] to meet some listeners there'. Through radio encounters, UFARA members could give popular research an increased spatial reach, all the while remaining within manageable range of their restricted mobility.

4.2 | Remaking collective life and mutuality

The formation of UFARA out of radio encounters points to popular research's collective and collaborative dimension—what I call its effort to remake collective life (drawing on Bhan et al., 2020). In UFARA, collective life was often expressed, as an ideal and an aspiration, under the rubric of family. Rose's perspective was typical: 'And now, when more people call in, you start to form a family!' As anthropologists have noted, the trope of family or kinship can be mobilised to assert relations of mutuality and reciprocity (e.g., McGovern, 2012). Indeed, by the time I met UFARA, the group was experimenting with various forms of mutual aid. Members who could pooled together money to support each other with various life events. Amongst women (Rose and Linda included), the idea of a more formalised *tontine* (mutual fund, which contributors access on a rotating basis) was making headway in 2016. Skills exchange was also gaining prominence. In Rose's words:

In the group, we've decided to trade services. Outside of radio, I'm a hairdresser; if a listener has a daughter who wants to learn hair-styling, I can take her in ... If people are mourning, we support them. If they lost money, we can top them up. It's through radio that we met but beyond radio, life goes on.

Through UFARA, in sum, encounters opened possibilities of 'making kin' (Clarke & Haraway, 2018), understood as the creation of reciprocities of all kinds. This kin-making can be read as peaceful in at least two ways.

First, appeals to family were a direct response to the violence of precarity. Accounts of violence in Côte d'Ivoire usually begin with armed conflict and the military coup of 1999. Yet it is important to situate conflict in a broader, global economy of violence. This helps understand the 'crises' of military escalation in 1999, 2002, 2004 and 2011 as intimately connected to previous 'crises' of economic collapse and mass immiseration from the late 1970s onward—themselves tied to (neo)colonial racial capitalism (see Matlon, 2016). It is impossible to account for the 'militianisation' of Ivoirian politics in the late 1990s without considering the increasing poverty wrought by the collapse of Côte d'Ivoire's cash-crop economy, and by the gutting of state capacities under 'structural adjustment' programmes. Abobo became a hotspot of violence during conflict years in part because it had urbanised, since the 1970s, to absorb impoverished households in *quartiers précaires* disconnected from lifeline infrastructures (Konaté, 2017). Furthermore, precarity in Abobo did not cease when armed conflict ended in 2011. At the time of writing (2022), the post-war regime of Alassane Ouattara continues to pursue anti-poor urban redevelopment policies that Richard Banégas (2017) has referred to as 'the class violence of *émurgence*' (*émurgence* being Ouattara's campaign slogan). In Abobo, these policies have included the large-scale demolition of *quartier précaires*, making life for the marginalised ever more tenuous in the city.

Crucially, for Abobo residents, the effects of military and economic 'crises' were often difficult to distinguish. When Abobo was nicknamed 'the warzone' (*Abobo-la-guerre*; Konaté, 2017) in the 1980s, it was to evoke the devastating effects of economic violence on social reproduction capacities in the district. And when UFARA members referred to instances of military escalation, they invariably emphasised conflict's impact on livelihoods—projects aborted, small accumulations vanished, futures on hold or re-routed. Rose, for example, lost a truckload of coal in 2011 when it was seized at a roadblock, plunging her into debt and forcing her to branch out toward yet another informal activity. Pierre lost two apprenticeships when the carpentry workshops where he worked were demolished by police in 2002 and 2004, on the grounds that they hired too many 'foreigners'; for him, this meant several years of unwaged training wasted, as he had to start from scratch in the third workshop he found (he again lost his trade in 2011, when he was forced to flee Abobo).

In this light, making family through popular research, at the time of my fieldwork, amounted to building forms of collective *security* through mutual aid. It was not just a way to make up for lost livelihoods but to create a potential safety net to weather future 'crises'—be they economic or military. While Rose did not evoke the possibility of future war, she put the threat of crisis in personal terms:

Today—you never know. I hope it won't, but what if my head starts to ache? At one point my mother was ill and I lost my father and his little brother. [Another UFARA member] called me, he was so sad. So many people called me—I tell you, I was so relieved ... Imagine, if I didn't know all these people, who would have comforted me?

