

Attuning to opacity: Interpreting “post-crisis” refusals on Abidjan’s local airwaves

ABSTRACT

This article examines how local radio producers in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, made sense of audiences’ refusals to speak on the airwaves in the aftermath of armed conflict (1999-2011). Since the 1990s, local or “proximity” broadcasting has materialized contests over popular expression in Côte d’Ivoire. After 2011, local stations also crystallized expectations and anxieties over the role of popular voice in peace-building. Drawing on scholarship linking public silences, power and insecurity, and on Édouard Glissant’s notion of opacity, I emphasize the relationality of audience refusals, as well as producers’ interpretative agency in response. I show that producers deliberately made room for the opacity of refusals by acknowledging the atmospheric pressures of political violence, without making its effects in the social world transparent or determining. I argue that such a practice of attunement – neither witnessing nor denial – preserved opacity as a ground for possible mutuality.

KEYWORDS

Radio; Abidjan; voice; refusal; post-conflict; opacity; atmospheres

Introduction

On a hot morning in February 2015, I accompanied Sébastien¹, a journalist in training at Radio Fraternité, for a routine reportage in Yopougon – Abidjan’s largest municipal district. Sébastien was to gather resident perspectives on recently completed road works at one of Yopougon’s busiest and most potholed intersections. Infrastructure extension or repair, as tangible manifestations of “development,” were habitual topics for Radio Fraternité, as they were for Abidjan’s 20 other local or “proximity” stations (*radios de proximité*) registered at the time. *Vox pop* reportages were also common practice. Residents’ perspectives acted as audible indices of “proximity” on the airwaves, distinguishing stations like Radio Fraternité from otherwise better-funded and sleeker-sounding state, commercial or religious broadcasters in the city.

Near the intersection, Sébastien and I headed into an unpaved, residential side-street where Sébastien walked up to two men sharing a beer at a *maquis* (open-air bar). They eyed him and especially me with suspicion, before refusing to be interviewed (“we have nothing to say”). Sébastien then accosted two young women across the street. They initially seemed willing to discuss the road works. One woman complained that traffic had been redirected through narrow residential streets which had caused problems with dust and fears of accidents, particularly for children. When Sébastien took out his recorder, however, both women moved away with a gesture of shyness (“who will want to hear my ugly voice?”). Sensing that my presence as a White French researcher would complicate Sébastien’s work, I proposed that we go our separate ways and reconvene in 30 minutes. I went back to the *maquis* in the hope of engaging the two men from earlier. They were gone. The manager, who had witnessed our

¹ All names of individuals and shows have been changed. I have kept a level of detail about producers’ social and professional locations commensurate with their own requests for confidentiality; where I felt it necessary, purely out of precaution, I have added further layers of anonymity.

interactions, invited me to sit and listen to Radio Fraternité on his portable stereo. I asked whether he could give a brief interview for Sébastien's reportage. The bar manager's refusal came, in typical Abidjanais fashion, in the form of a rhetorical question: "Is it going to do any good?" (*Est-ce que ça va donner du bon?*).

When we returned to Radio Fraternité, Sébastien spoke about the experience as though I had witnessed one of the hidden hazards of his work. "Did you hear [residents' refusals]? That's an effect of the crisis." In this instance, crisis – the preferred euphemism in Côte d'Ivoire for intensifications of political violence – referred to the post-electoral war of 2011, which itself had punctuated a decade of intermittent armed conflict (1999-2011). Between January and April 2011, an estimated 700,000 Abidjanais residents – about a sixth of the city's total population – were displaced by fighting between partisans of Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara (see Marshall-Fratani 2006; McGovern 2011).

Like Sébastien, many of the proximity radio producers I met during my fieldwork complained or worried about residents' refusal to speak on the local airwaves. Refusals took many forms, only some of which I discuss in what follows. They ranged from listeners failing to call during an interactive, phone-in show, to passers-by evading interviews, to audiences refusing to engage in interactions during live "public shows" (*émissions publiques*), hosted by stations in Abidjan's low-income neighborhoods (*quartiers populaires*). Notwithstanding their variety, though, producers almost invariably attributed different kinds of refusal to "crisis."

In this article, I explore the meanings of refusal on Abidjan's local airwaves. More precisely, I closely analyze producers' interpretations. How did producers make sense of refusals? How and why did they connect refusals to crisis? Answering these questions provides insight into how radio producers negotiated *relations* with urban publics in a "post-conflict" context (on the relationalities of radio voice elsewhere in Africa, see Englund 2018). Refusals and their interpretation, I argue, point to producer-audience relations structured through mutual

opacity (drawing on Glissant 1997: 189-194; see also Vigh 2015). For listeners, refusals were a way to express a deeply ambiguous disengagement from the local airwaves. For producers, the precise meaning of refusals was consequently difficult to grasp, even as it threatened the very foundation for their work. Appeals to “crisis” as an explanation for audience refusals thus can be heard as producers’ efforts to fill in the blanks, so to speak: attributions of meaning in the face of refusals’ (deliberate) ambiguity and ultimate unknowability. Yet I show that producers also deliberately made room for opacity in their interpretations. They did so by reconstructing “crisis” as an *atmosphere*, a diffuse “structure of feeling” (Williams 1978) in which political positionings and workings of power, as explanatory factors for refusals, were impossible to pinpoint with definitive clarity. This atmospheric reading of crisis – what I call a practice of “attunement,” following Kathleen Stewart (2007; 2011) – was in some ways self-serving, as it allowed producers to avoid confirming their own position within historic contests between state and citizens, and between competing political factions. My point, however, inspired by the ideas of Édouard Glissant (1997), is that attunement to opacity, in producers’ interpretations of refusal, was fundamentally about maintaining the *possibility* of relation with audiences.² By retaining opacity even in their attributions of refusal to crisis, producers preserved relations from being mechanical expressions of power and conflict, even as they acknowledged the latter’s atmospheric presence on and around the local airwaves.

To understand the negotiation of producer-audience relations on Abidjan’s proximity radio scene, it is necessary first to situate them within longstanding contests over the mediatization of popular expression.³ When stations like Radio Fraternité were first authorized in 1995, they represented the possibility that ordinary residents might be heard in the official, mediatized public sphere in ways that had previously been unimaginable. Until 1990, all mass

² I am very grateful to Dr Alana Osbourne pointing me toward Glissant and his theorisation of relational opacity.

