

12 HUMANITARIAN PROFITEERING IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC AS CONSPIRACY AND RUMOR

I first traveled to the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2003. A new president had taken power in an armed coup three months earlier. I experienced the capital, Bangui, as a city in waiting. Like during an equatorial downpour when everyone finds a roof to duck under, immobilized by the deafening sound of water on tin, everyday life both went on and was held in suspension. People were waiting to see if this new president would remain in power and if schools and offices and other institutions of daily life would reopen. Only barely a handful of humanitarian organizations were present in the country, all with just a few staff members and focused on small-scale development and health projects. In the following years I came back to CAR many times, including for dissertation research in 2009–10. A number of rebel groups had emerged in the country's rural areas in the intervening years, but none reached the capital. Then, in 2013, another armed takeover of power occurred, and the violence and upheaval metastasized into a war. When I returned to the country at the end of 2014, I expected to find a situation similar to that of 2003: a destroyed city whose residents were collectively holding their breath. Instead, I found traffic jams and roads full of potholes due to the patrolling of UN armored personnel carriers. Luxury condo towers by the still-beautiful river had been quickly built to house UN employees and

diplomats. Generators growled twenty-four hours a day in these compounds, and the city's two supermarkets now stocked French ice cream. At the same time, all my Central African friends had wrenching stories of tragedy, or for the lucky among them, tragedy narrowly averted. Prior to the installation of the humanitarians, geography, visa regimes, and the cost of plane tickets meant that few Central Africans had direct experience of the wealthy world's life. Now, prosperity had been transposed onto their own world, but still with impermeable cordons preventing them from enjoying it themselves.

To me, these were striking juxtapositions. They are striking juxtapositions to Central Africans too. In all my trips to CAR since "the crisis" (as the post-2013 period is known, despite the inexactitude of this term; see Roitman 2013; Carayannis and Lombard 2015) set in, people have been developing theories about who is profiting and who is suffering from the violence and disorder. Through the years, many more Central Africans have gotten jobs in humanitarian organizations and are themselves carrying out humanitarian projects; yet, many are all the more vocal about the ways that such organizations are on the side of antisocial forces and fighters. After all, only if fighting continues will the interveners remain in business; therefore, they have a vested interest in secretly fomenting violence. The evidence of a wealth-violence link was both obvious and in need of uncovering. It was the conspiracy on everyone's minds, and it circulated socially as a rumor. Paying attention to the social context of this conspiracy highlights that conspiracies are good stories (L. White 2000) that explain misfortune and assign blame. They channel histories of dispossession that at this point are very difficult to redress and present them as current practices with living, apprehendable perpetrators. Conspiracy is not just a matter of truth, whether that truth is understood to be factual or social. It is also always moral in ways that entangle a researcher, too. Yet while conspiracy stories are compelling and convincing to many people, the people telling them or nodding along to them do not necessarily change their actions as a result. The number of Central Africans who have acted upon their conviction that humanitarians are immiserating them is very small and mostly limited to a subset of those who have joined armed groups and have other reasons to target humanitarians.

FROM RUMOR TO CONSPIRACY IN CENTRAL AFRICA

The Central African Republic has seen more than its share of armed violence, particularly during the colonial period and over the last two decades.¹ In the twenty-first century more than a dozen rebel groups have emerged in the country, and they include men-in-arms from CAR as well as from beyond its borders (Chad and Sudan; Debos 2016). In tandem with the armed groups' appearance, since the late 1990s, CAR has also hosted a dozen interventions by regional and international organizations (the African Union and the United Nations, among others) and by other states (Chad, France, Russia, and Rwanda) with the stated objective of helping to reduce the extent of violence in the country's politics (Olin 2015). Since 2013, the violence has become more acute. In response, international interventions have also ratcheted up to a new scale. The country currently hosts a massive UN mission, about thirteen thousand people strong. As the fighting peaked, the number of humanitarian organizations in the country rose from about twenty to nearly 150, some with staffs of dozens of expatriates and hundreds of Central Africans. These organizations and their employees make for a diverse lot of interveners, whom I refer to elsewhere as the "good-intentions crowd." They are often competing and do not get along, and they see themselves as different from each other, although they share being present at the same place (being a crowd) and generally understand themselves in terms of their self-professed good intentions (Lombard 2016a). From the Central Africans' perspective, the good-intentions crowd's self-description as altruistic is at odds with their individual lives of material privilege, as are the claims to be building peace, given that Central Africans have experienced unending unrest and decline. The divergences observed among the good-intentions crowd between ideology and material reality require explanation, and Central Africans suspect they help explain their country's plight more broadly.

A Central African friend living in the United States sent me a few photos on WhatsApp during a period of heightened violence in 2015. The first showed uniformed Caucasian soldiers standing in a hole in the ground, holding small boxes in their hands. The next photo showed chunks of gold. My friend messaged, "French soldiers in CAR. What a shame!" He wanted a moment of commiseration and shared outrage, but I mostly let him down. He saw the photos as visual proof that French soldiers were illicitly exploiting the country's mineral wealth, carting away box after box of it.

I was not so sure that the meaning of the photos was self-evident. Maybe the soldiers were digging some other kind of a pit—perhaps a latrine? And maybe the photo with the gold was a stock photo? Or maybe not. But I still had questions. My concern—and my inability to join in his declaration despite sharing his critique of the French soldiers²—was about how he and others passing on similar information linked clues. It seemed obvious that he was making connections and drawing inferences a bit too quickly about nefarious forces behind seemingly everyday practices.

