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Challenging Silencing in Stigmatized Neighborhoods Through Collaborative Knowledge Production

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Abstract

Researchers are always potential traitors when they represent what they see or hear. This is of particular concern in the case of people in subaltern positions, who lack the power to challenge possible misrepresentations. This article deals with an old dilemma in critical social science: How to use language when research objects are silenced through dynamics of domination? Is it possible for research to create space for marginalized people to speak for themselves? This was one of the questions of the Université Populaire, a group initiative by actors in a marginalized social housing neighborhood in Grenoble. The community-based people's education initiative was created in a double context of violence and silence. As a result of incidents of violence, media coverage participates in depicting the neighborhood as a place of danger and otherness, which impedes voices from the neighborhood from being heard. The initiative of the Université Populaire made space for speech in this marginalized and racialized area of Grenoble dealing with the consequences of terrorist violence in France. It is an initiative the author has been involved in since its inception in 2015. This article explains how the author sought ways to reduce power asymmetry in research relationships, why she steered away from using interviews for data collection and organized public debates instead, and how this made space for speech.

Keywords

collaborative knowledge production; France; marginalized neighborhoods; postcolonial studies; spaces of speech; subaltern studies; territorial stigmatization

1. Introduction

In the following quotes, Chahid and Kenjah speak about their experience of being subjects of a scientific gaze that seeks to understand and explain certain social phenomena but also has the power to misrepresent the objects of its inquiry when guided by flawed interpretational frameworks:

> [The neighborhood of Villeneuve district] is a symbolic space, a theater where we are prisoners of prejudices and discourses on the banlieue....I see students in small groups, like tourists in a reserve. It makes one feel like one is in a zoo and we're monkeys. (Chahid, street interview, April 24, 2014)

> The Western academy has presented itself to us [in Martinique] with this desire for absolute transparency: science is going to tell us everything, show us everything, and pierce every nook and cranny of the human being, every secret. In return, Glissant says: "Not only is it impossible, but I refuse to be pierced like that, with this gaze. I want to preserve some *maquis* within me." (Kenjah et al., 2019, p. 60).

Chahid and Kenjah experience being subjected to this gaze as a form of domination. I met both of them in Villeneuve, a large social housing neighborhood in the Southern part of Grenoble, France. The neighborhood is directly opposite the Department of Geography and Urban Studies (IUGA) and is an area of observation for students and researchers due to its avant-garde architecture and its materialization of socialist ideals that gave it international renown in the 1970s. Despite its peculiarities, Villeneuve shares with other marginalized social housing neighborhoods stigmatization as an "other" space, "lost to the republic" riddled with violence, and populated by immigrants.

The stigmatizing gaze and language that mainstream journalists and certain politicians tend to employ in reference to marginalized neighborhoods and their inhabitants has made people in Villeneuve reticent to engage with researchers. The stigmatizing discourse around and policies directed at marginalized social housing neighborhoods are experienced as a form of injustice and have the effect of reducing their inhabitants to silence (see Fraser, 1992).

This article deals with the epistemological and methodological challenges of carrying out research in a context of asymmetric power relations and seeks to answer the question of how academic research can represent socially marginalized and racialized inhabitants in a way that is satisfactory for them and that serves their cause(s). It starts with a discussion of the French specificities of neighborhood stigmatization, to be followed by an exploration of the relations between knowledge and power in marginalized neighborhoods; it then discusses the limits of language as a basis of exchange in research settings that are characterized by asymmetric relationships; it continues with an explanation of how research configurations can be more horizontal, motivated by issues of shared concern, and can make space for subalternized voices in public debate.

