

A radio workshop to counter epistemic violence: how to make place for refugee-seekers to speak up

Interview with Séréna Naudin

Conducted by **Anissa Ouamrane**

Traduction | Translation **John Crisp**

This interview was carried out after Séréna gave a presentation in the seminar of the JEDI (Justice, space, discriminations, inequalities) group of the Labex Urban Futures.

*Séréna Naudin was employed by the association **Modus operandi** from March 2018 to July 2023. Her **PhD in sociology** was cofunded by the association and carried out with the research groups CRESPPA (GTM) and PACTE (Justice sociale).*

Anissa Ouamrane-Saboukoulou is a doctoral candidate at Lab'Urba (université Paris-Est) researching working-class youth mobilities and leisure, in particular touristic trips to Thailand, in an intersectional and critical geography perspective.

Keywords: epistemic violence, methodology, migration, asylum, speaking up

Mots-clés : violence épistémique, méthodologie, migration, asile, espace de parole

Anissa Ouamrane (AO): How did the idea for the radio workshop come to you and what were your objectives?

Séréna Naudin (SN): I was volunteering with this association which assists asylum-seekers and the experience made me realise that they meet people who live in this country generally as part of a relationship of assistance or as part of an administrative procedure. The way they speak is completely constrained by this. I was hired by a group that ran radio workshops, which inspired me to suggest it to the association Accueil demandeur d'asile (ADA, Welcome asylum-seeker), so the participants could have a place of expression to talk collectively, on topics they chose,

on the radio. I took the proposal to Koffi¹ who ran the French classes for ADA, because I wanted it to take place in an existing framework that actually filled a need for asylum-seekers. Koffi was intrigued and thought it could be an interesting alternative to conversation workshops. We were then joined by Karine², who worked with Modus operandi³ (Modop) and also volunteered with ADA. She had been looking for years for alternative ways of researching asylum processes in France. After several weeks experimenting in 2016, we made the workshop weekly to make it long-term and an optional part of the French classes, so no one felt guilty in case they missed a session and everybody came when available.

Our initial proposal was to pick the topics that the class participants felt like addressing, and prepare for interviews. Karine and I would not ask questions about people's migration or gather testimonies. We would prepare for interviews with other people, and we suggested participants interview each other in order to practise, and also in order to debate the themes of the interviews.

We did not suggest migration in particular as a topic. But as a matter of fact, since 2016, it has been a constant theme, in particular the way society treats asylum-seekers. Haba, one of the participants, once said "we can't talk about anything but migration, because the media keep talking about that, they have their solutions, so we have to come up with our own solutions [...]" (Grenoble, maison des associations, 30/09/2019).

Maybe the sound objects we produce are some of the "solutions" Haba had in mind, solutions that take the shape of alternative narratives, unlike dominant ones. Anyway, our initial objective, with Karine, was to set up favourable conditions for participants to speak up, and speak differently from the speeches they had to perform to be seen as victims, and as legitimate, speak up and be heard as political subjects.

AO: why were you trying to establish an alternative methodology for your doctoral research?

SN: During my years as student, I was uncomfortable with the research methodology taught as part of my master's degree in anthropology, as a result of the circumstances in which I met people for my research. I was interested in language differences in care settings, and as part of the care relations between carers and

1. Koffi Rodrigue Kouame was coordinator and instructor in the French classes of *Accueil demandeur d'asile* in 2015 and 2020. Along with Séréna and Karine Gatelier, he is part of a larger collective that ran the radio workshop *À plus d'une voix* (podcast of *À plus d'une voix* available on [audioblog](#) and the [Spectre](#) platform).

2. Karine Gatelier works for Modus operandi and also belongs to the research lab PACTE.

3. [Modop](#) is an association in Grenoble that conducts research projects and offers training in conflict transformation.

foreign patients living precarious lives. As part of my training, I met people in precarious administrative situations who also therefore experienced financial and social precarity. I felt completely unable to question them, to ask for interviews or even conduct informal discussions on my research topic. My research seemed meaningless when confronted with their situation, and from the perspective of people I was working with. I thought they might feel obliged to answer my questions, or at least to try and fulfil what they figured my expectations were. In fact, I didn't feel like doing that anymore. I was helping this forty-year-old man who was sick and homeless do his paperwork. One afternoon, we went to the post-office to send a registered letter. I paid the 4 or so euros for him. I realised how humiliating it was for him... I was not 25 years old, I was a student, and I was explaining the procedures to him, going with him to the offices so the civil servant would accept to take his paperwork, simply respect his rights, and paying a few euros for him... I was uncomfortable in this relation. I didn't want to build a career on humiliating moments like those. My studies had strengthened my critical thinking and political aspirations, yet the academics running my degree seemed comfortably installed in their position, describing violent and unequal mechanisms from a distance, without becoming politicised. Basically, I didn't see how I could keep doing anthropological analysis while remaining true to my principles.