Through Rose's allusions to death and illness, it is possible to discern the precarity that characterised life for most members of UFARA, for whom access to healthcare was a financially daunting prospect, and a headache a potential disaster. We can also note the affective dimension of family as mutual aid, beyond the material reciprocities outlined above.

The remaking of collective life through radio encounters had a second peaceful dimension, in addition to countering the effects of violence-as-precariation. It was significant, in the aftermath of war, that UFARA was a thoroughly multi-ethnic group. While I did not set out to map members' ethnicity, available clues—members who openly brought up their lineage in conversations or on African language programmes; members' 'traditional' attire—were enough to confirm the active presence of ethnic 'northerners', 'southerners' and 'westerners', as well as people from Côte d'Ivoire's 'central' regions. These broad coordinates, which I put in quotes because they are imprecise amalgams more than markers of self-identification, designated lines of antagonism constructed through conflict (Dembélé, 2003). Likewise, the group had a visible presence of both Muslims and Christians, of Ivoirian-born nationals and migrants from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea.

It is thus possible to say that popular research, at least in the case of UFARA, produced conditions for the ordinary, convivial experience of ethnic difference within and despite recent memories of ethnically targeted violence. Indeed, we can note that if UFARA mobilised tropes of family, it did so outside of conventional discourses tying kinship to ethnicity,

in Côte d'Ivoire as elsewhere. I do not insist on this point further, however, largely because it was not an aspect that many UFARA members themselves emphasised. This is not to say that ethnicity was a taboo: it was a regular feature in jokes, banter and mutual discovery. Simply, if UFARA members were invested in remaking collective life, (multi-)ethnicity was not a prominent concern. In part, this can be linked to the specific context of Abidjan, a historically creolised metropolis. Many members of UFARA, especially younger, had a distant relation to their own ethno-regional lineage. For example, Ibou ('northerner') and Clarisse (from 'central' regions), both in their early 20s, were born in Abidjan, had never been to their 'home village', and did not speak the language associated with their ethnic group. Many other members, Rose and Linda included, had multi-ethnic heritage. More fundamentally, however, I suggest that the lack of emphasis on (multi-)ethnicity with UFARA was linked to the group's overall commitment to indeterminacy, as I turn to in the next sections.

4.3 | Re-signifying indeterminacy

What I refer to as indeterminacy designates, first, the unknown dimension of encounters: their potentialities, what they might reveal or yield in terms of relational becoming. Encounters might allow anything to happen, including—perhaps especially—the unexpected. Of course, all encounters carry some degree of indeterminacy (e.g., Darling & Wilson, 2016). Yet for UFARA members, this indeterminacy was the driving motivation to meet strangers in and through the airwaves. It was, in other words, at the heart of popular research as a practice. By staging encounters, UFARA members were actively re-inscribing indeterminacy in their everyday lives.

To be more precise, radio encounters re-signified indeterminacy, so that the latter became a *positive* facet of urban life. One way to grasp this process of resignification is through reference to the expression 'you never know' (*on sait jamais*), a ubiquitous maxim in Abidjan. In Rose's quote in the previous section, 'you never know' referred to the possibility of illness. More generally, the expression can refer to the negative dimensions usually associated with uncertainty across urban Africa. Yet 'you never know' also has a positive, generative dimension in Abidjan. Later in the same conversation, Rose thus enthused over the possibilities opened by radio encounters in the following terms:

It's all relations. And we can have more! ... People don't realise just what radio can open. You never know!
 Did I know I was going to be drinking with you today?

In this positive sense, 'you never know' came to stand for the exciting indeterminacy of encounters. At its simplest, then, popular research was about re-signifying uncertainty into positive indeterminacy: where the former was charged with threat, the latter was charged with emotions such as optimism or hope. This re-signification was not just a matter of language, nor did it simply 'happen'. It entailed considerable affective labour and investment from UFARA members, not least in the aimless sociability of group meetings. It required an emphatically cultivated disposition toward improvised social interactions, so that these interactions might allow the slow disclosure of encounters' potentialities.