2. Neighborhood Stigmatization and Its French Specificities

Since the images of burning cars in the banlieues were broadcasted in 2005, the French marginalized social housing neighborhoods became infamous worldwide. They are seen as places of danger and otherness,

places that are "barely known but vividly imagined" (Gregory, 2011, p. 239). My research questions this discursive articulation from the point of view of those living in these neighborhoods. To do so, it looks at, through, and from one neighborhood in particular, called Villeneuve, which extends across the border between the municipalities of Grenoble and Echirolles. The neighborhood counts roughly 12,000 inhabitants of 40 nationalities. It has 4,200 housing units, 50% of which are social housing. Young people make up 30% of the neighborhood, which is 10% more than in Grenoble as a whole. It has the same proportion of managers and intermediate professions as in Grenoble, but twice as many blue-collar workers. In general, marginalized social housing neighborhoods have the following characteristics that differentiate them from other neighborhoods in French cities: (a) contain a high percentage of social housing, and therefore a relatively poor population; (b) contain a higher concentration of immigrants and racialized French citizens (poverty in France is racialized), leading to the racialization of these urban spaces; (c) are marginalized both spatially, in the sense that they are located in urban peripheries and thus stand in "peripheral" relation to an urban center, and (d) symbolically because they are "othered" according to what is considered "normal" and "desirable."

Factors contributing to the marginalization of these neighborhoods are described by Wacquant (2007) in his thesis on advanced marginality. Wacquant's theory has inspired many researchers worldwide to inquire further into the dynamics around the marginalization and territorial stigmatization of certain urban areas (see Garbin & Millington, 2012; Kirkness, 2014; Wacquant et al., 2014). The English term "territorial stigmatization" used by Wacquant and his followers poses some conceptual issues when it travels between disciplines and languages. The use of "territorial" as a synonym for "spatial" is inaccurate if we take into account the distinction between the terms in geographic literature. Moreover, the meaning of "territory" changes when translated into the French word *territoire* (Gregory et al., 2009). To avoid confusion, I use the term "neighborhood stigmatization" to provide clarity about the object of stigmatization. While neighborhood stigmatization is a global phenomenon, there are at least two French particularities. The first is the territorialization of social problems, by which I mean that social policies target certain neighborhoods rather than certain groups of people. The second is the type of discourse that specifically targets these neighborhoods' racialized population. I argue that the spatial vocabulary used to deal with social problems is currently used as a euphemism for racism in France; marginalized social housing neighborhoods are presented by mainstream discourse as "other" spaces. Postcolonial studies provide useful tools to analyze the epistemological sources of the representations of these neighborhoods as "other."

3. Exploring the Relations Between Knowledge and Power in Marginalized Neighborhoods

Postcolonial studies have demonstrated that a typical problem of colonialism is that the power to represent colonized and racialized populations was held by the colonizer. Colonial continuities are still important for racialized people in Villeneuve (Dijkema, 2021). Bouabid, an older labor immigrant I met in Villeneuve, described how having occupied an inferior position in a colonial society seriously affected immigrants' confidence "in the sense that it delayed the rebuilding of one's conscience" and therefore their capacity to critique the French and to defend themselves in public space or discussions (interview, May 9, 2016). The feeling of lacking legitimacy leads to practices of self-silencing, or what Dotson (2011) has called "testimonial smothering," one of the effects of epistemic violence.

In my struggle with the ethics of carrying out academic research in this marginalized neighborhood—that is still dealing with the legacy of colonialism (Dijkema, 2021)—I set out to explore the possibility of collaborative knowledge production in Villeneuve, inspired by critical approaches to explorations (Bunge, 1969; Leshem & Pinkerton, 2019).

I worked with community organizations in Villeneuve that have been created in contexts of crises following outbursts of violence. My research in Villeneuve comes closest to what Nicolas-Le Strat (2013) conceives of as "intervention research." This form of participatory action research is about intervening in and writing about a reality that the researcher helps to bring out, for example by actively participating in initiatives that aim to redress power inequalities in contexts of conflict or oppression. It is through operating changes that forms of resistance become tangible and it is in challenging power relations that they become visible (Nicolas-Le Strat, 2013, p. 79). It takes as a starting point that a situation never just *is*; it is always in movement and that to be able to study a situation one has to gain knowledge of the dynamics involved. The most common form my "interventions" took was the organization of public debates, but marches, demonstrations, theatre, poster campaigns, and group travel were other forms of collective intervention that I participated in. The role I played in these "interventions" varied from participation in existing initiatives to active contribution, i.e., in meetings and public events initiated by existing collectives, to the initiation of new projects. I contributed to the creation of the Université Populaire of Villeneuve and I participated in Agir Pour La Paix. The Université Populaire provides a space where members of community organizations set the agenda for public debates and participants can share their thoughts publicly. I have been involved in the organization of two cycles of debate, the first seeking to understand discrimination, islamophobia, and neighborhood stigmatization, and the second to understand what remains of the colonial past. People participating in the debates had different forms of involvement. Some people in the neighborhood engaged with these topics in informal street debates, others in the regular plenary debates. Then there were the invited speakers, who came from all over France and often came to share their insights on one specific topic; and there were the resource persons, who mostly came from Grenoble and brought important knowledge and local networks to the debate series, which rooted the discussions better in the local context; and finally the University Populaire working group, of which I was a part, and which initiated and guided the whole process. Through these different forms of engagement, the working group has been able to involve a very diverse group of people. With "diverse" I refer to levels of formal education, forms of politicization, age, gender, race, and class. The diversity of the working group itself has made this variety in social, cultural, religious, and national backgrounds possible (for a detailed description see Dijkema, 2021, pp. 250–301).