Linking clues to identify antisocial hidden forces is, of course, a definitional move of a conspiracy theorist. And yet rarely are Central Africans' claims about profiteering described as conspiracy theories. Far more often they are termed rumors. Partly, this may be an issue of language. Few in CAR speak English, and the working language among Central Africans and interveners tends to be French (though the use of English has expanded rapidly over the last five years). *Rumeur* is simply easier and more expansive than *théorie du complot*. Partly, it is probably due to the ways Africa gets constructed as Other. The rest of the world has data and the ability to verify stories (or so people like to think), while in Africa, reliable statistical data are limited or inherently misleading (Jerven 2013), and therefore what is left is mostly rumor. Prominent explanations for the birth of conspiracy as a concept tie it to the development of states and capitalism, using the particular history of Western Europe as a model (Boltanski 2014), while the historicity of African states is quite different (Bayart [1993] 2009). Others make a culturalist argument: African culture is more orally based than European culture, so that recounted stories—a variety of rumor—have a larger role in public discourse (Ellis 1989); or the role ascribed to invisible-yet-active forces is greater in Africa than elsewhere (Marchal 2015). These factors then become intertwined with area studies' vernacular preoccupations. Rumors are much studied in Africa (e.g., L. White 2000; Geissler and Pool 2006; Bonhomme 2009; Musila 2015), and participating in the debates about these issues is made easier by retaining that conceptual frame.

Asking why Africans only rarely get to have conspiracy theories is ultimately less interesting than seeing what we can learn by examining this Central African concern about humanitarian nefariousness, which is usually described as rumor, to see what it shows us about conspiracy theories, a category to which it clearly could belong. And vice versa: What might the concerns attached to conspiracy theories teach us about rumors?

I argue that the conspiracy frame foregrounds the cognitive aspects of invisible ontologies; conspiracies are generally treated as convictions (explanations the holders of the theories are convinced of). Thinking with rumor allows people to better attend to the fundamentally social aspects at play, which is to say, to whatever extent these processes are about belief, they are also about enunciation in the context of interactions and the kind of social reality that emerges from them. Thinking with conspiracy, on the other hand, draws attention to evidence and materiality in ways that rumor often overlooks.³

Supported by the methodological and conceptual insights from the literature on conspiracies and rumors, this chapter demonstrates the moral conviction and social productivity of Central Africans' conspiratorial thinking about humanitarian profiteering. But while joining the conviction-centered (conspiracy) and social interaction-centered (rumor) frames allows for a fuller conception of what conspiratorial thinking consists of, the approach also raises questions that require further exploration. The two questions this chapter takes up both concern moral-ethical considerations: First, What is the relationship between conspiracy/rumor and what people do (or how does the conspiracy affect interactions beyond those involving the telling of conspiratorial tales)? And second, How do researchers get drawn into ontologies that involve an important but invisible element, as conspiracy explanations always have, both during the process of research and in trying to write about it afterward? That there are moral implications to explanations, too, cannot be escaped.

BELIEF AND SOCIAL TRUTH IN INVISIBLE ONTOLOGIES

As Lisa Wedeen summarizes usefully elsewhere in this volume, "Conspiracy theorists view what can easily be regarded as disparate happenings as connected, as intentional products of a force whose interests are ultimately served by and organized through another's victimization or ruin." (162). There are a few key elements in this definition. One is the fact of connecting things that other people would not see as functionally related. A second is the nefarious intent behind these hidden but discoverable connections. And a third rests with the helpfully broad word "view," which highlights that conspiracies are about perception or belief.

Beyond those three points, some scholars of conspiracy wend in the direction of functional arguments about groups and power. For instance, studies of conspiracies in the contemporary United States highlight the groups that conspiracy creates. To take one example: “Americans periodically have *organized themselves* around narratives about hidden, malevolent groups secretly perpetuating political plots and social calamities to further their own nefarious goals, what we would define as a ‘conspiracy theory’” (Oliver and Wood 2014, 952; emphasis added). Others connect the “group” aspect of these processes to power dynamics, arguing that to label something a conspiracy is to delegitimize it.⁴ The powerful label the claims of the less powerful as “conspiracy” in order to focus attention away from the content of those claims or the sense of grievance or injustice that often underlines them, granting them instead a “social-psychological status” (Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018, 171). But these approaches move too quickly from observation of people’s expressed affinity for a conspiracy to functional outcomes and relational positions. They tend to present conspiracy as an idea that can be analyzed and dissected in isolation from actual social interactions, which are inherently messier and unpredictable processes.

Scholars of rumor, another kind of subaltern truth, cannot forget that rumor is inherently a social process. Rumors are defined as ideas that spread quickly by word of mouth or its electronically mediated forms. Telling stories in this manner is not so much an endorsement as a popular research technique. It is a way to invite a reaction from a listener, which itself becomes part of one’s assessment of the information as well as one’s assessment of that person. Perhaps an essential trait of a rumor is that rather than a “pure idea” that could exist in some kind of idealized intellectual ether, it implicates events, gestures, and affects—interactions and enunciations (Bonhomme 2009, 35). Rumors do effective social work, in other words, by allowing people to gather and share clues, explanations, and worries, and to gain succor and privileged insight from others in the process. In CAR, conspiracy theories of humanitarian profiteering acquire a social life through exactly these kinds of rumor processes. But people studying rumor have perhaps not paid enough attention to evidence and clues, particularly to their materiality—which conspiracy theorists have shown is crucial. This case from CAR therefore allows us to explore both the ways that conspiracy can be about a belief and the ways that belief is rooted in social processes and rituals, which have their own kind of meaning.

