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Place-Making, Media Practices and Orientations. Exploratory Connections Between Communication Geography and Sara Ahmed's Critical Phenomenology

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Place-making is an activity most commonly associated with planning, design, architecture and landscaping. To speak of place-making is to underscore the importance of place in everyday life, and to embrace the idea that place can be acted upon by adding, subtracting or transforming certain elements of our environment. Often these are physical elements, but more sophisticated understandings of place-making involve social and cultural interventions as well – like community organising, public art, or local festivals. This paper starts from the question of what *place-making media practices* might be. Is there such a thing? If so, how might we conceptualise these practices? And why might that be important?

My concern with media and place-making situates itself within a growing body of work in media studies which has re-examined the entanglements of media and place. I review some of this literature below, but it is worth highlighting already that what I propose here is but one perspective on what communication geographers call the "place-media nexus" [Adams 2009; Adams & Jansson 2012]. There are many ways to connect place, media and practice, and this is a good thing [Moores 2012]. It is because place is a rich and multi-faceted concept that it can challenge well-established perspectives in media studies, and help sustain interdisciplinary dialogue with anthropology, geography, philosophy and urban studies. I will draw on all of these disciplines in what follows, using phenomenological vocabulary as a point of connection between them.

I start by arguing for a conception of place as a *meaningful configuration of proximities*, collectively enacted at the same time that it is always contested and "under construction." I link this idea to notions of enactment and performance in geography and media studies. In this view, place-making refers to a myriad, diffuse and everyday practices – including media-related practices [Couldry 2010] – through which proximities are organised and given meaning.

From there, I look at the concept of orientation as it is elaborated by Sara Ahmed [2006] in her book *Queer Phenomenology*. I situate Ahmed's work to explain why studies of the place-media nexus might productively engage with her critical and spatial take on phenomenology, before sketching out the way that she discusses orientation in relation to space, proximity and its habitual enactment. I attempt to tease out some of the concept's implications for an empirical analysis of mediation by working from three propositions: that media practices orientate, that they are orientated, and that they create and sustain orientations. These propositions highlight some of the complexities involved in thinking through media practices in relation to orientations, and to reiterate some of the implications, for critical media studies, of focusing on questions of "shared inhabitance."

This essay is intended primarily as a theoretical contribution to the ongoing debates around media, place, and their entanglement, and so I write in general terms. Still, I illustrate orientation's analytical potential with examples of media practices taken from my ongoing fieldwork on small-scale broadcasting in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's primary metropolis. Without a doubt, this inflects the understanding of "media practices" – and "media" period – which guides my contribution. By "media" I do not mean a diffuse and environmental notion of "*the* media" [Couldry 2009], nor do I think it is necessarily helpful, analytically speaking, to conflate "media" with devices, platforms, applications, and other technological innovations. For my purposes here, I work from a pragmatic understanding of "media" – drawn mostly from Don Slater's [2014] reflections on the matter – as practical assemblages which are often partly institutionalised and which are always given "media" status in a particular context. As Slater and other media anthropologists [in particular Larkin 2008] have shown, this allows researchers to concentrate attention on particularly meaningful assemblages, while retaining an open mind about the kinds of devices, technologies and sites that can constitute a "medium." Crucially, it also means that *place* and *media* are particularly interesting to think *together*: through one, we can understand the other better.

1. Place-Making Practices: Organising and Performing Proximities

1.1. *Place: A Meaningful Configuration of Proximities*

Media studies have recently renewed their engagement with place, as a concept and a lived reality. Notably, scholars have explored place-media entanglements through the lens of phenomenology, in order to interrogate mediation as a material and embodied reality [e.g. Moores 2004 and 2012; Krajina 2009; Moores & Metykova 2009]; place, in this material-phenomenological view, is a sensory and semiotic ecology in whose "textures" [Jansson 2007; 2009] media technologies and experiences are constantly woven. In parallel, work on locational media has re-opened the question of place in political economies of data and information flows [Gordon & De Souza e Silva 2011]. Media anthropology, meanwhile, reaffirmed the usefulness of place – as an ethnographic "field of residential affairs" [Postill 2008] or a "communicative ecology" [Slater 2014, Chapter 2] – to understand how media technologies are "localised" in various contexts, as well as how the meanings that emerge out of these localisations are in turn appropriated and re-purposed in "translocal" circulations [Kraidy & Murphy 2008]. Last but not least, place has been used as a vehicle to examine the "synergistic" relationship between media and the city, with media contributing to the city's "placeness" and, in return, the city's particular environment acting as a motor for political and symbolic economies of media [Sundaram 2009; Georgiou 2010; 2013].