³ Like Fisher (2016), I use mediatization here in the sense of technological mass mediation, to distinguish from multiple other ways that voice and expression are mediated.

media were state-controlled in Côte d'Ivoire. Post-independence (1960), radio was mainly conceived as a didactic technology in the service of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and his PDCI party-state (Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire). Proximity broadcasting emerged out of struggles for democratization and media liberalization, which came to a head in the early 1990s (see e.g., N'Da 1999). Stations like Radio Fraternité are non-commercial, area-based, and generalist in their programming. These regulatory and organizational requirements (*cahiers des charges*) were inspired by international community radio advocates (namely UNESCO and AMARC). They were meant to make proximity stations “the voice of the voiceless” (see Bessire & Fisher 2012: 12-15) as the president of the national Union of Proximity Radios (URPCI) liked to remind its 120 members in 2015: to ensure stations were representative of, and accountable to, the diverse constituencies that they served.

From its inception, however, proximity broadcasting became a site for the *policing* of popular voice. By law, stations are forbidden from “producing or broadcasting content of a political nature” (HACA 2014: 6), lest they incur sanctions from the government-appointed media regulation agency (Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle, HACA). This unspecified but draconian restriction served to position the “infopolitical state” (Bernal 2014) as a decisive arbiter of what was “speakable” (Pype 2011a; see also Brisset-Foucault 2019) on the local airwaves. In addition, stations are surveilled by municipal authorities, which deploy a mixture of censorship and patronage in the service of their own interests. Indeed, Radio Fraternité, like about a third of proximity stations in Abidjan, is directly owned by the Yopougon municipality. At the time of my fieldwork (November 2014-January 2016), it fell upon unsalaried producers like Sébastien to interpret and enforce largely implicit state regulations, while navigating the lures and pitfalls of municipal patronage (echoing Pype 2013).

Compounding these longstanding configurations of power, in 2014-16 proximity stations faced heightened expectations over the mediatization of popular voice in the wake of violence. All of the eleven stations I visited in Abidjan received considerable funding from the Ivoirian state and from international aid agencies to orchestrate “local peace-building” in their area of operation (Cante 2020a). This funding came with demands that stations produce and amplify testimonies of conflict, as well as foster peaceful dispositions, in ways I illustrate below. Residents’ voices on the airwaves – in interactive peace-building shows, but also in mundane reportages about road works – were construed not just as indices of stations’ intimacy with their publics, but more broadly as audible signs of reconciliation and recovered conviviality in the city. This double meaning of radio voice as both intimacy and reconciliation is well summarized by the spokesperson for the Ivoirian Commission for Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation (CDVR, 2011-2014), who in 2011 was quoted as saying: “All media have a role to play in the return to stability and peace. Proximity radios even more so, since they are closest to the population” (in *Internews* 2014: 14).

My fieldwork took place at a particularly anxious conjuncture in Abidjan. The aforementioned CDVR disbanded in December 2014 without having produced anything in the way of public truth-telling (Akindès & Zina 2015); its final report, eventually released in late 2016, was significantly censored (Piccolino 2019: 368), lacked any substantial narrative of conflict, and confirmed that initial plans to mediatize testimonies of violence on national television had been scrapped for unnamed reasons (CDVR 2016: 87). This national “silencing of the past” (Trouillot 1995; see Akindès 2017) could easily be read as an outcome of Alassane Ouattara’s efforts to reconsolidate political domination following his military victory in 2011, aided by French military and former “rebel” militias that had governed northern Côte d’Ivoire since 2002. At the time of my fieldwork, hundreds of opposition militants were either in Ivoirian jails, or in exile (Laurent Gbagbo himself was standing trial for crimes against

humanity in The Hague, where he was acquitted in 2020). The Ouattara regime's imprint on the Ivoirian public sphere was further materialized, in Abidjan in the dismantling of pro-Gbagbo speakers' corners (Banégas & Cutolo 2012) and in a broader urban restructuring process that included the razing of dozens of "slum" neighborhoods (*déguerpissements*) between 2013 and the time of writing. This "class violence of *émergence*" (Banégas 2017) – Ouattara's ubiquitous campaign slogan at the time – was enacted in the name of development (mostly road-building) and environmental security (public hygiene, noise reduction and flood prevention), but was largely geared toward foreign investments in the city, and was widely interpreted as political revanchism. As new presidential elections loomed in October 2015, Abidjanais residents were anxious less about reignited partisan competition (Ouattara won with 84% of the first-round vote) than about what lay beneath the public silences left by the CDVR, by Ouattara's appeals to *Houphouëtiste* authoritarian "consensus," and by the technocratic suppression of urban "noise" at street level (Cante 2020b).

In sum, proximity radio's history and the post-2011 context loaded popular voice on the local airwaves with multiple, competing expectations and anxieties; in turn, this charged audience refusals with a surplus of meaning. In different contexts, anthropological scholarship has interpreted the refusal or evasion of public expression in at least three, partially overlapping ways: as a response to diffuse violence and insecurity (e.g., Ferme 2001; McGovern 2013; Dave 2014; Grant 2015; Archambault 2017); as a response to state censorship and repression (Pype 2011a; 2016; Bernal 2014); and as a response to traumatic memories of conflict and inconclusive reconciliation (e.g., Buckley-Zistel 2006; Eastmond & Selimovic 2012; Ferme 2018). I show that each of these interpretations was possible in post-war Abidjan. From producers' perspective, refusals could be heard as expressions of "quiet insecurity" (Grant 2015), which is to say pervasive fears about enduring political violence. Alternatively, they could be heard as expressions of defiance – against the post-2011 regime of Alassane Ouattara,

and against proximity stations themselves, given their close association with state listening. The latter interpretation threatened relations between producers and their publics most directly. More broadly, refusals threatened to undermine the performance of local peace and reconciliation that proximity stations were tasked with, conjuring questions about the “post-conflict situation” that few in Abidjan wanted to contemplate, let alone answer.

As Nomi Dave (2014) and Katrien Pype (2016) point out, silences and refusals are inherently polysemic. While they “say something,” meaning they are a form of expression (see also Obadare 2016), they withhold precise signification. In particular, refusals can be interpreted as both complicity and resistance, as compliance with state restrictions on public speech *and* as delegitimization of the state-mandated public sphere. I conceptualize this polysemy as opacity here to emphasize its relational dimension. My aim in this paper is not to explain audience refusals on Abidjan’s airwaves, or to evaluate different producers’ interpretations for their degree of truthfulness. On the contrary, I want to highlight how producers suspended definitive pronouncements in their atmospheric attunements, and in so doing, both acknowledged audience agency (including in potential defiance) and sustained the possibility of relation. Following Glissant (1997), then, I suggest that opacity was more than an unfortunate byproduct of post-war insecurity or state surveillance: within and beyond these constraints, it was a generative ground for ethical mutuality.

The following analysis, based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork embedded in four proximity stations across Abidjan, mirrors my interlocutors’ practices of attunement. Stewart (2007; 2011) describes attunement as an ethnographic sensibility that is oriented primarily to the emergent, “unforeclosed” quality of affective atmospheres. Attunement is an effort to open oneself entirely to unfolding events, and to discern in often minute sensory details shifts in the presence and substance of one’s socio-political context (Choy & Zee 2015: 211). For me, as for radio producers, albeit in a different way, attunement was a matter of ethics.

