

DRAFT – DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION  
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Dear WiSH seminar participants,

This article draft was intended to be longer and more fully developed. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, we have been unable to include a second ethnographic section and conclusion. As a result, the paper is incomplete. We ask for your indulgence and look forward to your comments and questions.

Rogers and Joshua

## Suspicious Times?

### Introduction

In September 2017, a typical South African headline appeared: “Bogus doctor jumps out of surgery window in attempt to escape.”<sup>1</sup> The story had all the uncertainty of the fake (including whether the fake was really a fake) built into it: “An alleged fake doctor jumped out of the window of her ‘surgery’ and fled as police conducted a raid at her premises in Soweto on Tuesday morning.” Surgery in shudder quotes – what *was* that place where she worked, in truth? As if to add to the “doctor’s” questionable character, we discover that she was a “Congolese woman, who had been operating as a doctor for the past 10 years.” The authenticity of her medical credentials and qualifications was an “as if” proposition in this news item. A foreign “alleged fake” doctor jumping out the window of her “surgery,” all to avoid capture for having issued medical notes for people seeking professional drivers’ permits.

The story raises the question of the trustworthiness of the credential as a material form (diplomas, degrees, certificates) that creates social value. But the credential does not carry its truth-value on its own. The credibility of the doctor and her credentials *as a foreigner* are also subtly called into question, with all that that implies in a South African where xenophobia looms just beneath the surface of public discourse. The story is thus full of ambiguity: was she a real doctor engaging in fraudulent activities? A fake doctor providing “real” medical notes? What of the trust we put in the signs of expertise and credentials? Others can try get to the bottom of that matter. For our purposes, let us dwell instead on what it evokes, inspires, creates:

Suspicion.

We propose that suspicion is the characteristic *par excellence* of modern subjectivity – not its excess, something to be relegated to the realm of irrationality. Nor is it an expression of enchantment, waiting to fade away. Rather, we take suspicion seriously as a mode of navigating, reading, and living in the world. From Cameroon, we explore how the power of elites and their moral authority is increasingly questioned due to their affiliations with freemasonry – a global secret society that traces its origins to Western esotericism. From the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), we demonstrate how people experience all kinds of signs – from things to people – as objects of danger and deceit that need to be carefully managed. Common to both contexts are the uncertainty and possible threat surrounding that with which one is in relation: institutions, things, people, infrastructures. And yet, connectedness is crucial for sustaining all life. What makes these times more suspicious than others?

### “Troubled Times” and the Idea of Suspicion

We are at a critical juncture. We live in times defined by an unprecedented free-flow of objects and ideas through real and virtual circuits, platforms, and infrastructures. Yet, this time is also

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/bogus-doctor-jumps-out-of-surgery-window-in-attempt-to-escape-11286093>.

one of great paradox. As William Connolly wrote at the turn of this century drawing on the work of Paul Virilio, we need to understand “the effects of speed on the late-modern condition.” On the one hand, the increasing “speed” of social, economic, and political flows fuels ever more movements of things and people (Appadurai 1996). On the other, the increasing speed of circulation and encounters is accompanied by or perhaps gives force to a growing sense of danger and uncertainty that triggers efforts towards social “closure” and retreat. This is the “ambiguity of speed” (Connolly 2000). This age of globalization and “millennial capitalism” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001) promises great mobility, flexibility, and inclusion as well as the compression of space and distance worldwide. At the beginning of this millennium, many advocates of neoliberalism as a panacea to world challenges said we were becoming one big, “global village.” Yet, we are all too aware that this moment is also dovetailed by deadly closures, restrictions, and distancing. Clearly, ours is a time marked by a heightened sense of flux and uncertainty. It carries both a sense of threat to and opportunities for examining the conditions of social life – that is, the conditions under which communal life is made im/possible in our times at different levels and across different spaces.

The resulting disjuncture between this promise of global mobility and inclusion and the reality of distancing and exclusion is stark. For example, we are currently seeing growing numbers of voluntary and forced movements of people leaving “hard” places in the global south towards destinations still viewed with “hope” such as Western Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand (Harvey 2000, Miyazaki 2004). Due to racial, ethnic, religious, and other fundamentalisms, many of these populations are also “shut out” at the borders, but also, increasingly, at home. For example, one of the major planks of the European Union’s foreign policy toward Africa is to use aid and trade to coerce countries on the continent in assisting them to stem the tide of migration by preventing would-be migrants from ever leaving their countries (see e.g. Nielsen 2016). The experiences of refugees from Syria moving to Europe or the USA as well as Myanmar’s Rohingyas knocking at the gates of Australia serve as prime examples of these “closures.” If and when these “different” peoples successfully enter and “settle” in these social spaces, many are confronted with ever newer ways of “talking culture” (Stolcke 1995). These include the politics of the veil or “terrorism” that spell similar kinds of exclusions and persecutions, precisely because of the same cultural fundamentalisms. In short, as Achille Mbembe (2016) has recently argued, in these times, our ability to live-in-common is greatly threatened by different kinds of ethno-nationalisms, inequalities, and religious intolerance as well as essentialist ideologies of gender, racial, and sexual differences we had wrongfully imagined to have long been *dépassés*.