This body of work demonstrates that place can be emphasised as a material and sensory datum, as a cultural artefact, or as a particular social and emotional configuration [for thorough overviews, see Adams 2009; Moores 2012]. Authors use place, moreover, to deal with the home, the car interior, the city, or the village. Any theoretical engagement with place and place-making requires some preliminary clarifications. I, for one, understand place as synonymous with "locality." Already this connects me with anthropological perspectives; crucially, it recovers place as a *collective* and *public* construction, rather than a private and individual one.

The multi-faceted nature of place is taken up by Arjun Appadurai [1996] in *The Production of Locality*. Appadurai writes that place is

> both […] a general property of social life and a particular valuation of that property [*ibidem*, 180].

Probing deeper, he argues that it must be understood

> as a phenomenological property of social life, a structure of feeling that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity and that yields particular sorts of material effects [*ibidem*, 182].

This property cannot be detached from what Appadurai calls "the neighbour-hood", that is, "the actual settings in and through which social life is reproduced." The difficulty of analysing place is clear. Place is a taken-for-granted fact of existence – we are always emplaced – and at the same time an active social process which requires the articulation of meaning and the confirmation of certain values. In addition, place is material, "phenomenological" *and* socio-cultural: it involves social disposi-tions condensed into objects (houses, roads, monuments) which in turn provide the always-renewed experience of "being in place."

To capture this complexity, we might think of place in terms of *proximity*. It seems obvious enough: place is commonsensically thought of in terms of what is physically near, or proximate. Yet as Appadurai shows proximity is itself plural, in addition to being fundamentally relational. To the "basic" fact of physical or ma-terial proximity, we can add: *1)* cultural proximities, which correspond to shared representations, appreciations, habits, cosmologies, etc.; *2)* social proximities, cor-responding to interpersonal affinities, kinship, attractions, exchanges, etc.; and *3)* an "in-between" realm of "experiential" proximities, which accounts for what we notice only in passing but which impresses upon us somehow, or what momentously enters our field of experience without our being able to make immediate sense of it [Krajina 2014].

In sum, it is possible to synthesise place as a meaningful configuration of prox-imities, where these proximities can be cultural, social, material and experiential in nature. Place is "made" from the dynamic interplay between these dimensions of everyday life. Needless to say, there is never a natural fit between different proximi-ties: people and things that are physically near may not feature prominently in our daily experiences or symbolic universes, while social and family relations that stretch across continents may be instrumental in making migrant groups feel "at home" in their adoptive city [Moores & Metykova 2009]. Thus, place-making is about giving meaning and value to certain proximities above others, and stabilising this configura-tion of meaning and value into a collective sense of what is "close" – or in phenomen-ological terms, "near" and "reachable" [Ahmed 2006; Couldry & Markham 2008].

1.2. *From Place to Place-Making: Organising and Enacting Proximity*

To conceptualise this place-making process in terms of everyday practices, we can draw upon geographical models of place as performance. Recently invigorated by "non-representational" geographers [Thrift 2008; Dewsbury *et al.* 2002; Anderson & Harrison 2010], these models have roots in sociological theory but find some of their

clearest theorisations in the work of Alan Pred [1984] and Doreen Massey [1993 and 1994]. These post-structuralist geographers consolidated an understanding of place as a "historically contingent process" [Pred 1984] in which institutions and social structures have a role alongside everyday agencies. As Massey and Pred argue, while people and institutions have different access to resources and unequal capacities to enforce their will, "ordinary" people inevitably contribute to the "stabilisation of meaning" in place [Massey 1994, 5], and shape its material configurations through the "paths" that their routines and resistances create over time [Pred 1984, 282].

This still leaves open the question of *which* practices are involved in the making of place. Beyond what Appadurai [1996, 183] calls the "conscious moment" of defining place, we have to look for its routine, habitual performance in a constellation of actors and activities. Urban studies have long used such an open-ended approach to practice and performance: following Lefebvre's theory of spatial production [1991], many urban theorists take for granted that cities are quite literally "made" and assembled by a vast and complex array of practices, patterned around equally wide-ranging socio-technical systems [e.g. Amin & Thrift 2002; Larkin 2008; Calhoun *et al.* 2013].

We might then think of "place-making" as an "integrative" practice in Theodore Schatzki's [1996, 98-109] classification: integrative practices involve

> many dispersed practices bound together by normative ends and emotions shared amongst those performing the practice [Rodgers et al. 2009, 247].