Given France's colonial and neocolonial involvement in Côte d'Ivoire, including its military support for Alassane Ouattara in 2011, several participants were understandably wary of my intentions as a researcher. As Ivoirian reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly (2000) warned about spotting the "Toubabou" (White man) in Abidjanais ghettos, "he's not here for nothing" (*il n'est pas là pour rien*). An important aspect of mitigating such wariness was avoiding any appearance of being overly interested in participants' personal experiences and, especially, opinions about crisis and politics. I built trust and gained insight largely by ensuring participants did not feel like they had to testify, to reveal the "underneath of things" (Ferme 2001) or speak about what others left unspoken. Over time, I learned how to become hyper-attentive to unspoken signals and stories – the "metadata" (Fujii 2010) of participants' silences or circumspections – while allowing my interpretations to be deferred, in some cases indefinitely.

The article proceeds in three parts. In the first, I provide more detail about proximity broadcasting's aesthetics of popular voice, and about the ambiguous ways it was shaped by state regulation, producer gatekeeping and audience refusals. In the second, I delve into two accounts of audience refusals to highlight the latter's conjunctural significance, as well as the dilemma refusals posed for producers' interpretation. In the third and concluding part, I argue that, in these interpretations, producers situated themselves and audiences within a shared realm of uncertainty and mutual opacity, in which the causes of conflict and political domination could not readily be tacked to their consequences in the unfolding present.

The ambiguous bounding of popular voice

At 6pm on an early December evening in 2014, I found myself on the Abidjanais airwaves for the first time. JC and Vincent, the two hosts of Le Zougrou Show, insisted I join them inside

Radio ATM's cramped studio, instead of by the mixing console where I had previously stayed. Thus I became a guest on what the hosts claimed to be the most popular show on Radio ATM, a municipally-owned proximity station in the coastal district of Port-Bouët. It was a rambunctious two hours centered around zouglou, one of Côte d'Ivoire's most popular musical genres, interspersed with SMS messages from listeners that JC and Vincent would riff from. The messages had to feature Nouchi expressions, emanating from Abidjan's street creole (Newell 2009). That night, JC and Vincent delighted in testing my knowledge of Nouchi vocabulary which, to no one's surprise, needed considerable improvement.

Following my performance, JC, Vincent and I went to a nearby maquis to celebrate. There, I asked JC and Vincent why they favored text messages for audience input. Given zouglou's emphasis on oratorical skill, and given the spoken nature of Nouchi, why not allow listeners to phone in and speak on the airwaves directly? JC's response was dismissive, and from this I could tell my question made him uneasy. He explained that the show initially did feature on-air calls (he situated its beginnings in 2008), but claimed that calls made for poor audio quality and too often involved people "speaking nonsense [*dire n'importe quoi*]." When I probed what he meant by that, he hesitated, before giving examples of obscenities and personal insults against artists ("your mother!" he blurted in an abrupt way that made a few heads turn at nearby tables, before explaining that this was an example of "nonsense"). For JC, then, SMS messaging was a form of gatekeeping (see Fraser 2016), allowing amateurs to screen listener input in the absence of other available mechanisms. As low-budget operations, proximity radio stations could not afford the technology or staff required for call- or message-screening procedures. On Le Zouglou Show, messages came directly to Vincent's personal mobile phones (he had one for every major operator in Côte d'Ivoire).

After a couple of beers, JC left Vincent and I at the maquis to visit one of the aspiring zouglou artists he managed. Once JC had gone, Vincent awkwardly brought up another reason

why Le Zouglou Show had shifted to SMS input, a shift he situated in 2012, shortly after his first involvement with the program (as an unpaid “apprentice”). According to Vincent, the switch to SMS was due to the fact that listeners “no longer [called] so much since the crisis,” meaning since the 2011 post-electoral war. SMS communication, Vincent argued, had the double benefit of allowing listeners to send messages during the musical segments of the show, and of avoiding animateurs’ anxiety of waiting for calls that did not come. He hastened to show me that he still received many text messages, an estimated twenty that evening.

I begin with this anecdote, first, because in its language, music and on-air interactions, Le Zouglou Show exemplified proximity broadcasting’s aesthetics of popular voice. Abidjan’s 21 registered proximity stations at the time largely filled their schedules with similar combinations of banter and music. The prominence of genres like zouglou, reggae and coupé-décalé attested to stations’ embeddedness in effervescent circuits of popular and youth culture (Bahi 2011; 2021). Most proximity radio shows were led by unsalaried and self-trained *animateurs* (Cante 2018) like JC and Vincent, whose main skill was enlivening sociability, making talk flow in all sorts of circumstances – from the radio studio, where they cultivated their reputation, to private events (funerals, birthdays...), institutional ceremonies and street marketing campaigns where they usually made their living. Audience participation, facilitated not just by mobile phones but also by the use of Nouchi and vernacular French (*français populaire*), also distinguished proximity radio stations from their two commercial and state-run counterparts in the city. The latter tended to privilege “fancy” (*choco*), socially exclusive versions of French, and carried far less interactive programming.

Yet as my discussion with JC and Vincent makes clear, popular voice on proximity radio was also bounded, shaped in ambiguous ways by both producer gatekeeping and audience refusals – in this case, refusals to phone in. On Le Zouglou Show, audience participation was both eagerly invited, and treated with suspicion. While JC and Vincent emphatically echoed

street-level expression in their ways of talking, and while zouglou “conveys both popular language and a popular art of storytelling, weaving humorous stories as it delves into social issues” (Konaté 2002: 783), the two animateurs were wary of giving their listeners too much access to the airwaves. In a similar way, the bulk of interactive programming on proximity radio kept caller input to a minimum, either by using SMS messaging, or, more commonly, by limiting on-air interactions to restrictive prompts. Some shows did invite open-ended caller responses to personal interest stories – usually moral dilemmas to do with romance, betrayal, or bargains with the occult. But most interactive shows on the local airwaves were either translation exercises (usually from French into one of Côte d’Ivoire’s many “ethnic” languages), trivia competitions, or greetings.⁴ This is not to comment on the quality of on-air interactions, or on the enthusiasm with which audiences did participate, but to highlight a general tendency toward the containment of said participation.