Nevertheless, the problem of verifiability continues to cast a shadow over professions of the value or meaningfulness of social truths. That is, some kinds of truth are visible and verifiable, and thus are easily assimilated to the scientific methods of assessment that have become a gold standard for rigorous research. Others are inherently “invisible”; they rely on truths that cannot be studied in the same way. Historian Carlo Ginzburg (1992) describes this tendency to differentiate among generalizable/scientific/verifiable and particular/experiential/subjective realms as having forced an “unpleasant dilemma” on the more interpretive accounts of social life:

The quantitative and antianthropocentric orientation of the natural sciences from Galileo on forced an unpleasant dilemma on the human sciences: either assume a lax scientific system in order to attain noteworthy results, or assume a meticulous scientific one to achieve results of scant significance. . . . The question arises, however, whether exactness of this type is attainable or even desirable for forms of knowledge most linked to daily experience—or, more precisely, to all those situations in which the unique and indispensable nature of the data is decisive to the persons involved. (124)

Ginzburg makes a compelling case that understanding the world requires immersion in social life, not just natural scientific truth. This general view has provided succor to those caught in the “unpleasant dilemma,” because what it poses is not actually a dilemma after all: understanding forms of knowledge related to daily experience *requires* conjectural and clue-based ways of finding out about the world, which remove evidence as verified by scientific process from its pedestal, providing space for other ways of making sense of the world.

But the realms of visible and invisible ontologies are not always so easily bridged. Or, put otherwise, it is possible that both are correct, that conjectural, clue-based, and social ways of finding out about the world allow access to insights not provided by Galilean techniques, and that those social modes of knowing the world have important limits. In particular, there are ethical and moral matters they do not, in and of themselves, address, as this case from CAR also lets us understand. But first let us see what “good stories” (L. White 2000, 30) Central Africans tell about the problems that afflict them, and especially about the stratification they experience with new potency.

HUMANITARIAN PROFITEERING

The following quote from a discussion with members of a local association in the capital city, Bangui, in March 2016, gives a sense of how Central Africans talk about the good-intentions crowd.⁵ The speaker was a man in his early forties:

For me, I am tempted to say the UN has a hidden plan. Pretty much all the actors [elites] in CAR benefit from the crisis. The hidden plan is for the UN to permit different countries to exploit our natural resources and to permit their people, who are involved in the management of the crisis, to buy gold, diamonds, animal pelts, and even parrots. The exploitation is under the cover of the UN and escapes the state's control. Is the UN providing a service to the Central African population or is it putting in place the conditions for the next crises? We do not understand anything in this.

"We do not understand anything in this," the man says, but in fact, he was fairly sure he did understand it—he saw the foreigners, and the UN in particular, as present in CAR to get rich and further eviscerate the state and the nation, just as he described. But profiteering at the expense of the weak is deeply antisocial and immoral and, therefore, incomprehensible to someone who wants to see himself as operating on the side of the good. That final expression—"we do not understand anything"—was not a statement of ignorance, but one of moral approbation: what the alleged peacekeepers are doing is wrong, and it is part of an invisible world that produces "sensible outputs" (Fields 2001, 293). The outputs are sensible in both senses of the term: they are apparent and observable, and they seem reasonable. The key thing about an invisible ontology is that the invisibility is not a reason to call into question its existence, since invisibility is a prior assumption.⁶ With his statements, this man was enunciating a sense of aspirational shared values about wealth and its distribution, when in fact values centered on wealth (how much one person should accumulate and display, how much should be shared) are incredibly contested in CAR. His belief in the truth of what he was saying cannot be severed from the various imperatives he felt to verbalize moral critique. His statements can be understood only in the inherently social context of a focus group and his own status as the intellectual of the group, someone to whom others deferred for his insight and spoken acuity. His stories effectively conveyed "ideas and points" that helped explain what people experience

as predicaments, as Luise White (2000) found in her study of vampire and other blood-related conspiracy-rumors in colonial southern Africa:

People do not always speak from experience—even when that is considered the most accurate kind of information—but speak with stories that circulate to explain what happened. This is not to say that people deliberately tell false stories. The distinction between true and false stories may be an important one for historians, but for people engaged in contentious arguments, explanations, and descriptions, sometimes presenting themselves as experts, or just in the best possible light, it may not matter: people want to tell stories that work, stories that convey ideas and points. (30)

The stories “work” because they explain things according to the suspicions, presuppositions, and concerns that people have.

The Central African colleague I worked with on this research was somewhat caught in between: he, like other Central Africans, understood both why these stories were true (in moral and factual ways) and, having lived in France to study anthropology, he also understood something of my skepticism. He put me in contact with people he saw as especially insightful, often because they had been privy to insider relations with the actors known for their nefarious profiteering. One such person had had a short tenure as a high-level government employee overseeing extractive industries, but at the time we met, he was no longer employed in a salaried way. In our conversation, he took up the issue of the peacekeeper and humanitarian interest in profiteering. “These forces [peacekeepers] have morality problems. They are *businessseurs*. They are buying diamonds, gold, other stuff. They do it openly.” When, eager verifier of facts that I am, I asked where, he explained:

The days they get their salaries you will see a whole market develop around their bases. This is from about the twenty-third to the fifth of the month. They are buying all sorts of things, including diamonds. Sometimes they even get duped by the fraudsters! . . . All this peacekeeping is a game in order to give them time to go fishing [meaning get wealth]. It’s a good job, and they want it to continue.