At the same time, it is important to remember that many if not most of the routine practices that are involved in place-making do not have "place" as a specific objective. For example, the enactment of place might involve regular commutes, witnessing signs in public spaces (posters, graffiti, screens), shopping and leisure habits, gossip and talk, all the way to grassroots organising [Buizer & Turnhout 2011]. Over time, these dispersed practices create expectations, affinities and histories – a collective understanding of what is meaningfully "near."This "nearness" is materialised in landmarks, histories, neighbours and neighbouring social groups, amenities, social and political issues, etc. – which are recognised, however fleetingly or controversially, as "local."

Where would media fit into these processes? At an infrastructural level, Nigel Thrift [2004] has shown that media(ting) technologies have long been integral to the ways people come to know *where they are in relation to the world*. This "knowledge of position" serves as a pre-condition for coordinated practice and social action – what Thrift calls "modes of addressing the world" [*ibidem,* 178]. If we think of place as a particular "mode of addressing the world," articulated around meaningful

proximities, then various media technologies, and by extension media practices, are *necessarily* embedded in its articulation. As Paul Adams elaborates:

> Communications are woven into places by daily activities [...] Such communications do not simply reside with pre-established and finished places; instead they contribute to creating places. [E]ach place still has its characteristic communications, and place as a concept and an experience depends as much as ever on communication. Whether visual, auditory, or multisensory, communications hold places together [2009, 167].

Following Thrift's techno-infrastructural analysis and Adams' communicational view, we can say that the enactment of proximities cannot be understood outside of the media environments in which it takes place; in other words, place-making processes necessarily involve mediations and concrete media practices.

Conveniently, the view of place as an enacted geography connects with models of mediation as performance [e.g. Barber 1997; Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998]. Indeed, Adams [2009, Chapters 11 and 12] has done much to map out the theoretical intersections through which practice and performance offer new takes on the relationship between media and place. What emerges from these intersections is that place-making media practices can be found in the "ordinary" processes in which audiences "perform" as audiences, in which producers perform as producers, and through which the relationships between audiences and producers are negotiated. In addition, we must consider not just the content that is circulated by media but also all of the activities that take place *around* content circulation, the sites through which circulation happens, and the socio-material "architectures" that gives some circulations a more or less stable and visible form [Rodgers 2014].

Admittedly, we are far narrowing the analysis down. Place-making involves a multitude of dispersed practices, including a multitude of equally dispersed media-related practices, through which proximities are collectively performed and given meaning over time. How to make sense of place-making media practices? In what follows, I make some suggestions about how *orientation* could serve as an analytical device to group together very different types of practices, within an overarching and dynamic understanding of place-making.

2. Orientations: Registering Proximities, Making Worlds, Enacting Place.

2.1. *Situating the Concept: Encounters with Queer Phenomenology*

Orientation is a concept which I encountered reading Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* [2006]. It is a phenomenological term, with roots in Edmund Husserl's

[1969] and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's [2002] reflections on embodied perception. It must be said, however, that my grappling with orientation has happened not through the "classic" texts of phenomenology, but through their critical and avowedly selective re-readings. I have favoured Ahmed's own perspective for three reasons.

First, she offers a solid response to post-structuralist critiques that have been levelled against phenomenology. Summarising these critiques, Silvia Stoller [2009] explains that phenomenology is accused of being empiricist, essentialist and ahistorical; challenged for its reliance on an unmediated and pre-discursive level of perception; and dismissed for being incapable of articulating social critique. Without being able to do justice to the nuances of Ahmed's thought, her very conceptualisation of orientation allows her to connect bodily experience with power-laden social orderings and histories. I would also highlight that through her consideration of racialisation processes alongside gendering ones [Ahmed 2006, Chapter 3; Ahmed 2007], she offers an "intersectional" [Collins 1986; Crenshaw 1991] reading of embodiment and emplacement that can guide phenomenology-inspired work as it tackles questions of difference, inequality and the production of norms.

In addition, Ahmed consistently avoids appealing to an "extra-discursive" dimension of experience and practice, in which these categories could be thought independently of their entanglements with discourse, or with the experiential filters of intentionality. This is so even when Ahmed argues directly for the relevance of corporeality, of affect and of emotion [Ahmed 2004a; 2004b].[1] Last but not least, by insisting on the ways that bodies, objects and spaces mutually shape each other, Ahmed is staunchly anti-essentialist in her thinking: her "queer phenomenology" situates the experience of queerness – which we can understand most broadly as the condition of being "out of place" and "out of line" [Ahmed 2006, 51-52] – in socio-spatial relations and interactions, rather than in an inherent condition of being queer.