Another ambiguity that comes through in my anecdote above relates to the role of state regulation and surveillance in orienting JC and Vincent’s gatekeeping practices. As mentioned in the introduction, proximity radio stations are forbidden by law from “producing or broadcasting content of a political nature” (HACA 2014: 6). I have also mentioned Radio ATM is owned and operated by the Port-Bouët municipality – itself controlled, since its creation in 1980, by the PDCI party. Municipal ownership on the local airwaves involved direct censorship of content deemed unfavorable to the mayor. Municipal and state interests were not always aligned (see Yapi-Diahou 1990), such that some municipally-owned stations felt more confident denouncing state policies than their privately-owned counterparts.⁵ In any case, more

⁴ It should also be noted that Le Zouglou Show’s treatment of Nouchi through the lens of translation or vocabulary indexing was a way for the hosts – and perhaps for their audience – to keep some distance with the language, still associated at the time with notions of impropriety and even criminality (as well discussed in Newell 2009).

⁵ A sense of the possible tensions between state and municipal authorities when it came to interpreting “political content” on airwaves can be derived from the fact that, in October 2001, Radio ATM was temporarily suspended by the HACA (or CNCA as the institution was then called) for covering the return from exile of former president Henri Konan Bédié. Heir to Félix Houphouët-Boigny at the helm of the PDCI, Bédié had fled to France after being ousted by a military coup in December 1999 – an event that ended the PDCI’s single-party reign in Côte d’Ivoire and simultaneously ushered a decade of political “brutalization,” in which the struggle for control of the

than outright censorship, municipal oversight and national regulation combined to encourage *self-censorship* (echoing Pype 2016). And while amateurs were for the most part confident in discerning what could and could not be spoken on the airwaves (Pype 2011a), despite the complete lack of definition of “political content” by the HACA, they did not always extend this confidence to audiences.

It is thus possible to interpret JC’s worry that callers on Le Zougrou Show might “speak nonsense” as a worry about them “speaking politics.” Calls from disgruntled Port-Bouët residents complaining about municipal policies might compromise the show’s prime-time slot on Radio ATM. In a frank discussion on the topic, JC denied using SMS to avoid “political” calls. Clearly thinking I was accusing him of enacting municipal censorship, he pointed to the fact that, despite his involvement with Radio ATM since the station’s beginnings, in 1998, he had never been “titularized,” which is to say salaried as a municipal agent. JC held this as proof that he was “not interested in playing political games [engaging in the reciprocities of patronage].” We might also note that zougrou, as a musical genre, itself pushed the boundaries of political expression. Not only was the genre born out of student mobilizations against the PDCI party-state in the 1980s and 90s, but it was subsequently harnessed by the regime of Laurent Gbagbo (2000-2010) as both a nationalist symbol of “genuinely” Ivoirian popular culture, and a way of narrating the economic hardship that Gbagbo’s socialist-leaning *Refondation* movement purported to address (Konaté 2002; Bahi 2011; Schumann 2013). During my participation in Le Zougrou Show, for example, JC and Vincent played Espoir 2000’s “Progrès,” a famous, plaintive song from 1998 which interpellates an anonymous

state became intertwined with armed conflict (Vidal 2003; see Vidal & Le Pape 2002). Bédié’s return to Côte d’Ivoire in 2001, while authorized by the government of Laurent Gbagbo at the time, was deemed too political by the CNCA to be covered by Radio ATM – even as it made newspaper headlines plastered around Abidjan. As one of Radio ATM’s managers remarked to me in an interview, furthermore, the city’s airport is located in Port-Bouët, such that Bédié’s return was local in addition to being national news. Yet the manager’s slip of the tongue – she called Bédié “our president” before correcting herself – was telling of the partisan implications of the station’s coverage.

member of the Ivoirian elite over issues of corruption. This choice of music stood in stark contrast to the ways some of JC and Vincent’s colleagues self-censored their own playlists: in an interview, another Radio ATM animateur admitted that he avoided playing reggae songs that evoked corruption or criticized political violence.⁶ As he went on to explain, “the song isn’t censored, no one forbids you from playing it, it’s you yourself who won’t have the courage.”

Yet even if JC and Vincent did not directly acknowledge the role of state and municipal restrictions in their management of audience interactions on Le Zougrou Show, it is difficult to believe that these restrictions were totally absent from their considerations. It is doubtful, to begin with, that JC could continue to work at Radio ATM without some arrangement with the municipal administration. A further clue about his and Vincent’s sensitivity to potentially “political” content can be found in a text message that Vincent showed me when we were sat at the maquis, and which he had decided not to read on air. The text included Nouchi expressions and abbreviations I could not decipher, and ended by calling Port-Bouët a “*terrain vagabond*,” a play on the expression *terrain vague* (wasteland) and *vagabond* (bum, a common insult in Abidjan). Vincent claimed he did not read the text on air because it was an insult against the district. I noted, however, that it could also be understood as a reference to a recent wave of government-mandated slum clearances that had demolished thousands of homes and businesses along the Port-Bouët beach barely two weeks before. These demolitions left a landscape of rubble and ruination – a wasteland that stretched for several miles. Strikingly, Radio ATM did not discuss the demolitions at all, at least during the time I spent at the station. Despite ATM managers’ insistence that they covered the event, the only mention I could find after hours of trawling through the station’s archives⁷ were brief, laconic communiqués that

⁶ He specifically mentioned Tiken Jah Fakoly’s “Mon Pays Va Mal” and “Mal Élu,” both released at the height of the Ivoirian conflict, and both overtly critical of government abuses.

⁷ Stations are required to store at least two weeks’ worth of content on their servers, to allow retrieval by the authorities in case a program should be requested by the HACA, or the police in the case of libel or “fake news.”

“advised the population” of government rationales for slum clearance, and invited residents to register themselves with municipal services to obtain state compensation. As Vincent admitted in a later conversation, “ATM talked about the *déguerpissements*, but from a state perspective. We can only give information. Whether it is good or bad, that we can’t talk about.”

Was the SMS message and its mention of “*terrain vagabond*” a veiled critique of slum clearance? It is obviously impossible to know for sure. When I suggested my interpretation, Vincent’s vague gesture of recognition was neither validation, nor dismissal. Ultimately, he argued, it was better not to read the SMS because “not everyone will understand [*sciencer*, to know in Nouchi],” which is to say, the message was open to too many, possibly risky interpretations. Whether it was an insult against the district, or covert political content, the safest option was not to air it.

Vincent’s claim that listeners “no longer [called so much] since the crisis” thus cannot be understood separately from JC and Vincent’s own implication in restricting what was “speakable” (Pype 2011a) on air. Put differently, gatekeeping practices and audience refusals both contributed to what we might call the realm of the unspoken. Yet how gatekeeping and refusal were related was unclear, and for amateurs like JC and Vincent, difficult to specify. Invocations of “crisis” that were meant to provide an explanation for listener refusals – and by extension, for the minimization of on-air interactions – only raised more questions for me, and more vagueness from my interlocutors. Although JC always denied that Le Zougrou Show had registered any dip in participation, when I pointed out in a later conversation that several phone-in shows on Radio ATM no longer seemed to be running, he agreed that interactive programming at the station had been “hit by a bit of a lethargy since the crisis.” His short elaboration was rhythmized by hesitations, as if he was carefully choosing his words: “complicity with listeners has become a bit... dislocated. Lots of people moved. Radio ATM used to have a listeners’ club, very active, but... lots of people moved.” We can note that JC’s reference to

displacement, which he associated with the 2011 war but which we might also link to the aforementioned slum clearances in Port-Bouët, further blurred the temporalities of “crisis” (see Roitman 2014) and only multiplied the potential reasons for audience disengagement. In the next section, I turn more squarely to producers’ interpretations of audience refusals, and highlight some of the tensions between competing accounts that help shed light on JC’s (and many others’) hesitations.