When I met Karine, she told me she aspired to alternative methodologies for people going through the French asylum system to take part in the analysis. She is an anthropologist and we shared a common language, but also discomforts and aspirations. We both felt asylum-seekers in France are prevented from speaking by the application procedure, by the incentive to narrate themselves in a certain way, and by dominant narratives. We also both knew that they felt isolated. The first workshops we ran were very intense, we really felt something was happening. It was emotionally intense, of course, but politically too. It made possible situations that were unprecedented. I remember an interview conducted with geography students, with questions on welcome in Grenoble and the first impressions of the participants. Gradually, though it was unplanned, some asked questions about municipal policies, local issues, foreign policy and desired changes. It was astonishing that foreigners, in precarious situations and recently arrived, knew so much about what was going on in the city. It was fascinating to hear them challenge students to reflect on their own government and political transformation. The students later told us they had never been questioned that way. What they had experienced was what they were being trained to do as part of their studies but had not been subjected to before.

Talks with Karine, discovering the work done at Modop—where I was working at the time—and things happening in the radio workshop made me realise it was possible to

carry out research differently from what I had been taught. This was the time when Modop started thinking through the idea of epistemic violence. The phrase neatly encapsulated many facts and intuitions, and provided a framework to analyse the observations Karine and I were making.

Epistemic violence was put forward by Gayatri C. Spivak (2009), and used by feminist authors such as Kristie Dotson (2018). It describes the process whereby people experiencing multiple oppressions are silenced, and points to what Spivak designates as a subaltern position. Speaking up is not just about expressing oneself, it's also about being heard. As sociolinguistics shows, speech has to be thought of as addressing others, building an interaction with an audience, with a degree of dependence on this audience. When speech is not acknowledged, knowledge is denied.

Without going in-depth into this concept, I would like to emphasise that epistemic violence takes place through the means whereby knowledge is produced, legitimised and accessed. It casts light on the power-knowledge nexus, and reminds us that knowledge is considered legitimate inasmuch as the person wielding it is well positioned in power relations. This means people experiencing oppressions are not recognised as knowledgeable, what they have to say is lent little credence or goes unheeded, or else they are silenced...

What epistemic violence does is to stop people from speaking up, and this insight was crucial to our work with asylum-seekers. It helped us make sense of the colonial continuities in the treatment they receive and the mechanisms inhibiting them from speaking up. It also inspired us to reflect on our research practices to avoid reproducing domination, and provided a vocabulary to express the discomfort I had felt as a student. Ultimately, researchers are liable to reproduce power relations and domination even as they seek to analyse, and even denounce them. In particular in research aiming to give a voice to asylum-seekers, researchers may also exert epistemic violence.

AO: How does this form of violence operate in anthropology or social science methodologies?

SN: In fact, the very position of the researcher implies a degree of authority that can cause epistemic injustice, because the relationship with research participants is asymmetrical. With respect to asylum-seekers, for instance, I have privileges due to my administrative situation, my social status, most often my racial identity, and also sometimes language. Research participants are made subaltern by migration policies and the violent administrative procedures they endure. Of course, not all of them

experience the same situations and the degree of their oppression varies. While avoiding essentialisation or oversimplification of their experiences, you can still underline the extreme complexity of the administrative procedures and the extent to which they are made precarious because they are not allowed to work, which causes them to need assistance. As a result, and also because they have to deal with a number of people handling their administrative procedures, they are faced with many people and sometimes confused as to what each one is supposed to do. How do you differentiate between a public servant, a volunteer, the employee of an association or a researcher? They fear for their lives and are therefore understandably cautious. They need to ensure their own safety and they are wary of the forms of control they are targeted with. Their credibility is constantly challenged and they have to carefully avoid being trapped by something they might have said. So not only is the researcher likely to be confused with any of the other many agents they are faced with, asylum-seekers are not in a position to refuse to answer questions or to develop any critique of the way they are treated in France, because first and foremost they are trying to gain acceptance in this country. But critique is essential to being acknowledged as a political subject—"political" in the sense of Rancière (2004), as the expression of dissensus, and therefore conflict, about what counts or not, and who is or isn't a part of society⁴. It's about making the invisible visible.

This led me to give up on research interviews in the form of face-to-face questioning. There are two other reasons to this.