Indeed, Ahmed's analysis thinks place and bodies *equally and together* – the second reason why I have found her approach compelling. In his argument for a phenomenology of media and place, Shaun Moores [2012, 53-55] distinguishes two points of departure: the first perspective starts *from the body* to think media technologies as extensions or novel forms of everyday embodiment; and the second focuses on what geographer David Seamon [1979; 2006] calls "environmental experience"

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[1] More recent critiques of phenomenology have come from theorists of "affect," for whom phenomenological thinking, by insisting on the intentionality of experience, aligns itself *too closely* with post-structuralism [Leys 2011, 457]. For example, in feminist theory, Elizabeth Grosz [see Kontturi & Tiainen 2007] has argued most strongly for a move away from the structured, "everyday" temporalities and perspectives conveyed by phenomenology. Addressing these critiques, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

– "the sum total of peoples' firsthand involvements with their everyday places" [Seamon 2006]. This is not to say that a focus on bodies and embodiment is incompatible with an ecological reading of mediation, but that there are different ways to target one's phenomenological analysis. Ahmed's approach stands out for its commitment not just to individual bodies, but to *spaces, bodies-in-space, and body-space relations*. This is particularly clear in her work on institutions [Ahmed 2012]. As she puts it in an interview:

> Orientations are not something bodies have, but worlds are orientated, which makes some bodies in place and others out of place. [Tuori & Peltonen 2007, 260].

This perspective allows us to start *from the dialectical relation between people and spaces*, to look at what orientations are being enacted, who does the orientating, and how. There are several advantages to this starting-point for the study of media and place: first, it strives for a destabilised and non-essentialist vantage point, which presumes neither bodily identities, spatial fixities, and mediating agencies; second, it emphasises the collective, social nature of place; and third, it re-situates media as "a 'middle,' an in-between or go-between" [Mitchell 2008, 4] which constantly feeds back between individual practices and the environments that they construct.

The third reason I have felt "at home" in Ahmed's work is because, by refusing to follow disciplinary "lines" [2006, 22-23], Ahmed leaves phenomenology open to entanglements with other traditions and methodologies. As I have shown, such entanglements are key to understanding place-making as a collective and multi-faceted process. And as will come out in the upcoming sections, I am committed to phenomenology only insofar as it provides a point of departure, a vocabulary through which to connect various perspectives. I have no illusions concerning the imperfections and failures that this strategic commitment involves; I hope that the dialogue opened here can make some of these failures productive.

2.2. *Orientations: Crafting and Inhabiting a Familiar Background*

Ahmed describes orientations in the introduction to *Queer Phenomenology* [Ahmed 2006, 3] as "different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others." She adds that

> Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance [*ibidem*].

"Registering the proximity of objects and others," first, implies a navigational activity, a "finding one's way" which is also a "finding out" as we discover things and

people along the way. Drawing on Husserlian phenomenological tradition, Ahmed describes this initial, active moment of orientation as a "turning toward:" we orient ourselves by turning toward particular objects, things, projects and people we single out as points of reference for our trajectories. Yet not all objects we "turn toward" become close in a lasting way. Not only that: it is easier for some objects and people to be durably registered as proximate than it is for others.

There is, then, a second moment, or facet, of orientation. In addition to being a wayfinding activity, orientation refers to the already-accumulated knowledge that allows us to "know how to get around" [Moores & Metykova 2009]. This knowledge "shapes" our spatial practices and discursive positionings – our way of "inhabiting" and of situating ourselves in a "world of shared inhabitance." Thus orientations are inherently dialectical: they are the maps that can suggest a set of a directions, but which exist only through the directions we actually take in the course of our lives. In this dialectic, proximity – in phenomenological terms, "nearness" and "reachability" – is enacted.

Crucially, the proximities through which we enact orientations belong to the realm of the familiar, to the "background" of everyday existence. Orientations are

> not only about how we "find our way" but how we come to "feel at home" [Ahmed 2006, 7].

This happens as we repeatedly "turn" in certain directions, and "tend toward" the same people or objects in our routines. These objects and the habitual practices that lead us to them become taken for granted. We know that they are there, close and reachable, and by relying on this closeness over time we lose sight of it. The consequences of this habitual proximity are enormous and entirely banal: spaces which are inhabited mainly by a certain type of bodies, like objects which are used mainly by a certain type of person, can take a certain shape – both metaphorically and materially – so that they will tend to "fit" the bodies that habitually use them [*ibidem*, 51]. As Ahmed puts in,

> bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the co-habitation of space [*ibidem*, 54, 58].