Fear or defiance? Interpreting refusals as products of crisis

Like JC, Vincent, and Sébastien in the introduction, many proximity radio producers I worked with were quick to designate audience refusals as products of crisis. The two accounts I center in this section exemplify the main interpretative tendencies I came across during fieldwork, both in their substance – what they suggested audience refusals “meant” – and in their composition – the way producers pieced together different elements of explanation in the course of long-running, often halting and non-linear conversations. The accounts, in other words, reflect producers’ practice of attunement: the weaving of audience refusals within a broader constellation of observed details, some of them seemingly unconnected, but which together composed something like a conjunctural atmosphere. Simultaneously, the accounts reveal the gaps, omissions and contradictions in producers’ explanations of refusal, which appeared to amplify the silences or uncertainties created by refusals, and which I return to in the final section of the article. The main point I want to draw out here is a tension within and between the accounts. This was a tension between interpretations of refusals as fear, and as defiance. While ultimately the distinction between these two was tenuous, the tension alerts us to what was chiefly at stake in producers’ interpretations: their uncertain relation with urban publics.

The first account of audience refusal I want to discuss makes more tangible the reasons why producers interpreted refusals as products of crisis. On a Sunday afternoon in late March 2015, I joined Radio Fraternité in Yopougon for a “public show” organized on the Place CP1, a large open square of red dirt lined with single-story houses and maquis. There was much anticipation around the event. It was the first in a months-long “caravan” of public shows staged in various Yopougon neighborhoods, funded by USAID⁸ and geared toward ensuring “peaceful electoral behavior” in the upcoming presidential elections of October 2015. The public shows harnessed proximity radio’s typical programming, including stations’ musical eclecticism and interactive segments, and recast it explicitly as a performance of “reconciliation” and joyous “social cohesion.” On the Place CP1, Radio Fraternité treated residents to four hours of mostly lip-synced performances by both established and emerging artists spanning a bewildering array of musical genres – including coupé-décalé, zouglou, reggae, Christian pop and “modern-traditional” (*tradi-moderne*) numbers in five Indigenous languages. Between musical acts, station animateurs invited the audience to participate in short games involving either trivia or translation. Halfway through the show, four neighborhood representatives – the neighborhood “chief,” another local elder, the leader of a women’s association, and a young imam – were sat in the center of the square for a 15-minute round-table discussion. The discussion was hosted by two well-known Radio Fraternité animateurs, co-hosts on the station’s call-in morning show, joined by an expert consultant (*personne ressource*). The round-table started by asking participants their thoughts on “what went wrong” during the post-electoral war of 2011, before inviting them to propose lessons learned. A recording of the discussion and of the show’s most

⁸ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was the most audibly active international organization at the time on the local airwaves, mostly funding programs dedicated to peace-building and to the promotion of entrepreneurship. As Abou Bamba (2016) discusses, this involvement is part of a longer history of US attempts to shape “development” in postcolonial Côte d’Ivoire, in more or less overt competition with the French.

memorable moments was later to be edited and broadcast by the station (for a fuller discussion of the show's discursive dynamics, see Cante 2020a).

If the Place CP1 event materialized Radio Fraternité's usual programming in a public performance of peace, it also materialized the station's "dialogic" (see Willems 2015) relation with its audiences. Indeed, while this was never confirmed by USAID consultants (who systematically avoided my requests for interview), I suspect one of the appeals of public shows was that they provided a concrete estimate for the number of listeners "reached" through the funded programs, in the absence of any audience figures for proximity broadcasters. Unfortunately, the Place CP1 show was sparsely and stiffly attended. Few people in the audience wanted to engage in the game sequences. They seemed uninterested in translating "We are one!" into the language associated with their ethnicity, or in answering questions like "Who is the president of the Independent Electoral Commission?" As the show progressed, it was unclear whether the one man who repeatedly and emphatically jumped in for games and dancing was genuinely enthusiastic, trying to make his friends laugh, or mentally troubled. He walked away before I could talk to him, when the show shifted from loud music to the round-table discussion – which I could barely hear beneath the microphone echo and my neighbors' chatter (Cante 2020b). I could see people a hundred or so meters away, looking in our direction. They never joined in. A broadly similar scenario was repeated in most of the 8 public shows I attended with Radio Fraternité. Despite animateurs' long experience of enlivening live events, and despite an impressive roster of artists (some of whom, like coupé-décalé rising star Safarel DJ, could bring any Abidjanais club to a frenzy), the public shows in Yopougon largely struggled to gather and engage an audience. Those who did attend the events were audibly unwilling to participate, refusing to speak into the animateurs' microphone during games or to demonstrate their appreciation by responding to animateurs' collective exhortations.

Two weeks after the Place CP1 event, I interviewed Philomène, who had served as the expert consultant during the show's round-table discussion. She confirmed my impression of audience refusals:

Back in the days, you could show up with a guitar and you would be overrun by a crowd. [Place CP1] is a space where people go to have fun. But at that show, there weren't so many people. People are holding back [*les gens se retiennent*]. They wonder what's going on, and what will come out of their participation. They're scared, basically [*ils ont peur en fait*].

Philomène's willingness to acknowledge audience refusals on the Place CP1 stemmed in part from her relative distance to the scene, so to speak. While she (self-)trained as an *animatrice* during the very first years of proximity broadcasting in Abidjan, including at Radio Fraternité which she joined in 2000, she left broadcasting for the international aid sector in 2005, working as a fixer and communications operative for various NGOs in the midst of the Ivoirian conflict. She fled Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, but returned to Abidjan in 2013 to take up a role as a trainer in a donor-funded radio school. Philomène's relation to proximity radio in 2015 was that of a seasoned, somewhat skeptical observer.

Philomène explained residents' refusal to engage in Radio Fraternité's public show on the Place CP1 in terms of fear. When I asked what she thought residents were scared of, she generalized her perspective, while bringing in a seemingly unrelated example:

Contact between stations and people has changed a lot. Everyone's become far too careful [*beaucoup trop prudent*]. Before the [2011] crisis, people opened up, but today no one says anything; everyone says, "I don't want any problems." It's fear, you know, no one wants to talk. [...] I even went to a health clinic, for a segment on malaria, and a doctor refused to say anything until I showed an authorization from the Ministry of Health. He said, "*Madame*, I'm a doctor, my job is not to say something here [into your

microphone] and then hear my voice somewhere else and have problems.” And I said, “But my question is in no way polemical!” Still, he would not talk.