Agir Pour La Paix was a collective consisting primarily of young and racialized friends and relatives of two young men who died as a result of group violence in 2012. This grass-roots initiative proposed weekly workshops and outreach activities to an audience that more institutional actors had a hard time reaching. The initial motive for which the core group came together was to make sure that the memory of their friends would not get lost and to transform their anger, hatred, and loss into something positive. The themes addressed in their weekly workshops were much wider than what brought them together in the first place. Neighborhood stigmatization, islamophobia, and terrorist attacks were some of the themes on the agenda in the first year. Most participants in the group were doubly impacted by paroxysmal violence, both personally as friends or relatives of Kevin and Sofiane, following the 2015 terrorist attacks, as inhabitants of a marginalized neighborhood, and as associated with Islam. A detailed presentation of the results of the fieldwork, what was collected and how, is available on Zenodo (Dijkema, 2023).

Timewise, my research started with the riots that broke out in Villeneuve in 2010. The framing of this violence in media coverage played an important role in the stigmatization of the neighborhood. On top of this came the terrorist attacks in 2015. As a result, the space for Muslims to express themselves shrunk rapidly, and they felt silenced (Dijkema, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). The term Muslim covers not only those people who assert themselves as Muslim, but also those designated as such but who might rather identify with other terms such as Arab, *maghrébins*, or with national identities. Even if Muslims were speaking out, they were not heard. Drawing on the work of Spivak (1988) on subaltern studies, I understand this silencing as a form of subalternization, i.e., being subordinated to hegemonic power. This experience of silencing resonates with a wider shared and long-term feeling of inhabitants of marginalized social housing neighborhoods that their voices are not taken into account politically. The Université Populaire and Agir Pour La Paix made space for these voices to be expressed publicly.

4. The Limits of Language and the Appreciation of Its Significance

Using language as a basis of exchange in research settings characterized by asymmetric power relations presents a challenge. This section outlines some of the problems I encountered in the field concerning speech as the transmission of knowledge between a researcher and research participants. These are the risks of betrayal, dispossession of one's narration, misrepresentation, and intrusion.

Spivak's observation that the subaltern cannot speak is my main theoretical reference on power relations and voice, and how to make space for subalternized voices. When Spivak said that the subaltern cannot speak she meant that they are not represented in institutions of power and they cannot represent themselves because they lack the power to do so, both politically and esthetically (Spivak, 1988, p. 279). One's capacity to speak can be measured through the ability to leave traces in official records, and even more so through the capacity to make one's claims heard. Being heard means that one is able to attribute meaning to events and that this meaning is taken into account in the way events are then remembered. The difficulty around hearing, listening, and understanding becomes clear through Spivak's understanding of *speaking as dialogue*. Dotson (2011) explains that the problem is that when subalterns speak there is no transaction between the speaker and the listener, that speech does not reach the dialogic level of enunciation. Giving those in a subaltern position the opportunity to speak in interviews, therefore, does not guarantee that a researcher will be able to hear and understand what interviewees are saying. There is always a form of decoding involved in hearing the other, and it is questionable whether researchers have the required codes to understand people in a position of subalternity. Choosing silence is a logical consequence if people feel that what they say is interpreted in terms of what they represent, and if they feel judged.

