When partners are suspect(s)
Trust, transparency, and racialised suspicion in global health infrastructures

Cal Biruk

Abstract
This article considers how concerns about trust in global health infrastructures—and the surveillance tools they justify—emerge from suspicions anchored in imaginaries of ‘Africa’ and ‘Africans’. Amid anxieties about corruption in global health circles, I consider how debates about providing per diems to African participants in international projects are articulated in racial terms. Drawing on examples from Malawi, I analyse the top-down push to make such disbursements more transparent via mobile money. Troubling celebratory framings of this technology, I demonstrate how a tool meant to increase transparency instead gives rise to mistrust and strained relations by casting African partners as suspects. While much of the scholarship on trust probes its interpersonal dimensions, this article addresses how bureaucratic infrastructures are constituted by assumptions about whom or what can be trusted. The impersonal and technical characteristics of transparency tools common to global health obscures their underpinning colonial and racial logics.

Keywords: Africa, audit, global health, infrastructure, race, surveillance, suspicion, trust

After a bumpy, hours-long drive, Sheila and I arrive at the gates of a sprawling fifty-one square mile Malawian sugar plantation that belongs to Africa’s largest sugar company.1 We are on the plantation in the name of global health: Sheila is a Malawian employee of an NGO whose primary focus is outreach, research, and advocacy with sexual minorities in Malawi, and I am an anthropologist-collaborator with the NGO. We arrived at the plantation that day by surprise, not realising our reserved lodging was within its gates, but the NGO has since returned numerous times, renting a conference room on the plantation to conduct workshops targeting district health care providers and their patients. On this visit, doctors, nurses, and
intake staff will receive training, facilitated by Sheila, on how to treat men who have sex with men (MSM) without stigma.

After arriving at the lodge, we head to the bar to eat dinner and edit some slides for tomorrow’s workshop. Glancing at our laptops, the server warns us, ‘They [the workers] won’t tell you the truth. They are afraid of losing their jobs.’ He mistakes us for auditors charged with doing impact assessments of sugar mill operations, revealing his awareness of a damning report that raised concerns about working conditions and claimed the sugar company was evicting farmers to garner more land (Kiezebrink et al. 2015). The report, and the server’s warning to us, speak to the suspicions and mistrust that characterise relations between managers and workers, between a corporate plantation and labour auditors, and between workers and outside researchers. The company’s mistrust of its workers and surrounding communities is evident in protections like community policing units, patrols, electric fences, surveillance cameras, and roadblocks that aim to mitigate theft of sugar cane and equipment and prevent setting of malicious fires that destroy cane. An absence of trust between unequal actors shapes the plantation’s very infrastructure and spatial arrangements (Li and Semedi 2021).

The next day, Sheila and I sit at a table in the conference room with thick manila envelopes stuffed with Malawian kwacha (local currency) in front of us. We jokingly refer to ourselves as ‘the bankers’. Health care providers line up as we count out their per diems in front of them—one by one—in one thousand kwacha note increments laid out on the table conspicuously to reduce their suspicion of us miscounting funds; they each also recount the moneys. Satisfied that they have received the correct payment, the health care providers sign an attendance sheet, a compulsory piece of paperwork that proves that a real person, represented by their signature and mobile phone number, received the money. As always, participants complain loudly about the inadequacy of the amount of money received, signalling that per diems and allowances for transport commonly distributed at workshops and trainings in the Global South are sites of patronage and appropriation (Englund 2006: 213; cf. Conteh and Kingori 2010; Smith 2003) and even sources of livelihood for those without access to formal wage labour (Geissler 2013: 23; cf. Biruk and Trapence 2018; Ferguson 2015). The sheet is one among many tools that demonstrate accountability and increase foreign partners’ or donors’ trust in local partners’ ability to carry out projects effectively and transparently. Such tools act as what Penny Harvey, Madeleine Reeves, and Evelyn Ruppert term transparency devices, or ‘purposeful apparatuses devised to enact transparency and provide a space of moral certainty about what constitutes good governance or harmonious social relations’ (2013: 299). Such devices anticipate future human moral failure, wrongdoing or corruption, prefiguring the people or things being monitored as not to be trusted.

Bringing insights from surveillance studies into conversation with anthropological work on audit and transparency in global health, I show how concerns about the trustworthiness of African partners and technologies that aim to increase ‘transparency’ are fundamentally rooted in racialised suspicion. To do so, the article first focuses on how debates about giving per diems in international aid
projects have been articulated in racial vernaculars (Pierre 2020). Drawing on ethnographic work in Malawi, I then discuss a push to make per diem disbursement more efficient and less prone to corruption by replacing interpersonal transactions of bank notes with mobile money technology. Troubling celebratory framings of this technology, I show how a tool meant to save time, increase trust and transparency, and eradicate human error (or malpractice) instead gives rise to mistrust, ambiguity, and strained relations, all the while obliquely casting African partners as suspects. The arguments made in this article and my analysis of discourse and primary source documents herein are informed by my long-term work with the Malawian-led NGO previously mentioned that advocates for sexual minority rights and implements research pertaining to LGBTI persons in Malawi. Since 2008, I have episodically (typically during Northern summers) participated in everyday NGO activities, including grant writing; attending conferences, trainings, and workshops targeting sexual minorities; aiding in preparation of monitoring and evaluation reports, annual reports, and other documents; and engaging with NGO staff and LGBTI-identified volunteers who implement donor-funded projects. My past and ongoing research takes interest in the transactions, relations, and politics that hold together global health’s socio-technical infrastructures.