An alternate reading of these payday scenes would posit them as evidence of excellent new opportunities for Central Africans: supply and demand working efficiently and to the benefit of all. But for this interlocutor, the

existence of a market *itself* was a sensible output confirming the existence of illicit profit-making at Central Africans' expense.

Around the time of this conversation, I participated in a meeting that involved a UN security briefing. "Central Africans are always watching us," the former French officer in charge of the briefing stressed. He said this in the context of a warning about all the ways Central Africans had developed to steal from foreigners. I found the concern exaggerated (I once had a watch stolen in Bangui, but nothing else). But he was correct in saying that Central Africans are preoccupied with trying to understand these new peacekeeping/humanitarian strangers in their midst, strangers who often seemed intent on avoiding the kind of contact with Central Africans that would otherwise make them seem like normal social actors. The Central African researcher with whom I collaborated for this research related his own stories about how people would socially share evidence gleaned from their contacts with the good-intentions crowd. The luxury towers that had sprouted up by the riverside, what they had inside, and how much it all cost were topics that came up repeatedly. Someone working as a cleaner or a cook in an expatriate house might overhear the cost of the house rental, when even just a room in an expatriate-standard house was going for US\$1,000 per month. A housekeeper might at some point get a glance at a pay stub or other paperwork left out on the table demonstrating the vast discrepancy between his own take-home pay (perhaps US\$100 per month) versus his employer's (if a UN employee, easily over US\$10,000 month). A waiter does not have to trouble himself to see the total tab even parsimonious diners rack up at the elite-oriented restaurants, where main courses are generally US\$20 or more. Gathering evidence, particularly in material form, is something often overlooked or underplayed in studies of rumor, which tend to emphasize the story over its sensible traces.

To a wealthy expatriate, there is nothing surprising or in need of explanation here: some places and people are rich and reap the benefits; some places and people are poor. Whether attributable to luck, divine power, or fate, such unfairness is simply the way of the world. But to many Central Africans, the inequality demands a combination of explanation and approbation. And the explanation that links all these clues and questions together is that the foreigners' real interests lie in resource exploitation and fomenting conflict so as to keep themselves wealthy and Central Africans poor. Central Africans make similar arguments about the nefarious greed of rebel leaders and local politicians, whom they also

see as authors and perpetrators of the curse of being a regular Central African today. But whereas those modes of profiting are more expected, the well-intentioned interveners' profiteering is only half obvious, half hidden by their humanitarian self-justifications, and from that comes an added frisson in uncovering it: it seems like the crucial missing piece in the puzzle.

The half-hiddenness of peacekeeper profiteering also means that people who can position themselves as having credible insider knowledge and material proof become socially more important as storytellers and shapers of circulating ideas about these matters. How insights about conspiracy bolster relations of social status, expertise, and dependency became particularly clear to me through a long conversation with a captain in the Central African military in March 2016. My Central African colleague had arranged the meeting, saying that the captain was known for always having interesting things to say and for being privy to things the rest of us could never hope to directly observe but wanted to know about. We sat on the captain's porch; his house was at the back of a large but bare concession with a high wall around it. The captain, close to retirement if not already pensioned, held a folder of documents carefully on his lap. He said he had been close to the former president, Bozizé, and that "they" (he did not explain who) had even tried to assassinate him once, a sign of his importance. When I asked him about the presence of international forces in CAR, he replied:

Things are difficult here now. There is no advantage to having the international forces here. They aren't playing their role. There has been pillaging and rapes, including by Sangaris [the French troops]. The French are the ones who give the UN mission prescriptions about what to do. And France just wants our rich subsoil. Ever since independence there was an agreement: what's over the surface is ours; what's under the surface is theirs.

Indeed, at independence, France had signed agreements with each of its former colonies securing privileged access to resources and military cooperation. By now, however, French commercial interests in CAR are vanishingly small (S. Smith 2015). At least officially. The captain continued:

It's the French who brought this war between Christians and Muslims. They intervened. And then it's gotten worse. People killed Christians right in front of the French. Then the French fire on

us. It's not good. They themselves [the French] give weapons. It's a reality. They brought in 184 Peulh [Muslim pastoralists with both long-standing presence and long-standing national ambiguity across West and Central Africa] by helicopter to Mpoko [the capital's airport], where they eat in the cafeteria with the other soldiers. They outfit them with UN uniforms—the blue helmets—and then they send them out to wreak havoc. . . . They are mixed up with the Rwandan peacekeepers. We know this because there were some deaths and it was confirmed that a victim was in fact Peulh and not Rwandan like the uniform he was wearing.

All that, it's France. Why do they greenlight Seleka [an umbrella term for mostly Muslim rebel groups]? Why do they bring them munitions? How does Seleka get the ammunition if not from the French? How did they get stocked? Seleka does not economize when they shoot—they just shoot, shoot, shoot. So they must have been supplied. And it must have been the French. There was a UN vehicle carrying five containers of guns at the central mosque. The next day the clashes were much worse. How could that happen, when they had been out of ammunition? We [high-level officers, people in the know] got called and were informed that the provisioning was in progress. And then the next day we saw the worst attacks.