Firstly, because this type of interview mimics the forms of institutional asylum questioning. Asking about migrants' trajectories, motivations for leaving their country of origin or their arrival in Europe inevitably resembles interviews as part of asylum procedures, where the expected narrative is very formalised and technocratic. Even if the questions asked are different, the expectations of asylum-seekers are often interpreted in the light of the asylum narrative. Hence a very constrained speech that has to conform to the asylum criteria and bolster the claim. So, an interview with a researcher might reproduce this form of interaction with institutions.

Second, the interview might resonate with daily injunctions to tell one's story that immigrant people encounter every day. Questions such as "why did you come? why are you here?" are part of a process of victimisation and remind them constantly that they are out of place. Victimisation is a result of the demand that they exhibit their intimate suffering and subjectivity, rather than express a political point of view.

4. "Politics exists where the count of shares and parts of society is upset by the appearance of a share for the shareless" (Rancière, 1995, p. 39).

Migration policies, as well as political and media discourse, are characterised by systematic suspicion and construct a figure of victims as the only legitimate sorts of migrants allowed to settle in France. Others are smeared as “fake refugees” or “economic migrants”. So, the only discourse that can be heard in society is that of the victim, which is, of course, very clear for all those who are concerned. In these conditions, how can they speak up as something else than victims? It’s not just about the process whereby their knowledge and words are devalued, it also has to do with the hegemonic ideological framework that has them trapped in “othering” representations and prevents them from speaking up.

Additionally, though this does not concern asylum-seekers only, research needs to reflect about the place given to what participants have to say. bell hooks (1990) cautioned against reducing marginalised peoples’s contribution to testimony. She points this out as a form of epistemic extractivism, whereby researchers appropriate and use their words in the service of their own analysis and theorisation, as though the oppressed couldn’t analyse their own experience. Words picked up by others might be distorted or rewritten to fit a specific interpretive framework. And when an academic career is at stake, there are ethical implications. We are the ones raising research questions and problematising issues, often without being directly concerned, and we may become experts of themes of which we have no personal experience, without fully acknowledging that our knowledge wouldn’t exist without the knowledge of those directly concerned. So epistemic violence takes place in the division of epistemic labour that we take part in, as academics.

There are several other aspects to this epistemic violence, but I’ll simply mention one: the fact that the academic formats of research restitution are often inaccessible to those concerned—hence the idea to imagine formats that allow for co-construction and broader outreach.

AO: You mentioned “epistemic injustice”, what is the difference with “epistemic violence”?

SN: In fact, Kristie Dotson used the concept of epistemic violence in relation with other concepts elaborated by US feminists, such as what Miranda Fricker calls “epistemic injustice” (1999). This is the process whereby what people experiencing oppressions say is denied credence, or that explains there is a lack of knowledge produced from the perspective of those people. Dotson also uses intersectionality to show that the mechanisms of epistemic violence are inscribed in complex power relations. I would also connect this with decolonial scholarship by Aníbal Quijano (2000), Bagele Chilisa (2012), Shiv Visvanathan (2016) or Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni

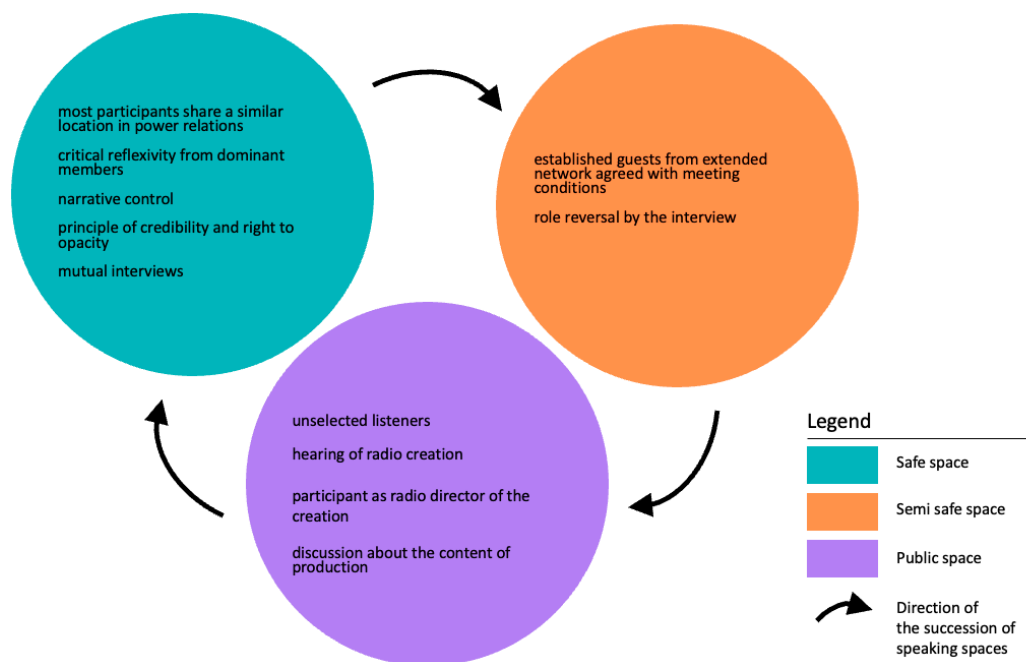
(2018) to name but a few. They point out that only Western criteria of what constitutes scientific knowledge are perceived as legitimate, which erases the plurality and diversity of knowledges. This can in some instances lead to the eradication of the knowledges of the subalternated.