What is interesting in Philomène’s response is the way she hinted at issues without naming them, and ultimately deflected contextual interpretation of audience refusals on the Place CP1 by appealing to a diffuse climate of fear. Unspoken in her account is thus the specific context of Yopougon, starting with the histories of violence that might make residents wonder “what will come out of their participation.” Yopougon was a hotbed of student activism against the PDCI party-state in the 1990s (see Steck 2008), which was severely repressed. As Claudine Vidal (2003) and Séverin Kouamé Yao (2017) remind us, Houphouët-Boigny and later Henri Konan Bédié (who succeeded Houphouët after his death in 1993) hired street gangs to suppress protests and harass oppositional speakers’ corners. During the Ivoirian conflict, these very same speakers’ corners – one of which had been located on the Place CP1 – were co-opted by the Gbagbo regime to serve not just as platforms for propaganda, but also as outposts of micro-local surveillance, intimidation, and violent retribution (Banégas 2010; Banégas & Cutolo 2012; Koné 2015). The “pacification” of Yopougon by pro-Ouattara forces in 2011 involved its own share of vengeance and predation, including the murder of a Radio Fraternité journalist, Sylvain Gagnetaud, by pro-Ouattara contingents. Yopougon residents, in other words, were well aware of the potential dangers of making one’s political allegiance too public.

Another important element left out of Philomène’s account was the specific urban geopolitics in which Radio Fraternité was embedded as a municipally-owned station. Given Yopougon’s size, control over municipal administration in the district has historically been vital for successive Ivoirian governments’ “hold” over Abidjan more broadly. After 2011, Ouattara’s RDR party (*Rassemblement des Républicains*) took the Yopougon municipality over from Gbagbo’s FPI (*Front Populaire Ivoirien*), who boycotted local elections in 2012 (as it did again in 2018). At the time of my fieldwork, the RDR-controlled Yopougon municipality

was overseeing the demolition of dozens of maquis once popular with pro-Gbagbo militants, including the (in)famous Rue Princesse, a stone's throw from Place CP1 (Cante 2020b). Radio Fraternité was silent on the issue, going so far as to censor a "citizens' report" on the topic, produced by one of the station's listeners' clubs and also funded by USAID. This was but one of the many, minute ways in which the station was editorially and discursively aligned with the municipality, and by extension, with the Ouattara government. In turn, the station's partisan alignment inevitably inflected the meaning of its public show performance on Place CP1 – and the meaning of audience participation. By joining a performance orchestrated by an RDR-controlled station, carrying a message of "peaceful elections" despite the absence of any genuine contest (not least due to the weaponization of transitional justice), many residents surely knew that their participation could be interpreted as a sign of allegiance, or at least acquiescence, to the post-2011 regime.

This brief contextualization of audience refusals in Yopougon specifies Philomène's allusions to fears of state surveillance (implicit in her anecdote in which a doctor requests a letter from the ministry before speaking), and to fears of retributive violence. It brings to light Radio Fraternité's own complicity, however unwitting, in the atmosphere of "quiet insecurity" (Grant 2015) that Philomène evokes so obliquely. Crucially, it complicates her interpretation of audience refusals as manifestations of fear. An equally plausible interpretation would be that refusals signified residents' defiance toward the station and the regime, or at least an unwillingness to be part of a contested performance of peace.

To illustrate the latter interpretation, let me bring in the story of Nadia. When I met her in November 2014, Nadia had worked in proximity broadcasting for less than a year. The station she was based in was privately owned but, through its collective ownership by prominent businesspeople, had close and longstanding ties to the RDR. Nadia, in contrast, was

quite open about her anti-Ouattara opinions.⁹ Her political views no doubt reinforced her growing disenchantment, even resentment, toward her employer. Not only was she unsalaried, but the few commissions (*gombos*) she could secure with NGOs or churches – Nadia was a devout Evangelical – were “pilfered” (*pillé*), as she put it, by the station manager. While Nadia was initially very reserved in her interactions with me, we later became close when I, too, fell out of favor with her manager. He had initially welcomed my research, but after two months of weekly visits appeared to abruptly change his mind. The manager asked staff to stop talking to me, and shut me out of weekly scheduling meetings I had previously attended. Not wanting to cause any trouble, I left the station but continued to nurture friendships with several of its animateurs outside the studio – including Nadia. She never confirmed that my “expulsion” from the station is what convinced her I wasn’t myself aligned with the post-conflict regime, but in one instance she secretly recorded a staff meeting at the station without me asking her.

Like many animateurs I met, Nadia had come to proximity radio “out of curiosity,” as she put it, which is to say out of a general search for livelihood opportunities. Initially, she was interested in playing Christian music, to elevate her profile as an aspiring Evangelical pop singer. But she quickly took up an opportunity to produce a series of short *reportages* on the hyper-dense district where the station was based, and where Nadia herself had lived for a decade. The reportages, funded by a well-known international media assistance organization, were meant to “unveil social realities,” in a classic style of developmental journalism (see e.g., Pype 2011b). Nadia was given specific topics to cover but she could choose how to go about composing the reportages.

During one of our meetings, Nadia relayed the following story of audience refusal, which echoed Sébastien’s experience presented in the introduction. Tasked with making a show

⁹ Nadia and Philomène were both born in Abidjan to parents of the same two ethnic groups from Western Côte d’Ivoire. While Nadia’s Evangelical faith was more prominent, Philomène also invited me to join her and her family in a Pentecostal church.

about produce markets (*marchés vivriers*) in her area, Nadia set out to understand the markets' supply chains and the challenges that traders (mostly women) faced. At a first market, traders flatly refused to talk to her. At a second market, traders refused to be interviewed unless the market "president" was present, but would not give Nadia the president's phone number. At a third location, repeated visits eventually convinced traders to take her to the market manager's office. He only accepted to be interviewed when Nadia mentioned that they shared an ethno-regional lineage on her mother's side.

For Nadia, the market traders' refusals were primarily the result of defiance toward journalists. Specifically, she assumed the traders "told themselves I work for a foreign radio" when she mentioned the NGO who funded her reportage. For Nadia, this defiance was due to the fact that foreign (and especially French) media had peddled "fake news" about Côte d'Ivoire during the 2011 war. When I asked why she didn't just say she worked for the neighboring proximity station, Nadia responded: "it doesn't help gain the trust of people who think it's a Dioula radio." Dioula, in this colloquial usage, is an ambiguous category amalgamating northern ethno-regional lineage, Malinké language, Muslim faith, and affiliation with Ouattara's RDR; as several scholars have noted, the label Dioula is also associated with foreignness or *allochthony* in ethno-nationalist ideology prominent amongst Gbagbo supporters (see Bouquet 2003; Marshall-Fratani 2006; Ouédraogo & Sall 2008; McGovern 2011). Reconstructing the sub-text of Nadia's argument, then, we can say that for her, market traders' refusals to speak on the airwaves were a gesture of defiance against media that were in the service of government interests, both domestic and foreign.