This "fit" that we continuously experience with certain places, situations and people, which we can also describe as a mutual "tending toward," is again not a *property* of bodies, objects or spaces, but rather a question of their "conditions of arrival" [*ibidem*, 41]. These conditions are renewed with each situation, even as they implicate the histories of habit and materiality. The objects and spaces toward which we tend are themselves loaded with the histories of their fabrication and their "ar-

rival" in our everyday life, while we are guided or directed toward certain objects by our life trajectories, by the social pressures that act upon us at all times, and by their materialisation in certain spaces (like the patriarchal home).

The orientations which precede our "arrival" may be the product of our own learning, or they may be inherited: over time, as an effect of repetition and social "lines" that guide us toward certain objects more than others, some orientations take on an appearance of objective structures – what Ahmed calls "forms of 'alignment,' or ways of being in line with others" [*ibidem*, 15-17]. What is certain is that orientations, as "ways of registering" what is around us, carry the hidden weight of familiarity, and certainly make some proximities easier to enact – certain objects and places "easier to reach" – than others.

Yet, in any case, orientations are *not* determining forces. They set the stage for any given situation, but the outcomes of our interactions with spaces, people and objects always result from the unfolding of experience and practice. It should be noted that Ahmed's concept of orientation can only be understood in light of its complementary dynamic, *attention*. Attention, in traditional phenomenological terms, is the momentary and potentially momentous process through which certain objects are highlighted, taken out of the background, to interrupt the habitual flow of our perception [*ibidem*, 29, 37]. Attention thus describes a "violent" (and often involuntary) but productive point of interruption [Stoller 2009, 717], from which dis- and re-orientation can indeed happen [Ahmed 2006, 5-6 and 48-49]. Ahmed's queer phenomenology is deeply committed to the possibilities of "turning" a different way, of experience opening new perspectives on the world [*ibidem*, 7-8].

Ahmed discusses particular orientations, or ways of being oriented, through questions of gender and sexuality [2006, Chapter 2], and racialisation [*ibidem*, Chapter 3]. I believe we can keep sight of the importance of these questions while opening up the notion of orientation to consider a multiplicity of "lines" according to which bodies and spaces are aligned, objects placed within reach, and proximities enacted. My own, rather different work on local radio in Abidjan – or "proximity radio" as it is commonly called in Côte d'Ivoire – has required me to "anthropologise" [Desjarlais and Throop 2011] or "sociologise" [Moores 2012, 59] the phenomenological concepts that Ahmed puts forward. In particular, I aim to "place" orientation in the city, by making it the very "stuff" through which urban locality emerges: starting from the territorial categories used in small-scale broadcasting and other everyday spatial referents (city, district, neighbourhood), I look at how media practices use these categories to make certain things "near" and "reachable," and not others.

It could be argued that this "dilutes" the phenomenological potency of orientation: its "deep" understanding of reachability, the generalities it allows itself in terms

of thinking social categories, and its commitment to "skin-level" analysis [Ahmed 2004a; 2006, 9]. I am aware that I also run the risk of making *everything* an orientation, and of "creating or reaffirming […] false dichotomies or problematically conventional ways of categorizing the world" [Desjarlais & Throop 2011, 93]. This unfortunately is not an issue I can solve here. It points to the complexity of using phenomenological notions in social scientific research. Yet I am convinced that, interpreted with flexibility and care, and drawing on Ahmed's own warnings about the assignations of identity, orientation can be a good way to avoid deterministic approaches and to account for the mobile, provisional and combinatory nature of categorisations in Abidjan.

For now, though, let us look in more detail at how, in theory and in concrete hypotheses, we can connect Ahmed's reading of orientations with the questions of place and media practices that I introduced at the start of this essay. In the coming sections, I do my best to draw on my ongoing fieldwork in four "proximity radio" stations in Abidjan. Because I am still in the initial phases of a long-running, multi-sited ethnography, the examples will appear as fragments, and will in some cases be biased towards the "production" side of media practice.

2.3. *Orientations and/as Place-Making Media Practices*

I have established that orientations, in phenomenological terms, are about the crafting of a familiar background, in which some people and things are taken for granted as "near." Enacting this world of familiarity requires the "work" of repeated turns, so that relations of proximity are constantly and habitually renewed, and through them a "world of shared inhabitance" constructed and maintained.

To ground this further, I propose working from three propositions, which can guide analysis. The first is that media practices *orientate* spaces and the people in them. The second is that media practices *are orientated*, caught in the various orientations that make up the context for mediation. The third, attempting a sort of provisional synthesis, is that media *practices create and/or sustain orientations*. Each proposition is intended to shed light on the complex relation between media practices and orientations, as well as sharpening our understanding of the latter in the same movement.