Mainstream language betrays residents of marginalized social housing neighborhoods and they are well aware of this. If social science is understood as a translation of a social reality made intelligible through a shared academic language, there is always the risk that this translation will be a misinterpretation of the reality being studied. In case of a misinterpretation researchers consciously or unconsciously betray the trust interviewees place in them to make a specific social world intelligible. This evokes the famous *traditore, tradutore* dilemma (Hancock, 2007), reminding us that translation always involves the risk of betrayal. Those who speak from a subaltern position always run the risk that their words will be used against them. During early field research, I engaged people on the street in discussion, and with hindsight, I am aware that I could

have betrayed the people whom I addressed. After all, what guarantees could I give that I would understand what they said, that their words were safe with me? These questions are reflected in the following note:

> The Friday after the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo, I am on my way to a meeting in Villeneuve and I decide to stop at the mosque halfway. Around twenty men are standing outside, chatting. It must be just after Friday noon. prayer and I try to engage a group of four young men in conversation I justify my initiative by saying that we hear "all these things" in the media and that I do not want to go by these media images, and that I would rather hear from Muslim people directly. They are quite cooperative. They tell me that Charlie Hebdo should not have published the cartoons of the Prophet, but that they condemn the use of violence. The moment one of them says that Charlie Hebdo asked for it, tension arises in the group. From the rapid exchange of glances between them, I understand that this statement is a source of concern. Some things are not supposed to be said to me as white, non-Muslim, and from outside the neighborhood. Do they secretly agree with their friend, but do not want to state it publicly, or do they disagree and do not want to be associated with this discourse? The others quickly take over the discussion. I get a sense of the importance of image management in the neighborhood and the limits of what could, and could not, be said to me. (field notes, January 9, 2015)

Opting for silence following the attacks is a logical consequence in the context of the criminalization of dissent. In this context, there have been cases when dissent was criminalized (Gresh, 2015). Still, regarding silence, Weselby explains Spivak's contribution by apprehending that "to truly understand the consciousness of the subaltern, we must appreciate the significance of their silence, instead of forcing their representation by speaking on their behalf" (2014, para. 2). One way of doing this is to acknowledge that people in a position of subalternity have the right to opacity. The right to opacity, a concept introduced by Glissant (Caron, 1998; M'bom, 1999), can be understood as the right to withhold information and to withstand the search for "absolute transparency" (Kenjah et al., 2019, p. 60). Instead of taking or collecting information from research participants, researchers should wait until it is given to them. This giving takes place in a reciprocal relationship, where both are subjects. Researchers who take or receive (the gift of) information, do not access the same knowledge.

Warren (2017, p. 5) understands the idea of opacity as acknowledging that the "other" "may not be understandable, may not be amenable to reductive conceptual frameworks." The right to opacity thus also means the renunciation of being intrusive. This idea is similar to Spivak's argument in favor of the right to silence. During my research in Villeneuve, I had to learn to respect silence and privacy and to accept that researchers do not have an intrinsic right to access the knowledge of another. Researchers can only invite the latter to share their knowledge. I relate the right to opacity to my experience with Muslim women for whom the choice to wear a veil was part of their private life, which they did not see fit as an object of my inquiry. As a result, I decided to renounce working on a topic that my interlocutors rejected, and privileged instead topics in which we had a shared interest. The acceptance of not fully understanding the "other" is what the right to opacity is about. The observations in this section lead to the following three concerns: How to work against subalternity in research? How to make sure research participants retain ownership over their stories? And how to establish reciprocity in dialogue?

Despite the difficulties around the use of language in asymmetric power relations in research settings, I nonetheless chose to work with speech. This is because language remains a crucial tool for establishing

relationships, and it is through narration that we can relate to the other. Speech has the function of Ariadne's thread: Sharing words is a means of connecting, with words we can create an existence and weave new worlds together. We create *ourselves* in relation to *others* as we speak, and it is through speaking that we *become*. To exist and to have our existence acknowledged, we need to inhabit the spoken world. We could say that the limits of language are the limits of knowable worlds (Harvey, 2000). The following section presents my explorations with making space for subalternized voices in research design.