I picked the term “epistemic violence” in order to link different perspectives on the specific mechanisms of de-legitimising or negating knowledge or discourse. The advantage of the notion of epistemic injustice is the connexion that can be made with the notion of cognitive justice set forward by Visvanathan (2016), which refers to the recognition of other knowledges and legitimacy criteria, and values plurality, conflict and dialogue in a perspective of knowledge democracy.

AO: How does the radio workshop create the conditions for speaking up in emancipatory ways? How do you create a space that welcomes this? Does it allow for the elaboration of a counter-discourse?

SN: The workshop was organised as a series of spaces for speech constructed over time. James C. Scott (2019), discussing the resistance to domination, distinguishes between the “hidden transcripts” expressed on the sidelines, outside the control of the dominating group, and the “public transcript” which is performed for that group. When the “hidden transcript” is publicly expressed, Scott calls it “speaking up”.

Karine and I were concerned with creating the conditions for this to occur, even as we, who represent the dominant group, are present. We drew our inspiration from Daniel Veron (2013), who was interested in the struggles of undocumented migrants and who depicted several types of space in which speech acts could take place and we realised that our radio workshop comprised three different types of space.



Scheme of the author

In the protected space, participants discuss topics, raise questions, I share technical skills for recording sound and they interview each other, as I explained. It's also where we discuss editing, which I then carry out. This part of the workshop remains informal. It's a suggested activity within the language class, but it's not a formal class, mistakes are not corrected. However, we do benefit from relations of trust built in this class context, in particular by Koffi who ran it for several years, twice a week. Koffi played a go-between role, encouraging participants to speak up, talking up the workshop using humor, and helping explain things when we were not understood. We would sometimes suggest participants also attend other workshops on the premises of our association (Modop).

The semi-protected space is where the workshop has visitors for interviews. There is a switch in roles, because what happens is the foreign people interview the locals. There may also be debates, in order to test the counter-discourse. Generally, the interviews take place in the venue of the French lessons, but sometimes we also go elsewhere. It's an opportunity to interact with unknown people within a trusted context, in a familiar room, and with a group of people met on a daily basis. In interviews experiences, opinions, ideas, and sometimes emotions would be shared. Little by little participants realise they can be heard, and that people who are positioned differently within power relations may feel critical about some things too, or at least be able to hear criticism.

What we call “public space” is what occurs when our documentaries, radio broadcasts, presentations are played or take place in public. Presenting documentaries gives opportunities for new exchanges, and to speak up. I see this as a space in which a wrong can be publicly articulated, and voiced to established locals who, even if they are aware of the issues, might also hold dominating places and be ignorant. Participants do not necessarily view them as allies, don’t imagine that they can have common critical perspectives, or even that they can be interested in what they have to say. Importantly, the workshop participants are presented as directors of the sound productions, which grants them a different position.

Radio is a tool and a fundamental instrument of this work, as it allows for ritualised and formalised conditions of enunciation: participants have a function and there are rules for listening carefully that also make staying silent legitimate. They gain confidence in their own voice, by listening to it, and they become able to say something publicly because it is being recorded, and then they choose what is broadcast or not. Listening to their own voice regularly operates as a form of practice for speaking up, and to construct a discourse.