Proposition 1: Media practices *orientate*. They contribute to the "taking for granted" of certain proximities. They can make things and people reliably close. They can put other things within reach, or at least make them "easier to reach;" they can allow people to know where things are, and where *they* themselves are.

Conversely, media practices are less involved in the enactment of certain "other" proximities.

This proposition appears straightforward when we think of media ecologies – of course, taken together, media orient us in the world – but more difficult to relate, in a direct and definitive way, to the making of place, to a concrete practical assemblage, and even less to an isolated routine. I will nonetheless suggest the following example, taken from fieldwork in Abidjan. The owner of small sewing workshop in the large and densely populated municipality of Yopougon (west of Abidjan), tunes in every day, from 8:00 to 19:00, to *Radio Fraternité* Yopougon, one of two "proximity radio" stations in the area. The sewing workshop is open to the street, about half a mile around the corner from the actual station. Its two speakers in the back, supported by a worker's mobile phone closer to the front, play the broadcast content out into the street.

The sewing workshop's routine practice of tuning in and relaying broadcast content into the street can be read as "orientating" in several ways. To start with, it literally (materially, experientially) makes the station "close," and through this close-ness "aligns" the street and the workshop with the station. This is not an innocent alignment. It is partly "interested," because the owner of the sewing workshop hopes he will get station staff to buy his services (the workshop is on the way to the station from one of the few minibus stops in the area). This may seem trivial, but listening to proximity radio, I have found, is often linked in people's minds to the promise of "getting something out of it." For the workshop and other small businesses just like it (some of whom are gathered in listeners' clubs), "getting something out" of listening can mean becoming a client of station staff, getting cheaper advertising rates, or even sympathy from the local authority – since the station is owned by the municipality. In a highly precarious environment, the public enactment of proximity with a station – just like the active maintenance of multiple interpersonal networks [Simone 2004; Newell 2012, Chapter 2] – is indissociable from potential, unforeseen windfall.

But there is more to the orientations at play here. Aligning one's shop publicly with the station, in Yopougon today, often means aligning oneself (willingly or not) with a local authority, a presidential party, and behind them the violent history of their "arrival." This arrival is indissociable from the post-electoral fighting which took place in Abidjan in 2010-2011, and hit Yopougon particularly hard. The town hall, right next to the radio station, is still being re-built after it was damaged during the crisis; the station itself was looted, its courtyard occupied by various armed groups, and one of its journalists (later) murdered. In the current state of things, many people in Yopougon refuse to listen or to have anything to do with the station. This "turning

away" has happened partly out of political a(nta)gonism. More generally, however, talk and "ambience" in Yopougon – an area once known for its uniquely thriving music scene and nightlife [Konaté 2005; Steck 2008] – are judged to be dampened by mistrust and a deep uncertainty about public allegiances and communication in general.

I would suggest, then, that listening to *Radio Fraternité* Yopougon in public "orientates" the ordinary space in which this listening happens by proposing a set of alignments and signalling shared histories. I use the word "proposing" because there is no single interpretation that can be assigned to this practice: it can be heard as a matter of musical taste, a political stance, a "clientelist" manifestation of loyalty, or a claim to the carefree enjoyment of music and talk. But through the interpretations which do inevitably accompany public listening in the workshop, a whole set of proximities become taken for granted, both in their materialisation and in the histories of their arrival (linked to people's personal trajectories, to what they know about the workshop and its owner, to what they feel about Yopougon's recent past, etc.). Through these interpretations, I suggest, a variety of ways to conceive of and to experience "locality" routinely unfold; in other words, meaning and emotion are ascribed to some of the proximities of "place."

Proposition 2: Media practices are orientated. They are "caught up" in orientations. They take certain proximities for granted, often as an effect of power, but also as a result of the wider environment in which they are situated. Or: orientations affect what media practices can "reach," the proximities that they can easily enact.

The process that I have described above as one of *media practices orientating* people toward certain proximities could also be understood as one of *media practices being orientated*. The distinction is difficult to make, and perhaps unproductive: it is precisely because media practices are orientated, in the sense that they "play into" a wider orientated world, that they orientate us. Still, from a researcher's point of view the difference between practices *orientating* and *being orientated* is worth keeping in mind.