In the captain's stories and arguments, the airport played an important role as a site where some things were visible and others were impossible to effectively surveil, and as a site of power and mobility. He said, "Each time, we don't know what they [the French] hide in the boxes they put in the airplanes bound for France." And yet he knew exactly what he thought went into those planes: boxes of diamonds and gold and even ivory. When I asked how he knew, he said he had heard from General Tumenta, the Cameroonian force commander of the UN mission in CAR (who had died a few months earlier, during his tenure as force commander).⁷ General Tumenta had told him, "Don't collaborate with the French. They are thieves." The issue, the captain further explained, is that there is an agency at the airport that is supposed to check what goes on any plane, but they do not really do their job in the case of the French. Military planes never get properly checked. There is, in other words, something that is constitutively invisible or opaque and that becomes constitutive evidence of profiteering interests.

The captain's overall analysis was clear. The peacekeepers in general and the French in particular were augmenting the conflict, and doing so permitted them to continue to exploit resources. His connections to insider circuits of knowledge, his claim to be able to definitively interpret statements that might otherwise seem ambiguous, the documents on his lap—all bolstered the social ways that he could be read as well-informed by his compatriots. Among Central Africans, official channels and venues of information are seen as an instrumental veneer covering what is actually going on but probably can never be definitively known.⁸ Therefore, accessing at least a portion of those truths requires networks of insider knowledge as well as the ability to obtain and pass on that knowledge in particular ways—such as to people in the neighborhood who regard the possessor of the information as an important person, a status that comes in part from having such knowledge.⁹ The knowledge, by definition, cannot be accessed through fact-checking, because the official facts are seen as designed to hide the real truth underneath. Being able to effectively mediate between and explain the interplay between the visible (what everyone can observe) and the invisible (what only some can access) therefore becomes key to telling a good story, one by which people will feel edified. Material evidence can be crucial in that respect: photos shared on WhatsApp or insider documents.

The captain never showed us the documents in his folder. I had another appointment, so I could only stay for two hours. My colleague said they were documentary proof of the veracity of his claims, which we would have seen if only we had stayed longer. My hunch was that they would be more mirror-like than transparent in their content, as Mariane Ferme (2001) has described what she terms “the real” being “hermeneutically encoded” in Sierra Leone:

Truth is what lies under multiple layers of often conflicting meanings. In this hermeneutic encoding of the real, the shifting order of visibility works less as a transparent surface, through which deep intentions and knowledge become accessible, than as a mirror, which mimetically doubles what is in front without giving away what is beyond the reflection. The impossibility of appealing to the truth behind the surface makes contestation an integral aspect of arriving at the truth, despite apparent declarations to the contrary on the part of social actors. (7)

To whatever extent such “hermeneutic encoding” is a Central African cultural trait, it is augmented by the way that the official narratives of what interveners are doing in CAR (“peacekeeping as peacebuilding”) are so out of tune with what Central Africans observe them to be doing, namely, making money and otherwise benefiting from material privilege (“peacekeeping as enterprise”; Jennings 2016). Central Africans analyze and interpret the evidence that surrounds them and have found a resonant way to talk about the “public secret” (Taussig 1999; Geissler 2013) of global wealth disparities and, moreover, a way to do so that foregrounds moral concerns and ensures that those concerns about morality and inequality remain part of broader conversations.

At the end of my notes from our conversation with the captain, I wrote, “Yeesh, that was a lot of blaming other people!” While no one could disagree that the interveners made princely salaries in comparison to Central Africans and enjoyed other luxuries as a result of their jobs in CAR,¹⁰ I was less convinced that boxes of diamonds were being loaded into every French plane, hidden in plain sight. I considered the debates in the French media and diplomatic circles about the cost of the Sangaris mission (800,000 euros per day). There, the concern was not to keep the mission going but to end it as soon as possible. I saw how the captain’s stories provided a way to express moral outrage over material stratification,¹¹ which is otherwise immensely hard to talk about, owing to its status as a public secret in the world of allegedly equal nation-states. But I also had trouble fully inhabiting the social, interactional, enunciation, and material evidence-based aspects that made the stories work for so many Central Africans.

Underlying Central Africans’ concerns with humanitarian profiteers is a preoccupation: “Why are we poor?” To the good-intentions crowd and other outsiders who have interests in the country, that question seems naive or beside the point. *Obviously*, goes their line of thought, the country is poor because it had a difficult colonial history (but that was long ago, no use thinking about reparations—think of all that France and other countries have done for CAR since), and because it has had self-aggrandizing leaders since, and crucially, because warlords now profit from violence. If the country gets on the “good governance” straight and narrow, it could be fine. A bit of misfortune, a lot of Central African complicity, a need to hew more closely to capitalist-state ideal types: that is the general diagnosis and prescription. This view owes much to the post-Cold War division of the world into allegedly equal nation-states, in which the maintenance of the state system is the highest goal (Ghosh 1994). This makes it possi-

ble to “compare newly like sovereign states—suddenly Senegal was ‘just like’ France and could be compared as such. Rather than demonstrating the disastrous relational effects of colonialism, these tools [GDP and other state-based economic measures] were employed to demonstrate global poverty in ostensibly discrete nation-states and to intervene, now in the name of economic growth” (Appel 2017, 298). This model is easier to take for granted by those people and those countries that have been the winners of these relational histories than it is by the less fortunate.

Social scientists have often seen it as our role to champion that plane of the social, to bring back in the “relational effects” that have brought far more injustice for some than for others. In this vein, we argue for the importance of stories that account for and express outrage over material and other forms of stratification. We are interested in what counts as a “good story” and why; and often good stories are those that effectively explain the connections between the visible/speakable and the invisible/difficult to otherwise express. But it is important to consider not just what a good story is but also what a good story *does*. Or rather: What do people who have told or heard a story and deemed it good (informative, expressive of truth) then do? If someone understands the story to be true, does that shape how they then behave and with whom they associate? It turns out that conspiracy can be a big part of how people understand the world, while at the same time, the actions people justify in light of the conspiracy can be varied. People do not always feel the need for there to be consistency between who or what they identify as nefarious or antisocial and their own spheres of operation and opportunity. A person might share conspiracy stories, consider them true stories and even important stories, but not use them to further the goal of self-consistency in belief and behavior. Recognizing these varied pathways from conspiracy into action is also necessary to any project of taking conspiracy seriously.

