



LUND UNIVERSITY
Center for Middle Eastern Studies



Dear Colleague!

We are writing as members of the research project, “Suspicious Materialities: Nigerian and Egyptian Cityscapes”, to invite you to a workshop we are holding in Lusaka, Zambia on the 9-10 December 2018 (with an optional day of post-workshop discussions in a relaxed atmosphere, on the 11 December).

What is city life like when suspicion comes to underlie everyday interactions with the familiar world? What happens when the suspicion grabs a hold of you that the other passengers in the minibus is a band of armed robbers disguised as commuters, or that the person on the seat next to yours is a government intelligence agent? What do you do when you start wondering whether or not the person you bought your house from was in fact the real owner, or if the butcher put poison in the meat you are about to feed to your family? How does it feel to wonder whether the soundscapes created by public sermons are signs of piety or terrorists’ hidden agendas? What is it like to be almost entirely sure that the electricity company has tampered with the prepaid meter on your wall? Or to discover that the label on your supposedly genuine Honda generator uses a different font than the one your neighbour has?

This is an invitation to participate in a workshop on the materialities, affects, imaginaries, practices, social interactions, and experiences that form when suspicions of this kind come to besiege city life and contribute to an edited volume or special issue in a journal. The theme has grown out of the four organizing researchers’ experiences from Egyptian cities such as Cairo and Port Said, and from Jos and Port Harcourt in Nigeria. Here, long-term dramatic changes are transforming landscapes, relationships and networks, causing a general sense of suspicion to seep into ordinary interactions with familiar matters. There is a deep-seated notion that objects, people, relationships, society, or indeed the world at large, are not what they appear to be, and often, this world of mirages seems to be animated by concealed malevolent agencies.

Recent theory grown out of experiences of fast growing African cities highlights *ambiguity* as a fundamental condition of everyday life, as intricate webs of economic and cultural logics, value systems, interpretations and expectations, allow for the simultaneous existence of irreconcilable truths.

A shared observation by the four conveners is that suspicion thrives when *the familiar* emerges as a site of ambiguity – when things and experiences that induce normalcy, security or monotony, simultaneously provoke doubts regarding the true nature of things, people, and relationships. People are continually compelled to try to anticipate which potentialities will solidify into realities. The array of anxieties that emerge from these moments of suspense form a useful starting point for investigating suspicion.

Another observation by the organisers is the close links between suspicion and materiality, in a broad sense, including objects, buildings, the physical environment, but also sounds, vibrations, smells, etc. The matters of this world haunt us. They concern us. They compel us to engage with them. We are caught in their force fields. We use them, but at the same time, they dictate what is possible and impossible. They map out the boundaries of our world. They push and pull us in different directions. Their vectors become our own. They are in our dreams. They invade our living spaces. They have the power to betray us, to open our intimate spheres to the real or perceived agency of others. Interaction with objects and other aspects of the physical environment is an important arena of social, political and cultural articulation that accommodates experiences and sentiments that are otherwise too ambiguous and fleeting to be captured. Once manifested in the material world, otherwise vaporous sentiments of suspicion become graspable, at the level of everyday life as well as academic enquiry. When objectified, attached to a specific matter, doors are in turn opened to larger contexts as each object, site, sound, touch and smell speak about their place in the world.

With this call, we want to delve into the spaces of ambiguity, the moments of suspense while hunches are yet to solidify into tangible truths, and explore what happens if we study suspicion not simply as a lack of trust, but as a phenomenon in its own right. What would be its defining characteristics? Which forms would it assume? What would be its social, political, cultural, or affective dynamics? Is suspicion the lived truth of a world where social contracts have crumbled? Is it a state of mind, or a way of being-in-the-world? Is it an effect of affect, is it matter that matters, or is it not about what we feel at all, but about what we do – a set of prescribed practices in a precarious world? Is it in fact a social force that makes transactions possible?

This call is an invitation to contribute to a publication on “African Cities and the Materiality of Suspicion” and to participate in a preparatory workshop to the same end. It is also an invitation to assume different approaches and new ways of thinking about suspicion as a social phenomenon of fundamental consequence for the human experience.

Workshop details

Sponsored by the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES), Lund University and Forum for Africa Studies, Uppsala University, we are bringing together 17 scholars of African cities to a workshop titled ‘African Cities and the Materiality of Suspicion’, which will take place in Lusaka, Zambia, 9-10 December 2018 (with an optional day of post-workshop discussions on the 11 December). The purpose of the workshop is to compare experiences, discuss perspectives, and chapter ideas. Travel, lodging and meals in connection to the workshop will be provided.

The preliminary program includes:

Day 1:

- Introduction: Suspicion as a theme.
- Each participant will be asked to talk for five-ten minutes on a concept, situation, object, picture, place, etc. that they find inspiring, enlightening, or disturbing in relation to the suspicion theme.

Day 2:

- Morning: Presentation of chapter ideas. Each presentation gets 15 minutes
- Afternoon: Publication options and timeline. Chapter/article guidelines.

Day 3: Optional post-workshop discussions under leisurely forms.

Before the workshop, we would ask all participants to send in an abstract on a chapter/article idea for the publication. We will also ask that you include one or two sentences on the concept, situation, object, place, etc. that you want to talk about. This will give everybody a chance to familiarise themselves with the participants' different approaches beforehand, and give the conveners the possibility to organise the different contributions according to themes.

We would be delighted if you are able to participate! Please let us know as soon as possible if you are able to join us!

With Sincerest Regards,



Mark Levine, PhD
Distinguished Visiting
Professor
Lund University/UC Irvine



Eric Trovalla, PhD
Uppsala University



Ulrika Trovalla, PhD
Uppsala University



Maria Malmström, PhD
Associate Professor
Lund University/
Columbia University