Materially, these spaces do not exist in isolation, they feed into each other and they become imbricated. What takes place in each one influences the rest of the process, which is why it is important to take time. Each space is organised differently at different moments in the workshop, depending on the group, the degree of trust that has been established, and so on. In each instance, the objective is for voices to grow in relation with self-confidence and trust in the audience, first, so that later it becomes possible to confront an unknown audience. I draw on Fraser’s critique of Habermas’s public sphere (2001), and her notion of “subaltern counter-publics”, whose voice is not heard as others are because of their oppressed situation. For Fraser, their meeting in their own arenas allows for a definition of what can be debated on the basis of experiences of the intimate, of the everyday or of specific group interests and subsequently addressed in the public sphere as common problems. I talk about “counter-discourse” or “counter-narratives”, following postcolonial notions of subaltern voices as erased from history, and also the feminist practice of awareness-raising groups (or safe spaces) allowing for the collective construction of analysis, and of a language to critique patriarchal and sexist structures.

Of course, all the experiences shared with workshop participants also include informal, everyday moments, which are part of the relation we build and strengthen trust, allow for reciprocal sharing, and hopefully a form of equality despite the profoundly unequal structures.

AO: Is your methodological choice to use sound also a form of critique of images and their use?

SN: Initially, the choice was not made as a critique of image. But I don't think I would have proposed a video workshop, because it requires more engagement and does not allow for anonymity. In the end, discussions with workshop participants, audience feedback and further thought, as I delved further into radio production, confirmed that it could be a choice critical of image and the ways it is used. To do without image gives a greater place to feelings that arise from sound: voice tone, accents, ways of speaking, silences, laughter, and so on. It can cause strong emotion and steep listeners into a universe constructed differently depending on the listener. Some people told us of representations they formed while listening to radio productions and how that always led to imaginations likely to reshape reality. It's a way of extracting ourselves from standardised images that the media have planted in us, which take over our everyday life and orient our interpretations without us realising.

Most participants say they wouldn't have taken part in a video workshop, they did not necessarily want their image to be associated inexorably to their words. Our productions are not quite anonymous—participants state their first name and present themselves in public—but it remains possible, in the case of this workshop, to disassociate words from people if need be.

AO: How did you pick the topics for broadcasts and documentaries?

SN: Karine and I would suggest topics after months of debating, discussing, interviewing in the different spaces, on the basis of recurring themes, or themes likely to federate frequent discussions. This is what happened with the documentary *A-t-on le droit d'exprimer sa colère?* (*Does one have the right to express anger?*). This question arose from discussion and it allowed us to narratively address the bad living conditions of administratively precarious people (barred from work, housing, inability to plan, long and uncertain administrative procedures...). So, we listened sound productions about that and recorded new narratives addressing the issues, which provided the structure of the documentary.

To quote this article

Naudin Séréna, **Ouamrane** Anissa, 2025, « Un atelier radio contre la violence épistémique : comment faire place à la prise de parole de personnes en quête de

refuge ? Entretien avec Séréna Naudin » [“A radio workshop to counter epistemic violence: how to make place for refugee-seekers to speak up. Interview with Séréna Naudin”], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, 19 (<http://www.jssj.org/article/un-atelier-radio-contre-la-violence-epistemique-comment-faire-place-a-la-prise-de-parole-de-personnes-en-quete-de-refuge/>).

References

- Chilisa** Bagele, 2012, *Indigenous research methodologies*, Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications.
- Dotson** Kristie, 2018, « Conceptualiser l’oppression épistémique », *Recherches féministes*, 31(2), p. 9-34 (<https://doi.org/10.7202/1056239ar>).
- Fraser** Nancy, 2001, « Repenser la sphère publique : une contribution à la critique de la démocratie telle qu’elle existe réellement », *Hermès*, 3(31), p. 125-156.
- Fricke** Miranda, 1999, « Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege », *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 25, p. 191-210 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1999.10716836>).
- hooks** bell, 1990, « Marginality as a site of resistance », in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (éd.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge, MIT Press, New Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 341-343.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni** Sabelo J., 2018, *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*, Londres/New York, Routledge.
- Quijano** Aníbal, 2000, « Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. International Sociology », 15(2), p. 215-232 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>).
- Rancière** Jacques, 1995, *La méésentente. Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée.
- Rancière** Jacques, 2004, *Aux bords du politique*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Scott** James C., 2019, *La domination et les arts de la résistance : fragments du discours subalterne*, Paris, éditions Amsterdam.

Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, 2009, *Les subalternes peuvent-elles parler ?*, Paris, éditions Amsterdam.

Veron Daniel, 2013, « Quand les sans-papiers prennent la parole », *Variations*, 18 (<https://doi.org/10.4000/variations.641>).

Visvanathan Shiv, 2016, « La quête de justice cognitive », *in* Florence Piron, Samuel Regulus, Marie Sophie Dibounje Madiba, *Justice cognitive, libre accès et savoirs locaux. Pour une science ouverte juste, au service du développement local durable*, Québec, Éditions Science et bien commun.