WHAT FOLLOWS FROM CONSPIRACY?

I have heard many Central African critiques of humanitarian profiteering, but I have never heard of a Central African refusing a humanitarian job on principle. The Euro-American head of an international humanitarian NGO in CAR, employing some forty expatriate staff and four hundred Central Africans, brought in a psychologist to speak with the staffers after their offices were attacked toward the end of 2015. The psychologist reported

that many of the Central African staff said that such attacks were understandable given how many humanitarian workers were participating in and fomenting violence in the country for their own profit. The NGO head was troubled that even Central Africans in the heart of the humanitarian enterprise (who, she assumed, should know that the allegations were false) were convinced of their truth. There are many reasons why someone who understood humanitarians to be authors of nefarious profiteering might still work in the humanitarian sector. Certain organizations or agencies get pinpointed as particularly bad, and others as less antisocial, for instance. Moreover, there are few jobs in CAR, and many Central Africans, while critical of the unequal structure of humanitarian aid, take satisfaction in earning a living while providing for the basic needs of people dealing with upheaval and desperate circumstances. They might also develop camaraderie with their fellow employees, such as during long and difficult road journeys around the country. In short, I mean no critique in pointing out that many Central Africans are both convinced that humanitarians are nefarious, conflict-mongering profiteers and nonetheless jump at the opportunity to work in that branch themselves. These divergences are interesting not because they are evidence of hypocrisy but because they demonstrate that conspiracy thinking does not lead functionally either to action or to a search for consistency between belief and action. People might relate to a conspiracy with conviction, and people might have fruitful social encounters around conspiracy—they might agree that these are “stories that work”—and yet, their actions and interactions are not determined by the conspiracy-related beliefs and encounters.

An interaction with two vocal proponents of the humanitarian-profiteering theory helped me further examine the apparent disconnect between belief and actions. In Bangui in December 2014, I attended a Saturday morning meeting between peacekeeping officers and “the community” in a borderland zone of the city that had until a few weeks prior been the site of frequent physical violence and criminality. During the meeting, military officers sat on a raised platform, while the community members (actually, a select group of invitees chosen for their positions as government officials or local organization officers; I was there at the invitation of a peacekeeper officer) sat on monobloc chairs in rows in front of them. A roof provided shade from the early dry-season morning heat. The military officers gave speeches, and then, one by one, people among the assembled audience requested the opportunity to voice their concerns

and thoughts. Toward the end, a young man in a fresh, bright polo shirt (broadcasting both urban youth cool and professional cosmopolitanism) claimed the microphone and proclaimed in a vehement tone, “The origin of the crisis in CAR is the international community.” He continued in this vein for about ten minutes before ceding the microphone to another.

When the meeting ended, I sought out the young man, who described himself as a rebel leader, and asked if he would be willing to expand on his ideas. We met the following week at a café of long-standing popularity (although not the current “see and be seen” spot) in the city center. I was late and had phoned to say he should order something to eat and drink. Arriving from the main street, I walked through the indoor section of the café, noting a French soldier at one table, and noting that he noted me. I continued to the back, outdoor area, where a ring of *paillottes* was in place for individual parties and found my interlocutor there. A friend accompanied him. I will call my original interlocutor Guy and his friend Henri.

Guy said he was an Anti-Balaka coordinator and attributed a similar role to Henri. The Anti-Balaka are often glossed as a rebel group, but they are neither rebels in the usual senses (Clapham 1998) nor a group. The term is instead an umbrella used to describe the many people who mobilized in the wake of the Seleka rebel alliance’s takeover of power in March 2013. In their self-description, they mobilized in self-defense, but that is a matter of perspective; the people they have targeted see them as offensive fighters. Anti-Balaka do not have a coordinated structure or leadership, making it difficult to verify these men’s claims to positions of prominence. Henri was a university graduate; he and Guy lacked the stable professional jobs (ideally state civil service) they desired (see Lombard 2016b).

I opened by asking who, exactly, they meant by “the international community” that was the origin of the crisis. Guy answered quickly and assertively, “France.” Henri nodded emphatically. The analysis that followed mostly hewed to a “Europe underdeveloping Africa” script, with a dose of hidden deals and other obfuscations. They criticized their country’s leaders too: “Our leaders play their part [meaning, they contribute to this state of affairs]. They see their own personal interests first. It’s the story of families. They see only their region, and not even everyone in that region. Their families eat and that’s it.”

For these young men, these explanations helped answer what were pressing concerns about their country’s decline and helped them imagine alternate futures.

The first country in Central Africa to get a TV station was CAR. Today, we're the last [in every way]. The first country in Central Africa to get a university was [the University of] Bangui. Today, we're the last. We don't benefit from anything. We could be ten times richer than France with all the resources we've got if they were exploited! And yet we're so poor.

Explaining decline and imagining a brighter future can be markers of resilience. But the answers and explanations can also push in the direction of "cruel optimism"—when what one desires becomes an obstacle preventing one's flourishing (Berlant 2011). The conviction that France is a puppeteer, an invisible yet key and nefarious mover in all that happens, seemed to prevent Guy and Henri from considering the various roles they and others like them might play in the current state of the affairs and what they could themselves do to change things.