Racialised suspicion

Calls to increase trust and transparency, and the tools employed in their names, operate in the African context as what Jemima Pierre (2020) terms racial vernaculars. Suspicions of corruption, for instance, are figured through longstanding tropes of Africans and Africa rooted in lack, indiscipline, duplicity, backwardness, or incompetence (Crane 2018; Muir and Gupta 2018: S6; Smith 2007). Suspicion and mistrust infuse infrastructures and technologies that aim to capture illicit behaviours or people, whether sugar cane thieves or potentially corrupt NGO staff or beneficiaries of donor projects. Such tools, which increase trust in the functioning and efficiency of a system through tightly governing or surveilling transactions and behaviours, function in and through relations structured in dominance and racialised suspicion (Pierre 2020: 87). I employ the phrase racialised suspicion to capture how suspicions of African partners to global health projects and programmes revive assumptions and stereotypes, dating to the colonial era, about the moral character, trustworthiness, or capabilities of Black Africans. Such suspicions, expressed in coded rather than explicit manner, motivate the use of transparency devices and audit tools to monitor people, resources, and practices in global health bureaucracies and partnerships. Yet, with my colleagues in this special issue, I am interested in showing how these technologies of trust are, ‘entangled with historical and ongoing sedimentations of power’ (Galvin, McKay, and Weichselbraun, introduction, this special issue).

This article approaches trust from the vantage of its opposite—suspicion—to consider how rhetoric, tools, and technologies invested in making financial transactions transparent are hailed as avenues for building trust but effectively conceal the
power relations in which they are architectured. The proliferation of such transparency devices is symptomatic of underlying racial hierarchies and assumptions that naturalise surveillance of people and resources. While much of the scholarship on trust has focused on its relational and interpersonal dimensions, this article troubles the idea that trust is solely a ‘thing’ transacted between actors. It moves away from assumptions that trust and mistrust necessarily manifest in interpersonal encounters between groups or individuals by paying attention to how infrastructures and bureaucracies are constituted by assumptions about whom or what can or should be trusted. Yet, the impersonal, seemingly neutral, and technical characteristics of transparency devices obscure these assumptions and their underpinning logics of colonial and racial difference.

Following Jemima Pierre (2013: 2), in this article I take the constitution of race and racial categories (here, ‘Africans’ and ‘Africa’) and ‘historically overdetermined assumptions about them’ as a starting point. Transparency devices and audit technologies are all around us, not confined to sites or places racialised as non-white. Yet, a place-based ethnographic analysis of such tools in situ in one corner of Africa attunes us to how cultural notions of race constitute infrastructures and instruments deemed technical, objective, or even benevolent (see Benjamin 2019a; cf. Bavli and Jones 2022 on X-ray machines, Beutin 2017 on police worn cameras, and Braun 2014 on the spirometer). Whether we are speaking of annual faculty performance metrics at a Canadian university, audit requirements for organisations in Malawi, or surveillance of labourers on a plantation, surveillance and tracking, ‘uphold…negating strategies that first accompanied European colonial expansion and transatlantic slavery that sought to structure social relations and institutions in ways that privilege whiteness’ (Browne 2015: 17; see also Beutin 2023).

**Trust and transparency**

Scholarship on trust has tended to theorise it as the glue that holds societies or groups together, a (good) ‘thing in itself’ or ‘universal essence’ (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016: 3). While trust, a taken-for-granted liberal value or virtue, is thought to be key to building relationships, mistrust is thought to sunder them and is thus framed as a problem to be overcome (Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2018). As Corsín Jiménez (2011: 178) suggests, the literature on trust assumes it to be, variously, a moral commitment, a character disposition, or a mutual balancing of interests between transacting parties. Thus, trust has been normatively cast as an achievement between people or groups, evident as well in our own discipline, where the idea that mistrust is an obstacle to carrying out fieldwork or producing good data becomes an anthropological truism. More recently, however, scholars have troubled binary framings of trust and mistrust, where the absence of trust means the necessary presence of mistrust and vice versa. Rather than presuming either to be a unified structure, they reframe trust as fundamentally entangled with and never pure of mistrust or suspicion (Brand 2018; Charles 2021; Chopra 2016; Leighton and Roberts 2020; Mallon Andrews 2022; Strathern 2021). In my analysis, I build on
the insights of these scholars to demonstrate how tools and technologies deployed in the name of trust play a role in obscuring, even as they amplify, the racialised suspicion that is the grounds upon which trust becomes a matter of concern in global health systems.