One way to say that the practice of public listening is orientated is to connect it to the workshop owner's opinions, his personal history, his reasons for tuning in to the station, and his conceptions of Yopougon as a "space of shared inhabitance." I would argue, however, that this interpretive gesture – looking at how practices are orientated – is more productive if we take an institutional or collective point of view. As I have explained above, the interpretive possibilities which accompany the practice of public listening tell us more about the *space* in which the practice takes place, and about the relations established between a station and its environment, than about anyone's personal opinions and preferences.

How would we say that institutional media practices are orientated? There are "traditional" levels of media-related analysis to consider here: the ideological dispositions embedded in political-economic structures, and their manifestations in discourses. Yet if we are to take orientation seriously as negotiated in and through a spatial context, and if we agree that practices always carry in their unfolding a "something more" [Slack 1996, 123] which allows the dynamic articulation of positions in discursive fields, then it becomes important to track orientations in a wider environment, as they intersect and are variously enacted by a particular media assemblage.

One example is proximity radio stations' relation to ethnicity, and the practices through which this relation is routinely performed. Ethnicity is part of orientations in Abidjan in the sense that it is an important mode – along with gender, class, religion, "generation" and race – through which spaces and bodies are "aligned" in the city, through which socio-spatial proximities are given the weight of familiarity, and through which cohabitation (or its breakdown [Dembele 2003; Roubaud 2003]) is both talked about and enacted. This is so even when – or perhaps because – most neighbourhoods in the city are heavily mixed [Freund 2001].

The radio stations, which broadcast mainly in French, cater to several of the dominant ethnic groups through local language shows, programmes dedicated to "traditions" and traditional music, humorous shows that rely on linguistic and behavioural caricature, and more serious debates during which local representatives of dominant ethnic groups are usually invited to provide their perspective. By giving airtime to multiple languages and groups, the stations emphatically signal their awareness of the "ethnic" diversity which characterises "their" area; they oppose this to small-scale stations elsewhere in Africa (Kenya, or most dramatically Rwanda) which are seen to cater only to a particular "community" by choosing one language over the other. It is possible to read proximity radio's performance of ethno-linguistic diversity as one of their primary claims to "local" status and one of the ways that they "make place."

Yet this performance is not straightforward: *it is inevitably orientated*. In some stations, certain languages are over-represented, giving the station an (unofficial) ethnic "label," more or less related to the actual regional origins of its staff, and more or less justified by the demographics of its immediate broadcasting area. Importantly, this "ethnic labelling" can also happen independently of a station's actual "ethno-linguistic" content, usually as a proxy for politics: "a mayor is of a certain ethnic and political background, therefore s/he has reserved staff positions for people of similar backgrounds." Such labels are usually not "true" but they are performative in the sense that they condition listening, the station's everyday activities and self-positioning. Several journalists, for example, have explained to me that they were refused

information in the street until they clarified that their own ethnic background was different from "their" station's. To add a final example to this complexity of orientations, a station's reliance on ethnicity-based institutions and hierarchies – such as "traditional" community leaders – to access local publics is double-edged, because many young people do not have much connection to their ethnic "origins" and favour a "modern" urban identity which actively turns away from "village" traditions and modes of belonging [Newell 2012]. All this to say: a station's practical relation to ethnicity and ethnic diversity is orientated not just by institutional arrangements but also by alignments which are part of the context, the *place* in which the station operates. In a complex environment, media institutions are not in full control of the ways their own practices are orientated.

Proposition 3: Media practices "create" and "sustain" orientations. They foster new, taken-for granted proximities. Here, we go beyond saying that media practices orientate, and that they are orientated: in both of these earlier propositions we could consider that media practices were simply "carriers" for existing orientations, without transforming them, without offering alternatives. What I am trying to explore here is media's active and transformative role in the social and material performance of place.

This final proposition is best left in question form: do media practices play a shaping role in the ways people "register the proximity of objects and others" on a habitual basis, as well as "how (people) apprehend this world of shared inhabitance?"

Empirically, it is too early to say whether this is the case for proximity radios in Abidjan. Conceptually, the question is interesting to re-open. How, in the final instance, do we as media scholars approach the mediation of orientations, and through it the making of place? As mentioned, place and orientations, are discursive in many of their materialisations but cannot be reduced to the "conceptual maps" [Hall 1997] of discourse and representation [Lefebvre 1991]. In addition, the diffuse and very loosely integrated/integrative set of media practices which works towards place-making is difficult to associate with a "media ritual" [Carey 1992]. Theoretically, then, the focus on place and orientations returns us to their phenomenological and ecological dimensions, implied in the notions of "shared inhabitance" and "cohabitation." This is not a simple matter of conceptual vocabulary. How we discuss the mediation of orientations ties back to critical perspectives on the place-media nexus. What I suggest is that this critical perspective is not entirely contained either by a deconstruction of representations and discourses, or by the evaluation of mediated place-making as a social ritual.