5. Reconfiguring Research Relations Through the Creation of Spaces of Speech

The research configurations in which research participants are invited to speak play a part in their ability and willingness to share their experiences and ideas. Hence, finding more organic ways of being in (research) relationships requires a reconsideration of the position of the researcher working with those in a position of subalternity, and the power relationship this implies. Spivak's statement in an interview with De Kock (1992, p. 46) that "you don't give the subaltern voice" but that "you work against subalternity" is an enigmatic but interesting starting point. When asked how to do this, Spivak answers that "to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech" (p. 16). However, simply inviting subalterns to speak—in interviews, for example—does not address the issue raised by Spivak about one's voice. How to create space through research so that others can speak for themselves? As subalternity is a relational issue it can only be addressed by a renegotiation of the terms of the relationship. Additionally, subalternity is situated so speaking is also a spatial issue.

As a geographer, I pay specific attention to the spatial aspects of (re)configuring research relations. In this section, I share three observations. The first observation explains what I mean by saying that subalternity is situated; the second deals with the ethical dilemma of "opening" the neighborhood to academic inquiry and proposes a two-way exchange; the third observation is about reconfiguring research settings, moving away from face-to-face to side-by-side settings.

5.1. Subalternity Is Situated

When we say that people cannot speak and are not heard politically, this is only true for certain locations. The ways power relations determine whether and where it is possible or impossible to say certain things became evident during the trial against one of the first invited speakers of the Université Populaire, Abdelaziz Chaambi. When I attended these court hearings it became clear to me that what people can say depends on the spaces that they are in.

The Université Populaire working group invited Abdelaziz Chaambi, president of the organization Coordination contre le Racisme et l'Islamophobie, for its first plenary debate on discrimination, racism, and islamophobia in response to the attacks against Charlie Hebdo and the tensions it produced in the neighborhood. The goal of the debate was to make room for discussion in the aftermath of the attacks when Muslims and those associated with this category felt silenced. Two years after this event, Abdelaziz Chaambi was put on trial for his activism and several participants of the Université Populaire were present at court to show their support and to defend freedom of expression. The first court hearing was in Bourgoin-Jallieu (2017) and the second was an appeal in Grenoble (2018). The following notes show in what way the (im)possibility to speak altered as the group of people who showed up moved from one space to the other: from the policed entry to the

Courthouse to the institutional space of the courtroom, to the public space of the street, and finally to the private space of an association:

> In the highly securitized setting of the Courthouse, it is not possible to speak in the sense of making a political statement and being heard. The placard I brought was not allowed to cross the security check and had to stay there. Was it seen as a source of danger? It looks like specific security measures have been taken for this court case. I feel the tension of the security personnel. Have they been briefed about the supposedly Islamist character of Abdelaziz Chaambi and is that the grounds for their fear? Each of the thirty people that have come to the Courthouse in Bourgoin-Jallieu to attend the trial have to be screened in a prefab building: metal detector, x-rays, and questions. They can only enter this building one by one, in an unclear order, picked by the security personnel. I am to enter second while many people stand in front of me. Public officials and police officers treat us with a mixture of fear and suspicion to which I am not used. (field notes, February 15, 2017)

> The highly policed space of the Courthouse contributes to the criminalization of activists and has an impact on their possibility to speak. This became particularly clear during the second court case in Grenoble when Abdelaziz Chaambi could not defend himself through words because he was not heard, in the sense that public officials could not relate to what he said. The sighs, the intonation, and silent signs of disapproval of the judges looking down upon Abdelaziz Chaambi from their high seats become clearly audible when he spoke the word islamophobia. In contrast, when the judge speaks of a police officer called "Monsieur Israël," suffocated laughs can be heard in the audience. This is a silent confrontation of forces where words do not have the same meaning for those speaking and do not have the same resonance for those listening. It is clear which words have more weight. (field notes, January 25, 2018)

The conditions of speech become possible again when we leave the Courthouse and move to public space, the piazza in front of the Courthouse where those in solidarity with Abdelaziz Chaambi pick up a banner and placards to make public statements (Figure 1). After speaking on the piazza, the group moves to Solexine, a space that is offered to us to meet.