Trust is a major preoccupation in the field of global health, especially given that the relations and transactions that characterise its operations are carried out across power asymmetries and inequalities between collaborating Northern and Southern actors and organisations. Talk about trust in such contexts coalesces around two main concerns: (1) building trust within North–South partnerships haunted by colonial hierarchies (getting partners to trust one another to ensure smooth operations of projects); and (2) increasing trust in the bureaucratic processes and tools that monitor the circulation of resources within global health infrastructures, especially amid what Patricia J. Gárcia (2019), in a recent article in *The Lancet*, terms ‘the open secret of corruption’ in global health’s circuits of resource distribution. This dual interest in fostering trust within relations and infrastructures manifests in and through terms like accountability and transparency, valorised as inarguable virtues.

In global health publications, research proposals, and collaborations, trust is framed as aspiration and benevolent pursuit crucial to the success of global health partnerships and the achievement of good governance (Gerrets 2015), which Samar Al-Bulushi, Sahana Ghosh, and Inderpal Grewal (2022: 2) remind us always embeds a preoccupation with ‘threats posed by purportedly suspicious “others”’. Scholars and practitioners are invested in figuring out what works best in partnership arrangements, employing a normative imaginary of trust as achievement, even determining typologies of ‘effective partnership’ and ‘evidence-informed framework(s) for the development of trust’ (Christie et al. 2022: 1145; Herrick and Brooks 2018: 523). Partnership, a term that connotes equality and harmony, is lionised as a corrective to unequal donor-beneficiary relations, promising to build trust and ‘reduce social complexity’, or uneven interests that may be an impediment to getting things done (Luhmann 1979: 71).

This emphasis on building trust—and implementation of audit systems in the name of accountability and transparency—goes arm in arm with the rise of efficiency and cost-effectiveness as core values in contemporary global health governance infrastructures that encompass distant partners who rarely meet face-to-face (see also Billaud, this issue, on managerial rationalities in humanitarian governance). These values have intensified the role of audit culture in performance-based funding ecosystems, where recipients of moneys and resources originating in the global North find themselves ‘playing by the numbers’ or ‘chasing numbers’ to demonstrate accountability and increase foreign partners’ or donors’ trust in their ability to carry out projects, research, or interventions effectively and transparently (Adams 2016; Inglis 2018; Reubi 2018; Storeng and Béhague 2014). Numbers and indicators become efficient ways to track people, practices, and resources and render them transparent, or pervious to inspection and evaluation. Yet, as Marilyn Strathern reminds us, ‘the very term accountability implies that
people want to know how to trust one another, to make their trust visible, while…
the very desire to do so points to the absence of trust’ (2000: 310, my emphasis).
Following Strathern, I am interested in showing how building trust is, paradoxically, built on racialised suspicions and mistrust made oblique by seemingly neutral and liberal discourse, protocols, and tools mobilised in the name of transparency and accountability.

While anthropologists of global health have studied the practices, entailments, meanings, and subjectivities generated by audit tools and are keenly aware of power asymmetries in global health partnerships, to date, very few scholars have attended to how racial logics are braided into the everyday practices of audit and tracking (of people, resources, moneys) carried out within the hierarchies of aid, development, and global health worlds. Here, engagement with recent work in surveillance studies, which provides a theoretical vocabulary for structures of monitoring and control and reveals how and why people and things are tracked, is instructive. Just as tools to surveil workers in workplaces like smart factories or warehouses have their origins in slavery and the plantation, so, too, does audit more broadly (Benjamin 2019b; Browne 2015; Ouma and Premchander 2022: 415), an important genealogy overlooked by anthropological scholarship on the metrics, audit protocols, and indicators closely associated with trust and transparency.

The antecedents of modern surveillance and audit tools that track people and resources lie in practices developed to control the movements of colonised and enslaved populations (Browne 2015). As Jacqueline Wernimont (2018: 145) suggests in her history of quantum media, black bodies were made into commodities in tabular media like ship cargo lists, insurance policies, and the financial documents of slave owners, including plantation ledgers that listed weights of cotton in tables organised by date and the first name of the enslaved person who picked it. The logics of converting the activity of picking cotton into a comparative value measured against a daily quota and against the work of fellow enslaved persons ‘articulated and created accountability to a boss/owner’ and sedimented an abstract notion of productivity (ibid.: 146) that also infuses present-day forms that track, for instance, the number of MSM ‘reached’ or ‘HIV tested’ by peer volunteers, who are often cast as untrustworthy, liable to fake or make up data or not complete their tasks faithfully (Biruk 2018). Volunteers are thus rendered corrupt by virtue of their supposed ‘manipulation of data’ (Gárcia 2019: 2121). Yet, as many have shown, such volunteers, rather than malicious or untrustworthy, are entangled in aid economies that tie their compensation or stipends to performance, quotas, or data. It is the mundaneness of technomanagerial, trust-building transparency devices like lists, databases, financial accountings, and reports that makes them appear natural, technical, or neutral. They are quintessentially ‘boring things’ (Star 1999: 377) whose ubiquity and technical character obscure how they embed and encode racialised assumptions about others that presume African partners to be suspects, as will be seen in the case of tools and rationales for tracking per diem payments in global health infrastructures discussed in this article (Benjamin 2019b; Browne 2015). Such tools work to increase trust that resources are being used in proper manner
When partners are suspect(s)