After a bit less than an hour of chatting, the French soldier from inside and a Central African man in striking, bright-purple West African-tailored clothing emerged from the café. They beckoned for Guy to join them, and all three went to the parking lot where they proceeded to converse for twenty minutes or so. When they got back, the French officer introduced himself. Then he told my interlocutors that they should watch out for me because I would write in English and they would not know what I was writing—I could write anything. (Concern about hidden, nefarious motives is certainly not a particularly Central African trait!) Henri stood up for me saying that, no, I was writing in French, and he pointed to the notebook I had in clear view of all on the table as evidence.

Once the officer departed, Guy explained what the meeting in the parking lot had been about. There was an Anti-Balaka coordinating meeting being planned in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital. The French officer was arguing to Guy and the man in the purple outfit ("Our coordinator," the self-proclaimed coordinator explained) that they should not go to the meeting because it would reverse fragile steps that had been made toward peace. My interlocutors said that they would indeed not go. Not because the officer told them not to—but because they had reasons of their own.

Soon it was time to pay the bill. I started doing quick calculations of coffees and teas and cake slices. Guy hastened to explain that I did not need to pay for them. I protested. I had invited them. No, they said, the French officer had already paid for their coffees and cakes. I could not help but reflect on this. The origin of the crisis is France, they had said.

But if a French officer bought them coffee and cake, they did not say, “No Thanks.” As James Laidlaw (2013) has brilliantly explored, self-consistency is but one way of thinking about autonomy or freedom in a human life. Moreover, a French officer benefits from material and symbolic power in his relation to a not-fully-employed Central African, who may therefore feel that he cannot refuse.

But those factors do not make the inconsistencies between conviction and action meaningless. At the very least they make the point that conviction—including about conspiracy—does not always serve as a guide for action and interaction. There have been many instances when Central Africans—generally understood to be lumpen youth—have attacked interveners in Bangui, and certain members of armed groups have made interveners a focus of their attacks, both in Bangui and elsewhere in the country. These convictions about hidden humanitarian malfeasance *can* inform action, but the ways they do so are not predetermined.

A conspiracy theory or rumor can be explored for its social truths, but all the pathways leading toward the storytelling and stemming from it need a lot more scrutiny as well. Identifying conspiratorial action seems to provide moral succor for those involved in it, but the correlates of that succor—is it a kind of cruel optimism or displacement of responsibility? or is it, by contrast, an important mode of speaking truth to power?—are not always clear. And it is not clear what the answers they uncover motivate subjects to do. Conspiracy, with its focus on evidence and conviction, and rumor, with its focus on social interaction, help us understand “forms of knowledge most linked to daily experience,” as Ginzburg (1992, 124) put it, particularly those accounting for potentially nefarious hidden forces. But both the conspiracy frame and the rumor frame have a tendency to unhelpfully bracket the conspiratorial *idea*, such that we forget to consider that the storytelling is but one element in longer social processes. A conspiracy skeptic might nevertheless take actions based on a “better safe than sorry” logic; an adamant promulgator of conspiracy might disregard the advice that seems to be wedded to her statements. There is an ethical (what do we do, or what should we do, now that we know?) dimension to the workings of conspiracy theories that is worth pursuing. When does the moral critique that is embedded in conspiracy require consistency in the realm of action and relations, and when not? What more can we find out about the affordances (Keane 2014) and pathways that shape the longer processes in which the conspiracy—as conviction, as social storytelling—is but one node? Whether arguing for taking an instance of

conspiracy seriously because it seems to point toward worrisome social proclivities or because it seems to express a meaningful social critique, in either case, unless people's actions and practices are traced outward from the conspiracy, the treatment will fall short of the goal.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF TAKING CONSPIRACIES SERIOUSLY

And what about me? The ethical questions I have raised of those who promote the conspiracy thinking apply to me as well. What do I do, or what should I do, now that I know? Can I use the classic anthropologist's work-around, developed initially to deal with studies of witchcraft? In those cases, the anthropologist would say that the invisible ontology in question was obviously not true, but that when one approaches it from the perspective of an insider, the ideas are logical and coherent and express moral precepts. E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), due to his study of witchcraft among the Azande, is often cited as the progenitor of this point of view, but Max Weber preceded him in making a similar, if less elaborate, argument about Mormons.¹²

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that there is nevertheless a difference between visible and invisible ontologies, and that acknowledging one's own position in regard to them is essential to intellectual integrity.¹³ Appiah is more interested in consistency and coherence than are most people as they work these matters out in their lives. Yet not only as philosophers, but as part of any effort to offer knowledge about the world, we must position ourselves in relation to these questions about visible and invisible ontologies. Here I have pointed out the rationality, logic, and "social rightness" of an invisible ontology, but I separate what I see as the moral truth from the literal truth in a way not shared by my informants. I argue, nevertheless, for taking it seriously because it reveals social anxieties and expresses a justified sense of injustice. Central African theories of humanitarian profiteering are a way to speak about the "public secret" of profound global stratification—a concern I share with them—despite my remaining comfortably on the wealthy side and worrying that their fixation on victimization distracts them from the things they could have control over, if they tried.