The major French daily, *Libération*, recently wrote that though “dispersed” and however unlikely that they are unified in coordination, there is little doubt that terrorist attacks in France in recent years have served as a pretext for the re-emergence and growth of “radical groups of the extreme right” (Le Devin 2018). Across Europe, the United States, and Australia, it is clear that right-wing ultranationalists invoke and stoke a politics of fear of the “annihilation” of European identity. Violent jihadists or quite simply immigrants are depicted as “dangerous.” Perhaps more than any other political leader of the moment, the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency of the USA is emblematic of this desire for closure. Cultural purity and the promise of security in the fiction of a homogenous cultural community are sought amidst and in contradiction to a global economic doctrine of “openness” still championed by neoliberals. To “Make America Great

Again,” Trump insists, the USA must barricade itself behind the “wall” of the borders at any cost. Of course, discerning and denouncing the violent expression of this politics of xenophobia and exclusion cannot and must not be confined to countries of the global north. In Africa and elsewhere in the global south such as India, we are also witnessing the deadly reactions of nationals to “foreigners” moving under the seemingly abandoned promise of inclusion-through-flexibility by the neoliberal order (cf. Ong 1999).

We realize that for some time now anthropology and anthropologists have been working with the awareness that ours is a “troubled time.” For instance, in their introduction to a volume on “Millennial Capitalism,” Jean and John Comaroff (2001, 1) chose to preface their words with those of that controversial cultural critic of Western capitalist modernity and its colonial imagination, Joseph Conrad. In his book *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad had remarked “We live in difficult times, in times of monstrous chimeras and evil dreams and criminal follies.” Another notable anthropologist attuned to developments in the cultural and political spheres that spell dangerous and uncertain times is Paul Stoller. He is a notable figure in the discipline given his presence in the media through blogging and other forms of public commentary. He recently published a blog post entitled, *Doing Anthropology in Troubled Times* (2017) because in these times, as in times past, anthropology’s public character and role “matter” immensely.

As Stoller (2016) explains in an earlier blog post, understanding the rise of Trump and alt-right political figures and movements whose politics of propaganda and disinformation spew “fact-free assertions” cannot proceed outside the “deceptively simple response” that culture still “shapes our interpretation of reality.” Even more recently, following Stoller, the Dutch Anthropological Association announced that on 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2018 its yearly anthropology day would be themed “Anthropology in Troubled Times.”<sup>2</sup>

In this age, then, the resulting disjuncture leaves many in states of anxiety (e.g. Taylor 2013; Zavoretti 2014; Berg 2016) and insecurity (see e.g. Bubandt 2005; Pedersen and Holbraad 2013; Lorey 2015). The present, like the future, is “fearful” for many and this notwithstanding class, race, nationality, sex, gender, etc. – those powerful essentialisms around which human societies organize the distribution of in/securities and hate. Irrespective of these categories (although to different degrees because of them), we are called upon to recognize, live with, and negotiate multiple forms of uncertainty and indeterminacy, largely through a prism of dread—the politics of fear (cite and Mbembe ecrire l’afrique monde). This despite incessant appeals for love and solidarity from various corners in order to avert the (creative?) destructions of neoliberal capitalism on societies and the natural environment (cite). However, as Stoller himself remarked in his blog post, “This state of affairs,” including the trope of troubled times, “of course, is old news.” What seems to be new(s), we propose, are the ways by which people across different societies and institutions, and regardless of class differences, are elaborating “cognitive maps” (Jameson 1988) hinged on a politics of suspicion and conspiracy theorizing to help them “locate the experience of their situation into a meaningful Whole” (Žižek 2008). That is, these “maps” – practices of interpreting and ways of talking about worlds that are feel increasingly inscrutable – are inscribed in visions of suspicion as the organizing lens from which to make sense of things, people, processes, and institutions in the present time. Drawing from the disciplinary context of

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://materialculture.nl/en/events/anthropology-in-troubled-times>

anthropology and from the ethnographic standpoints of West and Central Africa especially, we wish to unpack suspicion as a potentially helpful analytic for understanding the present. We follow Charles Piot's (2010) perceptive remark regarding the relations between power, uncertainty and their effects for social life and analyses thereof. For Piot, the transformations following the "Post-Cold War moment" of the 1990s in contemporary West Africa cannot be understood using previous modes of social analysis. Rather, considering ours is "a time when power seems more diffuse and less transparent...the hidden nature and indeterminacy of power" fuels a political imagination driven by suspicion about different objects, people, institutions, processes, etc. These suspicions must be studied along some new lines even as we remain attentive to older trajectories of social interpretations. For this purpose, Piot argues, "stories" people tell about their local worlds and its connections to broader contexts "appear particularly conducive to current times" (2010, 18).