and act as demonstrable proof of accountability (and therefore trustworthiness), on
the one hand, but so too do they amplify mistrust, on the other.

Outsourcing trust to mobile money technology

The sign-in sheet—usually emblazoned with the NGO’s logo and the logo(s) of a
sponsoring organisation—is a key object across the many workshops I’ve attended
in Malawi. I was often enlisted, as previously mentioned, into the sign-in sheet
ritual, giving me a glimpse into how this ‘boring’ artefact of audit culture generated
a plethora of emotions, complaints, and tensions. While donors and beneficiaries
rarely, if ever, meet one another, the sign-in sheet mediates between them. The
sheet populated by handwritten marks acts as imprimatur of the truth of a distant
reality, proof of the numbers of people trained or reached and of the fact that pay-
ments due were faithfully and correctly distributed to attendees. So, too, does the
performance of counting out allowances and per diems in front of recipients act as
an authenticating gesture of fair and equitable distribution, and provide insurance
against miscounting or misallocation of donor funds. Mutual suspicion between
distant partners is eroded as a semblance of trust is built on both sides of a trans-
action. Yet, in this section, I will show how this per diem ritual—inaugurated in
the 1970s with the normalisation of payments for participation in development
projects in the Global South—underwent a (seemingly) tiny transformation in
the name of efficiency and transparency to unexpected ends. A technological
fix—delivering payments formerly disbursed as cash notes through mobile money
instead—meant to streamline transactions and build trust in circuits of resource
distribution paradoxically gave way to mistrust, ambiguity, and suspicion. Follow-
ing Lundy Braun’s (2014) thinking about the spirometer, where ideas about racial
difference were programmed into a device for measuring lung function, the push
for ‘cash-less’ transfers in aid worlds belies, even as it effectively covers over, sus-
picions and anxieties rooted in the figure of the corrupt or greedy African birthed
in colonial geographies of racial difference. Such stereotypes become attached to
and embedded in the roll out of mobile money technologies for distribution of per
diems; as Ramah McKay likewise shows in the case of digital technologies that eval-
uate pharmaceutical reliability, ‘technical processes are motivated by and animate
epistemological assemblages shaped by pre-existing narratives of trustworthiness,
suspicion, and mistrust’ (this special issue).

NGO staff members recently informed me of a big change since my last visit in
2019. They narrated this to me with a sense of resignation, indicating that they felt
increasingly controlled by ‘the donors’, and noting, as will be elaborated further
in this article, that the changes were causing tensions between the organisation
and its partners and clients. Instead of receiving money in hand at workshops (as
described in this article’s opening vignette from 2017), beneficiaries or partners to
NGO projects now provide their mobile phone number to receive per diem and
allowance payments via local mobile money providers. The transition from cash
payments to mobile money is in line with calls to improve transparency and trust

The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology • 57
in aid worlds and, in fact, happened late in Malawi compared to other contexts. In 2013, for instance, a USAID report argued that switching to mobile money payments for delivering per diems would increase transparency, efficiency, and trust among the diverse actors who comprise the aid ecosystem. Mobile money has been rapidly taken up by organisations such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as a ‘natural solution’ to the problem of how to efficiently disburse such payments to informal health workers, volunteers, or data collectors across the Global South (Stein 2021). I quote the USAID report at length:

Mobile money improves transparency in cash systems and can reduce both actual as well as the appearance of financial impropriety. It also enables financial transactions to be independently verified and tracked and often lowers administrative burdens. Replacing cash transactions with electronic payments reduces the likelihood of leakage by decreasing the number of hands through which money passes. Use of mobile money for payment of workshop per diems and incidental expenses removes the financial logistics burden and any security risks that large volumes of cash may bring to the trainers [workshop leaders, e.g., NGO staff]. It also minimizes the number of hands through which cash is passed. (Haas et al. 2013: 9, my emphases)

In this representative description of the efficiency and innovative potential of mobile money, the technology is framed as trust-producing, that is, it is assumed to improve transparency by mitigating dishonest behaviour (or suspicions of it). The removal of ‘dirty money’ (material cash notes) from the aid ecosystem reduces the number of ‘hands’ that might divert, steal, or misuse cash payments. This excerpt evinces technochauvinism in assigning mobile money technology the agency to remove human errors, flaws, or misbehaviours from a system (Broussard 2018), mobilising technocratic and seemingly neutral language of efficiency as cover for an intervention that seeks to discipline, via closer surveillance, actors presumed to be suspects, corrupt, greedy, or duplicitous.