Indeterminacy as a driving motivation for encounters shaped UFARA's group dynamics in significant ways. For one, the group was focused as much on the consolidation of bonds (to make family) as on the relentless accumulation of new encounters. There was always room for more members joining, as exemplified by Rose's emphasis that 'we can have more [relations]'. Indeed, Rose was amongst those UFARA members most active in expanding the group: she ceaselessly advertised RAC and UFARA during her daily errands. Furthermore, it is possible to read Rose's assertion that 'we can have more' as an aspiration for existing relations to *become more than they already were*. This concern with preserving the indeterminacy of relational becoming worked in subtle but decisive ways to undermine all efforts to formalise UFARA as a group: to give it official recognition, and to codify its rules for membership and reciprocity. In four UFARA meetings I attended between April and September 2015, suggestions were made that membership be formally acknowledged through paying monthly dues; and that a list of members, along with an elected leadership body, be communicated to the Abobo municipality, so that the group might gain status as a recognised *association*. While these suggestions were never openly contested, they were politely ignored; there was a diffuse but marked resistance to defining roles and relations, to bounding the group and scripting its interactions for a unified purpose. I return to this point in the next section.

Beyond the micro-level dynamics of UFARA, the peaceful significance of indeterminacy lay in the way it re-opened the city as a relational field. Anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2011), drawing on fieldwork in Belfast and Bissau, discusses how his interlocutors had developed orientations toward their 'post-conflict' surroundings that were particularly attuned to what he calls 'negative potentialities'—the presence of invisible threats. In Vigh's analysis, history and conjuncture pressed upon people's affective dispositions such that these 'centered on omens of imminent violence' (ibid.: 97). In

contrast, UFARA members' practice of popular research worked to dispel recent memories of violence to make room for hopeful anticipations of mutual benefit. By actively staging encounters in the wake of war, UFARA members were involved in reconfiguring the city so that it might once more serve as a safe and inviting meeting ground, and as a space of becoming-together. As Ibou put it during a conversation about Abobo's post-war recovery: 'Now you don't hide'.

4.4 | Fugitive peace

So far, I have discussed indeterminacy as both a driver and an outcome of popular research. I have argued that re-signifying indeterminacy, transforming uncertainty from a realm of threat into a set of unforeseen but positive potentialities, can be understood as part of popular research's peace-making work. I now want to address the political significance of indeterminacy as a logic of everyday peace.

As Williams (2015) makes clear, everyday peace is inevitably political, because it takes place in contexts shot through with power asymmetries, enduring violence, and competing discourses of peace. However, UFARA members positioned themselves and their activities as resolutely anti-political. They expressed staunch defiance against formal political participation, in all its guises. At a peace-building event organised by RAC, Rose ridiculed a women's group in the audience for wearing t-shirts supporting Alassane Ouattara's 2015 presidential bid. 'They have understood nothing', she scoffed; if the women were serious about peace, they would not publicly express political allegiance. Hamid, a gardener in his forties, expressed views entirely typical amongst UFARA when he remarked: 'On [RAC phone-in shows], we can talk about anything, except politics. That's a good thing! Because, as you know, politics has caused too many problems'.

If UFARA enacted a politics through its practices of everyday peace, then, this was a fugitive politics: one that eschewed existing terms of political engagement. I borrow the concept of fugitivity from Black studies (e.g., Hesse, 2014; Shulman, 2021; Sojoyner, 2017; Touam Bona, 2018), where it designates efforts toward liberation within structural conditions of oppression that deny freedom. By holding together the necessity of emancipation and its continuing impossibility, fugitivity points to practices of evasion and refusal as generative and creative in their own right (Sojoyner, 2017). In addition, as George Shulman argues (2021), the notion of fugitivity folds subaltern anti-politics *into* the political, as a radical demand for politics otherwise. While fugitivity in this political sense originates in North American struggles for emancipation, thinkers like Dénetem Touam Bona (2018) and indeed Simone (see 2009, 2016) have worked to expand its geographical scope, encompassing a wider Black world across the Atlantic and beyond.