> Once arrived in this space, voices become loud. There is food on the table, prepared with care. Juice, crisps and hummus are going around. Those who want to speak, speak, although it is hard to contradict or even interrupt Abdelaziz Chaambi who is filling the room all by himself and clearly needs to blow off steam, and to release the tensions built up in his confrontation with the judge. I hear new stories from people I've known for quite a while now. Is it this setting that provokes these stories and new positions? (field notes, January 25, 2018)

The previous note demonstrates that subalternity is situated. What could not be said in some places could be said in others. In a similar vein, I understand the neighborhood as a locus of enunciation. What was silenced outside the neighborhood, in mainstream debates and discussion spaces (e.g., television and press), could not be silenced within the neighborhood. It is here that I was given access to inhabitants' stories and statements.

The above experiences bring up the question of what conditions make speech possible and how to configure "safe[r] spaces" that facilitate speech (Kesby et al., 2007, p. 21). Certain group and spatial configurations of

Figure 1. Abdelaziz Chaambi after the court meeting. Photo taken on January 25, 2018.

debate allow or motivate research participants to express themselves. My search to move from hierarchal, and hence vertical, to more horizontal relations has had an impact on the spatial configurations in my research settings. Which configurations could make the exchange of information flow in several directions?

5.2. A Tale of Two Towers

The neighborhood and the university can be seen as two sites of knowledge production. With one foot in each, I could establish connections between two spaces that were experienced as an ivory tower and a fortress respectively. The university feels like an ivory tower to many Villeneuve inhabitants because as a space of symbolic exclusion, it is inaccessible to them, despite being just across the street. Inversely from within the IUGA, the neighborhood also feels like a fortress because of its 1000-meter-long façade (see Figure 2; for an ethnographic exploration of moving between these spaces see also Dijkema, 2021).

In addition to these tons of concrete, there is an invisible border drawn up by discourse that stresses that the neighborhood is dangerous. With associative actors in Villeneuve, we took the initiative to establish relations between these geographically close but socially distant spaces (Breynat et al., 2016; Dijkema et al., 2015). To materialize this link, we created a mobile bench in the market square (Place du marché) of Villeneuve that for a while served as a transitional object between Villeneuve and the IUGA (Figure 3). We rolled this bench back and forth from the neighborhood to the IUGA until after some months it disappeared. Installing a bench in public helped engage in debate with passersby, who would stop for a moment and take some time to discuss, for example, the demolition plans in the neighborhood, upcoming elections, and other questions of public concern.

My hybrid position between the university and neighborhood associations made me aware of the limits, tensions, and complementarity of knowledge production in different spaces, and the possible tensions in bringing together actors from these different positions. Over time I realized that while our interests could be

Figure 2. Façade of the Galerie d'Arlequin, view from the park. Photo taken on November 13, 2016.

Figure 3. Constructing the bench that served as a transitional object between Villeneuve and the IUGA. Photo taken on December 17, 2014, by colleagues from Planning.

shared, the struggles and objectives of the different groups I worked with could never entirely converge. One important point of disjunction is the different interests in knowledge production. There is an important gap between the type of knowledge production that is relevant for community actors and that which researchers can valorize in academic writing and teaching. Tensions have also arisen between the confrontational approach of some local civil society actors that sought to rebalance power relations through direct action and a deliberative form of action that most academics were more comfortable with, especially

when operating in a professional context. For a more detailed description of (im)possibilities in this collective knowledge production see Dijkema (2020).

5.3. Learning to Stand and Walk Side-by-Side

In searching for alternatives to interview settings, in which information usually flows in one direction only, I experimented with side-by-side research configurations. These are group configurations in which the researcher is part of a larger group that collectively reflects on a shared question or issue. Two examples of side-by-side research configurations come from my collaboration with Agir Pour La Paix. Together with members of this collective, I organized a journey to Denmark and the Netherlands. During the journey, I became aware of the repositioning that took place when we were traveling. In the period prior to the trip, it was me who was a newcomer to their neighborhood, posing questions as a result of which, I sometimes felt like an intruder. In the period before the journey, we slowly became a group that prepared its discourse about how to (re)present ourselves to our interlocutors abroad. The physical displacement from a place where I was an outsider and others insiders, to a place where we were all outsiders, altered my position in the group. We came to stand side-by-side, observing a new situation together.