The shift to mobile money gains justification by building on abiding suspicions and concerns about the normalisation and ‘abuses’ of per diems that incentivise participation in development or global health projects in the Global South. The roll out of a new technological ‘fix’ for distribution of these per diems must be analysed in light of these suspicions. Since the colonial era, discussions and debates about ‘giving Africans money’ have reproduced cultural imaginaries of ‘Africa’ as a trope and racialised entity (Ferguson 2015: 39; Pierre 2020: 88), casting it as a place of rampant corruption, chaos, and disorder. Mobile money distribution mechanisms aim to eradicate such disorder from the system by more tightly tracking flows of money to prevent ‘leakage’ (diversion of resources away from their intended uses, disappearance or loss of moneys, etc.). Yet imaginaries of leakages in systems of resource distribution are anchored in racial vernaculars that express, if not explicitly so, suspicion of ‘others’ rooted in the presumed natural or inherent corruption or criminality of Africans caught up in networks, even markets, of aid distribution (Peterson 2021: 355). In an article focused on the pervasive distribution of per diem payments to Information and Communications Technology for
Development (ICT4D) project participants in Malawi, for instance, Sanner and Sæbø (2014) critique what they term civil servants’ ‘aid entitlement.’ The authors cast motivations for participation as potentially scheming, ingenuine, or spurious, captured in their (and others’) suggestion that partners ‘exploit’ or ‘abuse’ a system to their own benefit (Ridde 2010: E2) by ‘allowance hunting’ (Skage et al. 2015). These are some of the so-called ‘perverse effects of per diem’ (Samb et al. 2020: 2).

While this adjective (perverse) carries connotations of irrationality, depravity, or a grave departure from standards or accepted logics, Pfieffer (2003: 733) argues that seminarite (seminar­itis) in Mozambique—also termed ‘perdiemitis’ by Ridde (2010)—serves both foreign agencies, who claim they are ‘capacity building’ by training local partners in good governance and local workers who supplement salaries with attendance per diems. Situating this ‘perversity’ in the broader context of global political economy, then, recasts it as a tool through which two parties’ interests are simultaneously attained, even as African proclivities are tirelessly cast as threats to good governance.

The anxiety that Africans might participate in development projects disingenuously plays on abiding meanings assigned to money, coded as crass, dirty, corrupting, and transactional, often juxtaposed with the gift, associated with voluntariness, ethical relationship building, trust, and reciprocity (Biruk 2017). Per diems are blamed for ‘commodifying’ trainings (Herrick and Brooks 2018: 529), throwing into question the authenticity of participants’ interest in the topic at hand. Africans are suspected in the collective wherein their identities, geographic location, and presumed economic circumstances position them as liable to be less trustworthy, to lie, or to steal (Davis 2010: 142). Such anxieties have a long history.

In the late 1930s, for example, British colonial officials in Nyasaland (now Malawi) worried over how to balance ‘the commercial view point that bulk[ed] ever large in the native’s mind’ with what they termed the erosion of the ‘communal system of village life’. They began to contemplate compensation for those who participated in community development schemes, despite seeing individualism and competition as threats to African societies (NSZ 1/5/1. 1938; Vaughan 1982). Fears around ‘giving Africans money’ have been repurposed in the context of global health projects, where rationales against such payments contend that they foster dependency, act as ‘handouts,’ or threaten projects’ sustainability (Ferguson 2015; Johnson et al. 2022).

In an ethnographic study of a global health partnership between PEPFAR and the Kenyan Ministries of Health, anthropologist Hannah Brown (2015: 347) documents how Northern collaborators often complain that African partners are hard to pin down because they are attending meetings and trainings overseas (for the purpose of gaining per diems), for instance. Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins (2009: 1183) employ the metaphor of ‘hunting and gathering’ to describe the strategic actions of Malawians who seek out per diems in a terrain blanketed by proliferating AIDS projects. Here, fundamental African racial difference is constructed along joint axes of insatiable (excess) desire for money and cultural backwardness indexed by the term ‘hunter-gatherers,’ a way of life that has long preoccupied anthropologists, archaeologists, and tourists fascinated by primordial,
ancient, and simple life ways cast as out of step with modernity. At the same time, however, the egalitarian and ‘noble savage’ connotations of the term hunter-gatherer create a dissonance between the practice of hunter-gathering and the overzealous desire for per diems. The image of Africans ‘hunting and gathering’ per diems, then, unsettles western noble savage myths in which Africans are compelled to be genuinely grateful for western help, worthy of aid because they are suffering, lack agency to alter their conditions, poor (but noble), and backwards.