Crucially, the notions of "shared inhabitance" and "cohabitation" are openended in that they do not presume strong bonds or regular interactions between people and groups. They focus on space/place as the *very possibility* for the emer-

gence of bonds and interactions. It is an infrastructural level of analysis, a thinking about spaces and places in terms of latencies and potential. This analysis, attuned to the entanglements of power, is nonetheless ethically committed to reclaiming *the very open-endedness of space*, so that the registration and enactment of proximities may be as unconstrained, as multi-directional as possible. This is a well-established perspective in critical urban studies, which tends to defend urban space as a type of "commons:" grounds upon which, from the "weak ties" of shared space, unforeseen solidarities and everyday belongings can emerge [among others: Appadurai & Holston 1999; Hall 2012; Amin 2012]. This way of thinking about the spatialities of everyday existence, attachment and engagement finds echoes in Roger Silverstone's work [2007] on what he calls "the mediapolis:" the space of disclosure and appearance opened by media, which both constrains and enables our encounter with "others." What I propose here is a less media-centric take on the perspective opened by Silverstone, which connects to Ahmed's critical and materialist phenomenology, as well as to urban studies' emphasis on the infrastructural necessity of shared space.

Keeping with the amorphous, undetermined nature of "shared inhabitance" would also allow us to avoid anchoring our critical investigation to the normative perspectives which are already associated with place (in policy documents, for example), and which contribute to the *instrumentalisation* of media practices in regards to place-making. In "post-conflict" Abidjan [Banégas 2012], proximity radio practices are asked to foster "local development" – orientating people towards "positive" ways of doing and being – and "social cohesion" – transforming shared space into mutual understanding, and more generally a smooth, non-conflictual enactment of locality. Without arguing against "development" and "social cohesion" as productive concepts for critical analyses of place-making, I would argue that they *1)* risk burdening media practices with demands and expectations that aren't realistic; *2)* risk reducing place and proximities to measurable outcomes and parameters; and *3)* risk confusing place and shared inhabitance with the absence of conflict (leading, for example, to the fear of any "political" talk and the absence of on-air debates about local issues). I hope to have shown here how a commitment to place as a configuration of meaningful proximities, which is orientated in various ways, and in which media practices are both orientated and orientating, can move us away from such normative readings. At the very least, it should counter-balance these readings with an account of the everyday "work of inhabitance" [Ahmed 2006, 7], situating the critical exploration of place and media firmly in a sphere of familiarities, multiple belongings and provisional engagements, in which inequalities and differences are manifest, but proximities and habitual contact also have the potential of fostering new forms of togetherness [see Hall 2012].

3. Conclusion

Starting from the point of view of place-media entanglements, as they have been examined and recently re-invigorated by communication geography and phenomenological perspectives on media, I have argued for a flexible understanding of place as a meaningful configuration of proximities. In a second movement I have tried to map out some of the ways that research on mediation and place-making might benefit from engaging with Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, and in particular with the notion of orientation that she brings forward. Such a theoretical engagement would fit within perspectives of place and mediation as collective performances, and as partly open-ended assemblages of everyday practices. In the view that I have sketched out here, the concept of orientation allows scholars to analyse a wide variety of dispersed practices in relation to some of the routinely enacted and taken-for-granted proximities that sustain place. As a phenomenological concept, orientation allows analysis to remain attuned to material and experiential configurations in addition to cultural and social ones. Ahmed's considerations of racialising and gendering processes, combined with problematics of shared space and togetherness as they have been articulated in urban studies, open up avenues to think place, media and practice from the point of view of everyday inhabitance while maintaining a thoroughly critical perspective.

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Place-Making, Media Practices and Orientations

Exploratory Connections Between Communication Geography and Sara Ahmed's Critical Phenomenology

Abstract: This article begins by reviewing the recent literature on place-media entanglements, and proposes a "synthetic" understanding of place as a meaningful configuration of proximities. It then maps out some of the ways that research on mediation and place-making might benefit from engaging with Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology, and in particular with the notion of orientation that she brings forward. Supplementing theoretical considerations with fragments from ongoing fieldwork in Abidjan, this exploratory piece suggests that Ahmed's writing offers a fruitful point of departure to link media practices and the habitual spatialities of place, in a thoroughly critical perspective that nonetheless remains committed to embodied, everyday experience, as well as to the open-ended nature of a politics of "shared inhabitance."

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