In the context of UFARA, fugitivity involved, most prominently, the refusal to formalise the group as a recognised association, as mentioned above. I have argued that the refusal of formalisation was, in part, to preserve the indeterminacy of social relations. It was also, however, a way to avoid political capture. Again, this was not explicitly voiced during large group meetings, but discussed in smaller, more private circles. A conversation between Rose and a young apprentice tailor named Jérôme, for example, veered into a denunciation of the Abobo mayor,⁴ accused of treating voters like 'cattle' and 'appearing around election time to distribute money to women's groups'. From there, Jérôme expressed his concern that, if it were formally recognised, UFARA itself might be co-opted. 'Imagine, the mayor starts to offer transport money to go to meetings. Who will say no?' By January 2016, the prospect of co-optation was becoming more palpable: the Abobo municipality launched its own local radio station, which all UFARA members interpreted as an attempt to run RAC out of business. Indeed, the municipality had poached two of RAC's most popular *animateurs*. Hamid, speaking to Rose and I in front of his home, predicted: '[The municipality] will come and tell UFARA: now, you have to choose'.

The refusal to formalise UFARA was, however indirectly, a refusal to 'have to choose'. It stemmed from a reading of politics as a form of capture: not only as a zero-sum game of allegiance, but also as coercive violence. This reading of politics has a long history in Côte d'Ivoire, one that pre-dates conflict years. Indeed, as analysts have shown (e.g., Akindès, 2004; Vidal, 2003), the Ivorian conflict only entrenched and militarised an already martial relationship between political elites and subaltern urban spaces. From a subaltern perspective, conflict only multiplied the sources of political violence, or violent claims to sovereignty. In Abidjan, conflict intensified *existing* practices of territorial control for political gain, turning districts like Abobo into 'bastions' to claim and consolidate, and barracks from which to recruit militants and paramilitary muscle. Roadblocks, administrative harassment, the patronage of neighbourhood 'chiefs', street propaganda and surveillance, targeted raiding and murder, further enhanced an apparatus through which warring factions could assert their 'hybridised' sovereignty (Banégas, 2010; Fregonese, 2012b).

In turn, such territorialisation worked to sort, classify and fix identities in ways that were often arbitrary and reductive. Space became one amongst several dubious proxies to determine 'who is who' (Marshall-Fratani, 2006), to sort political friend from enemy. Again, this was a process pre-dating the start of armed conflict. In the 1990s, both the single-party

state and the opposition (including Alassane Ouattara's RDR at the time) were complicit in establishing equivalences between ethno-regional lineage and political allegiance; both were involved, in asymmetrical ways, in constructing Abobo as an 'ethnic northern' territory, ascribing it a putative ethnic majority and an electoral affiliation with the RDR (Konaté, 2017). That such categorisations bore little relation to Abidjan's mixed and super-diverse lived spaces only made them more violent once political contest became militarised. Thus, after the failed coup of 2002 in the north of Côte d'Ivoire, the government of Laurent Gbagbo (2000–11) targeted Abobo as a 'rebel' territory, whose 'northern' ethnic makeup and electoral majority could only signify sympathies for insurgent groups.

In sum, for ordinary residents of Abobo, conflict confirmed formal politics as a set 'bad choices', and only made them more deadly. It is against this backdrop that we can understand fugitivity as an (anti-)political stance—as the refusal of a stance that would always-already be placed on an antagonistic political grid, that would always-already be conscripted into violent politics. Post-2011, all UFARA members who expressed views on the topic agreed that politics had not fundamentally changed with the end of war. This perspective was no doubt informed by the Ouattara regime's dismantling of political opposition, by its incorporation of militias into its revamped police force, and by its publicly expressed nostalgia for the authoritarian rule of Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960–93). Within UFARA, fugitivity thus appeared not as a form of resistance, but as the refusal to put forward a defined identity, a refusal to be formalised, recognised and categorised. I suggest this largely unspoken desire for evasion also lay behind the group's lack of consideration for (multi-)ethnicity as something to be highlighted and celebrated. Claiming public existence as a multi-ethnic collective would not only expose the group to political capture, but also perpetuate fixations of/over identity that were reminiscent of established politics.