The rollout of mobile money is framed as a technological fix that might rectify or mitigate the assumed cultural penchant of Africans to misuse or steal funds in place like Malawi and rebuild trust in aid ecosystems, where Ingvild A. Skage, Tina Søreide, and Arne Tostensen suggest ‘corruption is rampant’ (2015). Malawi, like many other African countries, scores low on the Corruption Perceptions Index, the most widely used global corruption ranking in the world, marking it as ‘endemically corrupt’; such indicators and rankings, however, reprise and naturalise civilisational distinctions (Merry 2016: 21). In addition to its purported role in reducing corruption, mobile money technology may appear to make the work of NGO staff on the ground easier and more streamlined by ‘lower[ing] administrative burden’ (Haas et al. 2013: 9) and ensuring that the correct individuals receive moneys due to them in timely fashion. Yet, this technology was discussed as a source of inefficiency and problems by NGO staff members, who suggested it threatened their work rather than making it more orderly or efficient. They noted, for instance, that receiving per diem payments via mobile money mechanisms ‘demotivated’ partners. Staff members told a story of health care providers who grew frustrated, even angry, because they did not receive their allowances by the end of the day in their mobile money accounts. Another described how a group of peer educators who met for a data collection review did not receive their transportation allowance in their account in time to travel home before dark: ‘These guys don’t have pocket change to cover that cost if the money doesn’t come in time!’ he explained, signalling the precarious circumstances of data workers. Across such stories, staff members blamed mobile money technology for threatening their good relationships with stakeholders in multiple ongoing projects by increasing suspicion and mistrust between staff and ‘the community’.

Thus, the efficiency that mobile money promises in accounts like the USAID rendering of its trust-building potentials—building on local mobile providers’ marketing of their services as ‘freedom to send and receive [money] in the palm of your hand’—is experienced on the ground as generative of suspicion and resentment within fragile relations. The delays in receipt of payments previously discussed reflect the non-linear and multiple temporalities of paperwork, accounting, and audit that characterise aid worlds like this one, where NGOs are beholden to numerous donors and implementing multiple projects at once (McKay 2018; Sullivan 2017). For moneys associated with a given activity to be distributed in timely fashion via mobile money, a sign-in sheet must be sent to the organisation’s finance officer by implementing staff no later than 9:00 a.m. that day to ensure the funds will arrive to participants’ accounts by the end of the workday. However, some
workshops or activities are half day affairs—often involving long drives on poor roads from the NGO headquarters in the capital—that begin after noon, meaning participants would not provide the contact information necessary for the transfers to be initiated until afternoon. Further, some staff members ‘stack’ activities funded by different projects that occur in the same district back-to-back to avoid making two long trips; given this, it is sometimes necessary to hold activities on the weekend, when mobile money transfers are not possible because the finance officers (intermediaries between participants and the mobile phone companies who offer mobile money services) are not in the office in the capital. Further, high demand for mobile money transfers in Malawi sometimes overwhelms mobile money providers, meaning it can take up to three days for money to appear in someone’s account once funds are deposited at the bank. Such discussions about the specificities of implementing mobile money transfers within NGO infrastructure and project geographies that span the nation, which took place at a staff meeting, manifested as a blame game between NGO staff members, wherein, for instance, the finance officer insisted that staff leading workshops and trainings needed to ‘plan ahead better’ and stop doing things at the last minute. Mobile money, then, constitutes not only a shift in mode of delivery of monies, but also reshapes temporalities within the aid ecosystem toward the ends of better commensurating them with capitalist time geared toward profit, market value, and return on investment (Bear 2016). Mobile money technology choreographs labour practices toward a western ideal of efficiency, modern time, and standardisation (Fabian 1983; Barak 2013) that is juxtaposed with Northern partners’ imaginaries of so-called (slow, inefficient) ‘African time,’ even if, in reality, the old way of delivering per diems was more efficient for those involved directly in the transactions.

NGO staff members were well aware of the larger push toward efficiency on the part of donor organisations increasingly concerned with cost-saving measures and accountability, and often narrated such shifts in terms of a nostalgia for what they called ‘the old days’ (where they felt donors trusted them more). Grand shifts in global governance and aid distribution mechanisms felt personalised, with staff expressing that ‘the donors’ were ‘cracking down’ or more closely ‘watching us for every tambala [less than 0.01 USD].’ They also suspected that the transition to mobile money was an effort to take away opportunities to go to the field. They narrated their disdain with mobile money as a solution to inefficiency alongside other shifts in audit mechanisms and expectations. Whereas historically a staff member going to the field could claim fuel costs by the kilometre via a pre-set rate, some donors now require instead that they keep a strict logbook documenting actual money spent on fuel. This oversight affects taken-for-granted practices long associated with going to the field—a pursuit historically characterised by its juxtaposition with the ‘office’ as site of surveillance and monitoring of workflow and practices—by making it more difficult (even ‘corrupt’) to divert from the set route between the office and the location of a workshop or training. Quick visits with relatives living in a district where work was to be carried out, diversions to purchase local produce, honey or chickens, and so on—small perks of being outside the office—become
corrupt misuses of money. So, too, does the prospect of having extra fuel remaining in a personal car after a visit to the field disappear. The introduction of a new technology for delivering incentives, then, is interpreted alongside these intertexts wherein African staff and beneficiaries of global health programming are made to feel like suspects again and again through ever tighter audit requirements.