Nadia was not as categorical as might first appear, however. Personally, for example, she did not think the station where she worked was a "Dioula radio." As she noted,

"we do lots of shows in Dioula, but there are also shows in other languages, like Baoulé.

The manager is Dioula, the personnel is probably majority Dioula, but there's a bit of

everyone. I'm [of mixed ethno-regional lineage from Western Côte d'Ivoire]. So I show myself [meaning I disclose my ethnic background], for people to know they can speak safely."

Nadia also acknowledged (following my prompt) that many traders in produce markets were themselves Dioula, so the refusals she experience were not strictly motivated by ethno-political antagonism toward her station. At that point in our conversation, she generalized her explanation for refusals by painting a diffuse atmosphere of social breakdown. Gesturing to the maquis in which we sat, she explained that, despite her Evangelical faith and sobriety, she spent several hours here weekly for "observation and inspiration" for her radio shows. What she saw: students skipping school to drink, young women trading sex for "a bit of fried plantain and an egg," and FPI militants forced to hold clandestine meetings in bars because of brutal repression. Each time, Nadia tried to approach destitute young women or wounded militants for radio interviews, but they always refused. Together, these anecdotes were meant to invoke a context of moral decay and socio-political division ("life has only resumed for some people," as Nadia put it) that made proximity broadcasting's silences on such issues all the more shameful, and residents' refusals all the more desperate – a kind of wholesale yet unexpressed dissent from the post-conflict order. However, we can note that the precise connections between political repression, moral depravation, material precarity and radio silences in Nadia's account were implied and perhaps imagined rather than easily traceable.

Ambiguous also was the way Nadia positioned herself in this pessimistic atmosphere. Her description of interactions with FPI militants captures this ambiguous self-positioning well:

"They were wounded, one of them had blood on his shirt. So they came to finish their meeting right here behind me. Afterwards I reached out to them. One of the men

revealed a lot of things [to me], a lot of things. But there was no way he would speak to the station about his story [*il n'était même pas prêt à parler à la radio*].”

Nadia clarified that the militants with the bloodstained shirt had been kicked out of an FPI meeting by elders within his own party¹⁰, not by an intervention of the RDR state (though such interventions were also common at the time). Interesting here is how Nadia positioned herself *personally* “with” the militants, so to speak, in defiance of the post-conflict regime and of her own station where, she implied, such events could never be recounted. Yet in doing so, Nadia implicitly acknowledged her own, double complicity in leaving socio-political realities unspoken: both as a political dissident refusing to normalize the post-conflict order, and as a producer in one of the proximity stations where the hardships of life after crisis continued to go untold.

Attunement and mutual opacities

Philomène interpreted audience refusals as fear, Nadia as gestures of defiance in a context of general breakdown. Ultimately, however, it was impossible to ascertain what refusals meant. Their polysemy or polyvalence (Dave 2014; Pype 2016) was reinforced by the fact that they appeared to affect very different kinds of talk, from the more obviously “sensitive” issues of reconciliation and political repression, to banal subjects like road works or produce trading, even the sly sociability of a zouglou show. The unknowability of refusals was, furthermore, framed by proximity radio’s paradoxical history, structured by the promise of popular voice *and* its ambiguous restriction. As evoked in the first section, this paradoxical history raised unresolved questions about what could be said on air. In turn, questions about what was

¹⁰ The FPI was divided between those who refused to participate in post-conflict political life until Laurent Gbagbo was released from what they considered an unfair trial at the International Criminal Court, and those who argued the party should still put forward opposition candidates in his absence. In 2015, acrimonious internal debates accompanied the (self-)nomination of Affi N’Guessan as FPI candidate for the presidential elections.

“speakable” (Pype 2011a) were redoubled by the post-conflict regime’s simultaneous emphasis on “truth and reconciliation” and efforts to “silence the past” (Trouillot 1995). This tension between testimony and silence was audible in proximity stations’ at-times contradictory approach to on-air narratives of crisis, spurred by different donors’ expectations, but also by invited guests’ contrasting attitudes to truth-telling. As I discuss in more length elsewhere, hosts and guests on peace-building shows regularly struggled to agree over how much to say about local experiences of crisis (see Cante 2020a). If audience refusals hinted at collective taboos or “public secrets” that emerged from unresolved histories of violence (see e.g., Buckley-Zistel 2006; Eastmond & Selimovic 2012; Ferme 2018), then, they did not signify clear rules for “what could and could not be discussed openly” (McGovern 2013: 199), quite the contrary.

At stake in refusals were the relations between proximity radio producers and their publics, themselves entangled within a broader set of relations between neighbors, between former political enemies, and between state and citizens. At the same time, refusals made audible the *uncertainty* that characterized this relational field. Indeed, the opacity of refusals was troubling for producers because it questioned the very grounds for relation. In some sense, if refusals could be clearly understood as either fear or defiance, they could “speak” to producers and allow them to respond. Nadia and Philomène were both convinced that proximity radio could and should do more to amplify critical, indeed oppositional voices and experiences of post-conflict hardship. “The voice of the voiceless” was not an empty slogan for them but a guiding “ideology of voice” (Kunreuther 2014) which, while far from realized on the local airwaves, still charged radio work with hope and meaning (see Fisher 2016 on voice as an object of individual and collective affective investment). For junior amateurs like Vincent in Port-Bouët, furthermore, relations with audiences were a vital promise of livelihood opportunities (see Cante 2018). Vincent regularly carried off-air conversations with listeners

who sent him text messages during Le Zouglou Show; in late 2014, he was hopeful that one listener he'd met face to face would include him in a real estate scheme on Port-Bouët's rapidly transforming peri-urban edges. This never happened, but the sense of possibility that contact with listeners signified is the point here. Yet audience refusals scrambled such possibilities, appearing to deny grounds for dialogue and mutual exchange at the same time that they evaded clear significance.