What is suspicion, then?

### Definitions

The trouble with suspicion is precisely that it cannot be easily pinned down. And that is also what makes it a potent concept to think with. Is it a mood? A mode? An emotion?

We argue that doubt about the viability and reliability of signs is characteristic of social life *tout court*. But today, the particular, and particularly acute, anxieties about signs and their meanings are symptomatic of the increased velocity of their circulation and its destabilizing effects. For all concerned in this moment, the task of making and interpreting meaning to navigate the world is full of both danger and promise. Danger, because of the increased slipperiness of surfaces and appearances; promise, because suspicion has, more than ever before, become a form of agency. In this sense, the double-edged sword of suspicion is the only way to live in these times.

There are thus two points to be made about suspicion. First, popular attention has focused overwhelmingly on those aspects of suspicion that produce the nostalgia for certainty. Much of the suspicious anxieties in the global north have been consumed with the apparent, increasing encroachment of "fake news". The election of Donald Trump in 2016 (and before him, that of Barack Obama in 2008) was marked by the rise of seemingly new ways of talking about and interpreting contemporary social and political realities. One of the most evocative of these is suspicion. If Trump's own presidency promotes a suspicious orientation toward the media ("fake news" and "alternative facts"), that of his predecessor was marked by the conservative fixation on "birtherism" (led by Trump himself, calling the authenticity of Obama's birth certificate into question) and conservatives' multiply-inflected visions of liberal conspiracies. This moment, epitomized by the tone set by the current US presidency, seems to be defined by a hermeneutics of doubt and mistrust, one that hinges critically on suspicion. But doubt and mistrust are not the monopoly of this American presidency, its affiliated conspiracy theorists, and the alt-right purveyors of rumor and racist innuendo masquerading as truth. Our lenses for seeing these suspicious modes of reading the world must not be confined to the humdrum of American politics and the frenetic character of its 24-hour news cycle.

The proliferation and appeal of doubt and mistrust, their evocation of related notions of fear and anxiety as well as their opposites, faith, trust, confidence, and certainty also characterize how

people everywhere are encountering and engaging with the uncertain character of people, places, institutions, and objects today. To understand the world in these times requires seeking out and recognizing the various ways these notions appear and are instantiated (temporally and spatially) across the different worlds that hold our scholarly attention. This leads us to our second point, and more importantly for our purposes, regarding the multi-scalar nature of suspicion as a concept that must be taken seriously as an object of scholarly contemplation and critical engagement to examine at both the interpersonal and institutional-global levels. Suspicion might be productively mobilized as one of the ways through which we can think *with* as well as *against* the impulses of the current moment both analytically and ethnographically. Ethnographically, it can encompass a variety of forms of action typically studied under the rubrics of conspiracy theories, secrecy, witchcraft accusations, rumors, etc. In this sense, the term suspicion seems to connote an aporia of relation and distantiation, a point of entry into how people express doubt, distrust, and make accusations of those or what they “know” and are “in relation” with, even as they strive to engage with them in order to make sense of, and build, viable social worlds. Analytically and epistemologically, suspicion is dynamic: it expands our modes of critical approaches and of engagement with our worlds. It evokes the uncertainty about signs, and about the relationship between signified and signifier. In this second sense, suspicion seems to be a central, even organizing category not only in social, cultural, and literary theory. We now turn to our ethnographic examples from DRC and Cameroon.

### Suspicion, Discernment, and Reliability

Foreigners are suspect in DRC. For good reason. The country has long been the object of foreign predation and intervention. Patrice Lumumba, the nationalist Prime Minister, was killed with assistance by the Belgian government and support from the US (see e.g. De Witte 2001[1999], Kalb 1982, Devlin 2007). This history has created the conditions in which conspiracy theories about plundering the country’s resources are also rampant (Smith 2015, Jackson 2001). Thus, the question about the foreigner as representative of structures of exploitation remains. Herein, we consider the body of the white researcher as an emblem or token of this history. We locate the white researcher in the realm of what might be called a “national structure of suspicion.”

Like many white researchers in DRC, Walker has always been subject to suspicion. Some thought, for example, that he had been secretly sent by the CIA in order to assist in the plunder of the country’s diamond resources, since his PhD research was on diamond mining. Others thought he was secretly, illegally buying diamonds. The exigencies of ethical research and informed consent operate according to a logic of transparency. But his attempts to produce the material proof of what he was really doing (showing interlocutors his student ID and other pieces of documentation relating to his status as a researcher) were often met with skepticism and doubt. Here we return to the question of the truth value of the credential as material proof. Rather than dispel suspicions, showing these credentials in fact simply generated more. For are the Americans not so clever as to manufacture “real” documents in order to try to create a credible, fake identity of someone as a researcher? And are they not, in fact, so cunning as to send a real researcher with ulterior motives? This is one of the ways in which the logic and ethic of transparency ends up producing more suspicion, in a climate – the national structure of suspicion in DRC – in which *both* official documents *and* foreigners are suspect.