Explanation has moral dimensions, not just descriptive ones. Some invisible ontologies are more palatable for the researcher to "take seri-

ously” than others. It is easier to say that an invisible ontology/conspiracy theory should be taken seriously when one or both of the following conditions obtain: first, the analyst agrees with the underlying critique discernible in the conspiratorial thinking (e.g., the distribution of wealth in the world is unfair); second, the analyst does not feel a primary investment with the people being described (does not feel like “one of them”). If neither of these conditions obtain, taking an invisible ontology/conspiracy theory seriously starts to look a lot more like an apologia for social destruction and oppression. Even seeing conspiracy as a genre of moral discourse that people use to criticize and otherwise talk about public secrets, and attending to the ensuing recommendation that we be more attentive to the “work of unknowing”—that is, the work of not calling attention to the public secrets (Geissler 2013), or of calling out the power relations that produce certain invisible ontological explanations as conspiracy and others as truth (Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018)—these various projects are more compelling as action plans when the moral claims identified in the conspiracy align with or are irrelevant to those of the scholar. If the conspiratorial moral discourses are, say, racist, the “work of unknowing” starts to look like something else entirely.

An instance of conspiracy thinking can unfold in any number of ways and lead to any number of actions, but regardless of what happens, it is easier to justify taking the conspiracy seriously when one either shares in the grievance or fear that accompanies the conspiracy or feels unaffected by it.¹⁴ “Classic forms of Enlightenment critique—revelation (of reality) and iconoclasm (of false representations)—have less purchase” (Geissler 2013, 30) when people must express public secrets through idioms centered on moral grievance authored by nefarious hidden forces. Figuring out what has purchase, or what should, remains to be done. Further explorations into what follows from a person’s invocation of invisible yet decisive and nefarious forces in storytelling (that they are convinced of the story’s content, that their actions will be shaped by that conviction in particular ways, etc.) and how the moral positions of the researcher (and not just the power relations among proponents of opposing theories) affect her interest in claiming a value for invisible ontologies, rather than debunking them, might be places to start. Both might, in different ways, bring the relationship between truth and morality/ethics to the fore and in so doing allow for an alternative to seeing truth as either objectively verifiable or the product of the workings of power or social interaction. Dealing with conspiracy, whether as a professional or popular researcher,

is inescapably ethical (in light of the conspiracy, what should one do/what does one do?) and moral (what should be taken seriously and what criticized?), and not just a matter of truth, whether that truth is posited as assessable through scientific or social means.

NOTES

- 1 For a fuller account of this history, see Lombard (2016a).
- 2 Notably, some among these French forces had been accused of extensive sexual violence against Central Africans (Brabant and Minano 2017).
- 3 For instance, Bonhomme's (2009) fascinating study of the genital-stealing rumors that swept across West and Central Africa from the 1990s into the 2000s relied on newspaper accounts, which meant that the physical or material evidence was removed from his analysis.
- 4 Conspiracy narratives are "legitimized or delegitimized within the hierarchies of authority and modes of knowledge production present in particular interpretive communities" (Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018, 177).
- 5 In total, my research assistant and I spoke with about 125 people, some thirty-five in more extensive interviews, and the rest in focus groups.
- 6 In Central Africa, invisible ontologies have been one way of talking about the simultaneously hidden and in-plain-sight world of the antisocial. Everyone knows something about how witchcraft works, and that is both how they keep themselves safe from its dangers and know to accuse those who are using it for ill; but to profess any knowledge of it would be to situate oneself in that camp of people for whom it is familiar and normal, which is something most people would rather avoid, and this discourages extensive investigations.
- 7 An expatriate intervener told me that the general had used \$40,000 of UN money to renovate the bathroom in his Bangui residence. She had seen the invoice, she said. Some interveners, like Central Africans, were concerned about antisocial profiteering and ways others were taking advantage of the system but felt powerless to do anything about it.
- 8 Musila (2015) points out that people living in a place where *official* versions of events are often concocted and would-be investigators are met with webs of obfuscation (as was the case in Kenya during the Moi years) do not enjoy the hubris of people who have easy faith in their government's good will and in the associated conviction that it is possible to "get to the bottom of things."
- 9 This is an important aspect of African "pavement radio" as a source of information about the world (Ellis 1989).
- 10 The range of salaries interveners earn is very wide, with some far more modest, in keeping with their organizations' volunteer ethos (e.g., Doctors

Without Borders) and others paid as well as professionals in the world capitals where their organizations have their headquarters (the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations).

- 11 I use *stratification* rather than *inequality* in line with the helpful distinction drawn by Rio and Smedal (themselves drawing on the work of Louis Dumont): stratification refers specifically to “a system of unequal distribution of resources” (Rio and Smedal 2008, 8).
- 12 More recently, some have sidestepped the issue of “belief” in witchcraft by positing it as an alternate ontology, as something best studied as action (Ashforth 2005).
- 13 Appiah (1992, 135) wrote, “If modernization is conceived of, in part, as the acceptance of science, we have to decide whether we think the evidence obliges us to give up the invisible ontology. . . . The question how much of the world of the spirits we intellectuals must give up (or transform into something ceremonial without the old literal ontology) is one we must face: and I do not think the answer is obvious.”
- 14 Karen E. Fields (2001) pointed out this discrepancy in her comparison of racecraft in the United States to studies of witchcraft in Africa:

Following the well-established practice of most Africanists in this country, I have been granting the rationality of witchcraft, but not that of racecraft. That practice now seems to be troublesome, logically and ethically. If we judge by the dependence of both on presuppositions that are demonstrably false according to modern science, then both sets of traditional beliefs should go down together as irrational. But if we discount their falsity by that standard, then they should rise together as rational. Under our usual practice, they do neither: It is as though they were as different as cabbages and kings. (283–84)