While mobile money is dominantly cast as a more efficient mode of distributing money, the complex infrastructural and social relations it becomes entangled in reveal the fragility of trust and shed light on its material dimensions, as built on accumulated expectations, norms, and transactions between an organisation and communities it works with. In past years, an NGO staff member leading a workshop or activity submitted a costs sheet to the finance officer, received approval, and then went to the bank in-person on the day of an activity to collect the funds to be carried to the field (I have often accompanied staff to the bank). While touting around manila envelopes packed with millions of Malawi kwacha may appear risky or prone to ‘leakage’ from afar, for those on the frontlines of implementation, the materiality of these envelopes and the banknotes they contained stood in as visible, tangible, and timely manifestations of a present and future relationships between the NGO and its target populations. In my interlocutors’ views, the person-to-person gesture of receiving immediate payment in hand played a key role in building relations of trust and accountability.

Mobile money technologies arise to decrease fraud within a system by providing proof that funds are given only to real individuals who attend workshops. But the concerns that arise on the ground from their implementation had much more to do with the disruptions they caused to temporal, infrastructural, and contingent dimensions of trust. A technocentric tool meant to save time, increase trust in the integrity of transactions within a system, and eradicate human error (or malpractice) instead gives way to mistrust, ambiguity, and strained relations. As Natasha Vally (2016) likewise shows in her analysis of the roll out of biometric and digital tools to distribute social grants in South Africa previously administered via bureaucrats and paperwork, rather than producing the security, trust, and efficiency that it claimed to, the new digital distribution system increased insecurity and mistrust in the system. Techno-triumphalist narratives anchored in assumptions of increased security and efficiency for claimants that circulated at the national level obscured the everyday material and social relations in which digital technologies became entangled: fingerprint readers incapable of capturing the worn prints of manual labourers or fears on the part of store keepers who oversaw cash distribution points that so much money on the premises would attract nefarious activity and thieves, for example (see also Alampay and Cabotaje 2016 on the challenges associated with the roll out of mobile money for cash transfers in the Philippines; and Duclos 2017 on mobile health networks in Burkina Faso). So, too, does more rigorous audit and tracking of resources in the name of trust and transparency via mobile money compound and proliferate suspicion and mistrust (Harvey et al. 2013: 295) within aid distribution systems.
Conclusion

Situating seemingly boring or innocent technologies of audit in aid worlds as emergent from a longer genealogy of surveillance and disciplinary technologies birthed in the context of racial capitalism (for which ‘the plantation’ stands in) reveals discursive continuities that gain materiality in present-day transparency devices. Doing global health on a plantation prompted me to rethink accountability, transparency, and trust through the lenses of suspicion and mistrust that are key analytics in surveillance studies scholarship.

While studying trust ethnographically may bring to mind close attention to interpersonal relationships, transactions, or exchanges, I suggest that analysis of seemingly neutral technologies and tools, and rhetorical justifications for them, can also reveal the contours of trust and mistrust. In her study of domestic violence counselling in South Africa, Melanie Brand (2018) helpfully models how we might approach mistrust ethnographically. Attending to how trust and mistrust gain social relevance in observable practices and expressions in counsellor/client encounters, she demonstrates how bureaucratic and accounting regimes become a key alibi for counsellors’ mistrust of the veracity of stories told or information reported by their clients (see also Davis 2010 on Greek therapists’ construction of racially marked patients as deceptive; and Billaud, this issue, on how the imperative to document ‘impact’ and metrics erodes space and time for the interpersonal work of trust-building in humanitarian work). Brand shows how mistrust in the shelters becomes linked to the realm of the formal, to bureaucratic and therapeutic practices that go largely unquestioned by clients: ‘Screening and monitoring allows mistrust to remain tacit during counselling’ (2018: 79). Counsellors’ adherence to bureaucratic roles and procedures is fundamentally rooted in mistrust, in fact-finding, and in moral parsing of true from false. Yet, such mistrust is absolved of any interpersonal dimensions, much as the uptake of mobile money technology for distributing per diems is framed as a neutral, technical improvement to a system rather than as entangled in longstanding racialised assumptions and suspicions. Outsourcing trust to the transparency tools and devices that make up bureaucratic infrastructures, whether intake forms or mobile money technology, obscures the moralised and racialised suspicions held by bureaucratic actors, suspicions never made explicit because they are effectively masked by the naturalisation of such devices in realms primed for audit (von Schnitzler 2013).