One way of observing together was to walk through different neighborhoods. Walking provided a more relaxing way of discussing, because silences are less problematic than when sitting across from each other in the same room, and bodies behave more naturally when moving than when staying still. Walking has a long tradition in ethnographic, anthropological, and sociological research with communities (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Edensor, 2010; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008) and more recently also in biographical (O'Neill & Roberts, 2019) and participatory research. Walking in the context of my research allowed me access to new spatial configurations. In Echirolles my interlocutors were "at home" and I was foreign; in Copenhagen, the city was foreign to us all (Figure 4); in Amsterdam, I was at home and the other Agir Pour La Paix members were foreign.

Figure 4. Wandering in Nørrebro, Copenhagen. Photo taken on May 19, 2015, by colleagues from Agir Pour La Paix.

Seeing these cities abroad through the latter's eyes was informative for understanding their experiences in Echirolles, for example, what the terms "quartier" and "ghetto" meant to them. The marginalized neighborhood

we visited in Copenhagen could in their eyes not be a "quartier" or a ghetto (as referred to by our Danish interlocutors) because it didn't have any high-rise buildings and was "clean." Despite the merits, it is important to point out that wandering in Echirolles required a significant commitment from the male youth members of Agir Pour La Paix. In their neighborhood they had to deal with curious looks, being seen publicly with a white middle-aged woman. The next section is dedicated to further exploration of what it means to create space for speech.

6. Configuring Spaces of Speech: Discussion Circles, Street, and Plenary Debates

Throughout my explorations, I sought to open up the one-to-one relationship between a researcher and research participants into a much wider circle and to engage with people in places that were accessible to all. To meet my objective of engaging with the inhabitants of Villeneuve without being intrusive, I sought to create space for public debate. Public debates are an invitation to encounter and discuss: If people come, they are driven by their own motives. The topics of exchange were the outcome of collective discussions and reflected shared interests. Configuring spaces of speech is a way to avoid extractive research because what is said is not only said to me, but is said to all those who participate, and therefore I do not exclusively capitalize on the knowledge shared collectively. The spaces of speech took different forms, such as discussion circles, street debates, and plenary debates.

Discussion circles correspond to a variety of debate settings for 10–20 people that involve both learning and working together toward a shared goal. Examples are regular meetings of collectives, weekly workshops in the case of Agir Pour La Paix, and discussion circles in the case of the Université Populaire. The role of the latter was to explore a sensitive topic in a relatively safe environment. It is the relatively small size of the group, the regulation of speaking time, and the round form of the circle that contributed to the intimacy of this space of speech. Although publicly accessible, in order to participate in a meeting or a plenary debate, one has to overcome physical and symbolic obstacles. Each doorstep one has to cross is a hurdle for voices that have been silenced. Therefore, the Université Populaire and Agir Pour La Paix also created opportunities for debate on the street, where the threshold for participation was lower.

Street debates are short and informal discussions in public spaces that aim to engage in conversation with a wide group of people, including those who are typically not heard in public debates and in institutional settings (e.g., community centers) because of the distance between institutions and inhabitants in marginalized social housing neighborhoods. The spatial configuration of street debates fluctuated as members of the Université Populaire working group would walk around the neighborhood, alone or in small groups, going to places where people come together such as the market square, schools, benches, and main roads. The configuration of this space of speech was fluid. Working in pairs of differently racialized people led to interesting results: We noticed that white people tended to look at me while speaking and that racialized persons tended to look at my French/North African/Muslim counterpart. To include these voices in the Université Populaire plenary debates the working group took notes, discussed and analyzed them, and transformed them into a kind of performance (Figure 5) with which we started each plenary debate.

Plenary debates were the outcome of a longer period of organization to which both more intimate and more accessible spaces of speech contributed. Each plenary debate brought together between 40 and 120 people. The setting of the plenary debates was made up of sub-spaces of speech: small tables, where discussion took

Figure 5. Université Populaire preparation of the debate on freedom of expression. Photo taken on March 7, 2016.

place in small groups; the arena, where speakers and participants addressed the entire audience; and the platform, where informal discussion took place before and after the plenary debate, in an informal setting around a table with drinks and snacks. The articulation between these sub-spaces allowed participants to go back and forth between the intimacy of small group configurations and the public nature of the plenary. A diverse audience ensured the balance between safety through some form of familiarity between participants, and contradiction through different social and political positions. Contradiction and disagreement in debate highlight the fault lines in the neighborhood—and society at large—and hence are an important starting point for understanding power dynamics.