It is thus possible to hear in Nadia's affirmation of defiance and Philomène's diagnosis of fear attempts to make refusals "speak," to impose a signification and thus minimize opacity. However, the practice of attunement I have sketched out in the previous section did not quite succeed in doing that. Beyond their apparently different and confident conclusions, Nadia and Philomène both "explained" refusals through attunement to a general atmosphere (Stewart 2007; 2011) rather than through the specifics of situations, even as they wove together detailed anecdotes to justify their impressions. Throughout my fieldwork, producers' interpretations of audience refusals similarly tacked between the specific and the atmospheric. In doing so, they opened their accounts to connections between experienced events and a more or less distant conjuncture whose precise nature remained speculative or unclarified. This is consistent with Carlson and Stewart's (2014: 116) point that attunement (or what they also call "mood work") produces legibility but not readability. That is, attunement is a practice of sense-making that makes self and social world discernable in affective atmospheres, but without producing neat, bounded or linear narratives of either. As an atmosphere, "crisis" in Abidjan was an out-of-focus background, at once essential and insufficient to understand where things, people and processes stood in relation to each other. And as an interpretive practice, attunement was neither denial nor bearing witness. It registered crisis without giving it narrative totality, or transparency.

Rather than a failure of witnessing, I argue that the narrative gaps and uncertainties opened by producers' atmospheric attunement can be heard as an ethical response to the opacity of audience refusals. More precisely, these gaps which denied certainty in Philomène and Nadia's accounts were themselves a way to maintain the possibility of relation. To begin with, they positioned producers and audiences in a *shared* context of crisis and uncertainty. As Vincent summarized it when I asked him why he thought crisis had caused a drop in listener calls on Le Zougrou Show, "crisis has upended many things in the life of people [*la crise a bousculé trop de choses dans la vie des gens*]"; he then proceeded to explain how several iterations of crisis (post-electoral violence in 2000, armed insurgency in 2002, quasi-war and anti-French uprisings in 2004, and post-electoral war in 2011) had foiled his own ambitions to study at university and his subsequent attempts at various professional careers.

As shown in Philomène and Nadia's accounts above, producers' attunement to refusals acknowledged historical and conjunctural issues of state surveillance, violent repression and incomplete reconciliation but rendered them as atmospheric presences: clearly *there* but without evident influence on unfolding scenes. I came to understand that what lay behind this rendering was the suspension of clear *causality*, in two main ways. First, producers eschewed causality in the form of temporal succession and linear progression. If producers "prized ambiguity" (Ferme 2001: 5-6) and preserved the unknowability of audience refusals, I suggest, it was in part to avoid discussing individuals' actions, intentions and relations in the present *as outcomes of the past*. As evidence of this I take the fact that, by and large, most of the producers I spoke to were not reluctant to discuss experiences of conflict. Like Vincent, they spontaneously brought up their own trajectories interrupted by crises. They also routinely pointed out "hotspots" of violence during walks around the city. JC, for example, who was cagey about the "dislocation" of relations between Radio ATM and its listeners, had no hesitation in designating student residences around the stations as barracks for pro-Gbagbo

militias. After an evening of food and drinks at Abidjan's largest slaughterhouse, across the road from Radio ATM, he evoked the (human) bodies he claimed to have seen piled during the post-electoral war, explaining that most slaughterhouse workers were Burkinabè migrants who had been targeted as foreign agents by pro-Gbagbo groups. In Radio Arc-en-Ciel, a privately owned station in Abobo (northern district of Abidjan), amateurs who were not in the studio passed the time under a gazebo by the side of the road where they often recounted different episodes of conflict, quoting politicians' speeches as though from memory and sharing anecdotes about particularly gruesome or bizarre events; in one early instance, noticing that I was putting away my notebook, an amateur chided that I should on the contrary be "scribbling away [*gratter*]" because "it's history we're telling here [*c'est l'histoire qu'on raconte*]." These anecdotes are to say that, when producers like JC or Philomène left histories of violence unspoken in their evocations of audience refusals, it was not because they were avoiding traumatic or sensitive memories, or denying these histories' enduring presence. Rather, it was these histories' determining force in unfolding social relations that they were reluctant to pinpoint.

The avoidance of temporal causality in producers' attunement to refusal was twinned with an avoidance of *political* causality. That is, even when producers acknowledged structures of state surveillance and repression, they evaded detailed consideration of how these structures "landed," how they shaped everyday behavior – either their own or audiences'. To be sure, producers (and Abidjanais residents more broadly) could be quite categorical and vehement in their designation of governmental responsibility, past or present. Nadia especially was adamant that all audience refusals could be attributed to the Ouattara regime, whether they were manifestations of fear (of state surveillance) or defiance. As she put it: "Under Houphouët-Boigny, you couldn't speak much [about socio-political issues], but some. Under Gbagbo, you could say whatever you wanted. Under Ouattara, you can't even speak in your own bedroom."

Yet behind such definitive (and obviously debatable) assertions, I have shown, lay a much more nuanced and tentative grappling with social division and political repression, both rendered as atmospheric pressures more than tangible enactments.

Similarly, Vincent, JC and Sébastien were all categorical that the station they worked at were “for the mayor,” as Sébastien put it. But, returning to the anecdote I opened the article with, Sébastien did not think that Radio Fraternité’s RDR affiliation was the primary reason for audience refusals. Even as he noted that the men sitting at the maquis, the first residents he tried to interview about road works, “looked like supporters of the former president [Gbagbo],” he still maintained that their refusal to speak could not strictly be explained in terms of partisanship. Or rather, he left the causal link in suspension: “They see where the station is positioned [politically], so they watch and wait [*ils voient comment la station est positionnée, donc ils se disent, ah, on regarde seulement*].” The distinction between seeing and watching in Sébastien’s cryptic conclusion captures an analogous distinction between discerning socio-political antagonisms and establishing their consequences in unfolding practice, a distinction I suggest was characteristic of producers’ attunement.

Such evasions of causality might be seen as somewhat self-serving, bordering on willful denial. Yet they were *also* ethical gestures of reciprocity. As Mariane Ferme (2001: 6) puts it, writing from rural Sierra Leone, “the systematic intrusion of unpredictability” in popular accounts of social and political affairs is, in part, a way to sustain autonomous grounds of sociality and to limit power’s (be it the state’s or a local chief’s or a rebel militia’s) ability to determine social relations. In Abidjan’s Nouchi culture, Sasha Newell (2012) has further shown that “bluff,” which includes dissimulation as well as emphatic pretense, is integral to the maintenance of social ties, as well as to the delineation of a distinct form of street knowledge and moral economy. Glissant argues more generally that mutual opacity can in fact enable a fuller, more ethical relationality. He writes, “the thought of opacity distracts me from absolute

truths [...] saves me from unequivocal paths and irreversible choices [...] I am thus able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach of my opacity for him [sic]" (1997: 192-194; cited in Murdoch 2013: 887-888). In the case of Sébastien, Nadia, Vincent, JC and Philomène, each in their own way, the attunement to refusals' opacity was a way to indirectly acknowledge audience agency without reducing it to all-too-transparent processes of political domination and division. In return, they no doubt hoped, Abidjanais residents would not presume their own intentions and complicities in the silences that power produced on the local airwaves.

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