Whatever the case, UFARA's practice of fugitivity put it at odds with the requirements of institutional peace-building—including shows run by RAC. Between April and September 2015, the station was contracted by USAID to run a series of bi-weekly public events across Abobo, promoting the need for peace ahead of new presidential elections. Like other forms of institutional peacebuilding (Cante, 2020), these shows served to legitimise the post-war reconsolidation of political domination, and to enforce government visions of peace. To do so, the shows relied on a network of neighbourhood leaders (traditional chiefs, youth sections, women's associations, religious representatives) with more or less explicit ties to national and municipal administrations. Initially, RAC had hoped that UFARA members would act as 'civil society contact points' (*relais société civile*) in their respective neighbourhoods and might help with publicity. Overall, however, members avoided getting involved. In the one show where they were present as a group (Rose, ever enthusiastic about recruiting new listeners, had agreed to help organise the peacebuilding event in her neighbourhood), UFARA members made conspicuously light of the occasion. They shouted the wrong slogans, talked over solemn speeches and round-table discussions, and invaded the concert space during live musical numbers, despite repeated requests not to do so. Instead of acting as the exemplary civil society representatives that RAC had hoped would give the show legitimacy, UFARA members refused to let peace get in the way of a good party.

It is of course difficult to interpret UFARA's behaviour in a single event as a statement on institutional peacebuilding. What was striking, ultimately, was their absence of statement. The practice of everyday peace within the group did not articulate itself to dominant meanings of peace. It did not voice opposition or promote an alternative. Its contribution to the politics of peace, in post-2011 Abidjan, was fugitive, eschewing clear commitments, stances and responsibilities. What was left was an indeterminate future, at once fragile and pregnant with possibility: you never know.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that the practices of encounter that formed the UFARA local radio listeners' club, between 2014 and 2016, exemplify everyday peace-making in Abidjan. I make this argument, first, to highlight the significance of radio encounters—and the broader process of popular research they are part of—as collective life-making practices in the face of enduring, multi-dimensional violence. Through mundane acts of sociable connection, spatial extension, dis-identification and mutual implication, UFARA members remade their livelihoods and the city into indeterminate grounds for togetherness, in a way that pushed back against decades of militarised politics and economic precarisation. While UFARA members did not themselves label this process as 'peace', I suggest that their ways of being in the city constituted an actually existing alternative to the repressive visions of peace that had come to dominate in Côte d'Ivoire at the time of my fieldwork. That is, I analyse radio encounters as everyday peace explicitly to challenge the erasure of street-level agency in state-sanctioned and donor-backed peace programmes at the time, and to show that other, more emancipatory performances of togetherness were taking place, albeit radically outside official discourses of peace.

While grounded in Abidjan's specific lifeworlds, my analysis of radio encounters as everyday peace contributes to broader efforts to decolonise peace research and practice on the African continent. I suggest that closer engagement between peace geographies and ethnographies of ordinary city-making in Africa offers one possibility to re-think peace 'from below'. This approach can offer novel understandings of peace that are rooted in subaltern city life rather than in interventionist, Western-liberal doctrines, or even in African elite worldviews and the gatekept rituals of 'tradition'. Such new understandings of (everyday) peace require an end to the exceptionalising treatment of African cities as spaces of violence. The search for everyday peace must begin from the acknowledgement that violence alone does not define life in the *quartiers populaires* of Abidjan, Kinshasa or Mogadishu, and that collective futures are constantly being enacted in ways that are not necessarily recognisable by dominant epistemologies of peace.

Indeed, acknowledging the *fugitivity* of everyday peace—as practiced by UFARA members—pushes us as critical scholars to listen for forms of peace premised on radical refusal: the refusal of prevalent political conditions, but also the refusal of legible political opposition and institutional capture (including as a 'good practice' example that might be institutionally replicable across contexts). In its combination of ordinariness and fugitivity, everyday peace in Abidjan remains fleeting but calls forth the possibility—even necessity—that things might be otherwise.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of ethnographic inquiry, data for this article cannot be shared.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ There are more than sixty languages spoken in Côte d'Ivoire, several of them variations on languages spoken elsewhere in West Africa. Post-independence, the Ivorian government adopted French, the language of the coloniser, as the sole official language. The bulk of local broadcasting in Abidjan thus remains in French. However, stations also dedicate a few hours a week to different 'ethnic' languages (as they are colloquially called) spoken in the city, usually depending on the availability of volunteer staff. On RAC, African languages—especially Baoulé and Malinké—were at once prized (they generated lively publics) and marginal (they were mostly dealt with didactically, rather than serving as media for open conversations, and occupied a tiny fraction of overall programming).
- ² I capitalise White and Black to underscore their constructedness and relational nature as unevenly positioned racial identities.
- ³ All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
- ⁴ Adama Toungara, at the time, elected for the RDR in 2000 and re-elected shortly after the end of the conflict.

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