What conditions made speech possible in these spaces with different levels of publicity, safety, and group configurations? In what ways did these different configurations of debate make space for subaltern voices? Making space means not only being able to speak but also being heard in a political sense. Politics, according to Rancière, is neither the exercise of power nor the struggle for power; it is about a certain equilibrium (Dikeç, 2007). Politics happens when one challenges the supposedly natural order and the place that one has been attributed in it. Politics occurs, according to Rancière, "when a wrong (denial of equality) has been identified by a subaltern group" and "when they [marginalized] make a statement of dissensus" (as cited in Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 972). Hence, politics "is the arena where the principle of equality is tested in the face of a wrong experienced by those who have no part" (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 605). Rancière's conception of politics is about renegotiating the distribution of power. Based on this conception of politics, I argue that creating debate has a political importance in a political context where people say that they are not heard. The plenary debates of the Université Populaire functioned as a political arena. Making space for speech inevitably challenges the status quo, because it involves making space for the expression of what is supposed to remain silent. An indicator that the Université Populaire challenged the status quo is that while the initiative was celebrated by many, it also met significant resistance in the neighborhood and beyond.

While it was a political choice to create these debates in Villeneuve at first, after four years it became a political choice that these topics should be shared more widely. At the end of the cycle of debates about the colonial past and present, the Université Populaire decided to produce a video and a theater performance that answered the question we initially set out with. They drew on the transcriptions and notes of all the different forms of debates and were created in a participatory manner. A group of motivated participants sat together to select the most important statements and stories that served as the script for the play—which was written by one of the neighborhood participants, who was part of the working group—and as the storyline for the video. These were both innovative forms of writing together the results, including people with different levels of formal education and written language. The video and play were performed in three different locations: in the theatre in Villeneuve, the public library in Grenoble city center, and an independently run cultural center in a rural village 25 kilometers from Grenoble. The video provided the images, while the theatre play could transmit the emotional weight of a colonial past that is still relevant in the present. In my village, I asked the local volunteer theatre group to perform the play.

Performing these stories provoked strong emotions both among those belonging to the majority society who recited them ("we did not know") and among the racialized participants of the Université Populaire, whom I invited to come and who now listened to their own words, spoken by others. In this rural cultural center, a lively discussion emerged about how the life histories of the inhabitants of this village had been touched by the colonial past, making space, e.g., for the stories of *pied-noir* families and their trauma, but also made encounters possible between the people of these two places. Evidently, power relations were not challenged in a structural way, but the experience can be seen as a form of speaking truth to power.

7. Conclusion

This article presented some of the obstacles to using speech as a meaningful way of obtaining information in the context of asymmetric power relations, as a result of which research participants are in a position of subalternity. The risk for subalterns who engage with researchers is that they may be misunderstood, misrepresented, betrayed, or dispossessed of their stories. The risk for researchers is that the ones whose knowledge they seek to access choose to remain silent, refuse to collaborate, or do not say anything meaningful.

The explorations described in this section are an epistemological inquiry into more horizontal research relationships and they are a methodological inquiry into developing research methods that create the conditions for researchers to speak with marginalized persons on a basis of equality, and motivated by mutual interests. They involve the collaborative production of knowledge that is of academic and political relevance: academic relevance because the research methods developed give access to knowledge that might remain inaccessible otherwise; political relevance because the methods developed make space for marginalized people to speak out.

These explorations took the form of creating spaces for debate on topics chosen together with collectives I worked with. Making space for speech means that space is created in which speech becomes possible because it is configured in such a way that power dynamics are mitigated. In this space, a public comes together and exchanges with each other about a specific theme. It belongs to the public sphere and is publicly accessible; it may form in public space, but more often forms in a space that is enclosed by walls and

a door as the latter offers a form of protection and separates the space from the street. This closure helps to constitute a group for a particular moment in time and a particular space. The creation of spaces of speech provided the conditions to make the invitation to speak ethical, to make speech possible, and political.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The metadata for this study are available on Zenodo (https://zenodo.org/record/7763080).

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