Moreover, part of what generated suspicion around Walker’s research was, precisely, that he was a researcher. In the diamond mining city of Mbuji-Mayi, where he conducted fieldwork, there were only a handful of well-established categories of (white) foreigner, and researcher was not among them: missionary, NGO worker, UN worker, diamond buyer. “Spy” was a possibility that could overlap with any of these categories. By not fitting in, he was not therefore easily legible. He spoke Cilubà, like so many missionaries, but he was not working with a church. Yet he was interested in the diamond trade, but was apparently not interested in buying diamonds. And he did not represent any organization bringing aid. Thus, beyond the body of the white foreigner writ large as an object of suspicion, there was added ambiguity about his *particular identity* (or lack thereof) as a researcher. The fact that he inhabited an unknown or perhaps liminal category made him the object of even greater suspicion. At the same time, it also meant that he could be reinscribed in other, more fleeting categories. In the weeks following the resignation of the local soccer team’s French head coach in 2015, he was driving to the airport, wearing the team jersey. During the short trip, at least one passerby exclaimed: “Ah! He’s the new Sanga Balende coach.”

Our second example here also concerns differing assumptions made about the truthfulness of information, how it is disseminated, and what the act of forwarding means. This story begins with a message Walker received via Whatsapp from a friend in DRC on March 29, 2018. It began with a lengthy body of text followed by some images:

“IMAGES: A new continent is beginning to see the light of day: Africa is now cut in two. As these photos show, a large part of East Africa is detaching itself from the African continent starting from Nairobi. A phenomenon that was not foreseen by scientists! So, within 50 years from now, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Mozambique, Botswana, and a part of South Africa will form a huge island lost in the Indian Ocean like Madagascar today!!! According to certain scientists, in the beginning, all the continents were one, and such a phenomenon began to separate the current 5 continents. Is this the long-awaited end of the world that the Bible speaks about?”

#### INSERT IMAGES

As the photo above shows, the text was accompanied by images of huge cracks in the ground, apparently along the faultline of the new continent, and a map showing the described portions of East Africa broken off into the ocean. It seemed to be ethnographic “gold”: a clearly fabricated story about the physical breaking up of the continent that had all the trappings of a great metaphor for anxieties about African futures, their articulation in apocalyptic terms, etc. Surely, he thought, this fantastic story would also become intertwined in DRC with conspiracy theories about the West secretly engineering the breaking off of East Africa in order to get direct access to the minerals of the eastern DRC by ocean. Moreover, this was an interlocutor who often sent him conspiracy stories, particularly concerning Congolese and global geopolitics. He unthinkingly replied: “[A]ccording to certain scientists...’ – which ones? Where are their articles? This is more fake news, my friend!” No reply.

As it turned out, it was a BBC article that Walker saw a few days later which clarified things: the process that had been going on for millions of years in the east African Rift Valley had recently made news when a part of a highway in southwestern Kenya had cracked and split apart. Africa

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was indeed “breaking up,” but it was not new. What was new, perhaps, was the suspicion Walker had for the story until it was “confirmed” via a supposedly reputable news source. When he asked his interlocutor over a week later why he had not replied to his earlier message, he first did not even recall the message at all. It had, evidently, been lost in the shuffle of Whatsapp forwards and re-forwards that constitute one part of the blizzard of information in the age of social media. But when he did finally remember the exchange in question, his response as to why he did not respond was instructive: “It was a message that was sent to me, and since I hadn’t verified the information, I didn’t want to react, as I didn’t have any additional information.”

Herein we have a set of suspicious assumptions in the interaction that need to be unpacked. First is the question of the assumptions about what produces credibility. For Walker, the fact that the Whatsapp message did not cite a reputable news source (or any news source at all), made it suspect. This suspicion was amplified because he was receiving it from a friend whom he knew to be an avid follower of conspiracy theories. The interaction, however, was occurring in the spacetime of Whatsapp – one of the many new media in which information flows have become nearly instantaneous. The the possibility for this quick movement and spread of information has contributed to upending previous regimes of truth. For his part, his interlocutor did not attempt to verify the information, and made no claims to doing so. He was neither credulous nor suspicious. He was simply passing it along, perhaps with the unspoken intent to provoke a reaction of incredulity, to confirm the information, or something else entirely. We now turn to another set of suspicions, this time involving freemasonry in Cameroon.