While I have focused here on an analysis of technologies for distributing per diems, many other technologies that aim to enhance trust (in people, data, performance, capacity) in global health and development worlds present themselves for future analysis. For instance, elsewhere, I am thinking about how the rise of viral load monitoring technologies (which measure the amount of virus in a millilitre of blood to ‘indicate risk for treatment failure’ through patient non-adherence) in Africa build on and reinvent enduring racialised discourses about the peculiarly African challenges to adherence to HIV-medications, such as belief in rumours or falsehoods, inability to tell time, or cultural misunderstandings (Benton et al. 2017).
that reprise colonial assumptions of African resistance to science and rationality or of being outside modern time (Fabian 1983; Vaughan 1991). As Nhi Tran, Aminta Kouyate, and Monica U. Hahn (2022) suggest, such discourses, which make patients into suspects, build carceral logics into clinical reasoning and assessments. These are rhetorical devices rooted in an assumption of fundamental difference rather than empirical evidence: they tell us more about the fantasy or idea of ‘Africa’ (Mudimbe 1994) as the ‘projected continent of origin as the extreme form of the “native Other” to Man’ (Wynter 2000: 35). Amid a ‘public health turn from people to molecules’ (McClelland et al. 2020: 489) meanwhile, viral load monitoring molecularises trust. Trust-building, an endeavour previously entangled in messy, fallible, and ‘noisy’ interpersonal and material relations and the testimony of unreliable, even irrational, narrators who report their own adherence, is outsourced to molecules and technologies that stand in for an inarguable truth of treatment success or failure. These technologies effectively peer inside the body, beneath its ‘deceptive surfaces,’ (Newell 2012: 141) to excavate an apparent truth and produce trustworthy data. Such transparency devices play on tensions that assemble around the real/fake binary (also associated with moral/immoral, trust/mistrust, white/Black, sincere/cunning, North/South) that emerged out of colonial anxieties about African mimicry or duplicity and perdure in postcolonial contexts characterised by new technologies and infrastructures that blur lines between (fake) surfaces and (real) interiorities even further (Biruk 2020; Ferguson 2002).

Ethnographic attention to the place-specific entanglements and larger structures in which trust emerges helps us resist taking it at face value or seeing it as an unquestionable good. Trust-talk in global health worlds—and the practices, technologies, and infrastructures invested in securing and nurturing trust—speak to profound anxieties and suspicions that shape global health infrastructures in postcolonial contexts. So, too, do the forms and implementation of technologies and mechanisms meant to produce trust in aid worlds come to anticipate and recursively respond to cultural ideas of the people they mean to track and surveil. Thinking trust from the vantage of postcolonial global health worlds helps reveal that trust is not a ‘thing’ that can ever be fully achieved, even as entire systems are architected in the name of securing it. Audit tools that depersonalise trust relations by outsourcing the work of building trust to transparency devices, as seen here, can have the paradoxical effect of straining relations, increasing tensions, and generating suspicion and mistrust within a system. While scholars who study mistrust in global health worlds aptly observe the influence of colonial legacies and past violence on problems like vaccine hesitancy or refusal to participate in clinical trials, ethnographic attention to trust-producing tools and discourse in postcolonial contexts reveals how global health infrastructures are not merely ‘haunted’ by colonial ideas about racial difference, but fundamentally constituted by them in the ongoing present.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editors and other authors of this special issue for their feedback on earlier versions of this article, for fruitful conversations, and for intellectual stimulation. Thank you to Lyndsey Beutin for your encouragement and astute suggestions. The article has benefited from the comments of two anonymous reviewers.

Cal Biruk is associate professor of anthropology at McMaster University. Their research interests lie at the intersection of STS, medical anthropology, and queer studies. They are the author of Cooking Data: Culture and Politics in an African Research World (2018, Duke University Press) and numerous articles in journals such as American Ethnologist, Medical Anthropology Quarterly, The Journal of Modern African Studies, and Gay and Lesbian Quarterly. Email: birukc@mcmaster.ca

Notes

1. I use a pseudonym here. In this article, I refer to ‘NGO staff’ and ‘NGO beneficiaries’ in broad and general terms to protect anonymity of individual actors.

2. The NGO’s annual budget is fully funded by donor moneys, and the organisation regularly has active projects funded by ten or more donors. While there are differences between the reporting mechanisms and audit requirements among these donors, NGO staff and beneficiaries alike use the non-specific term ‘the donors’ to generalise or complain about what they felt as more and more surveillance and expectations of outputs coming from above, from distant and impersonal actors.

References


When partners are suspect(s)


The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology • 67


**Archival sources**

_Malawi National Archives (MNA)_

NSZ 1/5/1. 1938. ‘District Commissioners’ Conference at Nyambadwe,’ minutes, 7–8 October.